

Committee / Council: ECOSOC

Issue: Urbanization in Africa: Challenges and Opportunities

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Introduction

Cities have a crucial role in sustainable development and currently urbanization is at its highest rate to date. A United Nations report (marked A/65/316) indicates that for the first time in history, more than half of the world's population lives in urban areas, and it predicts that by 2050, this proportion will reach seventy percent. Every week, more than one million people move to cities and this rapidly expanding process of urbanization strains cities worldwide. Policy-makers need to keep up with this process whilst making decisions about energy, water, sanitation, housing, education, healthcare, transportation, welfare and much more.

Urbanization is a gradual growth in urban society, often accompanied by a decline in rural growth. The two main causes for urbanization are natural population growth in urban areas and migration from rural to urban areas. Natural population growth can only happen if the birth rate in a society is higher than the death rate. Natural population growth in cities increases as more people are born into the city. It decreases as urban citizens die. Cities with higher health, sanitation and food security standards usually grow due to a decline in the death rate.

On the other hand, the type of migration that leads to urbanization is migration from rural to urban areas. The most common motivation for rural individuals to migrate to cities is the search for capital. Industrialization and the increase in the use of machinery in rural businesses (such as farming) decrease the need for employees and leave many workers unemployed. Natural disasters, unexpected changes in the weather, excessive development, pollution and land grabs may cause loss or degradation of farmland or pastureland and leave pastoral individuals out-of-work. Urban areas almost always have better and more job opportunities than less populated rural areas.

Reducing transportation costs due to the ease of mass transportation in cities may be another reason to migrate to urban areas. Also, in many rural regions, it is difficult to gain access to a large variety of manufactured goods usually because of transportation costs. Along with job opportunities and transportation, cultural diversity, marketplace competition, education, commercial services and housing are better in cities than in rural areas in many countries.

However, problems caused by unplanned flows of migration, such as those caused by spontaneous sparks of rural violence, are harder to avoid. Because local governments in urban areas cannot predict such relocations beforehand, it is more difficult to alter infrastructure and governing policies to fit the needs of the suddenly grown population. In such cases, the city cannot provide the resources (such as low-priced housing, infrastructure, transportation etc.) that rural migrants usually seek. In cases of fleeing from rural violence, migrants are convinced they are better off living in squalor conditions, such as in slums, than in fear.

One out of every three city dwellers (approximately 998 million people) lives in a slum, or a similar informal settlement. The Millennium Development goal of improving the lives of at least 100 million slum-dwellers has been achieved, yet millions of people still live in urban squalor. Despite notable improvement in the lives of millions of slum-dwellers, the number of slum-dwellers is increasing and a UN estimate in 2010 predicted that this number would increase by 60 million in the next decade. Governments and policy-makers have to increase efforts to improve the lives of slum-dwellers and take measures against the expected increase in their number.

Definition of Key-Terms

Urbanization:

The process of urbanizing, taking on the characteristics of a city; the physical growth of urban areas as a result of migration from rural areas.¹

Industrialization:

The extensive and rapid development of industries²

Suburbanization:

A general tension of decentralization away from the town centre with all its problem caused by immigrants, degradation, overpopulation, etc. into the

¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/urbanized>

² <http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=industrialization>

suburbs, less densely populated areas in a certain distance from the city centre which are still considered part of the city.³

Counter-urbanization:

The migration of people from an urban area to surrounding rural areas.⁴

Rural-urban migration:

The migration of people into urban areas that results in urbanization.

Rural exodus:

The massive migration of people (from rural areas) to urban areas resulting in deserted rural areas.

Sustainable development:

The development of a country or region that does not cause harm to the environment as it does not use more natural resources than the amount that can be replenished naturally.

Slum:

An overcrowded and squalid urban street or district inhabited by very poor people.⁵

Background Information

The main reasons for rural-urban migration in the world, and in Africa, can be divided into two categories. The first category consists of the reasons that drive people out of rural areas, poverty and unemployment leading to food insecurity being the main reasons. Rural individuals in Africa generate most of their income from agricultural practices. Anything leading to a loss or degradation of their farmland or pastureland (or animals and crops themselves) will affect their income, and thus their life quality, immensely. Such events are usually environmental but humans can also cause them. Environmental events that affect rural Africans include natural disasters (mainly drought), abrupt changes in the weather and the various problems caused by global climate change. Non-natural/Man-caused events that affect these people's income include land grabs and excessive industrial development. Two other reasons for rural migrants to flee are political persecution and rural violence.

The second category consists of the reasons that attract rural citizens to urban areas. The main thing that drives these people to cities is the

³http://www.mebsbooks.com/cover_note/books/3/8/6/9780306477683/0306477688-c1.pdf
<http://ec.europa.eu/environment/urban/pdf/report-de.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.tuition.com.hk/geography/c.htm>

⁵ <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/slum>

opportunity of acquiring higher income and better living standards. Around the world urban job opportunities are considerably more preferable than rural ones, especially regarding low-skilled and unskilled labor. This is due to the fact that cities have a larger amount and variety of businesses compared to rural areas and therefore workers have more to choose from. The fact that there are more jobs is important for migrants that are looking for low-skilled and unskilled labor since many of these type of jobs are either temporary or short-term (for example, a construction worker has to find other work when the structure he is working on is finished).

Also, it may be dangerous for people with medical conditions that require frequent visits to medical facilities to live in rural areas that do not have those facilities. Many people prefer living in cities due to easier access to and higher quality of healthcare. Apart from healthcare, infrastructure, sanitation and access to clean water are just three more of the reasons why many rural Africans prefer living in cities. Many African villagers have to walk very long distances to reach water wells, even when some of these wells are contaminated with organisms and chemicals that harm human health.

Problems caused by excessive migration to urban areas are one of the biggest issues that most African governments are struggling to tackle. Recently, there has been a notable surge in numbers for urban area populations and the United Nations has warned that, if no action is taken in good time, the numbers could rise to as high as 1 Billion people by 2050.

Migration from rural to urban areas has been witnessed since the beginning of civilization, where people moved from their rural homes to urban centers in search for jobs and business opportunities so as to be able to take care of their families back home. However, reports indicate that since the mid 1970's, governments started putting in place stringent measures to curb this flow by promoting measures to increase rural life quality. The measures put in place by stakeholders and governments in almost 80% of African countries that have adopted strategies to mitigate rural-to-urban migration include empowering rural people so that they can be self sufficient and at the same time shelve the idea that employment is only found in urban centers, thus trying to discourage migration. In many countries, such efforts mainly favored higher-income rural citizens instead of the poverty-stricken that needed government assistance the most, thus strengthening their main motivation to migrate to urban areas, rising above poverty.

Also, international aid organizations have ceased funding projects in major cities and, instead, have started to focus on supporting rural areas that are under developed, in order to call attention to a potential of growth in these areas.

Companies, investors and the government set aside a large proportion of their money to invest in urban business development as well as urban infrastructure and this attracts future employees and business partners into the cities. However, before all these structures are put up and people move into them, and before people start migrating to look for work, certain factors influence their coming to the urban centers. One major factor is government legislation on the market. This determines how the market functions, thus determining in a great way the lifestyle of individuals, their buying power, business activities, movement, engagement in employment, health care as well as movement within a region. Government restrictions, fees, requirements etc. businesses determine things such as how attractive a city is to outside investors, how long it takes to set up a business, how much of the business' and income will be spent on fees required by the government and how the business will function. Because this government legislation applies to all businesses in a city, it affects the market as a whole.

Education opportunities in urban centers also initiate migration among citizens living in rural areas as schools and universities in the city are well funded and have the facilities to ensure learning at its best, qualified teachers and lecturers as well as neat, affordable and comfortable living quarters for students. It is usually from these prestigious schools that the best performing individuals secure well paying jobs and business deals that enable them to secure their future and that of their family.

Technological advancements as well as a generation to support the continuity of and its constant evolution are another reason that people choose to move from their rural areas to cities, as people living in urban centers and cities are at the fore front in accessing technology and equipment that is usually a luxury to people in rural areas, thus benefiting from the massive opportunities presented by these technologies including business opportunities and jobs, learning positions as well as moving in line with peers. For example, in many industries it is much cheaper to set up an online business that doesn't require the business to pay large amounts of money for a physical space. However, in many villages, it is impossible to do this due to a lack of infrastructure required for internet access. Therefore, many rural entrepreneurs wishing to integrate modern technology into their businesses choose to move their businesses to cities where such infrastructure is available.

Other factors that have been seen to attract rural people to urban centers include business opportunities present in the city. Businessmen operating from urban centers are generally more successful than their peers back in the rural areas mainly because many of the resources necessary for the operation of their business can be obtained in cities much easier. Because of this, those

that were previously operating from the rural areas migrate to set up their businesses in urban areas to match their successful counterparts.

Even though urban centers are touted as the epicenter of growth in Africa and other developing countries, there are several challenges that these centers face, ranging from competition for resources among neighbors, availability of clean and safe drinking water, inadequate electricity supply to cater for the needs of the people, change in the ecological setup of an environment and an inadequate number of schools that cannot accommodate the huge population. Many people living in these urban centers have been forced to settle for much less than what they expected. The problems that rural migrants were fleeing from continue to affect the ones that had to settle for less, the most common of these problems being poverty, food insecurity and crime.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)

UN-Habitat is the UN organization that deals with human settlements and it has shown notable efforts against the growth of slums and has helped governments adapt their land and housing policies to the needs of the poor, create affordable housing projects, improve financing systems for human settlements and slum upgrading. Joan Clos, the current Executive Director of UN-Habitat has announced in a recent statement that the UN-Habitat would increase its efforts in urban planning in the attempt to create sustainable cities and towns, improve urban transport provisions and focus on disaster-recovery and reconstruction through strengthening local authorities and improving municipal finance schemes.

Pamoja Trust

Pamoja Trust is a Kenyan NGO that advocates the rights of and provides basic services for the urban poor in Kenya. It engages in various activities from community led construction to directing slum-dwellers to jobs. It cooperates with Muungano wa Wanavijiji, a Kenyan slum-dweller network mainly focused on anti-eviction and anti-land grabbing activities.

Urban Poor Child Organization (UPCO)

The Ghana-based organization focuses on supporting urban children that cannot afford the academic career of their choice. The UPCO provides these children with a training of their choice.

Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya

A post-colonial addition to the reasons behind rural-urban migration in many African nations is the fact that food prices are significantly lower in urban areas. This was seen during the East African Food Crisis which mainly affected Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

In many African nations, but mainly DR Congo, rural violence and conflict continue to cause families to obligatorily move to urban areas, usually having to leave most of their possessions behind.

Relevant UN Treaties, Resolutions and Events

UNESCO/SS/AUW/3 – 12 February 1962

UNESCO Workshop on Urbanization Problems in Africa

A/RES/46/151 – 16 December 1991

United Nations New Agenda for the Development of Africa in the 1990s

A/RES/57/2 - 16 September 2002

United Nations Declaration on the New Partnership for Africa's Development

GA/EF/3294 - 2 November 2010

Sixty-fifth General Assembly, Second Committee, 24th & 25th Meetings

A/65/316 - 20 August 2010

Report of the Secretary-General on "Implementation of the outcome of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) and

strengthening of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)”

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

At the start of the Scramble for Africa, most of the continent’s locals were rural. Because the policies made by the colonizing empires were almost always focused on the exports of vital natural resources and cash crops, the urbanization was more concentrated in harbor towns to which these goods were taken to for export.

Regions close to mineral resources urbanized quickly by housing mine workers. Gradually, rural-urban migration caused a decrease in rural population which was a problem for the colonial powers as the natural resources they desired were situated in rural areas. Many Africans began to live in crowded and unsanitary conditions as early slums developed. This made Africans prone to diseases like cholera and malaria. However, instead of improving their conditions, colonial powers began to pass laws that separated Europeans from Africans.

Until the 1930s mining jobs were often seasonal, so miners would live in settlements close to mines while their families stayed in their rural homes. The Great Depression caused a rapid fall in the prices of African Exports, which led to unemployment, among many other difficulties. Especially in southern Africa, including South Africa and Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe and Zambia), companies started favoring permanent miners and so the families of these miners had to move to cities as well. From then on, colonial powers finally started improving many aspects of urban life including education, healthcare, infrastructure and transportation.

Current African governments have been developing policies aimed at discouraging migration to cities. This doesn’t seem to be decreasing urban population as the increase in urban population is mainly caused by high birth rates rather than wide flows of migration. In fact, such policies usually prevent urban life standards from improving.

Many NGO’s have also developed a similar strategy in recent years. International support to increase urban living conditions has been replaced by efforts to improve rural lifestyles and development in an effort to encourage people to stay in rural areas.

Nevertheless, in the last decade the UN-Habitat has carried out numerous projects to improve African cities. Most of them were focused on South Africa, but some also affected the continent as a whole. A project called

“Capacity-Building for Local Governance” was launched in 1999 and focused on assisting governments in their effort to cooperate with both rural and urban local governments and ensure that local governance officers were aware of issues in their respective regions and could be innovative in finding solutions for these issues. Another project called “Cities without Slums Sub-regional Initiative for Eastern and Southern Africa” dealt with understanding the needs of slum-dwellers and doing slum-upgrading activities accordingly. A UN-Habitat program called “The New Partnership for Africa’s Development” (NEPAD) tried to minimize the consequences of rapid urbanization in order to make 7 African cities more attractive for both domestic and foreign investors. An indication of the program’s success is that later on more cities requested to join the program.

Possible Solutions

Because the largest problem caused by rapid urbanization is urban poverty, the first solutions that come to mind are either about providing welfare or about improving the city to meet the needs of a larger population. Ensuring food safety, providing affordable housing, improving infrastructure, sanitation, transportation, healthcare and education to meet the needs of a rapidly growing population are definitely more than necessary to solve many of the problems low-income families face every day.

Being provided with basic services is a priority for low-income families, so improving these services should be a priority, but other measures should be part of the plan, in order to avoid welfare dependence among members of the urban population. Apart from basic improvements to the life quality and living conditions in cities that currently cannot support their large populations, measures to create job and training opportunities, especially for the poor youth, will help residents become less dependent on the local governments of cities. However, it is unrealistic for all these job openings to be created by governments, and therefore governments should instead try to promote the market’s tendency to create jobs by various measures. In many nations, businesses need to spend a great amount of time (and thus cash) on overcoming the ‘roadblocks’ (meaning time-consuming regulations related to business registration, etc.) that governments place. Most of these regulations are necessary, taking those regarding the safety of construction workers as an example, excessive bureaucracy discourages both domestic and foreign investments to settle in a city and develop programs that will surely create jobs.

In addition, it is evident that many organizations that deal with problems caused by rapid urbanization, but notably UN-Habitat, require additional funding and resources to work efficiently and meet their goals. The unpredictability of their funding and a recent decrease in the number of

donors is severely affecting their performance and contributing to the fact that the organizations' regional presence in many areas is unsatisfactory.

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