

# A third world view of cities

It may come as a surprise to many Americans that most cities of the world are the places to which people are flocking, hoping to find a better life. In this country where people still flee the city looking for the American dream out in the suburbs, this pattern of movement contrasts sharply with that experienced by most of the world's people. Growing urbanism is a force in the world that needs to be better understood, for here are opportunities as well as problems.

Over one-half of the world's people still live in rural areas where they work the land. Even China, with its sophisticated nuclear expertise, is still a land where every three of four people are farmers. And much the same is true for all of Asia, where three of five of all the people in the world live, 70 percent live off of the land. And it is in this massive continent and in other parts of the developing world that change to urban living is most rapidly taking place.

It is estimated that 77 percent of the world's population live in the Less Developed Countries, and among these countries only 34 percent of the people live in cities, whereas in the More Developed Countries the comparable city figure is 72 percent. Examples of these MDCs are the United States and Canada where 75 percent are classed as urban dwellers, while in Europe the figure is 73 percent.

It is in the LDCs that urban growth is most felt. For example, of the 14 largest urban agglomerations in the world, all of which exceed 10 million resident, 12 of them are in the developing world. New York and Los Angeles in this country are the only two in this group from the West. This was not always the case.

In 1990, for example, nine of the ten largest cities of the world were in the West, either in Europe or the United States. The Industrial Revolution, started in England and in this country in Pawtucket, accounts for the rapid growth of cities at that time, something that had not reached the third world countries. But now as more and more industrial activities shift from these countries to LDCs, cities in these developing countries have begun to boom. And places such as Sao Paulo, Jakarta, Shanghai, Bombay and others are experiencing this rapid growth.

Not only do cities attract the migrant from the countryside, but the countryside itself is becoming less hospitable for the farmer.

Of the 93 million people added to this planet each year, over 70 percent, according to United Nations estimates, will be added to the urban centers of the world. This means that the 43 percent of the world's people who live in cities today will grow to more (than) 50 percent by the year 2010.

This movement to cities is not necessarily bad, in fact, reasonable city growth is necessary as younger migrants replace older workers and economic development takes place. The problems arise when cities are engulfed by too many migrants in too short a period of time such that basic services cannot be provided.

It is a strange sensation to travel to the edges of Rio de Janeiro where one has to climb to the high ground away from the city center, and in this mountainous setting that has fantastic views of the ocean, one finds the infamous favelas, those well known slums of the city. In our country such sites would be prime land for expensive suburban development

because of the location. But in the developing world land in the suburbs, away from city services and the activities of the city center, is used by the poor because such suburban land is not as prized as is city land.

The growth of cities in the Less Developed Countries of the world promises to bring hardship to many because of the inability of these poor countries to accommodate and provide services to the vast numbers of migrants who find lessened opportunity in the countryside. But at the same time, the opportunities that can come with increasing city size mean a large and cheap work force, potential new markets

and a younger population to replace one that is older and at retirement.

For Americans who generally look upon cities with a jaundiced eye and who try to escape them, they should recognize that most people in the world see them as centers of opportunity and are moving to them. And as world population grows, cities will be an even more significant part of that growth. City growth and increasing urbanization are the wave of the future.

*Chester E. Smolski*

*Professor of Geography and Director of Urban Studies, Rhode Island College*