

# RURAL-URBAN DIVIDE

– FACT OR FEAR?

# 6



*“...research commissioned by MAF challenges the nature of ‘the great rural-urban divide.’”*

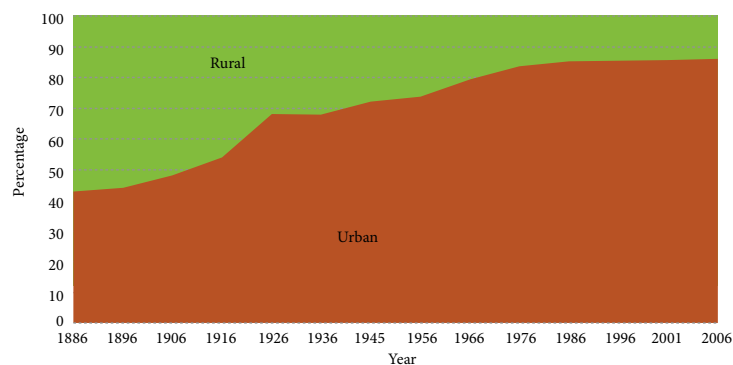
New Zealand is one of the few countries in the world that is both highly urbanised and highly dependent on the rural and primary sectors for its economic prosperity. This set of circumstances can lend itself to some friction between urban and rural New Zealand, but research commissioned by MAF challenges the nature of “the great rural-urban divide”.

## »» CHANGING NATURE OF NEW ZEALAND SOCIETY

In the 1880s, New Zealand was firmly a rural nation, with more than 60 percent of the population living in rural areas\*. By the time of the 1916 census, the country’s urban population was greater than the rural population. This trend has continued, with just 14 percent of New Zealanders living in rural areas according to the 2006 census.

However, the nation’s dependence on primary/rural sector based products has not changed so markedly. Prior to the mid-1950s, more than 95 percent of New Zealand’s merchandised exports were based on primary sector products grown in rural New Zealand. This has since reduced and is now stable at 65 percent. What has changed significantly is the mix of products.

**FIGURE 6.1: PROPORTION OF PEOPLE LIVING IN URBAN AND RURAL AREAS, 1886–2006 CENSUSES OF POPULATION AND DWELLINGS**



Source Statistics New Zealand.

\* Rural areas, in New Zealand, are those with a population of less than 1000 people.

## RURAL-URBAN DIVIDE

There is a perception that urbanisation has caused a growing misunderstanding and lack of appreciation for rural New Zealand among urban New Zealanders, and vice versa – the so called “rural-urban divide”.

Based predominantly in urban centres, public sector advisers sometimes need support to fully appreciate the implications of central government policies on the primary/rural sectors.

In recognition of this, MAF has developed a tool called Rural Proofing for those involved in creating Government policy. This resource helps identify and take into account the needs and circumstances of rural communities when developing and implementing policy.

### »» REAL DATA

In 2008, MAF commissioned UMR Research Limited to undertake research aimed at understanding the changing nature of rural and urban New Zealanders’ beliefs and values. The research scoped rural and urban people’s views of each other and covered a number of important issues affecting the rural and primary sectors.

The research was carried out over May and June 2008 in two components. The first was a series of in-depth discussions with six urban and rural focus groups. The second was a telephone survey of 1243 people, comprising a nationally representative sample of 750 New Zealanders – 608 urban and 142 rural – and a booster sample of 493 rural respondents (which provided a total of 635 rural respondents).

### »» GROWING APPRECIATION

Focus group participants and survey respondents, including a high proportion of urban dwellers, had a generally positive view of rural New Zealand. Overall, this view appeared to be improving. About a quarter of urban respondents said their view of rural New Zealand had become more positive over the past five years. This outweighed the 9 percent of urbanites who had a more negative view.



## URBANITES VALUE THE COUNTRY

Urban respondents recognised the economic importance of the rural and primary sectors, and they could see that the rural sector was a key driver of their own prosperity. The majority (64 percent) of urban respondents either strongly agreed (25 percent) or agreed (39 percent) that, if the rural sector was doing well, everyone living in the urban sector would be better off. Only 15 percent disagreed.

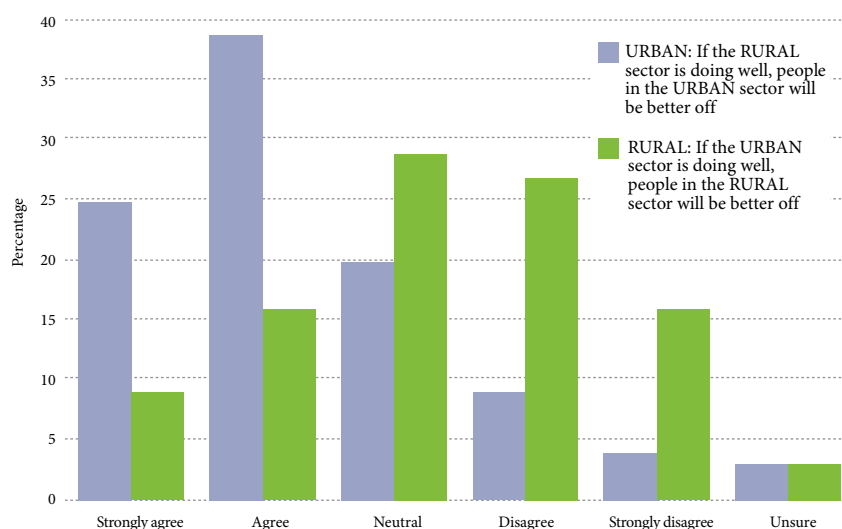
Urban respondents were, however, less certain that rural New Zealanders understood the importance of urban New Zealand – just 33 percent of urban respondents thought this was the case.

## »» RURAL DWELLERS LESS SURE

In contrast, rural respondents were less certain about the importance of urban New Zealand. Only a small proportion acknowledged the importance of the urban sector – just 25 percent agreed that, if the urban sector was doing well, people in the rural sector would be better off, while 43 percent disagreed.

Rural respondents questioned whether urban New Zealanders understood the importance of rural New Zealand. Five times as many rural respondents (64 percent) thought urban New Zealanders did not

FIGURE 6.2: PERCEIVED FLOW OF BENEFITS BETWEEN THE URBAN AND RURAL SECTORS



Source UMR Research Ltd.

understand the importance of rural New Zealand, compared with just 12 percent who thought they did.

However, the research shows these concerns held by rural dwellers are largely unfounded.

### PERCEPTION ONLY

One of the key findings of the research is there does not appear to be a lack of appreciation of the rural and primary sectors among urban New Zealanders. It points to a lack of understanding among rural people about the role of urban New Zealand and its importance.

Urban areas provide rural services, such as postal delivery and electricity supply, at a lower cost and higher quality through economies of scale. Urban areas also provide the infrastructure that allows the primary sector to prosper, including processing facilities, ports and transport infrastructure.

In the past, the rural sector argued that its export returns were used to subsidise internationally uncompetitive urban-based New Zealand manufacturers. However, this is no longer the case, as both urban and rural producers are largely unprotected from global competition.

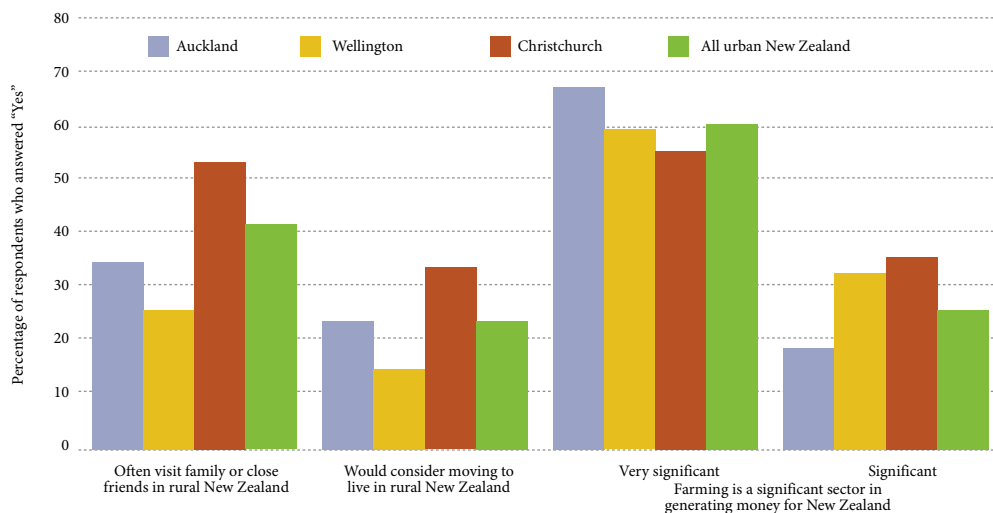
### »» BIG CITY THINKING

While recognising the limitations of these survey results in terms of sample size, the responses from Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch dwellers pose some interesting questions. Generally, the metropolitan responses indicate that a low level of connection between urban and rural does not necessarily result in a low level of appreciation of the importance of the rural sector.



For instance, Wellington respondents were less likely to often visit family or close friends in rural New Zealand (26 percent compared with 42 percent for all urban respondents) and were less likely to consider moving to live in rural New Zealand (15 percent compared with 24 percent for all urban respondents). But this did not appear to affect their appreciation of the importance of the primary sectors to the New Zealand economy (93 percent of Wellingtonians thought that farming was either very significant or significant to the New Zealand economy, compared with 87 percent for all urban respondents).

FIGURE 6.3: BIG CITIES' VIEW OF THE RURAL SECTOR



Source UMR Research Ltd.

## More online

The Beliefs and Values research project *Urban and Rural Perspectives of the Primary Sector*

can be found on the MAF website at:

[www.maf.govt.nz/mafnet/rural-nz/people-and-their-issues/social-research-and-welfare/beliefs-and-values/index.htm](http://www.maf.govt.nz/mafnet/rural-nz/people-and-their-issues/social-research-and-welfare/beliefs-and-values/index.htm)

Further information about Rural Proofing can be found at:

[www.maf.govt.nz/mafnet/rural-nz/proof/](http://www.maf.govt.nz/mafnet/rural-nz/proof/)

## »» URBAN MYTH

So, is the “rural–urban divide” real? The results of this research suggest that the “divide” is somewhat different and smaller than is the perception. What appears is a lack of clarity among rural communities about the role of urban New Zealand.

Rural New Zealanders could better understand the value their urban counterparts bring through their collective efficiency and purchasing power. Urban New Zealanders could move from appreciating the rural world to understanding – and, where necessary, moderating – their impact on that world.

The challenge now for agencies, including MAF, is to continue to strengthen a mutual understanding.

