



Rural municipalities in Chile ¹

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Executive Summary

Over the past decade, there has been a growing consensus that the dichotomous differentiation between urban and rural is an extreme simplification that offers a very segmented vision of reality. The limit between rural and urban is increasingly diffuse throughout Latin America, and is moving towards that which is observed in developed nations. At the same time, the rural is increasingly more complex, and there are many types of rurality. Definitions based on one or two simple criteria become less useful each day for understanding rural societies or formulating policies and programs that adequately reflect reality (Tacoli 1998, 2003; da Veiga, 2002; Chomitz et al., 2005; De Ferranti et al., 2005).

Throughout Latin America, rurality is defined exclusively or mainly on the basis of a single variable: population size. In countries like Chile, this heavily weighted variable is nuanced as a result of a consideration of the local importance of primary economic activities. World Bank studies (De Ferranti et al., 2005) have shown how this flawed characterization has led to an underestimation of the size of the population that lives in rural areas and, in the words of José Eli da Veiga, has constructed imaginary cities (da Veiga, 2002). In Europe, for example, where a more multidimensional focus is applied by both European Commission agencies and national governments, it is estimated that more than half of the population lives in some type of rural area (European Commission, 2006).

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Rural areas present a great diversity of activities and configurations and a complex network of articulations between economic sectors as well as different levels of linkage with urban centers. The current consensus among specialists goes in favor of the idea of a rural-urban gradient that would replace a contrasting absolute vision of rural and urban (da Veiga, 2002; Osses et al., 2006; Chomitz et al., 2005; De Ferranti et al., 2005; Rodríguez and Murillo, 2007; Saborío and Rodríguez, 2007). This definition of rurality requires that one consider where the population is located, its characteristics, and the interactions that a specific place has with strictly urban centers (Byrden, 2000).

This study presents a typology of rural municipalities in Chile based on the idea that there are different levels and types of rurality. This criterion is operationalized through a broad set of variables that incorporates demographics, economics, accessibility to or connectivity with urban centers and levels of human capital and access to services. The area studied ranges from the Coquimbo Region in the north to the Lakes Region in the south, which is home to a little over 90% of the country's population.

First, a simple quantitative criterion was established in order to define a municipality as rural. We initially identified the municipalities that were located in the urban extreme of the urban-rural gradient. Rural municipalities were then identified by exclusion. This exercise yielded a rate of rurality of 35% for the area under study. This number is significantly higher than the estimates of the National Statistics Institute, which are based on the official definition of rurality. These results are in line with those of previous studies that assert that rurality in Chile has been underestimated by official statistics (UNDP, 2008).

Once the clearly and undeniably urban municipalities were excluded, a statistical analysis of conglomerates was executed and nine groups of rural municipalities were identified according to their level and type of rurality. The researchers concluded that:

- 44% of the rural population lives in municipalities with an intermediate level of rurality in which there is considerable diversity of economic activities in different areas of agriculture.
- The second most important group (21% of the rural population) consists of municipalities with an economy that is highly dependent on agriculture and very rural in terms of demographics.
- The remaining third of the population of these rural municipalities is distributed into seven minor groups: those dependent on agriculture but with intermediate levels of rurality measured in demographic terms;

sparsely populated and isolated areas; areas in which tourism is a key economic activity; municipalities with economic activities that are mainly related to fishing and related endeavors; and rural municipalities whose specific characteristics position them near the urban extreme of the urban-rural gradient.