

Urban Poverty and the Changing Nature of Migration in Africa

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Introduction

The protracted and deep-rooted economic crisis that has affected nearly every country in sub-Saharan Africa has adversely impacted on the well-being of the majority of people. As a consequence, many Africans have experienced a decline in their welfare owing to a fall in real incomes and declining social sector expenditure per head. Urban unemployment and poverty have risen markedly as a result of recession and the implementation of structural adjustment and economic recovery programmes since the early 1980s. This has had a substantial impact not only on the quality of life of many urban residents but also on the nature, trends and patterns of migration and urban-rural linkages. With the present trends of economic hardships, increased cost of living and urban poverty, new forms of migration have emerged or old ones have intensified and others have slowed down (Tacoli 1997). There are indications that the rate of rural-urban migration has decreased, while return migration, *i.e.* from the city to the rural “home”, is emerging (Owuor 2006; Okali *et al.* 2001; Tacoli 1998; Potts 1997; Baker 1997; Tripp 1996) and circular migration between urban and rural areas is increasing (Owuor 2006; Smit 1998). In addition, urban dwellers are increasingly relying on the rural areas for their livelihoods (Owuor 2006). Based on studies done mainly in sub-Saharan Africa, this paper presents an overall view of urban poverty and the changing nature of migration and urban-rural linkages in Africa. First, however, urbanization trends, economic crisis and urban poverty in Africa is highlighted.

Urbanization, economic crisis and urban poverty

Urbanization is a process of town formation and growth. It is a function of population increase, both natural and migratory, and the spatial expansion of the settlements to accommodate increasing populations. Most developing countries today are undergoing a process of rapid urbanization and are seeing a dramatic movement of people to towns. In the mid-1970s, Africa was the least urbanized continent in the world, with only 25% of its population living in urban settlements. By the year 2000, 38% of the African population was living in urban areas and in 2025 it is projected that this figure will be more than 50% (United Nations 2003). Although these figures are still lower than for other continents and for the world as a whole, the annual growth rates of the urban population are highest in Africa (Cohen 2004; United Nations 2003; Nelson 1999; UNCHS 1996). As far as 39 countries in sub-Saharan Africa are concerned, the total population increased about three-fold between

1950 and 1990 (United Nations 1995), but the urban population increased about ten-fold during the same period.

As the (urban) population increased, the overall economic growth rates for sub-Saharan African states have generally declined since the mid-1970s (Amis 1990). This decline is mainly a function of recession in the global economy, but also has an important internal dimension, although with variations between countries (Tacoli 2002). Per capita incomes fell considerably in the 1980s and 1990s and real wages continued to decline (Kanji 1996; Jamal & Weeks 1988) while open unemployment and cuts in government spending on infrastructure and services increased (Rakodi 1995a).

The fact that urban poverty is increasing at a faster rate than rural poverty is of particular importance to any study of the nature of urbanization in Africa (Potts 1997). Furthermore, despite the variations between countries, the harsh economic conditions of the 1980s and 1990s have in many ways been felt even more acutely in the cities than in the rural areas (O'Connor 1991). The IMF policies, i.e. limiting subsidies, increasing food prices and restricting wage levels, have been disproportionately borne by the urban poor (Bah *et al.* 2003; Rakodi 2002; Tacoli 2002). As a result, the African urban poor have become an increasingly vulnerable group (Amis 1990).

For urban and rural populations in sub-Saharan Africa, global changes in the past few decades have resulted in deepening social differentiation and increasing poverty (Tacoli 1998, 2002). Several World Bank, IMF, OECD and UNDP reports, including national studies, show that over 40% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa is living in absolute poverty or on a Purchasing Power Parity of less than US\$1 per day. In fact since the late 1980s, the absolute number of people living on less than a dollar a day in Africa has grown five times more than the figure for Latin America, and twice that for South Asia (World Bank 2001). Based on the same measurement, national studies suggest that in several of the poorest African countries, more than half the urban population can be considered poor, i.e. are living below the poverty line.

The impact of both economic crisis and economic reform under structural adjustment on urban centres has been well documented. Urban economies in sub-Saharan Africa declined markedly during the 1980s and 1990s and urban poverty appeared to be increasing in much of the continent (Maxwell 1999). Life in urban areas has become more expensive while employment in the formal sector has gone down and real wages have not kept up with price

increases or even declined in absolute terms (Dietz & Zaal 2002; Simon 1997; UNCHS 1996; Jamal & Weeks 1988). Standards of living have deteriorated and urban unemployment reached levels never before attained (Beauchemin & Bocquier 2003; Kanji 1996). Increases in food prices and service charges and cuts in public expenditure on health, education and infrastructure have been felt more severely in the cities and particularly by lower income groups.

In many sub-Saharan countries, wage employment in the public sector has been seriously cut and as such has fallen in absolute terms over time (Odhiambo & Manda 2003), particularly in the lower echelons. The formal sector, of which parastatal enterprises were an important part, has been reduced, and workers have turned to self-employment or informal employment (Beauchemin & Bocquier 2003). As Jamal & Weeks (1988, 1993) noted over a decade ago, the distinction between the formal and informal sectors is becoming blurred. The difference in income that can be earned in the two sectors is decreasing, as is the difference in lifestyles and living standards. With the fall in formal-sector employment, many former wage earners have moved into the informal sector.

The proportion of the labour force in formal employment is very low; for example, 10% in Zambia and 5% in Tanzania (Kanji 1996). In Zambia, informal markets and petty trade have absorbed growing numbers of people due to employment retrenchment in both the public and private sectors (Hansen 2004). Retrenchments of public sector-workers and restrictions on wage levels have affected both formal-sector workers and the informal-sector activities that depend on their demand (Bah *et al.* 2003; Tacoli 2002). As a result, urban incomes in most countries have fallen dramatically, and the relative position of the urban population compared to the rural ones has drastically changed.

Urban poverty and new patterns of migration and urban-rural linkages

According to Tacoli (2001: 141), migration has been one of the major factors shaping urbanization in Africa. However, more than two decades of economic crisis and reform packages, and more recently, the internationalization of trade and production have deeply transformed relations between town and countryside in many countries south of the Sahara. This has affected the direction of migrations as well as the composition of the flows and the types of movements.

First, return migration is emerging. Return migration occurs when part of the urban household – especially the wife of the male head and/or children – is sent to live in the rural area; when city dwellers travel to their rural homes for some period of time to cultivate; when the retrenched migrants go back to their rural homes; and when young people unable to find jobs in town return to their rural homes – all these as a response to increased cost of living in town (Owuor 2006; Potts 1997; Rakodi 1995b).

Part of the urban household is nowadays sent to the rural area mainly because there is not enough money to support them in town and that, for the children, education is cheaper at home. By so doing, the wife concentrates on rural farming as a way of producing food for the family. Fostering urban children at the rural home is also common among female-headed households. For example, Muzvidziwa (2001) and Nelson (2001) found that female-headed households in Zimbabwe and Kenya, respectively, sent their children to stay at the rural home as a cost-cutting measure. The high costs of education in urban schools may push parents to return children to rural areas where schools and other related expenses are relatively cheaper (Potts 1997). Another reason for sending or leaving family members behind in rural areas is a lack of housing in town (Potts & Mutambirwa 1990). With the wife returning home to engage in farming and children to attend school in the village, the family can better face economic hazards (Beauchemin & Bocquier 2003) and at the same time the rural base kept as “a safe haven” (Bigsten 1996).

Tacoli (1998) explains that households may be “multi-local”, with some members residing in rural areas and others in towns. Muzvidziwa (2001: 95) adds that besides being a cost-cutting measure, the practice of “split-household residential patterns” by urban households is a form of mobilizing both rural and urban resources. For Beall (2002), such arrangements support the argument that the livelihood strategies of urban households cannot be seen in isolation from their wider context. Potts (1997) makes it clear that the decline in real incomes may have encouraged the re-emerging practice of urban residents to leave some people behind or send some home. She goes on to explain that this practice is particularly reinforced by urban households’ desperate need for food: people at home can grow food, some of which can supplement urban sources.

Second, although urban dwellers have always maintained links with the rural areas, the recent era of severe economic decline and structural adjustment has seen urban-rural linkages assume new and vital significance (*Ibid*). Rural links have become vital safety-valves and

welfare options for urban people who are very vulnerable to economic fluctuations (Owuor 2006; Smit 1998; Potts 1997: 461; Gugler 1991). There is evidence that transfers of food from rural to urban areas are increasing, not only in amount and frequency but also in importance:

It appears that far more food is now being brought in from rural areas, which of course greatly enhances urban residents' vested interests in maintaining their social and economic rural links. These transfers can rely on surpluses generated by existing rural kin or on urban residents returning in the rainy season to cultivate, which they would probably not choose to do if they could afford urban food prices or could gain access to sufficient land in town to grow food (Potts 1997: 466).

Urban households with limited social connections to rural areas are the most vulnerable to hunger. In contrast, those with active rural-urban linkages enjoy significant transfers of food from rural areas that offset hunger and vulnerability in the urban context (Owuor 2006; Frayne 2004). Therefore, for the large majority of urban dwellers, food from rural areas is important for the household's food security situation (Owuor 2006). For others, rural produce (when sold) is an additional source of the household's income (Owuor 2006; Fall 1998; Rakodi 1995b; Potts & Mutambirwa 1990).

In Zimbabwe, people in the rural areas felt that urban residents were looking to rural areas as a subsistence fallback (Bryceson & Mbara 2003). In some cases, rural dwellers were supporting urban relations rather than the other way round. Some of them complained of "sustaining families in town by sending them mealie-meal", "receiving fewer groceries from the urban dwellers" and "Aids patients being dumped on us" (*ibid*: 342). According to Frayne (2004: 500):

... rural-urban migration is creating dynamic and entrenched socio-economic relationships between the rural and urban sectors. On average, 86% of the respondents (migrants and non-migrants) visit their relatives and friends in the rural areas a few times in a year or at least once a year. While the majority of visits are for "family reasons" (...) the second most important reason (...) is farming related.

Access to rural assets is therefore, according to Krüger (1998), at least a supplementary if not essential element for securing and stabilizing the livelihood systems of many vulnerable urban households.

Third, while migrants continue to rely on food from their rural homes, there is evidence that remittances from urban to rural areas are declining (Bah *et al.* 2003; Potts 1997) despite simultaneously being important for rural households. Given the tension between rising need

and falling wages, Owuor (2006) found that half of the households in Nakuru town, Kenya send money back home less frequently now than before and that the decrease in remitting money to the rural areas is being felt more by the low to very low-income households.

The decline in rural remittances in amount and real terms is a consequence of the increasing employment insecurity and cost of living in town. Greater economic hardship and other important aspects such as the increasing cost of education, health care, housing and food has led to migrants sending less in remittances than before.

Fourth, as much as urban households send money back home, there are indications that the *reverse* is also true where urban households also get money from the rural plots (Owuor 2006). Those households engaged in rural farming and non-farming activities get money after the sale of their produce or goods. However, more often than not, the money is used by the rural household or family members and this reduces the migrant's frequency of sending money home.

Fifth, as a result of urban poverty, urban-to-rural visits without a specific reason are declining. Migrants no longer go to their rural homes as frequently as they did before. This is because they can no longer afford the high transport costs, particularly those who are poor and whose rural homes are far from the city. Likewise, rural-to-urban visits are also decreasing because urban households can no longer afford to accommodate their relatives in town for a long time. Nowadays migrants do not just entertain "unplanned" visits from "any" relative like long time ago, let alone accommodating them in the city for a long time.

Despite the decline in rural remittances and visits, social links between migrants and their home areas remain as strong as ever (Tacoli 2002). For many migrants, this is not only a part of their social identity but also a way of spreading their assets (and risk) across space and maintaining a safety net which helps in times of economic and social insecurity in cities (Bah *et al.* 2003: 20).

Sixth, due to failure to sustain themselves in town with their retrenchment packages, retrenched workers resort to going home or to small urban centres near their rural homes where life is relatively cheap and to start small-scale informal businesses. Similarly, young people unable to find jobs in town may return to the rural home out of choice or be sent there by their parents.

A review of recent empirical evidence on migration and urbanization in Francophone West Africa suggests that economic crisis may increase circular migration between towns and

villages (Beauchemin & Bocquier 2003). While acknowledging that urban out-migration is not a new phenomenon, Beauchemin & Bocquier (*ibid*: 10) argue that:

It seems to be increasing in importance (...) In addition to the traditional return flows of migrants, a new kind of urban-to-rural migration, linked to economic crisis, has appeared in West African countries since the early 1980s. (...) The job market degradation and the deterioration of the standard of living created new relationship between migration, employment and education. In the past, people moved to town to attend school or to find a job. Today, the opposite is quite frequent. A large number of people who have been fired from formal sector jobs return to villages. Most first try to find a new job in cities or towns, sometimes using their “golden handshake” to launch a new career (...) If they fail (as many do) the village is the last resort. In addition, some urban residents with jobs, confronting their incomes to the urban cost of living, choose to return to rural areas where incomes are lower but where food and housing are almost free.

Lastly, are the changes that concerns sectoral interactions. According to Tacoli (2002) rural-urban interactions include *spatial* linkages – flows of people, of goods, of money and other social transactions between towns and countryside – and *sectoral* interactions – “urban” sectors in rural areas (e.g. rural non-farm employment) and “rural” sectors in urban areas (e.g. urban agriculture). In general, non-agricultural rural activities have become a wide-spread feature in sub-Sahara Africa. Typical urban activities like e.g. manufacturing are increasingly taking place in rural areas as well (see e.g. Bryceson 1996, 2001, 2002). On the other hand, agriculture – an activity typically associated with the rural areas – has become a widespread phenomenon and a permanent part of the landscape in most sub-Saharan African towns and cities (see e.g. Foeken 2006; Mbiba 2000; Obudho & Foeken 1999; Mlozi 1996; Maxwell 1995).

Conclusion and emerging challenges

One of the consequences of both economic crisis and economic reform under structural adjustment is the changing nature of migration and urban-rural linkages. Urban households are now seeking to mobilize resources and opportunities in both urban and rural areas and to combine these into a livelihood strategy. They have adopted a number of livelihood strategies in their attempts to manage – in particular but not necessarily restricted to – the changes in their economic environment and circumstances. Urban households are undertaking a wide range of different activities in town and in the rural area to raise or maintain their incomes, maintain a certain standard of living or just to survive. In addition, migration and rural links have become vital safety valves and welfare options for urban people who are vulnerable to

economic fluctuations. Return migration, which apparently results in de-urbanization, seems to be a survival strategy, with two benefits: (a) it makes living in town less expensive, and (b) more food could be obtained from the rural home. In addition, the flow of food resources from rural households to urban ones is contrary to the common assumption that rural kin act only as recipients of goods and services originating from town.

The fact that households appear to be split into an urban and rural part and that livelihoods are not only multiple, but also multi-local calls for a re-definition of the 'household concept'. When a member of a household, e.g. the wife, lives at the rural home, a problem arises with defining the household. This is because, definitions of households have conventionally emphasized co-residence, sharing the same meals, cooking from one pot and undertaking joint or coordinated decision-making. However, households remain fluid in size, composition and location. As such, it is more useful to see households as being multi-local rather than strictly "rural" or "urban".

Related to the above, many development theorists and practitioners have, until recently, viewed rural and urban areas as two mutually exclusive entities with their own unique populations, activities, problems and concerns. However, this does not reflect the reality of multi-local livelihoods, which include both urban and rural elements. Interactions between urban and rural areas play an important role in processes of rural and urban change. According to Satterthwaite & Tacoli (2002), it is essential that policies and programmes reflect the importance of the "urban" part of *rural* development and the "rural" part of *urban* development. In other words, urban development strategies must take into account the rural links and context. The answer to urban poverty cannot be found in the urban areas alone. Policies ignoring this may increase poverty and vulnerability for those groups for whom 'straddling the urban-rural divide' is an important part of their survival strategy. Migration is still playing an important role in the livelihoods of many African people, although movements and patterns have changed in the last few decades.

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