

# **Problems of definition and evolution of rural populations**

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Rather than speak on actual rural demographic structures I have chosen to examine the problems that confront geographers who wish to study rural population internationally. I address four problems; the availability of published statistics; the definition of rural population; the problem of rural populations; and the world of the evolution of rural populations. At the outset, I would like to acknowledge my colleague J.B. Charrier the manuscript of whose book Villes et campagnes (Masson) has been one of the stimuli for this paper. It is to be published this year.

## **The limitations of published statistics**

Although published statistics are relatively abundant for developed countries of both east and west, they are very limited or difficult to access for developing countries. For example, the Demographic Yearbook of the United Nations gives only crude birth and death rates for the rural populations of 15 developing countries: India, Egypt, Bangladesh are there but not China, Indonesia, Pakistan, Brazil, Mexico that together have about a billion rural dwellers.

In reality, these statistics exist, but they are poorly distributed or not available outside the country. I suggest, in this regard that this Commission considers this problem and that we create a network for the exchange of rural demographic statistics for as many countries as possible. But why not also on the rural economy, society and culture of these countries with the idea of developing a consistent data base?

## **The diverse definitions of rural population**

The United Nations Yearbook notes about one hundred definitions of urban populations (and, therefore, by default of rural populations) that are utilised in different countries. Luckily, some definitions are not too dissimilar. The most common method is to fix a population size to distinguish urban from rural settlement but this figure varies noticeably from one country to another. The limit of 2,000 inhabitants is one of the most frequently used. This distinction is used for countries as different as France, the German Democratic Republic, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Israel, Ethiopia, Liberia, Honduras, Bolivia and Cuba. A very similar

definition (2,500) is used in the United States, Mexico, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Guam, and Bahrain. It descends to 1,500 inhabitants in Panama. The limit falls further in Canada, New Zealand, and Ireland, where it is 1,000 inhabitants. It descends even further to 200 inhabitants in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Iceland, to 400 inhabitants in New Caledonia, and 500 in Papua New Guinea.

The limit of 5,000 is, with that of 2,000, one of the most common. It is found in Cameroon, Ghana, Mali, the Sudan, Chad, Zambia, India, Iran, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. The limit rises as high as 9,000 inhabitants in Nepal, 10,000 in Senegal, Jordan and Portugal and even as high as 50,000 in Japan. It is necessary to add that, although in the majority of cases a population limit is the sole criterion, sometimes other criteria are added. In the United States, Canada, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Puerto Rico and Guam the urban population is defined as discussed but those settlements adjoining the main urban areas are subtracted from the rural population.

In other cases, as well as the criterion of size, account is taken of the occupations of the inhabitants. In Zaire, Zambia, Israel, India, and Japan a certain proportion of the population engaged in agriculture must not be exceeded for the population to be classified as urban. The figure ranges from one-third in Israel to three-quarters in India with Japan using 40 per cent. Sometimes a certain density of population has to be attained, such as 390 inhabitants per square kilometre in India and 100 inhabitants per hectare of built-up area in Czechoslovakia. In addition, the nucleated settlement must sometimes also exhibit certain urban characteristics when other conditions are not met. Such is the case in Cameroon, Sudan, Honduras, Panama and India. In the opposite sense, sometimes settlements are considered as urban when the population threshold is not met but certain other urban characteristics are present. In the case of Honduras, Japan, Czechoslovakia, New Caledonia specified facilities must be present whereas in the Netherlands and Zaire no more than 20 per cent of the population must be actively engaged in agriculture.

Finally, some countries combine numerous criteria. In India the urban settlement must have more than 5,000 inhabitants, more than 390 inhabitants per square kilometre, less than 75 per cent of the population actively engaged in agriculture and a pronounced urban character. The most extreme case is Czechoslovakia where settlements of greater than 5000 inhabitants must also have more than 100 inhabitants per square mile of built up area, at least five doctors, a pharmacist, a secondary school, an hotel, a bus terminal, less than 10 per cent of the population in agriculture etc. For those towns between two and five thousand people, the thresholds are lowered somewhat.

In an equally large number of cases, the criteria are simply administrative. Sometimes the main administrative centre at a certain level is classified as urban, In Malawi, Mali, Mongolia and Cyprus these are the main towns of the districts, in

Rwundi, prefectures in Costa Rica cantons (with several exceptions), in the Dominican Republic and in Brazil municiple centres and municiple districts, in El Salvado municiple centres, in Haiti communes, in Nicaragua departments and municiple centres in Equador provinces and cantons, in Paraguay departments and districts, in Indonesia municiple centres and regency capitals, in Syria districts and sub-districts, in Turkey provinces and districts, in Iraq communes, and in Jordan sub-districts. Sometimes settlements to be classified as towns are decided directly by the administration according to their own criteria. Such is the case in Benin, Botswana, Burundi, Swaziland, Togo, Tanzania, Upper Volta, Tanganyika, Zimbabwe, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Guyana, Afganistan, Korea, Finland, Greenland, Hungary and Poland.

There is, thus, an extraordinary variety of definitions of urban population, and, by default, rural population. This variety corresponds, in some cases, with different characteristics of the rural population. If, for instance, Japan's population threshold of 50,000 is applied in Scandinavia, or even Portugal's 10,000 threshold, most towns would be classified as rural. But in many cases the division between urban and rural populations is a result of historical decisions made on the basis of diverse criteria and often does not correspond to present day realities. In France, for example, some authors choose 5,000 inhabitants as the threshold and some (the sociologist Mendras and the historian Braudel) take it even as far as 15,000 people.

This variety of definitions involves more than a practical problem of comparability of sources. The more important issue is whether across our different countries we are talking about the same thing when we talk of the structure and evolution of the rural population. Are Scandinavian, American, French, Indian or Portuguese writers referring to the same thing when they analyse the rural populations of their countries? Assuming that we are speaking of the same thing, another less tractible problem emerges when we study the rural population itself, at least in developed nations. I speak of the definition and the nature of the rurban population on the one hand and the underlying rural population on the other.

### **Rurban populations: town or country people?**

We know that a process beginning in the 1940s in North America and Great Britain followed by the Benelux countries and Germany, a little later in France, and even later in the Mediterranean countries has involved large numbers of people leaving their towns for a rural location. To begin with they left the central cities, then the urban centres, then the urban agglomerations for more and more distant fringes. The process has become known as rurbanisation. The reasons for it are known. It has been caused by at the same time the urban crisis (ghettos, violence, poverty) and the attraction of the periurban areas (cost of land, nature, space) under the freedom generated by the automobile.

Despite a noticeable easing in the countries that experienced it first (particularly the United States and the Benelux countries), an easing that has been accompanied by a certain movement back to the central cities, the process has involved a considerable movement of people. In a country like France, where rurbanisation was not generally recognised until the 1970s, at the moment six rural dwellers out of ten live in the rurban areas, the Zones de Peuplement Industriel et Urbain (ZPIU) as defined by INSEE.

Several questions are relevant to understanding this phenomenon. First of all the definition of the rurban and underlying rural population. This is a similar problem to the definition of rural population that has already been confronted but this time within the rural population. When we speak of the rurban population across different populations are we really speaking of the same population? The French ZPIU, for example, are not exactly the same as the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas of the United States.

A second question is relevant. Should these rurban zones which maintain certain rural characteristics (open space, low population densities, a proportion of agriculturalists) but which depend functionally on the towns around which they form a sort of halo, be annexed by them? This annexation can be achieved quite effectively administratively as in the Federal Republic of Germany where communes are annexed by the city according to the extent of their rurbanization. Thus Duisburgh, an urban agglomeration of 600,000 extends over 230 square kilometres. In contrast, in France, communes on the edge of the urban area usually hang on desperately to their autonomy and refuse to be incorporated with the larger urban centre. More frequently it is when conducting research that the rurban population is combined with the urban population. According to whether rurban space is combined with the urban area or with the rural area demographic change appears completely different.

For example, in France if the rurban area had been annexed by urban areas between 1962 and 1975, the reduction in the rural population would have been catastrophic. Reduced to the underlying rural population it would have diminished by 0.75 % per year as a result of a negative migratory balance sheet (-0.63 % per year) and a slightly negative natural growth rate (-0.12 % per year). In contrast, by adding the rurban area to the rural area, the rural population was approximately maintained between the two censuses (-0.12 % per year) as a result of a migratory balance sheet slightly negative (0.14%) and a slightly positive natural growth rate (+0.02%). In the same perspective another question arises. Who is in the best position to study the rurban population, the rural geographer or the urban geographer? A question to which each will respond according to their own orientation.

But much more important than this internal geographic matter is the question of the unity of rural space. Now that it is fundamentally diverse can it still be the

object of a specific and coherent interpretation? In as much as rural space was fundamentally agricultural (for a long time rural and agricultural have been confused, at least in Europe) analysis of systems of production, of demographic and social structures, of agrarian countrysides has served as a lifeline or even as the backbone of the analysis of rural space, and has, therefore, provided its unity. From the time when, in developed countries, farmers became the minority, and sometimes very much the minority in rural areas (USA 10%, France 23%) and when the categories of other workers has tended to resemble those of the towns, the analysis has lost its central focus; it needs now to be undertaken on some other basis.

Without going beyond the demographics, it can be established that even if one takes into account all of the rural population (and not only the rural population) it divides into two parts with patterns of demographic evolution completely different. While the agricultural population is rapidly decreasing the non-agricultural population is growing. This is the case in the United States where the growth in the number of non-agriculturalists has compensated for the decrease in the number of farmers between 1950 and 1970 and has since passed it. It is equally the case in France and in other European countries. The question remains to know if rural population remains an object of study sufficiently coherent to merit a particular analysis with specific methods. This question is particularly relevant if we study the evolution of rural population in the whole world.

### **The evolution of rural population in the world**

The diversity of evolutionary paths is most evident. This observation might appear at first sight as quite paradoxical. Indeed, we know that the world's population is urbanising rapidly. Three per cent lived in cities in 1800, 15% in 1900, 30% in 1960, 42% in 1985. The figure will be 50% towards the year 2000. One could believe that in these circumstances the rural population is decreasing at the same pace. In relative terms this is true, because, as we have just seen, in a dozen years there will be as many urban dwellers in the world as rural even though the latter were the overwhelming majority less than a century ago.

In contrast, if we reason using absolute values things change completely. Because the world's population is growing rapidly a percentage decrease does not mean a decrease in absolute value. We can affirm that the total number of rural dwellers in the world continues to grow. But it is also true that the situations are very variable from one country to another. Generalising considerably, we can say that, paradoxically, the rural population is growing or maintaining itself at the same time in the most developed western countries and in the developing countries, but for quite different reasons.

Most of the developing countries are urbanising rapidly. On average the urban population is increasing each year by 4.8%. Now, if this increase is due in large part (2.8%) to a very strong natural increase (birth rates remain high while mortality

is becoming lower - the demographic transition), about half of it (2%) also results from rural migrants settling in the urban areas.

The rural exodus augments the urban growth but these departures represent only a relatively weak deduction from the countryside (about 1.4% per annum), a deduction less than the natural increase of the population. The rural areas are also experiencing the demographic transition. If mortality there is higher than in the towns (less developed medical facilities, a population a little older), birth rates are equally higher because traditions are more conservative. Illiteracy is also often 50 to 100% higher than in the towns which also influences the higher birth rates.

As a result, if in the developing countries the rural populations are decreasing in relative terms compared with urban populations they are growing in absolute terms. Between 1965 and 1980, the Chinese rural population grew by about 130 million, that of India by about 120 million, that of Indonesia has gained 30 million and those of Pakistan and Thailand each about 13 million. The rural population has also grown in Mexico, the Philippines, Zaire, Egypt, and in Turkey. Exceptions, such as Cuba, Iran and Brazil are rare and have maintained their rural populations at the same level.

In developed western countries, the rural population also has a tendency to increase (but slowly) in absolute value and to remain about the same in relative value, even though, for over a century it has been almost constantly diminishing, under the influence of the modernization of agriculture and then the growth of tertiary activities which have created employment in the towns.

The migration of rural dwellers, and notably farmers, towards the towns, if it hasn't ceased (in France, 500,000 rural dwellers moved to the towns between 1975 and 1982), has become much lower than the movement of town dwellers to the countryside (in France 1,500,000 between 1975 and 1982). Increase in the rural population which, as we have seen, is due to both rurbanisation and to the return of retired people to the country has, as a corollary, an easing or a stopping of urban growth.

In France, between 1975 and 1983, the population of the towns grew at only 0.9%; the central cities generally lost population. In Dijon, for example, population decreased by 1.04% annually between 1975 and 1982. In the United States the central cities are losing people, the suburbs are gaining a few, the non-metropolitan areas are growing rapidly. In the United Kingdom, all the major conurbations had fewer people in 1981 than in 1971. This turn around is the case for the majority of the developed countries as well as in Japan. It is also the case in certain developing countries such as Mexico, Brazil, South Korea and the periphery of some major centres in other countries. Rurbanisation has not only economic and social consequences such as daily commuting and the proliferation of social groups in the urban countryside, but also demographic consequences such as a rejuvenation of

the rural population (for it is generally younger couples who migrate there) and therefore an increase in fertility, a lowering of mortality, and finally a more balanced demographic structure.

The third major type of demographic change is that of countries where the rural population is decreasing in both percentage and absolute terms. These are the countries where the rural exodus is rapid and where it is not compensated for by natural increase. That is the case in a large number of eastern countries, notably the USSR. There the rural population, which was 131 million in 1940 (67% of the total population), dropped to 109 million in 1940 (52%), and to 100 million in 1979 (38%), despite a natural increase which, rather than decreasing, remained positive. We need to note, however, that these national figures mask diverse circumstances. The rural population is continuing to increase in central Asia, because natural increase is very high there (a similar situation to the developing countries), while it is decreasing in Europe and in Siberia.

In Southern Europe the situation is similar to eastern countries, where, Italy excepted, ruralisation has not yet attained the importance it has in western and northern Europe. The situation is quite similar in certain countries of Latin America (above all those of the south) where the rural exodus continues, but where the lowering of fertility does not allow the countryside to maintain their population.

### **Conclusion**

It can be seen that study of the structure and evolution of the world's rural population poses considerable problems at the level of the sources of data and definitions themselves, as well as at the conceptual and theoretical level of analysis. This only reinforces the need for a systematic study of rural populations, a task that this Commission should address.