

## **RURAL DYNAMICS IN LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES: A CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*During the past few decades, rural territories in Latin America have experienced profound changes as a result of productive, demographic and social transformations. The changes have been complex, spawning new approaches and points of view in response to the transformations. In the face of increasing complexity, a contemporary analysis of Latin American countries is proposed here. This analysis is based on empirical works and numerous case studies of rural territories in Argentina, Ecuador, Paraguay, Brazil, Mexico, and Chile, as well as the review of rural literature. This analysis contributes to the understanding of the complex processes of rural organisation, while also serving as a diagnostic tool to help define public policies that will promote a new type of rural development in the region.*

**Keywords:** Territory, Rural Development, Latin America

### **Introduction**

Rural territories in Latin America have experienced significant changes in terms of their production systems, as well as their social and demographic conditions, over the past few decades. These changes were accompanied by the emergence of a variety of approaches and

ways of thinking about rural areas, in addition to possible solutions to overcome stagnation and poverty. In times of change, multiple voices, points of view, and potential actions, generally appear.

However, the varied and changing situations in rural areas in Latin America constitute

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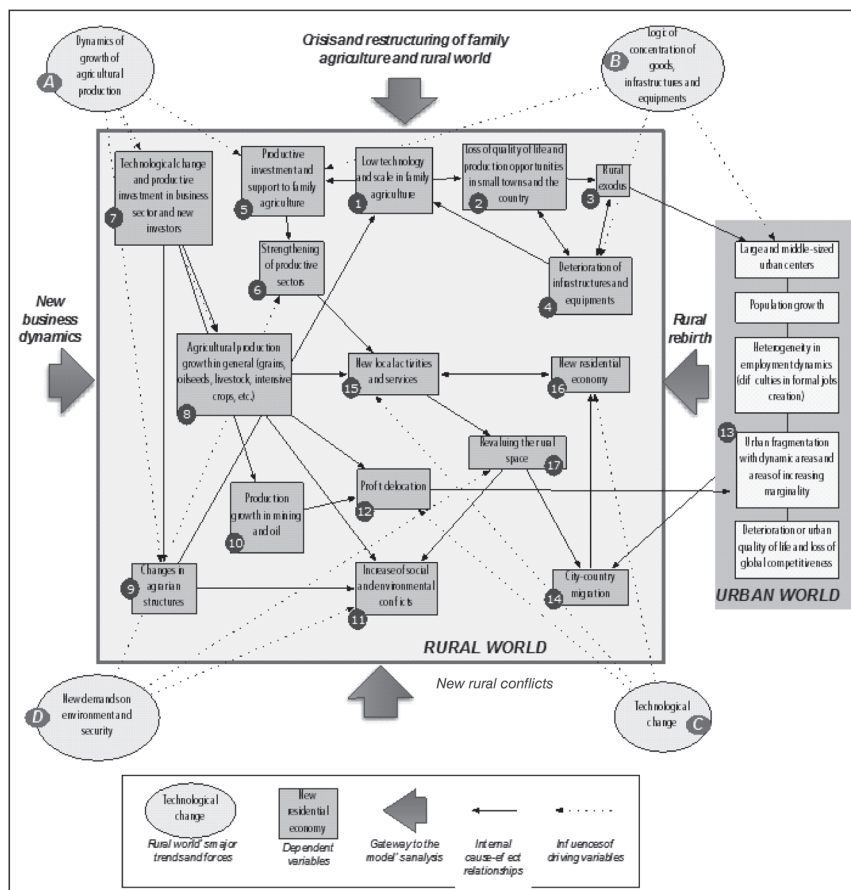
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a major difficulty so far as the diversity of situations makes it more difficult to correctly interpret them and take the necessary steps to solve structural problems (such as rural poverty and the degradation of natural resources), while also incorporating emergent factors such as the rise of non-farm rural employment, changing demands for the use of natural resources and shifting migration patterns from the city back to the country that are contributing to an incipient rural renaissance. As a result of the increasing complexity of rural areas, we propose to analyse

these territories and build a model to interpret the reality of rural areas, which will enable us to understand the complex dynamics that organise and structure rural territories in Latin America.

Our conceptual model of rural organisation and dynamics includes a set of concepts and relationships between phenomena that are meant to provide a complete view of the rural reality. In this sense, the model seeks to present a comprehensive view of the organisation of rural territories and the processes that affect them (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: The Rural Reality in Latin American Countries**

### **The Organisation and Dynamics of Rural Areas**

To understand the model, we must start with an analysis of the four global trends and forces of change that affect rural areas. Next, we review the four central themes, or gateways, which will enable us to observe the behaviour of each variable and its relationships to other variables. Each dependent variable is numbered in the model as well as in the text below:

#### ***The Driving Forces Behind Rural Change:***

These driving forces are global dynamics which consist of structural trends that affect how areas, specifically rural areas function. Four major forces can be identified:

We start with the growth of agricultural production. Having begun several decades ago, this dynamic is influenced by several factors. The first has been the increasing and persistent demand for primary products and agricultural foodstuffs in general (grains, oilseeds, meats, fruits and vegetables, as well as minerals and oil). Secondly, significant technological change has resulted not just from constant innovation in biology and genetics, but also in management and production systems in general. Third, the scale of production has changed substantially. Economic and financial conditions which were unfavourable to small production units encouraged ever larger-scale production as a means to sustain agricultural enterprises over time (Sili, 2007). This increase in the scale of production has been achieved mainly via the expansion of cultivated areas, as most dynamic firms rented or bought new land or opened up new areas, such as mountain slopes, forests and

wetlands. For example, grain and oilseed cultivation areas in Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia and Brazil doubled between 1987 and 2007, from 14 million hectares to 28 million hectares, while production rose from 26 million tonnes to 87 million tonnes in the same period. This continual growth has been supported by a strong discourse in favour of increased production, implicitly affirmed by successive governments. Organisations in the agricultural sector more explicitly espoused this view, setting a goal to reach 150 million tonnes of production. Essentially, this discourse sustains that continual growth and the resultant exports are the primary path to rural development, as well as to the country's development in general. These ideas have clearly informed various countries' production models in the agricultural sector. Thus, we can expect that they will continue to drive change in the medium and long-terms (Griffon, 2006 and Trueba, 2006).

The second force is the consolidation and concentration of goods, equipment and infrastructure in the most important rural towns. This process is associated with increasing scale and improving efficiency in the provision of services. Concentration of the population in the largest rural towns results in higher returns on investments in basic services (electricity, water, health, education) (World Bank, 2009), improving relative living standards compared to areas with a more dispersed rural population. This process supposes that increasing the concentration of resources in some areas is at the expense of others, thereby creating imbalances between them. It is evident that this phenomenon has led

to the depopulation of rural areas due to the lack of investment and low living standards, while congestion in the most populated areas as a result of the unexpected influx of people often exceeds the capacity for providing services (Sili, 2005). Rural population trends in Latin American countries provide a clear example of this: the region's rural population in 2015 is the same as it was in 1970 (120 million inhabitants, 43 per cent of total population), while in larger towns and cities where infrastructure is more concentrated, the population has risen by more than 215 per cent (CEPAL, 2015). The concentration of resources, infrastructure and equipment is sustained by a discourse on modernisation and growth of small and medium-sized towns, which is inspired by the hypothesis that only population growth can make infrastructure investment more efficient and create virtuous circles of accumulation.

Third, the transformation of transportation and communications is impacting rural areas. These changes affect not only the production system, but also contribute significantly to improving the quality of life of rural residents, reducing existing socio-economic differences between urban and rural inhabitants, and thereby tending to equalise living standards in both areas. Betancourt (2004) points out that the improvement of communications and transportation facilitates increased economic stability and access to better education and better information in rural communities, in addition to enhancing safety and facilitating connection to urban centres for the movement of people and goods. Improvements in quality and increased

access to communications and transportation may in turn contribute to improved living conditions in rural communities and encourage new inhabitants to settle in rural areas (World Bank, 2007).

Finally, the fourth force acting on rural areas is the increasing demand for greater personal security, environmental quality and healthier food. Over the past few decades, demands to preserve natural resources have increased. These demands have shifted from concerns raised by a minority of residents to echo throughout entire societies. Demands for environmental protection have given rise to political action by numerous groups and social movements (Melucci, 1999 and Castells, 2004). Examples include the fight for environmental conservation and against water pollution and the confrontations between these movements and activities like open-pit mining and cutting of native forests, among others. These important demands have emerged as a response to the increase in environmental conflicts in rural areas during the past few decades. The increasing demand for healthier food (including organic foods and those with a protected designation of origin) is also related to this new paradigm, which entails the regulation of the more massive kinds and methods of production (such as we see in grain, oilseed or genetically modified food production in general). A clear example of this phenomenon is the acreage dedicated to organic production in the region. "In Latin America, almost 4,00,000 farmers managed 6.8 million hectares of agricultural land organically in 2014. This area constituted 15 per cent of the world's organic

land and 1.1 per cent of the region's agricultural land" (The World of Organic Agriculture, 2016, p.30). In turn, demands for more personal security, which is assumed to exist in rural areas, in the face of situations of insecurity and even violence in urban areas, are also a key factor driving changes in preferences and strengthening a trend to revalue rural areas (Sili, 2005).

### **Gateways to the Understanding of the Rural Model**

In light of these structural forces, we turn to four central themes of analysis, which can be considered 'gateways' to our understanding of the rural model.

The first central theme or gateway to the model consists of the crisis in family farming<sup>1</sup> and the subsequent restructuring of production and rural areas. In fact, the crisis affecting family agriculture, which can be understood as the notable decline of this vast sector as a result of various factors and the consequent restructuring of the rural areas in which it occurs, has been a topic of interest for the past several decades in Latin America (Craviotti, 2014; World Bank, 2008; and Obstchanko et al., 2006). Family farms in Latin American countries evidence structural problems arising from the small size of farmers' landholdings. According to the FAO, the average family farm is 13 hectares in Latin America (FAO,

2014). The low level of technology employed, and difficulties related to commercialisation (1), which prevent them from increasing production and productivity and limit the market competitiveness of their production and traditional agricultural goods compared to farmers with larger landholdings and more capital. In the 1950s, family agriculture was practised by 90 per cent of the rural population; today it accounts for a little more than 50 per cent and is forecast to continue declining. These production conditions are combined with other problems typical of areas where family farming is highly concentrated, such as structural deficits of infrastructure and equipment (World Bank, 2007), which considerably diminish quality of life and production possibilities (2) (lack of or deterioration of roads, lack of electricity and water, low education levels, and problems accessing healthcare). This situation is most evident in rural areas where long distances between villages or to reach larger towns and the extremely low population density result in a very low provision of services, which in turn affects production and, especially, inhabitants' quality of life (Patagonia, Amazon, and mountainous regions). The low population density and the related lack of infrastructure clearly devalues rural areas as a place to live (Sili, 2010), generating a vicious circle of deterioration characterised by exodus to cities (3) and an increase in the deterioration of the few existing

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<sup>1</sup>Family and peasant agriculture consists of a broad universe comprising agricultural and forest producers, fishermen, and gatherers, with artisanal, agro-industrial or tourism activities. Families are directly responsible for production and management of agricultural activities; they produce for self-consumption, trading or selling at market. They reside on their farms or in a town nearby, predominantly employing family labour. The size of their landholdings differs greatly depending on the region and main activity, although productive resources are compatible with the family's labour capacity, current activity and the technology applied (FAO, 2014)

services and infrastructure (4), due to a lack of maintenance, thereby reducing the operational capacity of public services—especially schools and health centers, among others.

Nevertheless, considering this situation, opposing processes have emerged with the effect of reversing some of these trends. On account of multiple initiatives and strategies, from the public (rural development programmes), private (productive investments and linkages) and family (adaptation strategies) spheres, the structural problems of family agriculture and the rural areas where it is practised are being solved in many places. New rural infrastructure projects carried out by provincial/departmental governments or specific national public institutions and NGOs, plus new strategies for supporting commercialisation and technical assistance (provided by different institutions) have enabled thousands of small farmers to improve their capacity for production, transformation and commercialisation, creating new conditions and more virtuous circles of social and productive development (5). Pino (2013) shows how family farmers “have developed varied, multiple and diverse strategies of production and income sourcing, deployed through domestic dynamics by organising family labour, using available capital and activating a varied group of social connections (with the State).” Aranguren and Veiga (2013), Passamano (2013) and several other authors also present experiences in different countries, where families have developed multiple strategies, in many cases with the support of national and sub-national institutions, in order to adapt to the new conditions and improve their methods of

commercialisation, thus generating higher incomes.

Therefore, one cannot claim that all family agriculture and rural areas are immersed in structural crises, but rather we find a wide range of situations characterised by controversial and often opposing forces, where some sectors are in crisis pushing farmers to abandon their production in order to migrate or even simply changing from one business to another, while emerging sectors overcome poverty and stagnation (6). It is clear that these forces do not act in isolation; on the contrary, they connect with and feed back into the rest of the forces described in this section, in particular, interacting with the influence of new business interests, resulting in environmental and territorial conflicts. Clear examples of this predicament have emerged in Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Chile, etc., where rural/peasant communities sustain significant conflicts (centered around control of land) with economically dynamic business sectors associated with large-scale grain and oilseed production, or specialty sectors that produce sophisticated goods like wine (Chile) or flowers (Colombia and Ecuador), etc.

A second gateway for understanding the rural reality is framed by our analysis and comprehension of the business dynamics of the agricultural and agro-industrial sectors, arising from a new international price and demand scenario for primary products. Several authors and institutions have analysed this growth dynamic, including Hernández (2009), Gras and Hernández (2009), Guibert et al. (2011), and Guardia and

Tomarolli (2009), as well as the IICA-CEPAL-FAO (2010) and World Bank (2008). Generally speaking, they all point to the same factors as drivers of this new dynamic: technological changes in agriculture (new crop varieties, machinery, practices and inputs), management and commercialisation processes, the emergence of new players closely associated with the financial and services world (such as contractors, services and agricultural investment trusts) (Guibert et al., 2011) (7), and the increasing global demand for primary products (Quenan and Velut, 2014), all of which have contributed to create a highly encouraging environment for production and productivity growth. The past few decades provide evidence of this growth, which, in turn, consolidated a remarkable agricultural boom (Villagómez Velázquez et al., 2011) (8). It is clear that this growth in production has significantly impacted land organisation and tenure because numerous agricultural enterprises with strong financial support were carried out on deforested or desert lands, or in areas previously occupied by family producers, who were displaced through a variety of mechanisms. Taken as a whole, these factors generated a major agricultural restructuring in the region (Sili, 2011) (9).

This transformation has become evident in many rural areas in several countries: in the Pampas (Argentina), as well as in Brazil's Mato Grosso and Cerrados regions, and Chile's and Peru's central valleys. In these cases, production intensified due to the introduction of new technologies or the opening of new land for cultivation.

However, the specific characteristics of each territory, the strong dependence on international markets and the changing local political and macro-economic contexts affected the growth of the region's agricultural sector, making it very volatile and cyclical. Although the main production transformations in the rural world are related to the agricultural sector, it is impossible to omit the significant impact of mining and oil extraction (10). Investments that began in the 1990s, and picked up pace beginning in 2000, have had an impact throughout the Andean region (Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Perú, Ecuador, Colombia, México), creating important centres of production. In general, these new enterprises have been funded by foreign capital with very attractive tax and environmental concessions, which enable them to produce under highly favourable and profitable conditions (Vázquez and Mazzoni, 2004).

A third theme of analysis for understanding the organisation of rural territories is characterised by the rising presence of new environmental and territorial conflicts. Clearly, the expansion process analysed above has a spatial dimension, because growth has not only been the result of increasing productivity per hectare, but also, and firstly, the consequence of an accelerated move into new lands, mainly native forests that were deforested, or desert areas where new irrigation systems were introduced. The advance into new lands, evident in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Bolivia, Peru, Mexico and Colombia and the exploitation of new water

sources have generated numerous conflicts with family farmers, those displaced or without access to water as is seen in arid regions of Argentina, Chile and Peru, where newly capitalised wineries take and use groundwater at the expense of other farmers and/or communities. This also creates conflicts with the non-agricultural population, who suffer encroachment from new businesses that are not always respectful of local environmental values and conditions (e.g., pollution with agrochemicals or mining byproducts, deforestation and loss of biodiversity) (11). All these conflicts regarding the use and appropriation of natural resources (land and water) have been abundantly analysed in the cases of Argentina, Peru, Chile, and Bolivia, either by the scientific community or environmental and human rights NGOs (Manzanal et al., 2007; Manzanal, 2013; Sili, 2010; Iscaro et al., 2014).

In addition to the conflicts provoked by resource use, in many rural territories increased production has not, for the most part, resulted in rural development since investments have been accompanied by a constant process of profit relocation; in other words, the wealth produced was not reinvested in the areas where production took place. Thus, production growth, was not accompanied by rural development and a substantial improvement in quality of life. Several authors have clearly analysed this situation in Latin America in which poverty persists in rural areas, despite strong production growth occurring in those same areas (FAO, 2009; Guardia and Tornarolli, 2009). These authors present evidence that confirms that poverty persists in rural areas, especially poverty affecting families who depend

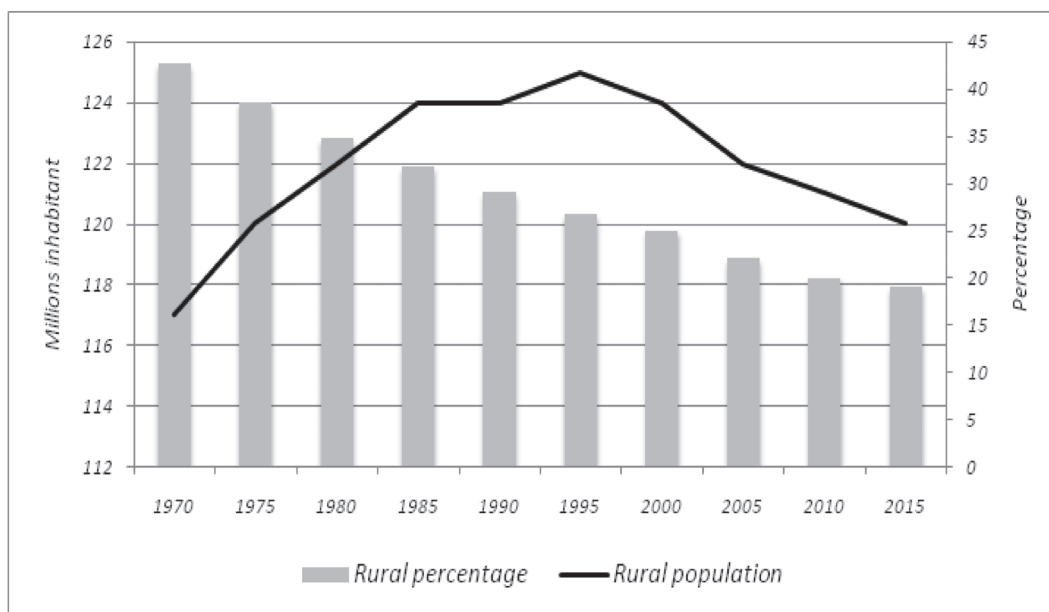
on agricultural employment, which is frequently informal in nature. Manzanal (2013) also advances in the same direction, offering evidence on the persistence and worsening of inequalities in Latin America, despite the remarkable process of economic growth that the region experienced during recent decades.

One example is the significant production growth in the newly opened rural regions (Amazonas, Northern Pampas, irrigated valleys in Peru): major investments in organising and enhancing agricultural landholdings and infrastructure and services related to them did not have a significant impact on these areas and towns as expected (12). On the contrary, increasing levels of poverty and marginalisation persist in spite of the agricultural boom. Only those places with more developed infrastructure and equipment, higher education levels, more transparent political systems and a high level of social homogeneity were able to translate the growth of agricultural production into substantial improvements in quality of life. Places without these conditions have rarely generated independent and widespread development, instead exhibiting profound socio-economic fragmentation where there are some winners and large marginalised sectors. This has also been the case in other areas that have historically lacked infrastructure and equipment. Therefore, as pointed out in Sili (2007), agricultural growth initiates rural development only in those places with pre-existing institutional strength, empowered economic actors and an appropriate distribution of territorial infrastructure and equipment.



One last dynamic that we would like to highlight as a mechanism for understanding rural transformation in Latin American countries is the ongoing process of demographic and social rebirth. Rural exodus has been present in the region from the mid-20th century onwards (Figure 2). However, the process of depopulation may have reached its final stage, and is now entering a new period of stabilisation of the rural population, and, in many cases, a demographic renaissance due to migration flows from the cities to the countryside and rural towns, a phenomenon not clearly visible yet in official statistics because of its low volume in aggregate

terms. This situation is observed in particular in small towns of up to 2,000 people in areas noted for their natural beauty, in coastal areas, along inland waterways and near major highways. This process does not mean that there are no longer areas in the country still affected by rural exodus, which is especially the case in areas with dispersed populations, but rather that the rate of depopulation and how it occurs has changed substantially and many areas are now experiencing newfound repopulation, which, for the most part, is not directly connected to agriculture, but instead to other occupations.



Source: CEPAL

**Figure 2: Rural Population in Latin American Countries, 1950-2015**

Several factors are behind this change. First, cities are undergoing a crisis, as seen in the relative loss of quality of life due to traffic congestion, lack of or crumbling infrastructure, and a dramatic increase in violence and marginalisation (World Bank, 2008; World Bank, 2009) (13). These factors have driven people to migrate from the largest cities to rural areas (14), especially to those areas near cities, or that exhibit natural beauty and a cleaner environment. Hundreds of cases exemplify this process through which artisans, professionals, tradespeople, entrepreneurs and pensioners are seeking a new lifestyle and connection with nature. This 'return' to rural areas (the country, villages or small towns) is complemented by the significant development of secondary residences or tourism in rural areas, also in pursuit of open spaces, close contact with nature and rural values.

A second factor that is contributing to the construction of a new 'rurality' is the establishment of different activities in rural areas, including new commercial activities, services for business and individuals, as well as hospitality services (15). The emergence of these activities is a response to the demands created by the expansion of primary production, the rising importance of agriculture and, above all, the increase in rural domestic consumption by both the local population as well as the new arrivals (16).

Therefore, the newly established activities, in addition to the steady or slightly growing rural population are creating a new dynamic in which rural spaces are being revalued—no longer seen

just as areas for production, but also, and sometimes out of necessity, as spaces for living (17). It is clear that this dynamic does not prevail equally throughout the country, but rather the existing processes vary widely. In some cases, these dynamics are strong and have the capacity to completely restructure rural territories. In other areas, these processes are incipient and have little capacity to drive any change of real importance.

Looking beyond the disparities and differences between different areas, what is clear is that new ways of social and territorial organisation have emerged, which allow us to ponder upon the construction of a new rural environment, very much different from the order established during the period of agricultural modernisation, which up until recent years was clearly organised and depended exclusively on the forces of agricultural production.

### **Beyond the Rural World**

In order to understand this model of how rural territories function, one must focus on the relationship between rural areas and small and medium-sized towns. During recent years, analysis of the country-city relationship has intensified, as the development of transportation and communications has connected the two spaces more forcefully, creating new concerns and problems. According to Satterthwaite and Tacoli (2006), small and medium-sized towns benefit rural areas in four ways:

- a) First, as market centres for local production, both for the local population as well as a platform for export to other places.

- b) Secondly, as centres for provision of goods and services to the region: in particular, health, education, banking, business and financial services.
- c) Third, as centres for development of non-agricultural rural activities, which are vital for the development of regional production.
- d) Fourth, as poles of attraction for new migrants to jobs in non-agricultural rural activities and residential services.

All these activities take place in small and medium-sized towns that are linked to a varying degree to the rural world. The complexity of the relationship is determined by each region's level of development and the town's size. In a broader context, however, what can be observed via the experience of different countries is a process of increasing integration of the country with the city, which in many cases has triggered a vicious circle of urban deterioration, fed by the transformation of rural areas.

Thus, during the past few decades in Latin American countries we have witnessed overall growth of the number of cities. For example, in 1950 there were 190 towns with a population between 20,000 and 50,000 people; by 2000, that number had increased to 1,112. Similarly, the number of cities with 50,000 to 100,000 people increased from 62 to 378 over the same period, cities with 1,00,000 to 500,000 people from 51 to 276, and, finally, cities with more than 5,00,000 from 62 in 1950 to 361 in 2000 (Da Cunha et al. 2009). Part of this growth is due to

migration flows from rural areas in general. The growth of towns with the closest connection to the rural world is partially due to the fact that the migration flows historically directed towards large and medium-sized cities (provincial capitals in particular), are now directed towards small towns, where migrants believe it will be simpler to find job opportunities, while remaining at a relatively short distance from their places of origin.

A few exceptions notwithstanding, the macro-economic conditions and economic dynamics in the towns that have experienced growth and immigration from the countryside have not been able to create enough formal and quality jobs at a rate sufficient to prevent poverty and marginalisation. In other words, their economies' capacity to create jobs is not sufficient to sustain the demographic growth generated by the combination of the town's own natural growth with the settling of new rural migrants.

Therefore, "Urban job markets show enormous gaps between the salaries of the better paid workers and those corresponding to the lowest paid workers, in addition to the high number of workers excluded from the formal job markets. Informal employment represents a large portion of total employment with the resulting limitations on worker's rights in terms of social security, working conditions and income levels" (Oporto, 2011).

Thus, what we observe in towns, regardless of their size, is population growth due to their own natural increase, but also to migration from the countryside, coupled with a rate of job creation unable to satisfy the total demand.

Together, these factors give rise to significant fragmentation and inequality in terms of income and opportunities for economic development.

The growth of towns also has profound consequences on the quality of life in general. The increasing demand for water, energy, transport, waste management, health and education services cannot always be satisfied by the towns on their own, resulting in poor living conditions in many areas. Towns thus face the extension of urban sprawl combined with significant fragmentation where overall quality of life depends on the applicability of different resource management models and the availability of financial mechanisms (which include private mechanisms to provide infrastructure in specific locations, such as gated communities). Therefore, given the low capacity to create jobs and the increasing difficulty of improving living conditions, most towns experience deterioration of social conditions and rising marginalisation, which feed new conflicts and occasional violence.

This situation, which is applicable to nearly the entirety of towns across Latin America, has driven, in turn, to a process of exodus towards rural areas, thereby contributing to the process of rural rebirth described earlier. Therefore, we can no longer conceptualise the country-city relationship as an unidirectional flow from the country to the city, but rather now must recognise the bidirectional migration flows and the accompanying bidirectional production and economic flows that are increasingly integrating both environments. Thus, a new model of

relationships emerges, which enables us to understand that dynamic towns cannot coexist with rural areas in crisis, just as dynamic rural areas cannot coexist with towns that lack the capacity to develop and offer a poor quality of life (Sili, 2007).

### **Conclusion**

Over the past two decades, changes in the international and national macro-economic contexts have enabled the consolidation of technological change and production growth in the agricultural sector across Latin American countries, as well as in other extractive activities (mining in particular). The process has been marked by a profound concentration of productive resources (land) and new forms of production management. Rural territories were thus relegated to the role of suppliers of primary products that were severely dependent on uncertain foreign markets. The effect was to marginalise family agriculture, which was historically responsible for dynamising social and economic life in rural areas.

Paradoxically, however, the same process of production growth and homogenisation of rural territories as a result of a greater participation in the world agricultural market, is also generating new ways of valuing resources (new activities, secondary residences, tourism, etc.), a new country-city relationship as a result of increased geographic mobility and technological change, and innovative cultural paradigms as reflected in new lifestyles and novel demands on society and the environment.

As a result of this dynamic, other activities have begun to gain relevance, modifying the predominant system of production and employment in many areas, and thus diversifying the rural economy and creating new linkages between production and employment. In some cases, these activities have even established virtuous circles of rural development.

The model presented here enables us to combine and observe all of these seemingly contradictory forces—production, social and

demographic changes, highlighting the multiple relationships established within the rural space and with towns of various sizes. However, the most striking point is that this model, in addition to offering a description and explanation of the processes of rural organisation and change, shows the multiplicity of bidirectional relationships between the variables, and between country and city, stressing the complexity of rural territories in this new historical context in Latin American countries.

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