

Community well-being in Chinese peri-urban areas: challenges and the way forward

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Keywords: Community well-being, Peri-urbanization, Sustainable development.

Abstract: In recent years, the rapid metropolitan growth and expansion have led to the exploration of the peri-urbanization process and concerns on community well-being in peri-urban areas. To achieve a better understanding of peri-urbanization, this article reviews the peri-urban definition, its dynamic drivers, and the development of peri-urbanization in Chinese cities. Based on the impact of peri-urbanization on community well-being, this article discusses the challenges and the way forward for the sustainable development of Chinese peri-urban communities.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the emergence of large-scale residential communities in suburban and peri-urban areas of metropolitan regions has been recognised worldwide. Many scholars have focused on such widespread phenomena of outward urban expansion. There is a conflicting conceptualization of what peri-urban is, and conflicting views on the nature of the processes taking place there. Therefore, many terms synonymous to Peri-urban areas have developed, such as urban fringe, urban stretch/sprawl, sub-urban areas, rural-urban transition zone, the edge city, or bordering villages and more recently, extended metropolitan regions [1]. All these words suggest complexities and ambiguities of the term peri-urban.

The communities in peri-urban areas have also changed sharply – from traditional villages to urban communities. More rural to urban resettlement communities will emerge in the peri-urban areas. While it is not new, this phenomenon has become stronger recently with the acceleration of urban sprawl. However, the situation of this kind of resettlement community has been little documented and its implications for peri-urbanization are not well understood. All of these problems amount to one crucial concern - the well-being of residents in those peri-urban communities. To put people first has long been advocated as the fundamental principle of development. This is reflected by the latest international and national urban policies, such as the UN's New Urban Agenda and China's New Urbanisation Plan, which promote a people-centred approach to urban development. In light of that, the idea of community well-being becomes increasingly popular among academic and policy realm.

To achieve a better understanding of peri-urbanization, this article reviews the peri-urbanization definition, its dynamic drivers and the development of peri-urbanization in Chinese cities. Based on the impact of peri-urbanization on community well-being, this article identifies the challenges and the way forward for the sustainable development of Chinese peri-urban communities.

2. Peri-urbanization

2.1 The definitions of peri-urban

The term “peri-urban” originates from the term “peripheral”. Peri-urban areas are a transitional phase between rural and urban. More specifically, peri-urban areas refer to the rural-urban fringe “where city and country land uses overlap” [2]. However, peri-urban areas are not just a fringe or boundary separating the urban settlement from the rural settlement but a transitional zone which is a zone multi-functional attribute [3]. There is a continuous exchange of people, production, finance, workforce and other utilities moving outwards from the city and travelling inwards into the city.

Peri-urbanization is the result of sprawl that rural areas get converted into urban areas and conceptualised as a dynamic process, in which rural areas located on the outskirts of established cities become more urban in physical, economic and social aspects [4].

2.2 A global review of diversity drivers

The drivers of peri-urbanization in the world seem highly diverse. The peri-urban development in Europe is often caused by the physical limitations of urban growth, such as the green belt in London. The spillovers of the central urban population take advantage of cheaper housing in peri-urban locations beyond the protected zone yet can still get access to essential economic and social services via good transport linkages [5]. Besides, in North American, urban expansion has led to suburban development and the emergence of so-call Edge Cities where small clusters of businesses and amenities are located [6].

On the other hand, peri-urbanisation is particularly prominent in developing countries. For example, in Indonesian, the urban population has been spread to peri-urban areas [7]. Metropolitan growth has resulted in a physical phenomenon called “desakota”, which refers that there is a mixture of agricultural and non-agricultural activities in peri-urban areas [8]. Besides, in many large African cities, as urban expansion is characterized by rapid physical growth into the predominantly rural environment and creates a rural-urban transition zone [9].

Together, peri-urban development in developed countries is always resulted by issues like international economic competition, urban welfare, regionalization processes and increasing urban population coupled with rural population decline. And peri-urban development in developing countries is driven by issues like rural-urban migration, natural population increase, and rural urbanization.

2.3 Peri-urbanization in Chinese cities

Chinese cities have been undergoing rapid expansion. Since the 1980s, large rural populations move to cities. To meet increasing functions, such as more housing and more industrial space, the urban boundaries in China have been extended far beyond their previous perimeters and out into peri-urban areas. As a result, the peri-urban area of these cities has changed dramatically. Peri-urban development in Chinese cities has shown an outwards trend [10], and it can be mainly divided into the following three stages. First, before the 1980s, Chinese cities were developed around a city centre while the peri-urban areas were used to accommodate industrial production.

Second, the 1980s just witnessed a passive movement in peri-urban areas, which was mainly about enterprise relocation and industrial development [11]. Although the “reform and opening up” policy has freed the shackles of Chinese urbanization, the process of Chinese peri-urban development just opened in a few big cities. Third, after a series of reforms including land use, housing policy and economic system, almost every Chinese metropolis begins to build large-scale residential communities. By government and real estate companies [12], this real estate movement accelerated the development of peri-urban areas. Because of the urban stretch, a lot of rural land has been requisitioned by governments and transformed into urban built-up areas. Consequently, previous villages have experienced a transition from rural to urban ones, which involves their physical, social, economic and cultural aspects [13].

3. Community well-being in peri-urban areas

3.1 The impact on community well-being

Given the highly diversified dynamics and processes of peri-urbanisation, the physical, economic, social and environmental compositions of peri-urban communities can unfold in vast varieties. Thus, as a product of highly dynamic yet unbalanced urban growth, peri-urban residential communities are inherently contested by a multitude of economic, social and environmental pressures. Especially in developing regions undergoing rapid urbanisation, problems of inequality, segregation and conflict are not uncommon. Empirical studies in China, Indonesia and Mexico have shown that peri-urban communities are frequently confronted with problems of poor infrastructural facilities, lack of quality school and hospital, long-hour commuting, environmental hazards and loss of social identity [14]. In developed countries, peri-urban communities are also problematic in terms of socio-spatial segregation and car-dependent lifestyle [15].

3.2 The community well-being framework

The concept of “community well-being” can provide a useful framework to comprehensively examine the relationship between the well-being of residents and spatial environment in their communities [16]. In general, community well-being refers to the fulfillment of needs and desires of a community, influenced by a comprehensive set of community factors, physical, psychological, political, social, cultural and environmental. The word “community” indicates the scale of analysis and “well-being” indicates the scope of analysis.

For practical policy implications, many scholars and policymakers believe that community well-being can best connect the well-being initiatives to the residents by acting upon their immediate living sphere, i.e. their community. Therefore, the issues concerning the community well-being of peri-urban communities are crucial to achieve people-centred development while managing and coordinating rapid urban growth.

3.3 Challenges and the research forward

Community well-being in peri-urban areas especially demands a relational conceptualization. First, peri-urban communities are dispensable of strong socio-economic links with the urban core via labour markets, commuting, community and social networks, the sense of place, use of services, etc. Therefore, it is impossible to treat peri-urban communities as unitary containers. Second, different social groups can be found in peri-urban communities, either spatially mixed or segregated. Therefore, for different social groups, such as local farmers, rural migrants, urban poor, low-and-middle class and the rich, they occupy different spatial-temporalities and therefore differ in the view

of community well-being. Therefore, the critical question for this research is how different social groups and their spatial-temporalities are shaped relationally in peri-urban communities and how social groups differ from each other on their views of community well-being.

However, one key weakness of current community well-being studies is that they treat the space and place as a static object and neglect the multiple dynamic relations that give variable meanings to space and place. In this respect, urban studies scholars argue for a relational understanding of space and place. In the relational conception, time is a crucial dimension of space; spaces and times are effectively produced and created through social actions within and between places. Another key relational understanding of space and place is the recognition of diversity and variety, that the urban becomes an embedded and heterogeneous time-space process; the city, by implication, "cannot be examined independently of the diverse spatial-temporalities such processes contain".

As argued above, there is an apparent gap between current studies of "peri-urban communities" and "community well-being". On the one hand, studies of peri-urban communities have focused on the big picture of peri-urbanisation trends without assessing the more direct welfare impacts at the community level; on the other hand, studies of "community well-being" have focused on developing a comprehensive framework for community assessment without reflecting upon the dynamics. Therefore, future researches should bridge such a gap by providing a relational analysis of the community well-being of peri-urban communities from the perspective of different social groups.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article reviews the highly diverse and dynamic drivers of the peri-urbanization processes, giving rise to living environments of different qualities and generating unequal well-being effects on different social groups. Besides, this article discusses the underlying mechanism of the emergence of peri-urban communities with a special focus on their implications for community well-being. Although there is a limitation due to the lack of adequate data, this article still achieves a better understanding of community well-being in peri-urban areas and provides reference for sustainable development of peri-urban communities. The research forward is suggested to adopt relational concepts of space and place to grasp the integrity of certain social groups with their living environment in peri-urban communities.

Acknowledgments

This work was financially supported by the China Scholarship Council (CSC) fund.

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