

# Moving to cities uplifts hundreds of thousands, even in difficult times

Many people who migrate to cities from the countryside have managed to lift themselves out of extreme poverty, despite the poor economic performance of the South African economy over the last decade. However, many also refrain from committing fully to urban lifestyles. This dual existence may add to their cost of living and could perpetuate the psychological divide between town and country, write *Prof. Ivan Turok and Dr Justin Visagie*.

A new study reveals that migration to cities has helped many people to escape extreme poverty, despite unfavourable economic circumstances. The analysis is based on the National Income Dynamics Study, which tracks the progress of a representative sample of 30,000 South Africans every two years.

Scaling up from the sample, we estimate that around 385,000 citizens were lifted above the poverty line between 2008 and 2014 by migrating from rural to urban areas and entering the job market.

## Worth taking the gamble

This important finding is even more surprising considering the anaemic performance of the national economy over the last decade, as indicated by a recent Statistics South Africa report about poverty trends in South Africa between 2006 and 2015. In addition, upward social mobility is known to be generally very low in SA compared with other countries. This reflects entrenched social and spatial inequalities, combined with a sluggish labour market and persistent failures in the education system.

What's more, poor households face major hurdles in relocating from the countryside to access urban opportunities. The cost of long-distance travel is one. Identifying

somewhere to live that is safe, secure and affordable is another. The long queue for jobs facing people with low skills is daunting, coupled with the intense competition from city residents with established contacts.

Nevertheless, our results show that most of those who took the gamble succeeded in getting their foot in the door. Some of their jobs were casual and low paid, but better than being unemployed and destitute. Another recent study by Simone Schotter, Rocco Zizzamia and Prof. Murray Leibbrandt from the University of Cape Town found that migration is the biggest trigger to upliftment of all the events they examined.

---

There is growing international recognition that urbanisation boosts productivity, spurs creativity and strengthens economic development.

---

## Benefiting rural communities

Migration also benefits vulnerable rural communities through the flow of income from family remittances, although this is offset by the loss of an income generator. Mobility is generally beneficial for the economy because it concentrates productive capacity, which creates efficiencies for public service delivery and stimulates business investment. There is growing international recognition that urbanisation boosts productivity, spurs creativity and strengthens economic development.

These positive effects need to be properly comprehended across society. Current attitudes to migration within many communities and in government circles are ambivalent. Established city residents tend to resist the emergence of new settlements because they fear the costs of congestion and various hazards associated with burgeoning informality. The government is not doing what it could to smooth the process and reduce the risks.

## Split households

As a result, it appears that many migrants refrain from committing fully to urban lifestyles. They seem to retain a dual existence – a kind of double life in the city and countryside. They remain attached to their rural



origins and identities by investing whatever spare resources they have in rural homes and livestock. Many also leave their children and elderly relatives in the rural areas, resulting in split households and disruption to family life.

It may be that people build houses in the rural areas because it is easier than in the cities to get hold of a plot of land without the threat of eviction and without having to abide by burdensome building regulations and other bureaucratic procedures. Rural homes are also insurance policies in case things go awry in the city – places of refuge if people fall ill or when they retire.

These behaviour patterns can presumably also be traced back to the forced migrant labour system and the tradition of temporary movement restricted to men. Nowadays cities are relatively high cost, complicated environments where people pay more to rent accommodation and for transport than elsewhere.

### City dangers

They are also inhospitable places where migrants can be forced to live in precarious, overcrowded conditions without essential services. This means a fraught existence exposed to fire, flooding, disease, violent crime and other risks to personal safety. It is hardly surprising that people's hope of a better future lies elsewhere.

The dual toehold in urban and rural areas appears to be an unsatisfactory

situation in many ways, although more research is required to analyse the costs and benefits. It seems to add to people's cost of living and perpetuates the psychological divide between town and country. Repatriating resources that would otherwise have been invested in urban settlements could also hamper the creation of local jobs, small-scale enterprises and thriving communities.

In principle, greater alignment between the spending decisions of households, businesses and government would promote prosperity and social progress. Coordinated investments would reinforce each other, generate greater value for families and firms, and attract other resources to build more productive and sustainable communities.

### Concerted effort needed

The government should endeavour to create more conducive conditions for migrant households to settle, work and invest in cities. A more concerted effort across state entities is required to accommodate and integrate new arrivals so that there are steady improvements in well-being and life chances over time.

Different sectors need to work together more effectively to plan ahead and prepare for urban growth. They should make public land available for human settlement, and invest in the appropriate infrastructure and amenities to create more liveable, inclusive and enterprising places. This will also require streamlining a range

of regulatory procedures and other red tape to accelerate the upgrading of informal settlements and backyard shacks.

A pro-active urban policy is a practical and uncontroversial way of reducing poverty and inequality in South Africa. It means recognising and responding to the reality and real achievements of people's spontaneous efforts to get ahead by uprooting themselves and moving to cities.

### Authors:

Prof. Ivan Turok, the executive director and Dr Justin Visagie, a research specialist, in the HSRC's Economic Performance and Development research programme.

[lturok@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:lturok@hsrc.ac.za)  
[jvisagie@hsrc.ac.za](mailto:jvisagie@hsrc.ac.za)