

# Rural Development and Quality of Life Disparities

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In 2008, for the first time in human history, the World Bank's population statistics indicated that over half the world's people resided in urban areas (Urban Population). On every continent and in every country, people increasingly are drawn to cities and their outlying regions for various reasons: they may be seeking employment or business opportunities; some want to live closer to relatives; some want to retire; and others are merely looking for a better quality of life. The fastest rates of current urbanization are generally found on the African continent or in South/Southeast Asia; however, many of the world's already highly urbanized countries are in Europe. Here, the dual trend of increasing urbanization combined with population *decline* exerts a great deal of pressure on rural locales, particularly in Eastern Europe and the Balkans; an illustrative example is the country of Bulgaria, which the UN expects will be 83% urbanized by 2050 (versus 74% now), while also contracting population-wise by 34% (World Urbanization Prospects).

Rural areas are already subject to many disparities in quality of life: the at-risk and impoverished rate in rural areas can be as much as 20% higher compared to urbanized zones, healthcare is less accessible, and the population generally trends older (Rural Poverty). Substance addiction is also more common in rural areas: >24% of all deaths (yes, all deaths) in Russia, Moldova, Belarus, Ukraine, Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania are related to alcohol consumption (Global Status). Younger generations are also more prone to migrate towards cities or out of the country entirely; their remittance payments can be valuable and even necessary in developing areas, but government policy has not managed to fix the broader problems that such emigration leaves behind. In Siberia in particular, government policy has also resulted in a lack of representation for native communities in regional government; these communities are frequently underserved, which as a consequence puts their cultural heritage at risk. There are also numerous examples of struggling remote communities being exploited for natural resources to the ultimate detriment of citizens. In the countries of Central Asia, for example, cotton is king -- in Tajikistan, cotton supports over 35% of the population (Peel). Nevertheless, farmers are often indebted to the government or other creditors and are economically unable to escape.

In many countries, anti-slavery laws are poorly enforced, and vulnerable rural children can be forced into labor on cotton plantations or trafficked outside of the country. This comes at a time when birth rates have declined to levels that are detrimental to the size of the working population. In addition to lower birth rates, brain drain has resulted in a lack of skilled young workers. Narcotics are funneled through many of the expansive rural areas of the region, with intermediaries depending on payments from traffickers to survive or pay their debts. Extremist groups also exploit such situations for recruitment; for many years the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan carried out terrorist attacks throughout Central Asia, and it is estimated that ISIL recruited over 1,000 fighters from the region (Loveluck).

These preexisting factors combine with current economic, demographic, geographic, and political pressures to prevent/slow rural development in the long-term and exacerbate the various immediate effects of negligence. Modernization and urbanization make it paramount for us to address the diverse issues faced by rural areas; and while some level of rural depopulation in Eastern Europe is inevitable, the remaining inhabitants deserve guarantees relating to their quality of life and future. While the rural citizens of the Caucasus and Central Asia are subject

less to depopulation than to quality of life disparities, they deserve the same guarantees. But to implement these guarantees anywhere will require addressing many different factors both on a broad and local scale. It can sometimes be difficult to tell what problems are causative and which ones are symptomatic. Some problems are both - they perpetuate the very conditions that created them.

To advance us further in the right direction, we propose the following:

### *Relating to Healthcare*

1. The creation of a regional drug trafficking prevention organization in Central Asia, Turkey, and the Caucasus to share information between countries; this organization will have the independent authority to pardon individuals who have facilitated drug trafficking in exchange for their cooperation, and will also be able to independently investigate and arrest government officials on corruption charges relating to drug trafficking. In order to prevent internal corruption, all employees will be annually reviewed by Interpol. If there is suspicion of corruption, that employee will be put on probation for one year pending a further review.
2. The implementation of basic policy changes relating to alcohol in nations that currently do not have such laws on the books; these policies include banning sales of alcohol to the already intoxicated, banning sales at petrol stations (which would reduce intoxicated driving), and regulating product placement and advertising/sponsorship to ensure that children are not being targeted at a young age by liquor companies.
3. Reconsideration of the appropriate legal alcohol drinking age and purchase age; because of the lodestone cultural status of drinking, it may be preferable in certain nations to allow drinking in the household/in public establishments at ~17 but set the private purchase age higher.
4. Government support for community action on substance addiction; this includes the creation and funding of addiction treatment centers, including centers that provide needle exchange services. There should also be a focus on the implementation of an educational curriculum for children of an appropriate age that teaches about safe consumption. These educational curricula should also include lessons on consent and self-defense, and should include lessons designed to reduce the social stigmas around substance abuse.
5. The creation of an outreach and funding program to ensure education and employment for individuals who want to become rural medical professionals, with an emphasis on recruiting aspiring healthcare personnel from the very areas that require service. This is especially vital in remote areas, where native languages are spoken and where housecalls are a necessity due to low population density. Participants in this program will be required to serve a number of years in a rural community; during this stint they are to both provide healthcare and educate local populations on how to themselves carry out basic healthcare procedures. During their years of service, program participants are guaranteed housing; after their time is up, they may renew themselves for further years of service or may be offered a position at an urban facility with a higher starting pay rate. This proposal will also entail increased funding for the medical facilities in rural areas.

### *Relating to Economic Viability*

1. The creation of a formal incentive program that will work to manage the potential benefits and downsides of emigration and resulting remittances. This program would devise a framework through which young workers who wish to move abroad to gain experience or skills/knowledge might be able to do so with government support, provided that, after a period of time, they repatriate back to their home country.
2. The creation (within various individual countries) of government ministries focused on working in tandem with rural communities in order to spur healthy, desirable economic development; transnational cooperation between these ministries to create economic corridors would be a priority as well. These ministries would also be responsible for suggesting regulatory changes and legal action regarding corporate predation and exploitation in rural locales. These ministries would additionally be responsible for upgrading basic infrastructure in rural areas like sewer and water availability.
3. An increase in funding for education in rural areas, along with the creation of a scholarship program focused on making higher education for rural individuals more affordable and accessible. In areas where native languages are spoken, curricula should be implemented to ensure that children are taught a second language that will allow them to participate in the economy beyond their native area. These curricula should be devised with the preservation of cultural heritage in mind.
4. The improvement (when desirable) of reliable and sustainable transportation links between rural communities and urban areas; this would help create job opportunities in rural communities by making them more accessible to the outside, and it would have the additional effect of reducing the cost of goods within rural communities, making them more liveable for present and prospective inhabitants. Providing access to reliable Internet connection is a concurrent priority. Any international transportation links will be funded proportionally by the countries involved.

### *Relating to Human Trafficking*

1. The creation of a regional human trafficking prevention organization in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Turkey, and the Caucasus to share information between countries; this organization will be able to independently investigate and arrest individuals on criminal charges relating to human trafficking. In order to help prevent internal corruption, all employees will be annually reviewed by Interpol. If there is probable cause for corruption, that employee will be put on probation for one year pending a further review into their conduct.
2. The implementation of systems in national intelligence gathering organizations through which rewards/prosecutorial immunities are given in exchange for information regarding human trafficking operations; these systems will dole out rewards based upon the eventual usefulness of the information and will guarantee protection for individuals who feel endangered or at risk due to the nature of the information they have provided. Laws should also be implemented that protect victims of human trafficking from being prosecuted for crimes relating to their being trafficked (e.g., a sex trafficking victim being prosecuted for prostituting).
3. The creation of a transnational social protection and rehabilitation program that will aid in helping reintroduce trafficked persons back into society in a healthy and safe manner;

this program will attempt to mitigate the risks of ostracization and re-abduction, and will carry out its operations with an emphasis on doing what is best for the individuals affected by human trafficking.

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