URBANIZATION AND POVERTY IN AFRICA
Evidence on linkages between urbanization, poverty and human well-being in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Population Growth and Human Welfare in Africa

Long summary report

Unprecedented urban population growth in the context of lacklustre economic performance in most African countries has created a new face of poverty characterised by a significant proportion of urban populations living in over-crowded informal settlements, commonly known as slums. Urban population growth in sub-Saharan Africa is driven partly by rural to urban migration of young adults seeking jobs and other livelihood opportunities, but more and more by endogenous population growth favouring a young demographic profile. Estimates by UN-Habitat show that about 70% of all urban residents in sub-Saharan Africa live in slums. The experiences of the urban poor are characterized by reliance on a cash economy, overcrowding, poor environmental sanitation, lack of security, lack of social and health services, greater engagement in risky sexual practices, social fragmentation, and high levels of mobility. This has led to the growth of highly marginalized sub-populations within African cities with health and well-being indicators that are increasingly becoming worse than those of other sub-groups and even of the rural poor. Without significant improvement in the well-being of slum dwellers, the Millennium Development Goals are unlikely to be attained.

Given the increasingly poor living conditions and livelihood opportunities that are observed in most metropolitan centres in the region, it appears paradoxical that many rural residents continue to flock to urban areas. Classical migration theories portray migrants as homo economicus moving to areas that maximize their household incomes and overall well-being. The fact that urban growth rates have persisted at such high levels despite the sustained economic downturn experienced over the past two to three decades underscores the need for better understanding of rural-urban migrations in sub-Saharan Africa and to address the consequent growth of urban poverty. The rising contribution of endogenous urban growth does not overshadow the importance of migration. Circular migration (between urban and rural areas, as well as between urban areas) is now becoming part and parcel of the migration system in Africa. What are the relations between these intense migration flows and urban poverty?

This seminar intended to draw together evidence on the dynamic linkages between urbanization, poverty and human well-being in Africa. The panel selected 16 abstracts out of 39 submitted. The UN Population Division was invited to present a paper while the UN-Habitat was also invited but did not present a paper. Two participants eventually declined the invitation or could not attend. Eventually, 15 papers were presented by 10 demographers and 5 sociologists or anthropologists. Apart from the organisers, 10 participants worked for higher education or research institutions, 2 as consultants, 1 for a governmental institution and 1 from an international organisation. Eleven participants were from developing countries (9 from Africa, 2 from Asia).

Links between migration, urban population growth and human development: evidence from micro-data

Three papers in this session focused on Nigeria. The first paper confirmed the deprivation and poor access to amenities of slum dwellers. A second paper examined the relationship between migration and violence among a small sample of young adult migrants in metropolitan Lagos. Most of these migrants are trapped in abject poverty but the study could not establish a clear relationship between migration, poverty and violence. The third paper showed that street children rely less on NGOs than on homeless adults; this situation leads to violence and keeps children in the street. All three papers contained methodological weaknesses such as inappropriate study designs and sampling methods, which may influence the robustness of the results. For example, proper analytical technique (e.g. matching techniques) would have helped to determine if attitudes of street children varied with and without support from homeless adults.

Another paper looked at education in five West African countries and used DHS data and multivariate analysis to determine gender and wealth inequalities in school attendance. The results showed that contrary to expectation, the gender gap is higher in the coastal countries as compared to the Sahelian countries. The gender gap in primary education increased with urbanisation in costal countries while it decreased with urbanisation in Sahelian countries. In secondary education, the gender gap decreased with urbanisation, for all countries. In four out of five countries, the gap between the poorest and the richest increased with urbanisation. The analysis did not control for possible endogeneity between the wealth variable and other controlling variables and this might affect the results..

Lastly another paper in this sub-theme questioned the value of the urban-rural dichotomy by examining 'translocal' networks among the poor in South Africa. The author argued that decision makers should deal with socio-spatial interdependencies, since the targeted poor may refer to, and migrate between two or more urban and rural locations.

Links between migration, urban population growth and human development: evidence from macro-data

One paper described the relations between urbanisation, demographic variables, and economic development using UN data to show that the demographic dividend is indeed concentrated in urban areas. The correlation between urbanisation and demographic transition is truly positive and could help achieve the MDGs.

A second paper in this sub-theme showed that population growth is positively correlated with urban transition on average, but in sub-Saharan Africa the urban transition is much slower than its population growth. The authors found no significant correlation between tempo effect of urbanization and tempo effect of poverty over the period between 1975 and 2004, but found a significant negative correlation between percentages of urban and poor around the year 2000. This apparent contradiction may result from a methodological artefact since both urbanisation and poverty trends are not linear over the 1975-2004 period.

Another paper reviewed all the MDGs relevant to urbanisation and poverty. The increase in slum population is believed to be the consequence of rapid urbanisation. However, in developing countries, the poor may be worse off in cities that grow slowly as compared to the overall population, because this is synonymous with economic slow-down.

These three papers made use of the World Urbanisation Prospects. While this source is quite useful to describe the past trends, the WUP projections should be used cautiously, as they may contradict the relationship between urbanisation and development observed in the past. The overestimation of urban growth that has been diagnosed in the WUP may lead to an overoptimistic view of the expected benefit of urbanisation in Africa. An urban growth slow-down would mean that poverty would continue to rise, while demographic transition may stop at the current level of mortality and fertility, with negative consequence for population growth.

The last paper on poverty and immigration in Accra made use of macro-data on urbanisation and poverty but it did not reconcile these with qualitative data on poverty collected by the authors from a limited sample and for different purposes. The benefits of urban immigration need to be assessed by comparing poverty or other measures of well-being at both the origin and destination.

Differentials of health and social outcomes by urban and rural and by wealth status

One paper examined the interplay between, poverty, household environment and infant mortality in Lagos State. The results highlighted the importance of the mother's occupation and household poverty as the main factors that influence infant morbidity. However the relative impacts of treatment cost and cultural habits were not assessed.

A second paper examined child well-being but in a comparative, descriptive perspective over the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. A third paper focused on child morbidity and health-seeking behaviour regarding diarrhoea and acute respiratory infections (ARI) in Egypt. The results show that the urban-rural gap diminished over time. Also while rural areas were more affected by diarrhoea, urban areas were affected by acute respiratory infection (ARI), probably due to pollution. Appropriate treatment for childhood morbidity was highly correlated with wealth and urban/rural residence.

The last paper in this sub-theme examined the spatial correlation between women's self-reported health and poverty in Accra, Ghana. The two types of indicators do not match well in space and the statistical correlation between wealth and health does not show for women contrary to what has been shown for children. More work needs to be done to understand the possible effects of migration, mobility within the city, socio-economic status and objective morbidity (using clinical reports and laboratory markers)

During the discussion of the papers, it was suggested that part of the inconsistencies or ambiguities in the empirical results presented in this session and others could be a result of treating relationships as linear (when they are not) and the fact that most of the authors did not check for possible collinearity in their control variables.

Measuring migration and urban poverty

Two papers using data from Cape Town, South Africa, were presented at this session. One paper provided empirical findings of rural to urban migration in Cape Town informal settlements, which served as good illustration of the circular migration system theorised in another paper on 'translocal' networks in Cape Town. A third paper in this sub-theme demonstrated the limitations of DHS-generated wealth quintiles when looking at urban-rural differences. The authors suggested the creation of separate urban and rural wealth quintiles, rather than using the DHS variable, which is heavily biased in favour of urban households.

Overall conclusion and implications for policy:

The seminar intended to draw together evidence on the dynamic linkages between urbanization, poverty and human well-being in Africa. Macro analyses confirm that urbanization levels and economic development are highly correlated. Urban-rural inequalities are so persistent that poverty can hardly be measured with the same standard in the two types of area. However, poverty reduction does not always come with urban development, and economic inequalities and unequal access to services within urban areas are increasing. The urban growth that is projected for Africa is not matched by the pace of development of urban infrastructure and services. The expected benefits of urbanisation with regard to health, education, gender inequalities, etc, have not materialised for most of the urban population on the continent. The urban poor, by far the largest component of the urban population, are not so different from rural inhabitants, which may relate to circular migration and residential ubiquity of many households. These African singularities should be taken into account in poverty reduction strategies.

As regard to decision-making, policy research is best suited for its tasks when it begins with a particular policy question in mind, preferably with decision-makers involved at an early stage. Many papers were weakly policy-oriented while pointing at the failure of institutions to deal with poverty. Rigorous presentation of the research framework (including sampling frame) and of the targeted population, and rigorous methods of analysis (controlling for biases and confounding factors) would help to produce more policy-relevant research findings.