**City migration as a development problem? It's the ultimate urban myth**

By Alastair Donald in the Guardian – February 17th 2012

**Rather than portraying rapid urbanisation in terms of overconsumption, we should be celebrating it**

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| In January, China marked a historic milestone in its development: for the first time ever, city dwellers outnumbered the rural population. According to the Chinese statistics bureau, 691 million people now live in cities, amounting to more than 51% of the population. Yet this fact merited just a single sentence in a Chinese government press release. Meanwhile, in the western media, to the extent that this genuinely historic event was covered, it sometimes seemed less a matter for celebration than trepidation.Such a reaction says a lot about the way rapid urbanisation in the developing world is viewed. Over the next 20 years or so, the global urban population is expected to rise to approximately 5 billion. This explosion of urban life could be greeted enthusiastically, as a sign of progress and development – moving people off the land and out of back-breaking labour. But far too often, urbanisation is instead seen through the contemporary prism of social, political and ecological concerns: overpopulation, fears about the breakdown of traditional communities, and the dangers cities create for the broader environment, to name but a few. | **BeijingRapid urbanisation in Beijing and elsewhere has taken the number of city dwellers in China over 51% for the first time.** |

Even those who nominally assume cities to be a force for good, acknowledging their attraction as places to live and work, seem troubled by the pace of change. According to Paul James, director of the Global Cities research institute in Melbourne, the speed of development is not culturally or ecologically sustainable.

Elsewhere, urbanisation's welcome association with increased prosperity is often turned into a tale of woe. The growth of cities, we are warned, will accelerate the depletion of water resources, which in turn may drive more country dwellers to leave the land. New city dwellers in China and India are condemned on the grounds that their urban lifestyles and changing diets require more energy to maintain than their village-based counterparts. Given such a negative worldview, it's perhaps no surprise that a reported 72% of developing countries have adopted policies designed to stem the tide of migration to their cities.

The current view of urbanisation is problematic on two fronts: it demonstrates how a negative worldview dominates much discussion of population and development, and highlights the collapse in confidence about humanity's ability to create a better future.

It's remarkable the extent to which people are now considered the problem rather than the solution. Last week, John Beddington, the UK government's chief scientific adviser, described population as "our biggest challenge", highlighting UN's growth projections suggesting Africa's population will grow "frighteningly fast".

Others have expressed concerns that focusing on overpopulation is a potentially racist distraction from the real issue: western overconsumption. Yet here, too, people are portrayed as the problem, and said to bear responsibility for the planet's supposedly imminent implosion. Such views may be presented in acceptably PC language, but the suggestion that humanity's drain on resources is the problem is again indicative of negative attitudes.

The regrettable consequence of such thinking is that it provides the justification for lowering ambitions for the types of cities and levels of development required for the future. If overconsumption is accepted as the problem, then the slums that have grown in many areas of the world as part of the process of urbanisation – and which should be viewed as a temporary solution for people on their way to something better – can instead be romanticised as a way to save the planet, celebrated as metabolically efficient because people recycle or get around on foot, bicycle or rickshaw.

For all that the slums represent a positive route into urban networks, and offer new urban dwellers the potential to create a better future, they also stand as a testament to the failure to develop far enough and fast enough. The belief, espoused by the likes of Architecture for Humanity, that informal settlements are not just tolerated but learned from as a way of keeping the city "in check" is in fact dehumanising. Viewing people as a problem to be contained within slum environments is an outlook that condemns the latest generation of urban adventurers to live out their lives as victims of circumstance, rather than the creative agents of their own transformation.

Thankfully, there's something in the human spirit that leads people to demand more rather than accept less. The creative minds and productive hands of new urban dwellers will hopefully mean that more wealth and energy use, and western standards of mobility, are realistic prospects. The real problem today is the culture of low aspirations. It's time to stake out the case for modernisation as the key to successful urbanisation.

**Despite China's growth, its workers endure a fundamental evil**

By Hsiao-Hung Pai, Beijing The Guardian, Tuesday 20 September 2011 16.30 BST

**Migrants who toil in the cities still face a decades-old system of segregation and exploitation. But many are now demanding fairness**

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| When I walk into Beijing's migrant worker slums, five minutes from the high-rising financial centre and shopping malls, I understand what Ai Weiwei means when he calls Beijing "a city of violence" – violence against a large section of its working population and their families. "We live under the same sky, why are we not entitled to the same rights?" is a question many ask in Xinzhuang and other migrant neighbourhoods.During the past month schools for children of migrant workers – who build the capital's offices and mansions, clean its streets and guard its security – have been shut down, with more to follow in the coming weeks. Tens of thousands of migrant children are left without schools and nurseries to go to. Here in Beijing, two worlds exist in parallel. Those of rural origin – a third of the city's 19 million population – are ruthlessly segregated from the urban dwellers, economically, socially and culturally. Despite the attempt to pretend this is a local issue and only local governments are responsible, the day-to-day injustices experienced by migrants are very much a result of central policies. | **Migrant workers' children in Beijing. Schools for children of migrant workers in China are being closed down.** |

The system that has maintained the rural-urban segregation within China's cities is hukou (household registration), set up in 1958 to control rural-to-urban migration. While rhetorically the peasantry was the "vanguard of the revolution" – and indeed the 1949 revolution wouldn't have been possible without them – in practice, in China's post-1949 drive to industrialisation, the peasantry became an unchangeable category of social class in the Maoist theory of the "four blocs of society" known as "new democracy".

Peasants' role was to produce and feed the cities and support the modernisation process of their motherland. Peasants' class status was fixed – as shown on their ID – no matter what they might choose to do. "Wo shi nongmin [I am a peasant]," I've had migrant workers tell me about their class origin, as if it were a stamp on your body for life. It was impossible for peasants to move their hukou to the cities. This class status hasn't changed since Deng Xiao Ping's economic reforms and opening up of EOI, in the late 1970s. The countryside underwent de-collectivisation while it remained the nation's production backyard. Agricultural production increased in the early stage of the reforms in "releasing the productive forces", as Deng called it, but with rampant corruption and heavy taxation, the poverty deepened. Since the mid-1980s half of the 400 million rural working population have been pushed off the land, seeking a livelihood away from their villages.

As rural residents came to the cities, they immediately faced discrimination and exclusion. Migrant workers' first welcome was being told to stand in the min-gong (peasant worker) queue inside train stations. And there was no way to disguise class origin: the migrants could be distinguished by their brown, tanned faces and bent backs (due to years of farm work). They spoke their own dialects instead of "proper" Mandarin. Many faced verbal abuse as soon as they arrived. Most migrants feel they are a hidden army of labour that supplies industries and urban life with their sweat and blood while enduring second-class status.

Today, when China boasts growth and foreign reserves, migrants continue to be burdened with the hukou system. The criteria for applying for a hukou remain harsh, and unreachable for most migrants, and many work for years without any status. Without hukou, they can't access services in the cities such as healthcare, education and housing. While urban dwellers pay a minimal cost for medical care, many migrants have to return home for treatment. While urban children enjoy free primary education, migrants either aren't entitled or can't afford it – monthly tuition fees in a Beijing primary school would cost a migrant parent two-thirds of their wages.

Some call hukou the fundamental evil. Even the government-funded National Development and Reform Commission admits it is an "institutional barrier" and believes it should be scrapped. However, these institutions aren't in the position to change things. "Protection of migrant workers' rights" is a rhetorical statement of state organisations, but the government has shown no wish to listen to migrant workers' demands. The only officially recognised channel through which migrant workers can voice their discontent is by petitioning the local authorities – a centuries-old tradition. Little happens as a result. Self-organised protests are classified as "mass incidents" and often dispersed quickly.

In recent years, migrants have raised their demands through protests, road blockages, sit-ins and spontaneous strikes. Although these have not always proved effective, workers have become more aware of their collective strength. In the past year they have won some improvements in wages and working conditions. Many migrant workers, now better informed, are far less willing to accept the status quo. As they grow in confidence, the regime will find it increasingly difficult to ignore their demands. China's rulers should realise now that it is in their long-term interests to listen.