

Preface

This book examines the nature and quality of publication output across the field of rural development globally over time. The aim is to determine the extent to which rural development, as an academic and practice discipline, is developing in such a way as to potentially facilitate evidence-based decision-making regarding local, national, and global challenges of our times. The book is an expanded version of the 2013 Sustainability Collection International Award for Excellence in New Research and Thinking winning paper (see Evans et al. 2013 in *The International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic, and Social Sustainability: Annual Review 2013*). We acknowledge that relevant sections of that paper are reproduced in this book.

Achieving healthy and viable rural communities in the face of rapidly changing social, ecological, and economic conditions is a stated global priority (United Nations 2010; World Bank 2010). Rapid urbanisation, inequalities in income and service levels within and between communities, and population and economic decline are challenging the viability of rural communities worldwide (ARUP 2008; Australia Futures Task Force 2007; Daley and Lancy 2011; Thomas 2008). Persistent global scale (re)occurrence of these and related issues has led governments to prioritise policies aimed at enhancing the livelihoods of people living in rural regions (Daley and Lancy 2011; Giarchi 2006; Shortall and Warner 2010).

Approaches to reviewing the literature on rural development have focused on a wide range of issues relating to, for example, education, gender, health and nutrition, and economic development, especially agriculture, through a number of explicit and transparent qualitative and quantitative methods (see Department for International Development 2011). However, none of the approaches have provided an analysis of overall trends of the quantity, characteristics, and quality of research output over time, which is useful for gaining a broad view of the field. Examining whether the types of publications on rural development have shifted from measurement research to descriptive research to intervention research over time can indicate whether research efforts have progressed beyond describing rural development issues to providing data on how to facilitate positive change (Sanson-Fisher

et al. 2006). Although the systematic literature review approach has been widely adopted in the health sciences (Berrang-Ford et al. 2011), it has not yet previously been applied to the rural development field.

The systematic literature review method also contributes to ongoing debates on research quality. Scientific research is often criticised in academic, professional, and public policy circles for being uneven and lacking credibility (Centre for Knowledge Translation for Disability and Rehabilitation Research 2005; Gersten et al. 2000; Shavelson and Towne 2002). Research about the same issue can vary considerably in its assumptions, methods, and findings (Gough et al. 2013). A lack of overall agreement on a specific set of standards for assessing research quality can add to the confusion, making it more difficult for research users to trust research. A number of groups have been working to bridge this gap through the development of research appraisal tools. For example, the Effective Public Health Practice Project (2009) has established a standardised quality appraisal tool for quantitative studies. The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (2013) has also established a number of tools for the evaluation of various research designs, including qualitative studies. Our research draws from this work to appraise the quality of research in rural development.

In this brief, we propose that the systematic literature review method offers promise in informing evidence-based rural development policy and practice. Specifically, we apply the approach used by Sanson-Fisher et al. (2006) and Bailey et al. (2009) in order to undertake a systematic literature review of rural development publications in the English language, investigate changes in the field across three time periods (1988–1989, 1998–1999, and 2008–2009), and classify research publications by type, region, and engagement with sustainability. We then apply the Effective Public Health Practice Project (EPHPP) (2009) Quality Assessment Tool for Quantitative Studies and the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) (2013) Qualitative Research Checklist to appraise the research approaches, characteristics, and quality of intervention studies within the rural development field. We seek to evaluate the general nature, quality, and reliability of growth in knowledge regarding rural development and, more specifically, whether the field is growing in a manner that reflects research and policy priorities, wider social trends, and interests related to sustainability in a robust and reliable manner.

Findings reveal that descriptive research has dominated the rural development field since the 1980s. Research output has shifted from developing to developed regions. The proportion of publications linked to sustainability increased significantly over the time period under review, and the majority of sustainability interventions employed processes of engaging the community and wider stakeholders. The authors consider implications for learning that can be derived from the systematic literature review process by highlighting four points relevant to researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and funding bodies in the field. Findings from the appraisal of research approaches and characteristics and quality of intervention studies reveal that rural development researchers have a predisposition for qualitative research approaches. Most intervention studies were found to be of a descriptive type, with only a small percentage comprising evaluation research. The quality

of intervention studies in rural development research was found to be predominantly poor, thereby limiting their usefulness for evidence-based decision-making.

We recommend two practical steps that individuals and teams can take to improve both the quality and the potential utilisation of their research at minimal extra cost. One step is to utilise standardised research quality assessment tools and reporting guidelines to routinely review peers' research grant applications and journal manuscripts prior to submission. The second step is to be explicit, when developing research proposals, as to how and by whom the research results will be utilised in order to inform decision-making.

Finally, this book promotes quality and utilisation of research in order to inform evidence-based decision-making within the rural development field. However, the quality improvement and utilisation strategies and understandings promoted in this book are transferable and, hence, we encourage researchers, policymakers, and practitioners from other fields to critically consider the work and adapt it for their own contexts.

Cairns, Australia

Neus Evans
Michelle Lasen
Komla Tsey

A Systematic Review of Rural Development Research
Characteristics, Design Quality and Engagement with
Sustainability

Evans, N.; Lasen, M.; Tsey, K.

2015, X, 63 p. 3 illus., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-17283-5