Urban-rural linkages fostering sustainable development in Europe

First statements and conclusions

A. Introduction

This paper explores ways in which urban and rural areas can co-operate for sustainable regional development, within the context of European agricultural, rural development and cohesion policies, programmes, and structural funds, as well as the particular social, economic, and environmental challenges facing Europe. It presents issues relating to four specific cross-cutting themes – urban sprawl, energy, cultural and natural heritage, and organisational arrangements - identifying the benefits of successful urban-rural linkages and the various barriers and enablers, along with references to the five case studies presented previously. It goes on to consider initial conclusions and discussion points.

Urban-rural linkages have a key part to play in local sustainable development, by encouraging the use of a shared approach which can lead to range of benefits – which may apply variously to urban areas, rural areas, and the wider territories they inhabit – through mechanisms such as shared policy-making and infrastructure, the pooling of skills and natural resources, joined up transport networks, and complementary governance arrangements. Many of the problems or issues which stand in the way of sustainable development are linked to the relationship between urban and rural areas. For example, issues relating to transport, housing, landscape, water, and waste all involve links between urban and rural areas. Hence it is appropriate that the solution to such problems should be found in the relationships between urban and rural areas.

The EU context

To give a better understanding of the conditions in which rural and urban areas of Europe exist and operate, some of the key contextual issues, themes and policies relating to the urban-rural debate within the European Community are briefly presented below:

- The EU budget review, CAP health check and cohesion policy review are together likely to result in a change of focus for future EU policy-making. Likely changes include reforms in spending priorities and funding instruments – such as the CAP and structural funds – leading towards the development of a new Financial Framework.

- The Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment (2005) makes reference to ‘urban area’ rather than ‘city’, thus paving the way for a greater urban-rural perspective. It has identified four main fields of interest for urban areas to move towards sustainability: management, transport, planning and design.

- The Lisbon Treaty (2007) identifies the Community objective of territorial cohesion (subject to ratification), as well as economic and social cohesion.

- The Territorial Agenda is a process led by the European Ministers responsible for spatial planning and development. It was agreed upon at an informal meeting in Leipzig in May 2007, as the result of deliberations which can be tracked back to the European Spatial Development Perspective (1999), the Guiding Principles for Sustainable Spatial Development of the European Continent (2000), and the Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities (2007). The Territorial Agenda has as one of its six objectives ‘Strengthening Urban-Rural Partnerships’, with five guiding principles: solidarity between regions and territories; multi-level governance; integration of policies; co-operation on territorial matters; and subsidiarity.
- CURE (Convention for a Sustainable Urban and Rural Europe) - key themes include shaping the context for sustainable urban and rural development in Europe.

- The Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Directive\(^1\), on the assessment of the effects of a wide range of plans and programmes on the environment, including those for urban and rural land use and planning. However, one of the potential positive consequences from an urban-rural relationships point of view could occur at the 'studying the alternatives' phase within the framework of a Strategic Environmental Assessment study; it is possible that the assessment thoroughly confirms to the competent authorities, as a positive approach, that potential rural–urban spatial strategic options have been examined.

It is also important to bear in mind that the European Community imposes only one of several sets of policies, programmes and administrative structures on its member nations. Localities within Europe are also influenced by the context of their national, regional and local laws and policies, which may have a stronger bearing on them than those at the higher European level.

**The EU and sustainable development**

The purpose of this short section is to give a brief introduction to the issue of sustainable development and outline the ways in which the European Union has engaged with and reacted to it to date.

Sustainable development has its roots in concern about the environment, climate change and rising carbon dioxide (CO\(_2\)) emissions, coupled with the combination of poverty in developing nations and unsustainable levels of consumption in developed countries. Its emphasis is on development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The EU adopted a sustainable development strategy in 2001 (renewed in 2006), setting out how it intends to meet the challenges of sustainable development over the long term. The aim is to achieve continuous improvement of the quality of life and well-being of present and future generations, through the creation of sustainable communities that are able to manage and use resources efficiently and to tap the ecological and social innovation potential of the economy, ensuring prosperity, environmental protection and social cohesion. The Strategy has identified key challenges for sustainable development: climate change and clean energy; sustainable transport; sustainable consumption and production; conservation and management of natural resources; public health; social inclusion, demography and migration; and global poverty and sustainable development challenges. Directives and other regulatory measures have been introduced to help the EU achieve its aims, such as those regarding air and water quality, energy efficiency, and landfill.

In considering the matter of using urban-rural linkages to foster sustainable development, the sustainable development definitions, aims, and challenges described above will be kept in mind.

B. Cross-cutting themes

This section aims to highlight the ways in which urban-rural linkages can help to foster sustainable development and thus enable EU sustainability targets to be met, with examples relating to four cross-cutting themes.

The differences that can be made by urban and rural areas working together to achieve sustainable development in a co-operative manner, are compared to what could happen in the absence of such co-operation. Without any urban-rural linkages, it is likely that there would be increased competition between urban and rural areas, and this would lead to a variety of problems.

Urban-rural linkages can be driven by either urban or rural areas, and can have a range of different results and benefits for each, depending on the subject area or theme of work under which the linkages are being developed. In some situations, the results may be disproportionate, with either the urban or rural area receiving more of the benefits of co-operation.

Following is an illustration of some of the problems that would be likely to occur without urban-rural co-operation in the key themes of urban sprawl, energy use, cultural and natural heritage, and governance issues, as well as the benefits that are likely to arise from co-operation and strong urban-rural linkages.

Urban sprawl

The issue

Urban sprawl occurs when cities spread until they cover much larger areas and the surrounding rural areas are subsumed. This is a result of interplay between those forces pushing people together in cities and those forcing them out. These are largely economic forces. People need to be near urban centres for work, but the cost of living in cities is too high for many, forcing them to move away from the centre. The housing preferences of people on higher incomes are also a factor: they may want their own house in green space rather than an apartment in town, but will still continue to work in the city. Urban sprawl can come in several different forms, including the emergence of secondary urban centres within a region, scattered suburbs of low density housing, peripheral fringes housing people who have left the urban centre due to the rising cost of living, and commercial and business centres.

The low relative cost of developing land outside cities where land is so much cheaper, and the various land use strategies employed by land owners, such as speculative development, can be key contributors to urban sprawl.

One main driver of green field development in the absence of urban-rural linkages is increased competition between cities and surrounding rural local governments. Neighbouring authorities may compete for residents and businesses to locate in their areas and so contribute tax revenue to the area. This can lead to high levels of development and the loss of green space.

Individual authorities can find it harder to maintain a commitment to sustainable development if the surrounding authorities have no similar commitment. This is particularly true in cases where sustainable development is not the most attractive or financially rewarding option. For instance, if developers wish to build a new out-of-town shopping centre in one area, but the local authority does not allow it because of doubts about sustainability, then it is quite likely
that another, neighbouring authority will allow the development in their area in order to benefit from extra tax revenue. The result is that the shopping centre gets built anyway, but the authority following the principles of sustainable development gets no benefit from it.

A key problem resulting from urban sprawl is the need to travel greater distances for work and services, leading to increased demand for good public transport links and – particularly in areas where public transport networks are poor - rising private car use. Other problems include the loss of unspoiled green spaces, and the increase in sealed land surface, which may lead to drainage problems.

_How urban-rural linkages can help_

Solutions to urban sprawl include promoting more compact and mixed land use development, co-ordinating land use and transport planning at a neighbourhood level, and tackling land consumption, mobility, and the decline of urban areas. Another option is to strengthen links between peripheral parts of a region, which can lead to positive impacts such as local development in small and medium size cities of a region, so that they can offer a better environmental quality and accessibility as well as more and better local public services.

The achievement of these proposed solutions would be facilitated by the existence of urban-rural linkages. This would help to ensure that activities are co-ordinated across wider areas and prevent the possible problem of displacement. Strong urban-rural linkages could lead to unified policies on issues such as land use, thus preventing the displacement of new developments. To return to the example of the proposed new shopping centre which could be opposed by one local government, but end up getting built in the next county where there is more concern with tax revenue than with ensuring sustainable development. Good urban-rural links could lead to a unified response to such a scheme, meaning that the ‘unsustainable development’ would not take place at all. The same is true of housing developments, where co-operative land use planning could help to overcome the competition between urban and rural areas for tax income from increased inhabitant numbers. An alternative or additional measure would involve using linkages in order to find a fiscal mechanism for sharing taxes.

Spatial planning strategies can be more effective in preventing urban sprawl if they operate beyond the local level, ensuring that there is a co-operative and joined-up approach to tackling the issue. This has been seen in the Leipzig case study, where linkages between municipalities have led to an over-arching strategic approach to land use, attracting people back into the city and out of new suburban areas of sprawl.

Strategic transport planning can ensure that public transport services link residential areas with areas of employment and services. There is an obvious advantage in having public transport strategies that extend beyond city limits, thus linking surrounding areas to the city. In the Lille Métropole case study, good transport links ensure excellent access to the central urban hub. This works alongside a tightly controlled planning strategy to prevent urban sprawl, by ensuring that rural inhabitants have little reason to require further development in their own neighbourhoods. Existing transport infrastructure could also be used to define new developments, by building only in areas where good transport connections already exist.

Good public transport links between rural and urban areas can help to reduce rural dwellers’ reliance on private cars for their travel needs, thus meeting other sustainable development targets. In Lille Métropole, the integrated public transport system is helping to tackle the problem of increased private car use in an area of urban sprawl.
Most transport funding is spent in urban areas, even though rural areas also need transport links to connect them to cities. It is therefore in rural areas’ interests to co-operate with urban areas so that they can access a share of this funding. There may be implications regarding the way money is allocated. For instance, if a larger proportion of transport funding was given directly to rural and outlying areas, this may encourage cities to actively seek connections with rural areas, thus helping to integrate transport policy.

It could be argued that policies to address the problem of urban sprawl, such as improving transport links, may in fact exacerbate the problem by making it easier for people to move out of town and commute. Perhaps without such transport links, more people would remain living in town and choose more sustainable travel options such as walking or cycling to work instead. However, this can be avoided if urban-rural co-operation is used to improve transport links only in areas where there are already settlements established, rather than improving access to areas of open space that could potentially be developed.

Urban-rural linkages and energy

The issue

One of the targets of sustainable development is reducing energy use, especially energy which comes from non-renewable sources. The burning of fossil fuels is especially undesirable as it releases CO$_2$ into the atmosphere. The Växjö/Kronoberg case study aimed to create a fossil fuel-free region. Improving energy efficiency – as in one of the Drenthe case study spin-off projects - can lead to substantial reductions in energy use without there necessarily being an associated reduction in our quality of life.

Attempts to reduce energy consumption, in the absence of any urban-rural linkages, would be likely to involve different local and regional authorities acting in isolation, leading to the potential duplication of scarce resources, for instance for research and development into new technologies, energy efficiency programmes and educational projects.

Without urban-rural linkages, it would be hard for cities to effectively harness the natural resources of rural areas appropriately to serve their (much greater) energy needs. Meanwhile, rural areas acting alone may lack the technological knowledge, financial capacity or entrepreneurial initiative to set up and run renewable energy facilities.

A key problem is providing incentives for organisations and individuals to reduce their energy consumption. It is much harder to do this in a situation where there is any doubt as to whether other people and companies are also doing their bit. This is particularly the case for targets such as reducing energy use, which brings few clear or immediate benefits to those involved (although there are wider, long-term benefits). Where regulatory measures are concerned, they may be more effective and easier to enforce on a regional basis rather than by smaller authorities acting in isolation.

How urban-rural linkages can help

Urban-rural co-operation on sustainable energy projects is likely to make a greater impact in terms of market share, e.g. the level of renewable energy as a proportion of the total energy use in a region or nation. This is often a goal of sustainable development. One city, town, or village adopting renewable energies has little impact, but joint working which involves lots of settlements can make more difference to what is achieved. Larger joint renewable energy projects may lead to greater effects, increased critical mass, and better marketing of successes. Including both urban and rural areas is important because each has a particular role to play.
The relationship between the rural area - as the provider of the energy source - and the urban area - as the user of most of the energy produced - is an established one. This can vary according to the type of energy being produced. Biomass projects need a source of materials for biomass (often timber, as in the case of Växjö/Kronoberg which uses fallen timber collected from rural areas surrounding the city). The benefit to the urban area is the energy provided from the biomass source, while the benefit to the rural area may be improved forestry management and local employment. The co-operation may not always benefit both urban and rural partners equally. With wind energy, for instance, wind turbines are best located in rural areas, but the benefits to the rural area are more mixed; although they can be a source of income to the landowners, there is often local opposition to turbines on the grounds that they are unattractive.

An overarching benefit of urban-rural co-operation which involves neighbouring areas is the opportunity to enhance the closure of local and regional matter and energy cycles. Greater self-sufficiency of territories and the message to ‘buy local’ are often key objectives of sustainable development strategies, as this cuts down on transport miles, boosts regional economies and prevents ‘leakage’ of wealth into other regions; in the case of energy, it may also help to ensure security of supply.

There is interplay between the type of rural area and the type of renewable energy project that it is feasible to pursue. Heavily wooded rural areas (e.g. Växjö/Kronoberg) lend themselves to biomass projects well, while windy coastal areas are good sites for wind power. Most areas pursuing renewable energy goals will aim for a mix of different types of renewable energies, but it makes sense to use the resources available to bring the greatest benefits to both rural and urban partners.

Even if the rural area is not particularly suitable for providing any specific renewable energy, there can still be urban-rural co-operation as seen in the Drenthe case study, to jointly procure energy from green sources, and improve energy efficiency. Such activities can bring benefits to rural areas such as better administrative efficiency and skills, as well as economies of scale.

The potential of consumer behaviour to help production patterns become more sustainable is heightened in a situation where the consumers are acting together because of strong urban-rural linkages. In Drenthe, joint procurement of green electricity is effectively standardising demand for energy, which is helping to stimulate the market for more environmentally sound products and services at lower prices.
Cultural and natural heritage

The issue

In keeping with the general aims of sustainable development, we wish to enjoy our cultural and natural heritage fully right now, while also ensuring that it is adequately preserved for the future. Cultural and natural heritage may take many forms, such as geographical features (mountains, lakes, beaches etc), types of flora and fauna, particular practices and customs, or historical buildings, monuments or artefacts.

While municipalities may find it possible to tackle issues of natural and cultural heritage in isolation, without co-operating with other areas, this is made much harder by the sprawling geographical nature of many natural heritage areas, such as coastlines and mountain areas, which cross different municipalities and make a shared approach the best way to approach the matter.

In many cases the issue or problem is in the form of an existing linkage between urban and rural areas. In the Lake Balaton case study, for instance, the linkage is the lake itself, which links several municipalities bordering it and each other. None of these municipalities can tackle the problem of lake water quality and protecting the lake ecosystem alone, so they need to co-operate to achieve this common aim, which will benefit all. The cost of not co-operating in this case is poor water quality and a threatened ecosystem, which would have potential implications for the environment, public health, and income from tourism.

There are clear links between the interests of the tourism industry and the desire to preserve heritage areas. These areas often help to attract tourists to particular regions, so their preservation and enhancement can benefit tourism, which brings an important source of revenue to many areas of Europe. At the same time, however, tourism can lead to high levels of development which is not sustainable, such as the proliferation of hotel complexes along isolated beaches. Without co-operation between neighbouring urban and rural areas, which ideally takes place at a wider regional level and hinges on a shared and joined-up approach to these issues, the result could be an over-supply of accommodation, coupled with reduced tourist numbers and loss of revenue because the natural and cultural heritage of the region has been degraded by over-development.

Without linkages between urban and rural areas, it may be difficult to plan transport networks to allow tourists (and staff) to reach isolated sites such as remote castles. It would also be harder to market tourist attractions at a regional level (which would be sensible as it may encourage tourists to stay in an area longer, thus bringing more money into the area, and to pursue more sustainable forms of tourism rather than, for instance, daytrips by coach.

How urban-rural linkages can help

Urban-rural linkages in the area of heritage preservation can bring a range of benefits to both urban and rural areas. The main aim is of course to effectively preserve existing heritage, which has benefits for all concerned. The range of benefits experienced at a regional level – as well by individual urban and rural areas - may include: aesthetic benefits (preserving the beauty of an area); cultural benefits (preserving historical artefacts and traditions); biodiversity; public health benefits; and boosting tourism revenue.

Additional benefits to both urban and rural areas as a result of co-operation can come in the form of integrated management and infrastructure, reduced administrative demands, the pooling of ideas and experience, and reduced costs, which are all a result of taking a shared approach to the ‘problem’ of preserving the heritage of an area.
Ensuring continuity in efforts to preserve heritage between rural and urban areas can be one result of urban-rural co-operation in this area. This continuity can be take a number of different forms, such as integrated or complementary management systems, and shared infrastructure and administration. Each of these can help to minimise costs and avoid duplication of efforts, while offering the best use of the available skills and resources, and potentially offering opportunities for economies of scale.

Developing positive urban-rural linkages in order to jointly tackle the preservation of areas of cultural and natural importance brings the potential for new solutions through the blending of different approaches (i.e. traditional rural and urban approaches, as well as those adopted by different geographical areas which have faced diverse challenges). There may be opportunities to share and transfer good practice in preservation between urban and rural areas, leading to shared benefits.

Co-operation between urban and rural areas also brings potential for a shared approach to the further development of heritage areas. For instance, this may be through creating paths to improve access to areas of natural beauty, or providing other facilities for tourists. In Lake Balaton, the initial co-operation to deal with the issue of water quality has been extended to other projects to help meet sustainable development targets, such as waste water treatment and rainwater canalisation. Because these projects are being managed co-operatively and building on the linkages already established, they take place with the agreement and input of all of the municipalities bordering the lake.

Shared approaches to managing and marketing heritage areas as tourist attractions can boost tourism within a region, and can also potentially lead to benefits such as better public transport links and integrated planning policies which minimise the threat of over-development of heritage areas.

**Institutional and organisational arrangements**

**The issue**

The public sector has an important role to play in the long-term development of any area. With regard to land-use, for instance, the private sector will generally take a short term view and, for example, opt to make money by selling off land for green field development even though this may be detrimental to the area in question (e.g. because of the loss of unspoiled green space). A strong public sector is necessary to defend the public interests and mediate between competing economic interests which can undermine long term vision and actions.

Partnerships between governing agencies can underpin urban-rural linkages. There are clear opportunities for government agencies and organisations to work in partnership – which may take a variety of forms and operate at different levels – in order to pool their skills and expertise, reduce administrative demands and achieve economies of scale. All of these outcomes could help individual municipalities to achieve their own targets for sustainable development more easily than they could manage by acting alone. In the case of joint green procurement, smaller rural authorities may benefit from sharing the expertise and capacity of larger, urban municipalities, while urban municipalities benefit from sharing the resources of rural areas. The advantages of such approaches would also be likely to benefit regions, nations and Europe as a whole.

Local governments would find it hard to address the issue of sustainable development if there were no partnerships between urban and rural areas. It would be difficult to achieve sustainable development targets, and the incentive to do so may be reduced due to doubt that other governments were ‘doing their share’. A competitive approach would be more
likely in the absence of co-operation, with, for instance, governments competing for tax revenue from residents and businesses.

**How urban-rural linkages can help**

One of the roles of the public sector is to defend the long-term interests of the area it serves. Where public sector partners can collaborate and co-operate, they can enhance their strength through unity, bringing benefits both to their own areas and to the wider territory.

A variety of different partnership arrangements may be adopted for effective urban-rural linkages. The best or most useful form of linkage may depend on the institutions involved and the areas they serve. The nature of the links may be formal or informal, may occur at different levels of government, may be between particular departments or be overarching, and may be between institutions with similar or diverse responsibilities, rights and governance arrangements. Relationships between individual members of staff at the respective partner organisations may be crucial or unimportant.

Official linkages can be made through the establishment of new bodies and procedures, common planning systems and policy documents. Conversely, voluntary and occasional co-operation can occur on a project-by-project basis. There is opportunity for municipalities to make joint governance arrangements for spatial planning, transport, and other themes which can be supported by sustainable development principles. A number of issues must be dealt with in assembling the infrastructure for such arrangements, such as how to foster the correct institutional arrangements and organisational solutions, how to combine subsidiarity and equity between local and regional authorities regarding funding of public goods, and the technical assistance that will be needed to support the new forms of governance.

All areas within Europe are subject to policies and regulations at a number of different levels, including local, regional and national, as well as at the European level. These shape activities such as planning and building (among others) and will of course have an influence on the ways in which urban-rural linkages can be made between neighbouring areas. This is especially significant where urban-rural linkages cross regional or national borders and so involve areas that are subject to different frameworks of regulations.

There are a series of options regarding how governments can approach the issue of sustainable development. This has often arisen at the local level, through actions such as Local Agenda 21 and Local Action 21. However, this could be tackled at the regional or territorial level, and there have also been actions and strategies at national and EU levels. The benefits and disadvantages of acting at a particular level of governance may vary according to the theme of work. For activities such as waste management and transport, for instance, it makes more sense to have integrated strategies which cover the region instead of stopping at the city limit. Such strategies will benefit from having greater continuity across a wider geographical area. Meanwhile, it may be more useful to set planning and land-use strategies at a sub-regional level, but to join up with neighbouring local governments to ensure that plans are complementary and prevent potential problems such as the displacement of new developments.

It may be difficult in some cases to define the exact nature of the partnership. Urban-rural linkages often promote the territorial level that is between the local level and the level of official 'regions' (e.g. German Länder, Italian Regioni etc). In such cases it is probably more useful to have a functional definition rather than an administrative one, as problems can occur along the functional links between cities and rural areas.

Partnerships between local governments may also be useful in identifying ways to motivate people to change their behaviour to become more sustainable (e.g. to use less energy,
reduce private car use, and use public transport more). Motivation and incentives can be useful, especially where the changes required of people are attractive or desirable, but there is a need for regulatory measures in some cases where the changes needed are less attractive. Policy making usually involves a combination of both incentives and regulation. Urban-rural links can help individual municipalities to achieve the required changes through both types of measure, leading to advantages to individual areas and to wider territories. Feeling that they are part of a united effort or programme to make changes may provide additional encouragement for individuals, and negates the potential thought that ‘no one else is making changes so why should I?’

Sustainable procurement is driven by urban areas, but it can have advantages for rural areas by making them more competitive and helping them to achieve economies of scale. Urban areas have greater administrative capacity and skills in procurement, which could mean better results for less work for rural areas. Similarly, the establishment of comprehensive management systems for natural resources (EMS) can often best be managed through rural-urban partnership: such systems need both the administrative capacity of larger cities and the natural resources of rural areas. Rural areas are unlikely to have the capacity to set up such a system alone, but can be included in urban systems.

The private sector is usually profit-motivated in its strategies and actions, and it is therefore usually assumed that the role of the public sector is to defend the public interest through regulation and effective decision-making which controls the private sector’s actions. However, the private sector may also engage in activities beyond those motivated merely by profit. An example of a public-private partnership exists between the municipalities of the Drenthe case study and the energy suppliers that they obtain their green electricity from. Corporate Social Responsibility projects and activities established by private companies are another example.

C. Initial conclusions

As the five case studies and the theme-based information presented in this paper shows, enhancing urban-rural linkages can help to foster common approaches and activities which follow the principles of sustainable development. This is particularly the case where the linkages are between neighbouring urban and rural areas working together to solve common problems or achieve shared goals.

In the absence of such co-operative working, there is a danger that neighbouring authorities would end up in competition with each other, for instance competing for the tax revenue arising from new developments. Such competition would be detrimental to the pursuit of sustainable development goals. Furthermore, neighbouring urban and rural areas are usually to some degree interdependent (for instance, urban areas provide rural areas with work opportunities, goods and services, while rural areas provide raw materials and resources), and this interdependence needs to be somehow managed.

Urban-rural linkages can vary greatly with regard to what incentives there are to make linkages in the first place, how easy or difficult it is to make linkages, what benefits – and problems – may arise from making linkages, and who will experience these benefits and problems (e.g. the linkage may favour the urban area, the rural area, or both). In some instances, there are clear benefits, while in others the benefits are not so clear (and it may be hard to see any disadvantage caused by not working together). In some instances, the incentives and benefits of joint working are greater for urban areas, while in others they are greater for rural areas. There may be advantages for both.
Similarly, the varying geographical nature of different territories can make it more or less easy, beneficial, and important to form linkages between rural and urban areas. Different types of area with different features can have very different needs and experiences. For example, the difference between small, remote rural villages and small or medium-sized towns which are close to urban centres may be great, and therefore the way in which they are motivated to form linkages and the benefits they receive as a result may be very diverse. Areas may also have widely varying densities – such as metropolitan versus rural areas - and geographical features. It is important to find the right balance for each particular area and, respectively, each linkage formed, rather than a ‘one size fits all’ solution to the development of urban-rural linkages.

It is important to note that sustainable development activities do not usually occur in isolation. The five case studies selected for this seminar present individual ‘silos’ of activity under particular themes, but in reality these are often occurring within whole programmes of actions which are helping to foster sustainable development in many themes of work through urban-rural linkages. Co-operation in one area of activity can often help pave the way for co-operation in other themes of work, through such means as building relationships between organisations and individuals, and setting up structures for working together.

Looking at the future, it appears that sustainable development targets, such as reducing our energy consumption, will become more ambitious over the next 30-40 years, in order to meet EU targets regarding CO$_2$ reductions and address climate change. This is likely to encourage government organisations to focus ever more strongly on meeting sustainable development targets through whatever means they can. Developing and strengthening urban-rural linkages may be a key mechanism for this.

The way in which we live our lives is also changing, and will continue to do so. The nature of many people’s jobs, coupled with advancements in technology, mean that increasingly people will need only an internet connection in order to do their work, so that they are not tied to the urban area because of their job. The implications of this include the possibility that more people will be able to live in rural and remote areas, without the need for excellent public transport links or daily private car use.

A number of tools and assessment techniques have been or are being developed to model the potential future impacts of current activities with regard to sustainable development goals. For example, the PLUREL project (Peri-urban Land Use Relationships - Strategies and Sustainability Assessment Tools for Urban-Rural Linkages) has developed a Generic Sustainability Impact Assessment Tool for Rural-Urban relations, as well as tools to assess the costs of urbanisation policies. Further development and use of such tools may help to promote the use of urban-rural linkages for sustainable development by demonstrating their effectiveness.

The question of whether or not it is appropriate to deal with the issue of urban-rural linkages for sustainable development at EU level is an important one. Sustainable development encompasses a number of different themes, areas and approaches, and it may well be the case that different issues are best tackled at different levels. In some cases, such as that of tackling climate change, the advantages and benefits that may emerge through successful urban-rural co-operation may be experienced not just at a local, regional, national or European level, but a global one. However, the EU has already been instrumental in setting policies, strategies and legislation for sustainable development, as have individual EU member nations, and these will soon become stricter and more wide-ranging. In addition, prices for natural resources are likely to rise. Local and regional advantages from co-operation may arise as a result.
It may be possible to encourage greater urban-rural linkage activity by introducing regulatory measures which does not allow urban-rural development to take place without co-operation between the urban and rural areas involved. Similarly, new EU funding streams could be set up giving incentives for linkages by requiring urban-rural co-operation as a condition of funding, or combining the goals of sustainable development and competitiveness. Funding programmes could also be developed to help share and transfer examples of good practice on urban-rural linkages to support sustainable development across Europe.

The European Community initiatives LEADER and URBAN both initially had a stronger emphasis on using an integrated approach of linkages between municipalities, but this was to some extent lost in the mainstreaming process of regional and rural development programmes. As a result, it has been seen that sometimes, for instance, cities tend to marginalise their hinterlands. It may be possible in future to launch a new Community Initiative combining the LEADER and URBAN approach in the framework of the sustainability agenda of the EU, which will be revised in 2009. A second option is to add a reserve fund for sustainable rural-urban projects to the mainstreamed programmes as ‘sustainable development plus funds’. This could be organised as a competition for the best performing projects.