

SYSTEMIC AND CROSS-SCALE DEVELOPMENT
OF REGIONS AND RURAL AREAS:
Approaches, Experience, and Lessons
Learned in Latin America

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay, supported by prior systematization and comparative discussion of Latin American experiences and capacity building, is to review, assess and contrast conceptual and methodological approaches to development at multiple scales in this region, based on a systems approach to rural territories and to area-based cross-scale development. It is also highlights certain lessons derived from participatory assessment of area-based experiences, as well as the self-critical conclusions and proposals of some of these assessments, and certain implications for public policies, social management and relational governance.

Keywords: regional development; area-based development; systemic approach; relational governance.

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INTRODUCTION

The social and political construction of the area-based approach to rural development -first in Europe and gradually, since the turn of the century, in Latin America, constituted a substantial step forward vis-à-vis the prevailing models of rural development. However, its full implementation in terms of positive, broad and in-depth transformations of rural areas and of multi-scale development has not yet been completed. As in the case of democracy, whose limitations or shortcomings require its expansion and deepening -rather than its weakening or substitution- it is necessary to strengthen the systemic and multi- as well as cross-scale nature of area-based, participatory and inclusive development, whilst recognizing its challenges and insufficiencies. This, in turn, leads us to necessarily reflect on the conceptual foundations and methodological approaches to area-based development as it has been implemented so far, and on lessons learned and further elaboration based on prior experience. It also pertains to the management of local development and that of rural areas or broader regions, as well as cross-border development, and to the design and implementation of area-based development policies or programs, in their respective national or supra-national contexts.

This article briefly addresses key components of a systemic approach to area-based rural development, based on conceptual and methodological elaboration derived from actual practices of participatory social management and of related public policies in Latin America. It pays special attention to lessons learned in Brazil, Colombia and Central America, where participants have contributed to their systematization (Samper and González, 2013) and interpretation (Samper and González, 2018 a, 2018 b; Samper, 2019).

We will specifically address the concept of rural areas as local systems, as it pertains to area-based development as a comprehensive, cross-scale process involving multiple interacting systems, as well as interactions among multiple overlapping systems and with the broader systems of which they are part and in whose dynamics they are involved.

Methodologically, we build upon prior participatory systematization of experiences in the social management of rural areas, as the basis for identifying lessons learned from each of them. (Samper, 2017) Comparative discussion of these experiences and lessons allowed us to subsequently find common denominators or significant differences among them. In addition, we resorted to several critical assessments and proposals regarding area-based rural development processes in Latin America and the Caribbean, especially those pertaining to conceptual and methodological aspects. This enabled us to derive conclusions of a more general nature.

Successive sections address the relevance of and the need for a systemic, cross-scale approach to development; the concept of rural areas as systems; the multiple scales of development and relations among the regional and sub-regional, micro-regional or local area levels of development. Other sections focus on current or potential synergies between rural and urban development, as well as the establishment and enablement of functional regions or rural-urban areas; cross-scale linkages in planning and management of development; methodological aspects of systemic, multi-scale development, and certain conceptual lessons learned from political-institutional and area-based experiences, emphasizing the concept of rural areas as systems.

RELEVANCE OF AND NEED FOR A SYSTEMIC AND CROSS-SCALE APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT

The area-based approach to rural development, as well as certain approaches to local development that incorporated components of this approach, together with others pertaining to urban-regional development, usually recognize -though sometimes in a rather implicit manner- the systemic nature of rural areas or micro-regions, of local socio-geographic areas often related to municipalities, and of planning regions or functional regions and territories. These various approaches also tend to address development processes to a certain extent as systemic ones, insofar as they seek to promote comprehensive transformations involving synergies among socio-environmental, socio-economic, socio-political and socio-cultural dynamics, among others. Area-based development policies and programs, as well as the social management of such processes, also recognize that these take place at various levels or scales and that it is necessary to foster linkages among local, territorial or micro-regional, regional and national processes, and take into account their supra-national and global contexts.

On the other hand, actual practices regarding development at each of these levels, as well as the design and implementation of policies and programs, public investments and joint efforts to promote development at these various levels, tend to set aside their systemic nature and the question of cross-scale development. The dynamic and interactive complexity of rural areas or of broader regions undergoes an analytical disaggregation into several dimensions or aspects, whose interactions and interweaving are not taken fully into account when devising strategies or plans by aspects of development. Nor do these explicitly address their interrelations and mutual influences. There is also a tendency to emphasize a specific level of analysis and intervention, e.g. the regional or territorial one (often rural but also urban or rural-urban) to the detriment of others. Little attention is then paid to the inherently cross-scale nature of development processes.

Certain Latin American approaches at the turn of the century focused on the systemic nature of development (e.g. Boisier, 2003) and envisioned a multi-scale approach to rural areas and other territories, or addressed relations between them -from a comprehensive and cross-scale perspective- and national, supra-national or global processes. (e.g. Cuervo, 2006) Other, more recent work (such as that by Buhr and Dallabrida, 2019) explicitly posited the systemic nature of the area-based approach, grounded on a comprehension of rural areas as complex totalities with multiple interacting socio-environmental components.

To comprehend rural areas as complex, open and dynamic systems with natural, socio-economic, political and cultural components requires an understanding of their multiple interacting subsystems, and of the various broader systems in which they are immersed. These dynamics -both within territorial systems and with their local, regional, national, supra-national or global milieu- generate emergent properties of those systems, that go beyond mere aggregation of their components or dimensions. Such interactive dynamics entail distinctive traits, as rural areas and also in terms of their development. These are socially constructed, geographically differentiated, and historically changing.

LOCAL, TERRITORIAL, REGIONAL, NATIONAL, CROSS-BORDER AND SUPRA-NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The multiple scales at which development takes place -as in the case of territorial systems constituted by interacting subsystems and immersed in broader systems of various types- are closely inter-connected. It is necessary to link them conceptually and methodologically, as well as in terms of the policies and initiatives to foster their development.

From the local to the sub-national levels, as well as in the intermediate ones pertaining to rural areas or territories, their interwoven and interacting socio-environmental, socio-economic, socio-political and socio-cultural dynamics take place at multiple scales. Planning and social management of development must complement each other, recognizing the appropriate scales for various types of projects and public investments, also exploring current or potential synergies among local areas, intermediate territories or micro-regions, and broader planning or functional regions.

Each of these levels can also encompass more than one scale of governance or of government, of social management and of differentiated implementation of public policies. The local level usually includes a number of communities and at least one municipality, or in certain cases inter-municipal associations. The sub-national level may involve planning regions, as in several Central American countries, or functional regions, as well as city-regions or intermediate levels of government. The latter include states in countries with federal systems -e.g. in Brasil, Argentina or Mexico- as well as other types of intermediate political-administrative units such as departments with significant degrees of autonomy in the design and implementation of plans, policies and budgets, as in the Andean countries. Rural, urban or rural-urban territories may vary considerably in their scope in terms of broader or lesser sets of municipalities, geographical areas and population. These differences are found not only between countries but also within a given country, and the social-geographical coverage of those territories may change over time. Planning and the social management of development must be undertaken at multiple scales and addressed in a cross-scale manner to be effective and to generate synergies or complementarities among the dynamics of these various levels. (Cuervo and Delano, 2019 a, b and c; Sotomayor *et al.* 2023)

On the other hand, domestic public policies, and in some countries public budgets and investments, are sometimes regionalized or distributed among subnational levels of government. It is rather exceptional for them to be allocated to micro-regions or rural, urban or rural-urban areas, while funds do tend to be decentralized toward local governments, who in turn have a degree of authority and certain functions regarding municipal policies and budgets.

Management of development, including the design of public policies, strategies and initiatives by authorities or stakeholders is not necessarily limited to the national, subnational or local levels. Cross-border dynamics and territorialities, often strong and significant, may generate bi- or tri-national inter-governmental bodies, as well as platforms for concertation or coordination among territorial stakeholders from neighboring areas of the countries involved. Also, mechanisms such as the Central American Integration System and others in South America may promote supra-national development policies or strategies, including those pertaining to specific types of territories. They may also foster exchanges, interactions and concertation among territorial governance bodies in member countries.

RURAL AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT

In Latin America, the territorial approach to development has been related primarily to rural areas, although these may include urban or rural-urban places. They may also interact with small or intermediate cities within functional regions or territories, and sometimes with major cities or metropolitan areas, as in the city-regions of Colombia. The basic principles and concepts of the territorial approach to rural development, as well as key components of the methods for social management of the development of rural areas and the lessons learned from them, are valid and relevant -with the requisite adjustments or modifications- to urban areas proper and to rural-urban areas.

On the other hand, the rural-urban dichotomy has gradually -albeit incompletely- been reconsidered in official definitions and statistics in Latin America. This has led to changes in the way rural and urban areas are viewed. It has also enabled a better understanding of the rural-urban gradient and of the historically changing and spatially diverse intertwining of rural and urban components.

Rather than being totally independent or contrasting, rural and urban development are socio-geographically differentiated but also complementary and interwoven aspects of development in regions or territories where area-based dynamics that we tend to associate with either cities or the countryside constantly interact. These historical and current relations, with their actual or potential synergies -but also with their conflicting or contrasting aspects- are multi-dimensional. This involves environmental services and impacts; exchanges of goods and services, matter and energy, knowledge and information; job-related regular movement from one place to another as well as permanent migration; political-administrative and power relations; the social fabric and various types of networks; cultural influences and collective identities.

Specifically urban or rural areas interact within rural-urban territorial systems and broader regional, national, cross-border and international systems. These interactions involve multiple intermediaries, short or long value chains and various types of exchanges. They constitute a multi-scale web of relations between cities and the countryside, and the importance of socio-geographical areas where rural and urban elements are interspersed in various ways tends to progressively increase over time.

FUNCTIONAL TERRITORIES AND RURAL-URBAN LINKAGES

Various types of studies have focused on functional regions and territories in Latin America, with major precedents in processes of regionalization of public policies to define planning or development regions.

In the 1970s, certain geographical studies made contributions to public institutions in specific countries for their regional planning. Such was the case of Costa Rica, where a study by German geographer Helmut Nuhn, published in 1974, was the basis for defining this country's planning regions, still in force today with minor modifications. His rigorous research and interpretive proposal combined structural and functional criteria to identify regions based on their physical and economic geography, among other aspects.

Studies conducted more recently by Rimisp - Center for Rural Development applied contributions from prior work by North American scholars on inter-municipal daily labor-related commuting, as indicators of functional relations. Rimisp focused primarily on rural-urban linkages among municipalities, in contrast to other, more deeply rural municipalities that were self-contained in terms of the workforce. (e.g. Berdegué *et al.*, 2011) Subsequently, researchers associated with Rimisp also resorted to night-time luminosity detected by satellites to explore urban-rural functional ties in several Latin American countries.

The *New narratives for a rural transformation in Latin America and the Caribbean* project, by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) with support from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), addressed the establishment of rural-urban functional territories, primarily in the cases of El Salvador and Costa Rica. (Gaudin and Padilla, editors, 2023)

MULTI- AND CROSS-SCALE AS OPPOSED TO SINGLE-SCALE APPROACHES TO DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES

National political-administrative systems generally assign a relatively autonomous role to local governments. Although the degrees of effective budgetary and functional decentralization toward those local governing bodies vary significantly, they tend to increase over time. Intermediate levels of governance may be strong or, instead, rather symbolic, with or without the ability to conduct their own planning and budgetary management.

Latin American policies and legal frameworks regarding regional, territorial and local development usually recognize the existence of several levels of governance, with variable degrees of involvement of the State and of civil society. However, mechanisms to ensure linkages among those various levels in the design and management of development strategies or plans, programs or projects, and public investments to implement them, are often less clearly defined.

Actual practices regarding area-based rural development in Latin America have tended to consider rural areas or territories as groupings of municipalities and as “spatial cut-outs”, even though their definitions refer to social-historical constructions and cultural identities that do not necessarily correspond to specific sets of political-administrative units.

For certain purposes in terms both of public policies and of social management it may be convenient or necessary to focus plans or strategies, projects and investments on a certain sociogeographical level, on a given type of political-administrative units, or on a certain scale of governance or consensus-building mechanism. Yet in doing so, it is crucial to explicitly and systematically address its linkages with other scales, with the broader systems of which territorial ones are a part, and also of their interacting subsystems.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO SYSTEMIC, MULTI-SCALE DEVELOPMENT

Methods for the social management of local, territorial and regional development in Latin America have evolved on the basis of various proposals and experiences. These include methodological proposals by cooperation agencies and coordination mechanisms such as the Inter-Agency Rural Development Group (GIADR, for its Spanish-language acronym), established

in the year 2000. They also derive from national policies and programs especially of the Territorial Development Secretariat (SDT, for its Portuguese-language acronym) and the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA) in Brazil. Other policy proposals and experiences pertain to the Central American Area-based Rural Development Strategy (Ecadert, for its Spanish acronym) or to specific Central American countries. These methodological approaches also build on the experience of Colombian public institutions responsible for rural development before and after the signing of the Peace Accords, and of national or subnational governments in other Andean countries, in the Southern Cone, or in Mexico.

THE GIADR, CONSTITUTED BY SEVERAL INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION AGENCIES IN LATIN AMERICA²,

addressed the need for area-based strategies in public policies to foster rural development, address persistent rural poverty, and propel substantial transformations in the rural milieu. In an assessment toward the end of the first decade of this century (Echeverri and Sotomayor, 2010), the authors highlighted the significance of joint initiatives among cooperation agencies, academic research groups and governments in the region for the conceptual elaboration of the area-based approach and to move beyond conventional approaches to rural development. They also posited the need to systematize and exchange experiences, in the context of knowledge management processes, to identify common characteristics of the various political-institutional and territorial experiences, and to identify methodological lessons learned from them.

In Brazil, especially between 2003 and 2011, the SDT learned from and also “tropicalized” political-institutional and territorial experiences of the LEADER (Liaison entre Actions de Développement de l’Économie Rurale) program in Europe. The SDT launched first the Identity Territories program and then the Citizenship Territories program. Within the MDA and in those rural areas, said programs were linked to those of the Family Farming Secretariat.

In Colombia, the diversity of both the territorial processes and the political-institutional ones, as regards rural development, and also that of the related academic groups involved, have led to a wealth of experiences and a certain degree of thematic and geographic scattering, which in turn generated diverse perspectives that have been conceptually and methodologically enriching. Certain interpretive and suggestive essays have recognized, on the one hand, the fluidity and heterogeneity, and on the other hand the political and institutional complexity, of the development of rural areas in this country. (e.g. Forero, 2016)

In Central America, during the broadly participatory design of Ecadert, between 2009 and 2010, a number of territorial experiences were systematically assessed to identify lessons learned. These area-based experiences included those of Darien in Panama; the highlands of Chalatenango in El Salvador; Belén Gualcho in Honduras, and three Territorial Action Groups

² FAO (the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization), IICA (the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture), ECLAC (the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean), IDB (the Inter-American Development Bank), the World Bank, IFAD (the International Fund for Agricultural Development), USAID/United States Agency for International Development, GTZ/GIZ (the German Cooperation Agency) and AECID (the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation for Development), together with the Ibero-American Cooperation Program on Territorial Management (Programa Iberoamericano de Cooperación en Gestión Territorial, PROTERRITORIOS).

in Costa Rica. In this country, methodological guidelines of the Expider Project, fostering innovative experiences of rural development in Latin America, had been taken up by the Rural Development Program of the Ministry of Agriculture. During the early stage of implementation of Ecadert, other experiences were documented and lessons learned were identified in a participatory manner in rural areas of the region encompassed by the Central American Integration System (SICA), as in Guatemala or the Dominican Republic. Lessons derived from them were subsequently published (Samper and González, 2013), and they contributed to the Regional Capacity-building Program of said Central American Strategy, supported by the Spanish cooperation agency. There were also assessments of their attainments and limitations during that early stage (e.g. Fernández-Portillo and Santos-Carrillo, 2015).

Systematically learning from Latin American experience has enabled the development of methodological proposals and approaches of a more general nature (Samper, 2016 a, b; Samper *et al.* 2016 a, b, c).

LESSONS LEARNED IN LATIN AMERICA REGARDING THE SOCIAL MANAGEMENT OF DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES, RELATIONAL GOVERNANCE AND PUBLIC POLICIES

Latin America has been a vast terrain for experimentation in various social “laboratories” in connection with local, regional or state-level and national, as well as cross-border and supra-national experiences of design and implementation of public policies for area-based rural development and social management of initiatives or strategies for the development of rural areas. Latin America has also been an experimental field with respect to relational governance, one based on complex relations and interactions among multiple stakeholders in dialogue platforms and processes. Such interactions have usually involved civil society organizations and national or sub-national institutions that are active in the territories; local governments have often participated, while private sector representatives have done so in varying degrees. Cooperatives or other associations have tended to be more actively involved, and private businesses, corporate firms or private-sector organizations to a lesser extent.

We will now subsequently address Brazilian, Colombian and Central American experiences and lessons learned from them, as well as certain more general ones derived from those processes.

In Brazil, the Territorial Development Secretariat of the Agrarian Development Ministry prepared and published, starting in 2005, several handbooks to guide participatory planning processes (MDA-SDT, 2005 a, b and c; 2006 a and b), as well as an assessment of the Program for Sustainable Development of Rural Areas (Programa Desenvolvimento Sustentável de Territórios Rurais, PRONAT) from 2003 to 2010. (MDA-SDT, 2010)

Cooperative relationships between academic teams and public institutions facilitated the process of conducting interpretive studies and assessments of area-based development processes and experiences, their attainments and their limitations. (Schneider and Peyré Tartaruga, 2006; Favareto and Schröder, M. 2007; Leite *et al.*, 2009; Favareto, 2009 and 2015; Schneider, 2010; Schneider *et al.*, 2010; Guimarães, 2013; Delgado and Leite, 2015; Dias, 2016)

In the state of Bahia, where territorialization of public policies was quite significant, a number of area-based development experiences served as benchmarks for others in Latin America, as in the case of the territory of Sisal. (da Silva, 2008; da Silva and Olalde, 2010; Oliveira *et al.*, 2011) Subsequently, building on experience in Bahia and other Territories of Identity or of Citizenship in Brazil, Humberto Oliveira prepared a valuable set of methodological handbooks for the management of state-level policies and of territorial processes (Oliveira, 2016 a, b, c, d; 2017 a, b). These handbooks address the construction of a state-level system for territorial development and the design of area-based plans for sustainable, solidary development and territorial actions for economic and environmental development with productive inclusion. They also deal with the design of territorial information systems, identification of opportunities for territorial development, and area-based planning.

In Colombia, during the intervening years between the enactment of the innovative 1991 Constitution and the signing of the Peace Accords by the Colombian State and the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, FARC), there were several area-based development experiences such as the Peace Laboratories and those in areas reserved for small-holders (Zonas de Reserva Campesina). Some of these experiences and their conceptual or methodological contributions, achievements and shortcomings, have been documented or systematized to identify lessons learned from them, and several interpretive assessments have been conducted, leading to related proposals. (de Roux, 1999; Guerrero *et al.*, n.d.; Cooagrogaviare and Incoder, 2012; Barreto, 2016; Corporación PBA, n.d. and 2017 a, 2017 b; FAO and ANT, 2018)

Colombian public institutions responsible for rural development gradually incorporated an area-based approach, first when the Colombian Agrarian Institute (Incora, for its Spanish acronym) gave way to the Colombian Rural Development Institute (Incoder), and subsequently through the establishment of three new agencies entrusted with various aspects of rural development. Incoder set forth new concepts and methodologies, and fostered rural development processes involving components of the area-based approach. In certain cases this was a joint undertaking with international cooperation agencies, as in Sur de Córdoba and Bajo Cauca with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (INCODER-UNDP, n.d., a, b, c.)

During negotiations, approval and subsequently complex and incomplete implementation of the Peace Accords, new forms of management of area-based development were designed, primarily but not exclusively in the territorial scenarios of the protracted domestic armed conflict in Colombia. Related proposals and norms as well as initial experiences led to new operational concepts, methodological tools, modes of implementation and interpretive, critical or propositional assessments. (CINEP, n.d.; Madrideojos, n.d.; Ninkov, 2012; Briceño *et al.*, 2016; CINEP, 2016; Programa Nuevos Territorios de Paz, 2016; Rincón, 2016)

In Central America, once those involved became familiar with area-based rural development policies, especially those of Brazil, and with certain territorial experiences in that country -as well as in Spain through exchange programs and the Pideral project- participatory systematization of several area-based development processes within this region led to identification of methodological lessons. Once Ecadert was approved, the Regional Capacity-building Program enabled shared learning and conceptual and methodological elaboration based on territorial experience and political-institutional processes.

Subsequently, in the context of the Territorial Development and Family Farming Management System (Sistema de Gestión del Desarrollo Territorial y la Agricultura Familiar, SiGET), an initiative by IICA toward 2016-2017, participants from a dozen Latin American countries learned from each other's experience, and a number of operational concepts and methodological guidelines were set forth. The first of five handbooks published by SiGET summarized methodological lessons derived from Latin American experience, including that of Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador. This handbook also explained the need for a systemic approach to the management of area-based rural development. It highlighted the importance of ensuring full inclusiveness regarding the various social actors, networks and groups in rural areas, and explored how to methodologically integrate management of area-based rural development and strengthening of area-based family farming systems. (Samper, 2016 a)

Assessments of territorial and political-institutional experiences (Berdegué, Christian and Favareto, 2020) and of lessons learned from Brazil, Colombia, Central America and other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean, identified a broad set of conceptual and related methodological lessons regarding both public policies and social management of area-based development. The following are examples of certain relevant lessons regarding the concept of rural areas or territories, based on an interpretive summary by the author, supported by participatory assessments and previous appraisals. (Samper, 2020)

CONCEPTUAL LESSONS LEARNED REGARDING TERRITORIES INCLUDE:

- Polisemy or multiple meanings of this concept in public policies, knowledge areas and social practices, as well as its changes over time. Thus, the term "territory" is often used to signify different things, making it necessary to explicitly state its meaning and the implications of the specific concept adopted.
- The importance of constructing a general systemic concept of territory and incorporating its key components in public policy instruments pertaining to area-based development -whether rural, urban or rural-urban- at various scales. Also, the need for dialogue among public and academic institutions as well as territorial stakeholder regarding each other's understanding of the territory as a system.
- The complex, open, and dynamic nature of territorial systems, at various scales, and the emerging properties resulting from their internal dynamics and their interactions with other territorial systems, both rural and urban, and with changing conditions in the regional, national, supra-national and global systems of which they are a part.
- The systemic multi-dimensionality of territories, that far from being a mere aggregation of neighboring dimensions, results from interactive relations and reciprocal influence among their multiple, intertwined components or subsystems.
- The usefulness of a general concept of territory to subsequently explore its specificities in rural, urban, or rural-urban settings, as well as at regional, sub-regional, micro-regional or local levels.
- The absolute inadequacy of dichotomously opposing rural and urban territories, and the relevance of specifically addressing territories that combine rural and urban elements in various degrees, in different and changing manners.

- The relevance of the type and intensity of relations between Nature and Society when addressing differentiation among categories of rural-urban gradients and their transformations over time.
- The limitations of legal and regulatory or administrative definitions of territorial zones as unvarying spatial “cut-outs”, as opposed to the concept of territorial networks and of multi-territoriality.
- The social function of networks and relations among those involved in the historical construction of territories and in the participatory design and implementation of their projects for the future, development strategies and plans.

CONCLUSIONS

Early on, the area-based approach to rural development incorporated some aspects of a systemic view and recognized, to a certain degree, the existence of relations among the various dimensions of rural territories, as well as among the different facets of their development. However, there has been some tension between this partial acknowledgment and the prevailing tendency to analytically segregate the various components both of rural territories and of area-based rural development. The latter trend has been reflected in public policies that treat environmental, social, organizational and cultural aspects as if they were nearly isolated compartments. It has also translated into political-institutional and social management practices regarding territorial development that focus on a given axis for the design and implementation of projects or proposals and public investments or joint initiatives. In both areas, the interactions of those axes with others have not been sufficiently considered, nor has the question of whether -or to what extent, and how- they will actually contribute to comprehensive development of territories insofar as complex, dynamic socio-spatial totalities, with multiple interacting components as well as interactions with broader systems.

On the other hand -yet also in connection with the above-, while certain early Latin American approaches focused on micro-regions (e.g. Sepúlveda, 2002) that presumably interacted with their respective regions, the multi-scalar nature of the territories themselves and the cross-scale nature of their development were minimized, if not completely ignored. Actual practice of public policy-making and institutional actions, as well as of consensus-building for the management or area-based rural development, has tended to focus on a given scale, often a group of municipalities. While there are reasons why it has been appropriate to involve local governments or inter-municipal associations in the governance and management of territorial development, together with social and institutional stakeholders, rural areas tended to become “spatial cut-outs”, in certain cases encompassing together almost all the respective country or state. Some of these have recognized the need to link such rural areas with planning regions or the broader political-administrative units, and with the municipal or local levels. This is clearly necessary, but we must also recognize and explicitly address the existence of multiple territorial scales as well as the cross-scale dynamics of area-based development.

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