

A Review of the Criteria for Defining Urban Areas in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT This paper is a review of criteria for the definition of settlements as urban areas in Nigeria. The review of literature was adopted as a basic method to gather information for analysis in the paper. Population size, densities and contiguities criteria as adopted by different nations of the world were reviewed. Other criteria such as functions of settlements and urban field criteria were also reviewed. In Nigeria, the population size and administrative/legal criteria are adopted in defining urban areas. The paper noted that because of the adoption of these criteria, Nigeria, with a population of 140 million people and a total landmass of 923,768sq km has just 774 designated urban areas thereby leaving out over 50% of the people from the urbanisation process. Based on this revelation, a comprehensive and rational criterion that is statistically determined and devoid of political sentiment is recommended for defining urban areas in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Urbanisation has been described as one of the most remarkable developments in human settlements in the world. It is a process which agglomerates people, and their socio-economic activities in settlements referred to as urban (towns and cities). In any part of the world, urban centres are unique human settlements because they are centres of economic growth, catalysts for various forms of development, melting pot of socio-cultural activities and springboard for the diffusion of innovations. However, as important as the urbanisation phenomenon seems to be in the human settlement development process, researches have shown that worldwide, the criteria used to define urban centres vary from organisation to organisation and from country to country.

Nigeria with a total population of 140million people (Federal Government of Nigeria 2006) adopts the 20,000 threshold population and legal/administrative criteria to determine urban centres. Considering that most people in Nigeria live in rural areas and using 20,000 as the minimum population benchmark for defining urban centres, majority of the people would be left out of the development process. This results in the massive migration of youthful population from the rural areas to the urban centres as experienced in Nigeria. The desire for Nigerians to be part of the development process leads to the agglomeration of people and economic activities at strategically located settlements originally known to be rural. These settlements are

assumed to be providing non-agricultural services such as commerce, education, health, religion, recreation, administration and transportation to their residents and surrounding settlements. Consequently, they have a pulling effect on the populations of the neighbouring settlements to meet their needs (Everson and FitzGerald 1970).

Study Area

Nigeria, the study area covers an area of 923,768sq km (356,669sq mile). It is bounded by Cameroon to the east, Chad to the northeast, Niger to the north, Benin to the west, and Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean to the south. The population of the country in 2006 stood at 140 million people out of which about 48% live in urban centres. Nigeria is administratively divided into 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory. The states are further divided into 774 local government areas. The implication of this division is that there are only 774 urban centres' (since legally; the headquarters of these local government areas are established urban centres) in a nation of 140 million people.

The Issue

The establishment of urban centres in Nigeria is based on population and legal or administrative criteria. As pointed out earlier in the introduction, Nigeria adopts a threshold population of 20,000 people as a criterion for defining an urban centre. In addition to this, all states

and local government area headquarters are legally or administratively regarded as urban centres (National Urban Development Policy 2006). Firstly, the population criterion seems to have left out about 60% of Nigerians from the urbanisation process as can be deduced from the Nigerian National Urban Development Policy. Secondly, the choice of local government area headquarters and state capitals was politically motivated and therefore, such urban centres may not be efficient as growth centres to necessarily spread development impulses to their surrounding rural areas. This kind of urbanisation is what Hartshorne (1992) as cited in Agbola (2005) described as 'false urbanisation.' He used this term to capture the problems associated with urbanisation in developing countries driven by demographic and political forces rather than dynamic economic and industrial forces. It is in realisation of this that the United States of America's definition of an urban centre which includes measures of population size, centrality and economic function (Pacione 2001) may be ideal.

The above two criteria currently in use in Nigeria to establish the urban centre status of settlements appear to be faulty for the choice of settlements as they seem to have failed to serve as growth centres for the spreading of development impulses to surrounding rural areas. Rather, the criteria have made very few settlements urban centres which stifle the development of their many surrounding villages. The task of this paper therefore is to assess alternatives or other criteria devoid of political sentiments, which are rational, wholesome and efficient in creating growth centres in Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

The paper reviewed several urban criteria adopted in different parts of the world to gain a clearer perspective of the past in relation to present situation in settlement development studies (Osuala 2005). Information for the paper bordered on criteria related to population, and population, density; and functions of settlements through the review of related literature, records, and maps.

Review of Criteria

An urban area is defined in many ways depending on the country in question. Some countries adopt a simple numerical value while

some just define an urban centre as a community of people bigger than a village. This is a subjective definition as it may be difficult to determine when a settlement is either a village or bigger than a village. In the use of a demographic definition, specific numbers are used as the lower limit for which an urban centre is made.

Population Size Criterion

The Population Division of the United Nations (UN) uses the population of people resident in a settlement to define an urban area. The Division sees as urban any settlement with 2,000 residents and above. This classification has been adopted by many countries in their population censuses. According to the UN Population Reference Bureau (2005), in Liberia, settlements of 2,000 or more residents are named urban; the threshold population in the United States of America is 2,500; in New Zealand, 10,000 people or more is the size adopted while in India and Nigeria, 5,000 and 20,000 residents respectively are used to define urban areas. In Denmark, Sweden and Finland, settlements of 200 inhabitants are regarded as urban areas, while in Greece and Canada urban areas have at least 10,000 and 1,000 people respectively (Jones 1969). Mexico also, defined an urban area as a settlement having over 1,000 inhabitants under Article 106 of the municipal law of the Mexico's States (Wikipedia 2007).

A glance at the populations of some of the countries listed above shows higher figures than Nigeria yet they have lower minimum figures for urban areas. At 20,000 minimum population as urban area, Nigeria is excluding many of her citizens and rural settlements that would have enjoyed urban status. The limitation of numerical parameter is that countries that are economically buoyant and with high per capita income could afford to define an urban centre utilizing lower figures. Perhaps this is because these countries have the capacity to make provision for the social amenities and infrastructure that must accompany or are directly relevant when a settlement has been classified as an urban population. If a country is economically buoyant it could decide to use a lower figure to define its urban centre because it could afford to provide as many as are qualified in terms of social amenities and social infrastructural requirements of such centres. This also may portray the high level of development a country has attained. Numerical

figures therefore make little or no meaning to the definition of an urban centre when the standards of such centres in terms of the functions performed are considered more important than the number of residents. Secondly, there is no universally accepted population size to which nations can make reference to as the figure a country chooses is determined by its prevailing conditions. These limitations make another definition necessary (Sule 2003).

Although Oucho (2001) agreed with the UN criteria which opined that an urban locality should be determined not only by population size, but with the proportion of non-agricultural activities prevalent in it or any other criteria can be used. The use of different criteria in addition to population size, however, varies from country to country. The example of Nepal is classic. A settlement in Nepal may have a large population but without a corresponding social service infrastructure may not qualify to be called urban. In view of this, Lloyd and Dickinson (1972) had defined an urban centre as any settlement where more than 50% of its population is engaged in non-agricultural occupations. Besides population size criterion, in Nepal – a developing country like Nigeria, Sharma (1989) reported that 10,000 people coupled with the availability of infrastructure such as high school, college, judicial and administrative offices, bazaar, communication facilities, mills and factories were used to define urban areas. Today, according to Sharma, the population criterion has been reviewed downwards to 9,000 in order to accommodate more people and settlements in the urbanisation process. This may be connected to the current realities of the developing level of Nepal. Sharma however regretted that even though Nepal set standards for determining urban areas as highlighted above, she is yet to give full attention to such yardsticks. Rather “political ad hocism” in the designation of urban areas is quite evident, Sharma concluded.

The above scenario is not different from the Nigeria’s case. Settlements with over 20,000 people and with some basic infrastructure seem to abound in Nigeria without according them urban status unless they were designated Local Government Area headquarters, through legal/administrative instruments. This criterion which is used in urban selection, is often influenced politically and not objective in approach. The criterion has left out many Nigerians and settlements from the urbanisation process.

Consequently, there exist inequalities in the levels of development among settlements within regions. There is therefore the need to consider other criteria that are objective in approach to spread development to other settlements that may qualify as urban.

Population Density and Contiguity Criterion

Density and contiguity are other criteria for defining urban areas though closely linked with population size. Literature search revealed that the minimum density requirement is generally 400 persons per square kilometre. In Australia, however, urban areas which are also referred to as “urban centres” are defined as population clusters of 1,000 or more people with a minimum density of 200 people per square kilometre. In Japan, urbanised areas are defined as contiguous areas of Densely Inhabited Districts (DIDs) using census enumeration districts as units with a density requirement of 4,000 people per square kilometre. The US Census Bureau defines an urban area as “core census block groups or blocks that have a population density of at least 500 people per square mile” (193 per square kilometre). Whereas in Canada, an urban area is a settlement that has more than 400 people per square kilometre and has more than 1,000 people (Wikipedia 2007). European countries also define urbanised areas on the basis of urban – type land-use, not allowing any gaps of typically more than 200 meters, and use satellite photos instead of census blocks to determine the boundaries of the urban area.

These criteria may be difficult to adopt presently in Nigeria, owing to dearth of data on the determination of the limits of these settlements. In Nigeria, the predominantly scattered pattern of settlements would pose difficulties in applying the population density and contiguity criterion. However, this paper could serve as a pointer in this direction to be explored. In Nepal, though density and contiguity are not taken into account in conferring urban status to localities, the overall population density in urban areas however is taken as 985 people per square kilometre compared to 136 people for rural areas. This varies from region to region within Nepal depending on the nature of topography (Sharma 1989). In less developed countries, in addition to land use and density requirements, a condition that a large majority of the population,

typically 75%, is not engaged in agriculture and or fishing is sometime used.

Given the low level of socio-economic development in Nigeria, most people, even in the known urban areas are involved in one form of agriculture or the other. Therefore, this criterion may not be appropriate if our settlements must benefit from the urbanisation process.

Function of Settlement Criterion

Mirchaulum (1977) reported that while the size of population is a useful criterion to use, urban geographers are of the opinion that the function performed by each settlement should be included in the ranking of settlements as urban centre, village and hamlet. Mirchaulum citing Carter et al. (1970) emphasized that those administrative and religious functions which are non-commercial functions ought to be incorporated in ranking settlements. The author used the function criterion to rank settlements that were usually regarded as rural into towns, villages and hamlets in the Longuda District of the then Gongola State of Nigeria now Adamawa State.

Urban geographers according to Mirchaulum (1977) gave considerable attention to the problem of classification of settlements into cities, towns, villages and hamlets. He further stressed that while the size of population is a useful criterion as it is emphasised in Nigeria, urban geographers are of the opinion that the function performed by each settlement ought to be incorporated in classifying settlements. He however opined that the problems that may arise in this method of classification are the types of function (socio-economic facilities) to use in the classification, weight to assign each function and the number of functions needed to define a settlement as an urban centre. As cited in Mirchaulum (1977), Jones (1966) asserted that Davis (1965) developed a model to help deal with the difficulties involved in the countless and unanimity of definitions of an urban centre arising from the multiplicity of criteria used.

Davis' method of classifying settlements was applied to group settlements as growth centres for development and planning. This method of clustering settlements which is based on functions was used by Davis in 1965 to rank settlements in the South-West part of the Norwich area (Everson and FitzGerald 1970; Mirchaulum 1977). According to the above

authors, Davis though noted that no method of ranking was found to be perfect, some methods were less biased than others. In ranking the settlements, Davis applied the formulae:

$$C = \frac{t \times 100}{T} \dots \dots \dots \text{Equation (1)}$$

where: C = Location coefficient of function t
t = One outlet of function t
T = The total number of outlets of function t in the study area.

Mirchaulum (1977) modified the above formula to circumvent the problems of types of functions and weight to assign each function in the classification as follows:

$$C = \frac{t \times 100 \times 1}{TN \times NT} = \frac{100t}{NT} \dots \dots \dots \text{Equation (2)}$$

where: C = Location coefficient of function t
T = One outlet of function t
t = Total number of outlets of function t in the study area
N = Total number of centres with function t in the study area.

Mirchaulum applied the formula to classify developing rural settlements into towns, villages and hamlets in the Longuda District. The emphasis placed on the consideration of functions (socio-economic infrastructure) besides population in this method seems to corroborate the issue of a comprehensive criteria in defining urban areas which this paper postulates. The only snag in this method is that it does not classify settlements statistically after computing the location coefficient of functions (C) of settlements. Classification here is done subjectively by plotting the Cs and introducing lines to group the settlements by the rule of thumb. This method lacks objectivity which this paper emphasises.

However, the other method of classifying settlements used by researchers is hierarchical cluster analysis. This is an improvement upon the former and in this method classification of settlements is statistically determined. Similar studies conducted more recently reported in Akpan (1992) on variations in development in Nigeria that applied this method are by Abumere (1981) for former Bendel State, Oyebanji (1981) for Nigeria, Akpan (1982) for Cross River State and Akpan (1992) on patterns of development in south-eastern Nigeria. These studies revealed different levels of variations and patterns of development in the respective regions. This method which is in the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 13.0 is found suitable for the study because it is statistical,

easier to manipulate especially when large data are involved and above all it is objective in approach.

Urban Field Criterion

Having considered the above definitions another one that has perhaps raised much interest is that based on the concept of urban field. This is a new form of urban habitat of relatively low density involving a good transportation system and a broad array of economic, social and recreational opportunities. Each urban field is centred on and dominated to a certain extent by a metropolitan area of at least 200,000 to 300,000 people. Its outer limits can be defined by two criteria:

- i.) the maximum time or distance that most people are prepared to commute; and
- ii.) the time or distance that most people are prepared to spend traveling to or from weekly or weekend recreational activities (Wikipedia 2007).

The concept of urban field is indeed new as a measure of determining urban status. Nigeria may need to explore this and possibly adopt it for a comprehensive definition of urban status. However, the application of this concept as a criterion for defining urban areas in a developing region like Nigeria may not be feasible since the entire region is dominated by a few 'metropolitan' areas such as the capital cities of the various states and headquarters of local Government Areas in the country. This situation has left most parts of Nigeria rural and undeveloped.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be observed that the problems of criteria for defining urban areas universally have been tied to the levels of development of regions in the world. The developed nations use population benchmarks that are low. Perhaps, this shows the importance attached to urbanisation and it enables such nations to accommodate most of her people in the urbanisation process. While the less developed countries are still battling with developmental problems, the population benchmarks such as in Nigeria (20,000) is high. Consequently,

most people in the rural areas are yet to reap the "dividend" of urbanisation. In all these criteria highlighted, Nigeria like Nepal seems to have adopted legal/administrative criterion in the naming of urban areas. It thus seems that nations establish urban centres mainly through planning policy formulation; and legal/administrative framework. Our governments therefore need to deliberately and empirically establish more urban centres by formulating objective and wholesome criteria that consider our level of development. Such policies should not allow our rural settlements to metamorphose organically into urban centres or growth centres characterised by haphazard developments that stifle the growth of surrounding settlements.

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