



## Understanding rural-urban transitions in the Global South through Peri-Urban Turbulence

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### Nature Sustainability

DOI:

[10.1038/s41893-022-00920-w](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-022-00920-w)

Published: 01/11/2022

Peer reviewed version

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

*Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):*

Hutchings, P., Willcock, S., Lynch, K., Bundhoo, D., Brewer, T., Cooper, S., Keech, D., Mekala, S., Mishra, P. P., Parker, A., Shackleton, C. M., Venkatesh, K., Rey Vicario, D., & Welivita, I. (2022). Understanding rural-urban transitions in the Global South through Peri-Urban Turbulence. *Nature Sustainability*, 5(11), 924-930. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-022-00920-w>

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# 1 Understanding rural-urban transitions in the Global South through Peri-Urban Turbulence

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## 22 Abstract

23 Much previous research has problematised the use of a binary urban-rural distinction to describe  
24 human settlement patterns in and around cities. This paper presents a framework that conceptualises  
25 rural-urban transition through the prism of shifts in natural, engineered and institutional  
26 infrastructure, in order to explain the processes of rapid change and the dip in service provision often  
27 found in peri-urban areas in the Global South. We draw on examples related to the provision of water  
28 and sanitation to illustrate the theory and discuss its implications for future research on the peri-  
29 urban.

30

31 **Key Words:** Infrastructure, Peri-urban, Rural, Services, Urban expansion, Urbanisation

32

## 33 Introduction

34 For much of this century, the world's urban population will continue to grow leading to an increasingly  
35 urbanised planet<sup>1</sup>. A significant consequence of this demographic change is urban expansion, as cities  
36 extend outwards incorporating land around them. This expansion of cities is evidenced in high income  
37 countries<sup>1,2</sup>, where urban population growth is modest, but the trend in developing countries in Asia  
38 and Africa is especially rapid<sup>1,3</sup>. This creates ever larger areas of interface between the urban and

39 rural. Depending on the definition, approximately 1 billion people were living in peri-urban areas in  
40 2015, with the proportion of peri-urban inhabitants particularly high in low- and middle- income  
41 countries<sup>4</sup>. The magnitude of population living in these areas challenges the usefulness of a  
42 dichotomous categorisation of urban and rural areas and reaffirms the importance of further  
43 theoretical and conceptual development of the peri urban interface<sup>5-7</sup>.

44 Peri-urban areas are, by nature, complex, multifaceted regions, and so the literature on these areas is  
45 spread across numerous disciplines. For example, there is significant scholarship on environmental  
46 and ecological conditions<sup>8</sup> as well as literature on changing patterns of land use<sup>9</sup>. Research has been  
47 emerging on 'cityness'<sup>10</sup>, 'urban' activities in rural spaces, such as wage employment<sup>11</sup>, 'rural' activities  
48 such as agriculture in urban spaces<sup>12</sup>, middle-class colonisation of rural areas<sup>13</sup>, understanding the  
49 interdependence between these two realms<sup>7</sup> and finally the livelihoods and resource management  
50 issues at the interface between the urban and the rural<sup>3,14</sup>.

51 There is therefore a need to bring these disparate themes together in an examination of the peri-  
52 urban, what Allen describes as:

53 *"a lumpy rural–urban continuum that challenges conventional distinctions between the*  
54 *urban and the rural ... where cities' appropriation and transformation of nature's nutrient*  
55 *cycle manifests most intensely."*<sup>3</sup>

56 Allen<sup>3</sup> goes on to argue that peri-urbanisation is a process that sees tensions between the imperatives  
57 of economic growth and natural productivity. The result is a zone of intensely heterogeneous activities  
58 in space, time and nature that frequently include subsistence and peasant farmers, abattoirs, squatter  
59 settlements, reservoirs, factories and mining activities side-by-side. This raises significant questions  
60 about the provision of infrastructure and services, about the ability of peri-urban interfaces to provide  
61 *"inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable"* settlement as envisioned in the Sustainable Development  
62 Goal 11 on sustainable human settlements<sup>1</sup>.

Box 1 – Key definitions for a theory of Peri Urban Turbulence in cities of the Global South, drawing on environmental and urban studies literatures.

- Urban: the territorial area of a city typically characterised by high population density, a significant built infrastructure endowment and municipal governance mechanisms.
- Peri-urban: the territorial area on the edge of an urban settlement typically characterised by rapid growth in population, mixed land use between agriculture, industry and housing and fragmented governance systems. Some densely populated rural areas may display similar characteristics.
- Rural: the territorial area beyond peri urban and urban areas, typically characterised by lower population density, significant agricultural land use and greater prominence of community-based institutions.
- Natural infrastructure: defined as ecosystem services, which are the benefits humans derive from nature (also known as nature’s contributions to people).
- Engineered infrastructure: the endowment of built structures and facilities that enable the provision of infrastructural services, such as water and electricity.
- Proximate institutional infrastructure: the formal and informal institutions that are concentrated within communities, such as community groups or local service providers, which manage public goods and deliver services.
- Distant institutional infrastructure: the formal and informal institutions that are dispersed across communities, such as municipal councils and public utilities, which manage public goods and deliver services.

63

64 Previous conceptualisations of the challenge of sustainable human settlement involve comparisons  
65 and contrasts between urban and rural which leads to a partial understanding of lack of services. There  
66 are approaches that theorise the urban and rural as areas that are in competition over resources and  
67 services<sup>15</sup>. For example, Lynch<sup>5</sup> highlights the relationship between the city and countryside that can  
68 be generic – complementary trade in agricultural goods and natural resources such as food, fuelwood  
69 and water – in exchange for finance, manufactured goods and services. However, this relationship  
70 can also be exploitative, drawing more value from the rural to the city, with limited return trade. A  
71 number of studies that indicate that urban demand places pressure on rural woodfuel sources, but  
72 that the research suggests that the pressure is mediated by ‘institutional scarcity’<sup>16,17</sup>. There are also  
73 examples of competing economic values applied to peri-urban land – direct use value, indirect use  
74 value and non-use value – or the benefits from not using natural resources, such as protection of  
75 wildlife, green space for leisure or wildlife conservation<sup>18</sup>. In this paper, we focus on the  
76 transformations that occur at the frontier of urbanisation and examine how the systems that underpin  
77 basic service provision, such as water and sanitation, and enable the management of public goods,  
78 like the land or green space, shift during rural-urban transition. We combine literature and theories  
79 from urban studies and ecology to form a new framework that explains a peri-urban dip in service  
80 provision and process of rapid change we characterise as ‘peri-urban turbulence’ (PUT).

81 The theory of PUT presented in this paper is based on the concept of shifts in the balance and  
82 magnitude of natural and engineered infrastructure and local and distant institutional systems during  
83 transition primarily in fast growing urban areas of the Global South (Box 1). We characterise natural  
84 infrastructure through the prism of ecosystem services – the benefits people derive from nature –  
85 especially those associated with regulating services whereby we recognise the role of the environment  
86 in purifying water and processing wastes. Engineered infrastructure includes the endowment of built  
87 structures and facilities that enable the provision of services, such as reservoirs, pumps, treatment  
88 plants and piped distribution networks that can form a water distribution system. The distinction  
89 between proximate and distant institutional infrastructure reflects partly the relative scale of  
90 institutional systems that underpin basic service provision. Here, we account for the unit of service  
91 management between local models of household (self-supply) and community-scale provision against  
92 more distant forms of municipal or large-scale market provision. However, it also reflects a distinction  
93 between the prominence of more localised institutions in broader areas of rural life, such as  
94 community groups, and the more dispersed, impersonal institutional systems that fulfil similar roles  
95 in urban life, such as municipal councils. We believe conceptualising the shifts in the balance of  
96 natural, engineered and institutional infrastructure can help explain the varied mechanisms through  
97 which citizens meet their needs and communities manage public goods across rural, peri-urban and  
98 urban areas.

99 Building on this introduction to the constituent parts of the PUT theory, the next section reviews  
100 literature on the peri-urban condition and assesses evidence on the reported distribution of  
101 engineered, natural and institutional infrastructure across urban, peri-urban and rural areas. It draws  
102 on examples from the water and sanitation sector to illustrate similarities and differences across these  
103 zones. The PUT theory is then unpacked and explained in more detail before a discussion about its  
104 implications on future research on the peri-urban and concluding remarks are provided.

### 105 **The peri-urban condition**

106 The expansion of peri-urban areas and the growing evidence of their relative neglect highlight their  
107 importance in addressing global poverty, however what we know about these areas is obscured by  
108 demographic statistics that distinguish between urban and rural populations, thus splitting the peri-  
109 urban between these categories<sup>19</sup>. Recent work has sought to better characterise the peri-urban  
110 condition. One study into child health in East Africa found that it was lowest in the peri-urban interface  
111 between the city and rural areas<sup>20</sup>, whilst a study in South Africa found that around two thirds of urban  
112 and rural citizens report that their quality of life had improved over the last five years, but only half of  
113 respondents reported such improvement in peri-urban zones<sup>21</sup>. The literature is clear that peri-urban

114 environments can amplify health inequalities<sup>22–24</sup>. Rapid urbanisation can overwhelm local water  
115 supply and sanitation systems and coupled with high-levels of animal ownership this leads to higher  
116 infectious disease burdens<sup>22</sup>. Weiss and McMichael<sup>22</sup> argue that these peri-urban dynamics are  
117 contributing to a “*major transition in the human-microbe relationship*” that is contributing to an  
118 unprecedented era in terms of the emergence and spread of pathogens, from the re-emergence of  
119 cholera to new infectious diseases such as SARS (and now COVID-19). In this view, the transitional  
120 status of some peri-urban areas represents not only localised welfare issues but also global health  
121 security risks. This is further compounded as peri-urban populations are also likely to be exposed to  
122 ‘urban’ co-morbidities linked to issues such as air pollution or lower levels of physical activity<sup>23</sup>.

123 Assessing the endowment of engineered infrastructure in peri-urban areas is complicated by the  
124 structure of most global datasets not using this classification. Those datasets clearly show that urban  
125 populations are more likely to have access to infrastructural services, such as water supply and  
126 electricity, than rural populations<sup>25,26</sup>. It is hypothesised that peri-urban areas are likely to sit between  
127 the urban and rural levels. However, in interpreting this distribution of infrastructure, it is important  
128 to recognise that the welfare costs associated with a lack of access are likely to be higher in peri-urban  
129 areas than rural areas. This is because in rural areas ecosystems can fill gaps in infrastructure service  
130 provision<sup>27</sup> or reduce the risks associated with low levels of infrastructure by absorbing wastes that  
131 leak into the environment before they impact human health<sup>28</sup>. Based on this logic, we would  
132 hypothesise that peri-urban populations are often faced with middling access to engineered  
133 infrastructure but the highest exposure to risks associated with inadequate access.

134 Similarly, the flow of ecosystem services to inhabitants within peri-urban areas is poorly understood.  
135 Provisioning services (e.g. fuel, food, and water; provisioning services) might be most accessible  
136 nearby the ecosystems that produce them and in areas where they can be transported easily (e.g. via  
137 value chains<sup>29</sup>), potentially resulting in a dearth in peri-urban areas where local ecosystems are  
138 degraded but transport networks are not fully established. Regulating services (e.g. maintaining the  
139 quality of air and soil, providing flood control; regulating services), by their very nature, are often not  
140 transportable as they prevent, moderate or structure natural processes. As such, regulating services  
141 might be best noticed by their absence. In rural areas, healthy ecosystems help maintain habitable  
142 environments, but increased pressure from higher population densities can disrupt these processes  
143 leading to increased flooding, droughts, soil erosion and disease<sup>30</sup>. Where established, engineered and  
144 institutional infrastructure can mitigate some of the disruption resulting from a loss of regulating  
145 services (e.g. paving slopes where vegetation has been lost reduces the probability of landslides).  
146 Furthermore, people living in rural areas may have more direct access to cultural ecosystem services  
147 (e.g. the ability to develop our mental, physical and spiritual wellbeing; providing space for recreation,

148 spiritual and aesthetic appreciation of nature) than those who live in urban areas as they are often  
149 physically closer<sup>31</sup>, although good city planning can preserve access to these services by maintaining  
150 urban green space, as well as providing good transport links to natural areas<sup>32</sup>.

151 Focusing on the differences and similarities in the institutions that underpin the delivery of services  
152 and the management of public goods, it is common that the urban and rural categorisation is used as  
153 an organising logic for distinguishing between different institutional environments. For example,  
154 across much of South Asia, the Panchayat Raj (village council) system of local government reflects a  
155 form of direct local government that has historical roots back to precolonial periods<sup>33</sup>. In rural areas,  
156 large-scale infrastructure development will be overseen by state-level agencies, but many households  
157 and communities will manage basic services, such as water supply and sanitation, themselves or via  
158 community-based management mechanisms. In this context, service provision is best described as  
159 being coproduced between household, community and government<sup>34</sup>. We conceptualise such  
160 arrangements in this paper as proximate institutions, which we formally define as the formal and  
161 informal institutions that are concentrated within communities, such as community groups or local  
162 service providers, which manage public goods and deliver services in those areas.

163 This compares to urban institutional environments whereby entities such as a municipal corporation  
164 take direct control or supervise specialist city-wide institutions such as metropolitan water boards to  
165 develop and run infrastructure to deliver services. In such cases, citizens and communities have a  
166 much more passive and distant role. These formal urban service delivery systems often exclude many  
167 citizens and therefore an ecology of formal and informal private sector providers, such as water  
168 tankers and vendors<sup>35</sup>, also play a role. However, the ultimate 'fallback' option of self-supply is greatly  
169 diminished compared to rural areas. In this paper, we conceptualise this environment as reflecting  
170 distant institutions, which we define as the formal and informal institutions that are dispersed across  
171 neighbourhoods, such as municipal councils and public utilities, which manage public goods and  
172 deliver services.

173 In peri-urban areas there is even greater heterogeneity as the rural based models become degraded  
174 by growing and dynamic populations, eroding the potential for community-based models, and  
175 reducing space for self-supply, yet the urban service delivery models are yet to mature<sup>36,37</sup>. This  
176 process creates a series of poorly recognised institutional tensions in peri-urban regions. For example,  
177 in many neighbourhoods long established households will rely on pre-existing infrastructure, either at  
178 the household or community level, and can be resistant to shift to new management paradigms that  
179 may require paying for services at higher levels than before<sup>37</sup>. Similarly, there are often governance  
180 tensions as rural authorities are hesitant to accept processes of municipalisation that will see local

181 political leaders power subsumed into larger governance units<sup>38</sup>. In parallel, municipal authorities may  
182 often be hesitant to expand their authority to include peri-urban areas whereby the management of  
183 public services and goods is challenging<sup>38</sup>. These institutional dynamics mirror the infrastructure and  
184 ecological transition that unfolds within the peri-urban sphere.

185 In summary, the peri-urban is a transitional site whereby the relative capacity of natural infrastructure  
186 to support populations is reduced compared to rural areas, yet the endowment of engineered  
187 infrastructure is not yet materialised. Communities are often mixed with some residents well  
188 embedded in proximate institutional networks, yet community-based management approaches and  
189 other similar proximate models become stressed by much higher populations. The expansion of more  
190 distant institutional systems, such as those characterised by municipal governance, often lags behind  
191 the change in settlement character towards urban-like conditions and can be fragmented across peri-  
192 urban regions resulting in a patchwork of institutional forms<sup>3</sup>.

### 193 **The Peri-urban Turbulence framework**

194 To help explain why these processes unfold as they do, we propose a theoretical model for rural-urban  
195 transitions that argues that changes in natural, engineered infrastructure and distant and proximate  
196 institutions represent important markers of rural to urban transition, especially in the Global South.  
197 The high-level logic of the PUT framework is derived from four (or more) semi-independent  
198 transitions: 1) high levels of natural infrastructure (e.g. ecosystem services) are associated with rural  
199 contexts with these being low in urban areas, whilst 2) engineered infrastructure follows the reverse  
200 pattern. Similarly, 3) an inverse relationship exists between proximate institutions (high in rural areas  
201 and low in urban areas) and 4) distant institutions. In this view, as cities grow nearby settlements  
202 experience deep-rooted transitions as their character shifts from 'rural' to 'urban', but this includes  
203 an intermediate period of poorly delineated and defined peri-urban existence that can last decades,  
204 whilst being characterised by rapid spatial and temporal change and uncertainty. The peri-urban  
205 character reflects the instability between the two systems whereby there is higher flux in land use,  
206 livelihoods, resource use and services; a transition which we label as PUT (Figure 1), with 'peri-urban  
207 turbulence' suggesting a lower level of natural, engineered, proximate institutional and distant  
208 institutional infrastructure in peri-urban areas.

209 Figure 1 here

210 **Figure 1** - Levels of infrastructure vary across rural, peri-urban and urban areas. Access to services  
211 varies across individuals within each area (arrows) and nature may act as a safety-net in many areas  
212 across the Global South (dashed green line).



213 Developing this theory, we draw analogies with but key differences to the red-loop and green-loop  
214 theory of rural and urban systems<sup>39,40</sup>. Red-loop and green-loop theory describes how local natural  
215 infrastructure declines during urbanisation, but how engineered, social and institutional infrastructure  
216 may fill this gap. In a green-loop system, the overarching pattern is one of direct use of local natural  
217 resources<sup>40</sup>. By contrast, in urban areas there is an increased reliance on socioeconomic infrastructure  
218 across larger spatial scales (e.g. regional)<sup>40</sup>. A wide variety of evidence supports this theory across a  
219 range of ecosystem services, from food production (e.g. subsistence agriculture in rural areas vs  
220 transport chains for urban supply<sup>41</sup>) to fuel use<sup>29</sup>. However, there are notable exceptions – e.g. in both  
221 rural and urban areas, proximity and access are factors in how much time people spend in green space.  
222 Living nearby an urban green space does not necessarily mean people spent time there<sup>42</sup>, as there is  
223 a need for some level of connection to nature for people to want to spend time there and gain the  
224 associated benefits<sup>43</sup>.

225 Figure 2 here

226 **Figure 2** Conceptual model of the relationship between the processes of urbanisation and ruralisation.

227 The ‘peri-urban’ character reflects the instability between the two systems whereby there is higher  
228 flux in land use, livelihoods, resource use and services. This transition, which we refer to as ‘peri-urban  
229 turbulence’, resembles a hysteresis loop and can move in either direction, but with a ‘service gap’ in  
230 the peri-urban space between rural and urban dynamic equilibrium states (illustrated in Figure 2).  
231 Historically, urbanisation is the dominant trend, but examples of ruralisation also exist<sup>44</sup>. Although for  
232 the purpose of PUT we emphasis instability of the peri-urban, we recognise that some may  
233 conceptualise rural, peri-urban and urban areas as three related complex adaptive systems that each  
234 cycle between phases of stability and change, within the larger system of how humans organise our  
235 biosphere.<sup>5,6</sup>

236 When establishing red-loop/green-loop theory, Cumming et al<sup>40</sup> suggest a transitional state whereby  
237 both local natural infrastructure and distant socioeconomic infrastructure are benefited from  
238 simultaneously but distant services predominate as urbanisation progresses. We suggest that this  
239 transition is not always perfect, leading to a hiatus between services. As a result, peri-urban areas may  
240 not experience the best of both worlds (as might be inferred from red-loop/green-loop theory) but  
241 instead go through a temporary void until infrastructure is able to provide access to distant services.  
242 In other words, PUT likely results in both reduced local ecosystem services and a dearth of engineered  
243 infrastructure that might enable these benefits to be supplemented from distant natural  
244 infrastructure. These ‘gaps’ are of high social and political importance when the loss of services results  
245 in a large reduction in wellbeing (e.g. sanitation services).

246 We hypothesise that both the rate of ecosystem degradation and the cost of establishing engineered  
247 infrastructure are major drivers in determining the dearth of services in peri-urban areas. For example,  
248 when the cost of supplying the service is high for the environment, then nature can only support low  
249 population densities. Similarly, when the cost of building infrastructure is also high, then it is only  
250 economically viable at high population densities. In a situation such as this, the green-loop system is  
251 likely to degrade prior to the red-loop system being fully established. For example, in low population  
252 densities pit latrines can be used safely, relying on natural processes within the soil to make the waste  
253 safe<sup>28</sup>. However, since establishing sewerage and sewage treatment plants is expensive, it is only  
254 viable to develop this infrastructure when economics of scale enable. Thus, medium population  
255 densities in peri-urban areas are likely to experience unsafe sanitation – where nature’s services are  
256 overwhelmed but engineered alternatives are not yet established. The likelihood of such a gap in  
257 infrastructure is increased as the institutional environment is also in a state of flux and therefore is  
258 unable to create viable solutions.

259 This type of negative spiral in peri-urban areas is greater for some services than others, and varies  
260 across geographic areas. For example, food production predominantly occurs in rural locations, but  
261 can continue within urban areas<sup>45</sup>. Even without urban agriculture, food can be transported within  
262 cities with relative ease via transport infrastructure<sup>46</sup> (which are relatively cheap when compared to  
263 other forms of engineered infrastructure [e.g. sewerage]). Similarly, an imperfect transition between  
264 natural and engineered infrastructure can be avoided through good governance and strong land  
265 tenure. For example, some natural infrastructure can be conserved throughout urbanisation through  
266 good city planning enforcing protection of green space despite heightened pressure for building  
267 developments. As well as this, large scale distant institutions, such as municipal water utilities, can  
268 subsidise the provision of services to increase viability at lower population density (e.g. provision of  
269 water supply is cross-subsidised from metropolitan areas to small towns and neighbouring rural areas  
270 in Uganda<sup>47</sup>). As such, we anticipate PUT to be stronger in areas whereby these forms of cross-  
271 subsidies do not exist and the transition in peri-urban areas proceeds unsupported.

272 Although we hypothesise that peri-urban areas have the worst overall turbulence, there are likely to  
273 be significant differences between groups living in each context. For example, higher income  
274 households and communities living in peri-urban areas will cover the relatively high costs of  
275 developing engineered infrastructure and therefore overcome the dearth of services. This manifests  
276 most visibly in the phenomena of suburban gated-communities that are now common in major cities  
277 of Africa and South Asia<sup>6</sup>. High-income households can also invest in facilities, such as generators,  
278 private boreholes and septic tanks to overcome a lack of some services. Low income peri-urban  
279 residents will be less able to overcome this lack of engineered infrastructure whilst their options for

280 using natural infrastructure systems is reduced or constrained, as compared to rural citizens. This  
281 magnifies inequality as a lack of local natural infrastructure (i.e. as red-loop systems develop<sup>40</sup>)  
282 decreases the resilience of households. Particularly, as more vulnerable households are often the most  
283 dependent on local natural infrastructure (either directly or indirectly<sup>40</sup>), both for their livelihoods<sup>48</sup>  
284 and as a coping strategy for buffering shocks<sup>49</sup>. Thus, the ability to rely on natural infrastructure as a  
285 safety net is reduced during urbanisation, potentially resulting in large reductions in wellbeing for  
286 those unable to access alternative services, or when these services fail as a result of a shock. For this  
287 reason, peri-urban areas face the starkest inequality with citizens that are not well served or  
288 integrated into the urban institutional systems or which have access to engineered infrastructure,  
289 facing limited alternative options. In this case, they are excluded from the institutional safety nets of  
290 the state and nature.

### 291 **Peri-urban Turbulence as a research agenda**

292 PUT points to the importance of improving our understanding of the peri-urban condition and  
293 dynamics. We believe what happens in these settings will determine global society's ability to meet  
294 many of the critical challenges of the next decades. As we have argued, under current paradigmatic  
295 approaches the necessary expansion of core services such as water and sanitation will be hardest in  
296 these regions and the populations living in such environments will be limited in their ability to  
297 overcome this gap in provision. This not only represents an issue of immediate human need, but  
298 creates a series of broader risks and opportunities. This includes environments in which it is more  
299 likely that emerging infectious disease can arise and spread<sup>23</sup> but these settings are also where people  
300 are re-setting a pattern of living that will determine their future ecological footprints. Here, we see  
301 significant opportunities in viewing the peri-urban as a site for creating more sustainable futures as  
302 well as a site for monitoring and responding to local and global risks. Red-loop and green-loop theory  
303 emphasised the danger of urban populations having consumption levels so high that they over-exploit  
304 distant ecosystems<sup>40</sup> and we should be wary of responding to PUT by simply accelerating the rate at  
305 which populations move towards these types of unsustainable consumption levels, thereby  
306 heightening global environmental risks. We believe research is required to understand whether the  
307 peri-urban is an opportunity to create more sustainable urban models that allow the meeting of  
308 human needs within acceptable ecological boundaries<sup>50</sup>. Some localised and sector-specific efforts on  
309 issues such as travel<sup>51</sup> and urban agriculture<sup>45</sup> may hold some promise yet there needs to be further  
310 examination of the peri-urban governance and service delivery challenge to accelerate and scale up  
311 such work.

312 We argue that PUT may occur through the interaction of numerous tipping points, resulting in a  
313 ‘perfect storm’ of poor infrastructure (e.g. natural, engineered, institutional etc.; Figure 1). The critical  
314 thresholds at which each system will tip (e.g. the population density at which household-based on-  
315 site sanitation is no longer safe and sewerage or supported faecal sludge management is required<sup>28</sup>)  
316 are notoriously hard to identify but more research can help unlock important insights on when such  
317 thresholds might be realised and the multiple pathways to avoid them. Here, we see value in bringing  
318 together conventional urban studies literatures<sup>3,5</sup> with contemporary work on studying systems  
319 change from rural perspectives<sup>34,41,52</sup> and other disciplines<sup>53–56</sup>. For example, this integration could  
320 inform urban and rural planners, designers and architects, to build into their practice wider systemic  
321 perspectives that take account of the peri-urban<sup>57</sup>. There is a need to develop pathways based on  
322 work such as this to address the services deficiencies in the peri-urban in ways that are sustainable in  
323 the long term.

324 The systems change literature provides conceptual frames and methods for studying early warning  
325 signals in system change, such as ‘flickering’ and ‘critical slowing down’ that have been used to predict  
326 when a system might collapse<sup>53</sup>. As such, taking the example of sanitation provision, as the critical  
327 threshold population density is approached, the on-site sanitation system of latrines might be safe for  
328 most of the year but ‘flicker’ to an unsafe state during points of stress such as high precipitation when  
329 flooding latrines may cause problems within densifying neighbourhoods. Similarly, the proximity to  
330 the tipping point is closer as the ability of the system to recover from these high rainfall periods slows  
331 down (i.e. from becoming safe a few days after heavy rainfall, to taking substantially longer). Such  
332 patterns have been identified in a wide range a systems, from shifts in freshwater lake systems<sup>53</sup> to  
333 critical transitions in financial markets<sup>55</sup>.

334 Methodologically, these ‘early warning signals’ are difficult to identify in advance, often being  
335 observed only with hindsight – although cutting-edge methods are being developed to address this<sup>54</sup>.  
336 Here, we draw analogies between deforestation (reduction in forest areas) and urbanisation  
337 (expansion of urban areas). Studies comparatively investigating rural and urban areas are well suited  
338 to identify many of the impacts of urbanisation (akin to analyses comparing pristine forests with  
339 agricultural fields to understand the impacts of deforestation). However, in order to identify the  
340 proximate and underlying drivers of these processes, it is necessary to study the frontier<sup>58</sup>. Ecologists  
341 produce high-resolution annual maps of deforestation to track this frontier<sup>59</sup>. Such maps can be used  
342 to 1) identify the drivers behind the expansion of the frontier, including down to individual-level  
343 motivations<sup>52</sup> and 2) anticipate the future expansion of the frontier<sup>60</sup>. Applying similar methods to  
344 peri-urban areas could lead to a step-change in urbanisation research, e.g. with annual, high-  
345 resolution maps of frontiers of urbanisation highlighting key locations for in-depth investigation to

346 follow the process as it occurs. Given the far-reaching consequences for sustainable development,  
347 enhancing our understanding of PUT is an important goal for future research.

### 348 **The way forward**

349 In proposing this framework of PUT as a route for new research, we are aware that any systems-level  
350 analysis of rural-urban transition is necessarily abstract and therefore does not account for the varied  
351 experiences of individuals living within such systems. There are many rural communities and  
352 households that will be 'rich' in infrastructure and linked into distant institutions, whilst urban ones  
353 that are comparatively poorer across these markers. However, we believe the meso-level of analysis  
354 which we adopt in the framework is still useful as it provides a way of conceptualising rural-urban  
355 change in a way that provides an explanatory account for often found deficiencies in peri-urban  
356 services and wellbeing. This is a generalisable challenge and this framework provides a robust  
357 foundation for building a research agenda that can help address it. We accept that this work is largely  
358 conceptual in nature and the next stage will be to validate the framework through comparative  
359 datasets and case studies of rural-urban change, but we note evidence presented from the literature  
360 throughout this paper that reflect the patterns of outcomes we have discussed and which we believe  
361 supports the central tenor of our argument. Moving forward, we believe it is imperative to focus on  
362 responding to PUT and to answer questions on when and how authorities can respond to rural-urban  
363 transition to ensure the services and public goods are best maintained in a socially and ecologically  
364 sustainable way. This may create tensions for urban administrators over their responsibility to provide  
365 services for the dwellers in these regions: At what point should they extend their boundaries to  
366 incorporate new urban areas? At what point do city authorities include in-migrants? Responding to  
367 this dynamic process has implications for a city's ability to meet the needs of its residents and  
368 therefore its key performance indicators. Future research in this area should be directed towards  
369 supporting such policy challenges and developing pathways to address these concerns. This  
370 Perspective develops PUT as an analytical framework to reveal the deficiencies in services experienced  
371 by those living in the peri-urban and the implications for both the urban and the rural. There are  
372 multiple potential pathways shaped by the specifics of context, rate of change, institutional capacity  
373 at various scales and degree of disparity (or sharpness of the boundaries) between the rural and urban,  
374 amongst others. The numerous possible combinations of these few variables results in a large number  
375 of possible pathways. We believe that system-based approaches for studying rural-urban transition  
376 can be used to better anticipate, predict, and explain systemic change thresholds and therefore the  
377 basis for pathways to better futures.

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## 516 **Acknowledgements**

517 This paper was mainly developed through a joint UK-India research project supported by the Economic  
518 and Social Research Council and the India Council for Social Science Research. Grant Reference:  
519 ES/R006865/1. SW was also funded by ES/R009279/1. CS was funded by the National Research Chairs  
520 programme of the DSI/NRF in South Africa (grant no. 84379). Thanks to Caro McIntosh for preparation  
521 of the artwork. We also thank Alexander Wandl and two anonymous reviewers, whose comments  
522 helped improve the manuscript.

523

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### 525 Contributions

526 P.H., S.W. and K.L. led the conceptualisation and writing of the paper. All authors contributed to  
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## 532 **Competing interests**

533 The authors declare no competing interests.

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