Chapter 16

Rural Migration and Shrinkage Transformation Processes in Mexican Countryside

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the empirical-theoretical approaches to shrinking cities in Mexico. The analysis intents to answer the challenges posed by economic and demographic tendencies according to economic changes, using the theories and models and no to fall down victim of simplistic projections and conjectures and theories based more in speculations rather than on facts. The method used here is critical analysis of economic, social, and political tendencies in relation to the situation of shrinking cities in México. The results of this analysis lead to the finding that the shrinkage process in México, as a developing economy does not follow the same patterns of well developed countries, where increase in shrinking cities occurs since the middle of the 1950s and the use of incentives in some localities to attract economic growth have had modest success in terms of turning around the shrinking process.

INTRODUCTION

Research on shrinking cities is a new field for Mexico. Research on the topic of shrinking cities in México is often criticized for lacking theoretical foundations or for insufficient reference to theory to explain the findings from empirical studies. This chapter is aimed to address this criticism.

The issue of shrinking and decline in population and economic prowess always provokes reactions due to political sensitivity. In general terms, shrinkage is only one side of the coin, growth being the other one. Mexican researchers are usually more worried about the fast-growing rate of population as well as its spatial and territorial implications. While more advanced and postindustrial economies of the world are thinking how to turn around city shrinkage into a steady growth, less developed economies are worrying about the implications from the too fast-growing rate of the urban population and its territorial redistribution.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-0111-5.ch016
Maybe it is necessary to develop shrinkage typology to better characterize the phenomena. One thing is especially important to stress here. While advanced countries are talking about the shrinkage process as the result of their postindustrial and/or even postmodern development, here in México where industrialization process is still under development, the shrinking process is taking place due to other causes, such as the most urgent drive of people for merely survival.

In other words, the situation of shrinking cities in Mexico does not follow the same patterns of well-developed countries, where an increase in shrinking cities occurred since the middle of the 1950s (Oswalt, 2005) and the use of incentives in some localities to attract economic growth have had modest success in turning the shrinking process around.

There is a variation of conceptual and theoretical proposals when it comes to analyzing the decline and shrinking of human settlements: they concern flows, decisions, phases, stages and composition of migration (Tuirán et al., 2000, p. 31; Brown, 1991). Sometimes these approaches are presented as some sort of evolutionary schemas, in other cases they are theories about the phases of economic development and/or social modernization leading to urban transition and mobility models. Most of these evolutionary schemes do not have general applicability because in some cases they are related only to determined movements such as exchanges between regions, urban and rural zones, between center and periphery in metropolitan areas etc.

The study of tendencies in economic and environmental shrinkage is directly related to substantive changes in the complex context of internal migration flows. Population mobility is the strategic rational response of survival in an unstable socioeconomic and/or political environment. At the same time, it is important not to fall down victim of simplistic projections and political speculations about migration and shrinking.

Generally speaking, the determinant factors of shrinkage are mutations which are the result of new economics and the emergence of new forms of population mobility. The basis for these changes in Mexico in particular is economic liberalization as well as structural adjustment programs, capital mobility, changing requests and demands from the labor market, advances in telecommunications and transportation, productivity conversion, increasing export activities, rapidly changing comparative advantages and finally, relocation of industrial activities from one region/locality to another.

MACROECONOMIC THEORY PERSPECTIVE

From the macroeconomic perspective, economic shrinkage is analyzed according to its functions in the economic system in which it occurs. Macroeconomics and neoclassical models explain shrinkage decision as a cost-benefit calculation (Davis, Stecklov and Winters, 2002, p. 292). The classic economic theory implies that agents can determine with certainty the occurrence of events and anticipate the utility of results which would, in their turn, provoke some future events. Agents also have the capacity to compare alternatives and choose in favor of the best utility.

The macroeconomics theory departs from the assumption that economic shrinking contributes to the equilibrium of local and regional markets, such as labor and real estate markets or economic sectors with patterns of specific territorial localization. The classic model of sector equilibrium (Yúñez, 1978; Renis and Fei, 1961) tries to explain rural shrinkage by the movements of labor force to the urban industrial sector of high productivity and better wages. Disarrangement between the periods of growth and the periods of lack of growth leads to disorders in a steady community growth, or shrinkage.
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