

# Mind the gap! Bridging the rural-urban divide

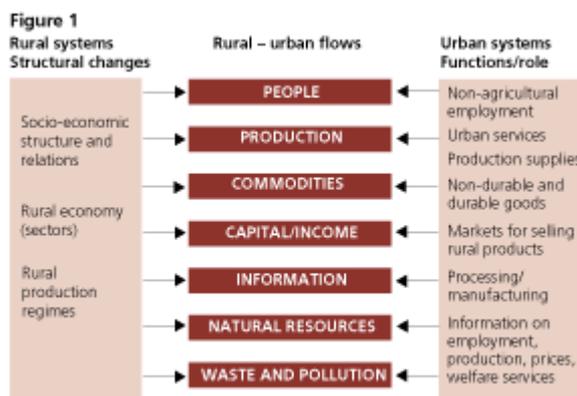
Rural areas have long been a source of food, raw materials and labour for cities. So too, are cities places of opportunity for rural dwellers, providing markets for agricultural products, specialised services and sources of temporary employment and shelter. Urban-rural linkages are particularly intense in the peri-urban interface, characterised by constant flux, complex social structures, fragmented institutions and shifting locus. Different policy solutions are clearly needed for peri-urban areas to those advanced for rural or urban areas.

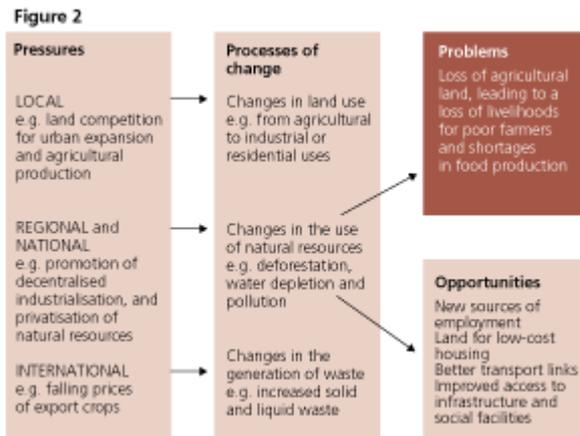
How is the peri-urban interface shaped by economic policies, administrative measures or planning regulations? How do such policies affect people's lives - and poorer, more vulnerable people in particular? How is the environmental sustainability of both cities and rural areas affected by the flow of commodities, capital, natural resources, people or pollution? Insights aims to explore these issues, to provide a better understanding of the problems and opportunities facing poor women and men in the peri-urban interface and to show how these issues are being addressed.

## Defining the peri-urban interface

The peri-urban interface is where urban and rural activities meet. Peri-urban areas are a mosaic of agricultural and urban ecosystems, affected by material and energy flows demanded by urban and rural areas. They are socially and economically heterogeneous and subject to rapid change. Small farmers, informal settlers, industrial entrepreneurs and urban middle class commuters may all coexist in the same territory but with different and often competing interests, practices and perceptions. Few institutions can address both urban and rural activities. Local government agencies have either an urban or a rural focus. Few metropolitan governments include rural jurisdictions. District and regional governments fail to bridge urban and rural concerns.

Peri-urban change is linked to urban-rural flows of people, goods, income, capital, natural resources and waste at three interconnected levels (see Figures 1 and 2):





**Local:** There can be competition between land for urban development and land for agriculture or pressure from extractive activities in response to city demands for building materials.

**Regional/national:** Often, greater policy support is given to urban-based industrialisation than to subsistence farming.

**International:** Falling export prices may prompt impoverished farmers to migrate to the peri-urban interface in search of alternative forms of livelihood.

Figure 2 also illustrates the **problems** and **opportunities** that arise from changes in the use of land and natural resources and in the generation of waste. The pace of change of a rapidly industrialising city will be felt more strongly in the peri-urban interface than in distant villages: the flow of people, information, money, commodities and waste will be correspondingly more intense. [Tacoli](#) explores why some peri-urban poor find it harder to adapt to rapid change and benefit from opportunities.

Land is the main source of livelihood for many living in peri-urban areas. Yet, as land prices rise, poor people are priced out of even the less desirable areas by middle-income earners. The poorest are often forced into temporary settlements. As peri-urban land is lost to residential development, so too is the potential for peri-urban subsistence farming and the cultivation of high value produce. Disputes over access to and control over peri-urban land often give rise to social conflict and spiralling violence. In Africa, land conflicts are compounded by clashes between formal and informal land right systems.

The peri-urban poor depend to a greater extent on access to natural resources than do wealthier, urban-based groups. Consequently, the peri-urban poor are adversely affected when these resources are lost or degraded by: influxes of people from expanding urban areas; and solid waste disposal and untreated liquid waste from residential and industrial areas. This can also lead to health risks, as discussed by [Birley](#).

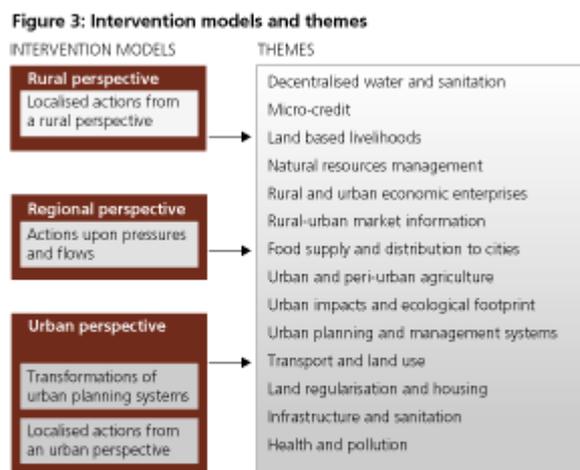
Gender differences in responding to changes in peri-urban areas are also important. Women are often most vulnerable to land conversion, with limited opportunities to initiate alternative activities. Often when land rights are sold (for example by village chiefs), women are not consulted. When men shift to urban employment, women tend to bear the burden of continuing farming activities. In India, women use organic waste for horticulture and firewood for household energy needs. When these materials become scarce, women are forced to walk further to collect them.

Peri-urban change can also lead to increased opportunities for those who are able to draw simultaneously on the comparative advantages of rural and urban areas. As rural-urban linkages intensify through improved infrastructure and the movement of people, the importance of commodities, information and money increases. Cheap, efficient transport encourages peri-urban workers to commute to the nearest city. So too, increased flows of solid and liquid waste out of cities - despite the risks they may pose to health - can offer

alternatives to commercial fertilisers for poor peri-urban farmers, as well as being a source of materials to be recycled and sold in urban markets.

Urban expansion can substantially improve access to services such as health and education for some peri-urban dwellers. Better transport to rural and peri-urban areas will increase people's access to information and political decision-making structures, which are often better established in cities. Increased flows of people and information can also help widen access to vital knowledge, such as current market prices, allowing rural households to respond more effectively to consumer preferences and urban labour market needs.

Solutions seeking both to improve the livelihoods and living conditions of poor peri-urban women and men and enhance the state and use of natural resources are still rare. The interventions that have emerged thus far can be split into three planning perspectives (see Figure 3):



Firstly, **rural planning** interventions seek to improve living conditions and the social infrastructure needed to increase rural production. Under the jurisdiction of rural authorities, these mostly involve discrete pilot projects in peri-urban villages to help protect land-based livelihoods. But such interventions often fail to recognise the potential advantages of being close to cities. [Brook et al](#) describe a participatory planning approach in Hubli-Dharwad, India, where traditionally marginalised villagers were involved in the policy-making process. [McGregor](#) shows how localised action can be the vehicle for community management of a watershed in peri-urban Kumasi, Ghana.

Secondly, **regional planning** interventions seek to develop infrastructure in both rural and urban areas and between small urban centres simultaneously, rather than simply concentrating on linkages with major cities. [Rabinovitch](#) shows how improving the flow of information between rural production systems and urban market demands can create synergies between rural and urban areas. Developing more effective urban/peri-urban links by using solid and liquid urban waste for agriculture is another approach. [Drechsel et al](#) discuss the challenges and benefits of recycling nutrients from organic city waste for use in agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa, whilst [Kundu](#) explores factors threatening the sustainability of traditional waste-recycling activities and sewage-irrigated agricultural systems in peri-urban East Calcutta, India. Removing conventional urban planning barriers to activities supporting self-reliance in urban and peri-urban forestry and agriculture is another approach. [Bourque](#) shows the major contribution made by urban agriculture to Cuba's recovery from the food crisis in the early 1990s.

Finally, **urban planning** has two broad approaches. The first focuses on the relationship between urban areas and their hinterlands, resting on the assumption that cities are highly dependent on resources extracted from surrounding areas: [Kiarie et al](#) show how immediate problems can be addressed by promoting sustainable linkages between urban and rural areas. The second seeks to improve the quality of life of peri-urban dwellers, through sanitation programmes with low-cost technologies, participatory methodologies for project design, community labour and micro-financing schemes.

Striking a balance between local planning (recognising the heterogeneity of, and power relations within, peri-urban communities), environmental planning (understanding the vital ecological functions performed by the peri-urban interface) and the broader dimensions of urban and regional planning is key. Active support to poorer and more vulnerable groups and a search for environmental sustainability demand creative management of the problems and opportunities arising from the meeting of urban and rural activities. Land use policies that help to enhance livelihoods and promote a better use of scarce resources and urban waste are crucial. Equally important are appropriate policies concerning basic infrastructure, training, information and improved governance for the peri-urban interface.

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**See also**

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