

CONCEPT NOTE

**EXPERT GROUP MEETING
(EGM):
RECOVERING
TERRITORIAL BALANCE BY
STRENGTHENING URBAN-
RURAL LINKAGES**

**March 13th-14th 2023
National Museum of Roman Art
Mérida, Extremadura**



Recovering Territorial Balance by Strengthening Urban-Rural Linkages

In an increasingly urbanized world, where more than 2/3 of the world's population is expected to live in urban areas by 2050, for some years the importance of preserving balances within territories has been discussed. The 2030 Agenda has reinforced the relevance of rural and natural systems on the road to sustainability, and the New Urban Agenda underlines the importance of strengthening the links between cities and rural spaces. More recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the deficiencies of urban systems that have largely lost their links with the territories in which they are located.

In the framework of this discussion, the Policy, Legislation and Governance Section of UN-Habitat and the UN-Habitat Office in Spain with the support of the Regional Government of Extremadura, Spain, have organized the Expert Group Meeting (EGM) ***Recovering Territorial Balance by Strengthening Urban-Rural Linkages*** that will take place in the National Museum of Roman Art in the city of Mérida, Extremadura, Spain, on 13th and 14th March 2023.

Experts from UN agencies, as well as representatives of national, regional, and local governments, academy, civil society will gather for two days to debate how current trends on territorially imbalanced development are threatening not only rural areas development and sustainability but also have consequences for urban areas.

The urban-rural divide

There is a dichotomy between the situations of rural and urban areas that accentuates many of the social and economic inequalities present in society in general, such as the profound inequality of opportunities between the two areas. This leads to emigration from rural areas, especially for young people, which in turn causes aging in rural areas and masculinization of the population in large urban areas.

The existing imbalance between rural and urban realities, if not adequately addressed, can lead to increases in the impoverishment of many rural areas. But rural impoverishment is also urban impoverishment. The rural environment and peoples are spaces and communities of vital importance for all society for many reasons, such as food production, water, energy, cultural heritage, biodiversity of nature, territorial intelligence, respect for the environment and maintaining social cohesion between rural and urban peoples.

This gap between rural and urban areas exists not only in economic and productive terms, but also has important and diverse consequences in social, environmental, and even political terms. Its effects are diverse: in addition to the territorial tensions produced by the divide, there are demographic, social coexistence and gender consequences. Some of these are a much more precarious position of women in the economic marketplace, with forbidden jobs and higher unemployment, more marked gender roles, a predominant burden of reproductive and domestic work for women, greater economic and other types of dependence, less participation in social and institutional spaces, etc. These factors increase pressure on social protection systems and on the welfare state, on telecommunications connectivity, and on transportation with a higher need for private vehicles. The urban-rural dichotomy leads to greater difficulty of access to services and general facilities, scarcity of resources for training and education, cultural activities, health care, and other human needs in both urban and rural communities.

Finding a balance between urban and rural areas should be a political priority so that citizens are not forced to leave their places of residence for reasons beyond their control. Policies aimed at offsetting macro trends, be it ageing or migration, do not yield the desired outcome. The focus, thus, needs to be on urban and territorial development policies, cohesion and locally tailored social policies that support diversely ageing regions and address the lack of opportunities for residents and marginalized social groups.

Small and intermediary towns are key settlements which act as bridge between urban and rural communities. By 2070, the share of land in small towns is projected to drop slightly as the land covered by larger cities grows faster. This trend essentially implies that smaller cities— as well as towns and semi-dense areas—remain critical to achieving sustainable development, especially in low-income countries. It is in these settlements that a variety of urban-rural linkages in production, consumption, and financial relationships can have profound impact across the urban-rural continuum if they are deliberately fostered. Therefore, adequate territorial planning and enhanced capacities in these settlements can strengthen the pivotal role they play as well to help reduce pressure on larger and capital cities in developing regions.

Territorial imbalance and rural depopulation

Depopulation is considered a demographic and territorial phenomenon consisting of a decrease in the number of inhabitants in a territory or settlements relative to a previous period. The fall in the number of inhabitants can result from a negative natural growth (when deaths exceed births), negative net migration (emigration exceeds immigration) or both simultaneously.

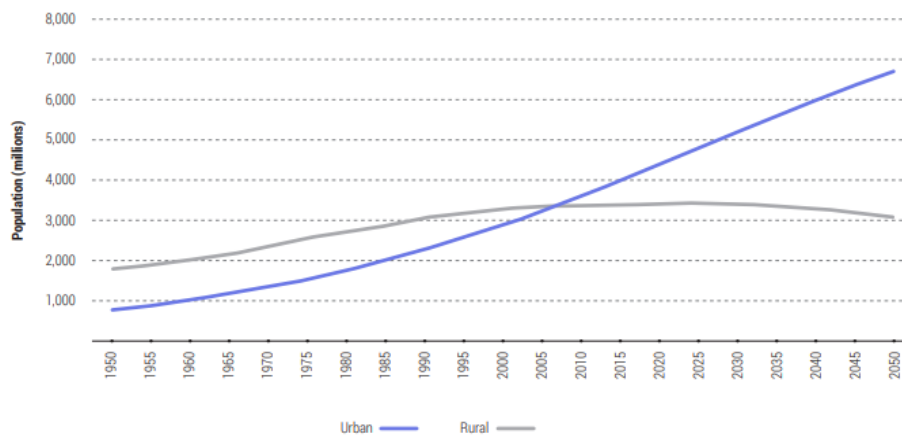
In general, depopulation processes are being considered as a consequence on imbalanced territorial development, as they have been triggered as a result of high migration rates from rural areas – mostly - to expanding urban centres. It is understood that depopulation processes are multidimensional. There are several economic factors playing a crucial role: the areas affected by them are usually economically depressed, underdeveloped, or less dynamic in relation to other areas of the same country/region. Urban areas, in general, are perceived as areas of economic opportunity and services that allow for a better quality of life, unlike rural areas. Additionally, the impacts of climate change, the increasing global conflict, as well as the general aging of the population, are factors causing depopulation and are expected to fuel depopulation processes in coming decades.

The processes of depopulation of rural areas and small towns have diverse social and economic consequences, such as the loss of social capital and economic value in rural territories. Regarding territorial administration, the loss of population in rural areas often leads to the withdrawal of government and social services previously installed in the territory. Depopulation processes frequently generate the loss of this heritage accumulated over decades or centuries.

Some regions all over the world have started to see a relatively new phenomenon: rural depopulation. Since the 19th century, although in much lower proportions than urban populations, the global rural population has been growing in absolute terms. Since 2015, this is no longer the case. The rural population will continue to decrease in coming decades, as shown in the graph below. This process looks different depending on regions and country level: in some European countries such as Spain, Latvia, Finland and Estonia more than 40% of municipalities have experienced depopulation between 2001 and 2018.

Within countries, the situation is also highly variable between different regions. In the case of Spain, for instance, only a few provinces saw slight population growth during recent decades, while most of provinces have been losing population – both in relative and absolute figures.

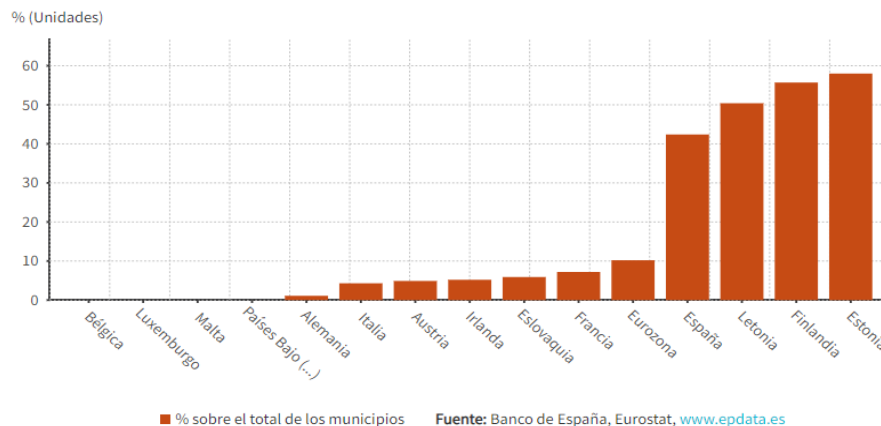
Figure 1.1: Urban and rural population of the world (1950-2030)



Source: UNDESA, 2019b.

Municipios en riesgo de despoblación por países europeos

Un municipio está en riesgo de despoblación con crecimiento de la población negativo entre 2001 y 2018, saldo vegetativo negativo desde 2001 y densidad inferior a 12,5 habitantes por km²



■ % sobre el total de los municipios Fuente: Banco de España, Eurostat, www.epdata.es

Urban rural linkages and territorial approaches to address territorial imbalance

Urban-Rural Linkages refer to constant and necessary flows of people, capital, goods, services, and information between rural and urban areas. The boundaries between urban, peri-urban, and rural areas are becoming increasingly blurred as urbanization and modernization continues to reduce the differences between urban and rural areas; urban dwellers have adopted some aspects of a rural lifestyle and vice-versa.

Several global conferences and forums have shaped territorial approaches to development and urban-rural linkages. Two that laid some of the foundation in the 20th century began with the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED or the Earth Summit) in 1992 launching Agenda 21 and the three Rio Conventions of UNFCCC, CBD and UNCCD), and the Habitat II conference in 1996. These looked to the 21st century and the Rio+20 which in 2015

produced the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in 2016 the Habitat III conference where Member States adopted the New Urban Agenda (NUA) to guide sustainable urban development. Urban-rural linkages were referenced throughout the NUA as an important component of integrated urban and territorial planning and development. The box below presents a few of paragraphs explicitly addressing urban-rural linkages.

Box: New Urban Agenda relevant paragraphs

49. We commit ourselves to supporting territorial systems that integrate urban and rural functions into the national and subnational spatial frameworks and the systems of cities and human settlements, thus promoting sustainable management and use of natural resources and land, ensuring reliable supply and value chains that connect urban and rural supply and demand to foster equitable regional development across the urban-rural continuum and fill social, economic and territorial gaps.

50. We commit ourselves to encouraging urban-rural interactions and connectivity by strengthening sustainable transport and mobility, and technology and communications networks and infrastructure, underpinned by planning instruments based on an integrated urban and territorial approach, in order to maximize the potential of these sectors for enhanced productivity, social, economic and territorial cohesion, as well as safety and environmental sustainability. This should include connectivity between cities and their surroundings, peri-urban and rural areas, as well as greater land-sea connections, where appropriate.

75. states the commitment to long-term urban and territorial planning processes and spatial development practices that incorporate integrated water resources planning and management, considering the urban-rural continuum at the local and territorial level

96. We will encourage the implementation of sustainable urban and territorial planning, including city-region and metropolitan plans, to encourage synergies and interactions among urban areas of all sizes and their peri-urban and rural surroundings, including those that are cross-border, and we will support the development of sustainable regional infrastructure projects that stimulate sustainable economic productivity, promoting equitable growth of regions across the urban-rural continuum. In this regard, we will promote urban-rural partnerships and inter-municipal cooperation mechanisms based on functional territories and urban areas as effective instruments for performing municipal and metropolitan administrative tasks, delivering public services and promoting both local and regional development.

136. We will support the development of vertical and horizontal models of distribution of financial resources to decrease inequalities across subnational territories, within urban centres and between urban and rural areas, as well as to promote integrated and balanced territorial development. In this regard, we emphasize the importance of improving the transparency of data on spending and resource allocation as a tool for assessing progress towards equity and spatial integration.

The 2030 Agenda saw the adoption of 17 sustainable Development goals (SDGs) with a goal dedicated to sustainable urbanization. Goal 11 seeks to make cities and human settlements

inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. Two targets are relevant to the topic of territorial balance. By 2030 target 11.3 asks governments to enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries. Target 11.a calls for supporting positive economic, social and environmental links between urban, peri-urban and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning. These goals imply that adequate territorial planning and enhanced capacities for managing urban-rural linkages are required.

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 aims to achieve the substantial reduction of disaster risk and losses in lives and livelihoods. The framework outlines priorities, targets, and indicators for national and local authorities to prevent the creation of new risk, reduce existing risk and increase resilience. This is more relevant to this EGM as some of the cases of rural and urban depopulation and are linked to disasters displacing communities and distorting livelihoods including conflict and climate change.

Towards supporting member states to achieve sustainable urbanization while ensuring the rural areas are not left behind, an initiative led by the UN-Habitat began in 2018. The initiative, called “Urban-Rural Linkages: Guiding principles and framework for action to advance territorial development”, convened over 130 stakeholders from over 40 international organizations. The process grew out of an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) in Monteria Colombia in 2015, whose [Monteria Communiqué](#) advocated for a multi-sector and multi-disciplinary approach to addressing urban and rural issues without creating sectoral divisions in the two areas. The consultative process agreed to 10 principles and 11 fields of action comprised of sectoral entry points and five entry points to creating an enabling environment. The principles aim to inform pragmatic strategies and propose a framework for action to build an enabling environment for inclusive and functional urban-rural linkages. They also provide reference for developing or revising national and sub-national policy frameworks. The importance of multi-level policy supporting integrated urban-rural planning and the need to contextualize the [URL:GP](#) principles and actions were further developed in a second EGM in La Paz, Bolivia which also produced a report and declaration.

The principles and framework of actions were successfully launched at the first UN-Habitat Assembly (UNHA 2019) and a [resolution](#) adopted by member states. The resolution was titled “Sustainable urbanization by strengthening urban-rural linkages” This resolution and the principles have been the basis for UN-Habitat work and partners in supporting member states through technical support for policy processes, tools and knowledge products, capacity building and sharing of case studies. Progress on implementation of the resolution will be reported at the second UN-Habitat Assembly, June 2023 where a global report on urban-rural linkages will be presented. A Global Status Report on Urban-Rural Linkages will also take stock of the global and regional trends for urban-rural linkages since the beginning of the millennium including the respective actions by international agencies including outcomes from this EGM.

Balanced Urban and Territorial Economic Development

The New Urban Agenda (NUA 136) calls on governments to promote an integrated and balanced territorial development. It states that to achieve integrated and balanced territories, it is needed to have polycentric land-use policies and plans, to stimulate cooperation and

business linkages between cities of different scales within the rural-urban continuum, in broad aspects that include from food security systems to the provision of affordable services and infrastructure.

Achieving this goal also involves reducing value chains and connecting small farmers directly to local, regional and national markets, supporting agricultural production in urban areas, and creating solidarity networks that stimulate local and sustainable consumption.

The World Cities Report (WCR) recommends improving the competitiveness of secondary cities with targeted investments in infrastructure to stimulate their economic growth and build resilience to future crises, and to avoid skewed development in the future.

According to the WRC, although megacities have retained prominence in the urban conversation and will continue to play a prominent role, most of the future urban growth will occur in small and medium-sized settlements and cities. Despite this, infrastructure investment and most economic growth continues to occur in large metropolitan areas. This is known as "big-city bias" and winner-takes-it-all urbanism, as growth in large territories continues to be driven at the expense of small and medium-sized ones. This concentrates development in small areas, instead of promoting a more diffused and balanced territorial development that includes all territories. This asymmetric development aggravates the urban divide, especially in secondary cities, whose inhabitants face various deprivations with respect to jobs, income, basic services and leisure offerings.

Intermediary cities should play an important role in government plans, as they are important centres for the supply of goods and services to the periphery and the hinterland, and are key to establishing urban-rural linkages, which facilitates the creation of an enabling environment for job creation and income diversification across the board. With effective management, these cities can offer greater trade and investment opportunities and facilitate transformation across the urban-rural continuum.

Territorial-Urban Agenda of Extremadura

The Government of Extremadura has been working in recent years to develop the potential of urban and territorial planning to achieve an adequate balance between the urban and the rural. In 2018, the principles emanating from the declaration of the New Urban Agenda were incorporated within the "Sustainable Land and Urban Planning Law of Extremadura" (LOTUS for its Spanish initials).

This law regulates the implementation of new uses, the rehabilitation and recovery of both rural and urban spaces, and the relationship between them; the legal instrument has made it possible to interweave any action on the territory with the principles of the New Urban Agenda, giving rise to the design of spaces that have people at the center and generating a territorial and urban development that takes into account the gender perspective, the perspective of childhood and ageing, as well as the relationship between the economy and the environment, as recognized in the second Quadrennial Report of the Secretary General of the United Nations on the progress in the implementation of the New Urban Agenda of June 2022¹.

¹ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N22/278/72/PDF/N2227872.pdf?OpenElement>

“36. Urban planning is a powerful tool for achieving climate mitigation and adaptation, equity and economic productivity and the protection and social integration of refugees, migrants and other marginalized groups. For example, Spain has implemented gender-responsive planning using gender impact statements, technical norms in Extremadura and regional and local plans in the Basque Country, improving women’s access to jobs, housing and services.”

The Extremadura territory can be considered predominantly rural, at least in comparative terms²; in this context, the Law has been promoted as one of the main instruments for balancing territorial and urban systems, so that no one and no place is left behind.

EGM Objectives, outputs and outcomes

Main objectives of the EGM presentations and debates will be:

- Understand the state of territorial imbalance globally, in Europe, Spain and Extremadura Region
- Understand the state of urban-rural linkages globally, in Europe, Spain, and the Extremadura Region, including ongoing initiatives as policies, plans etc.
- Identify the causes and impacts of territorial imbalance and (rural) depopulation
- Explore how territorial approaches (as urban-rural linkages) could contribute to addressing territorial imbalance and (rural) depopulation
- Explore other new approaches, strategies, policies, and plans addressing rural depopulation globally, in Europe and Spain
- Explore avenues to integrate territorial approach such as policy, plans and others.

As a result of the EGM a Communique will be elaborated. Outcomes and results of presentations and debates will feed into the normative work of UN-Habitat referred to the Urban-Rural Linkages, particularly the UN-Habitat’s **2023 Global report on Urban Rural Linkages**. This global report aims to take stock of initiatives, projects, case studies etc. from different contexts globally. The theme of the report is “Reducing Urban-rural Inequalities to Advance Territorial Development. Likewise, conclusions derived from the EGM will serve to prepare the debates and events on Urban Rural Linkages held within the framework of the II UN-Habitat Assembly in June 2023 in Nairobi and the review of SDG 11 in the High Level Political Forum (HPLF) in July 2023 in New York.

² at least comparatively: 49.1% of the population registered in Extremadura resides in rural municipalities compared to 15.9% of the Spanish average. Análisis y Prospectiva-AgrInfo nº31' on demographics of the rural population in 2020 of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Background publications

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