

**Transcending Rural-Urban
Boundaries
The Habitat Debate**

for

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Transcending Rural-Urban Boundaries, *The Habitat Debate*, Sangeetha Purushothaman, Robert Brook and Simone Purohit, September 2004

The Peri urban interface (PUI) is a rapidly expanding, dynamic space of interaction that surrounds all our cities and lies between the rural and the urban. It represents both opportunities for new livelihoods and the death of old ones. Rapid land use changes witnessed in the PUI, combined with market forces driven by fast paced urbanization are redefining the very nature of poverty in peri urban areas around mega cities like Bangalore as well as around medium sized towns such as Hubli and Dharwad. Due to new urban opportunities, communities abandon traditional natural resource management practices as they shift from land-based and agro-based occupations to urban related ones. Peri urban populations, thus tend to neglect their natural resources. The deterioration of natural resources used to serve growing urban demands is further accentuated by urban pollution.



The PUI is thus defined by a series of processes, not by a space, characterized by a variety of changes driven by urbanization in land use, in livelihoods and in environmental conditions. The PUI is no longer a simplistic geographical locale but extends unevenly from cities with the haphazard growth of infrastructure like highways, by passes, railways, electrification, markets, communications and information technology. Characteristics of the PUI ironically can now be found both within city boundaries as well as deep into the rural hinterland. Issues in the PUI certainly do not respect these boundaries. Yet, urban and rural authorities alike continue to act and frame policy in isolation from each other, from the periurban, rural and urban communities and from these new realities, within their own geographical boundaries. Thus the PUI is crying out for the attention of policy makers. Specifically it provides policy and decision makers a unique opportunity to rethink the old boundaries of jurisdiction and age old styles of administration and start to work across rural and urban lines.



Urban expansion, hand in hand with globalisation and privatization, has given birth to a new climate where changes are at their most visible and with the highest impact in the peri urban interface. The PUI as an emerging vibrant space has the potential to become centers of aggregation, processing for value addition, packaging and distribution of rural goods to urban and rural spaces. Livelihood changes born of such a space have given birth to a new form of poverty.

Poverty in peri urban communities around cities like Bangalore is multi-dimensional where the poor are subject to shocks caused by urbanization, many of whom lack access

to land and resources. Other characteristics include a weakening of family and social ties depicted by higher migration rates, high influx of urban relatives due to urban opportunities such as jobs and medical treatment, and higher ratios of dependents to earning members. The typical family in the PUI may have diverse occupations with some members working the land while others commute for urban jobs. While the vulnerability of the PUI population is high their coping strategies are equally diverse. What characterizes the very poor in the PUI are access to transport and markets, agricultural potential and the ability to utilize urban opportunities. To address this new emerging form of poverty the capacities of the very poor need to be built to withstand urban shocks, develop market resilience and access urban opportunities.



In the peri urban, the concentration of economic activities such as construction, mining, brick making, vegetable production through sewage irrigation, leads to natural resource degradation due to non biodegradable debris, dust that stifles crop growth, top soil removal and soil sickness. Land use changes in the PUI are subject to push factors such as housing and infrastructure expansion leading to escalating land prices and pull factors such as expanding urban job opportunities, the shift to cash crop production, tax holidays for urban investors, sale of land and of top soil for brick making and so on. Urban jobs which tend to be higher paid, devalue traditional occupations which in turn lead to the abandonment of age old community based natural resource management methods which tend to be labour intensive and voluntary in nature.

The issues that need to be addressed by policy makers is the impact of these push and pull factors on natural resources in general and top soil and land use in particular. A second factor is the impact on livelihoods, on urban sprawl and on poverty. The PUI thus represents an area of increasing threat and opportunity not just to the poor, but also to

policy makers. Today more than ever, it has to be recognized that a dichotomous approach to administration and planning is inappropriate in the PUI and instead a collaborative, integrated, holistic approach is required. Secondly evidence of greater diversity means that the one size fits all approach to planning and management no longer holds good and policies need to now factor in the different nature of poverty and diversity in farming and production systems. Thirdly the dynamic nature of the PUI also calls for non static policies and solutions.

No one pretends that addressing these issues is a simple matter but ignoring the existence of the PUI is not an option either. Today's village is tomorrow's peri urban community and the day after it will turn into a city... these dynamics requires a flexible administrative mechanism, which allows for expansion over time or else risk becoming as yet another fossilized administrative tier. Today's era of decentralized governance, leaves little room for old dichotomies on rural urban lines or for static policies, instead the space to rethink governance is now wide open.

A workshop to be held in Bangalore on February 8-9, 2005 at the Capitol Hotel by St. Joseph's College and Best Practices Foundation on the Peri urban Interface: A Bridge for Rural Urban Partnerships is a pioneering event to deal with this issue and to come up with a series of recommendations towards forging partnerships across the rural urban divide.