

# Planning and development of rural and semi-urban settlements

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## Introduction

For a city to develop as a successful human settlement, it has to be viewed and planned within the wider national context. This approach is especially important in developing countries where only the capital, and perhaps one more city, have the services and facilities that ensure a decent quality of life for their citizens.

The problems of over-population, environmental degradation and strained infrastructure, facilities, and basic services, which many cities in poorer countries face, may not be the result of ineffective city planning only but may also be related to the poor state of the hinterland's rural and semi-urban settlements. The planning and amelioration of such settlements should be included as a priority in any country's national development strategy. The attainment of this goal would not only provide a better quality of life for the poorer and less powerful members of society who usually inhabit non-urban areas, but would also enhance the main cities' ability to cope with their problems and to improve the living conditions of their own citizens.

## Urban attractions

Every capital city in the world is likely to attract migrants from other parts of the nation because of its greater social and economic development potentials. When the capital city is the main seat of political power and the center of the nation's economic, social and cultural development, as is the case in many developing countries, it inevitably becomes the main destination of out-migrants from the less developed rural and semi-urban regions. When the latter's economic growth and employment possibilities are limited and their housing, communication, social, commercial and entertainment services inadequate, it is understandable why the capital city may become overpopulated. If it suffers from population explosion, the problem may not be the result of the inhabitants' birth rates only; it may also be one of the consequences of the great influx of migrants from the underdeveloped hinterland. If these migrants happen to belong, as they often do, to the poorer and less educated strata, they will not only increase the size of the city's existing population; they may also undermine, through their negative response, any national population control efforts that aim at lowering birth rates through family planning.

Such underprivileged immigrants either end up in slums that are already over-populated or they create their own squatter settlements and shanty towns that add to a metropolis' physical planning, environmental and socio-economic problems. They also tend to ruralize the metropolis by importing into it some of their poor habits and patterns of behavior that may not be suitable to a proper city life – such as using the street as a garbage dump; turning the street into a children's playground; or keeping children, especially girls, out of school or encouraging child labor.

## A case in Egypt

In my country, Egypt, the southern region (Upper Egypt) was, for many years, the major area of out-migration because of its lower socio-economic development and its lack of higher educational services. As part of its decentralization policy that aims at developing all regions of the country, Egypt instituted within that southern region the social services it lacked, including higher educational institutions and universities, along with public and private sector economic development projects. As a result of such developments, a smaller number from among the poorer and less educated classes and fewer well-educated professionals and technicians may feel the urge to leave their region and move to Cairo as many others did in the past.

I would like to give an example from personal experience

as to the importance of the proper planning of small towns and rural areas so that they may keep their citizens within their fold, particularly those who are essential to their development.

I was born and I spent the early years of my life in a small semi-urban town in Lower (Northern) Egypt. Because it had many highly educated people, including my father, who encouraged its proper planning, it was one of the most comfortable and attractive small towns in the country. It was situated in a lovely setting along the Nile; and it had very good housing, basic educational institutions, proper health services, the necessary commercial services, and entertainment facilities that included a lovely sports club and a movie house. I have not forgotten the American cowboy and Charlie Chaplin films nor the ice-cream and sweets that I used to enjoy as a child within my birthplace. I also still remember the visits to our town that were undertaken by high level political leaders, and by famous Egyptian entertainers, such as Om Kolthoum and Mohamed Abdel Wahab who are considered the greatest singers that the Middle East and North Africa have known. As our town had no higher educational institutions, my family, which was interested in offering its children the best education possible, had to send its four children to boarding schools in Cairo. After a number of years, my father, who was a physician-surgeon, decided to leave the region and continue his medical career in Cairo in order to be close to his children. He had to abandon his two very successful private clinics, one of which was in our town and the other in a nearby town across the Nile where he was, also, the director of its municipality hospital. When my father left for Cairo, it was the poorer people in the region who suffered from the loss of such a high level medical professional. While the surgical operations that he used to perform at the municipality hospital were offered free to the public, he also used to give

free health care to needy clients in his own private clinics.

This example from personal experience is meant to show that if semi-urban and surrounding rural areas, because of their adequate facilities and services, keep their educated and professional citizens living within them, they have a good chance of developing into attractive human settlements and thus avoid becoming major out-migration zones. That is the reason why Egypt has decentralized its governmental administration so that all the governorates, and not only Cairo and Alexandria, employ all levels of civil servants, including that of under-secretary, who act as regional representatives of the various government ministries. Egypt had, for years, universities only in Cairo. During the second half of the last century, it decided to establish, along with other basic services, higher educational institutions in the other governorates so as to encourage their young residents to go to college as well as avoid receiving in the Capital all the ambitious young persons who wish to attend university. In the past, such education seekers not only pursued their university education in Cairo but usually remained in it after receiving their degrees in order to find jobs that match their educational level and to continue to enjoy city life. Even though nothing can stop all persons from migrating to other areas within or outside the country, there is no doubt that the development of the cities and smaller towns within the various Egyptian governorates does help lower the tide of out-migration and encourages the needed citizens – the professionals, the artisans, the entertainers, the traders, the industrialists, etc. – to remain and serve the semi-urban and rural regions of the country.

## Conclusion

Let me insist that what is important for the success of the city in the 21st century is the urbanization of the rural settlements and not the ruralization of the urban ones.