

Introduction

Rural development:
People-centered and place-based approachAlexey S. Naumov^{a,b,*}^a *Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia*^b *Institute for Agrarian Studies, HSE University, Moscow, Russia*

In the first decade of the 21st century the global urban population surpassed the total number of rural dwellers. Since then it has continued to grow, while the rural population keeps shrinking, and the gap between the numbers of urban and rural residents is expanding (UNCTAD, 2022). However, irrespective of this, the world is becoming progressively more urban. Yet the countryside—the cities’ antipode—will continue to be a vital resource for humankind, providing, as it does, most foodstuffs, and also serving as the dwelling for 3.4 billion people and ensuring income, or at least subsistence, for an even higher number of our contemporaries.

The concentration of people, capital, and power in cities which, despite urban sprawl, still occupy less than 1% of the total land area of five continents excluding Antarctica (1.1 million from 134.7 million sq. km; Gao and O’Neill, 2020), means that the usefulness of rural areas is always on the backburner in public discourse and policy making. Until very recently, this uneven attitude was expressed nearly worldwide through governments focusing on urban development and depriving rural areas—and rural dwellers—of access to financial aid and other kinds of support. Even in the most developed countries the only economic activity in rural areas deemed worthy of state subsidies for decades was agriculture. This lack of resources led to rural depopulation and other negative effects. In addition, the modernization of farming makes it less and less dependent on manual labor—a push factor for outmigration, along with the uncompetitive rural wages compared to urban ones—a pull factor, together generating exodus to the cities. Nevertheless, a recent review of global experiences shows that promising alternatives for rural development can be found (Li et al., 2019).

In the 1980s, a new era in rural development began. From this point onwards the European Union became a pioneer in radically reshaping the regional policy

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of its member states in favor of serious rural development. In European countries the latter started to be arranged on principles of integrated territorial development, environmental protection and sustainability, local governance and heightened participation (Mantino, 2010). The changes were expeditious, at first sweeping through the EU-12, and in the 21st century expanding to nearly the whole of Europe. The paradigm of rural development has completely changed (Torre and Wallet, 2016).

Rural development is now perceived as a complex process, involving not only governments as donors and farmers as beneficiaries, but also the whole range of actors, including rural communities, NGOs, non-agricultural businesses and even urban residents who seasonally, or on a permanent basis, seek resilience in the countryside. Building a new multi-functional rural economy requires the valorization of local resources of all kinds: soil, climate, geographical location, and manpower, as well as natural and cultural heritage. Along with industrialized commercial agriculture, alternative rural practices of so-called clever specialization are becoming more widespread: organic agriculture, shortened or grounded value chains, geographical indication of products, rural tourism, environment protection, ecosystem services, peri-urbanization, housing economics, rural industrialization, and the development of logistical terminals, etc. If, previously, rural development policy only targeted agricultural regions, nowadays the range of its objectives is much broader, including remote territories and areas with a harsh climate that is not conducive for open air cropping, forest zones, sea shores specializing in fishery and aquaculture, and urban periphery.

To summarize, the economic development of rural areas is now perceived through a territorial-based approach. This makes rural development a very interesting research field at varying levels. First, for country-comparative studies, second—for more detailed regional research within countries possessing a geographically uneven territory. The phenomenon of rural development and policy measures geared to its promotion in different countries are becoming an ever more popular topic for scientific papers. The coverage is quite diverse, encompassing European experiences, the implications of grass-rooted “Canadian Rural Partnership” networking, the Trump-established Interagency Task Force on Agriculture and Rural Prosperity in the USA, and the great leap in rural poverty eradication in China (Naumov et al., 2023).

Russia has recently shifted to a new paradigm of rural development. From the beginning of market reforms in 1990s, agriculture was considered the main pillar for social and economic welfare of rural areas, canalizing the lion’s share of state funding to subsidy large-scale farming and the promotion of agri-exports. This contributed to the alleviation of food deficiency and benefited mostly giant vertical-integrated agricultural holdings, but accelerated the decline of rural areas. During the last two decades, Russia has been continuously losing its rural population because of both natural decrease (low birth rate, aging) and the rural exodus. Highly mechanized and robotized agri-technologies are less labor intensive, rural wages are not comparable to urban ones, and the quality of life in the countryside is often far inferior to that of cities. As a result, since the beginning of the 21th century, the number of rural dwellers in Russia has dropped by 1.6 million people, equaling now to less than 37 million, or a little over a quarter of the total population (Serova et al., 2021). According to Rosstat,

only 3.9 million people are officially employed in agriculture whereas 5.5 million are doing commercial agriculture informally, or practice it for subsistence. In 2007, these two categories amounted to 5.8 and 7.8 million respectively. Many villages, especially in agriculturally less productive parts of the country, stay abandoned, and the development gap between rural and urban areas is growing.

The official Strategy of Spatial Development of Russian Federation—a very fresh guideline for regional policy—was primarily designed with the emphasis on accelerated growth of urban agglomerations. But in 2019 the ambitious State Program “Comprehensive development of rural territories” was approved, whereby the key role of rural areas—economic, social, cultural, and even strategic for national security—is also recognized (Serova et al., 2020). To encourage rural development, the best world practices were taken into account: the aforementioned clever specialization with reliance on not necessarily agricultural activities, building infrastructure to decrease the negative effects of remoteness and level up the living standards of villages and cities, a participatory approach in planning and budgeting, and contributing to boost the human capital in rural areas all over the country. But at the moment, it is too early to evaluate the impact of this new policy of rural development, especially considering the COVID-19 pandemic and the current geo-political consequences of international shocks. But even preliminary observations and estimates seem quite interesting and important.

That explains the choice of the topic for the expert round table “Role of agrarian universities and the academic community in the development of rural areas in Russia and in the world,” which was held on 13 April 2023 at HSE University during XXIV Yasin (April) International Academic Conference on Economic and Social Development.¹ The speakers came from Russian and foreign universities. Representatives of Novosibirsk and Stavropol state agricultural universities spoke about the mission of academia regarding rural development in their regions. Experiences of the Center for Sustainable Development of Rural Areas and the campaign to nominate the most beautiful villages and small towns of Russia were reported by the professor of the Moscow Timiryazev Agricultural Academy. A guest speaker from the Institute of Geographical Sciences and Natural Resources Research of the Chinese Academy of Sciences presented China’s Rural Revitalization Strategy and its socioeconomic effects. The participatory approach in rural development implemented in France, Poland and the United Kingdom was commented on by the professor of Kent University. In the final report, experiences of the Institute for Agrarian Studies at HSE University in researching rural development through different parts of Russia on the platform of so-called Mirror Labs with universities in different Russian regions were summarized. We decided to continue the discussions in *Russian Journal of Economics*. Most authors who were invited to write a paper for the special issue on rural development participated in the round table mentioned above, and the others completed the content of the issue with sound subjects.

The first paper of the issue, written by Marina Petukhova, Evgeny Rudoy and Nadezhda Orlova, can be seen as introducing the modern perception of rural development in global academia. Using the Scopus database, the authors reveal key trends of rural development, reflected by frequency of scientific publications.

¹ See <https://inagres.hse.ru/news/828593647.html> (in Russian).

The top-5 ranking topics in 2021 were rural tourism, ecology, engineering infrastructure, sustainable communities and migration; nearly the same as in 2000, but then the 5th place was assigned to natural disasters. Based on bibliographical research, the authors conclude that research interests in rural studies in the most prosperous and the less developed countries diverge. In the former, researchers primarily focus on environmental sustainability, adaptation to climate change, the impact of urbanization on the countryside and a fairer distribution of public goods between townspeople and villagers. For the latter group of countries, the main aim of the research is to ensure national food security, to justify social sustainability and diversification of economies. The case of Russia is controversial. Concerns about internal issues of rural development and its response to exogenous threats are traced, which enables the authors to not only indicate the most intriguing topics for R&D, but also provide recommendations to the Russian government regarding priority policy measures.

The following two papers present issues of rural development throughout Russia. The paper by Yulia Nikulina is based on statistical analysis of rural employment by so-called federal districts or macroregions of Russia. As the analysis of rural employment showed, the only two federal districts that defied the trend of a drastic decrease in agricultural employees were the Northern Caucasian and the Southern districts. Both regions stand out for being poly-ethnic and demographically more fertile than Central and other federal districts.

Global experiences demonstrate that along with the shrinking role of agriculture, a complex approach to rural employment is gradually gaining ground (Potapova and Naumov, 2022). This conclusion seems extremely important for recommendations regarding the state rural development policy in Russia, which has now almost caught up with the most developed countries thanks to its progress in rural evolution. Along with well-known policy measures such as the promotion of rural tourism, support for startups, small businesses, etc., one of the findings of the authors merits special attention: consider the countryside as a potential landing ground for urban residents. The global spread of remote working and the flourishing of the “home office” looks set to herald a promising future for rural development in Russia. As to agricultural employment, an interesting country-comparison is carried out. In terms of employment structure, Russia already appears as a less “agricultural” country than Poland, but still has a more simple structure of employment in the agri-food sector than the USA, for example, with highly developed processing industries.

The paper by two geographers, Tatiana Nefedova and Andrey Treivish, highlights a very “Russian” feature: the *dachas*, or second homes. Millions of urban residents—nearly every second family—possess land plots in the countryside, ranging from subsistence orchards with modest cabins to luxury manors with palaces. The authors estimate the dimension of this phenomenon and its impact on rural areas, seen from different points of view: demographical pressure, seasonal migration and weekend commuting, contribution to food production, etc. What is evident is that the *dachas*’ contribution to the Russian economy is extremely hard to quantify, similarly to the household plots of rural inhabitants (each of both categories estimated at some 16 million units). A typology of *dachas* is developed, proximity to cities being the main factor in their diversity and future: an expensive toy for the elite, or maybe a unique method of survival.

Table 1

Levels of rural development and agricultural development in the regions of Russian Federation.

Rural development	Agricultural development		
	Leaders	Average	Non-agricultural
High	Krasnodar Krai, Stavropol Krai, Belgorod Oblast, Republic of Tatarstan	Moscow Oblast, Leningrad Oblast, Kaliningrad Oblast	Khanty-Mansi AD, Yamalo-Nenets AD
Average	Kaluga Oblast, Tula Oblast, Altay Krai	Bryansk Oblast, Kursk Oblast, Republic of Bashkortostan	Republic of Karelia, Perm Krai, Sakha Republic (Yakutia)
Low	No example	Pskov Oblast, Kostroma Oblast, Republic of Ingushetia	Komi Republic, Tuva Republic, Chukotka AD

Note: AD—Autonomous district.

Source: Compiled by the author.

The authors cite the controversial impact of *dachas* on rural development: although it softens negative effects of depopulation, a massive sprawl of *dachniks'* settlements is hindering government efforts to centralize policy measures and support only the most promising strongholds. Regarding a controversial justification of *dachas'* existence, a fresh example comes to mind. During an electoral campaign, the Moscow City mayor complied with requests from many *dacha* settlements to pave access roads. Though these *dachas* are located in the other administrative region—the Moscow Oblast, the money from the Moscow City budget was used for this purpose taking into account the needs of one of the most active groups of voters—retired Muscovites, who prevail among the *dachniks*.

An extremely diverse regional pattern of rural development in contemporary Russia is evident. This is a multi-dimensional process, driven by different vectors. For instance, a big finding is that rural development as a complex evolutionary process, measured by the quality of life, does not necessarily match agricultural development. We tried to schematically express this bi-dimensional pattern (Table 1). One can argue whether all regions of the Russian Federation are correctly placed in this matrix, and not all cells have yet been filled in. Of course, a quantitative analysis is required to verify this hypothesis. But what is evident is that rural areas can prosper where agriculture is nearly non-existent, and also vice versa, that some “classical” agricultural regions are the most depressed.

After the 1990s, market reforms profoundly changed the centrally planned regional structure of what was left of Soviet agriculture. Optimization aiming at profitability brought about a strong regional concentration of agriculture, which benefited a dozen Russian regions with better natural conditions and advantageous geographical location relative to domestic and international markets. Profits from commercial cropping and animals grazing do not necessarily stay where they were generated, but, directly and/or indirectly, they have an impact on the socio-economic development of rural areas. That is the case with two southern regions of Russia, both being national breadbaskets,—Stavropol Krai and Krasnodar Krai. Rural development in these regions is discussed in two papers in this issue.

Aleksey Bobryshev, Andrey Baydakov, Olga Zvyagintseva, and Sergey Lugovskoy research the heterogeneity of rural areas of Stavropol Krai comparing statistical data by municipal districts and results of a pool of nearly 4,000 rural dwellers. A comparative study enabled to produce a typology of districts using as criteria the difference between an objective (based on statistical data on population, economy, land use, living conditions) and subjective assessment of well-being. This method seems quite productive for programs of rural development at a local level. E.g., if residents of rural settlements overestimate their well-being in comparison to objective social and economic assessment, they feel there are untapped resources for development, which could be used.

Along with Stavropol Krai, the neighboring region, Krasnodar Krai served for Renata Yanbykh, Valeriy Saraikin, and Olga Zvyagintseva as a polygon for sociological research of the management of so-called common resources on rural areas. This topic is quite interesting because of the vitality of Soviet legacy in the mentality of rural inhabitants, in the recent past nearly totally engaged in the *kolkhoz* or *sovkhoz* socialist agricultural enterprises. Sociologists have already proven that though the market economy was established almost three decades ago, the economic behavior of the workers of capitalist farms in many Russian regions still depends on socialist vestiges (Visser et al., 2019). A survey, carried out in two regions mentioned above, brought results that are very important for implementing rural development policy. Apparently, rural dwellers sometimes unreasonably rely on the aid “from above” and underestimate their ability to work together. The economic rationale to select priority directions for development of their settlements depends on age, household size, length of family residence, the period in the locality and other features.

Today it is hard to imagine a research of any social and economic process at a national level that does not include a comparison with other countries. Rural development in Russia is not unique and that explains why the paper on Chinese experience was included in this issue. The authors of this paper—Yuheng Li, Haowen Jia, Wei Xiao, and Alexey Naumov—focus on one of many very diverse parts of China—the Sichuan province, known for its special geographical features (a fertile inland basin in the middle course of the Yangtze river) and the role of one of the major agricultural regions of the country. The main goal of this research is to find out how geographical proximity is important for human capital valorization and improvement, which the authors consider a key tool for rural development. What is important, and what we have already learned from other papers by our Chinese colleagues, is that quantitative methods make rural development research reliable. These methods are applied not only to average statistics by provinces and districts, but also to individual data by each of millions of people, who are targeted by the state strategy of rural revitalization.

Six papers of this issue shed light only on a small part of the enormous field that is called rural development. This field still awaits dedicated research to cover its different aspects, diving into political economy, economics, sociology, and economic geography, etc. No doubt, most of their research will be human-centered, in line with the work of this issue’s authors. Because only those who live in the countryside, or use it as a ground for doing business, who escape from the cities or who simply relax on weekends, can decide the fate of rural areas and ultimately judge whether they should be assigned the role of resilient hideaways, or promising boosters of economic development.

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