

Chapter 2

Disputed Notions and Definitions in Rural and Regional Studies

Abstract Based on the literature Chap. 1 addresses the question of the disputed notions of rural, regional, territorial and development terms. The first issue is about the definition—or the very existence, even—of “the rural”. We isolate two main definitions highlighted the fact that in certain cases “rural” is used to refer to the landscape, while in others it is the population that is of primary interest. We also identify that rural areas have lost their past uniformity and have now become home to a mix of different service activities and agricultural or industrial production; and consist of both remote territories and areas close to cities, of historic and new populations. Then we consider the notion of development, and show that Regional science places considerations of economic and social change in territories at the heart of the debate, together with issues associated with the development process and the distribution of gains and losses resulting from new configurations, as well as the recent integration of well-being in social and economic indexes. Finally we move to the terms “region” and “territories”, and agreed to the idea that regional development refers to the processes that occur within the institutional borders of the region, whereas that of territorial development pertains to a construction of territorialities by local populations.

Keywords Changes • Development • Region • Regional development • Rural • Territory • Territorial development

Addressing the question of regional, territorial and rural development necessarily leads—given the amount of literature that exists on these issues—to pondering the meaning of the terms used. Three main questions are raised with respect to terminology and definitions of the fields of study.

They concern, respectively:

- The notions of “rural” and rurality and their shifting definition;
- The very notion of development and its scope;
- The regional/territorial trade-off and the definition of the notion of “territory”.

2.1 The Notions of “Rural” and Rurality: What Is at Stake?

The first question to consider is the definition—or the very existence, even—of “the rural”. This concept is often discussed and has been the subject of debate and controversy in contemporary literature and in the context of the criteria used by national and international agencies or governments in the main OECD countries, for example.

At first glance, the question seems simple enough and is often answered by distinguishing between people who live in cities and those who live in the countryside; and indeed, although it has its limitations, this effective distinction allows for a clear insight into the place and evolution of rural areas and their populations in today’s world. In this respect, it is an interesting and informative exercise to examine the figures provided by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations concerning the distribution of the world population between rural and urban areas (see Figs. 2.1 and 2.2; Table 2.1), those provided by the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), or by the Data Center in NASA’s Earth Observing System Data and Information System (EOSDIS) (Figs. 2.3 and 2.4).

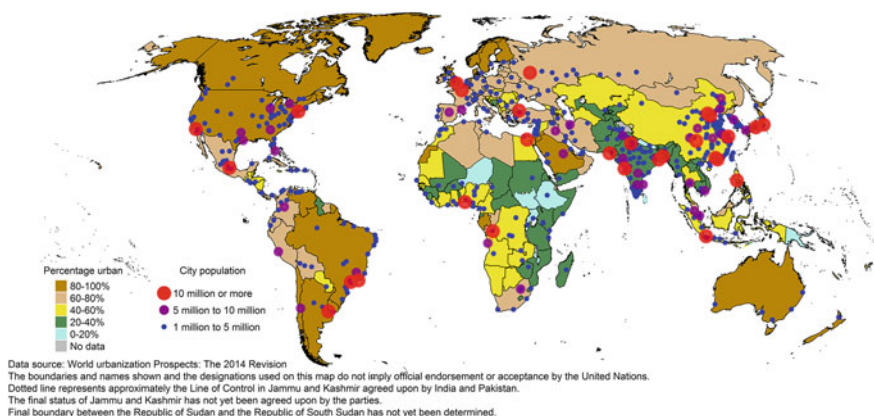


Fig. 2.1 Percentage urban and urban agglomerations by size class in 2014. *Source* United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2014), *WUP: The 2014 Revision, Highlights*

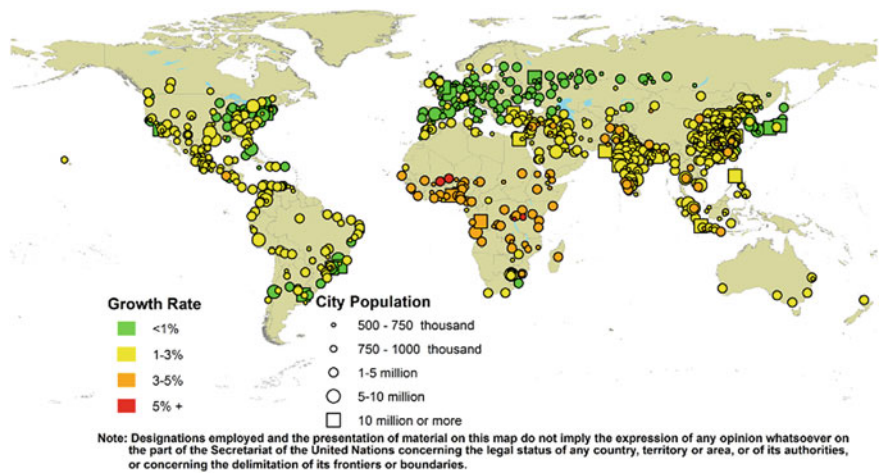
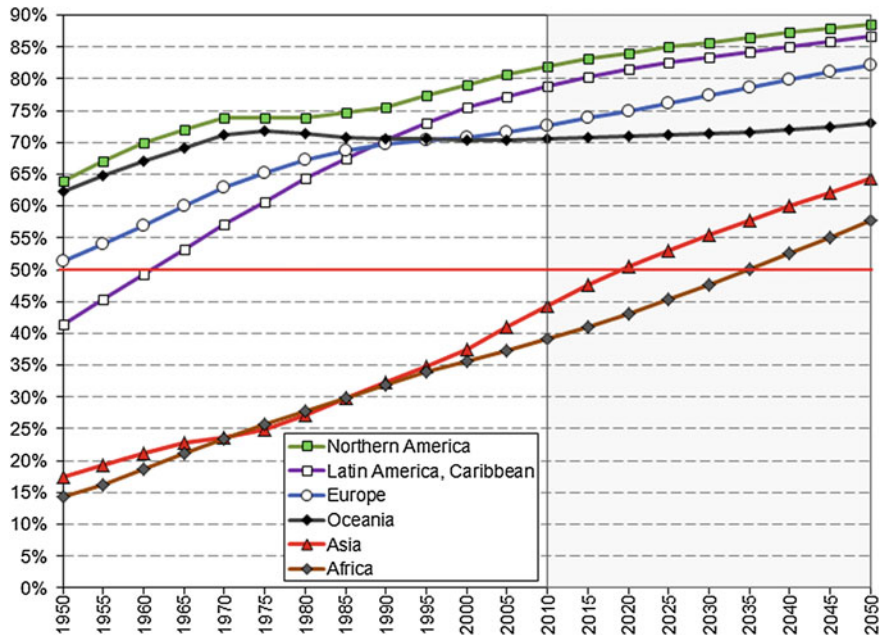


Fig. 2.2 Growth rates of urban agglomerations by size class 2014–2030. *Source* United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2014), *WUP: The 2014 Revision, Highlights*

Table 2.1 Urban population by major geographical area (% of total population). *Source* United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2012)



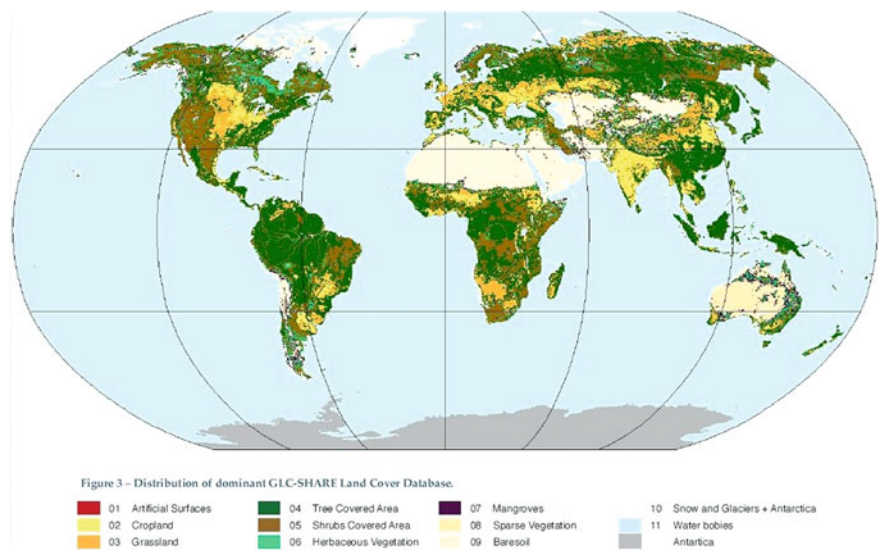


Fig. 2.3 Global land cover–Share for 2014. *Source* FAO, Global Land Cover Network

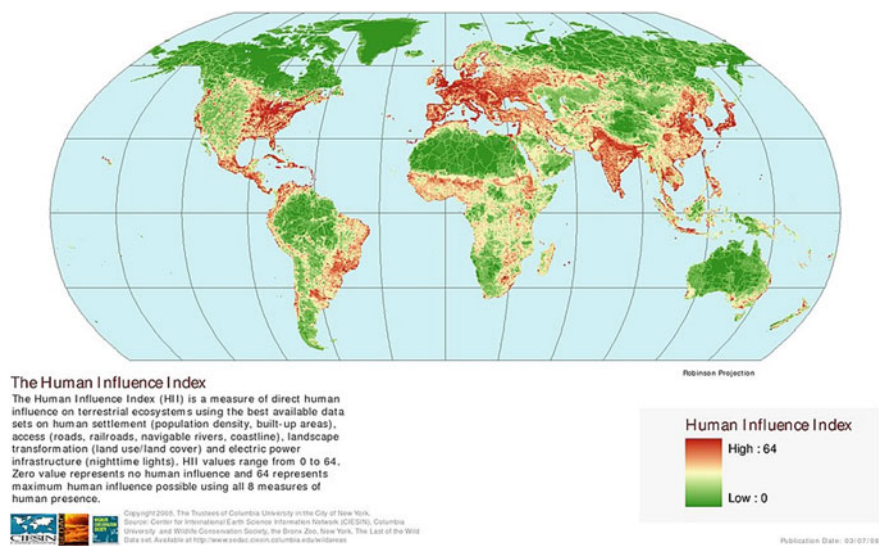


Fig. 2.4 The human influence index. *Source* NASA's Earth Observing System Data and Information System (EOSDIS)

World Urbanization Prospects, the 2014 Revision—UN|Key facts <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/index.htm>

Globally, more people live in urban areas than in rural areas, with 54 % of the world’s population residing in urban areas in 2014. In 1950, 30 % of the world’s population was urban, and by 2050, 66 % of the world’s population is projected to be urban.

Today, the most urbanized regions include Northern America (82 % living in urban areas in 2014), Latin America and the Caribbean (80 %), and Europe (73 %). In contrast, Africa and Asia remain mostly rural, with 40 and 48 % of their respective populations living in urban areas. All regions are expected to urbanize further over the coming decades. Africa and Asia are urbanizing faster than the other regions and are projected to become 56 and 64 % urban, respectively, by 2050.

The rural population of the world has grown slowly since 1950 and is expected to reach its peak in a few years. The global rural population is now close to 3.4 billion and is expected to decline to 3.2 billion by 2050. Africa and Asia are home to nearly 90 % of the world’s rural population. India has the largest rural population (857 million), followed by China (635 million).

The urban population of the world has grown rapidly since 1950, from 746 million to 3.9 billion in 2014. Asia, despite its lower level of urbanization, is home to 53 % of the world’s urban population, followed by Europe (14 %) and Latin America and the Caribbean (13 %).

Continuing population growth and urbanization are projected to add 2.5 billion people to the world’s urban population by 2050, with nearly 90 % of the increase concentrated in Asia and Africa.

Some cities have experienced population decline in recent years. Most of these are located in the low-fertility countries of Asia and Europe where the overall population is stagnant or declining. Economic contraction and natural disasters have contributed to population losses in some cities as well.

As the world continues to urbanize, sustainable development challenges will be increasingly concentrated in cities, particularly in the lower-middle-income countries where the pace of urbanization is fastest. Integrated policies to improve the lives of both urban and rural dwellers are needed.

These figures provide a striking estimation of the balance between rural and urban areas, as well as a vivid and ostensibly realistic picture of the world’s gradual transition from rural to urban, to the point where the majority of the global population lives in urban areas. However, examination of the data and methods used reveals that there are almost as many definitions of the term urban (and therefore implicitly, of the term rural, as these are the only categories considered) as there are countries in the world. For example, in some countries, a town is considered rural if it has a population of less than 10,000, while in others a town is rural if has fewer than 1500 inhabitants. In other countries still, all areas situated outside the capital

city and large administrative centres are considered rural. Geographical scale is, quite clearly, a key consideration: if the framework of reference comprises relatively small local-government districts, a given area may be classified as rural, whereas the same area could be deemed to belong to an urban zone if the reference framework is made up of larger units such as metropolitan areas or travel-to-work areas.

It is therefore necessary to clarify the distinction between rural and urban areas, as the vagueness of their respective definitions casts some ambiguity on the results presented (Halfacree 2003). Specifying the distinction between “rural” and “urban” or giving a clear-cut definition of the term “rural” is admittedly no easy task (Mormont 1990), but the uncertainty that characterizes current transformations may give rise to a productive debate.

Though rural areas are sometimes defined in the negative—as a remainder category of non-urban areas—the characterization of a rural area is traditionally based on morphological criteria: low population density, irregularly and sparsely distributed buildings, the presence of farming activities, etc. Yet this definition includes a diverse range of areas, such as countryside close to cities, natural or recreational spaces, or more distant, depopulated or disadvantaged areas. It is for this reason that the concept of “rural” remains vague and is often treated residually (as is the case in United Nations statistics); i.e. the rural is that which is not urban.

But even if we accept this basic definition, we still have to clarify what is meant by non-urban, as well as what exactly the urban counterpart of “the rural” is, especially given that traditional rural areas, which for the most part are farming areas, have undergone substantial changes, particularly since the second half of the 20th century. In most countries around the world, this period was marked by the massive migration of tens of millions of people from farming areas to urban areas, which subsequently expanded to previously unthinkable proportions. Meanwhile, rural areas, which had been predominantly or even exclusively used for farming, experienced major changes in terms of their economic activity. For example, in rural areas in France—a major agricultural country—farming now only ranks third in terms of the number of people it employs, behind the service and manufacturing sectors.

The frontier between rural and urban domains, often mentioned in reference to the city–country relationship, has weakened or even disappeared as a result of a twofold process. On the one hand, areas traditionally devoted to agriculture have been urbanized, with a dramatic increase in the number of buildings and individual houses encroaching upon open spaces. This has been accompanied by an increase in the size of small towns in which populations and services tend to concentrate at the expense of smaller villages. On the other hand, rurality and agriculture are making their way into cities, as demonstrated by the ever-growing success of locally based farming, local food systems and transition towns (Reid et al. 2012), and even urban agriculture (Despommier 2010). There is increasing demand from city dwellers for products with traceable origins as concerns rise regarding the ecological footprint of the commodities consumed by city dwellers, in terms of food miles, for example (Pretty et al. 2005).

Finally, the notion of the distinctiveness of rural populations—an idea once so firmly established that rural areas are often referred to as “rural worlds”—is now increasingly being eroded. Now, in the era of the Internet and Google, of television, mobile communications and smartphones, information spreads quickly and is accessible to growing numbers of people. This has led to a certain standardization of people’s attitudes, desires, and representations of reality, which suggests that the perception of rural folk as a distinct social category is no longer entirely valid. Indeed, the needs and expectations of rural populations increasingly resemble those of people living in cities, as a result of the “global village” phenomenon and the migration, in some European countries, of older populations to areas away from cities. But, like urban communities, rural areas are becoming more complex and more fragmented than in the past, with the development of pockets of poverty and of spaces devoted to tourism.

Today, “the rural” can be mostly considered a conceptual category, and, if we go by what Cloke says in “Conceptualizing Rurality”, we can accept that the construction of rurality rests on three interconnected frames of understanding that shed light on the concept and help us to gain a better grasp of its complexity (Cloke 2006).

The first is functional by nature and serves to identify markers of rurality such as the extensive use of land (often for farming), the small size of often scattered settlements, or respect for the environmental and behavioural qualities associated with living in the countryside. The second involves a more political economic perspective, based on the suggestion that certain structural problems affecting populations often take different forms in rural areas due to the latter’s distinguishing characteristics, including: a pleasant environment that attracts tourists, pensioners and those who are not economically active; the acknowledgement that these areas are not easily accessible due to a lack of appropriate infrastructure; and the great value attached to volunteering and self-help attitudes. The third and final frame of understanding pertains to rurality as a social construction and places emphasis on the cultural dimension, that is to say the social, cultural and moral values associated with rural areas, and rural living in general.

On a simpler level, this book subscribes to the idea that some of the conflicting or confusing definitions highlighted above arise because in certain cases “rural” is used to refer to the landscape, while in others it is the population that is of primary interest. This separation allows us to understand the differences and ambiguities of certain analytical definitions, and to categorize the different types of policies implemented in rural areas:

- When the primary focus is the area/land/resources, definitions of what is rural tend to refer above all to issues pertaining to nature, landscape, types of afforestation, environmental zoning, protected species or land use. When this is the case, it makes sense for sector-specific policies such as agricultural development or recreation/tourism to potentially be the main focus for both analysis and policy. The same is also true for environmental concerns and policies, as well as the historic association between agriculture and rurality.

- However, when population size, sources of income, and employment are considered, the definition of what is rural tends to be much more focused on functional ties between rural and urban areas, such as where people live and where they work and earn their living, and where they spend their money, consume goods and services or use amenities. Policies in favour of rural spaces are therefore above all targeted at local populations, be it in terms of action to promote employment and access to services or education, measures to reduce inequalities and increase income levels, or efforts to empower the population, develop local democratic processes and involve local stakeholders in territorial governance practices.

There is, of course, some overlap between landscape-based definitions of rurality and people-based definitions; for example, access to rural landscapes and recreation areas affects the living conditions and consumption possibilities of the population. But, in the end, the different visions of rural space—a productive resource historically related to farming, recreational or touristic activities related to the amenities that characterize it, or, more recently, natural areas—are conditioned by people's perceptions and by the different types of public policies implemented (Perrier-Cornet 2002). They combine with or oppose one another, offering a variety of trajectories for rural spaces—spaces which, in recent decades, have undergone profound transformations, and in particular have regained attractiveness following a long period of depopulation.

Indeed, the fact is that, in these regions, rural areas have become hybrid, so to speak. They have lost their past uniformity and have now become home to a mix of different service activities and agricultural or industrial production; they consist of both remote territories and areas close to cities, of historic and new populations. They are consequently facing forms of development far more complex than in the past, and therefore require particular attention.

2.2 A Review of the Notion of Development

Let us begin with the notion of development, which underlies all the approaches discussed here. A brief review of the literature shows that, in many respects, it is an intriguing concept that is sometimes lacking in clear theoretical foundations. As Stimson et al. (2006) pointed out, “[i]t is surprising to find how authors have diversely and often imprecisely defined the term”. Often used as a synonym for “process” or “state” (“this country has reached an important level of development”), it is still used as a sort of adverb associated with such terms as “economic”, “regional” or “agricultural”, or evokes the idea of increase or improvement.

Like all institutions, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), to cite one example, is now placing considerable emphasis on sustainable development, and clarifies the role of capacity development as “the process by which individuals, groups and organizations, institutions and countries

develop, enhance and organize their systems, resources and knowledge; all reflected in their abilities, individually and collectively, to perform functions, solve problems and achieve objectives” (OECD 2006c). Mention is also often made of the definition proposed by Perroux, according to whom development is a “combination of a population’s mental and social changes which make it capable of ensuring the cumulative and lasting growth of its real global product. Development encompasses and supports growth” (Perroux 1964). Just like the OECD, Perroux makes a distinction between development and growth, for the former does not merely pertain to factors such as increases in living standards or in GDP, but also encompasses broader dimensions related to people’s lifestyles, skills, knowledge and mental dispositions. Furthermore, this definition includes non-economic variables and brings to the fore the central role played by social and cognitive changes. Equitable access to resources such as food, education, justice and healthcare are dimensions that are now commonly included in the definition.

It is justifiable to consider that the essence of development lies somewhere else, in the idea of transformations and dynamic processes, or in the question of economic and institutional changes, along with changes in customs, lifestyles and people’s perceptions. In this regard, it is interesting to consider here what the key definition of psychology is: the development of a person, or personality, in his/her early childhood, corresponding to the development of a potential and of qualities and skills during the course of a trial-and-error process that is not necessarily linear. Another approach, of great interest, was initiated by Schumpeter (1934) with his famous theory of economic development, which above all translates a dynamic process of departure from the routine in transactions and homothetic growth, as well as the implementation of new rules and new modes of functioning, characterized by shifts from the more linear phases of growth.

This reference should discourage researchers or practitioners from limiting their reflection to comparisons or typologies, which, while admittedly useful, often merely consist of making observations or evaluations of a given state of development, without directly addressing the question of economic and technical transformations and changes in society.

In this regard, regional science provides a stimulating avenue for re-examining the nature of development processes while taking into account aspects such as geographic scales of reference for coordination and public intervention, and the diverse configurations of overlapping areas.

In addition to these aspects are the configurations and meanings of the concept of development that are at stake and the question of regional science. They place considerations of economic and social change in territories at the heart of the debate, together with issues associated with the development process and the distribution among players of gains and losses resulting from new configurations.

The expansion of definitions of development by integrating sustainability criteria has further complicated the situation in terms of the dimensions to be considered, rekindling debate not just on the hierarchy of goals and the possibility of their virtuous combination, but also on indicators and opportunities for measuring change (Jany-Catrice and Méda 2013). There is also a need to take account of

negative externalities in development strategies, mentioned in particular in the Stiglitz–Sen–Fitoussi report (2009), echoing calls for greater consideration of cultural and heritage dimensions (and more broadly positive externalities) and the issue of welfare in the review of development dynamics. Meanwhile, against the backdrop of maintaining or increasing differences in growth between territories is the problem of necessary regional convergence, and with it the identification of drivers of development and effects of inequality in the distribution of wealth with which scientists and policymakers alike are now faced.

2.3 On Regions and Territories

The notions of “regional development” and “territorial development” now tend to surround the term “local development”, generally applied to small, infra-regional portions of territory, undergoing self-reliant or bottom-up development processes. But the generalized use of these expressions raises questions: are they identical, opposed, or substitutable? And, above all, this raises the question of how the concepts of region and territory are defined.

The term “regional” refers to two relatively distinct definitions. The first, which is fading and is mostly used in an administrative sense by regional authorities themselves or by the EU, refers to administrative regions (e.g. the Centre region in France, or the Tuscany region in Italy). The second, used since the 1950s in the literature on regional development and regional sciences, and mostly based on an economic vision, pertains to the “geographical” dimensions of development or growth (e.g. Isard 1956). It encompasses questions relating to the “local”, the region, the location of activities or people, as well as the wealth and competitiveness of certain portions of space or nations.

Although regional development theories have changed significantly since the mid-20th century, there is no unanimity among researchers on this issue, and debates have raged since the emergence of these theories (see, for example, the discussions reported by Isard (1960), according to whom the term “region” refers to “any subnational entity not necessarily defined by political boundaries,” or to “generalizations of the human mind”). However, various definitions can be found, all of which correspond to different categories and core interests, depending on whether their authors place emphasis solely on economic or geographical cohesion, or on a more explicit premise (Dawkins 2003). Authors like Christaller (1933) and Lösch (1940) argue that regions can be identified through the existence of central places or cities, while other authors define the region primarily on the basis of the existence of local labour markets. Others still refer to “planning regions”, which they equate to political or administrative units. Finally, some define regions in terms of natural resources, ecosystems or geographical boundaries, while more recent theories go further and argue for an approach focused on the interdependencies between natural resources and human populations.

The territory is generally ignored in this type of approach. The qualifier “territorial” was recently introduced in the literature on development, particularly in the English-language literature, although it has been in use for longer in Italian- and French-language literature (Camagni 2009; Pecqueur 1996). It refers to the concept of territory, whose emergence was slow and sometimes controversial in this field of analysis. In this book, we have opted for the following definition: a geographic zone with defined boundaries, within which relationships are organized and governed by groups or particular populations that identify with one another through common projects. Here, mention should also be made of the conventional definition given by Sack (1986): “Territoriality will be defined as the attempt by an individual or a group to affect, influence or control people, phenomena, and relationships, by delimiting an asserting control over a geographic area. This area will be called the territory”. As a result, territories are permanent constructs with moving boundaries, and are constituted through oppositions between and compromises among local actors. Many authors, however, consider that the notion of geographical borders is obsolete, and that territories can comprise areas or enclaves that may be very far from one another.

Territories are collective productions of a human community, with citizens, governance structures and organizations, and are not merely geographic entities; they are formed of a combination of individuals and/or stakeholders located within areas whose boundaries may shift according to their interactions. They are under permanent construction, developing through contention and compromise between local and external actors, and are long-term constructs encompassing a history and a set of core concerns that are deeply rooted in local cultures and customs. Far from being set within fixed administrative boundaries, their frontiers are shaped by the existence of a sense of belonging (and awareness thereof), as well as by political governance institutions and specific rules of organization and operation.

Based on these definitions, the concept of regional development refers to the processes that occur within the institutional borders of the region, whereas that of territorial development pertains to a construction of territorialities by local populations (Mollard et al. 2007), in relation, naturally, with policy directives or more general incentives.

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