
GA: Rural-to-Urban Migration and the Rise of Megacities
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Committee Description

The General Assembly is often what comes to mind when one first thinks of the United Nations. Commonly abbreviated as the GA, the General Assembly is the main deliberative, policymaking, and representative organ of the United Nations, where decisions on questions like peace and security, admission of new members to the UN, and budgetary matters, among others, occur¹. Each country has one vote, regardless of size or population, and, depending on its importance, a resolution requires either a simple majority or a two-thirds majority to pass. Generally speaking, the most successful measures are those in which the entire GA has reached a consensus. However, for such a large committee to be successful, it is absolutely necessary to hear all perspectives from all delegates. Members of the General Assembly work together to find common ground and agree on solutions to injustices and problems that afflict the world before they become conflicts.

Statement of the Problem

Earlier this year, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division released a report highlighting the current demographic trends associated with human population growth throughout the world. “This latest assessment consider[ed] the results of 1,690 national population censuses conducted between 1950 and 2018, as well as information from vital registration systems and from 2,700 nationally representative sample survey” (CITE). The data was then studied, analyzed and used to predict the “plausible outcomes [of these

¹ "United Nations, main body, main organs, General Assembly." United Nations. Accessed September 19, 2017. <http://www.un.org/en/ga/about/background.shtml>.

demographic figures] at the global, regional and country levels. Though the findings were numerous, there were some key takeaways worthy of mention:

- Though it is occurring at a statistically slower pace than in previous years, the world's human population continues to increase. It is estimated that by 2030, the global population will reach 8.5 billion—up from a little over 3 billion in 1960 (CITE) To put this into perspective, the world will see its human population grow by well over 250% in less than one hundred years.
- Much of this population growth is occurring and will continue to occur in the developing world. For example, current projections report that between 2019 and 2050, 1 billion more people will be born in Sub-Saharan Africa alone.
- This growth “presents challenges for sustainable development [worldwide, as] the 47 least developed countries are among the world's fastest growing – [with] many projected to double in population between 2019 and 2050 – putting pressure on already strained resources” (CITE)
- “More than half of the projected increase in the global population up to 2050 will be concentrated in just nine countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, the United Republic of Tanzania, and the United States of America” (The U.S. is the only one of the countries mentioned that is NOT considered a developing nation.

As the world grapples with the realities of these statistical projections, there is another related factor that also requires attention—rural-to-urban migration in the developing world. Since the early 2000's, the World Bank has been reporting a significant uptick in this rural-to-urban migration pattern, where “it is estimated that by 2030, the gross number of the urban population in developing countries will have doubled compared to 2005, while the extent of built-up urban areas may even triple” (CITE). And while this trend is deeply impacted by migrants' desire to improve their socio-economic opportunities, today, over 50% of the countries experiencing this rapid urbanization have annual per capita incomes of between \$1,000 to \$2,000” (CITE). Thus, many nations whose cities are experiencing exponential growth, lack the economic, political and social resources required to provide for the challenges that often accompany this growth—(i.e. infrastructure development, jobs creation, adequate and accessible services in health care, law enforcement and education, to name just a few). This is especially true for the world's megacities.

The International Organization for Migration defines a megacity as “cities with 10 million or more inhabitants” (Urbanization and Migration). The United Nations has currently identified 33 urban areas to be megacities. While certainly, some of these cities are found in the developed world (i.e. New York and Tokyo), the majority of today's megacities “are located in the less developed regions or the ‘global South’. China alone was home to 6 megacities in 2018, while India had 5” (CITE). In Africa, there are a series of megacities across the sub-Saharan

region. One of the most prominent is Lagos, Nigeria, where—since 2008—between 2,000 and 6,000 people have been arriving daily (CITE). However Lagos will soon have competition, as nine of the 20 cities of the world, expected to hit megacity status in the next 80 years, Latin America has also seen massive urban growth, particularly in Sao Paulo, Brazil and Mexico City, Mexico. Megacity growth is predicted to continue to rise, with ten more cities reaching megacity levels in the next twelve years.

There are many in the business sector who argue that this type of migration actually has great economic potential; International Growth Centre, for example, remarks that “As people move from agricultural work to higher-productivity jobs in cities, countries can undergo an important transformation that may increase not only workers’ wages but also the country’s economic growth as a whole”(CITE). Though this is somewhat true, it should nevertheless be noted that the massive influx of unskilled, uneducated, impoverished people into the labor market may also serve to create benefits more greatly felt by their employers, rather than the workers themselves. Similar to the Industrial Revolution in late 19th-century America, labor surpluses in the megacities of the developing world, have frequently led to an ‘iron law of wages’, where workers’ incomes “fall to the minimum level necessary for subsistence”(CITE). In other words, the owners of industry are able to keep wages low and working conditions poor due to the supply of laborers often significantly outpacing the demand.

Inadequate infrastructure, corrupt and/or weak government structures, an ever-increasing wealth gap and overpopulation further inhibit nations from appropriately managing the consequences that come with rapid rural-to-urban migration. Thus, megacity populations are much more vulnerable to poverty, exploitation, class conflict, crime, unsanitary living conditions

and infectious disease. The physical environment is also at risk, as overpopulation—especially in places that are ill-equipped to handle such growth—as evidenced by rising rates of air and water pollution, resource depletion and land degradation. In short, the very reasons people are leaving rural areas for better opportunities in the cities are manifesting tenfold as a result of unchecked urban migration.

History of the Problem

Human migration—a phenomenon that dates back tens of thousands of years—have, according to the New World Encyclopedia, “affected the grand epochs in history, changing forever the demographic landscape of lands throughout the world, bringing, on some occasions, innovation and mutual benefits, and on others destruction and suffering. While social scientists and historians look for external causes for these happenings, including climate change and political or religious oppression, religious scholars and people of faith regard many such events as the playing out of God's providence, bringing humankind ever closer to a time when

human beings fill the earth and live as one family in peace and harmony” (Human Migration). The motivations behind human movement are manifold; causes have been climatic, political, economic, religious, or simply for love of adventure...[but]Its causes and results are fundamental for the study of...political and social history, and of political economy”. To put it simply, “migration has transformed the world” (Human Migration). Though movement has been a constant variable in understanding the human experience, patterns of migration have shifted from century to century.

In late 18th century America, for example, the majority of Americans lived agrarian lives, resulting in about 90% of the nation’s population settling in rural region (Khan Academy). By the mid-to-late 19th century, westward expansion, the liberation of black Americans from slavery and the Industrial Revolution spurred massive rural-to-urban migration across the country, so that by 1920, more Americans were living in urban rather than rural settings (Khan Academy). Similar trends can be seen in Western Europe.

The rural-to-urban pattern was occurring in the developing nations, where, from the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries, “large numbers of people migrated over large distances within Asia. Southeastern Asia received 50 million migrants, mainly from India and south China. North Asia—Manchuria, Siberia, Central Asia, and Japan together—received another 50 million. Less is known about exact numbers of the migrations from and within Africa in this period, but Africa experienced a small net immigration between 1850 and 1950, from a variety of origins” (New World Encyclopedia).

Throughout the developing world, migration was due to a variety of push and pull factors—from armed conflict and ethnic persecution to food and water insecurity, economic stressors and natural disasters.

This rural-to-urban trend has only intensified in the 21st century, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia and East Asia, where population growth, coupled with land degradation and climate change, as well as the aforementioned push factors, have compelled many in these regions to seek out better opportunities in urban areas, believing that doing so will ensure greater accessibility to the resources and opportunities no longer found in many rural areas. However, urban migration is not necessarily distributed evenly across any given country's metropolises. While the 1950's recognized only two megacities (New York City and Tokyo), today there are 33 UN-acknowledged megacities, 27 of which are found in the developing world (CITE). A combination of factors has led to this growth, including migration from rural areas, high fertility rates, and widening of the city's boundaries. Moreover, megacities have contributed to economic growth. But in most cases, "megacities are not necessarily becoming better places to live" (CITE), as in many of them, "the population is outpacing almost all support structures in [cities] where the threat of food shortages, traffic congestion and insufficient [health and] education facilities have become a stark reality"(CITE). In Mumbai, India, for example, where only 1 in 6 city dwellers were eking out an existence in the slums in 1971, "now they constitute an absolute majority" (CITE).

Though the United Nations has issued many research reports and recommendations specific to both rural-to-urban-migration and megacity growth, thus far, there have been no significant efforts made in the form of policy to 1) identify and mitigate the push factors causing

rural-to-urban migration in the developing world; 2) promote urban planning and infrastructure development plans to more effectively support vulnerable populations in the world's megacities; 3) construct plans of action to thwart the threat of global infectious disease or pandemic outbreaks that could spread rapidly in megacities—particularly in the poorest neighborhoods/regions.

Questions to Consider

1. Should the General Assembly set universal standards to ensure the basic living conditions and needs of megacity citizens are being met, or should it be left to each sovereign nation to decide?
2. In the long term, how can nations stabilize rapid rural-to-urban migration? Are there common push factors that could be mitigated through a globally focused, multi-lateral approach? (i.e. sustainable farming methods, land re-distribution, building green walls in

vulnerable agrarian regions, improving rural access to education, health care and technology)

3. How can nations combat widespread poverty and economic disparity in megacities?
4. To what degree could a reconfiguration of urban design and infrastructure development help to address the challenges of growing urban migration and megacity growth?
5. What are some of the positive consequences of megacities and how might nations be able to tap into those outcomes more effectively? What would they need to do so?

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