

Rural Revitalization: The Magic Solution to the Rural Crisis in Africa?

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ABSTRACT

“Planning shapes places where people live and work and country, we live in. it plays a key role in supporting the Government’s wider social, environmental and economic objectives and for sustainable communities^[1] (Statement printed on cover pages of all Planning Policy Statements (PPS) issued by CLG, indicative of the current expected scope of planning in UK (cited in Davoudi, 2009 p.9)

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Rural areas are the focus of this paper. The paper discusses challenges facing rural areas in developing countries generally and Africa specifically, and endeavours to provide plausible solutions with a view to realizing accelerated and sustained transformation of rural areas for the benefit of the current and future generations within the framework of the United Nations Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015) and other enabling policy frameworks.

The term “rural” refers generally to areas of open country with small settlements (Dasgupta *et al*, 2014). The Oxford Dictionary describe term ‘rural’ as areas connected with the countryside. On the other hand, USA’s Rural Health Information Hub (RHlhub) describe rural areas as encompassing all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area.

It is estimated that about 54% of global population reside in urban areas (UN-Habitat, 2016). Dasgupta *et al*.(2014) observed that nearly half of the world’s population reside in rural areas and about 70-90% of the rural population live in developing countries. Africa is characterized by low level of urbanization but high rate of urbanization. Kenya’s level of urbanization was estimated to be 28.4% in 2021. This implies therefore that about 71.6% of Kenyans still live in rural areas. Rural areas are therefore still home to a significant proportion of the developing countries population, and hence the need for their revitalization.

Rural areas globally are, however, in a crisis as reported by IFPRI (2019). The global rural crisis takes diverse forms including: widespread poverty occasioned by cultural practices, climate change, market factors, poor public policies; gender factors; among others. IFPRIL (2019) reports further that rural environments lack basic services such as education; health; roads; water and sanitation; and suffer from rising pollution levels and dwindling natural resources. The advent of climate change has played an integral role in making the rural crisis worse. Other elements of the global rural crisis include: landlessness, limited employment opportunities, energy poverty, inadequate housing, lack of basic facilities for the elderly and persons with disabilities, among others.

While the global rural crisis is not in dispute, the situation is dire in developing countries generally, and Africa particularly. It is against this backdrop that the call for rural revitalization has continued to receive increasing attention in both developed and developing countries. The UNDP describe rural revitalization as a way of positively transforming rural areas for present and future generations.

Objectives

The objectives of this discussion paper are to:

1. Interrogate the rural crisis in African countries generally, and Kenya particularly
2. Suggest plausible strategies for rural revitalization with a view to ameliorating the existing situation

METHODOLOGY

This paper relied on desk-based systematic review of literature on rural revitalization focusing on both global perspective and local perspectives. Best Practices in rural revitalization were also consulted. The study adopted descriptive research design informed by secondary data

Objective 1: The State of Rural Areas

Rural areas can be conceptualized as an arena comprising of complex system of systems. The various systems in the rural arena can be categorized into 5 main but interrelated settings viz: ecological, economic, social, infrastructural and institutional. The ecological setting comprises of the complex physical and biological environment and their associated processes. The social setting is about people and their social and cultural practices; the economic setting is all about economic activities that people are involved in including production and consumption patterns; the infrastructural setting covers infrastructure such as road network, water supply and sanitation, energy, irrigation systems, communication networks, among others. The institutional setting on the other hand comprises of policies, statutes, regulations, and organizations. Figure 1 show the diagrammatic representation of the rural arena.

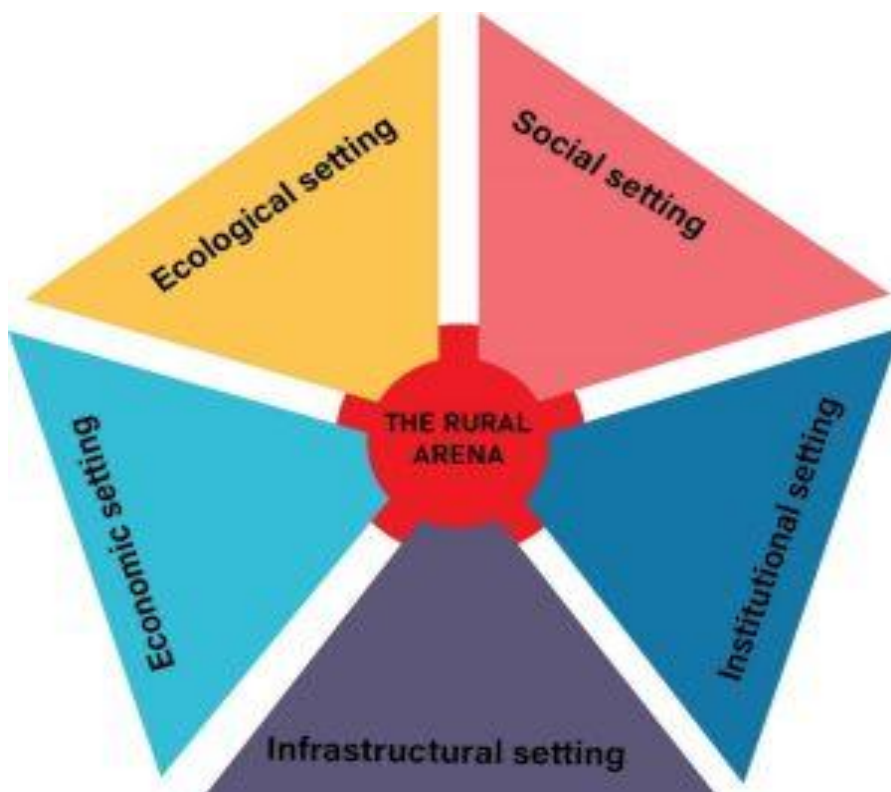


Figure 1: The Rural Arena designed by Nyamweno and Samburu

Rural areas in developing countries are characterized by dependence on agricultural and natural resources, high prevalence of poverty, isolation and marginality, neglect by policy makers, and lower human development as reported by Dasgupta *et al* (2014). In Kenya, smallholder farming accounts for 70% of maize production, 65% of coffee, 50% of tea production, 80% milk production, 85% fish production and 70% beef and other products as reported by Kweyu (2017). This implies; therefore, rural revitalization will involve significant interventions in smallholder farming.

Rural Poverty and Poor Quality of Life

Poverty is said to be as old as mankind and its eradication has remained a central issue in global political, social and economic discussions (Emife and Emeka, 2020). Poverty is said to be the most humiliating form of human suffering and takes diverse forms including: starvation and malnutrition, lack of money, lack of shelter and clothing, lack of access to potable water and improved sanitation, lack of access to quality education and healthcare, powerlessness etc. Emife and Emeka (2020) established that majority (73%) of the people living in Sub-Saharan Africa do not have access to improved sanitation. Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is the only region in the world where poverty, in terms of proportion of the poor, has been rising over time and where the poor are relatively worse off than their counterparts in other parts of the world (SESRTCIC, 2007). The rural poor bear a disproportionate burden of poverty, malnutrition and generally poor quality of life as reported by IFPRI, 2019. The global rural poverty rate is estimated to be 17% while the urban poverty rate is estimated to be 7% (IFPRI, 2019). Rural people comprise of 70% of the world's population considered to be living in extreme poverty. Rural areas are also lagging behind urban areas in reducing rates of child stunting (low height for age). About 17 million Kenyans suffer chronic food insecurity and malnutrition (IFAD, 2022).

Infrastructure in insufficient quantities and qualities

Infrastructure is herein considered to include roads, irrigation systems, water supply and sanitation, energy, information and communication technology (ICT) (African Monitor, 2012). Infrastructure is arguably the key to the transformation of regions. Queiroz et al, 1992 (World Bank Working Paper) established that there is a strong correlation between investment in infrastructure and Per Capita Gross National Product. Significant investment in other infrastructure facilities (energy, water supply, telecommunications, railway etc) similarly translates into high Per Capita Gross National Product. Queiroz *et al* (1992) established that there is strong correlation between the length of paved roads (LPR) and Per Capita Gross National Product (PGNP) $PGNP = 1.39 (LPR)$

While there is compelling evidence that interventions in various types of infrastructure stimulates development at various levels, the current state of infrastructure development in developing countries is wanting. The African Monitor (2012) for instance reported that majority of Africa's rural communities are characterized by inadequate and unreliable infrastructure facilities and services. Only 34% of rural Africans live within a distance of 2 Kilometers of an all-season road compared to 65% in other developed regions as reported by Torero and Chowdhury (2005). The African Continental Infrastructure initiatives failed to give priority to rural infrastructure that is overshadowed by mega projects as reported in the African Monitor report of 2012. Inadequate access to water services and sanitation associated with poor hygiene practices continue to kill millions of people in rural areas of developing countries especially in Africa (Kamba, Sangija and Wei, 2016). Kamba, Sangija and Wei (2016) also reported that in the Central Republic of Africa, scattered rural resettlements do not have access to reliable water supply and the situation is worse during dry spells when households have no alternative other than fetch water from unprotected sources (lakes, rivers, wells and springs) for domestic use. The situation is the same in Kenya where AMCOW Country Status report of 2011 indicated that piped water coverage (household connections) in rural areas of Kenya remained limited. The situation may have improved by now but not significantly considering that the population has been increasing with corresponding increase in demand for water. While access to modern energy is central to rural revitalization, developing have continued to struggle with low electrification rates in rural areas as reported by Abdullah and Markandya (2009).

Challenges Facing Aging Rural Population

Rural and remote areas in many countries are home to more pronounced ageing population compared to urban areas (UNECE, 2017). Consequently, rural areas have more elderly persons than urban areas (UNECE, 2017). The elderly population in rural areas face a myriad of challenges including: inhospitable terrain; reduced mobility, social isolation, lack of access to social and healthcare services due to the scattered nature of rural human settlements (Currie and Philip, 2019). UNECE (2017) reported that rural areas are characterized by low population density and the elderly are more geographical dispersed, a situation that militates against effective delivery of services to elderly people. Rural areas are also said to be economically disadvantaged and by

extension rural elderly people are economically disadvantaged as reported by UNECE (2017).

Challenges Facing Persons with Disabilities (PWDs)

According to the existing body of knowledge (WHO and World Bank) the world is home to 10-15% of persons with disabilities (PWDs) and 80% of these are living in developing countries as reported by Uromi and Mazagwa (2014). It is also estimated that 20% of people living in extreme poverty are persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities who live in rural areas face unique challenges in the society especially when it comes to accessing health services (Grut. Braathen and Ingstad, 2012) due to multiple factors that unfold and interplay throughout a person's life.

Rural Landlessness and land fragmentation

Landlessness is the quality or state of being without land, without access to land, or without having private ownership of land (UIA, 2022). The term landlessness is also used to refer to people who do not have any land for farming or who are prevented from owning the land that they farm by the economic system or by rich people who own a lot of land (Cambridge University, 2022). While land is a factor of production which should be available to all, there is compelling evidence that some rural households are landless while others have land in abundance. Shafe and Tadesse (2021) for instance reported that landlessness is a common reality in rural areas of Ethiopia. Food insecurity. Chowdhury and Baten (2010) also reported that landlessness is a reality among some rural farmers and farm labourers in Bangladesh, a situation that impacts negatively on access to food. Nayenga (2003) argues that landlessness is one of the frequently cited causes of poverty in Uganda. Once landless, the chronically poor are said to be exposed to interlocked factors that push them further into poverty (Nayenga, 2003). Access to land is highly skewed in Kenya too where some have it in abundance and others are landless

Energy poverty

The energy poor encompass between a billion and a quarter and three billion people who do not have access to beneficial energy for their cooking, illumination, or mechanical needs (Guruswamy, 2011). Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has the lowest energy access rates in the world. Electricity reaches only about half of its people, while clean cooking only one-third; roughly 600 million people lack electricity and 890 million cook with traditional fuels (IEA, 2018). Thirteen countries in SSA have less than 25% access, compared to only one in developing Asia (World Bank, 2018)

Climate Change- Climate change is considered to be one of the most important long-term issues facing the world today. It is described as a complex biophysical process which encompasses long term weather patterns such as increased average temperatures, precipitation changes, sea-level rise, and other associated changes. It required both mitigation and adaptation as reported by Fleischhauer (2008). Climate change has exacerbated rural crises in various fronts: poor agricultural productivity associated with unpredictable weather patterns; upsurge of vector-borne diseases; floods that destroy rural infrastructure and property; among others. Unfortunately, the poor rural communities are the worst hit as they lack appropriate climate change adaptation mechanisms.

Slowing Agricultural Productivity

The existing body of knowledge show that agricultural productivity has been declining over time. The World Bank Report of 2008 claimed that annual growth rates in yields of rice, maize and wheat had slowed down sharply since the 1980s. Alston *et al* (2009) also reported that between 1961-1990 and 1990-2007, yield growth rates for maize, rice, wheat and soyabeans had halved globally. Both land and labor productivity has also been declining as a result of declining growth rates in public spending on agricultural research and development. Climate change is also a key factor in drastic reduction in agricultural productivity. Kenya's agriculture is mainly rain-fed and only 2% of the country's agriculture is under irrigation as reported by IFAD (2022).

The multi-dimensional nature of Africa's rural crisis is presented in figure 2



Figure 2: The Rural Crisis as presented by Nyamweno and Samburu

Objective 2: Rural Revitalization and Development

Rural revitalization is arguably the key to the crises witnessed in rural areas. This involves positive transformation of rural areas for the benefit of current and future generations. Rural development is the process of improving the wellbeing of the people in rural areas (Kweyu, 2017). Rural development process involves problem analysis, identification of available resources, and effectively utilizing those resources to provide sustainable solutions to the problems (Kweyu, 2017). Rural revitalization programmes have been planned and implemented in various countries with varying degrees of success. China for instance is reported to have developed and implemented rural revitalization policies (Liu and Yang, 2020). China adopted the urban-rural integration model as a strategy for revitalization of her rural areas.

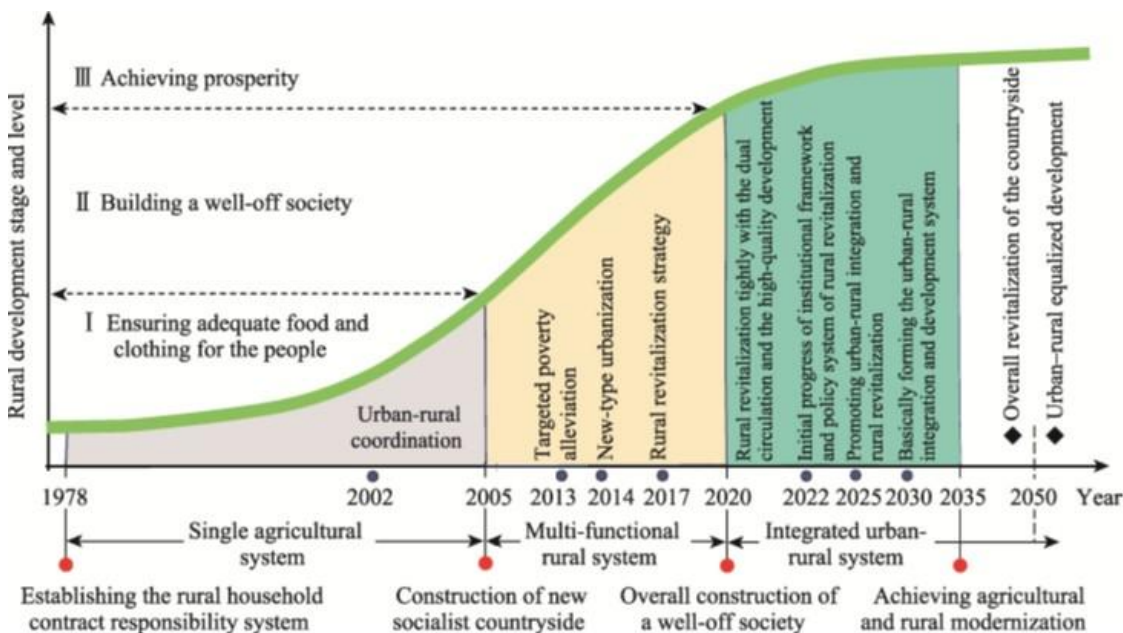


Figure 3: The rural development stages and levels in China from 1978 to 2050

China focused on five key areas in her effort to achieve rural revitalization and development. These are: rural civilization, industrial prosperity, ecological livability, effective governance, prosperous life as shown in figure 4



Figure 4: China's five key objectives and focus areas for rural revitalization

Public Policies and Strategies: Key to rural revitalization and development are responsive public policies and strategies which do not only provide the roadmap but also allocates resources for the same.

Strengthening Rural-Urban Linkages

Urban areas and cities are arguably engines for rural development as they act as growth poles. They provide a market for agricultural commodities produced in rural areas while simultaneously serving as sources of the inputs required for various forms of production in rural areas. The relationship between rural and urban areas should be symbiotic in nature and therefore both should benefit from each other. IFPRI 2019 described rurbanomics as the new approach to ensuring integrated development for urban and rural areas. Rurbanomics aims to achieve equalized development in urban and rural areas. Rurbanomics is an approach to revitalization that frames rural economies as equal partners with urban economies, emphasizing the vitality of rural economies (Achim and Shenggen, 2019). Forging links between rural and urban economies, not only with megacities but also with smaller towns and cities, will play a major role in revitalization, particularly in improving employment opportunities to boost rural incomes and rural-urban market links that can provide both urban and rural populations with healthy diets (Achim and Shenggen, 2019). Rural revitalization will also require investments in the off-farm and nonfarm sectors, information and communication technologies, education, governance, rural health, and a healthy environment. These building blocks can create vibrant rural areas that can attract and retain employed, educated, and healthy rural residents.

Infrastructure Provision and Management: Rural revitalization and development require significant investment in infrastructure of all types- roads, electricity, water supply and sanitation. Emphasis should be placed on inclusive infrastructure whose motto is “leave-no-one behind”.

Education and Healthcare: Access to education and healthcare is critical for rural revitalization and development. This may be achieved through Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and education for all programmes.

Physical and Land Use Planning: Deliberate effort should be paid to the physical and land use planning of rural areas especially the rural market centres which are the immediate places available to rural communities for low level services

The Elderly and Persons with Disabilities: Affirmative action should be taken to ensure that the aging population and persons with disabilities in rural areas live and enjoy decent lives. They are also disadvantaged in many ways both economically and socially.

CONCLUSIONS

Rural areas are critical to the development of urban areas and cities

Rural revitalization is the way forward if developing countries must achieve balanced development in both urban and rural areas. This will make rural areas more attractive to all

RECOMMENDATIONS

All developing countries should develop a framework for ‘accelerated and sustained rural revitalization ‘with clear implementation framework

More attention should be paid to revitalization of rural areas through planning and ensuring enhanced public financing

Partnership for rural development should be strengthened in line with the Sustainable Development Goal number 17

The World Rural Development Day should be launched at the level of United Nations to provide opportunity for countries to focus more on rural areas

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FOOTNOTES

[1] Statement printed on cover pages of all Planning Policy Statements (PPS) issued by CLG, indicative of the current expected scope of planning in UK (cited in Davoudi, 2009 p.9)