

Rural-Urban Continuum: Meaning and Definitions:

Rural-urban continuum, the merging of town and country, a term used in recognition of the fact that in general there is rarely, either physically or socially, a sharp division, a clearly marked boundary between the two, with one part of the population wholly urban, the other wholly rural.

According to Professor A. R. Desai, 'Social life in the country-side moves and develops in a rural setting just as social life in the urban area moves and develops in an urban setting, their respective settings considerably determine rural and urban social life.'

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From the analytical point of view, the characteristics of these two modes of living are represented by two concepts namely 'ruralism' and 'urbanism.' Ruralism signifies the rural mode of living in which there is predominance of traditions, customs, and folk culture and joint family. On the other hand, urbanism signifies the urban mode of living in which there is predominance of impersonal relations, individualism and secondary associations.

The rural social world is different from the urban social world. There is a valid distinction between village and city in terms of two different ethos of life, cultural patterns, socio-cultural groupings and modes of earning and livelihood.

However, there are also structural similarities between the two with regard to the patterns of caste, kinship, rules of marriages, observance of religious practices, migrations, educational institutions, employment opportunities and administration are the other institutional sources of linkages between villages and cities. Thus, villages and towns cannot be seen simply as dichotomous entities. They are interlinked and yet distinct from each other.

The concept of rural-urban continuum is based on the assumption of rural-urban differences. According to G. V. Fuguitt, 'If rural-urban sociology is to continue a specialized sub-field and has a meaningful conceptual basis, the need for a new orientation is evident.'

Professor Bertrand made the following observation: 'Proponents of the continuum theory feel that rural-urban differences occur in a relative degree in a range extending between two polar extremes of rural and urban.'

The continuum theory lays emphasis on the rural-urban differences rather than on the rural-urban dichotomy. Irrespective of the course of evolution, distinction can be drawn between rural and urban way of life.

The difference between urban centres and rural areas may seem so obvious that the definitions should not be an issue. However, there can be major variations in the ways in which different nations define what is an urban centre. The criteria used include population size and density, and the availability of services such as the secondary schools, hospitals and banks.

However, the combination of criteria applied can vary greatly. Even the population thresholds used can be different: for many African nations, it is 5,000 inhabitants, while for most Latin American and European nations, it can be as low as 2,000 or 2,500, or even just a few hundred inhabitants.

This wide fluctuation in definitions has three important implications:

i. Official classifications should be treated with caution—for example, a large proportion of settlements classed as ‘rural’ in China and India would fall within the ‘urban’ category, if they used the criteria and population thresholds adopted by many other countries. Given the size of the population of these two countries, this would significantly increase the overall proportion of urban residents in Asia and in the world.

ii. International comparisons are difficult, as they may look at settlements which, despite being classed in the same category, may be very different in both population size and infrastructure. In addition, the reliability of data on urbanization trends within one nation can be compromised by changes in the definition of urban centres over time.

iii. Public investment in services and infrastructure tends to concentrate on the centres that are defined as urban. As a consequence, investment can bypass settlements not defined as urban even if these can, and often do, have an important ‘urban’ role in the development of the surrounding rural areas. Within national and regional urban systems, larger cities also tend to be favoured with public investment over small- and intermediate-sized urban centres, including those with important roles in supporting agricultural production, processing and marketing.