

From Migration to Increased Mobility: The Blurring of the Rural-Urban Divide in Many Low and Middle-Income Nations

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Introduction

In 2008, for the first time in history, half of the world's population is expected to live in urban areas. Despite prevailing perceptions, rural-urban migration is not always the main factor behind this fundamental change in the spatial distribution of population. Natural increase (the excess of births over deaths) contributes an increasing share of the growth of urban populations. This is an established tendency in highly urbanized regions such as Latin America and the Caribbean, and a growing one in Africa and Asia, despite the limited availability of long-term estimates in these two regions (United Nations, 2006b).

At the same time, temporary mobility has increased as part of a general trend towards income diversification in both rural and urban areas. This, in turn, has both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, it strengthens the links between rural and urban development and allows households to accumulate assets and reduce their vulnerability. On the other hand, it can increase social polarisation and the marginalisation of groups that may lose their already limited access to assets. A better understanding of the causes and impacts of mobility is essential at both national and local levels, as is a redefinition of citizenship rights and of who is entitled to participate in local governance systems.

Economic growth, urbanization and rural-urban migration: changing perceptions

'Development' is a complex and contested concept. Nonetheless, economic growth still explicitly or implicitly underpins it. This can be summed up as the increase of the share of GDP contributed by industry and services, which employ a growing proportion of the workforce. At the same time, subsistence (and small-scale) farming gives way to mechanised agribusiness systems assumed to be more efficient and increase worker productivity. Part and parcel of this model is substantial population movement, as the 'surplus' peasantry joins the urban-based industrial and service labour force.

Urbanization (the increase in the proportion of the total population living in centres classed as urban) is thus a positive transition that reflects the transformation of the economic base. Cities are important drivers of overall economic development, and historically, countries with high rates of economic growth have also had rapid increases in their levels of urbanization. Especially in nations with low initial levels of urbanization, rural-urban migration plays a major role in transforming the distribution of the population, as people move to places where economic opportunities are concentrated.

Despite these positive associations, rural-urban migration has come to be seen as a problem by policy-makers in rapidly urbanizing nations. In sub-Saharan Africa, cities have been described as a major cause of economic and social problems (World Bank, 2000). A review of PRSPs in the continent shows that migration is only mentioned in negative terms, as placing pressure on urban areas, promoting the spread of crime and HIV/AIDS, stimulating land degradation and reinforcing both rural and urban poverty (Black et al., 2006). Policies restricting or preventing rural-urban movement have become increasingly popular among policy-makers (United Nations, 2006) although in most instances their main result has been to increase both rural and urban poverty, without significantly stemming migration.

In summary, from a positive view of urbanization as an essential component of economic – but also social and cultural - transformation, the prevailing perception is now one where urban growth more often than not equals the growth of urban poverty and of slums inhabited by poor rural-urban migrants.

Rural-urban migration as a problem: some misconceptions

How did such radical change in perceptions occur? In part, it is a consequence of the widespread view that poverty in low-income nations is essentially rural. While this is true in many cases and especially where the majority of the population live in rural areas (as in many low-income countries), the scale of urban poverty in low and middle-income nations is growing rapidly (Satterthwaite, 2007; UNFPA, 2007; United Nations, 2008).

A related misconception is that the increase of urban poverty is mainly the result of rural-urban migrants who move because of rural poverty. In much of sub-Saharan Africa, however, the rural-urban gap in incomes and access to services has shrunk dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s with the implementation of structural adjustment policies, which have disproportionately affected urban populations (Jamal and Weeks, 1993). Even in countries with rapid economic growth rates such as China, where

overall rural poverty has been declining, industrial restructuring has resulted in growing numbers of urban poor (Solinger, 2004; Wang, 2004). Urban poverty is in most cases exacerbated by the failure of national and municipal governments to provide acceptable levels of infrastructure and services to low-income urban groups, rather than by rural-urban migration.

Limited data and information also greatly contribute to misconceptions. The relatively widespread view that throughout the 1990s Africa's urbanization occurred without economic growth (Fay and Opal, 2000) fails to account for the limited availability and reliability of census data. Indeed, the analysis is very much based on figures of urbanization derived from earlier censuses, when social and economic conditions were very different and rapid urbanization levels related largely to the formation of new independent states (Kessides, 2005; Satterthwaite, 2007).

More solid evidence shows that in the 1990s, levels of urbanization in much of Africa fell following widespread economic decline, as impoverished urban populations returned to rural settlements (Potts, 2006; Potts and Mutambirwa, 1998). Where urban growth rates (but not urbanization levels) have remained high, this has been mostly because of high rates of natural increase (Beauchemin and Bocquier, 2004).

Moreover, there is ample evidence that rural-urban migrants are usually better educated and have more economic and social resources than people who stay in the rural areas. Indeed, unless they are actively discriminated against by policies that limit their access to housing and basic services (such as the household registration systems in China and Vietnam, or the apartheid system in South Africa up to the 1990s), there is no evidence that migrants are worse-off than non-migrants (Beauchemin and Bocquier, 2004; Montgomery et al., 2004).

Nor is there evidence that rural-urban migrants are the main group of residents of informal settlements and slums in the periphery of many large cities in low and middle-income nations. The expulsion of long-term residents from the inner city to the periphery is a major on-going process in many urban centres, especially the economically successful ones where central areas are taken over by financial districts, high-income residential gated communities and commercial centres.

But perhaps the most misleading – and pervasive – misconception is that most internal migrants in low and middle-income nations move from rural to urban areas, and do so, on a permanent basis. This is far from being the case: to a large extent, the direction of migration flows reflects a country's level of urbanization and its economic base. Hence, rural-rural migration is prevalent in agriculture-based economies, whereas urban-urban movement is more

important in urbanized regions, and rural-urban migration is high in areas with relatively low levels of urbanization but high levels of economic growth and a growing non-farm sector such as China and Southeast Asia in the past few decades. But what is important is that a significant share of this movement is temporary – effectively, it may be more accurate to describe it as mobility rather than migration.

Mobility: recent and current trends and their determinants

Circular and temporary movements tend to elude national statistics, but their growing significance is documented by a wealth of recent research. In many cases, people move from rural homes to urban (or peri-urban, especially in Asia) destinations for varying periods of time (usually a few months at a time), especially during the agricultural slack season. Movement is often motivated by emerging employment opportunities in non-farm sectors: in Asia and Southeast Asia these include export manufacturing (Guest, 1998; Rigg, 2003) and construction (Hoang et al., 2005). Good transport and road networks and relatively cheap communications have greatly aided this type of mobility. Research in China documents the high levels of mobility of workers in the export manufacturing industry, suggesting that it may be the result of poor working and living conditions and low salaries (Zhu, 2007) – but also of the need to maintain a foothold in the rural homes, especially where access to land depends on local residential registration (Ping and Pieke, 2003). The need for a rural safety net is arguably exacerbated by the poor wages and conditions of migrants in the cities.

Circular migration between rural areas, especially from drought-prone regions to areas of irrigated agriculture, has long been a traditional coping strategy. In India, sixty percent of the 20 million people estimated to migrate temporarily each year move between rural areas. However, there are signs that this may be changing and, as a result of both agricultural mechanisation and industrialisation, temporary migration seems to be increasingly directed towards urban centres and non-farm occupations (Deshingkar, 2005). In West Africa, temporary movement between drought-prone areas of the Sahel and the coastal regions has long been an essential component of livelihoods in the drylands, but also a key element of the development of cash crops such as coffee and cocoa in the wetter coastal forest zones.

Maintaining a rural home is often crucial for migrants in the cities, even those who stay for long periods of time. This has been well documented in sub-Saharan Africa, where investment in rural homes, land and livestock has provided essential safety nets against urban economic stagnation and insecurity, and supported urban-rural movement during the difficult 1990s decade (Krüger, 1998; Potts and Mutambirwa, 1998). In Africa as in China and in many other locations, keeping a foothold in rural home areas is

especially important for unskilled, low-paid migrants who have to rely on fluctuating incomes and live in accommodation often lacking security of tenure and with limited access to basic services.

Temporary movement is a way to take advantage of economic opportunities in different locations and at different times. Put differently, it is a way to reduce risks associated with specific activities or locations.

Mobility as a livelihood strategy

Several conceptual frameworks developed in the 1990s point to the crucial importance of access (or entitlements) to assets (or capitals) in determining how people construct their livelihoods (Bebbington, 1999; Moser, 1998). Mobility, and the greater options for the diversification of income sources it offers, is essentially a strategy to increase access to assets.

Detailed empirical studies of the livelihood strategies of poor and non-poor, rural and urban-based groups have shown how income diversification and mobility are increasingly important in most contexts (Bah et al., 2003; Baker, 1995; Rigg, 2003). An important distinction that emerges from this work is that between strategies that lead to the accumulation of assets, and strategies that only ensure the survival of those who undertake them.

There is also widespread agreement on the importance of the diversification of income sources in reducing vulnerability and in some cases helping people to move out of poverty. Some research suggests that when opportunities for income diversification are available locally – for example, non-farm jobs located in small towns that allow local residents to combine them with farming – levels of out-migration tend to be lower and the benefits for the poorest groups (who are often less mobile) tend to be higher (Beauchemin and Schoumaker, 2005; Hoang et al., 2008).

Mobility as a form of income diversification also helps to understand how household strategies often build on cross-sectoral investments. For example, farmers in the rural settlements of Vietnam's Red River Delta move temporarily to Hanoi and other urban centres to work in the construction industry during the agricultural slack season. These earnings are then re-invested in agricultural intensification and diversification, which in turn responds to growing demand from domestic urban markets (Hoang et al., 2005). Similarly, remittances from urban-based relatives are the key to the ability of West Africa's family farmers to respond to urban demand for high-value foodstuffs – which in turn increases their incomes (Tiffen, 2003).

In summary, a growing proportion of rural and urban households in low and middle-income countries construct their livelihoods from a diversity of income

sources, often in several different locations. These multi-activities, multi-local strategies are usually highly effective in enabling households to increase or maintain their asset base and thus reduce their vulnerability.

Accumulation or survival strategies? The importance of factors that are not related to mobility

The positive process of asset accumulation described in the section above is not inevitable, however. Often, it is weakened by the lack of support from policies that are still rigidly divided along sectoral lines. To name but a few, agricultural policies explicitly or implicitly favour large-scale, commercial production systems (and globally, agribusiness increasingly dominates this sector) over small-scale family farming – despite the latter's demonstrated ability to respond to changes in domestic demand far more effectively. And national strategies for economic growth in most countries rely on the concentration of manufacturing units, but often overlook the need for adequate provision of basic services for the migrant workers they inevitably attract.

The process of asset accumulation is also not unproblematic – in many instances, it is accompanied by growing social polarization and increased competition for resources. In turn, this stimulates out-migration. Perhaps the most important aspect determining whether mobility is part of an accumulation or a survival strategy is access to assets, especially security of land and housing tenure.

Inequalities in access to assets cut between income and class/caste groups, but also within households. The growing number of young women migrating independently in many parts of the world is in part a response to rapidly growing demand for their labour in industry and services. It is also, however, a consequence of the fact that, in many rural areas, they are expected to provide free labour on the family farm but are excluded from inheriting it (Bah et al., 2003). Moreover, especially for poor households, socio-cultural expectations make female family members far more reliable senders of remittances (internal and international) than their male counterparts. While this makes independent female migration more culturally and socially acceptable than it ever was, it often comes at a cost, as women may forsake safe accommodation and health expenditure on themselves while they are away (Afsar, 2003).

There is also evidence that women heading their households are more likely to move away from rural settlements and to urban centres because they often lose their rights to land following separation or the death of their spouse (Baker, 1995; Bradshaw, 1995). While these households – and especially the children living in them – are not worse off than male-headed households

(Chant, 2007), the widespread gender bias in access to land is a serious obstacle to women's ability to take advantage of multi-local assets.

The impact of climate change and environmental degradation on migration patterns is another growing concern. Mobility is essentially an adaptation strategy, and temporary migration has long been associated to events such as droughts (Black, 2001). As these are bound to become both more frequent and more severe, it is likely that migration patterns will also need to undergo radical transformations. Vulnerability to climate change is invariably linked to poverty (both rural and urban), and this will affect the composition of the flows, their destinations and their impacts on sending and destination areas. But whether migration can be a successful adaptation by poor groups to the increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events provoked by climate change depends largely on the policy context.

Some issues for policy-relevant research

Mobility and income diversification are increasingly important for rural and urban, poor and non-poor groups in most low and middle income nations. Strong links between rural and urban development are also crucial for equitable local and national development. At the same time, however, mobility and income diversification can, and often do, result in increasing social polarization. The nature and trends of these transformations vary between and within regions and nations as they are determined by multiple location-specific factors.

Research and policy-making need to reflect this level of local specificity and avoid generalizations. At the national level, for example, the spatial impact of policies and strategies such as land tenure systems, infrastructure development, agricultural production and industrial growth on specific groups is all too often overlooked. Hence, while local understanding and action are essential, they cannot make much difference without support from national planning and policy-making.

At the same time, the capacity (and financial resources) of local governments to deal with emerging issues is very limited- and, in many cases, so is their accountability. This is not a purely 'technical' issue. It involves understanding and addressing the economic, social (and cultural) re-alignments that result in shifts of power between groups – including processes of social polarization and marginalisation. Local governance systems that include civil society as well as local governments can best do this.

This, in turn, means addressing the issue of how to re-define citizenship rights and participation in governance systems in a context of high mobility.

Especially at the local level, citizenship is most often based on being a resident of a specific administrative-political territorial entity. For powerful groups, maintaining representation and power in home areas where they do not reside has never been a major problem. For growing numbers of poor and lower-middle income households and individuals, however, spreading their assets in different locations, including ones that are not their main residence, is critical for sustaining safety nets and reducing their vulnerability. The redefinition of citizenship rights in the context of higher mobility is especially important for these groups – that include out-migrants but also, especially in areas with high levels of international out-migration, in-migrants from lower-income groups and poorer areas. Equally important, however, it is the inclusion in governance systems of poor non-migrants who do not benefit from remittances or income diversification, and in many instances can well be the main losers.

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