What do we know about the age distribution of rural-urban migrants?

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Data on the distribution by age and sex of migrants, whether internal or international, are scarce. The United Nations Population Division has compiled the most complete set of data, primarily from censuses, allowing an analysis of the estimated age distribution of rural-urban migrants in developing countries and of international migrants in a large number of countries.

In the case of rural-urban migration, estimates of the net number of migrants by age group and sex can be derived by intercensal comparisons, using a slightly modified version of the methodology developed by Preston in the late 1970s to estimate the components of urban growth. In general terms, the method consists of assuming that the survivorship ratios calculated from the overall population, as enumerated in two consecutive censuses, provide reasonable estimates of the survivorship ratios for the urban population if the latter were subject only to natural increase. In practice, an adjustment is made to the overall survivorship ratios to take account of the rural-urban mortality differential that exists in most populations. Once the survivorship ratios are available, the urban population is projected from the first to the second census using the adjusted survivorship ratios and the resulting population is compared with the enumerated urban population, age group by age group. Generally, the latter is higher than the projected population and the difference reflects the net number of surviving rural-urban migrants.

On the basis of data for over 70 developing countries, the majority of which have information for two intercensal periods, estimates of the net number of rural-urban migrants classified by age and sex have been derived for each intercensal period. Analysis of the estimates obtained is expected to provide useful insights about the age and sex selectivity of rural-urban migration and its change over time. Such selectivity is known to vary by region. The proposed paper will explore to what extent the age and sex selectivity of migration is determined by the level of urbanization that countries have attained. Another issue to be considered is the extent to which migration has contributed to retard population ageing in urban areas and whether it accelerates ageing in areas of origin. Since the countries having the required estimates are at very different stages of the demographic transition, the estimates available reflect a wide array of experience in this regard.

The paper will also touch on the methodological problems associated with the methodology used. The effect of international migration, for instance, will be discussed in detail and the types of biases international migration may introduce in the estimation of the age distribution of rural-urban migrants will be analysed. To the extent possible, the indirect estimates of rural-urban migration by age will be compared with direct information as, for instance, that derived from Demographic and Health Surveys.

Although urbanization is one of the most important transformations that populations have undergone in recent times, there is a dearth of estimates permitting a better understanding of how migration and the demographic transition have interacted with urbanization to shape population dynamics. This paper will partly cover this gap in our knowledge.