

Decolonising the Rural-Urban Dichotomy in South Africa: An Asset-Based Approach

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Abstract

The rural-urban migration syndrome has eaten deep into the fabric of rural development in South Africa, thereby denying rural dwellers equitable access to social and economic amenities and social empowerment. This study, therefore, seeks to emancipate rural communities through an asset-based community development approach by forming university-community synergies for the purpose of decolonising these rural communities. The study attempted to provide a solution to the question of inequalities between rural and urban communities with a focus on how university engagement can be used to enhance community development in QwaQwa/Harismith Township and its environments. The study adopted a participatory action research design and the free attitude interview technique was used to collect data. The research participants consisted of one research assistant and 10 ordinary community members, members of NGOs and community leaders in QwaQwa/Harrismith Township in the Free State province of South Africa. Data collected were analysed through Laws, Harpes and Marcus's seven-step model. The study revealed that rural dwellers face challenges of inequitable educational facilities and resources, and a lack of security in terms of their lives, properties, and means of travelling. Likewise, the study also showed a lack of access to health facilities in their communities. It was therefore concluded that community

engagement through the asset-based approach and decoloniality would enable the university to empower rural dwellers with the freedom to attain their well-being by ensuring an environment that is sufficient and adequate for social investment.

Keywords: decoloniality; rural-urban migration; rural development; asset-based approach

Introduction

South Africa, as a nation, has experienced various unprecedented transformations in terms of social, political and economic life after the abolition of the apartheid regime, which was characterised by so many inhumane policies that popularised unethical discriminations and separation of whites from blacks (Du Plessis 2014, 70; Graven 2014, 1039; Singh 2008, 1). It was synonymous with a political, social and economic culture based on white supremacy and unavoidable subjugation of black Africans, Coloureds and Indians for minority benefit (Clark and Worger 2016, 4; Mayne 1999, 52). From a broad evaluation of policy reforms since 1994, one could draw a hypothetical conclusion, which is that arguably government made or is still making efforts to deal with historical socio-economic challenges affecting the general population (Gumede 2013, 278). The success gained through the anti-apartheid struggle, however, has brought transformational change to some extent in political, social, and economic spheres and slightly more equality and equal distribution of democratic dividends to the citizenry (Keswell 2005, 2; Omodan 2019, 188). In lieu of the above, Maree (2013, 70) described South Africa as one of the few African nations that can be considered a democratically liberal democracy. That is, South Africa could be regarded as a modern liberal society.

Despite efforts to transform South Africa and champion the good life for all, a great divide between the rural and urban populace still exists, which might be problematised with the lens of decoloniality as a move to bridge the gap and evoke the need to deal with the vampires of colonisation that manifested through unequal distribution of goods and services. Thus, this paper is part of a bigger project funded by the National Research Council and seeks to respond to the question, how equitable are these amenities to all and sundry considering the observed disparities between urban and rural development? This question further raises doubt as to whether South Africa has really transcended the era of oppression and domination through the manifestation of ontological density, as some, in particular rural dwellers, are still pushed to the zone of non-being. Hlalele (2014, 104) further buttresses this in that even the settlement patterns in rural and urban areas in South Africa still reflect former apartheid and colonial policies. To participate in narrowing the gap, we concur with Hlalele (2014, 104) that universities have a significant role to play in emancipating the rural populace and enhancing rural and urban connection.

The roles of universities cannot, therefore, be underrated in the sensitisation of rural communities through community engagement since education in South Africa is generally regarded as a transformational instrument for correcting the leftovers of apartheid injustices in terms of the distribution of resources, employment opportunities, discriminations in education and power distribution (Du Toit, Erasmus, and Strydom 2010, 78; Myende and Chikoko 2014, 249). Hlalele and Tsotetsi (2015, 143) conceptualised community engagement as an organised process of purposely working together with identified groups of people in order to identify and address issues affecting them and their well-being. The intergroup connections between these identified groups according to Hlalele and Tsotetsi are related to geographical location, special interest and affiliations. According to Mothowamodimo (2011, 23), it is imperative that the community is viewed as an asset that is identified with the same values and notions of commonality and that shares solidarity related to a common goal. The idea of university-community engagement as an attempt to decolonise people's mindset towards rural communities and their development could therefore be a roadmap for rural development.

Situating the Problem

Mlambo (2018, 63) also observed the rural to urban migration dichotomy when he said that South Africa's urban population is growing at an alarming rate, with a projection that by 2050, almost 80 per cent of the population will be residing in urban areas. This may implicatively have a retrogressive effect on the development of rural communities. Similarly, the United Nation's Vision 2030, which projects that 71.3 per cent of South Africans will be living in urban areas, makes one wonder if government has adequately invested in the development of rural areas in terms of infrastructure, access to education and health services and economic opportunities (Mlambo 2018, 64; Stapleton 2015, 2). This may not augur well for rural dwellers, especially for the upcoming generations (children) because over half (54%) of South Africa's children live in rural areas (DoE 2005). These rural-urban disparities, according to Shezi (2013, 1), deprive the remote areas (rural) of economically vibrant parts of populations, which are mostly people between the ages of 18 to 55 years old; it also leaves rural townships with a prerogative of having to fend for themselves. This singular act undoubtedly hinders the execution of various rural developmental programmes and projects because the necessary skilled human powers including educationally minded people have migrated to the cities in search of greener pastures such as better living conditions, lucrative and better-paying jobs.

The rationalisation for this study is based on concern for the impact that excessive rural-urban migration has on the development of the rural locations. The consequences of this for rural development have become a point of concern for all stakeholders, including university leaders and educators most especially at universities located in rural areas in South Africa. These anti-developmental consequences include half-baked economic participation, loss of manpower and the best human resources. The consequences also

extend to poor quality infrastructure and schooling, poverty, rural-urban brain drain and child labour (Hlalele 2014, 101–10). This was also found as the reason for teachers' dispassion to work in rural schools (Mahoko, Omodan, and Tsotetsi 2019, 21). The problem of the study may not be unconnected to the observed migration of the economically, socially and politically active people from QwaQwa/Harrismith Township in the Free State province of South Africa to various cities. As such, rural areas have gradually become reservoirs of labour or retirement sanctuaries for retired and infirm labour (Shezi 2013, 5). Hence, there seems to be limited public awareness of rural diversity and limited rural education research, with insufficient understanding of urban-rural linkages. Hlalele therefore further argues that for a coordinated approach that addresses urban and rural migration patterns for the purpose of facilitating learning opportunities to be materialised, the universities have a significant role to play.

To buttress this argument, white papers on post-school education and training (DHET 2014, 39) declared a continuous allegiance to support government policies towards university-community engagement, though it is concerned primarily with the “ad hoc” and “fragmented” nature of community engagement that is not linked to academic programmes. On the other hand, the mobility dynamics of rural-urban connections potentially affect the development needs of both locations and the university's role as a public good (Mgqwashu 2016). Regarding this, the University of the Free State (QwaQwa Campus) is taking it upon itself to respond to the lingering rural-urban dichotomy within the confines of QwaQwa and Harrismith townships in the Free State province of South Africa. This university is located near the majestic Drakensberg mountains. The university was initially a branch of the University of the North. An attempt to give students in and around QwaQwa a tertiary education and to ease the burden of travelling 700km from QwaQwa to the then University of the North, led to the establishment of this university in the 1970s (UFS 2013–2014, 5).

Theoretical Examinations: The Asset-Based Community Development and Decoloniality Approach

The research is drawn from the perspective of an asset-based community development approach in the search for a participatory solution to local and community knowledge, and the theory of decoloniality is used to explore and create a new mindset.

The Asset-Based Community Development Theory

The asset-based community development approach was developed in 1993 from the community development work pioneered by Kretzmann and McKnight in the United States of America (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, 1). This concept emerged as a way to counter the predominant needs-based approach to development (O'Leary 2015). The criticism directed towards this dominant needs-based approach, also referred to as a traditional path by Myende (2015, 34), led to the acceptance of an alternative that focuses mainly on the capabilities of community people and their associations to build

a powerful community called an asset-based community development approach (Fuimaono 2012, 22). This approach dwells more on the recognition of gifts, strengths, talents, community and individual resources to build sustainable development in the community (IACD 2009, 2). Ryan (2008, 15) also averred that the asset-based community development approach empowers the community by focusing on abilities, strengths, resources and already-existing possibilities.

From the above, it is evidenced that the fundamental principles of the asset-based community development approach are based on the argument that all communities are inherently asset rich and can use this to survive. The foundational principle of asset-based community development is that all communities are asset rich. This is in line with the asset-mapping model that, according to Garoutte and McCarthy-Gilmore (2014, 14), puts forth that all communities have the ability to create sustainable development from within without external interference. Therefore, this development is internally focused and collaboratively driven. McCarthy-Gilmore further argued that community development is built from the solution constructed by the capacity of people and associations within and that the solution driven by community initiatives reconfigures the top-down approach by outsiders. This, in our view, presents the interconnectedness of the university and the community that brings the relationship to what is called community engagement. Therefore, the study will remain within the ambit of community resources in generating solutions to the problem by focusing on its assets, and will make the community as a whole see that it is asset rich with a view to building on those assets (Phillips and Pittman 2009, 38).

The asset-based community development approach involves the identification and utilisation of all the potential of the community, such as talents, skills, organisational capabilities, human and material resources, including financial resources in a collaborative manner. The use of this approach to find solutions to the problem of rural-urban migration that has eaten deep into the fabric of rural development will not be inappropriate because it enables the university to enter into the community with a focus on galvanising the assets that are advantageous within the community for the community. The asset-based community development approach operates under the premise that neighbourhoods can drive the development process themselves by identifying and mobilising existing assets, thereby responding to and creating local opportunities for positive change (Mathie and Cunningham 2005; Wilke 2006, 5). It is therefore appropriate to rationalise the study in this way because it enables the university and the community to come together, identify, galvanise and organise both human and material resources available within the community to respond to the rural-urban dichotomies in the selected communities.

The Theory of Decoloniality

Decoloniality is a theory that attempts to substantiate the nexus between the Frankfurt School's version of critical theory and the paradigm of coloniality (Mignolo 2007, 150).

This means the idea came in as an attempt to blacklist the leftovers of Eurocentric modernism. This, according to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, 23), is done by empowering the colonised, exploited and the enslaved people to regain their ontological density, voice, land, history, knowledge and power. This theory is a struggle against the colonial difference towards a decolonial liberation struggle to a world beyond Eurocentred modernity (Ramón 2011, 12). The aim of decoloniality was further clarified by three quintessential questions posed by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015, 23) that elaborate the epistemology behind decoloniality: “How can a ‘dismembered’ people be ‘re-membered’? How can they re-launch themselves from the world of ‘non-being’ into the world of ‘being’? How can they re-capture their lost land, power, history, being, language and knowledge?”

From the above premises, we therefore argue that this theory can create an epistemic space within which a new perspective in the rural mindset could be created to be “re-membered” and to discourage rural-dominated dwellers from their beliefs in rural-urban migration. Since this is envisioned to create humanity devoid of racism and coloniality, it will enable the assurance of universal opportunities for all and sundry (Cesaire 1968, 125). This theory is also relevant to this paper because it exposes the university-community synergy, serves as an epistemic platform to find solutions, challenges the status of Western ways of doing and eliminates coloniality through re-engaging all to the zone of being. This will further enable the emancipation of the ontological density of rural people and void the counter-revolutionary strategy that may derail efforts to achieve an equal society for all despite race and geographical divides. Hence, the need for decoloniality in this study becomes expedient, because it brings equal opportunities for all, as the urban community will not only be attractive to itself but also the attractiveness is equally shared between all and sundry. And people in the rural communities will no longer represent the disadvantaged and marginalised space of being.

The Rationale for this Study

This rationale for this study is born out of the perception that there are lacuna and sickness in the university-community relationships. In addition, our observations show that there is limited public awareness of rural diversity and limited rural education research, with insufficient understanding of urban-rural linkages. Accordingly, there are numbers of educational institutions within the precinct area, but we do not know how they relate to their surrounding rural areas. The QwaQwa Campus of the University of the Free State (UFS) is situated within a former homelands rural area, but we do not have information relating to the neighbouring Harrismith and Phuthaditjhaba connections or an overview of the learning providers in these areas. In the context of the apartheid settlement patterns, there is a need to explore how to facilitate interaction between communities and institutions which will enable us to obtain an overview of existing learning provisions in selected urban and rural contexts in QwaQwa/Harrismith

in the Free State and their respective urban/rural linkages to find a solution to uncontrollable migration.

Research Question

In order to give this paper a piloting direction, the following research question was raised to guide the study:

- How can a university-community engagement be facilitated to empower rural dwellers with the freedom to attain community development and individual well-being?

Methodology

The methodology for this qualitative research paper is the participatory action research (PAR) design. This type of research approach, according to Schneider (2012, 153), originated from research based on contact with a community of oppressed people in the developing areas of Tanzania. PAR is a research approach that engages the people in the process of finding solutions to enable their voices to be heard and respected (Shelane 2013, 416). The three elements that drive the success of PAR are the following: shared ownership of the research project, a community-based analysis of social problems and an orientation towards community action (Kemmis 2006, 162). This, in our view, is a guiding tool to the process of finding solutions to the problem of the study. This research design is adopted in order to get into the participant's experience and balance the power relations within the project (Merriam and Tidsell 2015). This is because PAR as a research design seeks to understand and improve the world by changing it through collective reflections; these reflections are made by the participants themselves to understand the situation and for the purpose of taking action (Baum, MacDougall, and Smith 2006, 854). Since the focus of this paper is to ensure and empower community people to have a sense of control over their lives and development, the design is appropriate. This is also justified by Leowenson et al. (2014, 14) who stress that PAR centres on how communities within which research is taking place can benefit by responding to the reality that injustices are not natural and therefore could be challenged.

The free attitude interview technique was used to collect data. This method allows the researcher to have a personal relationship and contact with the participants and the community at large (Julia 2014, 101). This method of data collection is relevant because it gives interviewees the freedom to speak and to give information that is more informative compared to structured interviews (Buskens 2011, 1), which we consider helpful for this paper. The participants consisted of one research assistant and 10 community dwellers, which comprised two ordinary members, two community leaders and six community members in QwaQwa/Harrismith Township in the Free State province of South Africa. Thomas and Harden's three steps of thematic analysis were used to analyse the data. These steps, according to Thomas and Harden (2008, 7–8), include coding text, developing descriptive themes and generating analytical

interpretations of the data according to the themes. This form of analysis is relevant to this study because it enables us to study, peruse and categorise the data according to the theme of importance in order to make sense of the data generated (Alhojailan 2012, 40).

Findings and Discussion

To start with, the findings of this paper are presented under the following sub themes that emanate from the use of Thomas and Harden's three-step model. The themes are schooling, travelling and health. Please note that the high schools mentioned during the data collection process will be referred to as "Community School 1" and "Community School 2" in the course of analysis. In addition, the codes used to represent the participants are NGO members (NM), Community Leaders (CL) and Community Members (CM).

Schooling

Our findings show that schooling is a nexus of interactions between rural and urban areas. Dimitrijevic (2017, 892), in his treatise on "Schooling as a Rational Rite of Passage," shows that schooling bridges and equalises the thinking and experiences of people irrespective of their backgrounds, locations, advantages or disadvantages. This was deduced from the participants' explications of their thinking and perspectives regarding the questions, as shown below (emphasis added):

CM: I travel 3 kilometres away daily to learn. I am pedestrian [I walk to school daily]. Library is 10km away. Yes! I use library once I have extension, I go to library too for assignment and to study sometimes.

CM: I did attend from Grade R in Harrismith till my matric, then I went to Community school 1, I also went to Community School 2 and I remembered the Principal used to say you should not miss even a second because it counts a lots. *Overcrowding, we were many and the school is so small*, the school have *a lot of space* if only they can help us put more buildings it will help a lot.

CL: We do not have computer centres, community library, parks for the entertainment of children, playground at schools and tools to use like machines for agriculture.

From the foregoing, one can deduce that as important as schooling appears to the rural dwellers, the challenges identified are linked to inequitable educational facilities and resources such as a libraries, computer centres, playgrounds, agricultural implements and overcrowded classrooms because of a lack of physical facilities such as buildings and classroom facilities.

Travelling

Travelling is the movement from one place to another by animal-powered vehicles, trains, airplanes, automobiles, boat, bus, and airplane, among others (Korstanje 2011,

223). In this case, rural dwellers travel to nearby townships as part of daily life in order to search for work and raise money to sustain themselves and their family and even to pay rent. The participants revealed the following (emphasis added):

NM: I travelled three kilometres daily to Harrismith from Intabazuwe to *work*. I also have *friends* there.

CM: 10 minutes driving, to *raise money* because I have *kids*, to *pay rent* and lot of things.

The above extracts show that people travel between the two areas for personal and family sustainability, which indicates that there are mobility challenges encountered by community members.

CL: Challenges are there, in FET, no 1 is transport to get there, another is security because is not fence and they use to steal the computers, I don't know if they are guards there or not but according to my knowledge there are no people who are looking after there for that place at the present moment , and I think is not under the government but NGOs I am not sure (is there anything you think the University of the Free State can do) I think so but for now is still under construction so therefore maybe after they finish it then I can realise maybe u can help.

Apart from transportation challenges, the lack of security in terms of lives and properties were also highlighted as challenges in taking part in rural learning opportunities. Therefore, travelling highlights the insecurity of their lives and properties and the means of travelling, which is transportation. This made the running and development of rural communities in the selected area of study difficult.

Health and Social Development

Healthcare amenities are one of the most important issues to better the lives of the rural and urban dwellers. That is, the provision of accessible healthcare facilities should not be restricted to certain locations, but these findings showed that there are inadequate healthcare facilities such as clinics and other healthcare facilities in the studied area. This is shown in the responses bellow (emphasis added):

CL: The learning opportunity in Intabazwe are *library, clinic, community multi-purpose hall, schools*, based on the situation right now we have 2 clinics but one of them got burnt and now the whole community uses one clinic and is not spacious.

NM: The *clinic got burnt* because the community have strike demanding improvement of infrastructure so they decided to burn the clinic down so that they can hear what they are talking.

CM: Another challenge in Intabazuwe is the clinics, only 1 clinic is working and the number of people are high so *only one clinic cannot accommodate most of us* to such an extent now they give you day to come to clinic because of people on the queue.

CM: The other situation we are facing with the assets that we have is *disability centre*. It not well appropriate for learners who are disable because *it does not have teachers to teach learners with special needs* there are *unqualified teachers* teaching learners.

NM: University can help in terms of health facility so that they can help fix the clinic so that learners will no longer miss classes because learning is very important. Likewise the university can help by providing specialist in handling disability issues.

The above data indicates a lack of accessible healthcare facilities such as clinics that can service the community without having to go through any stressful and unnecessary delays in attending to the health challenges of the students and all community dwellers. In the same vein, basic facilities to accommodate disabilities were found to be lacking as well.

Discussions

The discussion of this paper is presented below according to the findings under the sub themes, which emanated from the use of Harpes and Marcus's seven-step model. The themes are schooling, travelling and health and miscellaneous.

Schooling

The experiences of the participants show that the teaching and learning facilities in the rural areas are inadequate for the educational needs of the residents. The comments of the participants show that there are imbalances in the learning experiences of children who reside in the rural areas compared to their urban counterparts. This indicates that the position of the Department of Basic Education (DBE 2018) that the key players in education in rural communities should be provided with resources to enhance teaching and learning, literacy, reading, ICT and homework, and that the school community should be mobilised in development initiatives is still unattended to by the concerned authorities in South Africa. This finding was also confirmed Van Deventer (2012, 162), who revealed that most schools in the Senior Phase (AP) and the Further Education and Training Phase (FETP) in South African rural locations indicated that they did not have the necessary facilities and equipment to achieve as compared to their counterparts in developed areas of the country. The school size is also another concern for the learners in the selected areas and points to the fact that the school's topographical size is not encouraging. This will not only affect their well-being in terms of a spacious school compound for extracurricular activities, but will also affect their academic performance because there is a positive correlation between school size and students' academic performance (Odunlami and Omodan 2017).

Travelling

Travelling is one veritable medium of connection between urban and rural dwellers and is regarded here as the ease of transportation or otherwise in enhancing mobility in rural locations. Travelling/transportation here is not seen as tourism travelling, but as a bare

necessity that enables community members to maintain their kids at schools, attend to urgent family needs and stay alive. The findings showed that the means to travel, i.e. transportation, to enhance their jobs and allow economic transformation and movement, among other reasons, was lacking and made the running and development of rural communities in the selected areas of the study difficult. This further confirmed the findings of Mlambo (2018, 66) that rural-urban migration in South Africa is largely motivated by economic reasons as rural areas cannot provide sufficient employment to better livelihood; people opt to venture into cities in search of convenient and conducive opportunities. The consequence of this trajectory is not limited to mobility alone for rural residents, who are deprived of many transportation options, but also suffer significant financial losses under the excuse of sustainability and at the same time are unable to change their choice to stay in rural areas (Jovic and Rankovic-Plazinic 2013, 10). The resultant effect of this systematically delimits the developmental factors of rural areas, which discourages the zealous appearance of social and individual groups in the rural areas whose survival is at risk.

Health

The findings showed that there is a lack of adequate healthcare facilities such as clinics to attend to the various health challenges of the people in the communities, including students. In the same vein, basic facilities to accommodate disabilities are lacking as well. Our deduction is that the adequacy of healthcare facilities in the urban locations and the reverse in the rural areas might have influenced and is responsible for the movement of rural dwellers to urban areas in order to improve their health. This study therefore agrees with the suggestion by Hlalele (2014, 106) that in order for rural communities to succeed, the members must be allowed to enjoy a good job, equitable access to healthcare, quality education and strong community ties.

Conclusion

The discovery that Intabazwe burnt down one of the two healthcare clinics servicing the community in protest for improvement of health infrastructure shows that universities need to rethink their roles in community development and ensure the delinking (decolonising) of rural dwellers' minds towards government properties, which are perceived as non-community property during protests of any kind. The asset-based approach also becomes a veritable tool for universities and the community to adopt to tackle challenges hindering urban and rural linkages. This approach will enable the university to empower rural dwellers with freedom to attain well-being by ensuring an environment that is sufficient and adequate for investments. The intervention by the universities will enable the urban and rural communities to build social capital collectively. If this is not addressed as a matter of importance, rural development in South Africa will continue to witness an uncontrollable rural-urban migration.

Implications for Theory and Practice

This opening gambit is a clarion call to stakeholders in the faculties of education at universities in South Africa to work collaboratively with low-income communities to build resilience in order to surmount different educational and social challenges. Such initiatives have a strong prospect to transfer control of development actions from the government to individuals and communities.

The university can also play the following roles:

- Assist in enabling communities to look at or think of assets they have that can be put in place in the meantime while they await the government to play its part. An example could be using a classroom as a library. Learners can use this space for studying while some books and newspaper can be put in for referencing.
- Help in presenting workshops on how to handle overcrowded classes.
- Donate or sell some of the unused computers to the community. The community can be sensitised or advised when the university puts some of the computers on tender.
- The university, as a centre of intellectual capacity, can advise and offer workshops to youth on various ways of displaying unhappiness without destroying one property to get another, such as burning a clinic to get better municipality services.

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