THE RURAL-URBAN FRINGE: THEORETICAL ISSUES AND ISRAELI EXPERIENCE

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Abstract
The rural space, and particularly the rural-urban fringe (RUF), in developed market economies have undergone a major process of restructuring in recent times. The RUF is a zone in transition, where urban and rural uses mix and often clash as a result of different forces that affect farmers, homeowners, and institutions. The result is the evolution of a diverse range of non-agricultural activities and a conversion and succession of land uses within this belt, affected by contesting forces as well as changing agricultural and planning policies. Changing land-use patterns in this belt have been coupled with urban encroachment on the rural space, environmental awareness, and changing rural policies. The basic trends in Israel are similar – specialization and intensification of agricultural land use, as well as expansion of structures for residential and commercial purposes. These trends reflect economic and social changes in the rural-urban fringe.

Introduction
For several decades the rural space in developed market economies has been undergoing a major process of restructuring. Trends of concentration, specialisation, and scale economies have been the driving forces of agricultural change (Robinson, 2004; Wood, 2005). This has been coupled with an acceleration of urban encroachment on the rural space, flows of counter-urbanisation, an
increase in environmental awareness and protection, and changing government and local authority policies. From the point of view of the individual farming household, the new economic policies, committed above all to viability, have trapped farmers into adopting adjustment strategies that bind them to a technological and economic treadmill. The outcome of increased productivity and efficiency of farmers has been an inability to compete on the market, thus pushing a large number of them out of agricultural activity, so that they have to seek new survival strategies (Ilbery, 1998; Sofer, 2001). Altogether, the rural space today is a diversified landscape, with its inhabitants representing a mixture of demographic and occupational profiles. It is multi-functional by nature, and it is characterized by new land uses and employment patterns (Holmes, 2005). Moreover, the goods and services produced in this space serve broader local and national goals, beyond the assurance of food and rural development (McCarthy, 2005).

Within the rural space, the ‘urban rural fringe’ (RUF) – the interface between the urban area and the countryside – is the belt where the transformation process is most dynamic. It is a transitional zone, where urban and rural uses mix and often clash as a result of various forces that affect farmers, homeowners, and institutions (Heimlich and Anderson, 2001). The result is a conversion and succession of land uses within this belt, affected by contesting forces as well as changing agricultural and planning policies. It is the nature of the actors involved in the land market (either public or private; big capital or small holders; planning institutions etc.), their relative power, and the constraints (regulation and deregulation) imposed on the development process, including planning controls that determine the spatial pattern. Mechanisms contributing to the urbanisation of the RUF include, among others, increased population mobility, changing location advantages of the fringe rural communities, differences in costs of land, changes in the desired lifestyle, housing availability and radical changes in the pattern of housing (shifts from collective to one-family dwellings), employment opportunities locally and in the surrounding area, and public policy. The major processes that have shaped the RUF, as a result of these mechanisms, include: the changing nature of rural communities and their socio-demographic structure; increasing social inequality between the subsistent agricultural farmers and higher-income urban newcomers; the loss of prime agricultural land; the diversification of the economic base; the appearance of hitherto unknown environmental issues and nuisances; and an ever-increasing income gap within and between communities (Bryant, 2002; Sofer and Applebaum, 2006).

**Theoretical Issues**

Studies of land use in the RUF have revealed a mixture of uses that reflects both the irregular growth and encroachment of the city on the rural space – in different directions and at different rates – and the difficulties faced by the rural space and its inhabitants to face up to this bow wave. The common outcome is an
incoherent land-use pattern including agricultural and non-agricultural activities, open spaces and out-of-town retail and service centres, farms, and built-up suburbia, all of which compete for the same space (Hart, 1991; Bryant, 2002). In the case of the USA, metropolitan expansion has been occurring as a result of two opposite flows: rural people moving off the farms, and residents of the densely urbanised areas moving to the surrounding RUF (Heimlich and Anderson, 2001), including the influx of people from more remote rural areas and from urban centres. Economic growth and preferences for housing and lifestyles, enabled by new transportation and communication technologies, prompt new housing development and new land-use patterns. However, there are land-use conflicts in the RUF in the USA, primarily from the point of view of the newcomers, as shown in the case of Florida. These can be grouped into three categories: (1) lifestyle issues focused on environmental nuisances, such as odours, noise, etc.; (2) infrastructure and amenities, such as roads, crime protection, and waste management; and (3) property rights and wealth distribution (Clouser, 2005). As a result, the dominance of productive usage is giving way to a mixture of production and consumption-led activities, and the rural space surrounding the urban space is losing its traditional image as a farming area (Hart, 1991; Bryant, 2002; Clouser, 2005).

In a summary of the mechanisms that operate in the RUF of Hamilton, New Zealand, Wright (2006) pointed to the relaxed subdivision policy and development interests that have seen the area change from a production-based economy to one of small lifestyle blocks. The in-migration brought two groups of urban dwellers: part-time farmers, who hold full-time urban jobs and indulge in farming activities in their spare time; and people who sought a rural residence as a status symbol, where a large house and well-landscaped gardens represent wealth and a sense of achievement.

Land-use changes in the RUF can be understood as household-level measures of adjustment to macro-level development and state policies. This insight bears implications for policies towards the RUF economy, ecology, and social structure. The gradual turn from public support and protection of rural settlements to a withdrawal of subsidies and exposure to international competition caused dynamic and hectic processes of adjustment in the RUF communities, which also left their footprint on the land (Cohen and Sofer, 2007; Bittner, 2010). The trend of farmers reducing their agricultural activities or even dropping them altogether and turning to new sources of income is growing. Thus, to some degree, land-use changes in the RUF represent a decline in the importance of agriculture to the national economy. However, they also represent increased demand of the rural population for non-agricultural economic activities, as well as the entry of a non-farming population into rural settlements. Land-use patterns must therefore always be understood as the outcome of both political and economic frameworks and of the (re)actions of local stakeholders.
Nevertheless, the proximity of urban development to farming has had a number of implications for agriculture:

- Loss of farmland for urban development, leading to an irreversible reduction in the physical resource base for food production;
- Reduction in the amount of farmland, potentially reducing the size of properties and/or leading to fragmentation of holdings;
- Speculation on farm land in anticipation of the expansion of urban development, leading to deterioration in farming standards;
- Penetration of unwelcome activities with their environmental implications.

The changes in the RUF can be divided into four major domains. First, it is clear that the transition from dependence on farming to a more diversified economic base has changed the nature of the rural communities. In part, this economic diversification is based on re-use of rural buildings by non-agricultural entrepreneurs (Verhoeve et al., 2011). Thus the rural space has been transformed from a space of production to a space of mixed production and consumption. In addition to the supply of agricultural products, rural households now provide the urban areas with commercial products, leisure services, and housing space (Guran and Sofer, 2011). The newly shaped interrelationship is also spreading into the labour markets, and the RUF rural communities have become an integral part of the urban employment field, supplying labour inputs to urban areas and local employment opportunities for urban dwellers. Nevertheless, although the penetration of urban-type elements – residential neighbourhoods, non-agricultural activities, or leisure facilities – are blurring its agricultural character, there are still farming households in the changing communities, and agriculture and its related activities remain an important element of its economy, landscape, and, possibly, of its appeal to in-migrants, as well.

Second, the entrance of a new population seems to have rejuvenated failing and aging rural settlements. At the same time, however, the new population is also changing the power structure in the RUF, weakening the position of farmers and their control over the use of land. Another type of pressure on the land comes from development interest groups, which include both external urban groups and internal groups of farm owners, all of whom wish to redesignate farm land for residential, industrial, or commercial uses. Another interest is represented by environmental protection groups, which maintain an ambivalent relationship with the farming sector, regarding it on the one hand as a protector of open spaces, and on the other hand as one of the biggest polluters of natural resources. In the face of all these groups contesting its control of resources, and with the loss of its social prestige and political power, it is not surprising that the agricultural sector often finds itself in a defensive position.
Third, within this changing situation, rural residents make different choices in different directions, depending on the regional and local context, the opportunity structure, and their personal characteristics and ability to make the necessary adjustments. The result is a growing economic, social, and environmental heterogeneity within the RUF as a whole and inside individual settlements. The settlements are no longer dominated by the agricultural population but comprise a mixture of different interest groups such as active farmers, part-timers who practice pluriactivity, ex-farmers and non-farming residents, and sometimes gentrifiers, as well (Guran and Sofer, 2011). This heterogeneity has produced an organizational transformation in the communities. There are signs that the handling of local affairs might shift to an urbanized or semi-urbanised form.

Fourth, there are many indications that this heterogeneity is also leading to growing intra-community and inter-community inequality across regions and communities (Sofer and Applebaum, 2012). The existence of uneven development may be deduced from an analysis of the employment structure. For instance, there is certainly a difference between communities that remain more rural in nature compared with those that have shifted to a more urbanised character. Similarly, there are differences between communities that suffer from both dwindling farm income and lack of alternative sources of employment, and those that have succeeded in diversifying their economic base through commercial and leisure enterprises or other non-farm enterprises.

The continuous process of transformation, which is reshaping and redefining the basic features of the RUF rural settlements, raises doubts about their ability to retain their identity as rural communities and their future course of development. At this stage, several trends can already be discerned; others can only be speculated upon.

**The Israeli experience**

The rural space in Israel has undergone a process of restructuring since the mid-1980s. The embedded changes are attributed to a tremendous increase in productivity, decline of agricultural employment, and suburbanisation of the countryside. Today the majority (about 90 per cent) of the economically active population in rural settlements is employed in non-agricultural activities, primarily in the tertiary sector (Ministry of Agriculture, 2011). Under the steamroller of change and confined to specific local economic conditions and regulations, the rural space has been losing some of its uniqueness: a decline in the degree of collectivism and co-operation between farmers (Ben-Dror and Sofer, 2010) and among settlement systems, and increased levels of inter-regional and intra-settlement inequality (Sofer and Applebaum, 2006, 2012). In the early 1990s the government initiated an “expansion” program, which allowed the allocation of residential plots inside the farming villages. In addition, the state removed another restriction on
farmland by allowing, under specific circumstances, the allocation of land for non-farming uses. Administrative amendments based on the recommendations of a special committee facilitated the use of premises and buildings on the home plot for non-agricultural activities (Sofer and Applebaum, 2006). These changes in policy drew new entrepreneurial interests and developers into the rural settlements looking for land resources (Sofer and Applebaum, 2006, 2009).

The most significant land-use changes in the rural space of Israel have been occurring at the rural–urban fringe, where internal conflicts within the rural communities and contested entrepreneurial forces have existed for at least forty years (Gavish and Sonis, 1979; Amiran, 1996). The major factors do not differ much from those summarized by Shoshany and Goldshleger (2002). They include population growth; decreased demand for agricultural land and increased demand for land for economic investment, primarily for housing; regulations embedded in the official physical planning policies of government authorities and municipal agencies, which allow the construction of neighbourhoods for non-farmers in agricultural settlements; environmental considerations, represented mainly by NGOs and the Ministry for the Environment Protection; and spontaneous endogenous changes in the rural settlements, caused by the penetration of industrial and commercial activities, often in violation of official planning policy (Sofer and Gal, 1996; Maruani and Amit-Cohen, 2010).

The in-migration to the Israeli RUF has had a significant impact on the host communities in economic, social, cultural, and physical terms (Sofer and Applebaum, 2006; Regev-Metuki, 2010). The in-migrants found their new residences in settlements that were previously dominated by farming households; by introducing suburban development, they have affected the nature of the rural community. Urbanised residents are now living side by side with farmers and ex-farmers. The location of the RUF within commuting distance of urban centres allow the newcomers to benefit from the improvements in transportation, which enable them to enjoy a rural lifestyle and still continue to work in non-agricultural occupations – mainly white-collar jobs or independent businesses – located in nearby urban centres (Cohen and Sofer, 2007; Bittner, 2010).

The changes in RUF communities were strongly affected by a number of variables, and distance was not necessarily the primary one. More important are the period of establishment of the settlement, converted into the number of generations on the land; the area of origin of the settlers and its related social structure and ideological zeal; the entrepreneurial approach of the farmers; and the internal cohesion of farmers and non-farmers, as demonstrated by the degree of resistance or disagreement to the development of non-agricultural activities in the RUF settlements (Cohen and Sofer, 2005; Daniel and Sofer, 2010).
Conclusions

The outcome of all these changes is a significant restructuring of the RUF, expressed in the employment structure, land-use patterns, and the loss of both tangible and ideological affinity to agriculture by a growing portion of the rural population. Changes in the Israeli rural-urban fringe (RUF) can be understood as measures of adjustment to development at the household level and changing policies at the macro level. In response to the decline of agricultural income and the gradual turn from public support and protection of rural settlements to a withdrawal of subsidies, farming households have been forced to seek new survival strategies. The search for new income sources has led to heterogeneous development in local land use, which to a certain degree reflects the decline in the importance of agriculture to the national and local economy. However, it also reflects the increased demand by the rural population for non-agricultural economic activities, as well as the notable entrance of a new non-farming population to rural settlements.

A number of major transformations stand out. First, the transition from dependence on farming to a more diversified economic base has changed the nature of the rural communities in the RUF. They have been transformed from a space of production to a space of mixed production and consumption. The newly shaped interrelationship is also spreading into the labour markets, and the rural communities have become an integral part of the urban employment field. Second, the entrance of newcomers seems to have rejuvenated failing and aging rural settlements. At the same time, the new population is also changing the power structure in the RUF, weakening the position of farmers and their control over the use of land. Third, new and hitherto unknown environmental issues are arising in rural settlements, particularly as a result of uncontrolled non-agricultural activities. Fourth, the nature of the unique moshav type of cooperative rural settlements is also at stake. This type of settlement played a major role in Israeli settlement history and to a great extent represents the characteristics of the country’s rural space. The exposure over the last three decades of the moshav-type settlements to uncontrolled and often chaotic adjustment measures casts doubt on their future. It might be necessary to regulate and preserve some of the distinct features of these settlements so they do not to fade into ‘ordinary suburbs’.

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