

Foundational Economy and Regulation for Sustainability: from “Rurbanisation” to Rural Futurism

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Abstract

Sustainability provides another framework of understating the duality between urban and rural development. While the rural space has been generally perceived as a passive and slow adaptor of urban quality of life, rural development has its own logic, pace and strategy. Urban areas are characterized by disruptions, focal points of development, innovation, dynamism and lack of animals. These values try to make the best for sustainability which is perceived as a next step for the civilized world. Despite this rather logical perspective, the argument of this article is that rural areas are natural starting points for sustainability due to prudent actions, a conservative model of governance, social care (non-alienation), protection of bio-diversity, etc. The structure of the argument is to present what mainstream sustainability is, map out sustainability actions and solutions as far as now, and present from a conceptual point of view what sustainability could be from a foundational economy and regulatory perspectives. Our conclusion reads that rurbanisation in sustainability has its backsides, while a new paradigm of rural futurism should be followed for future developments in the area of sustainability for a new paradigm.

Key words: *agricultural economics, rurbanisation, rural futurism, sustainability*

JEL classification: *Q56, R00, A12*

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1. Introduction

Maximization of financial profits came at the expense of environment, work-life balance and the limited resources, generating a trilemma with various options between financial and non-financial equilibrium. The narrative around People Planet

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Profit (PPP) discourse in whatever world order, attributing different weights to different priority, found recent advancements in climate resilience, social responsibility and a new type of economic efficacy. Gradually, since the 1970s when the Stockholm Declaration enlisted 26 principles of environmental diplomacy and industrialization, continuing with the important work of the Club of Rome and the Brundtland Commission, environment, industrial growth and democracy were linked together. Nowadays, as a conceptual framework was set, different programmers and legislations like the US, EU and Chinese Green Deals, Net Zero Industry Act, Corporate Social Responsibility Directive, various measures on agri-environment-climate keeping air, water and land clean are into force.

This transitory period towards sustainability, looks like a voluntary pro-stasis for public good putting economic growth in its classical form on hold, transitioning for a new type. Economists and politicians look at this momentum from a resilience perspective, putting forward almost a futuristic perspective and asymptotic views (Gordon, Todorova, 2019). Not losing momentum when the chance in given for a fresh start is also part of sustainable thinking and action.

This article considers that sustainability is in danger of being captured and engaged in a top-down regulatory arrangement, which is at its very best a political compromise, getting governmental authorities in command and control for self-assumed higher public benefits. This mainstream vision can be falsifiable, taken into consideration the other natural options available for a bottom-up approach, self-regulatory spaces, the interactions between blue and green type of economies. The rural areas a more natural point to start a new paradigm compared to the urban areas.

Next, our argument is structured by presenting a literature review on mapping out present sustainability practice from a rural point of view, data, core values and future developments, with the purpose of wrapping sustainability in a foundational economy model. The applied research will take into consideration Romania's rural areas in terms of economy, population and policy in a data analysis format to drawn on conclusions and further discussions. The authors main argument is that sustainability should be part of foundational economy and regulation in order to make impossible green washing. Also, for better results sustainability should approach rural development from a different perspective, create a self-regulatory space, which can be another departing point, as villages have in-build sustainable characteristics like nature conservation, protection of bio-diversity and its own governance models. In this respect a better differentiation should be done between urban and rural aspects of sustainability.

2. Academic literature review

The process of urbanisation represents one of the main features of modernity. The transition from feudal economy toward the capitalist model, which is still in place today worldwide, was fuelled by the growth of cities, both in terms of population and economic importance. In Western Europe, urbanisation was already a transforming phenomenon in the 18th and 19th centuries. In countries that

are outside the nucleus of capitalist development, only in the 20th century did the migration from villages to cities increase significantly (Pop, 2019). For instance, in Romania, in 1948, the urban population represented only 23.4% of the total. Forty years later, the figure was much higher: 53.2% (Murgescu, 2010).

Urbanisation is considered, alongside industrialisation, education, and wealth, a key factor in boosting democratisation (Lipset, 1959). In other words, establishing or maintaining liberal democracies is considered a difficult task if a country prioritizes rural areas in its developmental projects.

Given that the type of discourse presented in the previous paragraph is hegemonic in numerous Western academic circles, arguing about a sustainable future in which villages will represent a core element is often seen as obsolete (Spanier, 2021). The urban space is considered one of innovation and progress, both from an economic and cultural point of view (Pop, 2019). Moreover, cities are also seen as educational hubs. On the other hand, rural areas are described as potential obstacles for modernising endeavours, mainly because they are associated with conservative and traditionalist worldviews. This approach is not characteristic only of a certain ideological vision, being shared by supporters of the free market model, ecologists, or even Marxists (Spanier, 2021).

Before presenting the alternative views of those who support the notion of *rural futurism*, it is necessary to clarify the manner in which we can differentiate an urban administrative entity from a rural one. First of all, it is important to mention that there is no generally accepted definition of *rural space*. Despite the fact that it refers to a physical (geographic) area, not an abstract domain, the term has a kind of ambiguity. It can be used from a demographic, social, economic, ecologist, or cultural point of view (USVT, n.d.).

A possible approach is to define rural space by identifying the main characteristics of the opposing concept. If we engage on such a path, we can observe that an area is considered urban if it is densely populated and if it has certain economic features. More precisely, cities do not include agricultural land, and agricultural jobs are not present on the labour market (Wineman, 2020). Regarding the population, the thresholds can vary from one country to another. For example, in Romania, an administrative entity can be considered a city if it has at least 5 000 inhabitants. Moreover, other conditions are legally required: the number of employees that work in agriculture must not exceed 25%; at least 70% of households must have running water; at least one institution that offers access to secondary education must exist; medical units must assure at least 7 beds per 1,000 inhabitants; there must be at least one public library, etc. (Law 351/2001). Not all political forces agree with these regulations. For instance, a recent legislative project proposes increasing the population threshold to 10 000 inhabitants (Dobreanu, 2023). In a southern African country that is placed more than 6 000 km from Romania, Zambia, the criteria are similar: a city must have at least 5 000 inhabitants and the majority of employees cannot be involved in agricultural activities (Wineman, 2020).

This information highlights that rural areas have relatively few inhabitants, the density of population is reduced, and the main economic activity is represented

by agriculture. Moreover, it is suggested that villages may lack some basic facilities like running water, centralised heating, or road infrastructure. Medical and educational services might not be available, and, as mentioned above, the cultural life is rather dull. We must take into account that the line that separates the two categories, rural and urban, is quite thin: „Growing villages often attract migrants from more sparsely populated areas and become hubs for employment, trade, and services.” (Wineman, 2020). This phenomenon produces the so-called emerging urban centers (intermediate urban centers).

If we analyse the demographic overview, we can observe that rural areas have higher birth rates and a higher mortality rate (this aspect is influenced both by the absence of sexual education and by the lack of medical services). Unlike cities, villages are usually homogenous regarding the living standards of the population. Here, social mobility is reduced, and interpersonal relationships are much stronger and steadier than in urban areas. Obviously, in rural space the natural environment is omnipresent (Pop, 2019).

Rural futurism is a concept that puts forward a „...critical perspective, in which multiple points of view (and listening) converge: art – and techno-culture(s) more specifically – provide new and striking ways to rethink what ‘rurality’ is (and could be). “Rural futurism” is a challenge raised to the current discourses about rurality and the binarisms that support such discourses: authenticity, utopia, anachronism, provincialism, tradition, sense of stability, belonging vs. alienation, development vs. backwardness.”(Pisano, 2019). Indeed, this perspective aims to counter the vision according to which progress and innovation are inextricably linked to the process of urbanisation.

Rural futurism focuses on heterogeneous performances that characterise the countryside and have the capability of shaping the future of society (Spanier, 2021). Its advocates argue that rural space is not limited to tradition or passeism but is dynamic and encompasses the unique opportunity to capitalize on non-human elements. Therefore, villages can become „...places of experimentation, performativity, critical investigation and change, where it is possible to create futures scenarios...”(Pisano, 2019). Food and energy security, climate mitigation, biodiversity conservation, or even mental health are seen as elements that will be neglected if the role of the countryside is not at least as important as the role of the urban areas in the strategic planning of governments for the next decades (Spanier, 2021).

The concept of *rurbanisation* refers to a process of modifying the urban landscape in a way that creates more green spaces and enhances agricultural activities. Rurbanisation could be facilitated by rural elements that have survived over time in cities and metropolises: „Rural is insinuated in the city not only as a lifestyle choice or as a singular attempt to integrate sustainability into urban life, as expressed and analyzed in some discussions of urban agriculture in Western cities. Thus, the rural is not just an accessory reintroduced in entirely urban areas, but is actually part of an interesting combination of two seemingly opposite dimensions: Urbanity and rurality.”(Orîndaru et al., 2020).

The domain in which the terms *rural futurism* and *rurbanisation* are used has recently witnessed the growing importance of another concept: *sustainability*. Sustainability is defined by the United Nations as “...meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (United Nations (1987). In the EU’s Sustainable Development Strategy (EU SDS), alongside social equity and cohesion, economic efficiency, and meeting international responsibilities, environmental protection is presented as a key component (Fieldsend, 2012). Although there are sometimes heated discussions in political and academic circles regarding the optimal instruments that can be employed in order to reach this goal, at the EU level, it is observable that there is a growing consensus regarding the fact that rural areas should be part of a „...smart, sustainable and inclusive economy delivering high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion”. (Fieldsend, 2012).

We highlighted above that there is no unanimously accepted vision regarding the distinction between rural and urban spaces. The same can be said regarding the definition or even the utility of the concept of sustainability. However, there are two elements that can be identified in most of the approaches: financial viability (the ability to generate profit) and non-negative impact on society (this element underlines the necessity of accountability) (Buda et al., 2021).

Our contribution to the literature is represented by the endeavor of reimagining the ideal course for reaching the goal of sustainable economic and social development through applied research that focuses on economic, demographic, and political details regarding Romanian rural areas. In this process, we employ terms like *rural futurism* and *rurbanisation*, arguing that the former is more appropriate for shaping a future that neutralizes all the dystopian perils that create anxiety in the present.

Our contribution to the literature is taking side with certain scholars and professionals like Julie Froud, Colin Haslam, Julia Spanier, Leandro Pisano and others and promote certain argument in favour of a certain rural development and economic growth, considering the usage of frameworks and instruments like foundational economy, futurism, and better linkages between sectorial standards and financial performance, like IAS 41 and GRI 13, for instance. In this way we add into sustainability theory and practice exploring and providing understanding on why rural areas are a new starting point for a new paradigm in sustainability studies, characterised by prudent actions, restauration of heritage, circular economy, gaining momentum.

3. Current professional perspectives of rural development

Lv et al. (2021) considers the understanding of rural and urban development logically inseparable one from the other, as there are continuous bidirectional financial, operational and human flows, with challenges on both sides. Agriculture and rural development and no longer necessarily go hand in hand due to a complex process of rural transformation, and a decline of the role of basic agriculture in the

food chain. Farming, as a core aspect of rural life, modernised up to the extent that large corporations, urban based, at the core of globalisation, do it, shifting the productionist perspective to a financialist one. (Long et al., 2012; Haslam et al. 2015). Consequently, rural transformation is understood as mainly rural areas following the urban development models, like the existence of factories, tourism, skills outside traditional professions. This happens as sustainable leadership theories are focus on management practices, better legislation and ethics, with little attention to transformation of environments Elkington (1994); Avery (2005).

Rural areas are paid special attention to from political, economic, social and environmental perspective. The European Commission has made public its vision for 2040 rural areas, focusing more on tailor made local solutions and policies for specific potential, enhancing connections for better collaborations for enhanced food security, economic growth, dynamic communities and well-being, inclusion and entrepreneurship (European Commission n.d. b). Currently, there is a human centric value attached to this rural development vision, like food security and well-being, collaboration between communities and social inclusion. However, it has to be acknowledged that nature is more than a stakeholder, considering the environment as more than a geographical framework and holistic jointing of ESG. As a current economic development and regulatory perspective, sustainability in rural areas is addressed in the background level. For instance, all the 2040 Ten shared goals of the European Commission do not explicitly mention sustainability, yet there are in-build characteristics of it within all the goals. Such initiatives, like the Ten shared goals take into consideration the potential for rural areas to deliver of UN Sustainability Goals. Therefore, aspects like economic growth consider on one hand eradication of poverty, which is in general devastatingly rural, and on the other hand potential of growth framed into an appropriate pace of development, prospectively gamed into nature regenerative power (United Nations, n.d.).

For example, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1 states that: “by 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment” , while SDG 2 adds into it explaining that resources for development are needed as well as creating a sustainable manner for agricultural and fishery advancements in support for farmers (ILO, 2023).

Additional consideration is shown to rural areas and agricultural activities in SDGs, covering from SDG1 and 2, to goals 12-15 responsible for conservation, climate action, the report between productions and consumption. In addition, Fieldsend (2012) observes that the EU Sustainable Development Strategy has four pillars: environmental protection, social equality and cohesion, economic prosperity and meeting our international responsibilities, which are aimed at developing a smart and sustainable EU structure, where rural areas are at the centre of the cohesion policy. This policy aims at turning „the EU into a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy delivering high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion.

[...] cohesion policy and its Structural Funds ... are key delivery mechanisms to achieve the priorities of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth in Member States and regions.” Fieldsend (2012).

From this perspective, sustainability is a paradox, a mix between the backbone of legislation and also a target. Sustainability is on one hand cross-sectional, acting like a background, especially in finance as stated into Sustainable Finance Disclosure regulation, Sustainability reporting directive, etc. while on the other hand, there are other pieces of legislation touching on the subject matter from a clear perspective: land cultivation, industrial emissions, critical materials, etc. with clear prescriptive rule and standards on pesticides, pollution, etc.

Attention has to be paid to aspects like the CO₂ gases generated from rural activities are the backside of economic growth, as Land Use, Land-use Change and Forestry (LULUCF) and other activities count already for billions of tones of emissions in CO₂ and non- CO₂ gases (Iordachi, Popa, 2022). In this respect, carbon intensive economy exists both in the rural and urban areas, as the first follows into the footsteps of the latter, which should not be the case, as rural emissions are more natural compared to urban emission which are artificially man made generated.

Foundational economy and its afferent legislation that might come along put forward a different appoint, still human centred, focused on individual, with material and providential activities (education, health care) with financial returns (Froud et al. 2020). Similar to a 1950s in the UK currently there is a panic for everyday economy especially in the production sector its stagnation and decrease in value due to the transformation economy. This is a valid argument because in Romania agriculture get more performants despite the shortages in labour and the resistance of subsistence agriculture. Further on, the structure of rural economy will be presented in the EU and in Romania as basis for the discussion section before the conclusion. Next, this article concentrates on the argument that rural areas should have more weight in legislation and also treated differently, as rurbanisation is an old school option, not fit for purpose any longer, compared to rural futurism which is a more natural perspective for development. Next section addresses firstly the connections between rural and urban in the concept of rurbanisation and secondly explains the importance of rural futurism manifesto, before looking at numbers and narratives to reach the final conclusion.

4. Structure of rural economy in numbers

European rural space represents 83% of EU territory, summing up 157 million hectares (38% of EU area) of land used in agriculture production by 9 million farms. Also, rural areas are home to about 137 million people, out of about 500 million EU citizens. Eurostat data reads that: “a majority (51.0 %) of the EU’s GDP in 2019 was concentrated in predominantly urban regions”, while the countryside GDP acquainted for 15.3%, the remaining 33.7% being covered by the intermediate regions. From a rural economics perspective the top performers were Ileia, Pella

(Greece) and Bjelovarsko-bilogorska županija (Croatia) (European Commission, 2021; European Commission, n.d.; Eurostat, 2022a; Eurostat 2022b).

Worth mentioning is that, rural economy consists of both agricultural and non-agricultural branches, including food production (animal and vegetal), forestry, light manufacturing, tourism and commerce. EU data looks rather encouraging when looked at different sectors like bio-economy and agri-food chain, currently over 2 trillion euro in revenues, employing 17.5 million people and on an ascending economic trend, expected to create more than half a million jobs by 2050. When considered an enlarged perspective of agro-industrial sector, 27% from the total employment is engaged at work, accounting for 4% of global GDP and 25% of the developing countries GDP (European Commission, n.d. c.; World Bank, n.d.).

Table 1. Structure of rural economy

	Primarily agriculture	Agro-food industry	Non-agriculture rural economy	Wheat production (average 2022)	Gross value added from agriculture	Average farm size	Employment in agriculture / total
EU average	14,1%	-40,3%	75%	5.76t/ha	1.7%	14.4 ha	4.2%
Romania	60,5%	-78,1%	40%	4.2t/ha	6.6%	3.4 ha	18%

Source: Comisia prezidențială pentru politici publice de dezvoltare a agriculturii (n.d) and European Commission (2023) and Statista (2023) AHDB.org.uk (2022); agroberichtenbuitenland.nl (2023)

Key facts about Romanian agriculture disclose that agricultural land in Romania covers more than 50% of the land (counting for 3.9 M farms, where 93% of them are less than 5 ha), while forestry is 30%, with an average population of about 45% living in the countryside, producing 6.6% of country's Gross Value Added, one of the highest shares in the EU which has an average of 1.7%. Romania is also lacking behind in terms of non-agricultural SMEs registered in the rural areas showing a general lack of skills and professional qualifications, not only specific to agriculture, fishery and forestry specialized work, but also in general understating of management and marketing, ethics and human resources performance and digitalisation.

Table 2. Romania's population structure

Year	Number of inhabitants	Density			
		urban	rural	urban	rural
2000	22810	12546	10264	55%	45%
2007	20882980	11455494	9427486	54.9%	45.1%
2013	19988694	10772678	9126016	53.9%	46.1%
2019	19375835	10458061	8917774	54%	46%
2020	22142000	12492000	9650000	56%	43%

Source: National Institute of Statistics (INS)

Nițescu (2014) considered that rural development in Romania is a dynamic equilibrium considering the rural economic sectors, however, it has a „deeply distorted structure in addition to the 40% of the rural population is at risk of poverty and social exclusion” (European Commission (2023) as unfortunately large number of micro farms (less than 2 acres) exist. This explains the lack of high performance for the Romanian agriculture, despite its large rural population and arable land. Also, its rural economy is predominantly agricultural based: “the primary sector 64.2%, of which in agriculture 56.6%, the secondary sector 18.5%, the tertiary sector 17.3%” Comisia prezidențială pentru politici publice de dezvoltare a agriculturii (n.d) compared to the EU one which is agricultural service based mainly. Also, it should be mention that the food industry is divided between rural (producing) areas and urban (processing) area, with a higher economic value for the latter, adding up into our arguments for this article.

Despite being considered a rural country, as opposed to an industrial one, Romania has an under average performance when it comes to the wheat production, though in overall yield per hectare it is closed to the EU average in terms of production, however not in terms of money value for products. This situation is mirrored in this countries GDP where a few percentages are produced by about a quarter of people employed in agricultural work. Therefore, it can be notice the absence of clear business models and a clear profile for agriculture contour of the country. Next some solutions envision by the Romanian Government are considered.

5. Plans for rural development

Currently, the Rural Development Programme (RDP) for Romania legally started in 2015 and was last amended in May 2023. Six priorities are mentioned with the following key words: competitiveness, preserving, innovation, risk management, modernisation. In practical terms, 4600 farms will be supported, new ones will be created helping about 14 000 young farmers (European Commission, 2023).

Also, the Romanian National Strategic Plan mentioned clear objectives to be reached by 2027 to realise the potential developments of the rural areas. Among the solutions are:

- Promoting smart village, smart agriculture, to obtain higher food security and diversification of food;
- Better conservation of bio-diversity and consolidation of environment protection and enhanced climate resilience;
- Promote knowledge economy, R&D and digitalization in agriculture (Romanian National Strategic Plan, 2021).

It seems that EU and national money are available for restauration of land and forestry, 1.2 million ha getting support in order to save biodiversity and prevent erosion. The Romanian National Strategic Plan also mentions the creation of 25 000 jobs, save that land abandonment is not happening, the governmental funding aiming to help directly and indirectly people as well as infrastructure. Sustainability with a human centric perspective is not a holistic perspective, people’s needs at centre of

policy objective, within a framework of resilience, gives a clear direction for action. From a ruralisation perspective, developing rural infrastructure is one of the key policies. While common aspects like concrete and asphalt roads, gas, running water should be part of the XXI century comfort, in some countries they are a sign of a rural area turning into a small urban settlement. Such developments should be addressed more clearly, not to conceptually confuse. In this sense, protection and preservation of rural heritage should be addressed, as well as restoration of villages, when possible (European Commission, 2023).

The authors of this article put forward for discussion policy options for economic growth in rural areas, if it is to be treated like a bubble or a rural autonomy, outside the urban modernisation influences. The differences between the rural and urban economies are in terms of economic life, administrative organisation, labour market and arguably demographics leading to different levels of development, inter-human relationships, life quality and social mobility (Pop, 2019).

In the same direction of thinking, Spanier (2021) considers there is enough room in the performativity theory also able to reinforce the structural logics of the capital system when there is an „ontological reframing” of rural areas and their economic growth in the future. One way to do this is to provide enough transparency and high-quality data to start from. Authors of this article argued elsewhere that a better integration between financial and non-financial reporting in agriculture IAS 41- GRI 13 is needed to provide for capital maintenance, developed SMEs and corporation with advance needs of complex economics, also encouraging a protectionist economy different from the financialised one more typical in the urban areas (Hoinaru et al., 2023).

6. Conclusion

This article argued for a different type of rural development, trying to decouple, in sustainability terms, the country side from the more developed urban areas that have more complex resources, benchmarks, needs and a different organisation. Rural areas are generally natural sustainable settlement due to conservative politics, prudent economics, every day governance of the community including aspects of care (non-alienation) and clear identities, bio-diversity and wellbeing, despite backlogs on education and medical services, among others, including their economic situation. The rural areas are a more natural and logical point of starting a new type of sustainability, identified by some scholars like Spanier (2021) and the author of Rural futurism (2021), framed into foundational economy and regulation for everyday life.

Again, as defined by Pisano (2019) “Rural Futurism is a critical perspective, in which multiple points of view (and listening) converge: art – and techno-culture(s) more specifically – provide new and striking ways to rethink what ‘rurality’ is (and could be). “Rural futurism” is a challenge raised to the current discourses about rurality and the binarisms that support such discourses: authenticity, utopia,

anachronism, provincialism, tradition, sense of stability, belonging vs. alienation, development vs. backwardness.”

In conclusion, Romania has a lot of space to implement rural futurism as past development models, including rurbanisation, proved to be deficient. The agrarian profile of the country has no clear business model, correlation between the workforce employed in fieldwork, average production per ha and agricultural GDP value not correlating in a performant way despite the potential of the country for sustainability for foundational economy.

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