

THE IMPACT OF RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: A PHILOSOPHICAL APPRAISAL

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Abstract

Rural-urban migration has been a defining feature of Nigeria's development trend since the 1970s oil boom, intensifying due to poverty, unemployment, insecurity, and the neglect of rural areas. While extant literature largely frames migration as a zero-sum problem of rural loss and urban congestion, this paper adopts a philosophy of reciprocal dependence to examine the impact of rural-urban migration on economic development in Nigeria. Using qualitative analysis of secondary data, the paper assesses how migration shapes national economic stability. The findings reveal that migration contributes to economic development through five key channels: labour supply for urban markets, remittances that sustain rural households, skills and knowledge transfers, and market expansion for rural producers. The paper further identifies the absence of social infrastructure and deliberate state neglect as the primary drivers of migration, creating a 'developmental push' that compels movement rather than choices. The critical gap this paper fills is the lack of scholarship on rural-urban migration as a system of mutual economic survival. Most studies ask how migration harms either rural or urban areas. This paper instead asks: *can rural and urban Nigeria economically survive without each other?* In response, it proposes the 'Dual Survival Model,' which positions rural-urban linkages as the foundation of national stability. The paper recommends a paradigm shift from migration control to migration management through rural-urban synergy. This entails large-scale investment in rural infrastructure, including roads, electricity, healthcare, education, communication, security, and

agro-processing facilities. Such investment will strengthen the rural-urban economic corridors, integrate value chains, and transform migration from a distress response into a choice, thereby fostering inclusive and balanced economic growth.

Keywords: Rural-Urban Migration, Economic Development, Nigeria, Dual Survival, Reciprocal Dependence, Rural Infrastructure for Nigeria.

Introduction

Rural-urban migration refers to the movement of people from rural or countryside areas with agriculture-based economies to urban or more developed areas with industrial, commercial, and service economies. Adebayo et al. (2023) state that migration is the movement of people from one geographical location to another, involving permanent or temporary settlement. The region from which people are leaving is referred to as the source region, whereas the region to which people are entering is known as the destination region. Rural-urban migration is the movement of people from rural areas—villages—to urban centres—cities. One noticeable aspect in society today, according to Bukar et al. (2021) is the rate at which people move from rural to urban centres. The trends, challenges and impacts of rural-urban migration have continued to generate great debates over the last three decades. According to Nnorom and Onchi (2022), migration has been a key human response to environmental, social, political, and economic changes. Therefore, while creating a vacuum and economic

hope in the area of origin, it also creates some level of concern in the place of destination. According to Adewale, as quoted by Nnorom and Onchi (2022), “the vast majority of the world's migration originates from the rural areas, where most of the world's poverty is also concentrated” (p.30). He further clarifies that rural-urban migration is the phenomenon of a historically unprecedented movement of people from the rural countryside to the burgeoning cities of Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The reason is that, in the post-industrialisation era, migration existed internally and externally to enable excess labour to be taken slowly from the rural areas to provide a workforce for industries in the urban metropolis and therefore aided industrial growth. However, Adebawale and Ayeni (2012), aptly express that experience in developing and underdeveloped countries has shown that the rate of rural-urban migration has ceaselessly outweighed the rate of job creation and has an overweight on the social and infrastructural amenities available in the urban metropolis.

It is worthy of note, people are still

moving daily in large numbers from rural to urban areas in Nigeria and other parts of the world. Therefore, urban areas are growing rapidly and getting overpopulated. The pertinent question is, why do people move from rural communities to capital centres? To this effect, Onuchukwu and Onyinye (2025) aver that people migrate from rural to urban areas due to limited access to *educational opportunities, infrastructure, and job opportunities*. In addition, Adebayo et al. (2025) argue that people tend to move away from a place due to the need to escape *violence, political instability, drought, congestion in various dimensions, and suspected or real persecution*. Urban metropolises mostly gain importance when a country's development rate rises because this is where a country's economic strength is mostly displayed, which attracts rural dwellers. Conspicuously, people migrate based on the prevailing conditions, and the reasons vary from one person to another depending on the situation that brought about the decision. This makes migration a selective process affecting individuals or families with certain economic, social, educational and demographic characteristics. Adverse physical conditions such as floods, *landslides, erosion, and earthquakes, drought, famine or threats to economic livelihood, such as crop extinction due to insects and pests*, according to Nnorom and Onuchi

(2023), can be the reason for migration.

The United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (2014) says that, apart from socio-political conflicts and economic prospects, adolescents and youth also migrate abroad in response to globalisation and the possibilities of education. These students, after their education in a foreign land, reportedly often seek employment in their host country, thereby establishing residence and migrant status. However, the need to get a stable job is the major push for migration as youths move in search of greener pastures. Employment remains the main reason for youth migration not only in Nigeria, but globally. On this note, the high rate of unemployment in Nigeria can be interpreted as one of the main motivating factors behind the rise of rural-urban migration.

Research has shown, according to the United Nations (2018), that urban and rural areas comprise almost half of the nation's population of around 189 million people. Aligning with this, Nnorom and Onuchi (2023) state that the proportion of Nigerians living in urban areas increased from 15.41% in 1960 to 49.52% in 2017 (UN, 2018). These statistics buttress the argument that migration from rural to urban centres has become a major driver of urban growth.

This paper contends that rural-urban migration in Nigeria from 1970 to the

present is not inherently a developmental problem, but a conditional process whose capacity to drive national growth through labour, remittances, and markets is realised only when paired with deliberate rural investment and coherent urban planning within a framework of mutual dependence.

To engage this argument robustly, the paper will proceed in three parts. First, it reviews existing literature in rural-urban migration to situate the debate within current scholarship. Second, it provides a critical analysis of the issue within the Nigerian context from 1970 to date. Third, it concludes with policy recommendations grounded in the *Dual Survival Model* – the proposition that sustainable development requires the simultaneous strengthening of both rural and urban spaces.

Literature Review

Rural development has no single, fixed definition. Yet following Uyanga in Onuchukwu and Onyiye (2025), it is commonly conceived as an integrated approach that addresses the interconnected factors influencing rural life. Rural areas experience both measurable and non-measurable changes over time that improve welfare and living conditions. Although agriculture remains central to this process, Onuchukwu and Onyiye (2025) stress that rural development is distinct from

agricultural development. The central goal has consistently been to improve the living conditions of the rural poor and to promote development that is self-reliant and sustainable. The concept of rural development, they further state, “distils rural development into three interlocking principles: improving living standards through balanced resource allocation, ensuring broad-based participation by low-income groups, and building self-sustaining institutions with local capacity” (p.4). Philosophically, this reframes rural development not as charity, but as an act of justice and capability-building; the act of giving rural people the means, voice and institutions to determine their own future.

On this note, self-sustenance demands more than normal inclusion. It requires the active engagement of rural populations as co-architects of development programmes, not as passive recipients to be merely *contacted* or informed after decisions have been made. That is to say, sustainability emerges when rural people participate in the design, implementation, and evaluation of projects that affect their lives. Anything less reduces development to a performative gesture.

Urban economic growth is widely understood as the expansion of economic activity within cities through trade, investment, and infrastructure development. According to the United Nations

(2020), it also entails strengthened institutional capacity and improved human capital. The World Bank (2021) similarly associates urban economic growth in developing economies with effective public service delivery, expanded access to education, and integration into global supply chains. Building on these perspectives, Onuchukwu and Onyinye (2023), citing Roberts and Sykes (2023), argue that a critical dimension of urban economic growth is the structural transition from basic, low-productivity industries to higher-value sectors such as technology, finance, and services. These sectors require skilled labour and are central to promoting sustainable urban development.

On the influence of rural-urban migration on agricultural production, Anikeze (2026) argues that rural areas are disproportionately incapacitated by a cluster of structural deficits: inaccessibility, seclusion, underdevelopment, extreme poverty, ignorance, depopulation, hunger and other forms of deprivation. Compounding these challenges is the persistent drift of people from rural to urban areas, which leads to a steady decline in rural population. This exodus exerts direct negative consequences on agricultural output and retards the pace of development in rural communities. With the exit of youth and able-bodied adults from villages, the burden of farm labour disproportionately falls on the aged,

women, and children. This demographic imbalance results in reduced agricultural productivity, with ripple effects on national GDP, government revenue for development, household income, and the overall standard of living in rural areas. This labour deficit contributes to rising food inflation and increases Nigeria's reliance on food imports despite the availability of fertile land, directly conflicting with constitutional objectives on food security and economic welfare. The weakening of rural economies further entrenches poverty and reduces the capacity of local governments to generate internal revenue, making them dependent on federal allocations and eroding the autonomy guaranteed to them. In extreme cases, it culminates in the progressive abandonment and underdevelopment of rural areas.

Moreover, the continuous decline in rural population over the years incentivises government neglect. Policy attention and infrastructural investment are increasingly concentrated in densely populated urban centres where returns appear more immediate and visible. This pattern reinforces a vicious cycle of neglect and underdevelopment, evident in the absence of rural industrialisation and the poor state of physical, social, and institutional infrastructure in rural communities.

Impact of Rural-Urban Migration on Economic Stability

The economic growth and stability of a nation are fundamentally contingent on the interdependence of its urban centres and rural areas. To treat them as separate economies is to misunderstand development itself, for the survival and prosperity of one is predicated on the productivity of the other. Onuchukwu and Onyinye (2025) aptly frame rural-urban migration not as a rupture, but as the vital circulation of life between two interdependent organisms. They identify six foundational pillars of this relationship: “food security, job/labour market, market availabilities, environmental sustainability, remittance, supply of raw materials to industries” (p.5). This conceptualisation moves us beyond seeing rural and urban spaces as competitors. Rather, it positions them as co-constitutive entities engaged in a perpetual exchange of value. The city provides the market and the factory; the village provides the farm and the workforce. To sever one is to destabilise the other, which would destabilise the economy.

On a more critical note, this reveals the truth of mutual becoming: neither the rural nor the urban can attain full self-actualisation in isolation. Their existence is relational. Therefore, the policy imperative shifts; the goal is no longer *migration control* – and an attempt to dam a natural flow which has a significant role in economic

development, but *migration management* – the conscious cultivation of the channels through which this interdependence flows.

Other scholars have linked the economic development and stability of urban centres to the continuous flow of food supply from rural areas and the supply of cheap labour by migrants. Todaro and Smith (2015). Yet, despite the acknowledged contributions of migrants, rural-urban migration is often blamed for urban problems such as overpopulation, slums, and social vices. This raises a critical question: beyond the remittances sent by migrants to rural areas, what reciprocal economic benefits do urban centres provide to rural communities? Data from the National Bureau of Statistics reveals that a significant proportion of rural household income derives from the sale of agricultural produce to urban markets and from urban-based remittances NBS (2020).

The reality is that neither rural nor urban areas can thrive economically in isolation. Potts (2019) describes this as a “livelihoods continuum” (p.221), where households and economies straddle both rural and urban spaces. Rural areas depend on urban centres for markets, manufactured goods and services, while urban centres depend entirely on rural areas for food security, raw materials, and labour. This relationship is symbolic, not parasitic.

Critical Evaluation

Using qualitative analysis of secondary data, this paper finds that rural-urban migration contributes to national economic development in five key ways: *Labour Supply* for urban industries and services, *Food Security* through the movement of agricultural produce to urban markets, *Remittances* that sustain rural household consumption and investment, *Skills and Knowledge Transfer* between rural and urban economies, and *Market Expansion* that links rural producers to urban consumers.

However, this raises the pertinent philosophical question that challenges the dominant narrative: do urban centres survive solely on agro-products and labour from rural areas? To answer in the affirmative would be to reduce the city to a mere consumer. Urban centres are not just endpoints of rural production. They are also sites of innovation, finance, technology, industrial processing, and service economies that create value which then flows back to rural areas in the form of manufactured goods, infrastructure materials, financial services, and knowledge. Thus, the relationship is not one of extraction, but of exchange. The city feeds the village with capital and tools, just as the village feeds the city with food and labour.

This paper also finds that the root cause of migration is the absence of social infrastructure and deliberate

state neglect of rural areas CBN (2023). This creates what can be termed a “developmental push” – where people are not merely attracted to cities, but pushed out of rural areas by the absence of basic conditions for a dignified life.

Adebayo et al. (2023) present a cautionary perspective, arguing that rural-urban migration poses “grave implications for national development” (p.27). They contend that migration not only threatens agricultural productivity and food security in rural areas, but also generates systemic urban problems: the escalation of insecurity, socio-economic strain, environmental degradation, and infrastructural collapse. Specifically, they note that urban congestion has accelerated the spread of communicable diseases and placed enormous pressure on physical and social infrastructure, including electricity, healthcare, education, roads, water, and housing.

While this diagnosis is empirically visible, it reflects a *pathological framing* of migration; one that treats migrants as the cause rather than as symptoms of a deeper structural failure. This gives rise to another question: are societal vices peculiar to the city alone? This assumption reflects the belief that virtue resides in the village and vice in the city. In reality, social dislocations such as crime, fraud, cultism, and moral decay are not bound by geography. They are symptoms of structural

failure – unemployment, inequality, weak institutions, and absence of opportunity. To blame the city is to misdiagnose the disease. Vices thrive wherever human dignity is denied, whether in rural hamlets or urban slums.

Furthermore, if rural migrants are to be blamed for urban “misdemeanors” and social vices, then to whom should we attribute the same vices that exist in rural areas? Poverty, cultism, drug abuse, and communal violence are not inventions of the city. They exist wherever there is exclusion and neglect. To localise blame in space is to misunderstand the nature of the problem. As history shows, every era produces its own “species” of social challenge. The vices of pre-colonial villages differ from those of post-oil-boom cities, not because one space is inherently moral and the other corrupt, but because the conditions of survival and opportunity differ.

The questions raised above expose a deeper truth: the rural-urban divide is an artificial construct. Both spaces produce, and both spaces suffer. Both spaces sustain and both struggle. The ethical and development task, therefore, is not to apportion blame, but to build systems of mutual responsibility. A stable Nigeria will not emerge from privileging one space over the other, but from recognising that the survival of the city and the village are ontologically intertwined.

Thus, the implication is clear:

contemporary leadership must reject the dualism that pits village against city. The healthier path for national economic growth lies in treating both the urban metropolis and rural areas as indispensable and co-constitutive parts of one national organism. Development policy must therefore shift from assigning blame to building bridges, because a nation cannot be healthy when one of its lungs is collapsing.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the impact of rural-urban migration on economic development in Nigeria. Migration remains one of humanity's oldest responses to the imbalance between people and opportunity. Since the oil boom of the 1970s, rural-urban migration has reshaped Nigeria's demographic structure, labour markets, and regional economies.

A central finding of this paper is that development cannot be achieved by focusing on cities alone. Government at all three tiers – Federal, State, and Local- must make a coordinated commitment to rural investment. However, investment alone is insufficient.

The paper therefore concludes that sustainable development depends on strengthening the economic linkages between urban centres and rural villages. Integrating both spaces will enable the free flow of goods, services, and capital, and create incentives for urban merchants to

invest in rural enterprises. This integration will stimulate rural business, expand youth employment, and transform migration from a distress-driven exit into a choice. Achieving this requires holistic collaboration among government, the private sector, and indigenous investors. The cohesion of rural and urban Nigeria through purposeful partnership is not optional. It is the foundation for inclusive, balanced, and sustainable national growth.

Recommendations

In light of the foregoing, based on the *Dual Survival Model*, this paper recommends a paradigm shift from migration control to migration management. The goal is not to stop movement, but to transform migration from a distress response into a choice. This requires investment anchored on three pillars:

- i. **Improving Rural Living Standards:** construction and maintenance of motorable rural roads, stable electricity, piped water, and digital communication networks to connect farms to markets. Expand access to functional primary healthcare centres, secondary schools, and tertiary institutions in rural areas to reduce 'developmental push.' Establish agro-processing mills, storage facilities, and farm input centres to add

value to rural produce before it reaches urban markets. This makes rural areas viable places to live and work, not just places to leave.

- ii. **Ensure Broad-Base Participation:** design and monitor rural development funds to ensure they reach low-income Local Government Areas and households, with transparency mechanisms to prevent elite capture. Involve rural communities, women's groups, and youth in the design/planning and implementation of projects to ensure relevance and ownership. Prioritise welfare and productive services for the most marginalised rural populations first. This implies that development must be with the people, not for the people.
- iii. **Building Self-Sustaining Institutions and Capacity:** building capacity at local, regional, and national levels for project planning, execution, and maintenance. Invest in vocational training, agricultural extension services, and technical education to develop human capital within rural areas. Create incentives for private sector investment and cooperatives to mobilise

additional financial and human resources for continuous rural development. This moves the rural areas beyond donor-dependent projects to systems that can sustain themselves.

When these three pillars are met, the rural-urban economic corridor is strengthened and functional. Rural areas thrive as zones of production and dignity. Urban centres are sustained as market and service hubs without congestion. Migration becomes a circular flow of skills, capital, and markets, rather than a one-way flight from despair. This is the foundation of inclusive and balanced national economic growth.

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