



Development in South Africa: Bridging The Rural-Urban Gap

By Lesego Masenya | Peer Review

Abstract

South Africa is a highly unequal society with high levels of inequality, poverty, unemployment and other injustices that continue to affect the majority of the population. Although great strides have been made in addressing these challenges, there continues to exist a significant gap between the urban areas (usually over-developed) and the rural areas (usually under-developed), making it harder to bridge these parallel worlds. Worth noting is the report from the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) which suggests that Covid-19 has further widened the gap between urban areas and rural areas. These disparities

have always existed, but the Covid-19 pandemic has brought to light a lot of challenges that have been ongoing, especially in the case of South Africa. To mitigate the urban-rural divide, agriculture in rural areas should be considered as a viable solution, with the support of technological platforms. The results of investing in rural economies will have spill-over effects, positively impacting on urban areas, while creating employment in the peripheries of the country. Now more than ever, it is crucial that we look into other alternatives which will not only benefit the country, but also bridge the gap between rural and urban areas.

Introduction

To live in one of the most unequal yet highly urbanised societies in the world means that there are high levels of inequality, poverty, unemployment, and other injustices that the majority of the population have to live with (Burger et al., 2017). This reality carries with it not only decades of discriminatory policies, but poverty-stricken livelihoods that cripple any chance of progress in a society where wealth has a strong racial correlation (Burger et al., 2017; Leibbrandt, Woolard, and Woolard, 2000). While South Africa is the most advanced and diversified economy in Africa, and the wealthiest in terms of GDP per capita, the country is still haunted by high levels of inequality. According to the 2018 World Bank Report, more than half of South Africa's population lives below the upper poverty line of R992 per month per person, by use of 2018 prices. These are the realities that we are faced with – this is in addition to being the leading country in the world in unequal income distribution, with a Gini index of 63.4, as shown below in Table 1.

Structural challenges and weak economic growth have undermined the progress in reducing poverty, which have been further heightened by the Covid-19 pandemic in the last year. According to the World Bank, Covid-19 has had a major impact on South Africa's economy resulting in a contraction of 7% in 2020. Additionally, this severe contraction is estimated to increase poverty levels by 2 million people. These are the challenges that will ultimately affect the ability to achieve progress in household welfare – an indicator that is severely constrained by rising unemployment.

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Table 1: The world's 10 most unequal countries

Ranking	Country	Gini Coefficient
1	South Africa	63.4
2	Namibia	61.3
3	Haiti	60.8
4	Botswana	60.5
5	Suriname	57.6
6	Zambia	57.1
7	Central African Republic	56.2
8	Lesotho	54.2
9	Belize	53.3
10	Swaziland	51.5

(Source: *World Atlas*, 2020)

Although great strides have been made in targeting unemployment and economic growth, it is crucial to address these historical inequities adequately, in order to improve the quality of life for the majority of South Africans and to bridge the gap between these parallel worlds. Thus, this article will take measure of the nature of inequality and make an effort in advancing some routes which could potentially be taken to allay the present challenges.

Not a New Idea

The idea of bridging the gap between two parallel worlds is not one that is unheard of (Zhu, 2017). Asia, being the largest continental economy by gross domestic product (GDP), has also experienced rapid socio-economic development in recent years. A great example of this is China: since the late 1970s, the development of Chinese cities has not only attracted immense inflows, but has also been a key driving force for urban growth and development, with the 2010 census stating that 87% of China's 'floating' population migrated to cities and towns from villages. Zhu and his colleagues make use of in situ urbanisation, which refers to the process of rural settlements

and populations transforming themselves into urban or quasi-urban ones with little geographical relocation of the residents. This phenomenon has two dimensions whose development has played a key role in China's urban growth between the late 1970s and the late 1990s (Zhu, 2017). Of the two dimensions, one focuses on the creation of new industrialised centres, while the other refers to the practical and physical modifications of rural areas through the expansion of township and village enterprises (TVEs) (Zhu, 2017).

The experiences of developed countries propose that in the industrial period and post-industrial period, many individuals and their families move between and/or within cities numerous times due to changes in either employment status or housing needs, which are often caused by various life cycle events such as marriage and childbearing. This is the kind of urban-urban and intra-urban mobility that is often observed in many developed countries (Zhu, 2017).

From the case study mentioned above, we learn that incorporating migration along with *in situ* urbanisation will not only ensure that people residing in rural areas benefit from the prosperity of cities, but will also benefit from the resources and potential development that could occur in their hometowns (Zhu, 2017). Spatial links will need to be visualized and implemented at finer spatial levels, with 'a coordinated regional approach' that 'cuts through fragmented boundaries' in order to assist the movement of people between and/or within urban and rural spaces (Zhu, 2017). Additionally, more attention will need to be given to issues of various social security programs and public services, to safeguard so that migrants will not be disadvantaged by this migration (Zhu, 2017). Gopaul's (2009) paper based on the South African case also indicates that something needs to be done to assist people living in rural areas who live in extreme poverty, or else their standard of living will continue to worsen. He suggests that the solution lies in tourism: 'to accomplish rural development, there is a need to nurture a sense of willingness and enthusiasm amongst the poor communities to participate in rural development' (Gopaul, 2009).

The Evolution of Urban Development in South Africa

Rapid development and large scale rural-urban migration in South Africa were inspired by the

discovery of diamonds in Kimberley, and that of gold in the Witwatersrand in the 1860s and 1880s respectively (Mabin, 1992; Turok, 2012). These economic activities brought some much-needed opportunities to rural communities, and transformed South Africa from an agricultural state to an industrialised nation (Moomaw and Shatter, 1996; Turok, 2012). An invasion of foreign investment in mining from De Beer, Anglo American and Consolidated Gold Fields was also witnessed in the late 1800s, and further generated the rapid growth of support industries and services that were supported by temporary migrant labour that was migrating to the cities (Turok, 2012). As a result, the developing world – including South Africa – has witnessed unprecedented growth in urbanisation rates in the last two decades (Cohen, 2006). Thus far, urbanisation in South Africa has been increasing by roughly 0.5% on a year-to-year basis, with technological innovation and employment in urban areas continuing to increase due to its ability to offer considerable socio-economic opportunities in comparison to rural areas. Behrens and Robert-Nicoud (2014) further argue that cities are not the only locus in which inequality materialises, but that they are hosts to instruments that contribute extensively to changes in that inequality. Thus, it is not surprising that individuals seem to migrate to economic hubs where more opportunities exist (Behrens and Robert-Nicoud, 2014; Ozler and Hooegeveen, 2005).

Having an urbanised economy or cities as economic powers while rural communities are under-developed is not an exclusively South African phenomenon – it happens all over the world because of several reasons, as seen in the case of Asia. Amongst the key reasons is that of economies of scale and rural-urban migration. As such, Fields (1972) referred to the rural-urban migration theory as an economic phenomenon in his paper. The theory hypothesises that workers compare the projected incomes in the urban sector with agricultural wage rates in the rural areas and migrate if the former exceeds the latter. In addition, rural-urban migration is often regarded as the adjustment mechanism that workers use to assign themselves between different labour markets, some of which are located in urban areas and some located in rural areas. Thus, rural-urban migration is the equilibrating force that connects rural and urban projected incomes and is regarded as a disequilibrium phenomenon (Fields, 1972).

Consequences of Urbanisation

To date, Africa and Asia are the only remaining continents where the rural population outnumbers the urban population. However, both continents are urbanising at unprecedented rates that can be thought of as a double-edged sword. While urbanisation spurs economic opportunities and often increases access to infrastructure, it is also widening inequalities in health and development (Feng, 2015). Worth noting is that while Asia's urban population is projected to surpass its rural population within five years, Africa is not expected to have a majority urban population for at least another 20 years (Feng, 2015).

Looking at South Africa, we have observed how urbanised the cities are, and how they continue to advance. The downsides of these advances have had destructive societal, economic, and environmental consequences (Turok, 2012). Meanwhile, rural areas continue to remain under-developed with high levels of deprivation with respect to sanitation, access to water and access to energy, high levels of unemployment, inadequate use of natural resources, insufficient access to socio-economic and cultural infrastructure, low skills levels, and insufficient literacy rates (Behrens and Robert-Nicoud, 2014; Burger et al., 2017; Gopaul, 2009; Krishman, 2016; Ozler and Hoogeveen, 2005).

Upon an analysis of international studies, Barro (2000) found that people living in rural areas might be using old technological methods, whereas urbanised areas employ more recent and advanced techniques in their daily undertakings. As such, we observe how large municipalities within the cities are deeply accommodative of additional commercial services and more advanced roles concerning finance as well as developmental projects, whereas smaller municipalities – which are mainly located on the peripheries of cities – are only able to accommodate a large portion of lower mandate facilities and industrial work (Behrens and Robert-Nicoud, 2014). In addition, these smaller municipalities are often under-resourced and are surrounded by areas that have high levels of poverty and deprivation.

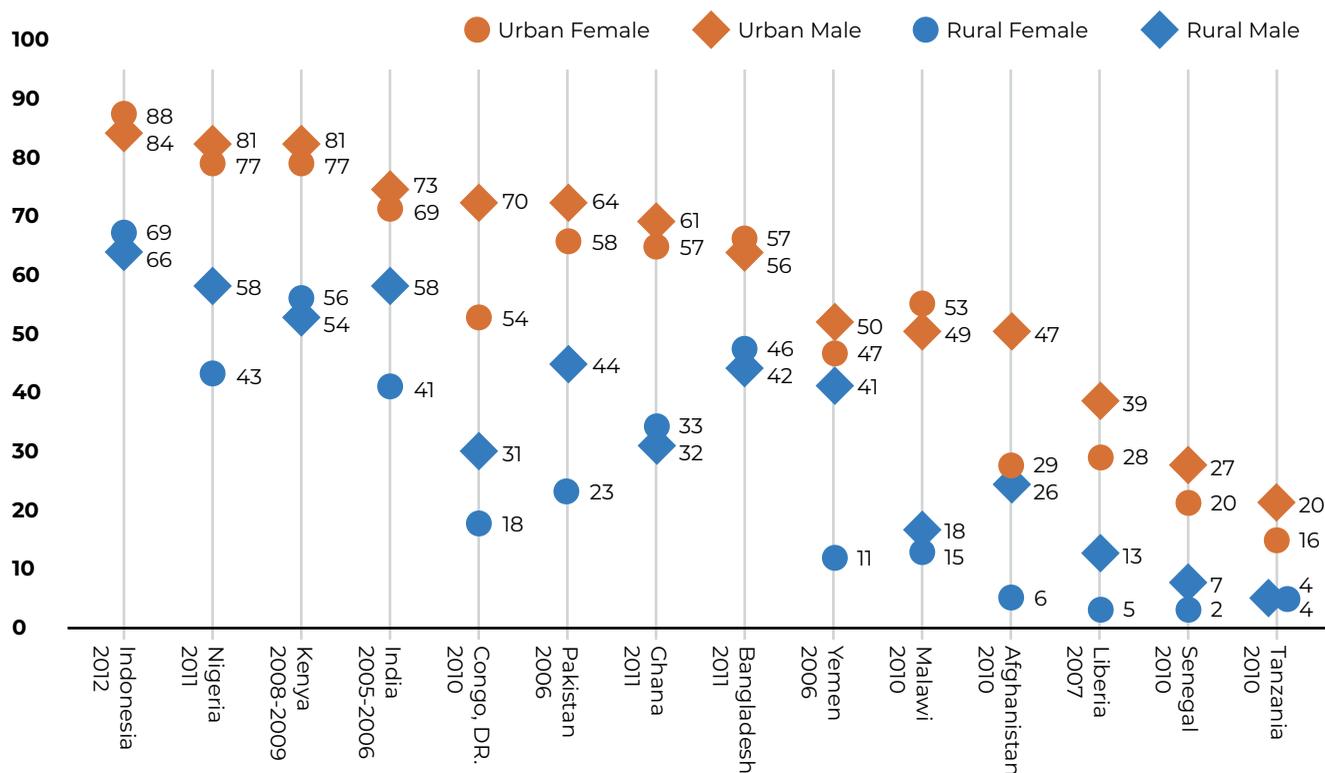
Currently, an approximate 66% of South Africans live in urban areas, with the expectation that eight in ten people will be living in urban areas by the

year 2050. This not only means that the demand for infrastructure and housing will increase rapidly, but that the cost of living will also increase for the average South African. Though urbanisation is the most convenient instrument currently being used to accelerate the rate of growth in developing countries by means of (i) driving economic growth, (ii) sustaining larger and more productive populations, (iii) sourcing higher means of income, new and diversified engines of growth need to be considered. The results of having cities that are too urbanised may have negative externalities that may adversely affect rural economies, whose role is to provide economic sustainability and food security (Krishman, 2016). As such, other measures need to be considered if we are to sufficiently and effectively bridge the gap between rural economies and urban economies in order to ensure that growth takes place in a way that is beneficial to everyone.

Although cities are the dominant centres of economic activity and employment, and continue to attract maximum foreign investment, they are not performing to their potential or reaping the benefits of agglomeration due to prevailing shortages of energy and water infrastructure, transport congestion, and deficits in education and skills (Turok, 2012). This is in addition to creating poverty traps on the peripheries of cities, which results in favouritism for road-based transport: private cars and minibus taxis (Turok, 2012). To ensure that rural economies are not left behind in this fast-paced economy, we need to consider redeveloping rural areas into sustainable communities that can support themselves economically (Gopaul, 2009; Krishman, 2016).

Consequences of the Urban-Rural Divide on Youth

Young people who reside in the urban areas of developing countries are generally more likely to stay in school longer than those who reside in rural areas. In addition, there exists a significant gender divide, as young men (aged 15 to 24) are more likely to complete lower secondary school than women. Generally, women and girls who reside in rural areas are least likely to complete schooling. As seen in Figure 1 below, Malawi is an exception amongst African countries, in that more urban women than men are likely to have completed school.

Figure 1: Percentage of young people aged 15–24 who have completed lower secondary school

(Source: *New Security Beat* (Woodrow Wilson Centre for International Scholars), 2015)

The urban-rural divide in the education space has always been evident in South Africa, mostly to the disadvantage of rural areas. However, the need to adopt online learning during Covid-19 further highlighted the lack of access to resources required to succeed. While some learners were fortunate enough to be able to access online learning platforms during lockdowns and school closures, others had to depend on government and private funders for smartphones, tablets or laptops and, in some instances, free data. Thus, providing the technological tools was and is a critical step in ensuring that learners do not fall behind. If a student or learner has never used the internet, or has not been taught the necessary skills to evaluate or create information, a technological tool meant to aid in the learning process – an obstacle that many rural learners have had to face.

Consequences of the Urban-Rural Divide in Covid-19 Outcomes

A report from the Human Sciences Research Council

(HSRC) suggests that Covid-19 has widened the gap between cities and rural areas. The disparities between urban areas and rural areas have always existed, but Covid-19 has brought to light a lot of issues that have been ongoing and are now further exposed due to the need to vaccinate as many people as possible.

A study conducted at Oregon State University documented the disparity in outcomes during Covid-19 in terms of ethnic minorities, who are not only more likely to have died from the virus but have also suffered economic destitution. The two key findings that came from this study are: i) unequal outcomes and ii) high levels of vulnerability. The former found that people who reside in either mostly rural or completely rural settings are 15–26% more likely to die from Covid-19, as opposed to their peers residing in mostly urban environments; the latter found that minorities are usually on the lower end of the socio-economic status spectrum which may result in a need to work in occupations where there is contact with a lot of other people, ultimately putting them at a higher risk of contracting the virus.

In South Africa, the common challenges that both urban and rural settings have faced during the pandemic include stigma and misinformation with regards to the virus, high levels of fear among health care workers, and issues around oxygen provision in hospitals. Unfortunately, the differences far exceed the commonalities. Using the vaccine as an example, it is harder to implement vaccine rollouts in rural areas due to a lack of amenities such as good road networks, clinics and hospitals, and limited access to personal protective equipment. Other challenges include fewer health resources available and multi-layered governance systems, to name a few.

What has been key in these under-resourced rural areas is the need to think out of the box, since strategies that work in urban areas are not always a good fit for rural areas. Additionally, strong partnerships will need to be formed at all levels of society. It is also key to have policies that prioritise rural health and the adequate distribution of health resources to meet the needs of minority populations, especially with the distribution of Covid-19 vaccinations.

Poverty and Inequality in Rural Areas

Households that have high levels of poverty and inequality are largely Black or coloured communities who tend to reside on the peripheries of cities. Thus, a high level of vulnerability is usually observed in areas that are remote and isolated from the main cities (Burger et al., 2017). High levels of unemployment are largely concentrated among poor people in rural areas and continue to remain a core challenge in the South African economy with a 238% growth from 1 703 863 in 1994 to 5 752 632 in 2016 (Dube et al., 2018; Quantec, 2018). According to Ozler and Hoogeveen (2005), South Africans are neither separate, nor are we equal in post-apartheid South Africa. The authors make this statement because the question of whether the economic inequalities of the apartheid era have faded remains, especially with the high levels of poverty and inequality that this country still faces in rural areas.

Poverty is at an all-time high in South Africa and is highly concentrated within the African race, women, rural areas, and the youth (Triegaardt, 2006; Woolard, 2012). Statistics show that Africans account for 95% of the poor population and a large percentage of them reside in former homelands, rural areas, and townships

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households (Woolard, 2012). It is also important to note that poverty is closely linked to an increased mortality. This stems from the fact that poor people have difficulties in accessing health care facilities as they do not have the basic income for transport services, nutrition, and clothing – further perpetuating high levels of inequality (Woolard, 2012). Consequently, unsatisfactory living conditions continue to intensify high poverty levels, which further exclude and marginalise poor people from participating in the economy (Triegaardt, 2006; Woolard, 2012). As such, agriculture presents opportunities for job creation, particularly in rural areas (Dube et al., 2018). As a labour-intensive and rural industry, agriculture makes a contribution of 10% to total employment. However, a slight decline has been observed between the period of 1994 and 2016 – from 12% to 6% (Dube et al., 2018).

How Can Agriculture Help Eliminate Poverty and Deprivation?

In rural areas all over the world, agriculture represents the principal land use and is a major element of the practicality of rural areas. Rural communities can be developed to increase their competitiveness in agriculture. The in situ urbanisation case mentions how rural areas have to transform themselves into urban or quasi-urban ones with little geographical relocation of residents; in the case of South Africa, this can be achieved through agriculture. Farming and related undertakings primarily encompass the basic fabric of rural life, contributing meaningfully to the overall state of rural areas by facilitating and creating employment, business prospects, infrastructure, and quality of the environment. This can be a driving force for economic growth and can have lasting impacts on the overall community.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the agricultural sector remains the dominant livelihood for many, more especially in Rwanda and Burkina Faso, with 79% and 85% respectively of the population relying on agriculture. In the case of South Africa, agriculture is a twofold production system that comprises of large-scale commercial farmers and small-scale farmers (Dube et al., 2018). As it stands, agricultural production remains concentrated on field crops given their prominence in determining national food security. However, the growth in South Africa's agriculture sector – the fruit sector and small-scale farmer participation in particular – is restricted by insufficient infrastructure: mainly ripening facilities, pack-houses, and cold storage facilities (Dube et al., 2018). This limitation causes costly delays, limits entry into the formal sector, and hinders expansion into export markets.

Government or private sector needs to intervene by initiating and constructing capabilities in agriculture and agro-processing if these small-scale manufacturers do not have the means to get their products to final consumers (Dube et al., 2018). What will ensure success in this initiative is linking farmers with large producer-exporting companies that already have access to infrastructure and international markets (Dube et al., 2018). The government can then incentivise large producer-exporting companies to collaborate with minor producers. In return for large-scale companies lengthening technical services and information on production and standards to small-scale farmers, the large companies can be offered tax breaks, grants for investments in storage and cold chain amenities, or support with raising funds. This initiative is one that not only benefits small-scale farmers, but also has the capability to have spill over effects that will benefit the whole economy.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Rural areas undoubtedly have the potential to lead to great economic growth; however, this reality will only be possible if skills are uplifted and investment in research and development is prioritised. The results of investing in rural economies will have spill over effects and positively impact on urban areas, while creating employment in the peripheries of the country. With a highly urbanised country such as South Africa, it is crucial that we look into other alternatives which will not only benefit the country as a whole, but also

have an undeniable impact that can bridge the gap between rural and urban areas.

Competitive agriculture in rural communities, particularly when supported by technological platforms, can drive economic growth. An example of this is the Khula farming app, founded by Karidas Tshintsholo with the aim of assisting emerging farmers to find their feet. To date, 175 farmers are currently using the app, and this has ensured that farmers who were initially unable to access formal markets can connect with suppliers. The purpose of the app is not only to assist small-scale farmers, but to assist with alleviating poverty and ensuring that young entrepreneurs have an opportunity to make a decent living.

With such great innovations taking place in the country, the possibilities of the kind of development that can be fostered in rural areas are endless. Indeed, South Africa's developmental woes can only be resolved from within: through South African ingenuity, and through modulation of the experiences, technologies, and investments of external partners.

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