

# Food systems: New-Ruralism versus New-Urbanism

Hossein Azadi,<sup>a\*</sup> Veronique Van Acker,<sup>a</sup> Kiumars Zarafshani<sup>b</sup> and Frank Witlox<sup>a</sup>

## Abstract

There is a growing debate on whether agricultural land in urban fringes should be maintained or converted to other uses. While 'pro-ruralists' believe agricultural land conversion can threaten food security and cause rural-urban migration, 'pro-urbanists' find it a necessary change for transition from a primitive agricultural-based community to an advanced industrial-based society which has the capacity to create mass productions. New-Ruralists follow an agricultural-based development approach that promotes small-medium farming and acknowledges rural lifestyle while New-Urbanists give a priority to large industrial-based sectors and encourage urban lifestyle. Given the unlike concerns of different societies, the paper concludes that the approaches might have different priorities in the less developed, developing, and developed world.

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**Keywords:** food supply; agro-ecosystem loss; agricultural land conversion; lifestyle

Since 2008, the world has passed a cut-off point where more people live in urban areas than in rural areas.<sup>1</sup> The concentration of people in densely populated urban areas, especially in developing countries, has currently heated up an ongoing debate on whether agro-ecosystems in urban fringe areas should be maintained or converted to other uses. Most fundamentally, 'land', unlike other agro-ecosystem elements, has special characteristics. To some extent, it is fixed in supply, as no more land can be created. Land is also a unique resource because it is neither importable nor replaceable while demand for it keeps increasing. Consequently, agricultural land conversion (ALC), by which land is converted from agricultural to urban uses, is happening intensively all over the world with much higher rates in emerging economies. As the most emergent economy, China experienced ALC at the rate of 802 ha day<sup>-1</sup> in 2004.<sup>2</sup> Even if the loss of agricultural land in the developed world is significantly less than in developing countries,<sup>3</sup> their rates of the converted land still remain as a warning as well. In Germany for instance, the rate was reported to be 114 ha day<sup>-1</sup> in 2006.<sup>2</sup> For further analysis of ALC in different countries according to their level of development, see the paper by Azadi and colleagues.<sup>3</sup>

Although ALC is a phenomenon that is almost unavoidable during economic development and periods of population growth,<sup>2</sup> uncontrolled land conversion has great impact on the environment in general and agro-ecosystems in particular. On the top of agro-ecosystems losses, the effects of ALC on the carbon footprint of the food supply are questionable. According to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment,<sup>4</sup> increasing ALC in urban fringe areas has not only put additional pressure on natural habitats and ecosystem services but also has resulted in higher energy use for food transport and marketing. Such impacts have greatly decreased carbon storage capacity in urban areas and count for a large part of the extra CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the conversion often damages water-regulating services, like evapo-transpiration and water retention,<sup>6</sup> which can threaten food production systems.

Such important arguments have brought up an increasingly heated debate on whether agricultural land in urban fringes should be maintained or might be converted to other uses. This debate can be shown in a pro-ruralism-pro-urbanism continuum.<sup>3</sup> In the pro-ruralists' view, ALC has negative impacts not only on agro-ecosystem losses, but also on agricultural jobs and rural-urban migrations. Consequently, it would significantly affect agricultural productions and threaten food security. Pro-ruralists conclude that agricultural lands should be maintained to secure food production. In their view, the urbanisation process is destructive and should urgently be stopped. On the other hand, pro-urbanists optimistically find the process constructive. They welcome it not only because the possible losses on the environment and agro-ecosystems can be avoided but also as it is a necessary change for transition from a primitive agricultural-based community to an advanced industrial-based society which has the capacity to create mass productions, most importantly food. They argue that land conversion is a logical consequence of urban sprawl and the decline of agricultural production can be compensated by using modern technologies and capital-intensive production techniques in our food production chain.<sup>7</sup> Hence, in their view, ALC is neither considered as a threat for agro-ecosystems nor for food security.

The 'rural-bias' school holds the ideology of 'anti-urbanism' while the 'urban-bias' goes for 'anti-ruralism'.<sup>8</sup> Such a traditional rural-urban antagonism<sup>9</sup> might be traced to the Marxist analysis of antagonistic class contradictions between 'city and

\* Correspondence to: Hossein Azadi, Department of Geography, Ghent University, Belgium. E-mail: hossein.azadi@ugent.be

<sup>a</sup> Department of Geography, Ghent University, Belgium

<sup>b</sup> Department of Agricultural Extension and Rural Development, Razi University, Iran

**Table 1.** Comparison of New-Ruralism and New-Urbanism

Element	New-Ruralism	New-Urbanism
Philosophical roots	Participatorism	Post-modernism
Proponents	Environmentalists	Architectures
Goal	Sustaining rural areas	Sustaining urban areas
Main commitment to	Agro-ecosystems	Cities
Development	Agricultural-based	Industrial-based
Promotes	Small–medium size farming	Industrial agriculture
Encourages	Rural lifestyle	Urban lifestyle
Extending	Low density peripherals	High-density centres
Society	Produce less, consume less	Produce more, consume more
Gardening	House is built in a garden	Garden is built in the house
Main target group	Farmers (active producers)	Urban residents (passive consumers)
Main foods served	Slow-foods	Fast-foods
Foods sort	Organic, fresh, tasty, low processed	Non-organic, stale, tasteless, high processed
Migration orientation	Urban–rural	Rural–urban
Tourism-based	Nature-made	Human-made
Travel	Pedestrian/biking-based	Automobile-based

countryside<sup>10</sup> that embodied various forms of urban dominance and exploitation.<sup>11,12</sup> The countryside was politically ruled, economically exploited, and culturally oppressed for the benefits of the city. The city was seen as a political centre where the ruling elite would impose some laws onto peasants; an economic centre where rural taxes would be collected and agricultural surplus would be absorbed; and a parasitic centre of consumption where capitalism could take shape.<sup>7</sup>

The traditional rural–urban antagonism has recently been replaced by a new rural–urban debate; i.e. the New-Ruralism–New-Urbanism continuum. In the new continuum, both the schools agree with the fact that greater population asks for the expansion of built-up areas that can threaten agro-ecosystems. However, each school holds its own priorities (Table 1).

The emergence of New-Ruralism by Sibella Kraus<sup>13</sup> is an attempt to draw attention to the rural side of urban–rural interdependencies. She reasons that urban residents are increasingly overfed and undernourished, disconnected from rural and natural surroundings. Although Kraus does not introduce any clear philosophical root, New-Ruralism shows a closer correspondence to ‘participatorism’ as it tries to include architects, planners, developers, and policymakers; all paying close attention to farmers<sup>14</sup> as a marginalised group in the view of New-Urbanists who mainly originate from the ‘post-modernism’ theory. Accordingly, most of the New-Ruralism’s proponents are environmentalists whose main goal is to sustain rural areas compared to architectures in the New-Urbanism (also called ‘smart growth’) who seek for sustaining urban areas. Consequently, the main commitment of the New-Ruralists is ‘conserving agro-ecosystems’ in comparison with ‘developing cities’ in the view of the New-Urbanists. The first group follows an agricultural-based development approach that promotes small–medium farming<sup>13</sup> and acknowledges the rural lifestyle, while the second gives a priority to large industrial-based sectors and encourages the urban lifestyle. Furthermore, the first group tries to extend low-density peripheral communities that might produce and consume less, whilst the second focuses on high-density centres that often go for mass productions for huge populations that consume a lot. In the New-Ruralists’ view, a house should be built in a garden, while the New-Urbanists try to add a garden when designing a house. The first group takes great care

of farmers not only as active producers, but also as conservators of a valuable heritage<sup>14</sup> compared to urban residents who are often passive consumers in the view of the second group. The main foods served in the New-Ruralism are ‘slow-foods’ which are mostly organic, fresh, tasty, and low processed, in contrast with the ‘fast-foods’ which are often non-organic, stale, tasteless, and highly processed in the New-Urbanism. In the New-Ruralists’ thoughts, an urban–rural migration is expected whereas a reverse migration from rural to urban areas often happens in the New-Urbanism. The tourism sector in the New-Ruralism is mainly ‘nature-made’ while the sector is mainly ‘human-made’ in the New-Urbanism. Also, the transportation sector is mostly formed based on pedestrian/biking in the view of the first group compared to automobile-based traveling in the view of the second group.<sup>15</sup>

While the elements of this comparison can be extended, it remains questionable whether a society should go for New-Ruralism or New-Urbanism. Considering climate change and growing environmental concerns, the New-Ruralism seems a better answer while the ever-growing population may demand facilities provided by the New-Urbanism. Accordingly, policy makers need to make their choice based on the priority of their society. For a given society, the mitigation of environmental pollutions might be a preferred choice while other societies might need to answer urgently to basic demands of their high population growth. As a result, the approaches might have different priorities for less developed, developing, and developed world. The latter has already reached mass productions and low rates of population growth. Therefore, the Western world may prefer to focus more on improving the quality of productions and human and environment health by following the New-Ruralism’s view while the less developed world might still suffer much from famines and low production quantities. Indeed, we cannot neglect, for example, the current famine in the Horn of Africa and ideally ask policy makers in that region to regulate their development policies<sup>16</sup> based upon the New-Ruralism. As for the emerging economies, China for example, which could now reach high economic growth rates and mass productions, needs urgently to mitigate its environmental pollutions<sup>17</sup> by approaching the New-Ruralism.

Nevertheless, many developing countries might prefer to stay rather in the old ruralism to keep their population in the

countryside because of the lack of job opportunities in urban areas. For them, the New-Urbanism with a large rural–urban migration can lead migrants to live in poverty and slums, and end up with food insecurity and increased crime. Examples include agri-rural economy-based societies (in sub-Saharan Africa for instance), in which the majority of the population live in rural areas and their income and employment depend almost entirely on rain-fed agriculture. In this situation, the rural–urban migration, the capacity of industrial and agricultural sectors to create job opportunities, and technological levels of the agricultural sector to produce enough food are important questions facing policy makers in less developed and developing countries.<sup>18</sup>

While both the approaches are popping up, due to the possibilities offered by each, societies will need to make some important choices about the type of the world they wish to build.<sup>19</sup> Politicians in the less developed world are still dealing seriously with a crucial question on how they can feed and accommodate the increasing population of the hungry<sup>20</sup> while the main concern of the developed world and emerging economies might be the mitigation of environmental pollution. It is therefore important to think less ideally and more practically and respect critical and emergent needs of different societies and make our best choice accordingly.

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