



The Role of Rural–Urban Migration in the Structural Transformation of Sub-Saharan Africa

ALAN DE BRAUW,
VALERIE MUELLER

and

HAK LIM LEE*
International Food Policy Research Institute, USA

Summary. — Rural-to-urban migration is an inherent part of the economic development process, yet it is relatively understudied in sub-Saharan Africa. In this paper, we attempt to describe the present state of rural–urban migration from several different angles. Migration rates are quite low in several countries, despite the fact that large proportions of populations continue to reside in rural areas, and that there are clearly several types of gains to migration. We offer a number of possible explanations for low migration rates. We make recommendations for improvements in research on rural–urban migration and migration policy in Africa.

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Key words — rural-urban migration, structural transformation, Africa

1. INTRODUCTION

Rural-to-urban migration is a necessary component of the economic development process, as the migration of labor out of agriculture has been a feature of the growth path of every country that has developed (Taylor & Martin, 2001). From a macroeconomic perspective, every country has its own distinct growth path (World Bank, 2008), but the common feature is that as economic growth occurs, labor moves out of agriculture into the manufacturing and service sectors. However, as noted by Foster and Rosenzweig (2008), from a microeconomic perspective the transition out of agriculture is not well understood. The path from a largely agricultural economy to a wealthier, manufacturing, and services based economy seems varied, and perhaps more importantly it is not clear how to positively influence progress along that path using policy.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the same negative correlation between GDP per capita and the share of the population living in rural areas exists as elsewhere in the world (Figure 1, Panel A). It does not change if we replace the rural population share with the share of the economically active population working in agriculture (Panel B). Moreover, both graphs indicate that the majority of the population still lives in rural areas in much of sub-Saharan Africa. If those economies are to grow rapidly in a sustainable manner, additional rural–urban migration must occur.

Rural–urban migration is a topic that often gives policy makers pause, due to perceptions about potential negative impacts of migration. In urban areas, concerns about significant rural–urban migration include increasing unemployment, providing services to new arrivals, and potential for political unrest (UN-HABITAT, 2010). In rural areas, a historical concern about rural–urban migration is that a labor shortage occurs at times when specific agricultural tasks must occur (e.g., Binswanger and Rosenzweig, 1986; Byerlee, 1974). Yet without migration, the returns to labor in urban and rural areas can become significantly imbalanced. For example,

Pritchett (2006) notes that during the 20th century, a large part of the Great Plains region in the United States experienced roughly the same rate of economic growth as the remainder of the country, while the population of the Great Plains fell in absolute terms by 27%. Without migration, the population would have been nearly three times higher, and living standards would almost certainly not have grown as quickly. Moreover, migration can enhance living standards in rural areas through remittances migrants send back (e.g., Cox-Edwards & Ureta, 2003; Yang, 2008). If migration is slow or not occurring, such potential growth is not occurring. Although African cities have grown quickly over the past 50 years, rural–urban migration has played a relatively small role in recent growth (Kessides, 2007; Potts, 2012), and in some African countries, net rural–urban migration is even negative (Beauchemin, 2011).

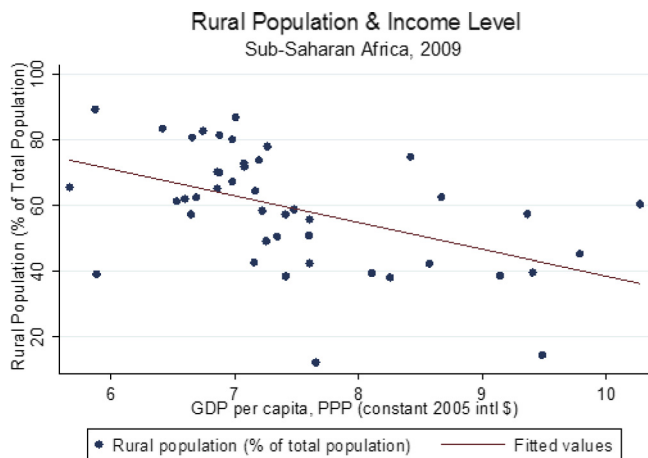
We have two primary objectives in this paper. First, we provide a description of the state of rural–urban migration in Africa, updating previous research on the topic (e.g., Byerlee, 1974). Second, we explore possible reasons why migration rates are not higher, given the difference in returns to labor in agriculture and other sectors. One of the primary challenges faced in this paper is that few data sets exist in sub-Saharan Africa that allow for the detailed study of migration and its implications.

2. OVERVIEW OF RURAL–URBAN MIGRATION IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

In this section, we initially describe the knowledge gaps that arise from the relative lack of data on rural–urban migration in sub-Saharan Africa. We then present rough measures of

* We thank Kathleen Beegle, Claudio Montenegro, Derek Headey, and two anonymous reviewers for their feedback.

Panel A



Panel B

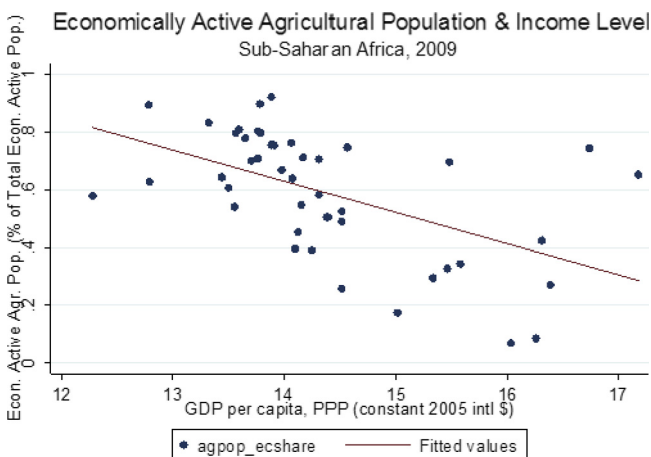


Figure 1. Rural population versus GDP per capita in PPP terms, sub-Saharan Africa. Source: World Development Indicators (2011).

the rate of rural–urban migration in the countries of sub-Saharan Africa.

There are several reasons that information on rural–urban migration in sub-Saharan Africa is relatively scarce. Nationally representative, multi-purpose household surveys often lack a distinct migration module (e.g., Lucas, 2000, chap. 16). They do often ask about the birthplace of people, which means migrants can be observed at the destination, but one cannot use destination information alone to construct estimates of migration rates. Panel surveys often only follow household heads, such as the World Bank Living Standards Measurement Surveys (LSMS), which implies that information about migrants is lost between rounds unless explicitly included in the survey. Moreover, migration modules in LSMS style surveys often lack information to characterize migrants; for example, the Ghana Living Standards Survey conducted in 2006 included a migration module, but did not record whether the individual’s birthplace was in a rural or urban area, and only asked about the last location. As people appear to move within Ghana, the information is inadequate for characterizing the flow of rural–urban migration. Recently, a few efforts in Africa have attempted to follow migrants, such as the Kagera Household Survey (e.g., Beegle, de Weerd, & Dercon, 2011) and the ERHS Migrant Tracking Survey (de

Brauw, Mueller, & Woldehanna, 2011, 2012). Other surveys are also underway to follow individuals from all of the households in the panel, such as the World Bank’s Living Standards and Measurement Study – Integrated Surveys for Agriculture (LSMS-ISA). As the LSMS-ISA panel data sets become available, more basic information about rural–urban migration in Africa will be revealed.

Among the few datasets that document migration patterns, there is substantial heterogeneity across countries, which partially comes from the inconsistent definitions of urban over space and time. Different countries define an urban area in different ways. Urban areas have also expanded, and are often officially reclassified from rural to urban. Therefore, demarcations of urban zones continue to accommodate the birth and growth of metropolitan areas since 1960. As a consequence, national statistics on rural–urban population shares are not immediately comparable across space or time. While there are several efforts underway to measure urban expansion (e.g., Bloom, Canning, Fink, Khanna, & Salyer, 2010), without holding urban areas constant, it is nearly impossible to compute rural–urban migration rates, as one cannot attribute city growth in excess of natural population growth to migration alone.

Given our description of urban expansion, it is perhaps not surprising that urbanization is often linked to rural–urban migration, though migration is not the only cause of urbanization. Nonetheless, the fact that the countries of sub-Saharan Africa are often described as rapidly urbanizing is often assumed to imply high rural–urban migration rates (e.g., Todaro, 2000). For example, Byerlee (1974) reports urban growth rates of over 7% per annum in the 1960s. However, there is recent evidence that growth has slowed or even reversed in some cases (e.g., Potts, 2009). Considering all of the areas defined as urban in the CIESEN (2004) data set, the average urban growth rate was 3.4% in sub-Saharan Africa between 1990 and 2000.

We want to estimate the contribution of migration to urban growth in sub-Saharan Africa. Urban population growth is the sum of four components: net fertility, where net fertility is the birth rate less the death rate; urban expansion or reclassification of areas from rural to urban; rural–urban migration; and international immigration. Although fertility rates are largely thought to be lower in urban areas than in rural areas, we assume they are the same in this case. We control for urban expansion by using a definition of urban areas that is consistent over time, as defined by the CIESEN (2004) project.¹ A major problem in comparing rural–urban migration across countries is that the concept of “urban” takes on varying forms in different countries, so simply comparing national statistics across countries may not lead to correct conclusions. We then interpret the difference between the urban and rural population growth rates between 1990 and 2000 as the rural–urban migration rate.²

We find that the population weighted rural–urban migration rate was 1.07% per annum between 1990 and 2000 in sub-Saharan Africa.³ Not surprisingly, the average masks a great deal of heterogeneity at the country level (Figure 2). Although several countries have rural–urban migration rates right around 1%, a few countries have very slow or even negative rural–urban migration rates, and only a handful experienced migration rates over 2% during the 1990s.⁴ Negative rural–urban migration implies that re-ruralization is occurring; these findings are corroborated by other evidence for at least some of the countries for which we find re-ruralization. Specifically, Beauchemin (2011) finds evidence that people are returning to rural areas in Cote D’Ivoire. Potts (2009) notes the copperbelt towns in Zambia also decreased in population during the 1990s.

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