

# The rush to the city

Susana Amaya

*Why do people migrate to the city? Answers to this important question emerge from a series of studies carried out in developing countries during the past decade. An IDRC Migration Review Task Force recently reviewed these studies in order to relate the findings to the process of economic development and assist in the development of new policy-related research that may help developing-country planners deal with internal migration. Some of the trends revealed by the research conducted in Latin America are summarized in this article.*



*Findings of the Migration Review Task Force have been published by IDRC under the title Social change and internal migration. A review of research findings from Africa, Asia and Latin America (IDRC-TS62), and in Spanish as Cambio social y migración interna. Una resena de hallazgos investigativos (IDRC-TS105).*

I nternal migration in developing countries is a highly visible problem. In fact, 65 percent or more of the adults in many of the large expanding cities of these countries are migrants from rural areas. The problems resulting from this movement are numerous: the circles of slum housing around the city, the cost of extending services to ever-growing suburbs, water shortages, and a general administrative confusion because of overlapping political jurisdictions.

The fact that a high proportion of the "problem" population in the slum area may be migrants with little education and of poor rural origins has reinforced stereotypes that all migrants to the city are of poor farm backgrounds. But is this so?

As the researchers participating in the Migration Review Task Force point out, the motivation behind migration is generally economic. Studies also show that most migrants are young adults who have higher education levels, and that the more education they have, the more likely they are to migrate to the city.

In Latin America where urbanization is well underway, the population is already more than half urban. More Latin American women migrate than men, and they generally head for metropolitan areas where work is available. Men, on the other hand, often move to distant settlements or to areas where there is seasonal agricultural work. Friends or relatives living in the cities help perpetuate the migratory flow.

Three very important economic and social factors that have traditionally limited work opportunities in the rural sector determine rural-urban migration in Latin America: the structure of landholding, low agricultural productivity, and the rapid increase of population. Technological innovations that bring about an increase in worker productivity can also stimulate migration by reducing work opportunities, and ecological damage and soil erosion due to excessive land use can cause the population to move. Another recent factor is class conflict: for example, in Colombia, the period of rural upheaval known as "the violence" that began in the 1950s sparked major migratory movements of the rural population to urban areas.

Initially, it was thought that the migrants arrived directly from their place of origin to the city. It has been established, however, that this process is not so simple and occurs in stages. It is clear that migrants do, in time, improve their economic situation and that the labour force in these areas grows as a result of the migration of young, productive people. A person with training will be able to use his ability and the untrained individual can acquire an education; migration will make social mobility easier and therefore contribute to the system's stability.

One major claim made about migration is that mainly illiterate peasants migrate to the city and crowd into slums, which become centers of social upheaval. However, no empirical evidence exists to link social and political instability to migration. Indeed, most migrants are better prepared for urban life than is generally thought, or they adapt very quickly to it — many, in fact, come from small or medium sized towns.

Although considerable knowledge has been acquired on population movements much remains to be studied, and there are important points on which future research efforts would do well to concentrate. For instance, little information exists on the effects of migration on the receiving communities and on the communities of origin, and on the impact of government policies on migration. This phenomenon has frequently been studied in isolation and not as a variable in the development process. Cyclical or seasonal migration is also little known.

Urban development in Latin America will continue to expand. The time has come, says the Migration Review Task Force, to carry out more studies on the impact of social and economic development policies that may lead to population redistribution patterns that will enhance overall development. □