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Rural areas in the information society: diminishing distance or increasing learning capacity?

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Abstract

This paper examines the prospects for rural areas within the Information Society, referring particularly to the EU experience. Among these are the diminishing effects of distance from core markets and enhancing the learning capacities of rural areas by improving access to relevant information. EU policy to date has been influenced by a strong technology dimension with an emphasis on the installation of necessary infrastructure and equipment. There is an increasing awareness, however, of the need to focus on the social dimension, as scepticism grows about wasted resources, poorly thought out projects and false expectations. Teleworking, which was widely hyped as the best prospect for rural areas, continues to be predominantly an urban or suburban phenomenon. Although the new technologies are no substitute for entrepreneurship, the potential they present, within a more enlightened policy environment, should not be underestimated.

Keywords: Information society; Rural areas; EU policy; ICTs; Telework

1. Introduction

This paper explores the prospects for rural areas within the emerging Information Society. While acknowledging the many problems associated with urban locations, such as congestion and social exclusion, the particular obstacles inhibiting the development of rural areas are highlighted. The potential which the new Information and Communication Technologies offer such areas for overcoming the negative effects of distance from core markets is explored, while downplaying the exaggerated claims for the 'death of distance'.

There is little doubt that major changes in the geography of economic activity are being brought about in part by the new technologies. These changes are primarily a consequence of a restructuring process within capitalism since the 1970s, as large corporations sought more flexible forms of organising their activities globally. While the new ICTs do present opportunities for indigenous companies in remote areas to become connected with larger markets internationally, they also present a serious threat to rural areas by facilitating their integration into the global economy. The experience to date within Europe, in helping rural areas exploit the new technologies is explored, and some important lessons for policymakers are suggested.

2. Urban and rural locations

By definition, rural areas are those parts of the space economy which are least affected by the process of urbanisation, and are therefore more associated with a much more dispersed pattern of population distribution and economic activity. They are also affected by varying levels of peripherality, depending on their distance from markets and their access to services. Traditionally, spatial theories of development have focused on the relationship between core and peripheries, with the more deterministic and sometimes ideological interpretations suggesting that uneven development is an inevitable outcome of the nature and functioning of capitalism (Harvey, 1989). Empirical evidence gives considerable support to the view that higher levels of economic development are associated with urban centres, and that the spatial structure of the urban system reflects the spatial pattern of economic opportunities, with greater access to opportunities being concentrated in the more urbanised areas.

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In addition to being the main centres of economic activity, large urban centres are also associated with severe levels of social polarisation, traffic congestion and environmental pollution (O'Loughlin and Friedrichs, 1996). In an Irish context, the greatest levels of social exclusion and marginalisation are to be found in local authority housing areas in large urban centres (Nolan, Whelan & Williams, 1996). The lowest rates of participation in third level education, for example, are found in large urban areas rather than in rural areas (Clancy, 1995). For a variety of reasons, therefore, large urban concentrations contain areas of extreme values, including both neighbourhoods of concentrated wealth, advantage and high levels of skills, and also neighbourhoods of high unemployment and low levels of educational background.

Despite their disadvantages, large urban areas continue to attract a significant proportion of investment in economic activity. Among the many factors which make urban locations attractive for new investment, and which make it difficult for rural areas to compete for such investment, are economies of scale associated with their size, access to a large pool of labour skills, to vital transport services, particularly frequent airline connections, and to information and telecommunications infrastructure. Despite the fact that the new technologies facilitate the dispersal of economic activity internationally, this does not mean that within a given country like Ireland that we can expect a greater dispersal of new investment. The evidence of recent years would suggest a high level of concentration of such investment in the large urban areas, particularly in sectors which are major users of the new technologies such as software and telemarketing (Grimes, 1997).

Large urban centres are characterised by concentrations of important decision-makers, and factors such as face-to-face contact and the influence of the half-hour contact zone remain important in the way business is organised. Some may argue that it is the perceived need for face-to-face contact in the business environment that reinforces the concentration of decision-makers in existing business centres, despite the possibility of decentralisation offered by the new technologies. There has, however, been a considerable under-estimation of the significance of face-to-face communication, which has a richness unattainable in any other mode of communication. Features such as modulation of voice and slight changes in facial expression can enrich the interaction process. Creativity and efficiency rise sharply as the frequency of face-to-face contact rises with solutions to problems being found more efficiently (Sweeney, 1987). Once face-to-face contact has been established, the contact can be maintained by means of technology such as phone, fax or email, but face-to-face contact retains primacy of importance as a means of communication. In fact Storgaard (1998) argues that telematics can only take over after personal contact is established, and while Meier-Dallach (1998) acknowledges that telematics may help to replace 'routine contacts', it does not substitute for 'decisional contacts'.

Despite the continuing lack of competitive advantage of many rural relative to urban areas, the problem of rural development must be placed in context. Proportionately, the problems of these areas are not that significant relative to the extreme situations of exclusion found in many urban concentrations. Thus while spatial factors such as distance from the market, peripherality and accessibility may help to explain variations in poverty and affluence, other factors in relation to the emerging Information Society must also be examined. To some extent disadvantages such as distance from the market can be ameliorated by recent developments in information and communication technologies (ICTs). The effects of these ICTs on rural and remote areas can be conceptualised in two ways; firstly, in terms of how they contribute towards reducing the friction of distance and secondly by how they facilitate remote regions to improve their knowledge base as 'learning regions'.

Rural areas have been particularly hard hit in recent decades in their attempts to adapt to the restructuring of the economic system. The global marketplace has redefined the requirements for growth as being mainly in the form of a skilled workforce and sophisticated communications. Storgaard (1998) argues that contrary to the common belief that high tech is closely related to urban areas, highly advanced users of telecommunications are also found in rural locations. The main difference, however, is the number of such users, which may imply specific problems for establishing an advanced infrastructure to serve rural users. Urban areas, in contrast, are usually the locus of innovation and information, and support more specialised services and occupations that create a cycle of information creation.

Initially, some of the theorising about the potential impact of ICTs was overly optimistic, suggesting that they would have a major impact in reducing the effects of distance and inaccessibility of peripheral areas. Scenarios in a Norwegian and Nordic contexts have been much less optimistic than those presented by many futuristic writers such as Alvin Toffler at the beginning of the 1980s (Hetland, 1998). Even quite recently, there have been some exaggerated statements and predictions about 'the death of distance' (see *The Economist,* September 30, 1995). Although it is quite early yet in the emergence of the so-called 'Information Society', research to date suggests the need for a more cautious conceptualisation of the changing geography of economic activity associated with the new technologies (Graham and Marvin, 1996). The remarkable flexibility associated with the new technologies presents a range of options to their users, to decentralise or centralise, resulting in either further agglomeration or dispersal (Robins and Gillespie, 1992).