

# The poor are moving to town

*By Henrik Valeur, 2010*

According to the UN, the world will be populated with about two billion more people within the next twenty to thirty years, almost all of whom will inhabit cities in the developing world. Thus within just one generation, the urban population in this part of the world will almost double.

Building cities for nearly 100 million additional people every year over the next twenty 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!

## **Urbanization**

It is no coincidence that the first great civilizations arose in the fertile lands around the Euphrates and Tigris, Nile, Indus River and the Yellow River. Here, agricultural production could feed large populations - a crucial precondition for the development of cities.

In cities, people could free their minds from the issue of providing food, thus initiating huge cultural, economic, political, scientific, social and technological advances.

In the ancient Greek and Chinese city-states lived some of the thinkers and creators who founded the world's two great civilizations – the eastern and the western.

East and West were connected by the Silk Road, which enabled an early form of global cultural, commercial and technological exchange. The “road” consisted of various routes by land and sea that connected important cities and market places of which the most important were Rome at the western end and Chang’an at the eastern end.

Western civilization reached a peak in ancient Rome. New building and infrastructural technologies enabled the city to accommodate an estimated one million people already two thousand years ago. But with the collapse of the Western Roman Empire (ca. 476) followed a long period of de-urbanization in Europe, appropriately named the “Dark Ages”, in which much of the ancient art, culture, science and technology was either lost or - via the Eastern Roman Empire (the Byzantine Empire) - transferred to the emerging urban Muslim world (and from this world, later back to Europe again).

Chang’an was the capital of several Chinese dynasties, including the Western Han (206 BC – 9) and Tang (618-907). During the latter, it is believed that about two million people lived in the metropolitan area of Chang’an, half of them within the 30 square miles of highly planned and organized city, behind a rectangular city wall. Back then, the citizens of Chang’an were reading printed books and following the time on astronomical clocks, while enjoying the benefits of air conditioning, natural gas, sewage systems and ... toilet paper.

The concentration of knowledge, thoughts and ideas in cities - and the exchange of knowledge, thoughts and ideas between cities - has resulted in numerous inventions and innovations that have greatly improved our living conditions. But cities also pose many dangers, such as infections that spread with deplorable sanitary conditions, violence in many different forms and for many different reasons, and natural disasters such as the recent flooding of New Orleans and the earthquake in Port-au-Prince, which have made the vulnerability, especially of the urban poor, very clear.

Dangers may seem worse in urban than in rural areas, just as aircraft accidents may seem worse than car accidents, even though many more people die in car accidents (both in total and relative numbers). In fact the city is usually safer than the countryside, because it is easier to provide assistance and protection to people concentrated in a small area rather than to people scattered over a large area.

However, the main reason for rapid urban growth in developing countries is not that they are safer, but that they present the only chance to escape rural poverty.

In Europe it took about 200 years, from the beginning of the industrial revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to move about 200 million people from rural misery to modern urban life. Now it looks like many developing countries have embarked on a similar exodus, only this one is ten times faster and includes ten times as many people!

### **Lifting people out of poverty**

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.

These problems are primarily rural, not urban. According to the World Bank, three quarters of the world's poor live in rural areas.

But these 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.

Therefore the sad result of many years of development aid invested in rural areas is that millions of people have been restrained in rural poverty.

Agriculture must be made more efficient with fewer people producing more. This means that more people must move to cities where living conditions, job opportunities, education and health care can and must be improved.

But this will take an enormous effort.

As it is, many of those moving to cities end up in urban slum, where living conditions are sometimes even more oppressive than what they were fleeing from in the countryside.

One country has apparently managed to avoid this, and this is the country that in recent decades has witnessed the most intense urban migration ever recorded on Earth.

Over the last twenty years, Chinese cities have received an influx of 15-20 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 experiments of urbanization and market economy, which Deng Xiaoping initiated in the coastal areas of Eastern China, and the agricultural reforms, which enabled rural China to feed a growing urban population.

In the early 1980s, about one billion people in East Asia, or four-fifths of the total population, lived in extreme poverty - most of them in China. Twenty years later (2005) this figure had been reduced to one-third of a billion or less than one-fifth of the total population.

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 total 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 experiences 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.

### **The time is now**

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.

Two billion new urbanites will create markets of immense proportions. But will it be markets for “clean” or “dirty” products and services?

We may help answering this question by helping developing countries develop new policies, methodologies and technologies for sustainable urban development. Thus making them better able to combat poverty, population growth, resource depletion and climate change.

Through co-operation we may try to find the solutions that best suit local conditions while integrating the best knowledge, ideas and experiences from around the world. Such co-operation is obviously also needed in our part of the world, where the challenge is to modify already existing cities - and the way we use them – in order to restore nature.

In poor countries the challenge is rather to construct new cities without destroying the existing nature.

In any case, the time to answer the question is now - not in twenty years!

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