Shifting the Imbalance

The Impact of Structural Adjustment on Rural-Urban Population Movements in Northern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

In many African countries, high rates of migration have often been blamed on the “urban bias” in the resource allocations of the state. While the urban areas have benefited from investments, the rural areas have suffered depletion, thereby widening the gap in incomes and basic facilities between the two areas. Inevitably, there has been massive migration from rural to urban areas in search of the “good life.” This population explosion in urban areas has had its attendant strain on facilities. One school of thought has suggested that the Structural Adjustment Program would address imbalances by shifting rural-urban terms of trade decisively in favour of rural producers and thereby encouraging a “return migration.” Another school of thought has disputed the predictions that SAP would relieve the urban areas of their burden, however. An examination of the impact of SAP on population movement between rural and urban areas in northern Nigeria supports this sceptical view; SAP has not stemmed rural-urban migration.

In the majority of African countries, high rates of rural-urban migration have been blamed on the “urban bias” in resource allocation within the policy framework of the developmental state. According to this argument, investment and terms of trade have been biased in favour of urban centres, while rural areas have suffered from systematic extraction of resources and infrastructural neglect. The result has been a widening gap in incomes and facilities between rural and urban areas, which has tended to attract increasing numbers of rural migrants to the urban areas in search of a share in the good life. Largely as a result of rural-urban migration, urbanization in sub-Saharan Africa has proceeded at twice the rate of overall population growth. This has led, on the one hand, to an increasing strain on urban facilities, the proliferation of shanty towns, and the burgeoning of uncontrolled informal activity, and

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on the other hand, to the depletion of the agricultural labour force in the context of declining production incentives.

Structural adjustment programmes have attempted to address these imbalances by shifting rural-urban terms of trade decisively in favour of rural producers. Some development analysts have suggested that reversing rural-urban terms of trade will produce a trend toward “return migration”—a movement of low-income urban dwellers back to the rural areas. Others, however, have suggested that the highly uneven impact of adjustment on both rural and urban areas is likely to produce a much less predictable pattern of response in terms of rural-urban population movements. The aim of this paper is to consider how adjustment has affected population movements between rural and urban areas in the northern part of Nigeria—an area which combines highly commercialized but environmentally unstable agriculture with intense population mobility and a long tradition of urbanization.

Central to the analysis of these issues is the recognition that the urban bias approach has overlooked central aspects of the distributional dynamics of African societies. This paper attempts to draw out some of the major historical and policy determinants of these dynamics. It begins with a brief outline of the history of rural-urban migration in northern Nigeria. This is followed by an analysis of the impact of crisis and adjustment on urban incomes and terms of trade, on rural income generation, and on the operation of rural-urban social networks. Evidence from recent fieldwork in various parts of northern Nigeria is then drawn together to suggest the emerging patterns of rural-urban population movements in the context of structural adjustment, and the implications of these new trends for economic development and social stability in Nigeria.

**The History of Rural-Urban Migration in Northern Nigeria**

Northern Nigeria stretches from the Guinea savannah to the Sahelian ecological zones. The climate is characterized by a short rainy season and a long dry season during which a variety of nonagricultural activities have traditionally been practised. The agricultural system is essentially grain-based, primarily maize and sorghum in the more southerly reaches of the region, and millet in the drier areas of the far north. The dominant ethnic group in the region are the Hausa-Fulani, the vast majority of whom are Muslim.

The long dry season and unreliable rainfall characteristic of northern Nigeria have encouraged the development of a culture of frequent migration. This, coupled with the long tradition of urbanization, dating back several centuries, has given rise to complex traditional patterns of rural-urban migration. While permanent rural-urban migration (kaura) existed even in precolonial times, temporary migration has traditionally been much more important. The most common type is seasonal migration (cin rani), often to urban areas, in search of income-generating work during
the dry season. Peripatetic Qur'anic scholarship constitutes a second important form of temporary migration. While students often followed their teachers (malamai), to rural locations, migration to cities for the period of scholarship was also common. Students combined study of the Qur'an with begging or casual labour, for the malamai or for wages. Both seasonal migration and peripatetic Qur'anic scholarship have traditionally been important means of relieving dry season pressures on the family granary, as well as channelling external resources to rural households.⁴

In precolonial times, rural-urban migration played an important role in the adaptation to uncertain rainfall and frequent drought characteristic of the region. This largely complementary relationship was altered during the colonial and post-Independence periods by the unevenness of economic development and increasing economic pressures on peasant agriculture. These developments have contributed to the distortion of the economic incentives underlying migration. The migration of rural inhabitants increased markedly during the early colonial period, in response to the imposition of taxation, the increasing commercialization of agriculture, and local and regional food shortages.⁵ These forces tended to undermine the pre-colonial systems of production and distribution in rural communities, intensifying pressures for migration to urban areas in search of additional resources to supplement household incomes.

During the post-Independence period, two factors dramatically increased the rate of rural-urban migration. The first was the Sahelian drought of 1972-1974, which forced inhabitants of many parts of northern Nigeria and neighbouring Sahelian countries to flee to Nigerian urban centres in search of food and work. According to Mortimore,⁶ permanent outmigration from rural communities in the far north virtually doubled during the period of the Sahelian drought, and cyclical migration increased even more dramatically, swelling the ranks of the urban informal sector with street traders, night guards, load carriers, and people engaged in a range of other itinerant service activities normally performed by cyclical migrants from rural northern Nigeria. In the two decades since then, subsequent droughts and the general downturn in rainfall levels and harvests in the Nigerian far north have maintained high levels of cyclical rural-urban migration.

The impact of the Nigerian oil boom was perhaps an even more vital factor in the acceleration of rural-urban migration. The economic effect of the oil boom was to dramatically increase the unevenness of investment in the rural and urban areas. Rising urban wages, cheap food policies, and a boom in urban investment were accompanied by a serious neglect of peasant agriculture. High levels of food imports, the increasing overvaluation of the exchange rate and rapid inflation seriously depressed rural-urban terms of trade.⁷ At the same time, rising wages among the urban working class led to rising demand in the urban informal sector, and the urban construction boom created a high demand for casual labour. This expansion of opportunities in itinerant and casual urban activities attracted an increasing number
of permanent and cyclical rural migrants struggling to supplement their incomes in the face of drought and declining agricultural terms of trade.

Both the economic pressures on rural households and the relatively buoyant opportunities in the urban areas forced northern Nigerian rural migrants to venture far beyond their traditional migration circuits to distant urban centres in the south of Nigeria. Mortimore speaks of the “discovery” of Lagos during the 1970s by rural migrants of the far north, plagued by drought at home and attracted by the “pot of gold” at the core of the Nigerian oil boom. Much of this rural-urban movement, even between the far north and Lagos, remained cyclical and revolved around itinerant street activities, or commercial activities of northern comparative advantage, such as goat trading.

Some authors view these developments as evidence of the continuing complementarity between drought-prone northern agriculture and the urban areas. Rural-urban migration, whether permanent or cyclical, is seen as a means of channelling urban resources to rural households in the form of goods, remittances and dry-season incomes. Even during the height of the oil boom, however, the informal sector in Nigerian cities—the main income-generating option of rural migrants—was already showing signs of stress. Despite buoyant demand during the period, the informal sector was increasingly plagued by stagnating incomes and a declining capacity for labour absorption. These pressures were greatest in low-income informal activities, especially the itinerant, temporary activities largely pursued by migrants.

The bloody Maitatsine uprising which took place in the northern city of Kano in 1980 testifies to the increasing tension between the needs of rural migrants and the urban economic realities of the oil boom period. The followers of Maitatsine were drawn largely from the floating population of “youths, gandawa, and unemployed migrants” who were increasingly unable to sustain themselves in the context of rising inflation and intensifying saturation at the lower end of the informal sector.

While the majority of the participants in the uprising were from northern Nigeria, the presence of followers from Cameroun, Niger, Chad, and other Sahelian countries indicates the wide hinterland from which migrants were drawn to Nigerian cities, particularly in the context of the oil boom and the aftermath of the Sahelian drought. The 3,000 or more people who died in the uprising, and the eruption of similar conflicts involving the same yam tattsine sect in four other northern Nigerian towns in the five years that followed, are a stark indication that these population movements, even during the fat years of the oil boom, failed to constitute a “benign factor transfer” to the rural areas. On the contrary, the patterns of rural-urban migration during the oil boom era represented an intensification of environmental pressures and social inequalities, along with the erosion of the urban income-generating options of the majority of rural migrants.
The Lean Years: The Impact of Crisis and Adjustment

When crisis hit the Nigerian economy in the early 1980s, any semblance of complementarity in rural-urban migration patterns was eliminated. In the rural areas, terms of trade continued to turn against rural producers. By 1985, production terms of trade had fallen to barely one third of their 1981 level (Table 1). These developments were accompanied by a serious contraction in supplementary income-earning opportunities available in the urban areas, both in the formal and the informal sectors. Rising urban unemployment, falling real wages and accelerating inflation simultaneously eroded the income-generating capacity of the informal sector and swelled its ranks with increasing numbers of unemployed and underpaid urban dwellers, bidding down returns and intensifying the competition faced by rural migrants.12 Rural households found themselves squeezed between falling terms of trade in agriculture, and a dramatic contraction in urban opportunities for supplementary income generation.

Nigeria’s Structural Adjustment Programme was introduced in 1986 with a principal aim of correcting this mounting bias against agriculture. With regard to agriculture, policies of devaluation, liberalization of agricultural producer prices, and the removal of subsidies from agricultural inputs constituted the core of the structural adjustment prescription. These conventional adjustment measures were accompanied by the unconventional move of banning grain imports, which had reached a staggering 2,000,000 tonnes per year by 1982.

In the urban areas, on the other hand, structural adjustment policies aimed to remove the privileged access to resources sustained by state capitalism in the context of the oil boom. In addition to the measures mentioned above, public and private sector retrenchment intensified, resulting in a continued increase in urban unemployment, while severe wage restraint in the context of skyrocketing inflation dramatically eroded real wages. By 1987, real wages in the lower rank of the civil service were worth only 37% of their 1975 value.13 However, the expectation that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inputs Year</th>
<th>Agricultural Commodity</th>
<th>Composite</th>
<th>Consumer</th>
<th>Commodity/Farm Inputs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Price Ratio</td>
<td>Price Index</td>
<td>Price Index</td>
<td>Price Index</td>
<td>Price Index</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981/2</td>
<td>128.9</td>
<td>116.7</td>
<td>147.6</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982/3</td>
<td>118.3</td>
<td>131.2</td>
<td>166.5</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983/4</td>
<td>147.2</td>
<td>199.7</td>
<td>228.5</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984/5</td>
<td>140.5</td>
<td>274.3</td>
<td>358.4</td>
<td>0.39</td>
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</table>

these measures would free up resources for the expansion of informal enterprise proved to be misplaced; devaluation caused input and equipment costs to skyrocket, while falling real wages and rising urban unemployment eroded informal sector markets and depressed income levels.¹⁴

**Shifting Terms of Trade and Rural-Urban Linkages**

The net effect of adjustment policies was a dramatic shift in rural-urban terms of trade against urban wage earners. In Nigeria, the ratio of the real urban minimum wage to its rural counterpart declined from 2.5 in 1977 to 0.8 in 1991, indicating that average rural incomes were now above the urban minimum wage.¹⁵ Urban informal incomes also fared badly under structural adjustment; a study conducted in 1992 showed that 46% of informal entrepreneurs earned below the minimum wage, eroded as it was in the context of adjustment.¹⁶ However, the shift in rural-urban terms of trade does not appear to have encouraged a reversal of rural-urban migration patterns. As some commentators point out, the shift in terms of trade is not so much the result of a rise in rural incomes as of a dramatic depression in urban incomes, from which rural producers do not appear to have gained.¹⁷ In fact, the distributional dynamics of Nigerian society suggest that rural households have actually lost from the decline in urban fortunes. Evidence from a variety of African countries indicates that in the face of the severe contraction of urban incomes and employment, rural households are now plagued by declining remittances and nonfarm employment opportunities, and a reduced demand for rural agricultural products.¹⁸

Even within the agricultural sector, structural adjustment does not appear to have improved the lot of the bulk of rural producers. While large-scale farmers, particularly those with access to high-value urban and industrial markets, have gained from structural adjustment, the majority of small-scale farmers have not benefitted from the new structure of incentives. In northern Nigeria, grain is both the major food crop and the major cash crop. The dramatic increase in grain prices under the Structural Adjustment Program has in general been outstripped by increases in production costs and the cost of living.¹⁹ As Table 2 indicates, the price index for fertilizer distributed on the open market (the main input used by northern Nigerian farmers) increased to 766 by 1992, against a corresponding grain price index of 536. Labour costs have also skyrocketed; in Kano State, casual agricultural labour rose to an index of 600 between 1986 and 1992. Grain prices have not fared much better against the cost of living, only managing intermittently to rise above the rural CPI. In addition, the drought-prone nature of northern Nigerian agriculture makes small-scale farmers highly vulnerable to food shortages, especially in bad years. Even in good years, 10-20% of northern Nigerian farmers do not produce enough food for their households.²⁰ In this situation, high grain prices become a problem, contributing more to eroding rather than increasing small farmer incomes.
Table 2  
Index of Fertilizer, Grain and Rural Consumer Prices in Nigeria (1985 = 100)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Fertilizer Price Index (Official)</th>
<th>Fertilizer Price Index (Market)</th>
<th>Grain Price Index</th>
<th>Rural Price Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>112.2</td>
<td>127.8</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>112.2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>112.2</td>
<td>194.4</td>
<td>173.0</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>164.6</td>
<td>305.6</td>
<td>179.2</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>225.6</td>
<td>255.6</td>
<td>174.0</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>225.6</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>329.9</td>
<td>328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>426.8</td>
<td>766.7</td>
<td>535.8</td>
<td>471</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Within this context, access to nonfarm incomes has become more rather than less important under structural adjustment. In the face of rising production and consumption costs, access to adequate amounts of inputs, labour and consumer goods depends increasingly on access to additional sources of income outside agriculture. In the face of a general decline in agricultural incomes among the majority of small-scale farmers, rural nonfarm income opportunities have tended to contract. This has tended to increase rather than decrease the pressures for migration to urban areas in search of seasonal employment.

It has been argued that extended family and communal ties between rural and urban areas will play an important role in the reallocation of labour and resources motivated by the shift in rural-urban terms of trade. Some argue that kinship ties will facilitate return migration to the rural areas, while others maintain that these ties will provide urban households with access to cheap food from their rural relatives, eliminating the need for return migration. Although they reach contrary conclusions with regard to the impact of the Structural Adjustment Program on rural-urban migration trends, both views emphasize the importance of rural-urban kinship and communal networks in determining the outcome of structural adjustment incentives. Kinship and communal networks are recognized to have played a central role in facilitating rural-urban migration during the 1960s and 70s, and the literature appears virtually unanimous in assuming that they will play an equally central part in determining the new patterns of rural-urban population movements arising in the context of adjustment.

Little consideration has been given to the question of how the Structural Adjustment Program has affected the strength of rural-urban social ties themselves. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that economic crisis reduces the effectiveness of social networks in facilitating migration and access to resources between rural and
urban areas. The intensification of economic pressures on rural as well as urban households may actually reduce the ability of kinship and communal networks to respond to the needs of their members on either side of the rural-urban divide. This would tend to undermine the role of kinship ties as an equilibrating mechanism, resulting in the intensification of pressures in both the urban and the rural areas. In this case, changes in rural-urban migration patterns would represent independent responses to increased economic pressures in both sectors, which may well intensify rather than reduce the disequilibria created by shifts in rural-urban terms of trade.

**New Trends in Rural-Urban Migration**

A number of Nigerian studies indicate that, under the Structural Adjustment Program, the predominant direction of migration is still from rural to urban areas. The assumption that rural-urban kinship ties and the continued availability of land would serve to pull surplus urban labour back to the rural areas has run up against the realities of economic pressures and coping strategies in urban and rural households.

From the perspective of urban households, the hypothesized return to the rural areas is not taking place for a variety of reasons. First of all, the phenomenon of urban farming has made it possible for urban households to turn to agriculture without returning to the rural areas. Many of those who take up farming in order to mitigate the effects of skyrocketing food prices and falling real wages make use of back yards or nearby vacant lots or rent land in the peri-urban areas. Others have actually turned to farming land in their home villages, but, rather than returning physically to tend the land, carry out their farming activities through village-based relatives while continuing to reside in town.

These strategies derive from a second and more fundamental impediment to return migration: life in the rural areas is perceived to be no better under structural adjustment than life in the urban wage-earning and informal sectors. Because of the high cost and uncertainty of returning to agriculture in the context of adjustment, it is not attractive or even economically feasible for the urban poor, who are perhaps the least well-placed to take on such a risky occupational shift. In addition, depressed incomes among the bulk of small-scale farmers make such a move even less attractive. The quick returns and wider range of income-generating opportunities available in town continue to maintain the attraction of urban residence despite the drastic contraction in urban incomes.

From the perspective of rural small-scale farming households, the rising cost of agricultural production and consumption goods has intensified the importance of non-agricultural activities in funding input purchases and household expenses. The profitability of rural nonagricultural activities has been undermined by falling agricultural incomes and the increased penetration of urban informal-sector goods into the rural areas.
The result has been an intensification among northern Nigerian rural households of circulatory patterns of rural-urban migration.\(^\text{30}\) Rural migrants are increasingly coming to town to look for money during the dry season, both for household needs and to finance inputs, and then returning to farm when the rains come. This pattern characterizes a number of male itinerant workers, from hawkers of cigarettes and sweets to mobile nail clippers. In the face of a declining capacity of urban relatives to provide accommodation and food for rural migrants, the latter are relying increasingly on the institutions of itinerant Qur’anic scholarship to facilitate seasonal stints in the urban informal sector. The practice of itinerant Qur’anic scholarship allows them to stay with their Qur’anic master in town and work at petty trading jobs during the day. In northern Nigeria, certain sectors of itinerant informal workers, such as itinerant fruit hawkers and petty load carriers, are dominated by Qur’anic students.

Permanent rural-urban migration only appears to be taking place among migrants from southern Nigeria, many of whom come from the Igbo areas of the southeast, which are already plagued by severe land shortage.\(^\text{31}\) In northern Nigerian cities, migrants from southern Nigeria tend to dominate the more lucrative informal activities, with incomes capable of sustaining a permanent move to the urban areas. Furthermore, Igbo migrants from southeastern Nigeria have access to well-established commercial networks which facilitate their entry into more lucrative urban informal activities. These trends appear to be contributing to increasing ethnic and religious tensions in northern cities. Muslim northerners perceive themselves to have been ghettoized into low-income activities in their own territory, while the more lucrative opportunities continue to be dominated by southeastern Nigerians who are predominantly Christian.

In general, however, kinship and communal networks have failed to act as an equilibrating mechanism in the face of structurally adjusted terms of trade. Rather than drawing labour back into the rural areas, kinship ties have in many cases been weakened under the pressures of adjustment. The severe contraction of real incomes in both rural and urban areas has left households on both sides less able to maintain ties and contribute to extended family needs. Despite assertions that the flow of remittances from the urban to rural areas has reversed under the Structural Adjustment Program, the prevailing situation in Nigeria is one of declining remittances in both directions.\(^\text{32}\) With declining remittances from urban relatives, rural households are less able to produce food crop surpluses which could be sent to urban relatives. In addition, the dramatic rise in the cost of transport has drastically reduced visiting between rural and urban households, which tends to be the main avenue for remittances.

As economic pressures mount, both rural and urban households have also shown themselves less willing to take in relatives and clansmen, a central mechanism for migration in both directions. As mentioned above, aspiring rural migrants are forced to make increasing use of the institution of Qur’anic scholarship because of their
declining access to assistance from urban-based relatives; far from drawing urban relatives back to the rural areas, rural households are increasingly sending family members to the urban areas in order to relieve the household of mouths to feed and possibly bring in a little additional income from urban sources.

Conclusions

Overall, the adjustment of rural-urban migration patterns under structural adjustment, rather than contributing to the re-establishment of an equilibrium between income-generating capacity and the availability of labour, has tended to reinforce tensions and disequilibria within and between rural and urban areas. The already saturated urban informal sector continues to draw in labour from the rural areas, owing to cost-push factors in the rural areas and the substitution of Qur’anic networks for the weakened relations of assistance between rural and urban relatives. In the process, labour is drawn out of agriculture, despite an intensifying labour shortage and improved terms of trade relative to the urban sector. In the final analysis, the reversal of rural-urban terms of trade under structural adjustment has not improved income distribution but rather has tended to contribute to the further economic marginalization of both low-income urban dwellers and small-scale farmers.33

In the context of intensified economic pressures on the operation of social networks, the avenues available for rural-urban migration have tended to reinforce ethnic and religious tensions within the urban areas of northern Nigeria. The predominantly Muslim migrants from northern Nigeria and Niger are largely channelled into low-income itinerant activities in the urban informal sector, a tendency which is reinforced by declining rainfall patterns, the circulatory nature of rural-urban movements, and the increasing use of Qur’anic institutions to facilitate migration. The predominantly Christian migrants from southeast Nigeria, however, have access to well-established and economically fairly buoyant commercial networks, which tend to channel migrants into more permanent and lucrative informal activities.

As economic pressures mount in the face of declining real incomes and an increasingly saturated urban labour market, ethnic and religious tensions have begun to erupt. Since 1991, several bloody riots have broken out in northern Nigerian cities, in which itinerant Qur’anic scholars and other street youths have been mobilized to attack Igbo traders, restaurant operators and other high-income informal actors. As in the case of the Maitatsine uprising, however, these warning signals of serious disequilibria in rural-urban migration patterns have largely been ignored. In the expectation that the market is capable of determining appropriate patterns of rural-urban migration, structural adjustment has increasingly undermined rather than promoted the tendency of internal population movements to contribute to the emergence of stable frameworks for economic development or democratic collective action.
NOTES


7 Watts, *Silent Violence*, 75.

8 Mortimore, *Adapting to Drought*, 35.

9 Ibid., 195.


11 Lubeck, “Islamic Protest and Oil-Based Capitalism,” 269, 281.

12 Meagher and Yunusa, “Limits to Labour Absorption.”


16 Meagher and Yunusa, “Informalization.”


21 Berry, “Coping with Confusion,” 251.
22 Jamal and Weeks, Africa Misunderstood, 127.
23 Addison and Demery, “Rural Poverty Alleviation,” 81.
24 Jamal and Weeks, Africa Misunderstood, 124.
25 Berry, “Coping with Confusion,” 269; Watts, Silent Violence, 509.
27 Jamal and Weeks, Africa Misunderstood, 124; Meagher and Yunusa, “Informalization.”
28 Meagher and Yunusa, “Informalization.”
29 Jamal and Weeks, Africa Misunderstood, 127.
30 Meagher and Yunusa, “Informalization.”
33 Jamal and Weeks, Africa Misunderstood, 123.