

Educational Differences in Internal Migration Trends Over the Course of Urbanization in Developing Countries

Our understanding of the migration patterns that underly the fast urbanization in developing countries is mainly based on theory and country case-studies. We develop a comparative perspective to test the mobility transition hypothesis of a patterned spatial and social diffusion of internal migration within countries. Adopting a long-term view, spanning all stages of urbanization, we describe trends in the rates of different types of internal out-migration from the primate city, other cities, their rural hinterland and remote rural areas for two educational strata of population (completed primary or less versus higher levels). The estimates rely on repeated population censuses from 41 developing countries (covering the period 1975-2017), internationally consistent remote-sensing definitions of urban agglomerations, and random-effect Poisson regressions to integrate the international set of migration rates.

Results confirm a fast decline in inter-rural and a rise in rural-to-urban migration in early stages of urbanization. The rural exodus diffuses down the settlement hierarchy alongside a shift from proximity to long-distance movements over time. Inter-urban migration played a major role in the initiation of the mobility transition, but then declines swiftly and rises again in late-transitional stages. More educated populations exhibit higher rates of migration when compared to the less educated, especially in early to mid-stages of urbanization and in urban-ward and long-distance flows, most prominently towards the largest city. Lower educated strata experience higher migration down the hierarchy of cities, and their rural exodus is spatially diverted to the rural hinterland of cities.

The insights confirm a vanguard role of higher educated populations in the spatial diffusion of migration down the settlement hierarchy, by innovating new forms of migration over the urbanization process. Yet lower educated strata face obstacles in establishing an urban living base. We propose potential explanations for these findings and discuss their implications for urbanization in developing countries.