

Pinning hopes on rural youth

More and more young people are leaving the rural areas and migrating to the cities. Although the industrial and the developing nations come from different starting points, such migration ultimately has the same effect on village life and the rural areas everywhere. In the industrial nations the agricultural population is ageing. There are fewer young people to take over the farms, and the way of life is not considered particularly appealing. As agriculture is still an important source of income in rural areas, however, investment is needed in special programmes aimed at attracting more young people. In Germany the average age of the rural population is 43. In 15 years' time there will be six adults for each young person. By that time young people on the land will be the minority, making rural areas even less attractive than they are now. The lack of training and income-generating opportunities is making the situation more untenable. The importance of creating educational opportunities in rural areas, at both a basic and a tertiary level, is now widely recognised: experience has shown that once young people leave home to study, they tend to stay away. Ageing is also leading to the breakdown of traditional communities, which have always been the backbone of village life. Migration and the unabated mobility within our society are eroding the social solidarity in rural areas.

■ Social structures are breaking down

The demographic situation in the developing countries is quite different. The average age in Africa is 19.6 years, while 44 percent of the population in sub-Saharan Africa is under 15 years of age. Social systems in the villages are usually structured as gerontocracies, in which resources are controlled by old men. Because their home villages offer them so few prospects, young people are fleeing to the cities – affecting village life in similarly negative ways as in the industrialised nations. Rules of respect and standards are breaking down, intergenerational and gender conflicts are escalating, and traditional family life is in decline. As this occurs, the systems which only families can provide – laying the foundation for personality development and the future, and forming a social system which takes care of the sick and the aged – are also breaking down.



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HIV/Aids have also imposed major changes on these village systems. Increasing numbers of grandmothers are trying to take the place of a generation of parents. These women, often already worn out from lives of heavy physical labour, are incapable of practising subsistence farming. The same goes for teenagers who have been forced by HIV/Aids to become the head of the household. Support programmes are needed which cut through the red tape to help people in such precarious situations; these groups are not able to help themselves and cannot be reached by self-help schemes. Here the crucial benefit of the human rights-based development approach, which calls for safety nets and a right to food, becomes apparent.

■ Agricultural knowledge aimed at young people

The children and young people living in these households do not have the experience or the physical strength needed for subsistence farming. Who is going to give them this knowledge? In many cases traditional skills can no longer be passed from generation to generation. More education should therefore be made locally available, within the village, in order to equip the young with the agricultural knowledge they used to learn from their parents and grandparents. It is important that youth is seen as a target group in its own right. Agricultural knowledge should also be taught at a basic level in primary school.

Future development strategies must pay special attention to demographics in rural areas. Technocratic approaches tailored to individual target groups, which do not view families and village communities as a whole, are of little use. The social community in the villages can only function collectively with family and neighbours. For this reason the migration of the future generation may create more problems than it solves (increased remittances from work in the cities, for instance).

■ Taking advantage of the demographic window of opportunity

High fertility rates combined with the consequences of HIV/Aids and rural exodus pose one of the greatest challenges for the future of rural areas in developing countries. However there is a period of time in a nation's demographic evolution when birth rates fall and the proportion of older people is not yet too high. It was this "demographic window" which the Asian tigers, for instance, took advantage of for their economic upswing.