IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE PIONEERS

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Spontaneous migrations bring new life to a remote region of the Ivory Coast. Will problems follow?

For some 15 years now, the southwestern region of the Ivory Coast has been the preferred destination of all internal migration. Whether they come from the central, northern, or eastern regions of the country, the migrants' objective is San Pedro, a rapidly expanding port city 460 kilometres from the capital, Abidjan.

Peoples of the central region of Bandama, in particular, have abandoned their land to the rising waters of Kossou Lake to flock to San Pedro, the Eldorado of the Ivory Coast.

It was to learn more about this phenomenon — without question the largest internal migration ever recorded in the Ivory Coast — that the National University's Institute of Tropical Geography undertook a far-reaching study in 1980, with financial support from IDRC.

After independence in 1960, the Ivory Coast channelled its development efforts into the modernization of its agriculture. Because of its favourable climate, and abundant and relatively cheap labour, agriculture in the forest zone in the southern region of the country prospered. Consequently, population and primary activities have concentrated in the south: 70 percent of the population now lives in this region, and almost all export crops and more than half of the food crops are grown there. Moreover, three-quarters of the country's businesses and jobs in the modern sectors are located in the south.

But, beginning in 1968, when the construction of a port complex and a main road opened up the southwestern region, migratory movements began to flow toward the San Pedro backcountry. In the past, this region was very sparsely populated: The average village had from 47 to 171 inhabitants, and in 1965 the total population of the region was barely 120,000. The city of San Pedro did not even exist at that time. Today, its port has made it the second economic centre of the country.

As new forest roads were opened from 1971 to 1975, the influx of migrants continued and new plantations flourished. During this period, the population density of the Bouaké district, for example, increased from one to four inhabitants per square kilometre. Although migrants made up only 37 percent of the population of the region in 1971, they had increased to 59 percent by 1975. The proportion of foreigners from Upper Volta, Mali, Guinea, Togo, and Nigeria also increased, from 5 to 24 percent.

The demography of the original population of the region showed an "unhealthy" structure. Only about 38 percent of the population was under 15 years of age although, nationally, this age group made up 50 percent of the population. Moreover, the rural exodus had led to an imbalance in the number of men and women: In the 15-50 age group, the women significantly outnumbered the men. A large part of the migrants are men, however, who represent an important addition to the labour force of the region.

Despite their large numbers, the migrants appear to have integrated well in the region. This peaceful coexistence is due in part to the land ownership customs that prevail in the southern Ivory Coast. Two principles govern the relationship of the local inhabitants with the land. The first is that land is above all inalienable. This means that under no circumstances can anyone gain permanent title to land. Since land cannot be sold, there are no exchanges of money in land transactions. The local inhabitants simply grant the migrant the right to use and enjoy the land. The second principle is that all land is owned. Depending on the region, the ownership may rest with the tribe, or village, or follow family lineages.

Anyone wishing to settle on a piece of land must first apply to the representative of the community owning it. In order to conclude the agreement allowing the applicant to settle on the land, he or she must pay the receiving community a symbolic price, usually a bottle of liquor (whisky, gin, or cognac). As long as the new migrants comply with the customs and usages of the receiving region, African cultural solidarity makes integration a relatively easy process.

Mr Haohouot Asseypo, director of the Institute of Tropical Geography, emphasizes that the efforts made by the Southwest Development Authority (ARSO) to open up the southwest have helped make this region particularly accessible. "The ancient fear of the forest has been conquered," says Mr. Haohouot. "Thanks to the efforts of forestry workers who penetrate deep into the forest, this region has finally come within reach of the migrants. So much so that, in fact, that every day trucks arrive bringing entire families. In two to three years the families build entire villages where none existed before. Extraordinary things are happening on this pioneer frontier. New villages, teeming with life, are sprouting like mushrooms."

Although it has not yet happened in the southwest, these spontaneous internal migrations could become the source of serious conflicts in the Ivory Coast if the region's resources become strained. The Institute of Tropical Geography has begun to investigate the causes and effects of migration in the country, and the role of organizations such as ARSO in facilitating successful settlement and development in the area. This research should enable them to better understand the migration phenomenon that has until now eluded efforts to control it, or to plan its ordered progression for the benefit of the country as a whole.

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A "bush taxi" carries migrants to Abidjan and other Ivory Coast cities.