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**ECONOMIC CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF  
MIGRATIONS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF  
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WEST AFRICA<sup>\*</sup>

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I. Introduction

In recent discussions of development and inequality in Africa, at least three positions can be identified concerning relationships between rural-urban migration and inequality.

The most simplistic and journalistic view is that migrants come to the cities only to find unemployment and miserable living conditions. The story, as usually depicted, identifies the problem as misguided persistence in migrating -- explanations based on the inappropriateness of educational curricula, lures of brights lights, and misinformation. Despite little evidence to support this view, many African politicians have identified persistent migration as the cause of urban poverty and have attempted to stop the flow of migrants through exhortation, administrative controls, and coercion. Actions seem to have been based on the notion that the problems of urban poverty will disappear if only the poor

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stay away. Although it is seldom stated explicitly, there seems to be a hope that migrants would readily find appropriate opportunities if only they would remain in the rural areas.

A second view is that migration reflects, rather than causes, great inequalities in job opportunities and amenities between rural and urban areas. If most migration is sensible from the standpoint of migrants, and most migrants, even though poor, are somewhat better off than they would be had they not migrated, it follows that observed inequality in the growing areas must be attacked through improving opportunities at the source through accelerated development in backward regions. The tacit assumption is that inequalities should be reduced in the development process and that policy will be so directed.

Finally, there is a "radical" view best expounded by Samir Amin and Joel Gregory that inequalities are a fundamental part of capitalist development, that at least some migration is a response to such inequalities, but that whatever improvement migrants achieve is slight and that the consequence is that fundamental demands for structural change are muted.

Of course each of these "positions" is a caricature of views held by particular observers. Yet it seems useful to

identify these positions in order to set a framework for looking at the relationships between migration, regional labor markets, and inequality. The thrust of the argument to be developed is that migration in West Africa is in fact a rational, individual response to unequal opportunities, that to some extent such migration reduces the degree of inequality in the economy as a whole, but that insufficient attention has been paid to operational definition and identification of consequences of migration for inequality in a dynamic context.

The problem is thrown into sharp relief in the case of the Sahel. Relative stagnation, punctuated by disasters, best characterizes the performance of these economies in recent years. But the Sahelian populations have been among the most mobile in the world and migration, particularly to the coastal economies, has been a strong response. However, the response has varied among Sahelian countries with the movements from Upper Volta to the Ivory Coast and Ghana the largest, movements from Niger to Nigeria and Cameroun smaller, and relatively little migration from the poorest Sahelian country of all, Chad.

Whether these large-scale movements have been a partial solution to the problems of development in such a fragile environment, or whether they have prevented "genuine" development from occurring remain hotly debated. Even more important

for the future will be the policy decisions reflecting long-term strategies for development of the Sahel. On the one hand, efforts may be concentrated on developing relatively self-sufficient economies based on the rural potential of the region. On the other hand, greater integration with coastal economies could be sought to increase the specialization and trade between the two zones as well as to encourage even greater labor mobility within the region so that Sahelian peoples will be able to move easily to better-endowed areas.

Even in the context of relatively market-oriented strategies, one can contrast the European case in which labor from the Mediterranean basin has been drawn into the industrialized economies in response to labor shortages with the Japanese experience in which the response to labor shortage has been to transfer investment to Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, the Philippines, and Indonesia. The former would correspond to increased concentration of development in the coastal economies -- the latter would correspond to greater industrial dispersion within the region.

Among the unanswered questions concerning the relative merits of these two alternatives is whether the labor force would be sufficiently mobile to adapt to either strategy, what would be the effects on real incomes for the respective populations, and how would further development be affected by the strategy followed.

## II. Determinants of Migration

Setting aside the important category of population movements that arise from political upheaval, war, famine, and the like, attention will be directed to the migration that is "voluntary." The economic theory of migration (reflected in Harris and Todaro, Harris and Sabot) takes as a point of departure that differential earnings opportunities exist in various sectors and regions of an economy. Migration is then observed as a response of individuals and families to perceived opportunities. The central point in the analysis by Harris and Todaro is that individuals are aware both of levels of earnings that they may enjoy if employed and also of probabilities of actually finding employment. Therefore, it may be quite rational for individuals to migrate in the hope of finding a well-paying job even though the risk of being unemployed is considerable. Gugler has described this process as playing a job lottery, which is an excellent way of portraying the process. It is to be noted that the villain of the piece giving rise to substantial urban unemployment is the relatively high level of wages in the modern sector. The implication is that with less inequality in earnings levels, total migration flows would be lower, unemployment would be lower, production would be higher, and the distribution of earnings would be somewhat more equal. And it is behavior of the government

and large-scale sector in setting a relatively high wage level that both creates and perpetuates inefficient use of resources and increased inequality. In that analysis, which is also the basic framework underlying the ILO report on Kenya, institutional features are responsible for inequality which arises from the ability of organized workers to back their claims by effective political action and alliance with the civil service which also desires higher salaries and privileges.

It should be clear that this analysis views migration as a response to inequality and sees specific institutions as responsible for perpetrating higher degrees of inequality than are "necessary" for the functioning of a market-oriented economy.

In the more recent analysis of Harris and Sabot, it is pointed out that migration in the face of unemployment requires a process of search to find a job and that people who search long enough are eventually rewarded. A critical feature to be observed is that unemployed persons have to survive in some manner or other and, in Africa, are in fact heavily reliant upon support from already-employed friends and relatives. Extended family systems redistribute substantial amounts of the unequal earnings and in so doing provide a mechanism whereby persons with greater resources will refrain

from accepting the first job that comes along in order to search further for better opportunities.

It is clear that individualist models cast in a dualistic framework are much too simple to capture West African reality. However, it is conceptually straightforward to focus the analysis on decision-making units whether they be families, extended families, or other social groups. Such social units have available to them certain resources, primarily the potential labor and skills of the unit plus access to land, credit, existing capital, technical knowledge, and "contacts." There is no space here to expand on the wide range of economic and social resources that may be mobilized by such decision-making units. The problem that is then faced is how best to allocate those resources among the various opportunities known and available to the unit. Here Hart has made an excellent contribution in outlining the wide range of opportunities faced by Ghanaian families, a range that goes far beyond simple dualistic models. The theory that emerges from this framework is that West African decision-making units act in their perceived self-interest in allocating their resources among the opportunities. In the West African context, these decisions frequently involve migration, of short or long duration, as part of the "solution." It follows that the more unequally distributed over space are the opportunities, the more likely will migration, in some form, be an appropriate response.

### III. Evidence from Africa

The evidence is quite unambiguous that people who are able to search longer end up finding better jobs, which is consistent with the observation that people with greater levels of education tend to remain unemployed for longer periods while they wait to find a "suitable" job. Furthermore, when people are unsuccessful in finding a suitable job, their expectations about what they should be able to get are revised downward. This was evident in Nigeria in the early sixties when primary school leavers ceased looking for clerical jobs and began entering apprenticeships in great numbers. Therefore, while it is true that continuing rural-urban migration contributes to unemployment, it is also clear that a great deal of this unemployment is in fact confined to an initial period of extended job search. Rempel demonstrates that in Kenya the longer people stay in urban areas, the higher are their incomes. These increases in income result from less open unemployment, from transition out of self-employment into wage employment, and of enhanced earnings as people stay for extended periods within a particular sector. There is abundant anecdotal evidence, and a small amount of hard evidence, suggesting that people who are unsuccessful in obtaining urban employment return home after some time.

Barnum and Sabot demonstrate convincingly that as the supply of more educated workers increased over time in

Tanzania, the propensity of the more educated to migrate to urban areas remained high and even increased while the propensity of those with little education to move to urban areas has decreased sharply in recent years. In earlier periods, the less educated were able to compete for urban jobs since there were few educated competitors for those openings. However, as the supply of educated personnel has increased, they have ceased to find sufficient job opportunities at the levels that had prevailed earlier, and have begun to compete for lower-level jobs. Employers tend to use education as a screening device and hire those with more education in preference to those with less. Therefore, over time, the apparent educational requirements or qualifications for filling particular jobs has increased and there has been a "filtering down" in the labor market by the educated with subsequent displacement of those who are less "qualified." The fact that the less educated have responded to this situation by showing a decreasing propensity to migrate bears evidence to the fact that they are indeed sensitive to availability of opportunities, have adjusted their expectations accordingly, and have in fact been willing to stay in the countryside when attractive urban opportunities no longer remain open.

Peter Lloyd provides an excellent summary of the findings concerning success, satisfactions, and aspirations of

urban slum dwellers. There is, therefore, no need to repeat his analysis, but merely to reinforce his conclusion that the vast majority of migrants to urban areas believe that they have bettered their lot and enhanced the opportunities for their children. Furthermore, extended family, ethnic, and friendship networks are important and strong and there is little evidence that large segments of the urban population are "permanently cut off from the roots." Byerlee and Eicher, in reviewing the literature on African migration in their 1972 survey, provided support for the above statements which have been further reinforced by more recent work.

Let me try to recapitulate concisely the African evidence. Migration has been a response to opportunities resulting from development, a response to unequal opportunities arising in different regions. Most individuals or families that have migrated feel that they have, in fact, achieved a degree of improvement in their situation as a result of migration. Furthermore, there is considerable suggestion of fluidity and mobility within the social structures, of extended family and friendship networks providing a substantial degree of income redistribution, which means that realized levels of living are less unequal than the distribution of earnings would first indicate.

However, it is not clear at this date whether these semi-traditional systems of redistribution are breaking down.

The degree to which these networks cut across "class" lines, and particularly the degree to which education and parents income status are related are not well known. It is quite possible that the social systems will break down under the weight of changing economic interests and self-definition of classes. However, hard evidence that this is in fact occurring is not abundant, assertions to the contrary notwithstanding.

At the present state of knowledge, we can say only that there is considerable inequality of earnings in most African countries. While many experienced observers believe that inequality is increasing in most African countries, the evidence is not clear-cut. It also seems true that private redistribution serves to make consumption levels much less unequal than earnings. Furthermore, there is considerable reason to believe that if we look at life-time earnings, there is less inequality than would appear in any static analysis.

From this I conclude that migration is a response to underlying inequalities and not their principal cause. There is also reason to believe that the degree of success actually achieved by migrants has made them less ready to challenge the status quo and to demand major structural reform. Again, this is a subject that Peter Lloyd has dealt with elegantly,

and I wish only to indicate my strong agreement with him. Unfortunately, there is no comparable paper dealing specifically with migrants from the Sahel although fragmentary evidence provided by Goddard and Hart are not inconsistent.

#### IV. The Meaning and Measurement of Inequality

That inequality exists in Africa is unquestionable.

That in some important sense it is increasing is also a widely accepted belief. Yet despite the tremendous amount of discussion on the subject in recent years, the concept of inequality remains ill-defined and even less measured. Whereas it is not surprising that this basic lack of conceptual definition and empirical evidence has not in any way impeded the making of pronouncements, it may be useful to digress for a few moments to think about the problem.

In the past few years, economists have come to talk much more about problems of income distribution and a number of attempts have been made to provide measures of equality and inequality in specific economies. Most recently, this work has been taken up with great energy by the World Bank, and a number of papers have come out from that institution. In particular Ahluwalia and others have been collecting systematic data on income distribution and a recent volume written by Jain has been published. It is fair to say that no strong

conclusions have yet emerged from these data because of serious conceptual and empirical problems. Two of the more notable recent attempts have been that of Chenery and colleagues and of Adleman and Morris in trying to relate changing income distributions with the development process.

At least part of the problem is that the scanty and hardly reliable data that are available relate only to static measures of distribution of money income at particular points in time. Whether one uses summary measures such as gini coefficients, or shares of income going to particular percentile groups of the population, snapshot views of inequality can be misleading. This is particularly true in the case of Africa where substantial amounts of real goods and services are produced outside the monetized sectors and are therefore usually under-enumerated if not forgotten. Second, most income data are recorded by the recipients of income rather than the users of income which may be misleading when private redistribution systems, such as extended families, break the tight link between income earned in the market place and consumption realized. Finally, and perhaps most important, it is now well known from analysing income distributions in Western countries that important life-cycle phenomena are masked by the data. In particular, new entrants and retired members of the labor force usually are seen to be earning

low levels of income. Highest incomes accrue to people who are in their middle to late earning years. Thus, the picture that one gets in looking at the distribution of income at any moment in time fails to reflect the fact that individuals over their lifetime will earn fluctuating incomes. It is widely known that the distribution of lifetime earnings are less equally distributed than are earnings at any particular point in time. I am aware of no successful attempt to come to grips with these issues in an African context.

A more realistic approach might be to examine the earning patterns of particular age cohorts. It may well be that one of the greatest sources of inequality in the African context is between younger and older generations, a difference that is partly related to migration to urban areas. Although there may be great inequality within urban areas in African countries, the measure of gross inequality is usually greatest between rural and urban areas where income differentials are of a factor of four or five. Yet, there is a possibility that the transfer of younger generations from lower to higher income positions, while exacerbating income differentials in the short run, may, in fact, be leading to greater equality in the longer run. I would not be so foolish as to assert that this is the case but neither would I argue with confidence that it is false. We need more research addressed specifically to this question.

A second problem is the amount of inequality in income contributed by geographic or regional differences in levels of development. Even where such data do exist, the whole web of interregional remittances and investment flows is systematically missed. We are unable to identify regional origins of income earners in the higher-income, rapidly-growing areas.

Returning again to the conceptual level, it has been common in the West to talk about equality of opportunity as opposed to equality of outcome. Again, I am not asserting that equality of opportunity exists in Africa, yet it is quite possible that one would find less variation in opportunities than it appears in actual earnings. This is particularly true where periodic bouts of unemployment are common; at any moment of time one will find some individuals who have found regular employment and others who have not yet succeeded. Yet both the successful and unsuccessful may face relatively equal opportunities and, over time, may have experiences less divergent than the observations at any moment would suggest.

Without attempting to solve these knotty conceptual problems, I would at least plead for people to spend more time thinking about the nature, extent, and measurement of inequality when addressing the problem. Only in the short run can rhetoric substitute for analysis and fact; we are far from knowing the facts at the moment, and the lack of conceptual clarity impedes collection of better information.

## V. Migration and Regional Inequality

Finally, let me turn to the larger question of the degree to which migration has in fact perpetrated further inequality. Amin has argued that "no single region of emigration has ever developed either in Africa or elsewhere. The transfer--which is more than considerable--is virtually a 'gift' from the poor source areas to the rich areas which benefit from it and this is sufficient in itself to explain the stagnation of the regions of origin of the migrants. And, because of their stagnation, the conditions for the reproduction of the pattern of unequal development are perpetuated; because inequality in the 'allocation of factors,' far from being 'natural,' is produced and reproduced socially" (p. 106). Obviously such a sweeping statement is historically unsupportable--Sweden provides one obvious counterexample, while the Eastern region of Nigeria, as documented by Green, provides another. Furthermore, one must be careful not to confuse place well-being with people well-being--although until very recently Scotland has been a relatively backward regional economy, the Scots as a group of people have done reasonably well. Goddard has shown nicely in his paper on Northern Nigeria the ways in which families from areas with different opportunities combine farming and seasonal migration in different proportions to increase their incomes. Migration provides superior alternatives for those who

come from areas less well serviced by roads and proximity to major centers.

We do know from Johnson and Whitelaw, among others, that savings rates of urban migrants in East Africa are relatively high and that their propensity to remit funds to home areas is extremely high. Beyerlee, Tommy, and Fadoo find generally similar results in Sierra Leone. And there are scattered bits of evidence suggesting that migrants remit to home areas for the purpose of educating children and making investments in rural areas where this appears profitable, whereas people coming from districts with little potential or poor opportunities for investment tend to seek outlets for their savings in urban-based activities such as trading, rental housing, and the like. Much less is known in this respect concerning migrants from the Sahel.

The issue of whether migration robs an area of resources when people leave therefore depends a great deal on the potential of the area. Nevertheless, this establishes a presumption that migration from relatively well-off areas will result in further investment being generated through remitted urban earnings, whereas people will permanently leave the less-developed regions. However, before one starts to decry this process, one has to ask what would be the effects of trying to use scarce resources in the less-developed regions.

It is possible that residents of those backward regions will be better off as a result of transferring substantial parts of their population to more dynamic areas in which risks are substantially reduced. There is no logical imperative that all regions should be developed equally, since we are presumably interested in what happens to the distribution of income among people. As Alonso has pointed out, there need be no correlation between equality among average regional incomes and equality in the distribution of personal income.

To take another case, Stolper has shown that the relatively unequal distribution of income in the Ivory Coast is accounted for largely by a disproportionate number of migrants from Upper Volta and other Sahelian countries that form the high tail. The distribution of income among Ivorians is in fact surprisingly equal. At the same time, the relatively low earnings of Voltaics in the Ivory Coast appear to be considerably higher than they could possibly earn if they had remained in Upper Volta. And it is quite unambiguous that opportunities to migrate have been important for the survival of large parts of the Sahelian population during the period of the Sahelian drought. It seems highly unlikely that the real income of Upper Volta would have been higher and the distribution less unequal than they would have been in the absence of outmigration. At the same time, the presence of

Voltaics in the Ivory Coast allows an economic structure that generates relatively unequal incomes overall but in fact provides relatively equal and high incomes for Ivorians. This demonstrates the complicated relationships between the equality or inequality of regional and personal incomes and the process of migration.

Although these cases demonstrate the complexity of the problem, it remains clear that our knowledge of the consequences of migration, particularly how migration may perpetuate and intensify patterns of unequal development, remains very limited.

## VI. Conclusions

I have argued that migration from rural to urban areas in Africa has been a response to considerable inequalities in income-earning opportunities. In part this inequality has resulted from specific policy interventions designed to protect politically powerful groups in a context of foreign-oriented economies. While there is overwhelming evidence that most migrants believe that they have bettered their situation, it is difficult to demonstrate convincingly that there would have been less inequality in the absence of such migration.

To some extent, the apparent degree of success felt to have been achieved by the majority of migrants may have

defused some of their discontent, thereby restraining effective demands that would have brought about fundamental structural change. However, I have not yet seen evidence that demonstrates the validity of this contention. It seems clear that had African economies developed in ways that provided more equal opportunities, there would have been somewhat less migration and more efficient use of labor. But it is also true that if we look at the dynamic patterns of income generation over a person's and family's lifetimes, the degree of inequality that we see at any given time is probably exaggerated. While the a priori case that internal mechanisms for redistribution are withering in the face of class formation and consolidation, understanding of the way these interests become articulated is minimal. Existing conceptualization and measurement techniques are wholly inadequate for examining inequality in a dynamic framework.

The existing evidence makes it abundantly clear that West African populations are highly mobile and responsive to new economic opportunities. I am not aware of any documented case of viable opportunities remaining unexploited for lack of a labor force. At the same time, it is clear that some groups have been bypassed, having participated only minimally in the opportunities that have developed.

Therefore, attention must be diverted to understanding how economic growth and development can best be fostered in order to benefit the Sahelian populations. Whether equity-oriented development is more feasible under relatively self-sufficient rural-based strategies for Sahelian countries (as argued by Amin and Gregory) or by greater integration with the coastal countries remains an open question. Analysis of the alternatives is difficult and largely uncharted but deserving of high priority. In addressing this task it will be crucial to avoid confusing people welfare with place welfare. We are interested in the well-being of Sahelian peoples--hence the focus of attention must be on GNP--not GDP.

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