

Are 'urban' and 'rural' outmoded terms?

Panel Contribution to the PERN Cyberseminar on Urban Spatial Expansion by Tony Champion, Professor, School of Geography, Politics & Sociology University of Newcastle Newcastle upon Tyne, Email: tony.champion @ncl.ac.uk

Two days ago Robert Engelman raised the issue of urban definitions, Alex circulated John Hasse's statement that discussed quantifying urban form, Deborah Balk hoped that I would chime in on relevant activities undertaken with IUSSP, and mention was made of the article that Graeme Hugo, Alfredo Lattes and I published in *Population & Development Review* (PDR) last year. What I thought I would do at this stage is to present the main conclusions of the Working Group on Urbanization (WGU), which was the precursor of the IUSSP's Scientific Panel on Urbanization and Health that is the co-sponsor of this cyberseminar. Then participants can follow up in more detailed discussion if they wish.

In fact, the PDR article formed our initial position statement, raising the issues tackled by the WGU. Its working papers and conclusions have subsequently been published in an edited book: Tony Champion and Graeme Hugo (eds) *New Forms of Urbanization: Beyond the Urban-Rural Dichotomy*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company for IUSSP, 2004, ISBN 0 7546 3588 0. So the following represents a brief summary of that book, and especially its concluding chapter.

The point of departure of the book is that where people live has an extremely important effect on the type and quality of the lives that they lead, on their life chances, and so on. Traditionally, the single most important dimension - after country of residence - is whether people live in an urban or a rural area. This is a major reason why so much effort has been put into measuring the proportion of national populations that reside in urban areas. Time and again, when demographic, economic and social variables of urban and rural areas are compared, there are big differences. Plenty of examples are presented in our book, including many relating to fertility, life expectancy and health.

But there are two problems with this approach. Firstly, this two-way urban-rural split is an extremely crude way of classifying places in a country. Secondly, it is becoming increasingly difficult to classify each part of national territory as definitely urban and definitely rural. Indeed, these two problems work together to render the basic dichotomy increasingly obsolete. As has been mentioned by previous contributions to this seminar, the urban-rural distinctions are becoming increasingly blurred. Around individual cities, for instance, suburbanization and urban sprawl are giving rise to partially built-up areas, called various terms like 'semi-urban' and 'transitional'. Comparing individual settlements, no single threshold of population size or density clearly separates urban from rural ones, even within one society. And new forms of urbanization have been evolving, such as 'edge cities', 'exurbia', 'polycentric urban configurations', 'extended metropolitan regions' and 'desakota' (literally village city).

Perhaps equally important, the demand for better intelligence about where people live has been growing steadily. The result is that we are now faced with an extremely wide range of users. This adds up to a great variety of data needs, because the majority of users are not satisfied with a general-purpose delineation and classification of where people live, least of all just a two-way split between urban and rural. They want something customized for their own purposes; e.g. for physical planning, transport planning, economic development policy, health care delivery.

At the same time, as Hasse has outlined so clearly, the technical possibilities for providing that information in our computerized and satellite age are enormously greater than in the past. Data can be compiled and released (subject to confidentiality and cost restrictions) at a very fine-grained spatial scale and then these small building-block areas can be aggregated into whatever larger reporting zones are wanted by individual users. Moreover, this data does not just relate to the internal characteristics of these blocks and the zones built from them, but can also be in the form of 'contextual variables' that use GIS-type methodology to measure aspects of surrounding areas. For instance, data for a neighbourhood can include information on its residents' proximity to hospitals, jobs or pollution sources and on the types of areas that surround it.

All these considerations prompted WGU members to consider whether the urban-rural dichotomy - already a well-established idea when it was adopted for UN's reporting on population over half a century ago - is past its sell-by date. Basically, 'a no-brainer' was the general consensus. But then comes the challenge of finding ways of improving on it, replacing it or side-stepping the issue completely. Put bluntly, would it be possible to manage without ever mentioning the terms 'urban' and 'rural' ever again? If use of these two words were banned today, how would researchers and their customers go about identifying the places where people live, and then, if necessary, proceed to classify them?

This question, posed to WGU members, not surprisingly provoked a flurry of ideas. And the most common theme was that settlements cannot readily be reduced to a single dimension. The multi-dimensional nature of settlements was seen to take three main forms, partly related to each other. One concerns the element of a settlement system being examined; for instance, the size of settlements, or the degree of concentration or dispersal of the settlement pattern, or the accessibility of settlements to services. A second concerns the aspect of primary interest; for instance, the ecological (like size, density, accessibility), or the economic (like the diversity or autonomy of the local economy), or the institutional (local choice, public sector capacity), or the socio-cultural (like beliefs, ethnic diversity). Yet a third set of multiple dimensions concerns the spatial 'architecture', meaning layers of spatial organization which are normally thought of in hierarchical terms moving from individual people and households through local neighbourhoods, localities, cities, city regions and macro-economic regions up to the national level.

Ideally, we would like to label all individual persons and/or households on the basis of the 'place' where they live. But just as people have multiple identities, so too do the places, and to some extent these are linked because people 'belong' to a variety of places

according to particular aspects of their lives such as home, school, church, job, recreation. Thus, in order to assess the effect of 'environment' on aspects of people's lives, it is helpful to have measures of the environment that relate directly to each aspect, e.g. standard of school, strength of local labour market. And those measures are normally produced by defining the relevant 'catchment area', summing the appropriate ingredients of it (often based on all or some of its residents) and producing an average score. In sum, this approach involves finding the relevant spatial 'container' for each aspect.

Perhaps it is rather an anticlimax to admit that, when faced by the challenge of improving on the UN's statistical reporting on urbanization, it seems that a two-dimensional approach is able to capture a great deal of the variety in people's circumstances. One dimension refers to the physically built-up area that people live in, basically what is traditionally referred to by the UN as an 'agglomeration'. The other refers to the functionally defined region that surrounds a significantly-sized agglomeration and represents a relatively self-contained area in terms of daily mobility, especially journey to work. This is equivalent to the 'metropolitan area', for which the UN tries to collect population data from countries that do not recognize agglomerations, but it is a substantially different concept from the agglomeration. Most notably, a metropolitan area is likely to contain a number of agglomerations of various sizes. This two-dimension distinction is vital in that people living in an agglomeration of 10,000 people situated within the metropolitan area of a million city are likely to face a very different set of opportunities from people living in a 10,000-people agglomeration that does not have a larger centre close by.

Of course, it could perhaps be argued that the collection and publication of national population data in the manner carried out by the UN for over 50 years is no longer the most important reason for measuring urbanization in countries round the world. Indeed, the range of applications for these sorts of data is now much greater than the use made by the UN itself. Nevertheless, even for single-country applications let alone cross-national comparisons, the task of delineating the individual components of a settlement system on a consistent basis - so that like can be compared with like - is still a very challenging one. The WGU recommended that advantage should be taken of the 2000 round of population censuses to examine the changing nature of settlement systems in a sample of countries, with statistical agencies, researchers and data users getting together to examine what sort of 'containers' best represent the settlement system for the presentation and analysis of population-related data. In the UK at least, helped by the present government's increasingly interventionist stance, this has now become a big political issue.