

Migration, Mobility, Urbanization, and Development

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The two papers offered by Ronald Skeldon and Cecelia Tacoli on the relations between migration – or mobility – urbanization, and development have led me to think about how to explain some of the critical demographic issues behind their arguments, issues that I think not all researchers and policy makers focusing on migration and development understand as well as perhaps they should. We have been talking about multidisciplinary approaches, including the views of economists, demographers, political scientists and others. We use the same terms assuming that others understand the complexity behind the terminology, but perhaps they do not. I wish to address both papers in relation to some basic demographic questions, the answers to which we should all understand, and then suggest some questions for future research.

The first question is: “what is the demographic transition?” Skeldon’s paper describes transitions that he calls demographic, urban and migration, and their connections to development. But the critical transition, the one that inspires us demographers at any rate, is the demographic transition.

When I started studying demography, the “demographic transition” was described as a theory. Yet, as Skeldon’s paper points out, the demographic transition is in fact more a description than an explanation of a process that is affecting almost all populations in the world. In 1970, this process was still at its beginning stages in most developing countries. Today, I can affirm that it is definitely advancing in most developing countries and that it has almost run its course in the developed world. There are very few countries where the demographic transition is still at its early stages.

So, what is the demographic transition? Everyone has heard that it is the passage from a state of high mortality and high fertility to a state of low mortality and low fertility. In most societies, mortality decline comes first and this is important because reductions in mortality have a major impact on population growth. If, as is usually the case, mortality declines earlier than fertility, population growth accelerates and is mostly concentrated at the younger ages. This happens because, when overall mortality is high, it is especially high among children and, when it starts declining, it declines most at the youngest ages. As a consequence, more children survive than would had mortality remained high and the base of the age distribution increases. Therefore, the age distribution becomes younger during the first stage of the demographic transition. Today, we mostly forget that the demographic

transition involves at first a rejuvenation of the population because most countries have completed that phase of the transition—especially the most populous countries in the developing world—and have gone on to the stages where population ageing dominates. It is worth underscoring that rejuvenation of the population takes place at the beginning of the demographic transition when population growth accelerates.

During the second stage of the demographic transition, fertility declines and, after a certain period, the number of children starts decreasing. It is at this stage that population growth also declines. We once thought that the decline in fertility would lead to zero population growth, but today we know that populations often overshoot and many are now experiencing or will soon experience negative population growth (that is, the population itself will decline). The decline in fertility produces population aging. Again, it is worth underscoring that the cause of the growing proportion of older persons in a population is the reduction of fertility, which causes successive cohorts of children to become smaller. As a result, the proportion of children decreases and the proportion of adults and older persons increases. This ageing process is very important. Skeldon's paper tries to clarify the implications of this demographic transition for the urban and rural parts of a country.

We know that the demographic transition starts in urban areas. Why? Because urban areas tend to be better-off and have better services and infrastructure than rural areas. Therefore, when knowledge about how to reduce mortality spreads, especially in the developing world, it spreads first among the better educated in urban areas and then to other people in cities who can get access to health services or appropriate treatments. In rural areas, where people are poorer and services are less accessible, information spreads more slowly and access to healthcare is limited.

Therefore, when the demographic transition starts, the first places to experience accelerated population growth are urban areas. I think that we demographers have not given enough attention to this aspect of the transition process, having neglected the implications of the demographic transitions for the urban-rural divide.

My second question is: What is urbanization? As Cecilia Tacoli indicates in her paper, which focuses on mobility between rural and urban areas, urbanization is the increase of the proportion urban and the rate of urbanization is the growth rate of the proportion urban.

How does the urban population grow? Three processes contribute to urban population growth: an excess of births over deaths in urban areas; positive net rural-urban migration, and expansion of urban areas by the transformation of rural settlements into urban centers or the expansion of

urban centers to absorb rural settlements. Tacoli's paper begins by saying that a common misconception about urbanization is that rural-urban migration is the primary cause of population growth in urban areas.

A third question is: How does urban population growth affect the rate of urbanization? The relation between the two is expressed by a simple formula. The rate of urbanization—that is, the rate of growth of the proportion urban—is the difference between the rate of growth of the urban population and the rate of growth of the rural population. This relation is very important because it implies that, for the proportion urban to increase, the rate of growth of the population in urban areas must be higher than that of the population in rural areas.

Let's consider now a hypothetical country where there is no rural-urban migration when the demographic transition starts and assume that the demographic transition begins in its urban areas. Then, when urban mortality declines, the urban population will grow more rapidly than the rural population. Consequently, in this hypothetical population, the onset of the demographic transition will increase the rate of urbanization because urban growth will surpass rural growth even in the absence of migration. That is, the onset of the demographic transition accelerates urbanization and contributes to trigger the "urban transition". Although this acceleration probably happened in every country undergoing the demographic transition, we have no data illustrating these dynamics because we demographers have not focused on estimating the effect of the demographic transition on the process of urbanization.

Instead, most of the focus has been on net rural-urban migration as the main process accelerating urbanization because it has undeniably been a major contributor to the difference between the urban and rural population growth rates. There is also a historical reason for paying attention to net migration instead of concentrating on differences in the natural increase of urban and rural populations. Historically, in Europe, urban populations did not grow from natural increase because mortality was so high, so they could only grow as a result of migration. Inspired by such history, demographers have come to expect migration to be the most important component of urban population growth.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, when we asked governments, "Are you worried about the rate of increase of your urban population?" they said, "Yes." And when we followed-up with the question: "What are you doing in order to reduce it?" They would answer, "We will stop migration." That is, most governments discounted the possibility of reducing fertility to slow down urbanization, largely because they have not been aware of the importance of natural increase for urbanization.

And we are still living with the idea that controlling urbanization and urban population growth depends on reducing migration and there is a sense that both urbanization and migration are detrimental. Yet, within the prevailing economic model, where the most productive areas are those where industries and services congregate, the concentration of the population in urban centers is necessary. Nevertheless, the case for urbanization can be difficult to make. Even economists keep on misunderstanding what the question really is. For instance, in a recent article in a special issue of *Science*¹ devoted to cities, well-known researchers claim that urbanization by itself does not lead to economic growth. Certainly, we, demographers, have not argued the contrary. Instead, we have noted that sustained economic growth would be impossible without urbanization. Consequently, countries that are more advanced economically are highly urbanized and Skeldon's paper presents the rationale for this outcome very clearly.

Now the fourth question: In how many countries is rural-urban migration the major contributor to increases in the urban population? Studies carried out by the United Nations Population Division have found that in three-quarters of developing countries, natural increase is the most important contributor to urban growth. This finding applies to the 62 developing countries with data for the 1980s. For the 1990s, we have data only for 34 countries, but in 25, or two-thirds of them, natural increase is a more important contributor to urban population growth than net migration. Of course, internal migration also has made an important contribution, but almost everywhere we look in the developing world, natural increase makes a greater contribution to urban population growth, both in terms of the rate growth and the number of people it adds.

China, however, is a major exception. In China during the 1980s, natural increase accounted for only 30 percent of urban growth, and in the 1990s, for just 20 percent. China is exceptional because its fertility is currently very low, especially in urban areas. Hence, migration is the main force driving urbanization and, I should add, a major contribution is also being made by the reclassification of rural areas into cities. According to the statistics on cities that China releases, some cities appear "fully grown". Indeed, the number of areas classified as cities in China has been growing dramatically, mostly as a result of administrative changes that had not been possible before and that maintained large population centers classified as rural. Mostly because of reclassification, China appears to be experiencing a relatively high level of urbanization although its population is still only 40 percent urban.

1 David E. Bloom, David Canning, and Gunther Fink, "Urbanization and the Wealth of Nations, in *Science*, 8 February 2008, Vol. 319, No. 5864: 772-775.

The next question: What explains urbanization without development, which, as Tacoli's paper points out, seems to be the case in Africa? Africa is one of the world's least urbanized regions and includes some of the least urbanized countries. Only 10 percent of Burundi's population, for example, is urban. Uganda is 13 percent urban. Tacoli's paper points out that the proportion urban has actually declined in some African countries. We estimate this decline in the proportion urban has occurred in seven African countries and in 39 countries of the whole world, many of which are highly urbanized and developed and whose population is decreasing. So there is a great variety of trends in urbanization. Tacoli's paper claims that limited data have contributed to misconceptions about the contributions of rural-urban migration to urbanization and to urban poverty. We have better data now. The latest version of our urban estimates and projections has just been issued.² We call it the "2007 Revision" and it is based mostly on the 2000 round of censuses, which ended in 2004. Out of the 56 countries in Africa, we have recent data on urbanization for only 38 or 68 percent of those countries. Africa is one of the regions where we have low coverage on urbanization. Coverage is almost poor for Europe, where we have data on urbanization for just 60 percent of the countries: 32 out of 48. Coverage is better for all other regions. So, Tacoli is only half right. Although coverage is not perfect, there is sufficient information to make credible estimates in most of the world. However, lacking recent data probably makes the projections to 2050 more tentative.

Tacoli's paper makes another extremely important observation: that there is often confusion about the relation of internal migration to poverty. Very often discussions of how the urban areas grow focus on migration and assume that poor migrants give rise and maintain urban poverty. Even when there is evidence that migrants are not always poor, the assumption that they are seems to prevail. No matter how many studies we have showing that migrants come from every walk of life, that they are usually positively selected from their places of origin, that they tend to do pretty well at destination, that they are not equivalent to slum dwellers, and that people living in slums could have been living there for generations, this confusion persists.

Researchers at the World Bank have estimated for the first time changes in poverty in rural and urban areas in 90 developing countries, four fifths of which have data allowing an assessment of trends from 1993 to 2002. To estimate poverty levels the authors had to take into account that the cost of

² United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Population Prospects, The 2006 Revision, <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wpp2006/wpp2006.htm>

living is higher in urban areas than in rural areas. Their results show that, considering as poor those living on less than \$US1 a day, rural poverty declined by 98 million but urban poverty increased by 50 million. In both cases, the proportion of people living in poverty declined but the proportion of the poor in urban areas, 13 percent, is much lower than the 30 percent in rural areas. The countries in which the number of rural poor declined and that of urban poor increased are mostly in South Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. It is important to note that in Latin America and the Caribbean, the population is 78 percent urban. So, the increase in urban poverty should perhaps not be a surprise: since most people live in urban areas, poor economic performance in countries of Latin American and the Caribbean is likely to affect more urban dwellers than rural inhabitants.

Nonetheless, there is a big debate about where poverty is more concentrated and what attention governments ought to give to the poor in rural and urban areas. I think that the answer has to depend on the type of government and type of country. Poverty is undesirable no matter where it is found, so governments have to pay attention to both. But in countries that are highly rural, poverty is likely to be more concentrated in rural settings, while in populations that are highly urban, it will be more concentrated in urban areas.

I have said that rural-urban migrants are not always poor. But are they the majority of slum dwellers? Definitely not. However, we do not have good data about slum dwellers, but rural-urban migrants are definitely not equivalent to slum dwellers.

Tacoli's paper raises a sixth question: In how many countries does rural-urban migration predominate over other forms of migration such as urban-urban, rural-rural, or urban-rural migration? As she knows, not in many.

We have some new data from the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) that has really shocked me. The surveys asked women where they were born and raised and identified those who had moved within the six months prior to the interview. Because we have data for just 46 developing countries, the sample is not representative of the whole developing world, so take the following results with a great grain of salt. In those 46 countries, rural-rural migration is the most important in 26, or 57 percent. Urban-urban migration predominates among women in 15 countries, or 33 percent. So, where is rural-urban migration, the one that we are usually interested in? In this sample, rural-urban migration predominated in only three countries or 7 percent. Then, in just one country, Burundi, urban-rural migration predominated.

For males the numbers come out somewhat differently, but essentially, the

direction of migration flows within countries seems to reflect the concentrations of rural and urban populations: Latin America is 80 percent urban while Africa is 60 percent rural. Therefore, in analyzing migration flows in each country, we have to pay careful attention to the proportion of the populations in urban and rural areas. Otherwise, generalizations can be very misleading.

Consideration of the above questions about demographic transitions raises another: what is the relation of demographic transitions to urban transitions and what Skeldon calls the migration transition?

The demographic transition in developing countries has taken place more or less at the same time as those countries have urbanized. Latin America, for example, has become highly urbanized as mortality and fertility have declined.

Skeldon's paper points out that, when we estimate urban growth in Latin America, the proportion due to natural increase is still relatively high. The reason for that outcome is that the rural population has been depleted and comprises such a small percentage of the total population that rural-urban migration cannot contribute that much to urban population growth. The same is true for developed countries, particularly European countries. However, their fertility is so low that natural increase also cannot contribute much to urban population growth. So from where are their urban centers gaining population? From abroad.

Skeldon's paper calls the shift to international immigration a new transition but, rather than a transition, it might make more sense to view it as the next stage in urbanization when, once domestic possibilities for urban population increase have been exhausted, if a city is to grow, additional people must come from abroad.

This is not the first time that cities have grown from international migration. When I started working, my boss, an Argentinean demographer, was very worried about the fact that demographers seemed to assume that international migration was not particularly significant for urbanization. She knew that the population of Buenos Aires had grown mostly because of international migration. So urbanization through immigration has happened before, but it is likely to become increasingly common because more population have reached the late stages of demographic and urban transitions. Although at this point this explanation may seem straightforward, I think it is pretty important and enlightening, because we have not told the story this way before.

In sum, I think that Ron Skeldon's and Cecelia Tacoli's papers have made a

very important contribution to how we think about the relations of the demographic and urban transitions to internal and international migration: they allow to distinguish the different stages of the transitions and suggest the changes of population dynamics they entail. Even if their contribution is nothing but a description of a process, and not a theory, as Skeldon's paper suggests, it may nonetheless enable us to ask better questions in the future. What might those better questions be?

One that Tacoli's paper raises is: what is the significance of temporary movement or other forms of mobility? From the research of Graeme Hugo, I learned that circular migration was a relatively frequent coming and going of people between places of origin and destination. Now, I frankly do not know what circular migration is. In the context of international migration, it seems to be a new term for an old concept: temporary labour migration, taking place under highly regulated contractual arrangements. In other contexts, what is circular migration? If it is temporary movement, or temporary mobility, how short must it be for us to consider it migration and pay attention to it? The shorter the duration, almost everyone moves. Is it important?

Another question relates to how much mobility and redistribution of the population takes place within the urban system of highly urbanized countries. In the countries that are highly rural, why and how are rural areas transforming themselves into urban areas?

Earlier, I mentioned the issue of *Science* magazine devoted to cities. It contains a very interesting article by an urban planner, whose discipline is not represented in this conference. The summary of his article says, "Despite a century of effort, our understanding of how cities evolve is still woefully inadequate." He goes on to say, "Recent research, however, suggests that cities are complex systems that mainly grow from the bottom up."³ This position is consistent with my own separately formed view that most urban growth takes place at the base rather than from migration. This is not so much the case in the mega-cities or in big cities, but in places that are being transformed and becoming urban. How are the small cities growing into bigger cities? The *Science* article argues that in growing from the bottom up, size and shape of cities follow well-defined scaling laws that result from intense competition for space, a process that urban planners are trying to model mathematically.

As the *Science* article indicates, there is a lot we have yet to understand about how human beings organize themselves into territories to produce,

³ Michael Batty, "The Size, Scale, and Shape of Cities," in *Science*, 8 February 2008, Vol. 319, No. 5864: 769-771.

exchange news, transport themselves, et cetera. Even as we improve our interpretations and refine our questions to guide future research, I think we will find that the fundamentals lie in the urban-rural dichotomy. I do not think that I presented all of the valuable ideas contained in Skeldon's and Tacoli's papers about rural-urban divisions and relations, but I am grateful for having the opportunity to present my thoughts about how we can improve our understandings of these processes.