



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

World Development

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/worlddev](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/worlddev)

## Why secondary towns can be important for poverty reduction – A migrant perspective <sup>☆</sup>

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Accepted 13 December 2017

Available online xxx

#### Keywords:

Migration  
Urbanization  
Secondary town  
Off-farm employment  
Poverty  
Life history  
Tanzania  
Sub-Saharan Africa

### ABSTRACT

This paper develops the concept of ‘action space’ as the range of possible destinations a migrant can realistically move to at a given point in time and, intimately linked to this, the set of possible livelihoods at destination. We show how this space expands and contracts over time through “cumulative causation”. Such a dynamic framework allows us to appreciate the role of secondary towns in rural–urban migration and poverty reduction. Secondary towns occupy a unique middle ground between semi-subsistence agriculture and the capitalistic city; between what is close-by and familiar and what is much further away and unknown. By opening up the horizons of the (poorer) rural population and facilitating navigation of the non-farm economy, secondary towns allow a broader base of the poor population to become physically, economically and socially mobile. Secondary towns therefore have great potential as vehicles for inclusive growth and poverty reduction in urbanizing developing countries. These are the insights emerging from in-depth life history accounts of 75 purposively selected rural–urban migrants from rural Kagera, in Tanzania.

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## 1. Introduction

Urbanization and development go hand in hand (World Bank, 2009). Yet, the debate about urbanization and development is usually held in the aggregate, focused on economic growth as opposed to poverty reduction, and without differentiation of the urban space. Incipient evidence from Africa (Christiaensen & Todo, 2014; Dorosh & Thurlow, 2013, 2014) and South Asia (Emran and Shilpi, 2017; Gibson et al., 2017) suggests however that it is secondary town development that has especially great potential for

poverty reduction, and possibly more so than advancement of cities.

Given the concentration of the poor in rural areas—80 percent of the worlds’ extreme poor live in rural areas (World Bank, 2016)—this may not surprise. Secondary towns offer off-farm employment opportunities nearby. This facilitates rural livelihood diversification, which has long been proven to be an important vehicle out of poverty (Ellis, 1998). Yet, cities hold the potential of larger economies of agglomeration and thus faster economic growth and off-farm job creation (World Bank, 2009).<sup>1</sup>

Taking an economic perspective, Christiaensen and Kanbur (2017) provide an initial review of the incipient literature on the reasons why secondary town development<sup>2</sup> may be more poverty

<sup>☆</sup> The authors would very much like to thank the migrant survey participants for sharing their life histories, the Tanzanian research assistants as well as two anonymous reviewers. Financial support from the Strategic Research Program of the World Bank Group and the International Growth Center of the Department of International Development, UK is further gratefully acknowledged. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this paper are entirely those of the authors. They do not necessarily represent the views of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/World Bank and its affiliated organizations, or those of the Executive Directors of the World Bank or the governments they represent.

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reducing than city development. Many puzzling facts remain and the mechanisms behind them are still poorly understood. This is well illustrated by the findings from the Kagera Health and Development Survey (KHDS). This is a rather unique long running panel, which first interviewed a representative sample of about 915 households from rural Kagera, Tanzania in 1991. All household members, including those who moved to settle elsewhere, in other rural areas, secondary towns or cities, were subsequently interviewed again in 2010.<sup>3</sup>

As shown by [Beegle, De Weerd, and Dercon \(2011\)](#), those who left their baseline locations clearly fared much better than similar individuals who didn't move. [Christiaensen, De Weerd, and Todo \(2013\)](#) further find that moves to cities (in this case Dar es Salaam and Mwanza, the two largest cities in Tanzania) were substantially more lucrative than moves to secondary towns. Yet, despite the larger gains from moves to the city, more than twice as many people moved to towns than to the city. As a result, migration to secondary towns contributed much more to overall income growth and poverty reduction in Kagera during the period under study (43 and 38 percent respectively) than migration to the cities (28 and 21 percent), at least in an accounting sense.<sup>4</sup>

It begs the question why and how many more migrants ended up in secondary towns despite more modest income gains. With the majority of the poor concentrated in rural areas, addressing this question also helps understand why development of secondary towns may hold greater poverty reducing potential than development of cities. So, what induces rural-urban migration, in general, and migration to secondary towns compared to large cities, in particular? Do these different urban environments attract different migrants, as emphasized by [Young \(2013\)](#)? Or, do they attract migrants with similar characteristics for different reasons (such as proximity favoring towns as it reduces the cost of migration) or through different processes (such as migration networks that arose due to historical idiosyncracies and help overcome the transport and search costs that rise with distance)?

To address these questions, a qualitative, life history approach is pursued. This helps obtain a more contextualized and path dependent understanding of the factors shaping migration and location decisions.<sup>5</sup> In particular, in 2015, the study revisited 75 purposively sampled, young adult migrants from the original KHDS and recorded their life histories with a focus on their migration trajectories and the factors motivating them. While all migrants originated from the same region, with similar rural socio-economic backgrounds, they literally followed quite different paths in life: some made only one move, while others moved up to 9 nine times; some migrated to secondary towns, some ended up in mega-cities, like Dar es Salaam, while still others eventually returned to their village after migrating. This richness in experiences provides a good setting to uncover migration patterns and the factors shaping them.

Through the analysis of the migrant narratives two important concepts emerge: 1) the notion of a migrant's action space; and 2) the notion of cumulative causation. The first refers to the set of plausible destinations and livelihoods a prospective migrant can each time reach (in a single move). It relates to both physical as well as socio-economic mobility. The second concept, cumulative causation, refers to the path-dependent, sequential nature of

migration, during which factors that enable or hinder mobility – such as financial resources, networks, aspirations and norms – are each time gradually reshaped, thereby altering the migrant's action space. Migration emerges as a cumulative process through which each migration decision (and destination) taken, affects the basis for taking the next decision (destination). This contrasts with a more common conceptualization of migration as a one-shot event, in economic modeling and policymaking.

It also bears on the importance of secondary towns in facilitating migration. While the migrants in our study widely consider the capital city to offer most opportunities by far, it is, originally, within the action space of few. The first move is therefore special. At that point, the focus is on getting out of agriculture and the village (which migrants often consider not to provide much perspective), to shake things up and open doors, including, but not only, to more desirable migration outcomes later on. As a result, the first move is more often towards a secondary town, which, given its proximity, is more likely to fall within the original action space. For many it also turns out to be where they end up, as the window of opportunity for further migration usually narrows when families are started and people settle down in their jobs.

In sum, many people migrating out of agriculture end up in secondary towns because they can, and remain or return to secondary towns because they have to, due to the binding nature of life and livelihood choices and events. Other study participants end up in secondary towns because they want to. They seek to live in an urban environment and the secondary town satisfies their needs. They do not aspire to move further towards big cities. While seeing migration and location choices as the outcome of a deliberation process weighing opportunities and costs in the broadest sense is not new ([Lall, Selod, & Shalizi, 2006](#)), its dynamic, iterative nature and the powerful role secondary towns can play in the process, as important entry points to livelihood diversification and poverty reduction, has remained underappreciated.

The role of secondary towns in facilitating migration is also better understood when considered within migrants' own conception of the urban space. A first defining feature of the urban space, revealed through the conversations, is 'mzunguko wa pesa'. It literally translates from Swahili as 'the circulation of money', but is often invoked to convey the broader notion of vibrancy, in terms of circulation of money, goods, people, ideas and so forth. Respondents set urban areas apart from rural ones in terms of this metric, with bigger cities (e.g. Dar, Mwanza) considered more vibrant, and thus more attractive, and secondary towns holding the middle ground between the village and the city. A second distinguishing feature is the monetary nature of exchange in urban areas, which contrasts with the more reciprocal nature of life in the village and is often considered a challenge, especially the first time around. Finally, urban areas are characterised as anonymous, providing opportunities to escape from the more stifling village environment. Yet, the lack of a tight social network is also considered an obstacle, as one now needs to learn how to operate within that anonymity, with limited safety nets. In sum, while cities speak most to the imagination, secondary towns are mentioned to be "far enough, but not too far". They occupy a more manageable position in between the more reciprocal livelihood of the village and the capitalist economy of big cities.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 briefly discusses the life history approach and reviews the key features of the data collection. This is followed by a recount of the history of Raymond, one of the study participants, bringing the deep dynamic nature and complexity of migration to life (Section 3). Section 4 develops the notions of action space and cumulative causation. Section 5 lays out how migrants consider different locations along the rural-urban spectrum, followed by an in-depth analysis of the factors that shape a migrant's action space in section 6. Section 7 then

<sup>3</sup> See [De Weerd et al. \(2012\)](#) for a detailed description of the data and data collection process.

<sup>4</sup> The results abstract from feedback effects between cities and towns, as well as self-selection ([Young, 2013](#)).

<sup>5</sup> The literature probing migration processes is longstanding, both through quantitative and qualitative inquiry. Yet, much of it has focused on international migration and the studies examining internal migration often conceptualize the urban space as unitary and monolithic. A notable exception in the quantitative tradition is [Fafchamps and Shilpi \(2013\)](#), who, building on insights from economic theory, apply econometric techniques to study the determinants of the choice of migration destination in Nepal (conditional on migration).

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