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Introducing Rural Planning: A new AESOP Thematic Group

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We are excited to launch a Thematic Group on Rural Planning within AESOP. The new thematic group was approved at this year's AESOP Heads of School meeting in Liverpool, following a formal submission and oral presentation to the Council of Representatives (CoRep), and the group had its first formal meeting at the AESOP Annual Congress in Istanbul in July 2025 (see Figure 1). But why a Rural Planning Thematic Group in AESOP? What is Rural Planning about? And why does it matter?

Debates around the management and governance of the countryside or, broader, places that are not easily typified as 'urban' have been limited in planning theory and practice. Indeed, traditionally, rural concerns were largely subsumed under agricultural policies, and planning interventions – where they existed – focused on farmland preservation and amenity protection, characterised by a minimal approach to socio-economic conditions (Lapping and Scott, 2019). However, the conflation of the terms 'rural' and 'agriculture' produced and sustained by the urban-rural duality – a persistent spatial binary that privileges urban rationalities – is no longer valid in our times. In the 21st century rural places are complex, multifaceted and dynamic. The continued impacts of new forms of urbanisation (including counter-urbanisation), demographic changes and the gentrification of rural spaces, the decline of the agricultural economic base, and emergence of multi-functional rural landscapes and deeply contested new demands for rural space suggest a new set of challenges at the heart of planning scholarship and practice (Scott et al., 2019). In addition, climate collapse continues to create new exclusions, new mobilities and new hazards in rural areas (Scott et al., 2023). The countryside globally has been afflicted by poverty and gross inequalities brought upon by capitalism – topics also at the heart of planning debate (Gallent et al., 2025). For example, platform capitalism has produced new and aggressive forms of exploitation, including the touristification of rural places (Scott, 2025); the experience of a global epidemic has left nuanced but critical urban-rural inequalities, with rural middle classes being able to capitalise on their resources and housing assets in the shift to home-working (Gallent and Hamiduddin, 2021); and rural housing issues continue to frame a critical planning literature exhibiting contradictory cases of socio-spatial exclusion and unaffordability as well as abandonment and rural depopulation (Gkartzios and Ziebarth, 2016). We need to rethink the rural; not as a mere geographical extension of urban-driven debates, but as the core space that such challenges are emerging from and evolving through.

'But what is rural then?', we are often asked. We are not interested in producing hard definitions of what is and what is not rural in this thematic group. We normally work against such a spatial and absolute binary. Our positionality regarding rural scholarship is not to create a siloed field, but to appreciate, in a relational way, the importance of the rural context for 21st century challenges. We understand that rural definitions carry different interpretations globally, can be marked by colonial and oppressed histories, and are framed through multiple – and even contradictory – terms. We embrace research in all rural spaces: remote, peripheral, mountainous, and coastal areas, as well as metropolitan fringes near urban centres; repopulated and gentrified or stagnant and so-called 'left-behind' rural areas; European and global countrysides, interconnected and exposed to the forces of globalisation. We acknowledge that rural and place identities are not only plural but continuously shifting, yet we maintain that these places cannot – and should not be expected to – fit urban or metropolitan discourses. In understanding this differentiation, in our previous book (Gkartzios et al., 2022), we talked about the rural as a constellation of four primary capitals: land-based, economic, built and socio-cultural. Drawing on well-rehearsed capital thinking in planning and development studies, our ambition was to shed light on all the elements that constitute the countryside – its fundamental blocks – and highlight both its material and immaterial aspects for planning practice. They all matter: networks, physical and digital infrastructures, housing, storylines and myths, heritage and natural resources, social capital and festivals, local businesses and regional economies. Of course, rural areas are extremely differentiated, but for every place it is possible to explore its development trajectories, failures and conflicts through these capitals and their mutual exchanges.

A Rural Planning Thematic Group is an exciting development for all of us in AESOP. It has been rather uncomfortable sometimes to talk about 'the rural' in a discipline that often defines itself as 'urban planning'. Learned societies, journals, faculties, degree programmes and even named chairs are too often framed by the urban narrative. In many cases rural planning research remains 'hidden': for example, this year's AESOP Congress had no rural-focused track, although plenty – and excellent – rural planning papers were discussed in the parallel sessions. Still, rural planning as an object of research is in fact thriving in the context of planetary challenges and their spatial implications. Not only do 'rural papers' regularly appear in planning journals, but reputable planning scholars have produced ex-

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All three professors work on the interface of spatial planning and rural development covering various aspects including housing, governance and sustainability.



Fig. 1: Concluding the first meeting of the Rural Planning group at AESOP2025.

ceptional rural-focused work over the years (e.g., Healey, 2022; Davoudi and Stead, 2002; Cloke and Little, 1990). In this context, we aim to further contribute to raising the profile of rural planning scholarship within AESOP and beyond.

Essentially, we believe that the rural matters because it is a place where people live and work: the rural sustains economies, livelihoods, aspirations. The rural is just another place (and thus experienced, practiced, negotiated, contested), but it has its own material and symbolic dimensions. Rural places matter because their conditions produce paradoxes, conflicts and inequalities – and the mission of rural planning policy is to improve those places, to make them *better* (Shucksmith, 2018): to address issues of spatial justice, support their sustainability, contribute to their resilience, their democratic governance. As such we view the new Rural Planning group as a platform to explore and debate issues including:

- Crisis, resilience and rural planning responses (climate change, wildfires, pandemics, floods, etc.)
- Nature restoration and landscape scale spatial planning
- Rural housing, affordability, and the impact of second/holiday homes
- Counterurbanisation, rural gentrification and mobilities
- Rural spatial justice, just transitions and ‘left behind places’
- Inclusive practices – the right to the rural, indigenous, feminist, queer perspectives
- Place-based development and rural sustainability

- Conflict and development in the global countryside (touristification, land grabbing, etc.)
- Managing rural heritage, cultural landscapes, artistic practice and rural planning

Some of these issues were discussed at our first AESOP thematic group meeting. In setting up our new group, we had already been endorsed by a select group of scholars worldwide, both within the planning domain and beyond. We were welcomed this summer at Istanbul’s Yildiz Technical University by a large group of doctoral, early career and more senior colleagues who shared our enthusiasm for the new group. We talked about topics and potential projects that we would like to start. We discussed what kind of actions our group would like to see, supporting the idea of workshops oriented towards scholarly outputs (e.g. edited books, journal special issues, etc.). We plan to advertise such an opportunity of our first workshop to take place in 2026 in the near future. We explored ways to keep in touch, and we recently started a new LinkedIn page to keep connected and post opportunities and news relevant to the group. We want to maintain our diversity by working within AESOP but also wish to engage with scholars and departments beyond the AESOP network, and also outside Europe. We were particularly pleased to see so many Asian participants at this year’s AESOP Congress – likely facilitated by Turkey’s position bridging Asia and Europe – and we remain keen to deepen existing networks while cultivating new relationships with China, Japan, India and other Asian countries. We warmly welcome you to join us.

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