

# Urbanisation and labour migration

Daphne Venturas

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**T**HIS paper aims to illustrate the economic dynamics underlying increasing urbanisation and labour migration in a developing economic system.

The simplest and clearest analysis of this urbanisation and labour migration process is the elementary 'push-pull' model, developed by Dr F. A. H. Wilson in *Migrant Labour in South Africa*.

The two areas under consideration are the rural sector which supplies most of the labour and the urban or industrial sector which is the demand side of the model.

- *Force 1 is the urban, or demand pull* which attracts labour to the source of work. Not to be discounted is the non-economic pull of the 'bright lights' of an urban area: people, especially the young, are drawn to cities, not only for the money and job opportunities, but also because it promises greater excitement.

- *Force 2 is the rural, or supply, push* which is exerted on people living in the rural areas to go to work in the towns.

*In the case of the traditional, subsistence, rural sector*, the supply push can be due to increasing poverty through rapid population growth, unmatched by changes in agricultural methods. Another pressure may flow directly from land reforms which are done in such a way that the number of landless peasants is increased as was the case with 19th century enclosures. There may also be the simple desire of subsistence farmers to go out and earn sufficient money to buy equipment. Finally there is the pressure of some cash tax imposed by the central government to coerce labour into cash employment.

*In the case of modern commercial farming*, the major pressure pushing people off the land is associated with the increasing prosperity of the land. The development of mechanisation, in particular, has exerted a strong two-stage push from the land, which made redundant much of the labour used. Farmers no longer wanted labourers on their farms all year round, although there was still a strong demand for labour to do the harvesting and weeding.

With the development of weed-killers and mechanical harvesters, there came a sharp decline in demand for seasonal workers and workers were pushed by unemployment off the land and away from the villages to look for work elsewhere.

- *Force 3 — the pull back to the land* occurs more in subsistence rural sectors than in commercial agriculture. This pressure derives mainly from the social security provided by the traditional society. When men go to the towns to work for the first time, the work they do tends to be unskilled and poorly paid, without much in the way of unemployment insurance, sickness benefits or old-age pensions. In such a situation, the traditional society will provide the security the town does not if the worker has maintained his links. Further, there is the sociological force of a pull back to the roots of a home community for people who consider themselves farmers at heart, but who have to go to the towns just to make ends meet.

- *Force 4 is the employer, or demand push* of labour away from its place of work. This is a push which occurs not only, as in agriculture or construction, because of seasonal fluctuations in demand. It is also an economic response by employers in situations, particularly common in developing economies, where the losses incurred by a high annual rate of labour turnover are outweighed by the gains to be had from employing workers who have a supplementary income from the land and whose families do not require all the social infrastructure to support life in town. This is very much the case if labour is migrant and families have been left at home in the country.

As an economy develops, both sets of forces (1 and 2) exerting pressure on people to move to towns have become stronger and stronger, while forces 3 and 4 have grown weaker.

*Thus, one of the direct consequences of industrialisation has been the process of urbanisation whereby a larger and larger number of people have moved permanently to the cities. Between 1900 and 1950, whilst world population, as a whole, increased by 49 per cent, the number of people in urban centres of 20 000 or more, increased by 239 per cent. (G. Breese, *Urbanization in Developing Countries*.)*

In applying the model to South Africa, it helps to divide the rural side into two parts: the white-owned commercial sector and the subsistence area set aside for black ownership by the Land Act of 1913.

All four forces operated in South Africa initially, as they did in any other country. Over time, force 1, the urban pull, has become stron-

ger and stronger, starting from the opening of the Rand gold mines and, more recently, can be seen in the rate of growth of employment in urban-based sectors. It is *force 2*, however (the rural push), which has strengthened. The mechanisation of agriculture pushed both black and white off the white farms, while the failure of farming in the Reserves which did not produce enough to feed all those living on the land, pushed blacks off the land owned by them.

Another consequence of the increasing poverty of the Reserves was the steady weakening of *force 3*, the pull back to the rural area. *Force 4*, the demand push by employers, has probably remained stronger in South Africa than in any other economy developing at a comparable rate and the reason for this is the existence of the industrial colour bar. The effect of this racial barrier has been to slow down the acquisition of skills by black workers, the whole purpose of the colour bar being to reserve skilled, more highly-paid jobs for whites. This has meant that it is still more profitable for employers to hire migrants than to bear the cost of stabilising their work force.

But even this has become weaker over time, for as the economy has grown so the demand increases for skilled labour and there has been pressure on the colour bar. While this has not broken, blacks are doing far more skilled work than they were previously allowed to do. Increased economic growth can only make it less and less profitable for employers not to stabilise ever-increasing proportions of their labour force.

This is where the South African model diverges from that of the rest of the world — in fact, where economics and ideology are in conflict. Economics would dictate the absorption of the rural population into the urban areas where it would form an ever-increasingly skilled pool of labour and this, in turn would facilitate increased industrial and economic development. Since 1948, however, government policy in South Africa has been to reduce, halt and ultimately, reverse the flow of African labour to the towns.

If the goal of a society is to prevent the majority of its industrial workers from settling near their place of work, then forces 3 and 4 have to be strengthened. Making the rural pull stronger is not easy. To achieve its objective, the government has to concentrate on *force 4*, the demand push.

Economic forces have, over time, made this force weaker and weaker, but ideological forces are aimed at boosting the ever-weakening demand push away from cities and it is towards this goal that only workers with contracts come to the cities to work, leaving their families behind in the rural areas.

*Force 2* may be getting stronger as the Reserves become more poor, but it is now illegal for those without contracts to come to the towns, so they do so knowing that there are risks. *Force 3* is reinforced by the fact that workers want to see their families and so return to the rural areas.

*Force 4* is given legal sanction and effect by the plethora of laws which forbid labour to settle permanently in the urban areas. Moreover, housing for black labour is in the form of single quarters with little provision for family accommodation.

South Africa has, therefore, decided to pursue economic growth which requires more and more labour in the urban areas, while insisting that all Africans must ultimately make their homes in the Reserves. The result is a pattern of oscillating migration at the very heart of the economy, despite all economic pressures to the contrary.

In 1966, it was decided to halt and reverse the flow of black migrants into the Western Cape which was declared a coloured preferential area. No new housing has been erected for families since 1972 and the demand for housing in the townships far exceeds the supply. The result has been the creation of squatter camps where men, legally in Cape Town, live with their families who may or may not be here legally. These camps are regarded as a grave problem; in fact, they are actually a solution to the housing shortage and to the poverty of life in the Reserves. In other words, these camps are logical economic responses to the economic pressures which encourage urbanisation of rural populations as industrialisation and commerce expand in a growing economy.

