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Rural-urban synergies: towards a conceptual framework applied to the functional area of Valencia (Spain)

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ARTICLE SECTION

Rural-urban synergies: towards a conceptual framework applied to the functional area of Valencia (Spain)

Abstract: The successful creation of rural-urban synergies for sustainable regional development requires an integrated approach at local and regional level. This article is a contribution to the analysis of these relationships in the functional area of Valencia, based on the study of different governance models as a conceptual framework. This approach derives from the H2020 ROBUST project, which analyses how to advance in unlocking rural-urban synergies at the local-regional level, with special attention to the capacities of municipal and regional governments, related administrations and other stakeholders to generate and enhance mutually beneficial relationships. In the case study of the province of Valencia, different types of governance structures have been analysed, such as the Valencia Food Council, the Territorial Pacts for Employment and several examples of - in some cases, potential or theoretical - good practices, such as rural taxis, ATMs or cultural networks. The governance arrangements analysed emphasise the commitment of the regional government to activate multilevel governance mechanisms, as well as public-private cooperation at regional level (thus beyond provincial boundaries). The applied methodology can help to identify further measures and actions suitable for improving and creating new governance models in rural-urban relations.

Key words: Living Lab, rural-urban synergies, governance, functional area of Valencia.

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IDEAS CLAVE / HIGHLIGHTS / IDEES CLAU

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Las sinergias rural-urbanas vienen definidas por Nuevas localidades, Desarrollo sostenible y Redes de Gobernanza.2. Los elementos de la buena gobernanza se relacionan con las redes informales, las iniciativas, comunicación y colaboración.3. Hay un compromiso hacia la gobernanza multinivel, así como la cooperación público-privada a nivel regional.4. El desarrollo rural implica sinergias rural-urbanas positivas más fuertes en el área funcional de Valencia.5. Los <i>Living Labs</i> pueden percibirse como una forma experimental de gobernanza. | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Rural-urban synergies are defined by New Localities, Sustainable Development and Governance Networks.2. The elements of good governance relate to informal networks, initiatives, communication and collaboration.3. There is a commitment to multi-level governance, as well as public-private cooperation at regional level.4. Rural development implies stronger positive rural-urban synergies in the Valencia functional area.5. <i>Living Labs</i> can be perceived as an experimental form of governance. | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Les sinergies rural-urbanes vénen definides per Noves localitats, Desenvolupament sostenible i Xarxes de Governança.2. Els elements de la bona governança es relacionen amb les xarxes informals, les iniciatives, comunicació i col·laboració.3. Hi ha un compromís cap a la governança multinivell, així com la cooperació públic-privada a nivell regional.4. El desenvolupament rural implica sinergies rural-urbanes positives més fortes en l'àrea funcional de València.5. Els <i>Living Labs</i> poden percebre's com una forma experimental de governança. |
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EXTENDED ABSTRACT¹

The European Union promotes the creation and strengthening of rural-urban links, together with regional authorities and stakeholders. It is not something new, given that many countries are moving towards an increasingly comprehensive approach that allows taking more and better advantage of the opportunities offered by rural areas, beyond agriculture. Relationships and interdependencies along rural-urban trajectories take the form of a wide variety of functional links, leading to stronger cooperation at the territorial level. It includes, among others, more efficient land use and planning, better service provision (for example, in public transport or health) and better management of natural resources. These are dynamic relationships over time, as the ways of production, consumption and communication are changing. In recent decades, changes in rural-urban dynamics have been intensified, in terms of migration flows, exchange of goods and information, increased economic relocation and specialization of land use (production, tourism, housing, etc.). New social networks have also emerged or have been reconfigured.

However, the policy and governance approach has yet to be fully adapted and more clearly incorporated all these new trends of rural-urban interaction and dependencies. Governance emphasizes the participation of local stakeholders and partnerships across sectors and levels to foster synergies between rural and urban areas in terms of inclusive, sustainable and smart growth. Most rural regions need more thoughtful approaches to governance, replacing hierarchical and policy-focused leadership with collaborative modes of governance, for instance, by fostering public and private collaboration. The H2020 ROBUST project analyses how to advance in unlocking rural-urban synergies at the local-regional level, with special attention to the capacities of municipal and regional governments, related to administrations and other stakeholders to generate and improve mutually beneficial relationships. Evidences suggest that regions can grow best when their growth strategies are tailored to their own strengths and potentials. This article addresses these issues of rural-urban relationships or partnerships through examples of governance in the functional area of Valencia. The aim is to define rural and urban relations based on a conceptual framework in order to improve synergies and identify governance models and routes that promote them. In reviewing rural-urban synergies, attention is paid to ROBUST's interests in: New localities; Sustainable development and Governance Networks. By these concepts, the interactions and comparisons between rural and urban areas and societies that occur differently in different regions are studied, far from considering rural and urban areas separately.

The concepts of “Living Labs” and “Community of Practice” are ROBUST's main approaches to explore region-specific governance aspects and structures, as well as planning tools. Living Labs are understood as platforms in which different actors work together in the development and testing of new policy instruments, services, planning instruments and forms of organization. The aim of the Valencia Living Lab is to analyze the challenges derived from unbalanced growth in the functional area of Valencia, as a result of the increasing influence of the capital, both on its closest environment and on remote rural areas within the region. It was involved a wide range of stakeholders, through participatory methods, with the aim not only of gathering information but, above all, of bringing together and exchanging the different views. As a result of the territorial imbalance in which the region finds itself, there are increasingly complex territorial,

¹ Traducción exclusiva de los autores / Authors' exclusive translation.

social, economic and landscape realities - and tensions that must be managed. Therefore, comprehensive development strategies are needed, both for the region and for individual areas, in order to manage the territorial dynamics and take advantage of opportunities. The task is challenging as it clashes with political-administrative structures, used to working in a sectoral and often also short-term way. Likewise, the Valencia Living Lab aims to address three key issues that are directly related to the current agenda of local and regional governments: i) Sustainable food systems, ii) Public infrastructure and social services and iii) New business models and labor markets. In each of them, different governance models were identified as the most appropriated to be exchanged such as the Food Council of Valencia, the role of the territorial Pacts for employment and, finally, examples of good practices, as the rural taxi, cultural networks or ATMs.

So far, the studied governance arrangements show influence on regional and local governments and represent a good practice of the Valencia Living Lab dedicated to identify new forms of organization, collaboration and management of the territory. Such agreements from the Food Council of Valencia are built from a city and its surroundings, the starting point being the "absolute space" with the aim of expanding towards a more blurred rural-urban interaction or "relative space". The Territorial Pacts have made great progress in the most developed areas, such as urban and peri-urban areas. However, rural areas made little progress in adopting and adapting such a novel mechanism to govern labor markets. The main stakeholders highlighted the lack of cooperation between the Pacts, which is very limited in spatial terms (strictly the scope of the pact). The governance agreements in the Territorial Pacts can be expressed in the following three themes: a) relations between actors within the framework of a specific territorial association; b) internal relations of each actor that participates in the alliance; c) relationships between partners from different territories.

Certainly, the governance network is complex at territorial level due to the persistence of individualistic dynamics, the lack of a truly comprehensive vision of the territory (no longer including urban spaces, but even the closest rural areas), and the absence of a temporary vision in the medium and / or long term (often, this is limited to municipal elections, that are, four years). By influencing the public sector, particularly regional governments, they can systematically impact urban-rural relations throughout the regional territory through new regulations, new institutions, and new forms of multi-level governance. They are making a difference when i) they provide human and financial resources; ii) they legitimize new formal agreements; iii) adopt new rules at the regional level (institutionalization). In particular, their presence and support, in all cases, stimulate the participation of other actors / stakeholders. The ATMs and rural taxi projects illustrate how crucial is the commitment of the regional government to activate multi-level governance agreements and public-private cooperation at the regional level. In both cases, it would have been almost impossible for city councils at the municipal level to initiate these activities themselves, which require coordination between municipalities (e.g. rural medical taxi) and with powerful private firms (e.g. in the ATM network). Involving the private sector has often been a major challenge in rural-urban interaction despite its importance for obtaining synergies.

The forms of governance taking place at Valencia have important implications for the links between rural and urban areas. Actions from regional and local government are identified as fundamental to promote effective governance arrangements. Furthermore, the different examples allow for close interdependencies across governance networks, all of which imply new development trajectories based on a more inclusive and sustainable approach, particularly for rural development. The experience at Valencia has made it

possible to highlight a series of lessons that can help guide future work. Evidently and to conclude, Living Labs must generate and identify common objectives, build on previous cooperation networks, ensure shared leadership and transparency, design incentives for private actors, adapt their activity to the context and guarantee its continuity over time.