

ECONOMIC
AND
SOCIAL COUNCIL



GENERAL
E/CN.12/URB.25
UNESCO/SS/URB/LA/25
29 May 1959
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

SEMINAR ON URBANIZATION PROBLEMS IN LATIN AMERICA

Jointly sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the United Nations Bureau of Social Affairs and the secretariat of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America, in co-operation with the International Labour Office and the Organization of American States

Santiago, Chile, 6-18 July-1959

CERTAIN CONCLUSIONS RELEVANT TO LATIN AMERICAN URBANIZATION
WHICH MAY BE DRAWN FROM THE UNITED NATIONS SEMINAR
ON REGIONAL PLANNING
(TOKYO, 28 JULY TO 8 AUGUST 1958)

by the United Nations
Bureau of Social Affairs

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1. Definition of the problem of urbanization

Urbanization is understood to mean in this paper [the process whereby an increased proportion of a country's population lives in urban localities] as defined by the United Nations.^{1/}

Demographic trends indicate that it is reasonable to expect that cities will continue to grow. Modern technology has not only created favourable conditions for urban growth, but also makes it necessary. This is confirmed by present trends which indicate that more and more people are depending on urban activities and that consequently the urbanization process will continue. Urbanization should not be regarded, therefore, as an evil in itself. In fact, in Latin America in particular, it may be considered as indispensable for its development, but not in its present form.

Before drawing any conclusions, however, it is necessary to analyse this process as it is now occurring in Latin America. A review of the available information seems to indicate that the urbanization process does not affect to the same degree all urban areas, but that it is rather the result of concentrations of population in a few large cities. In fact, there are cases where medium size and small towns have not only shown little growth, but have actually diminished in size. A country may have a moderate overall rate of urbanization and yet an alarming rate of urban growth in some of its metropolitan areas.

In Latin America the lack of accurate data makes it difficult to draw precise conclusions. Nevertheless, the national rates of urbanization, at least in the few countries examined, are not alarming, while the rates of population increase of cities such as Bogota, Colombia; Buenos Aires, Argentina; Santiago, Chile; and Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, to mention a few, are disproportionately high.

^{1/} United Nations Report on the World Social Situation, New York, 1957. (United Nations Publication, Sales N° 1957.IV.3), p. lll.

Table 1 below, clearly shows that since the rate of urban population growth is higher than the national rate and much higher than the rural rate, proportionately more and more people will be living in urban conglomerates (this seems to be consistently true for all Latin American countries). A further analysis of the same table indicates that the rate of growth of the capital cities, in particular, and of the cities with more than 100,000 population, in general, is equally high and, therefore, the present concentration of population (Table 2) will continue to increase.

Table 1

URBAN AND RURAL POPULATION. AVERAGE ANNUAL RATE OF INCREASE
 FOR A SELECTED NUMBER OF COUNTRIES

Country	Period	Average annual rate of increase			Average annual rate of increase		
		Urban ^{a/}	Rural	Total	Localities with more than 100,000 pop.	Capital city	
Argentina	1869-95	3.8	2.7	3.0	4.2	Buenos Aires ^{b/}	4.31
	1895-1914	4.6	2.8	3.5	4.8		4.29
	1914-47	2.5	1.7	2.0	2.5		2.0
	1947-54	-	-	-	-		2.49
Chile	1865-75	2.1	1.2	1.3	2.1	Santiago	1.18
	1875-85	2.7	1.5	1.7	2.4		3.73
	1885-95	3.0	0.1	0.7	2.7		3.01
	1895-1907	2.6	1.1	1.5	2.3		2.16
	1907-20	2.2	0.6	1.1	2.4		3.20
	1920-30	2.6	0.9	1.4	2.7		3.37
	1930-40	2.1	1.3	1.6	2.4		2.88
	1940-52	2.6	0.7	1.5	2.6		2.88
Colombia	1938-51	5.2	1.5	2.2	5.4	Bogota ^{c/}	5.39
Venezuela	1936-41	4.7	2.2	2.7	4.6	Caracas ^{d/}	7.79

Source: Except as indicated: Demographic Aspects of Urbanization in Latin America - ECLA document.

- a/ In order to make possible some comparisons, urban population has been considered here to mean the population living in localities with more than 20,000.
- b/ Carlos Acevedo, El Problema de la Vivienda en Argentina, Report prepared for the UN. Unpublished.
- c/ Estudio de Población en Bogotá. Oficina de Planificación Distrital de Bogotá, 1958.
- d/ La población del Area Metropolitana de Caracas. Corporación Venezolana de Fomento, 1956.

/Table 2.

Table 2
 PROPORTION OF POPULATION LIVING IN URBAN AND RURAL
 AREAS FOR A SELECTED NUMBER OF COUNTRIES

Country	Population distribution expressed in percentages		Percent (in round figures) of the urban population living in the capital cities
	Urban a/	Rural	
United Kingdom	80.8	19.2	
Germany	65.4	34.6	
United States of America	64.0	36.0	
Canada	61.6	38.4	
France	53.0	47.0	
Spain	37.0	63.0	
Turkey	23.4	76.6	
Argentina	62.5	37.5	46
Chile	59.9	40.1	38
Venezuela	53.8	42.6	25
Mexico	42.6	57.4	20
Brazil	36.2	63.8	12
Panama	36.0	64.0	44
El Salvador	36.5	63.5	25
Colombia	36.3	63.7	16
Costa Rica	33.5	66.5	52
Paraguay	34.6	65.4	44
Bolivia	33.6	66.4	31
Ecuador	28.5	71.5	14
Guatemala	28.0	75.0	41

Source: United Nations Demographic Yearbook 1955, 1950 Census.

a/ Definition of urban and rural areas according to the countries' definition for census purposes.

Table 2, however, shows that the proportion of people living in urban and rural areas in Latin America, still is far from that of industrialized countries and that there may still be an ample margin. But the proportion of the population that is living in the capital cities is already so high that the concentration of the population is by no means comparable with population distribution anywhere else. This coupled with the rate of increase for these cities (Table 1), clearly demonstrates that these concentrations are likely to get worse.

The following quotation will give in absolute numbers an idea of the magnitude of the problem in metropolitan areas of Latin America:

"En general, las tendencias hacia formas desequilibradas de urbanización, que eran tan evidentes quince años atrás y que producían concentraciones de población en una sola gran ciudad de cada país o región, continúan y se fortalecen hoy en todos los países, con la excepción de Colombia y, hasta cierto grado, de Venezuela y del Brasil. Muchas de las grandes ciudades siguen creciendo aún más debido al flujo de la migración procedente de las áreas rurales o de las ciudades más pequeñas, mientras que estas ciudades pequeñas no han podido alcanzar el mismo grado de crecimiento. Se comprobó, por ejemplo, que Lima había llegado al millón de habitantes, esto es a duplicar aproximadamente su población de hace quince años, mientras que Arequipa, la segunda ciudad del Perú, con unos 115,000 habitantes, representa tan sólo un 10 por ciento de la aglomeración urbana de la capital de ese país. Santiago de Chile ha aumentado en un 50 por ciento y cuenta ahora con 1,500,000 habitantes, mientras que Valparaíso, la segunda ciudad de Chile, tiene aproximadamente 230,000. Buenos Aires, la más grande de las aglomeraciones urbanas de América Latina, tiene más de 5 millones dentro de su área metropolitana, esto es un incremento de un 30 por ciento desde hace quince años, mientras que las ciudades de Rosario y Córdoba, segunda y tercera en importancia en Argentina, la siguen con menos de 600,000 habitantes cada una. En muchos casos, las ciudades que ocupan el segundo lugar en un país representan tan sólo un 10 por ciento de la población de la ciudad principal. Quince años atrás, Sao Paulo que parecía un Chicago con un millón y medio de personas, cuenta hoy con más de 3 millones, y Río de Janeiro ha sobrepasado los 3,600,000. Colombia, que es una notable excepción a esta regla, parece privilegiada por una división natural de regiones geográficas formadas por las principales cuencas de drenaje y las cordilleras, y por el hecho de que su capital no se encuentra localizada céntricamente. Estos son algunos de los factores que han favorecido el crecimiento equilibrado de ciudades más pequeñas, como Cali, Medellín y Pereira. En Venezuela se notaba una tendencia hacia la concentración de la población en la capital, la que creció a un ritmo fenomenal desde 1940 a 1956, triplicando su población de 350,000 a un millón de habitantes; pero su tendencia actual es la de un incremento en la población de ciudades más pequeñas, tales como Maracaibo, Valencia y Barquisimeto, donde las actividades industriales están en aumento debido a las mejoras de las rutas de transporte que las unen a las áreas de consumo. 2/"

2/ Francis Volich, "Quince años después, planeamiento urbano en América del Sur". Vivienda y Planeamiento N° 24 (Unión Panamericana, Washington D.C., 1957.) p. 14.

The Latin American technicians have been aware of this problem. In fact, the Second Inter-American Technical Meeting on Housing and Planning, organized by the Organization of American States and held in Lima, Peru, in November 1958, recommended, "La descentralización de las fuentes de trabajo y energía con miras a una mayor distribución geográfica de la población."^{3/}

2. Conclusions

(1) The metropolitan areas rather than the cities generally are the primary location of over-rapid growth.

(2) The problem of urbanization in Latin America is really one of overcentralization and a concentration of population in a few large cities. The majority of the population, however, still is rural, and when compared with the industrialized countries, there may be still an ample margin for a balanced urban growth.

(3) Since the rate of growth of the urban population is considerably higher than the rural rate, it is urgent that measures be taken to permit a balanced urban-rural growth and to curb the present centralization and concentration of population.

These conclusions seem particularly timely since in Latin America industrialization is not only necessary but a stated goal in the policies of most governments, which to judge from experience to date will accelerate the process of urbanization. The question remains, however, and here perhaps is the crux of the problem, should this growth be allowed to continue to be centralized or localized in a few large metropolitan cities, particularly in the capitals, or should the industrialization process be so guided as to make possible a more balanced population distribution throughout the country.

3. Centralization versus decentralization

The evils inherent in metropolitan congestion are widely recognized but the growth of these swollen centres continues unchallenged, and the rate of the urbanization of metropolitan areas in most developing countries means that soon they will reach fantastic proportions.

^{3/} Organización de los Estados Americanos, Segunda Reunión Técnica Inter-americana en Vivienda y Planeamiento. Informe Final. (Lima, Peru, November 1958), Section XIV, p. 2 (c).

In the preceding section there is an obvious hint at the need for "decentralization", as a remedy for metropolitan congestion. While it is true that there is a growing interest in decentralization (for economic as well as social reasons), it would not be wise to assume that decentralization is implicit in physical planning.

The Tokyo Seminar in fact considered not only the merits and potentialities of both centralization and decentralization, but what is more important pointed out that the question of decentralization or centralization could only be decided after taking into consideration the particular conditions of each case. "An understanding of the economic functions of the metropolis in relation to the total national economy is a prerequisite to policy making with respect to the centralization or decentralization of industry; the achievement of proper balance between urban and rural economies; and the effectuation of an efficient organization of functions in the various types of metropolis with a specifically limited hinterland which serves the nations as a whole or is an element in international economic organization";^{4/} and concluded:

"The need for the centralization and integration of industries should be given due weight when the overall advantages to the national economies are being considered.

"At the same time, industries might be organized, whenever possible and desirable, on a non-concentrated basis. For example, aluminum, paper, and so on, and the decentralization processes may be planned in the interests of wider dispersal of industry.

"Industries, large-, medium- and small-scale, have considerable changes of development in the river basins which should be regarded as an integral part of the effort to stabilize and expand employment opportunities. The development of such industries, accompanied by an adequate economic and social infra-structure, should become an important force to counter the "push" and "pull" factors currently in operation and accentuating the problems of metropolitan areas."^{5/}

^{4/} United Nations Seminar on Regional Planning, Tokyo, 28 July to 8 August 1958. (United Nations, New York (ST/TAA/SER.C/35)).

^{5/} Ibid., pages 34 and 35.

And this cannot by any means be interpreted so as to justify the over-concentration that is taking place in Latin America. In the above recommendations there is the question of intention, which cannot be ignored.

The idea of decentralizing urban development to combat the evils of congestion is not, however, new. It has been a dominant trend in most of the industrialized countries for the past forty or fifty years. "In the United States it has mainly resulted in metropolitan suburbanization, at first in terms of low-density homes for middle and upper-middle income families, then a scattering of factories, shops and offices. But the present American pattern of endless spread around a dense core of central skyscrapers cannot be said to provide a wholly successful model for the future, particularly for poorer countries. Mounting problems of traffic congestion, communication, servicing and fringe area disorganization are increasingly critical, necessitating ever costlier remedies and show little sign of ready solution."^{6/} The New Town movement in England is a half-century-old idea. The garden city movement developed around the idea that people and industries should move out of crowded areas to independent new communities, protected by green belts and with a relative self-sufficiency. The New Town Act was designed, in fact, to curb the growth of large metropolitan areas.

In Latin America, Brasilia is one of the boldest attempts at decentralizing administrative functions and locating them in an area not yet developed, with the obvious intention of not only moving activities away from a densely populated geographic region but also of attracting people and activities to a hitherto undeveloped region.

In developing countries, however, the problem may not be so much that of decongesting existing cities, but rather of providing a regional pattern of urbanization based on a pattern of employment to rural populations who would otherwise drift to already overcrowded cities. In Latin America the solution is perhaps to strengthen medium size cities as in Switzerland

^{6/} Catherine Bauer, Economic Development and Urban Living Conditions, Report prepared for the United Nations. Not published.

and to bring industry to rural regions, as in the Netherlands, Yugoslavia and India. It may also be to develop natural resources in under-populated regions as in Australia and Canada. Furthermore, this policy may be based on a balanced national development as in Israel and Puerto Rico. But whatever the aim may be, no pattern of urbanization will materialize along expected lines unless it is closely related to overall economic development policies. It is in fact the pattern of industrialization that will shape the pattern of population distribution.

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