

The Developing City: A Comparative Analysis of Urbanization in Sub-Saharan Africa & Latin America

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Urbanization is one of the most prolific challenges to face the development sector in recent decades. Its universal impact has been felt around the developing world, and the associated socio-economic consequences have been drastic. Today's 'developing city' is a departure from traditional patterns of urban development, and indeed a key unit of analysis for understanding both population growth and migration within the developing world. Determining its distinctive growth pattern, service needs, and barriers to sustainable growth are crucial to understanding the needs of the developing world's urban poor. The creation of an urban underclass is a direct result of the new economic order, and thus a function of the structures of modern capitalism.

Urbanization itself does have a distinctly economic basis, and such claims are not completely unfounded. One of the most pressing issues for urban planners, rural-urban migration, is also a function of economic factors. A concise theoretical analysis of urban development, however, is somewhat difficult; a regionalized approach is often more effective and representative. Extensive diversity is found in the urban developing world, and a regional approach allows necessary assumptions to be most accurate. Regional profiles from Latin America and sub-Saharan

Africa allow us to situate the particularly geographic nature of urban development.

Theoretical Frameworks for Urbanization in the Developing World

Cities in the developing world are undeniably part of a larger social and economic order, both situated within a national urban system and an international economic and political structure. In order to understand their particular characters, it is essential to situate them within this larger framework. Particularly in the developing world, the concepts of site and situation have influenced the pattern of urban development. Post-colonial nations contain some of the greatest areas of urbanization in which the patterns of urbanization are informed by a colonial past. A city such as Mumbai, India, is an example of the importance of site; situated on a peninsula and protecting a harbor, Mumbai became a key foreign trade point for India. Several primary cities in Western Africa such as Dakar, Accra and Lagos illustrate the importance of situation; virtually all West African coastal cities are so particularly prominent because "they served as crucial points of contact, not only for the collection and transshipment of goods from the interiors of the river systems at the mouths of which they are located, but also as points of access and

distribution to the interior...”[1] Obviously, these two examples also illustrate the interaction between both site and situation.

Traditional growth theories, such as Burgess’ zonal hypothesis, must be subject to certain background considerations when applied to the developing world. In particular, most urban areas in the developing world grew with a much less rigid regulatory system than North American or European cities; in fact, most of these cities have grown “...without zoning ordinances, subdivision regulations, building height controls or limits, and effective control over coverage of sites.”[2] There are two main alternative theoretical frameworks for how developing cities have grown geographically. The first applies to cities that have grown from an old urban centre; cities with an old urban core generally also have evidence of wall-building, which encouraged growth in a concentric pattern. Once the walls were destroyed, generally growth graduated to a radial pattern along major access routes. In the alternate case, in which urban areas developed as a result of foreign influence (i.e. colonization), cities were generally characterized by a planned core surrounded by “...haphazard growth of native settlements heavily influenced by radial access routes.”[3] Again, the obvious disclaimer must be offered; these patterns are not representative of the entire urban developing world, but rather general tendencies.

Land use and ownership are also key factors to consider when attempting to understand the developing city. As briefly indicated in the previous section, the developing city generally has three main areas: 1) the “old city”; 2) “a “Western” area comprising suburbs, new commercial business district (CBD)

developments, and possibly new planned industrial districts”; and 3) “squatter areas.”[4] More broadly, several key factors also dictate the pattern of land use in the urban developing world. Settlement is generally of a very high density; both larger family size and smaller lot size contribute to this phenomenon. The presence of the informal sector also means that a large number of activities take place on the street or in public places in developing cities, whereas in

Western cities they would occupy fixed locations. Perhaps the most observable rational sorting of land use is a vertical pattern, in which the ground floors of industrial and office structures are used for commercial purposes, while the higher floors serve residential needs. As well, the high prevalence of small shops and market areas is also related to the cultural practice of specialization; the “big box” of Western consumerism is generally uncommon in the developing world, with merchants choosing to offer specific services.

Challenges with Urban Growth in the Developing World

Once we have gained a picture of the spatial patterns of the developing city, the challenges to its organization become fairly obvious. Though each region (and indeed each municipality) has its own particular obstacles, it is possible to generalize. Nonetheless, the regional approach to be utilized later is ultimately most appropriate. In general, Stanley D. Brunn and Jack F. Williams offer a particularly adept summary of such issues.

The first and most apparent challenge is excessive size. Cities in the developing world are constantly under the burden of surplus population, and this is at least a partial cause of many of

the other challenges. Excessive size leads to another fundamental and influential issue: overcrowding. Essentially, overcrowding introduces the principle of scarcity to the urban environment – unemployment is rampant. As well, the sheer physical impact of such a “tidal wave of humanity” is a serious consequence of excessive urbanization.[5]

The urban underclass created as a result of rural-urban migration and subsequent overcrowding requires an impressive laundry list of social services, most of which many developing nations simply cannot provide for such a prolific population. Housing shortages are one of the most acute forms of this phenomenon. Typically, poor people suffer the greatest from this occurrence because land rents in the cities skyrocket as a result of free-market capitalism. Basic human needs such as piped sewage systems, running water, telephone service, electricity supply, and garbage disposal systems are also routinely inadequate. Beneficial, though comparatively less practical, services such as education, health care, and recreational facilities are almost universally insufficient.

Slums and squatter settlements are yet another challenge for urban policymakers. Slums specifically are areas of authorized housing that are “underserved, overcrowded, and dilapidated.”[6] Conversely, squatter settlements are informal, unauthorized residential settlements consisting of makeshift dwellings that are generally located on the periphery of cities. There are no minimum sanitation practices in squatter settlements, to say nothing of controlled construction or essential service provision.

A litany of other challenges also faces urban planners in the developing

world. The consequences of urbanization, including some of those listed above, can have significant social repercussions. One such repercussion is the development of racial tension, often attributed to the inclusion of large migrant worker populations. This can lead to political oppression and even structural violence; for example, the development of apartheid practices has been partially attributed to the inclusion of several diverse ethnic groups in urban South Africa. Environmental degradation from excessive strain on resources and the loss of agricultural land due to urban sprawl are also grave concerns.

Perhaps the most theoretical (and most disturbing) concern of industrializing urban growth in the developing world is the preservation of the delicate balance between “Westernization” and “modernization.” According to Brunn and Williams, the challenge for developing nations in this sphere is “...in trying to modernize their economies and cities, to industrialize and raise standards of living, without at the same time completely abandoning traditional cultural values and ways of life.”[7] This dilemma is a classic paradox within the development discourse, and the process of urbanization is no exception.

Urbanization is often a result of industrialization, or at least a result of a shift in economic processes within a region. It has also been asserted that urbanization is in fact a result of, or a function of, capitalism and its structure. Karl Marx himself saw the city as a fundamental unit of capitalist organization, as well as a location from which to subjugate the proletariat. He believed that the urban proletariat was essentially an amalgamation of the rural labour force. This population then

became urbanized and was subsequently distanced from the means of production. In his opinion, “the town implies...the necessity of administration, police, taxes etc... Here first became manifest the division of the population into two great classes, which is directly based on the division of labour and on the instruments of production.”[8] The history of labour migration to urban centres dates back to colonization, and indeed migrants have formed a cheap labour force internationally everywhere from Miami to Nairobi. Rosenberg and Fitzgerald summed up this condition with a simple statement: “one of the needs of capitalism has always been cheap labour.”[9]

More recent theorists have also commented on the influence of globalization on urban development patterns, essentially reinforcing Marx’s idea that the capitalist structure heavily informs urban settlement and consequently causes inequality. David Clark claims that the new international economic order has greatly encouraged urban development, noting that “urbanization has become a global phenomenon as a result of far-reaching changes in the structure and spatial relations of capitalism...[including] the replacement of monopoly capitalism by transnational corporate capitalism.”[10]

Developmental Aspects of Rural-Urban Migration

As Marx so strongly indicated, this capitalist order requires a large labour force drawn from the rural regions of a country. Migration practices in the developing world certainly confirm his statement. Rural-urban migration is a massive source of population increase for cities in the developing world, and is in fact the indirect cause of virtually all urban problems. Such a broad claim is

not meant to be accusatory, but rather simply realistic. The large population in most developing cities is both a source of consternation for planners and an undeniable truth.

One aspect that must be understood before discussing the motivation for and consequences of migration is the issue of composition. Traditionally, the primary migrants to urban areas from rural communities have been relatively young men, in search of paying work, the funds from which will tide over their family until the rural situation is bettered and they can migrate home. The reality post-migration is quite different from the ideal, however; according to Josef Gugler, “given widespread urban unemployment, the more common pattern is for these men to become long-term urban workers while leaving wives and children in their rural area of origin.”[11] Though the consequences of this demographic trend are too lengthy to discuss here, it is important to offer at least a cursory mention of the gendered nature of urbanization.

The decision to migrate is often, as indicated above, a family affair and is certainly derived from an economic imperative. Economic opportunity is often skewed towards urban areas as result of capitalist operation. Gugler and Flanagan offer a concise summary of this experience in West Africa, noting that “economic factors largely determine the incidence of rural-urban migration in terms of the family units that are induced to release one or more of their members to the urban scene.”[12]

Realistically, the decision to migrate to the urban core is often not a decision at all, but rather a response to extreme poverty. Stuart and Kerney found in the case of San Jerónimo, Mexico, an impoverished community in

the state of Oaxaca, that “in the absence of other viable alternatives, it is meaningless to talk of a household’s decision whether or not to send some of its members outside of the community to work. The focus of decisions is where to go, who to send, and when to send them.”[13] The idea of “forced urbanization” could have interesting policy-based influence if taken seriously.[14]

There are other, more specific, motivations for migration than extreme poverty, the discussion of which could provide more insight into a potential solution rather than simply inspire despair and pity. “Insufficient and poor land” is often an impetus for migration, as well as potential increases in prices or international market conditions that stimulate sectors requiring little manpower.[15]

There are also significant incentives, or at least the perception of incentives, for migration to urban areas. More specifically, the potential for education for oneself or one’s children is a huge reason for rural-urban migration. The simplistic “bright city lights” justification for migration is overly romanticized; most people who move to urban areas of the developing world are doing so for largely practical (and economic) reasons, however uninformed they may be about the reality of employment or service possibilities. The desire for a higher standard of living is powerful; in the words of Walter D. Harris, “the average rural migrant sees the urban place as offering a panacea for all his problems; he sees it as offering unlimited opportunities, especially for unskilled labour which is, so he is told, in great demand.”[16] Many migrants also consider medical facilities or health issues as motives for moving to the city; unfortunately, as discussed earlier, these

services are often woefully inadequate. The relative importance of these motivational factors, whether push or pull, is entirely regional, cultural, and individual.

A Regional Approach to Urban Analysis

Both the motivational factors for migration (and the resultant population increase) and the process of urbanization itself are quite regionally specific. Therefore, a comparative analysis is the most effective method of understanding the practical differences between regions. A comparative look at Latin America, empirically the most urbanized region on earth, and sub-Saharan Africa, relatively the least urbanized region, is especially demonstrative of the peculiar nature of global urban development.

Comparative Analysis: Urbanization in Latin America

The primary precursor for contemporary Latin American urbanization was the relative transformation of internal city structure. The transformation of these cities was based partially on the expansion of the central business district. This expansion had an impact on that traditional social structure; the upper classes were gradually pushed out of the urban core to make way for industrialists willing to pay commercial prices. Industrialization was another serious basis for transformation. Industry obviously needs certain infrastructural frameworks, such as access to major highways and railroad links. The industrial workforce also requires housing and urban services; essentially, industrialization was the cause of most of the issues faced by contemporary urban planners in Latin America.

As indicated, housing for this industrial workforce has become a huge

issue for Latin American cities. Squatter settlements and self-built housing have become the norm, as a large portion of the population is too poor to participate in the legitimate housing market and there is a lack of developers willing to invest in such marginal populations. Self-built housing, made of any available materials, is a common solution in informal settlements; urban services are often provided to these settlements in time, though residents are usually on their own for a period. Since these settlements are technically illegal, governments are tempted to evict; however, “their sheer numbers and the political realities of the situation (there is no place for them to go) make expulsions rare indeed.”^[17] Government-funded central housing is inherently something of a pipe dream. John F.C. Turner explains the unreality of central housing plans quite effectively, commenting that “...in countries with very large proportions of low- and very low-income populations, government budgets are bound to be extremely small. Centrally administered housing production in such contexts is a pretence; a sort of charade to distract attention from reality.”^[18]

In addition to housing issues, cities in Latin America face several other common problems. In many cases, cities face “...increasing marginality due to high rates of under- and un-employment, serious traffic congestion, and.... severe air pollution.”^[19]

Physical marginalization of residents as a result of overpopulation results in a reliance on mass public transit, though the automobile has also been used increasingly. According to Walter D. Harris, “the impact of the automobile on cities is aggravated by the inadequacy of the road network to handle traffic; traditional streets are narrow,

intersections are inappropriate, and parking space is scarce.”^[20]

A decidedly interesting example of the intersection of these factors and issues is the city of Rio de Janeiro, the capital of Brazil. Location is one of its greatest assets; nestled between a coastal mountain range and a beach-laden bay, Rio has relied on tourism as an economic vehicle for years. The physical situation of the city, however, has also negatively impacted development. The city’s expandable land is very limited and any peripheral development attempts have had adverse environmental consequences. As well, the mountain range obstructs access to the interior. As Brazil’s second largest city, Rio has developed primarily in one general direction as a result of its unique site. Because of the scarcity of land, commercial and industrial development has occurred to the north and the west of the city along highways and rail lines; almost all of the city’s economic activity takes place in one sector northwest of the traditional downtown core.

As could be imagined, Rio has significant urban housing issues. The urban poor generally live in favelas, squatter settlements located on the hillsides surrounding the city. Ironically, “the poorest squatters live on hillsides with panoramic views of the luxurious beach communities that lie within a stone’s throw of truly squalid living conditions.”^[21] This kind of obvious inequality is a fact of daily life in the urban developing world, including Latin America. Rio de Janeiro is a city adversely affected by the premature advent of industrialization and a lack of financial capital with which to deal with the consequences. The typical issues of overcrowding, environmental degradation and housing strain are all present, making it an unfortunately

effective representative of regional urban trends.

Comparative Analysis: Urbanization in sub-Saharan Africa

Such issues are also evident in sub-Saharan Africa, though of a slightly different character. Africa is traditionally one of the least urbanized areas of the world, but the continent is now “...experiencing an extremely accelerated process of urbanization.”^[22] Sub-Saharan Africa in particular is a compelling case study; an incredibly diverse region exhibiting sub-regional tendencies in Western and Southern Africa, it has been the subject of much debate. Urbanization has brought economic progress to the region, but has also created a distinct template for political conflict and a means for the spread of HIV/AIDS.

African urbanization has centered on the development of ‘primate cities,’ regional nodes of economic and social activity. The specific cities that have experienced this elevated status are often vestiges of colonial administration. West Africa in particular exhibits this trend; the pattern of urbanization in modern West Africa is informed by the colonial legacy and “...is largely the result of events and conditions dating from the era of coastal trade and the colonial period.”^[23] Nairobi, Kenya, to be profiled later, is the best example of this trend regionally. It is important to note that some prominent cities in the Horn of Africa are also derived from indigenous centres. Interestingly, some of the most prominent cities in the region (regardless of their political origin) are dependent on their access to the coast; colonial and modern Africa as a source of resource extraction has needed this urban character to sustain its economic order. As well as acting as centres of economic

activity, cities in Africa south of the Sahara have also been hubs of cultural mixing. The region is mind-boggling in its ethnic diversity, a fact that has often been partially blamed for long-term regional conflict.

As in the case of Latin America, rural-urban migration and the prevalence of migrant workers within urban society is a huge cause of political conflict in the cities. Migrant workers come with their own cultural baggage, and indeed “...remain firmly rooted in a rural-based descent group.”^[24] Colonial administrators often prioritized certain ethnic groups in African cities, and these ethnic groups continue to hold significant administrative, political and economic power. The marginalization of lesser ethnic groups is a direct result of the unequal access to financial and political opportunity afforded to the dominant group by such division. As has become evident in South Africa, Rwanda, and countless other nations, this ethnic division can lead to serious political conflict.

Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, is a compelling example of the impact of migration on African cities, and is a useful illustration of varying urban patterns in the region. Though traditionally a protective area for the Masai people, Nairobi soon served as a hub of travel, linking merchants from the coastal area of Mombasa to the interior hinterland in Uganda. Nairobi was chosen as the headquarters of the railway, giving it unprecedented regional importance; the city became the essential colonial capital of Africa.

The same factors that encouraged the growth of Nairobi have created its primary problems. The city’s site, though ideal for railway, was disastrous for sanitation. In addition, the city “...has never been considered a suitable place to

live by the Africans. For reasons based on absence of any indigenous base... and an initial monopoly of the site by foreigners, Africans always considered the city a place of work and not a permanent residence.”[25] A city of migrants, Nairobi has always been segregated ethnically; the three major ethnic groups (Africans, Asians, and Europeans) are separated by occupation and residential pattern. A look at the spatial layout of the city can confirm this fact. Nairobi has continued to serve its undeniable economic function, however – “as a primate city with exclusive advantages in attracting important secondary, tertiary, and quaternary functions, Nairobi plays the dominant role in a core/periphery relation in a highly dualistic economy.”[26]

Perspectives on ‘The Developing City’

A regional look at urbanization patterns gives a telling glimpse into the reality of urban development issues. Urbanization is an undeniable trend in modern human society, and one that must be addressed pragmatically if there is any hope of its control. The distinctive nature of the ‘developing city’ is a result of largely economic factors that have had significant social, political, and cultural repercussions. Urbanization is indeed a function of capitalism; as a broad revolution of our economic order is hugely impractical, it is necessary for development professionals to understand the vagaries of urban troubles and attempt to find a solution. Attention to the lessons of geographic thought will be a crucial determinant of their success in this endeavour.

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