

All hubs and no spokes? Exploring the potential of hubs to sustain rural and regional development

A proposal for a Special Issue of *Local Economy* by Prof. Gary Bosworth (Northumbria University) & Dr Koen Salemink (University of Groningen)

Hub: “The central or main part of something where there is most activity” (Cambridge Dictionary)

This Special Issue seeks to examine why “Hubs” have become so pervasive in regional development, innovation and local economic policy-making (see, for example, Price et al., 2018 and Rundel et al., 2020). In particular, we want to **examine whether the term “hub” has a consistent meaning across different places and different types of activity**. Through such analysis, the goal of the SI is to identify opportunities for greater cross-sector, multi-activity hubs – but this is only possible if different applications of “hubs” share common understanding and seek to generate similar benefits and complementarities to their users.

Hubs originate both physically and conceptually from urban regions. Cities have always been economic and cultural hubs and the implementation of hubs across smaller towns and rural regions seek to replicate the economies of scale and critical mass that are found in urban centres. However, a new wave of hubs are emerging with very distinctive functions, organisational structures, social physical characteristics. This special issue aims to **shed a spotlight on their diversity and build alternative theories** to explain determinants of success, user characteristics, internal and external networks, policy frameworks, business models and wider regional/rural impacts.

While this special issue is **focused on the rural/small town contexts**, we also welcome papers that draw comparisons with urban hubs and especially those that examine the roles of hubs within inter-dependent and inter-connected rural-urban spaces. This is critical to address the challenges of creating “smart rural futures” (Cowie et al., 2020; Bosworth et al., 2020) where rural regions keep pace, and potentially lead in many forms of innovation and sustainable development. More theoretical studies that reflect on new regionalism and the role of new technologies as drivers of growth and re-ordering of spatial hierarchies are also welcome. Heightened mobility and distinctions between embodied and disembodied technologies, for example, open up a range of key questions about the links between local development and human capital (Tomaney & Bradley, 2007), particularly in light of the impacts of Covid-19.

Single case studies are not encouraged unless they provide a particular opportunity for theory-building or a unique example of innovation or best-practice, notably from a practitioner perspective. Submissions that critically examine the local or regional policy context as well as those focusing on hubs from the perspectives of managers/owners, users and wider communities are all welcome. We particularly encourage authors to consider the origin of hubs with regard to the identification and scale of demand or need within the locality. Are new hubs arising as a result of entrepreneurial opportunity creation or public sector and social enterprise responses to address rural needs?

Some examples of hubs that might feature in articles include (but are not limited to):

Transport & Mobility hubs	Digital hubs
Technology hubs	Creative hubs/arts hubs
Innovation hubs	Business incubators
Co-working hubs	Healthcare hubs

In addition to these, there is considerable literature on more loosely identified “community hubs” and “third places” which could all be co-located with hubs serving economic and business functions. In more rural areas, the overlap between economic and social motivations and the interconnections between the rural economy and society all suggest that if hubs are to be effective in rural areas, their strategic development should bridge economic and community objectives.

While focusing on rural and regional economies, this call for papers therefore welcomes papers that examine a wider range of hubs with a range of facilities and functions, serving different groups of society and different needs. Eventually this should lead to a better understanding of how rural and regional hubs are different from, yet perhaps connected to, urban hubs.

Types of papers:

We call for papers that follow the journal’s guidelines for ‘feature articles’, i.e. peer reviewed articles of about 6000-8000 words before references that follow the common structure of (empirical) papers. “In perspective” articles that allow practitioners to reflect on recent or current policies, programmes, or projects are also welcomed. Please have a look at the submission guidelines online: <https://journals.sagepub.com/author-instructions/LEC>

Timescale and deadlines:

January 2021: call issued

June 1st, 2021: First paper deadline for authors who will participate in the Rural Entrepreneurship Conference, Swansea 15-17 June 2021. <https://isbe.org.uk/18th-rural-entrepreneurship-conference-2021-15-17th-june-2021-swanea/>

Sept 1st 2021: Final deadline for paper submissions

Completed issue expected early in 2022.

References and further reading:

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