

# **The poor are moving to town**

*By Henrik Valeur, 2010*

According to the UN, the world will be populated with two billion more people within the next twenty to thirty years, almost all of whom will inhabit cities in the developing world.

Building cities for nearly 100 million additional people every year over the next twenty to thirty years is a challenge, but also an opportunity of enormous dimensions. Depending on how it is done, it could either become one of humanity's greatest successes or one of our worst failures.

Population growth is in many ways problematic, but it is better that it occurs in cities rather than in isolated rural areas. The reason is that we are better able to solve problems and make progress when we do it together. This is also why the evolution of cities and civilizations has always been closely intertwined.

Two billion new urban inhabitants could give an incredible boost to the development of our civilization!

Today, one in five people the world over live in extreme poverty; more than 100 million children never attend school and, although the relative infant mortality has never been lower, millions of children still die each year from pneumonia, malnutrition, diarrhea, malaria, infections and the like.

According to the World Bank, three quarters of the world's poor live in rural areas.

Thus it would seem obvious to direct development aid into rural areas, as is the current practice. But no matter how much aid is distributed, rural areas will never be able to generate sufficient surplus to sustain the almost exponential population growth developing countries are experiencing. Only cities can generate that kind of surplus.

The poor move to cities because they know it is the only way to improve their livelihood. Yet many end up in slums, where living conditions are sometimes even more oppressive than what they were fleeing from in the countryside.

China is one of the countries that largely seem to have avoided this. It is also the country that in recent decades has witnessed the most intense urban migration on record.

Over the last twenty years, Chinese cities have received an influx of approximately 15 million new inhabitants annually, which roughly corresponds to the number of people who have been lifted out of extreme poverty in China in the same period.

This is an incredible success story, which we can learn a lot from.

It all started in the early 1980s with the Chinese experimentation with urbanization and market economy, which Deng Xiaoping initiated in the so-called “special economic zones” situated in the coastal areas of Eastern China. This was accompanied by agricultural reforms, which enabled rural China to feed a growing urban population.

In the beginning these “special economic zones” offered cheap labor in “cities” that only still existed on paper. But it was enough to attract investment first from nearby Hong Kong and Taiwan, soon followed by Singapore, South Korea, Japan and then the rest of the developed world, thereby initiating what is now known as globalization. People quickly began moving from the countryside, where reforms had now rendered their labor superfluous, to the new cities, where they could earn much more and thus could better support their families in the countryside.

Despite the fact that the mortality rate in cities is significantly lower than in rural areas, the consequence of urban migration is a reduction of overall population growth because people in cities simply have fewer children than their rural counterparts – even without a one-child policy as in China.

China differs from other countries in many ways, but the Chinese experience of lifting such a large portion of its people out of poverty could undoubtedly be very valuable to other developing countries seeking to do the same.

A tremendous challenge still remains.

As people move to cities and begin to earn more money, they tend to acquire the same consumption patterns as those of us in wealthier parts of the world. Since our patterns of excessive consumption are causing the current environmental crisis, the scale and speed of urban migration in developing countries could turn this crisis into a full-blown catastrophe.

What can we do?

We need to shift our focus to what might be termed “development urbanism”.

The aim of development urbanism would be to aid developing countries develop new policies, methodologies and technologies for sustainable urban development. It is not an exercise in exporting solutions, but rather development urbanism involves facilitating global cooperation and exchange enabling local actors to develop solutions best suited to local conditions, while integrating the best knowledge, ideas and experiences from around the world.

Only through the co-evolution of sustainable cities will we be able to effectively combat global ills such as poverty and population growth, climate change, pollution and resource depletion.

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