

Environmental Review

A Monthly Newsletter of Environmental Science and Politics

Volume Five Number Seven

July 1998

Urban Population Growth in Developing Countries

Since the 1970s mega-cities of the developing world have absorbed huge population increments, and other large cities have experienced on average, a doubling of population size. In their recent article *The Poverty of Cities in the Developing World*¹, Brockerhoff and Brennan used infant mortality and other indicators to compare people's wellbeing across cities of one million or more, smaller cities, and towns within developing regions. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the advantage of big city residents has declined since the 1970s, and was no longer apparent by the 1990s. In sub-Saharan Africa mega-villages have emerged, places in which basic human needs — adequate nutrition, early schooling, good child health — are less fulfilled than even in small towns. Unfavorable living conditions in mega-cities of Latin America and in the North Africa/Asia region, and in the medium-sized cities of sub-Saharan Africa, are strongly related to the pace of population growth of these cities since the 1960s and 1970s.

Martin Brockerhoff earned a Ph.D. in demography from Brown University in 1991 specializing in African studies, specifically studying child health problems in migrant communities in the areas around Dakar in Senegal and Bamako in Mali. He worked at the US Agency for International Development in Senegal and Washington D.C. from 1989 to

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1993 as a health analyst and program officer, and since 1994 he has worked for the Population Council in New York conducting research on urban population, health, environment, and poverty issues. We spoke him about living conditions in developing countries.

ER: Dr. Brockerhoff, what is the Population Council?

MB: The Council was founded in 1952 by the Rockefeller family primarily with a concern about high fertility and global population growth, and that was its main focus until 1994. In that year there was an international

population conference in Cairo that focused more on gender-related issues, and high fertility since then has not been the exclusive, central concern in the population field; there has been increased research and programmatic attention to migration, the growth of big cities, child health problems in Africa, illegal immigration into the U.S., rising mortality in the former Soviet Union, a whole range of other issues that had been neglected for a long time.

One of the reasons I joined the Population Council was to study urban growth and its consequences. The U.N. and other organizations have projected that about 95 percent of population growth in the developing world in the first quarter of the 21st century is going to take place in urban areas. The Cairo agenda recognized that population growth rates in poor countries of the world have been slowing, and most of the population growth is happening in urban areas, largely because people migrate from rural to urban areas.

But those are just straight demographic projections. We may understand the demographic underpinnings of urban population growth but we don't know what the consequences of it are going to be. Some people have visions of what happened in the U.S. and Europe in the 1960s for instance, ghetto riots and social unrest. We see riots now in Jakarta, for instance, and some demographers relate such unrest to population pressures. This has not been studied much and the historical evidence that many of these social problems are related to urban growth

