

Communication

Tackling Rural Health, Energy, . . . and Technological Issues All at Once: A Call for a Global Interdisciplinary Platform for Strengthening Rural Setting Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The recent COVID-19 pandemic has revealed flaws in rural settings where most people live without the necessary tools, income, and knowledge to tackle such unprecedented global challenges. Here, I argue that despite the research studies conducted on rural areas, these have not solved rising rural issues, notably poverty and illiteracy. I propound a global institute to be formed by governments that provides a platform for empowering rural communities through better training, skills, and competencies. Such global endeavour will ensure the remaining rural communities withstand future pandemics if they occur.

Keywords: rural; global platform; training; skills; competencies



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Over the past decades, a plethora of research has been funded by the public (but less by the private) organisations to assess rural communities, institutions, and their challenges. There are currently a few institutes that, directly and indirectly, address rural issues from various perspectives and across different jurisdictions. They are surveying, researching, and monitoring the rural problems.

The findings have been published using complicated models, data, and charts in top journals, presented in international conferences or released as reports. Commonly, most of the findings have been re-used by peers, and thus, this recycling has continued. After all, there have been no tangible benefits or lessons learned presented using understandable wording for the poor farmers who, most of the time, were asked to participate in these research activities. Since 2007, the number of rural residents has declined to less than 50% globally [1]. Still, these rural research works have been carried out with the same research frameworks and agenda.

In reality, however, the number of hungry people is rising and could exceed 840 million by 2030 [2]. Lands, mostly in rural areas, are degraded at a faster pace globally where 75% of Earth's land areas are degraded [3]. Most hungry people are from deprived communities living in rural areas dependent totally on agricultural income affected by climate change impacts (e.g., droughts). Those farmers with large-scale farms (notably in the developed world) can survive beyond the financial and climatic uncertainties portrayed by scientific models. Other disadvantaged poor farmers (mainly in the least developed and developing countries) must still cultivate in less productive lands [4] or abandon villages and migrate to the cities to work in unsecured jobs, e.g., [5]. At the larger scale, some migrate to Europe.

In an unprecedented situation of current global events, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic, these deprived poor farmers suddenly emerged as the primary victims, e.g., [6]. Whether as small-scale farmers or poor city migrants, they will be once again the most damaged victims of the current and future waves of unprecedented financial disruptions and unemployment created by this pandemic. Although, at this time, the pandemic has also impacted urban dwellers on an unprecedented scale. The pandemic has created new scenes of encroachment of urban people toward rural areas, as they work remotely via the internet. For instance, the surge in rural property interest has been reported in Ireland [7].

Over the past two decades, like other scholars, most of my study and research has focused on a tripartite chain of agricultural settings, rural development, and human-based environmental changes. After two decades, I am still trying to find the answer for student inquiries when asked about the best approach to eliminate poverty in rural areas. I use the cliché answer emphasizing that rural poverty is spatially diverse and varies from one country to the other while there will be no unified prescription to eliminate it. To some extent, this is true; however, I wonder why there has been no panacea or vaccine for poverty in rural areas while we are capable of producing state-of-the-art vaccines and drugs for curing complicated diseases worldwide.

Here, I coin a new acronym for CORONA as “COMmunities of Ruined Organisations or Non-existent Associations” to elaborate my significant debate further. Is the root of rural poverty hidden beneath the earth (soil carbon) or above in the air (rainfall)? or is it due to a chain of interconnected humanistic issues on the surface? To me, the latter one is more plausible.

In poor countries, rural communities are not, structurally and individually empowered enough to think boldly, voice loudly, integrate ideas, act collectively, or create innovative solutions needed for such a complicated world, e.g., [8]. Rural people do not normally possess the required skills, knowledge, and literacy. They are rarely considered key actors in any rural policy-making platform; sadly, though, they have always been the end-users of the laws and regulations enacted by the urban legislators. While their urban fellow citizens are reluctant to be involved in their farms technologically or physically, rural people are easily prepared to get their hands dirty in the cities.

The lack of supportive and decisive rural institutions capable of lobbying and legislating at the top level is apparent. In most countries, rural cooperatives are typically small-scale inferior farm entities with little financial savings, an untrained workforce, or limited decision-making powers. These rural cooperatives are generally dysfunctional, non-competitive, corrupt, and essentially bankrupt and so are being dismantled and dismissed quickly, e.g., [9]. Land tenure is another bottleneck for rural communities to prevent systematic growth [10]. Any approachable way to reach out to these rural people should be detached from the notion of the word ‘land’ if it is to be acknowledged and followed by them. Their fear of losing land is based on their memory of menaces of the past. As such, rural communities are rarely united for their voices to be heard at the levels beyond their villages. Research had been conducted to collate such rural voices before the pandemic. In special research conducted in Northern Ireland in 2018 titled “Rural Voices”, for instance, rural women identified six key priority areas for advocacy: Caring Responsibilities; Rural Transport; Rural Development; Education and Training of Women; Rural Women, Poverty and the Economy and Social Isolation, Health and Wellbeing [11]. These issues raised are also commonly heard in rural areas of Asian and African countries. The author served as a project coordinator of a rural-based carbon sequestration project in eastern Iran for three years. Interestingly, similar issues were also propounded by local communities of women in that rural area.

The above assertions are pertinent to those farmers in the least developed countries and developing countries, although a few assertions could be even applicable to the rural institutions elsewhere, e.g., in Europe [12]. More recently, a new rural survey conducted in the North American West emphasises the broad, interdisciplinary body of work examining rural people and places within the broader context of COVID-19 [13].

Therefore, it is proposed here to strengthen the rural setting at the global level. The governments must create a new interdisciplinary global platform with enough financial and technical support. The interdisciplinary notion is an essential reference for covering a broad spectrum of unresolved issues, including education, health, and technological shortcomings in rural areas. This interdisciplinary global platform has ambitious goals such as eradicating poverty and illiteracy in rural areas by 2040. In the meantime, it can raise the hope for large-scale access to vocational and entrepreneurial training, as well as financial and human resources management skills. This platform can be founded on

lessons learned and experiences accumulated by similar global organizations (e.g., FAO) but with more diverse cross-disciplinary agendas and targets. The organization's earlier structure could be formed as a consortium of NGOs, governmental bodies, funding agents, etc. It can be hosted by any country that can render complimentary financial and logistical support at the earlier foundation stage.

In the long term, rural people can be trained to be involved in national legislation, executive, and decision-making agendas more proactively. Countries can learn lessons from others by cross-border knowledge-sharing. Deprived rural representatives may find a place where their voices are going to be heard. They will learn how to adapt to the changing and turbulent environments in the 21st century by improving their targeted skills, knowledge, and literacy.

This procedure is similar to delivering fishing nets that are knitted in factories and offered to shoreline communities. These communities would not need to learn knitting techniques and think innovatively, broadly and urgently as long as these fishing nets are delivered to them. Rural people must be provided with the 'skills' to enable them to weave the fishing nets.

We must do something soon to prevent a 'poverty pandemic' for the sake of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals globally. Previous successful global endeavours such as the Montreal Protocol (Ozone layer) had proven effective [14] when there was a genuine desire amongst the global citizens.

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