

FOREWORD

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The moment is drawing near when in low- and middle-income countries, more people will live in urban areas than in rural. Most countries of Latin America and the Caribbean are already majority urban; if the forecasts of the United Nations Population Division prove to be on the mark, by 2030 Asia and Africa will also have passed the half-way point (United Nations, 2008). This gradual but apparently irresistible demographic transformation will eventually force a reappraisal of today's theories of economic development and the national development strategies and programs that these theories inform.

The force of the demography to shift ideas is being amplified by another large trend, in its way as profound as that of urbanization, in the nature of the political economy of poor countries. Many if not all of these countries are in the midst of decentralization, a process by which national governments and bureaucracies place greater responsibilities for service delivery and revenue-raising in the hands of lower-level governmental tiers, with municipal governments being especially important among them (Panel on Urban Population Dynamics, 2003). While national populations are being recomposed by urbanization in ways that channel more and more citizens into relatively small, dense geographic units – cities, in a word – many of the core activities of government are also being relocated to the governments that serve these units. Urbanization and decentralization are similar in being

messy processes, unevenly distributed and operating in fits and starts; but each seems to have developed enough momentum for the changes underway today to be carried forward well into the next century.

It now appears inevitable that these two trends will be joined by a third, that of global climate change, which will have unsettling consequences for the residents of cities and rural villages alike. In the drylands ecosystems that are expected to face increasing water scarcities, for instance, the agricultural practices suitable to an earlier era may well be seriously disrupted, and this may magnify the normal flows of migration between rural and urban areas and might also increase urban food prices, thus placing the urban and the rural poor under stress. Dryland cities will themselves have to cope with water scarcities, which in some cases will affect power supplies as well as the access to and cost of drinking water. Coastal cities, especially those at low elevation, will be more frequently buffeted by storms and flooding, which already present serious risks to the health, lives, and livelihoods of the urban poor. To adapt effectively to the coming threats, municipal and higher-level governments will finally need to do what they should have been doing all along: safeguard the neighborhoods in which the poor live, so that these neighborhoods at last have adequate drainage, safe supplies of drinking water, and housing durable enough to withstand periodic severe storms. The need for effective adaptation to climate change adds a new note of urgency to the often-neglected urban development agenda.

Much of the academic and popular writing on cities emphasizes the large cities that loom so vividly in the mind's eye – Lagos, Cairo, Mumbai, Shanghai, São Paulo – while overlooking the smaller places where the vast majority of urban residents live. Smaller cities and towns are usually less well-stocked with the technical and managerial expertise needed to meet the responsibilities being thrust upon them by decentralization; they also lack the revenue base to cope without well-designed transfers from higher governmental levels; they are unlikely to be equipped with the information systems and spatially-specific data to manage climate-related adaptation; and their residents already face health risks and exhibit levels of fertility that are similar to those of rural areas. Yet these small urban places also serve as important markets for the agricultural produce of surrounding rural areas, and provide significant services and supplies to these areas. In fashioning urban development strategies, careful thought needs to be given to

the challenges facing this small-city component – collectively large but often overlooked – of the urban population.

As the moment of the urban majority approaches, it will become increasingly important to think critically about the meaning of urban-ness, to set aside habits of thought that have placed city residents and rural villagers in separate conceptual categories, and to recognize the many ways in which their lives and well-being are intertwined. The notion of an urban–rural dichotomy has not yet lost all of its analytic value, but there is a growing understanding that it will need to be replaced by more graduated measures of the urban–rural continuum, ones which recognize the connectedness of rural residents to multiple urban places.

It will also become more and more important to conceive of cities not in terms of the well-being of their average resident – which is generally superior to that of the average rural villager – but rather as places of astonishing diversity and inequality, in which substantial populations live in slum neighborhoods facing threats to health that are as bad or worse than in rural environments. The urban poor cannot continue to be neglected, as they unfortunately have been in many national development strategies, and once they are recognized their situations will need to be correctly appraised. Poor city-dwellers are themselves a diverse group, and although they are often taken to be synonymous with slum-dwellers, substantial percentages of the urban poor live not in slums as such but in a variety of neighborhoods strewn across the urban landscape.

The chapters of this volume are notable in the efforts made by their authors to explore urban diversity, examine the differences that separate small cities from large, and document the multiple ways in which rural and urban dwellers engage, whether directly or indirectly, with each other. The materials collected here were obtained by methods that range from imaginative historical reconstructions to innovative sample surveys combining social and natural science techniques to the use of satellite imagery. The full arsenal of such scientific methods is likely to be needed if we are to fully apprehend the dimensions of urbanization and devise new development strategies to adapt to and humanely guide it.

References

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