

# The New Regionalism. Policy Implications for Rural Regions\*

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César E. Ortiz-Guerrero\*\*

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## Abstract

The New Regionalism – NR, is an arena in which diverse movements, theoretical approaches and policies converge, and is increasingly accepted and used in the field of regional planning. As a macro-structure, the NR articulates different movements and streams of thought, with regional development as the common goal, although primarily focused on metropolitan regions. This paper analyzes the NR, outlines the current contents and theoretical underpinnings identifies the main criticisms and lessons learned with potential application in rural regions. It also suggests adjustments and a policy framework that can be applied within the context of rural territories.

## Keywords author:

New Regionalism, rural planning, rural territories.

## Keywords plus:

Regional integration, regional planning, regional development, regional policy.

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\*\* Ph.D. Associate professor. Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. Facultad de Estudios Ambientales y Rurales, Departamento de Desarrollo Rural y Regional. E-mail: c.ortiz@javeriana.edu.co

# El nuevo regionalismo. Implicaciones de política pública para las regiones rurales

## Resumen

El Nuevo Regionalismo – NR, es una arena en la que confluyen diversos movimientos y aproximaciones teóricas y normativas; tiene una creciente aceptación en el campo de la planeación regional. Como macro-estructura el NR articula diferentes tendencias teóricas con el objetivo común del desarrollo regional, aunque de manera prioritaria enfocado en regiones metropolitanas. El artículo analiza el NR, describe sus contenidos actuales y marco teórico, identifica sus críticas centrales y las lecciones aprendidas con potencial aplicación en las regiones rurales. También sugiere algunos ajustes y un marco de política pública para los territorios rurales contemporáneos.

## Palabras clave autor:

Nuevo Regionalismo, planeación rural, territorios rurales

## Palabras clave descriptores:

Integración regional, planificación regional, desarrollo regional, política regional

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# Le Nouveau Régionalisme. Implications des politiques pour les régions rurales

## Résumé

Le nouveau régionalisme - NR, est un domaine dans lequel convergent différents mouvements et des approches théoriques et politiques; il possède une acceptation croissante dans le domaine de la planification régionale. Comme macrostructure, le NR articule différents courants théoriques avec l'objectif commun du développement régional, bien que de manière prioritaire est centrée sur régions métropolitaines. L'article analyse le NR, il décrit son contenu actuel et le cadre théorique, identifie ses critiques centrales et les leçons apprises avec des applications potentielles dans les régions rurales. Le texte suggère également certains ajustements et un cadre de politique publique pour les zones rurales contemporains.

## Mots clés auteur:

Nouveau régionalisme, planification urbaine, les zones rurales.

## Mots clés descripteur:

Intégration régionale, planification régionale, développement régional, politique régionale.

# Introduction

Since the 1990's there has been a growing interest in regional landscapes as a place of social, political, economical, and environmental changes based on rapid transformations of territorial relationships, which motivates scholars to address the regional question (e.g. Bourne & Olvet, 1995; Haughton & Counsell, 2004; Hodge & Robinson, 2001). Among the diversity of views about the concept of region, I adopt the definition suggested by the Planning Association of America that sees the region as *a territorial community distinguished by a common history, common social institutions, and a shared view of the relationship between humans and the environment* (Ndubisi, 2002).

This current diversity of regional views is considered essential to understanding and managing the process of globalization, and its effects on regional dynamics such as growth, equity, and quality of life (Pastor, Benner, Rosner, Matsuoka, & Jacobs, 2004; Wheeler, 2002; 2004). This activity has been termed the renaissance of regional planning in the era of globalization (Bienefeld, 2000; Haughton & Counsell, 2004; Rainnie & Grobbelaar, 2005) and a paradigm shift in regional planning, commonly described as the New Regionalism - (NR) (OECD, 2001; Rainnie & Grant, 2005; Wheeler, 2002). NR goes beyond the classic quantitative approaches promoted by Isard (1975), and its proposals are now increasingly accepted (e.g. Anttiroiko & Valkama, 2006; Rainnie & Grobbelaar, 2005). However, this literature and initiatives has been largely confined to metropolitan regions, and have little to say about rural regions.

In this paper I have chosen to focus on those NR features that can be evidently and straightforwardly applicable to rural territories and highlight implications of the NR for the formulation of territorial development policies and strategies. Therefore, this document is a planning theory exercise, oriented to critically outline the central characteristics of the NR, to identify lessons learned and the key implications for public policies oriented to rural territories.

## 1. Rural Regions:

As the concept of *region*, 'rurality', and by extension *rural regions*, also has varied alternative views. One central debate concerns whether "rural" is a *geographical concept*, a location with clear boundaries on a map, or whether it is a *social representation*, a community of interest, a culture and a way of life (Halfacree & Boyle, 1998). Following this debate, a second concern debates on the rural – urban dichotomy. Since after WWII rural regions have faced multiple transformations accelerated by processes

of globalization. Important changes are observed in the production dynamics, in the integration of the rural dimension with national society, in the cultural dimension, the role of the state, the social and political role of actors, and demographics. These changes make it increasingly blurred the boundaries between the rural and the urban, resulting in rural areas that are no longer subject to the dichotomy which assimilated the rural dimension with dispersion and backwardness, and the urban dimension with agglomeration and advanced. It is becoming clearer that these two dimensions are a continuum between the urban and rural areas which demand new approaches from theory and public policy, the latter increasingly oriented to a territorial and a more integrated approach (Manzanal, 2006; PNUD, 2011).

Furthermore, rural regions are increasingly recognized as diverse, complex and multidimensional. The diversity is reflected by farming regions, which are connected to metropolitan systems and are far, in the periphery, resource regions, where fisheries, forestry, and mining are the basis of the economy, or are combined with agriculture. Finally, tourism regions where the exploitation of scenic resources is the main economic activity (Ferranti, et al., 2005; PNUD, 2011). In consequence, the concept of rural regions involves a wide array of regional forms, explained from Han's (1970) perspective as a "continuum" which goes from the 'completely rural' to the 'nearly urban' regions. The notion of a 'continuum' delivers us from the generalization of non-urban areas as rural. In addition, rural areas are not merely a residuum of urban activities, neither the non-city dimension of a region, nor a synonym of resource based activities. Some central features of rural regions are (Hodge & Robinson, 2001; Bourne and Gertler, 2003; Ferranti et al., 2005; PNUD, 2011):

- \* A limited interconnectivity with urban centers, small size (in terms of population, market and labour supply) urban centers, and limited links with higher scale economies.
- \* A wide variety of income distribution, a very high capital costs for access and development, self-employment, and specialization in boom-and-bust economies provide most of the employment.
- \* High production and servicing costs, and limited range of public and private services limit economic diversification and levels of employment. Other employment sources are activities servicing the primary sector, the public-sector activities, handcrafting, and environmental services.
- \* Holistic in the space they encompass and in the range of issues they present, transcending the capabilities and authority of local areas, and with

a particular identity or attributes of difference: history, language, political orientation, landscape, climate etc.

In sum, we can understand rural regions as complex spaces resulting from relationships among four dimensions: the *territory*, as the source of natural resources, support of economic activities and the scenario where multiple political and cultural interchanges occur. *Population*, sharing a particular cultural model and with livelihoods connected to the natural resources and land. *Settlements*, developing relationships between themselves and with the outside through the exchange of people, goods and information. Lastly, the public and private *institutions* that provide the framework within which the whole system works (Perez, 2001).

## 2. The field of the NR movement: Theoretical underpinnings

Table 1 serves for two purposes, the first one is to present the central eras, periods, key movements and traditions through which regional planning has been evolving. The second one is to identify the theoretical underpinnings of the NR. The evolution of regional planning has increased our knowledge about regions, but also has led to an explosion of movements and ways of understanding and approaching regions. As a result, contemporary planning movements are becoming more diverse and ephemeral, leading to the re-emergence of the NR as a macro-structure that is constantly renewed and nesting a complex combination of normative and theoretical approaches. Contemporary forces continue to strongly influence this process and even influence its meanings and descriptions.

Although the term NR is not new and has been used in the planning literature since the late 1930s, it is used in the North European and the United States of America contexts since the early 1990s to address diverse concerns, which could be best approached from a regional scale, such as sprawl, environmental impacts, homogeneity of built environment, uneven regional development and persisting social problems. These concerns developed into several movements, directly connected with the NR, such as new urbanism, sustainable communities, and smart growth, which have had profound implications in regional planning (e.g. Amin, 1999; Burfisher, Robinson, & Thiefelder, 2004; Keating, 1998; Porter, 2003; Rainnie & Grant, 2005; Wheeler, 2002; 2004).

CHART 1. The historical Stages of the Regional Planning

STAGE	CHARACTERISTICS	PERIODS
Ecological regionalism, in the early twentieth century	Concerned with the problems of the overcrowded 19 <sup>th</sup> century industrial city. Tried to balance the city and countryside. Relatively holistic, normative and place based approach.	A) The early period (1920-1945) This period was integrated by two main streams: a) the regionalist tradition: focused on urban decentralization, with thinkers such as Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford. This group was called the “decentrists” and developed a normative and holistic approach in regards to regional planning, b) the metropolitanist tradition: focused on pragmatic physical planning, such as the view of the New York Regional Planning Association.
Regional science, the late 1940s to present	Regional economic development, rooted in quantitative social science. Attempted to present analyses as neutral value, lacking of a normative framework. Spatial analysis rather than place oriented.	B) THE AFTER WORLD WAR II PERIOD (1945-1970) In this period, the work of Isard leading the school of <i>regional science</i> during the 1950s, and the work of Friedmann during the 1960s on regional planning and development, consolidated a perspective based on regional economic development.
Neo-Marxist critical regional geography, in the late 1960s to present	Developed analysis of power and social movements within the region. Normative.	This sectorial perspective was challenged by Castells and others during the 1970s from the perspective of the Marxist regionalism, adding the discussion about power and social analysis. During the 1980s, regional planning suffered an important disinterest from scholars and official institutions.
Public choice regionalism, 1960s to present.	Analyzed region in terms of a free-market version of neoclassical economics. Focused on institutions, non-traded relationships, democratic systems, economic development oriented.	
New regionalism, 1990s to present.	Concerned with the environment, equity as well as economic development. Focused on specific regions and the problems of postmodern metropolitan landscapes. Often placed oriented; action oriented and normative.	C) THE NEW CENTURY PERIOD (1990 TO PRESENT) In this period we can see a re-emergence of regional planning. Different movements orient planning theory and practice to respond to the challenges presented by globalization and the post-industrial societies. Increasingly focused in the metropolitan system. Several movements are grouped under the macro-structure of new regionalism.

SOURCES: based on Baeter, 1934; Haughton and Counsell, 2004; Lucarelli, 1995; Reagan, 1998; and Wheeler, 2002

To some extent, the NR is permeated by other approaches such as core-periphery models (McCann & Simmons, 2000), city regions and learning regions (Sagan & Halkier (2005), governance strategies in different sectors and levels (Bienefeld, 2000; Wood & Valler, 2004), equity within city-regions (Katz, 2000; Pastor, Benner, & Rosner, 2006), the region as the ideal economic scale in the global economy (Amin, 1999; Amin & Thrift, 2002; Porter, 2003), and the various types of regionalization (Anttiroiko & Valkama, 2006), including those resulting from diverse forms of the international free trade agreements (Ortiz, 2005; Bouzas, 2005; BID, 2002).

This diversity of views results from a deeper understanding of regions as complex structures where the social, political, economical and environmental dimensions are permanently overlapping and changing, which is making more difficult to reach a consensus about a workable concept of the NR. As a result, the NR is seen as a multi-disciplinary movement (Wheeler, 2002), a new paradigm (Rainnie & Grobbelaar, 2005), a new era in the regional planning (Haughton & Counsell, 2004), and even a flexible and contested concept (Rainnie & Grant, 2005; Lovering, 1999; Sagan & Halkier, 2005).

In general, regionalism is a permanently evolving subfield in planning, where the NR is an emerging macro-structure nesting specialized contributions to the current debate about the orientations to address the new challenges presented by globalization.

### 3. The core characteristics of the New Regionalism

The diversity of regionally-oriented planning movements, listed above and grouped under the macro-structure of the NR, share the following five central characteristics:

#### a) The focus on specific territories and spatial planning: Closed vs. Opened

Friedman and Weaver (1979) predicted that future regional planning approaches would have to emphasize in “territory”, as opposed to “function”. Certainly, the NR promotes a revival of the spatial dimension and more attention to place (Wheeler, 2002, p.270; Rainnie & Grant, 2005).

The NR considers localities as the focus of socio-economic and political initiatives as globalization eliminates barriers to national economies and enhances tendencies to agglomeration in selected locations. These agglomeration processes result from an intensive interaction in dense local networks conformed by corporate and institutional nodes (Scott and Storper, 2003), fostering collective and localized learning, and promoting trust between the economic actors (Morgan, 2005), which helps to explain the apparent success of industrial agglomerations. In this regard, Rainnie & Grant (2005:10) argue that the way we allocate local resources and institutions to enhance competitiveness, trust and innovation, largely explains a successful region. Furthermore, the flow of those resources within the local networks is not constrained to political –administrative boundaries. In this regard, the NR accepts that regional boundaries are not closed, but elastic, and that regions represent an *organic unit* of socio-economic and political activity (Scott & Storper, 2003).

The consensus between the public - with private is, implicitly or explicitly, present in all the above perspectives through the promotion of connectivity among local actors, the mobilization of the population, the social cohesion, the cultural identities, the collaboration between institutions and networking. These aspects are also key for the development of rural regions.

## b) Answers to contemporary problems in metropolitan regions: Government vs. Governance

Rural regions reflect a mosaic of physical forms, political forces, social structures, economic activities, and environmental constraints. The NR recognizes the difficulties faced by governmental institutions for addressing such complex contexts, and looks for a comprehensive understanding of different governance options, analysis of social movements, and development of different socio-economic capitals within the region (Pastor, Benner, Rosner, Matsuoka, & Jacobs, 2004; Wallis, 2002; Wheeler, 2002). This approach facilitates recognition of increasingly opened regional contexts with localized governance systems, and socio-economic assets, addressing them through a holistic and normative approach.

## c) A holistic approach: power vs. empowerment

The NR planners seek to balance environmental, equity and liveability concerns with economic objectives (Campbell, 1996; Wheeler, 2002, p. 271). As a result,



growth theory is increasingly contested as many regions are suffering the negative externalities generated as a result of economic booms and sprawl (Pallagst, 2005). Within this context, a holistic approach is promoted to reach a sustainable development and address the conflictive interaction between the environment, social justice, equity and economic growth (Campbell, 1996). This approach, similar to the holistic “descentrists” perspective in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, promotes a regional development by empowering local actors. Empowerment increases connectivity among actors (public and private), it brings new interests to the regional agenda, and facilitates the creation of new capabilities and innovative initiatives (Wallis, 2006, p.4). This approach highlights the transformative power of local agency, and the possibility to approach rural challenges from an endogenous perspective.

#### d) A new emphasis on physical planning: structure vs. process

The movements of the New Urbanism and Smart Growth arise out of a new understanding on the part of planners and citizens that ‘design matters,’ and that ‘good urban design’ must be integrated at all scales in planning practice. However, the followers of these movements are realizing that isolated projects or growth controls are not enough. Rather policies and strategies in regional planning must complement their efforts in order to achieve a more “*coherent overall regional fabric for both metropolitan regions and exurban areas*” (Wheeler, 2002). The result is a sense of place with a focus on processes such as visioning, strategic planning, conflict resolution, and public participation, as the vehicles to reach the planner’s goals (Wallis, 2006).

In this regard, regulation theory calls our attention to the need of considering not only structure and its form, but also change of socio-economic patterns, the process leading to it, and its causality originated in the specific configurations of social relations, institutional forms, culture and other non-economic factors in any geographical location. From this perspective a balanced analysis of structure and process is necessary to properly address regional development (Boyer & Saillard, 2002; Lauria, 1999).

From the above perspectives, the emphasis on conflicts, institutional forms and their arrangements, and the recognition of a need to go beyond the physical form, are particularly noteworthy to approach rural territories.

## e) Addressing regional problems: coordination vs. collaboration

The NR can be seen as a reaction to approaches focused on regional economic development, and based on quantitative, aspatial, and abstract analysis. The NR articulates a more normative and proactive participation of planners and a more fluent interaction of theory and practice (Wheeler, 2002). In this regard, the NR advances in an opposite direction from the classic detachment of regional science promoted by Isard (1975), it emphasizes an inclusive and collaborative approach to problem solving and the recognition of diverse actors as distinct but equal (Wallis, 2006). This position and proactive role of planners are key elements when planning for rural regions.

In summary, the focus on the metropolitan regions, the holistic analysis, an inclusive and collaborative methods, the normative goals and practical approaches are the NR key characteristics which represent an opportunity to develop new regional planning tools and strategies to address contemporary regional problems occurring at a territorial scale. Furthermore, the emphasis on the territory and its multidimensional nature, the need to approach it from a holistic perspective that recognizes its governance system, institutional arrangements and multiple realities, the transformative power of local agency, the importance of conflict, cooperation, and capitals, and the need to approach regions from an endogenous perspective, are the key lessons offered by the NR, which can shed more light when addressing to increasingly complex problems within rural regions.

## 4. Theoretical Underpinnings of the NR

Central movements within the NR (e.g. smart growth and sustainable communities) share two key theoretical roots: the institutional theories and collaborative planning (Calthorpe & Fulton, 2001; Duany & Talen, 2002; Kotkin, 2005; Pastor, Benner, Rosner, Matsuoka, & Jacobs, 2004; Wallis, 2002; Wheeler, 2002, 2004).

*Institutional Theory:* Institutional economics are at the core of the so-called “institutional turn” in regional development theory. This theory approaches economic life as an institutionally based process, and a socially embedded activity and studies ties of proximity and association as a source of knowledge, learning, and development. (Amin, 1999; Amin & Thrift, 1995, 2002; Phelps & Tewdwr-Jones, 2004; Scott & Storper, 2003). This body of thought sees the economy as

non-equilibrating, imperfect and irrational, a perspective based on the following three principles (Amin, 1999; North, 1990) : 1) Markets are socially constructed and economic behavior is rooted in networks of interpersonal relations. As a result, network properties, such as mutuality, trust, and cooperation, or their opposites, influence economic processes; 2) Actor-network rationalities generate different forms of economic behavior and decision-making, and influence the creativity, learning and adaptive capacities of actors; 3) Economy is an outcome of long term collective forces, which include formal (rules, laws and organizations) and informal (habits, routines, and social values) institutions.

By applying these conceptions, the NR is primarily focused on the study of successful regional economies (e.g. Silicon Valley), and on international trade agreements, to investigate the sources of local-regional advantages, such as the role of untraded interdependencies (e.g. trust and networks), and the interaction of formal and informal institutions (Bienefeld, 2000; Bouzas, 2005; Burfisher, Robinson, & Thiefelder, 2004; Porter, 2003) and economic governance. The latter is promoted by four general principles (Alasia, 2005; Amin, 1999; Amin & Hausner, 1997; Amin & Thrift, 2002): 1) To foster an “institutional thickness” based on a plurality of autonomous organizations, institutional renewal, and strong human capital. 2) To build a regional culture of social inclusion, empowerment, economic creativity, and collaboration. 3) To build “agglomeration economies” based on networks of association and cooperation. 4) To promote learning regions based on strengthened sources of knowledge (e.g. linkages between universities and industry), innovation, strategic vision, and adaptation.

The institutional and organizational context in a particular region influences the type of human capital (skills and knowledge) available that has important implications for the development of a society. Hence, organizations, institutions and capitals are linked, they influence and transform each other (North, 1990; Verma, 2007; Ortiz, 2010).

These theoretical and economic governance principles are of central importance for the study of rural regions. However, contemporary rural problems such as depopulation and decline of towns, has been for the most part focused on the analysis of formal institutions (Bourne, Gertler, & Slack, 2003; Force, Machlis, & Zhang, 2000; Polèse & Shearmur, 2006) leaving unattended diverse aforementioned “soft” variables of the rural social structure.

*Collaborative Planning Theory*: Collaborative planning is now a dominant paradigm in planning theory (Alexander, 1997; Innes, 1995; Tewdwr-Jones &

Allmendinger, 2002). Collaborative planning (Healey, 1997, 2003, 2004) is concerned with the transformative influence of planning upon existing structures (in the institutional sense) (Wallis, 2002). In this context, institutions are seen as structures that are actively constituted through relational networks of actors, which facilitate access to opportunities, diverse capitals and development of shared values and consensus (Morrison, 2006). In general, collaborative planning is focused on issues of context (the nature of particular places and systems of governance) and structure (institutions and organizations) (Harris, 2002). In addition, collaborative planning addresses issues of power relations and adopts an explicitly normative agenda for developing more democratic planning practices (Healey, 2003).

Healey (1997) considers that collaborative planning explores why urban regions are important to social-economic and environmental policy and how political communities may organize to improve the quality of their places (p. xiii). Collaborative planning is explicitly concerned progressing normative agendas (Healey, 1997), facilitating diverse actors' initiatives for collective action and the creation of social, human and political capital (Morrison, 2006) and it can therefore be applied as both a framework for interpreting, and as a framework for practical action (Harris, 2002). Collaborative planning also recognizes the importance of networks, for example by asserting that *networks intersect at nodes that provide arenas for discourse between people* (Healey, 1997).

## 5. Criticism

The literature on the NR presents some caveats and paradoxes that need to be addressed by scholars and practitioners before applying this framework to rural development processes.

Some authors criticize the NR for having little to say about questions of race, gender and class. A vague challenge to social exclusion is the only evidence to address these concerns (Loving, 1999; Rainnie & Grant, 2005). This paper additionally points out the absence of a systematic analysis of rural regions.

A focus on innovation and creativity can generate a discriminatory model of regional development, abandoning any notion of inclusivity inherent in the NR. Also, this language can easily fit into the neo-liberal discourse (Rainnie & Grant, 2005), which allows governments to avoid responsibility for rural regions, arguing that development now lies in their own hands. On the other hand, shrinking the size and financial capabilities of governments and local economic development

agencies make questionable whether this fragile institutional structure can develop the framework of innovation, inclusivity and associationalism that the NR promotes (Sagan & Halkier, 2005).

From the perspective of institutional theory, it is still difficult to explain the reasons for regional disparities and inequalities (Parente, 2001). Institutional theories cannot offer a clear solution to the challenges faced by disadvantaged regions, as these theories lack the propensity to anticipate and respond to changing external circumstances (Amin, 1999).

The perspective of the collaborative orientation criticisms can be summarized in four groups (Dredge, 2006; Harris, 2002; Healey, 2003; Morrison, 2006; Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 2002). 1) The NR is excessively focused on the process, and neglects the context. 2) The NR lacks of an adequate base in social theory, and does not properly address issues of power, inclusion and exclusion, and conflicts. 3) The NR includes a partial analysis and recognition of Institutional theory. 4) The NR needs to go beyond the characterization of actors as either rational or moral individuals, and recognize how they scale up into organizations.

## 6. Implications for public policies oriented to rural regions:

As can be seen, the NR has much to offer to rural development. Nevertheless, the context and characteristics of rural regions are different enough to make the transfer of this experience a difficult task. The transfer of lessons learned by the NR to the rural context demand modifications and adaptations so as to answer to characteristics and challenges of rural regions described above. With that purpose, we would need to consider at least the following seven key elements:

First, the recognition of the importance and role of rurality and small communities in regional development processes. Second, the recognition of the role of ethnicity and culture, and more generally, a wider approach of the multiple dimensions and systems involved in the territorial development. Third, the focus on connectivity, conflict transformation and public participation to avoid inequities and address regional disparities. Fourth, the promotion of collective action and social networks in order to enhance rural governance systems. Fifth, a consideration of informal institutions as a way to address issues of politics and power. Sixth, the recognition of the role that networks, social capital, collective

action and connectivity play in regional development. Finally the introduction of social networks as planning tools that will facilitate a structural analysis of rural social systems.

Furthermore, despite the significance of the NR to enhance and complement the emergent trends oriented to recognize the territory as a more comprehensive and integral concept, structured sources focused on the analysis of NR and rural regions were not identified. However, considering the NR characteristics and criticism described above, and the relatively persistent transformation of rural regions leading to spaces in which there is a continuum between the urban and rural dimensions, it is possible to suggest the following public policy framework oriented to connect the perspective of the NR with processes of rural development and capitalize the benefits of the NR movement in rural regions:

- a. A research oriented to analyze governance dynamics among different levels of government, social dynamics, economic activities, and environmental linkages in rural regions (Sagan & Halkier, 2005).
- b. A systematic research into the physical, social, political and economical patterns, of rural regions and their evolution in the context of globalization (Hansen, 1996; Wheeler, 2002).
- c. Actions oriented to recognize the active role of rural regions and its current importance for the society, environmental services, and national economy along with promotion of public participation in governmental intervention (Manzanal, 2006; Temple, 1998).
- d. Actions oriented to build social capital, nurture social justice, enhance environmental quality and, in general, to improve the quality of life in rural regions (Morgan, 2005).
- e. Actions oriented to build sustainable development processes for rural regions based on the recognition of the rural history, the evolution of rural institutions, the culture, politics and society (Morgan, 2005; Temple, 1998).
- f. Actions oriented to develop a new kind of institutions that can articulate rural regions through an information exchange, and knowledge creation. To promote collective action, and to improve the capacity for networking, innovation and learning (Morgan 1997; Rainnie & Grant, 2005).
- g. Research and actions oriented to recognize diverse governance systems and social networks existing in rural areas, which represent the backbone of the social structure.

h. Research and actions oriented to facilitate the application of lessons learned from emerging movements, directly connected with the NR, such as smart growth, new urbanism, and liveable communities.

The above policy initiatives and networks of action are particularly localized in the planning realm of rural territories, nevertheless to operationalize such processes it is important to recognize at least the following five key elements (Schejtman & Berdegue, 2003; Schneider & Peyre, 2006; Ortiz, 2010):

a. A productive transformation and institutional development must be combined and applied simultaneously and consider in this regard the issues connected with race, ethnicity and environmental conflicts.

b. The policies and programs targeting rural regions should consider and operate under an integrated approach of territorial rural development.

c. Rural territories involve scales, spaces and places, where usually one or several development projects, and governance systems, can be found. Heterogeneity is the norm in rural territories.

d. Diversity of actors and networks are common and key elements of the rural social structure to be considered in processes of policy making and operationalization of the development programs.

e. Because of rural territories complexity, policies should be designed for medium and long term ranges.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper confirms that the NR is a macro-structure nesting different theoretical tendencies. The meaning of the NR varies which according to the context of use and the interests pursued. Although evidence pointing to NR integrating a unified analytical model was not found, its efforts to understand regions in a new manner, by joining together innovative theories that have been consolidated over the past two decades (e.g. network theory, institutional economy and collaborative planning), offer lessons useful and inspire the approach to rural regions. Consequently, I have outlined the current contents and theoretical underpinnings of the NR, the identified core criticisms and suggested the adjustments and a policy framework which can be applied in the context of rural territories.

The NR offers the possibility to devise more democratic and inclusive approaches to regional development, contrasting with the market-led initiatives which characterize remains of the neo-liberal discourse. However, the NR is not a silver bullet to solve challenges in rural regions, but it shows how we might create new opportunities by combining emerging approaches to regional development. Beyond that, the particular problems of given rural areas must be assessed within their specific socio-economic, political and cultural contexts. The NR is useful because it allows us to link together the tradition and experience of regional development with the challenges and opportunities faced by contemporary rural regions. As I have planned to show here, each frame of reference articulated to the NR must be matched to the particular rural development problem that challenges us. In other words, we must link specific theoretical approaches and lessons learned to the particular set of economic, social, cultural and natural conditions that exist in given rural areas. This paper suggests a framework to start filling this gap. Researchers and policy designers should consider the potential role that NR can play in processes of development in rural territories.

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