Do Rural and Urban Scotland need each other?

My main area of research is on spatial-structural change in retailing and its implications (see www.stirlingretail.com). Given the high profile plight of the high street and of town centres, most of my recent work has been focused on urban centres. However, even with this focus, there has been a rural dimension, not least because of the interactions of many towns with their “hinterlands”. Most recently, I have been involved with the Understanding Scottish Places (USP) project (see www.usp.scot). As the base component of this work, we identified, described, analysed and devised a typology of 479 towns in Scotland. These towns range from the largest in the city regions and outside down to what can only be described as “rural settlements”. Retail and urban Scotland need each other.

(a) Are rural and urban actually on a spectrum or are they really different?
Dichotomising rural and urban is not really that helpful, yet it is hard to argue that there is a continuum linking one to another. There are different dimensions to both, yet there are also some dependencies depending on the context and situation. As USP shows, we are often blind to the similarities and dis-similarities amongst and across our network of towns. At the same time, whilst we often talk about networks of centres or places, we barely understand particular the nature of the inter-dependencies or independencies of the places and people in the network. The same is undoubtedly true when we consider towns in context; which is often rural.

(b) Should urban and rural be looked at differently or is this an outdated approach?
As mentioned in my comments above, the dichotomous nature of the question is problematic. There are issues and points where distinctive approaches are beneficial; but at the same time there are occasions when an integrated approach makes much more sense. The concept of the market town, whilst not prevalent in Scotland, makes this point. Many towns in Scotland do in reality play this, or a similar role.

(c) Can the Scottish government’s over-arching targets be met by continuing to look at them separately?
Assuming that “them” here refers to urban vs rural and not to the targets (though that is a valid point as well) then the answers to (a) and (b) above indicate my train of thought. There may be merit in some measurement distinctions (but care is needed here) but we need to see places in their
context and interactions. Travel to shop is a good example of how targets here are not capable of pure divisibility.

(d) Is a place-less approach more appropriate?
You could interpret this question in a number of ways. I am not sure what is intended here really. I am a firm believer that people identify with place, so place-less is problematic for me. But how people define their place is of course variable and informative. Denying this seems a curious approach to take. But, if the point is that we are often too hide-bound by rigid definitions and interpretations of place, then there is probably some truth in this. As I commented before, we need to be much clearer in our understandings of the (inter) dependencies of space and place and how these are being restructured in economic, social and cultural terms.

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