"Many medium-sized cities in the Global South face a systematic problem with data collection due to inadequate data infrastructure. One priority would be to address the imbalances created by the fact that urban science is essentially developed in the Global North."
—Esteban MUNOZ, Sharon GIL

Quote from the article "Accelerating the Transition to a Circular Economy Through the Creation of Local Jobs" in Intersecting Vol. 9 by Esteban Munoz and Sharon Gil (The United Nations Environment Programme UNEP, Cities Unit, France). Image Source: In Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, where the last decade has seen a dramatic increase in the construction of new roads to cope with rising traffic volumes, people still largely have to make their daily journeys on foot. 2018. Image by Nicolas J.A. Buchoud, all rights reserved ©.

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The Ins and Outs of Urbanization

Gunnar HARTMANN (GH): "Almost all growth of the human population this century will be accounted for by a growing number of city dwellers." [1] Clear, unquestionable, based on statistics – the statement nevertheless requires unpacking. Behind this apparent one-way move, hides a back-and-forth between what, in the past, we called rural and urban. A binary that has worn out its use, and should now be replaced by a process. The process of urbanization.

Lars LERUP (LL): The statement suggests a distinct separation between a rural dweller and a city dweller –

a miraculous overnight transformation. However, a newcomer to the heavily urbanized city struggles to make use of its abundance of resources, and it may take years to utilize these resources, if ever. It is therefore more correct to speak of an urbanizing dweller. For many of us, this is a lifelong process.

Old thoughts linger – at one end, we assume that a city contains a series of essential functions within walking distance (government, control, courts, and cultural venues). Here the city is seen as a central and discrete object. At the other end, the word "city" is freed from its object, operating in language, and available for a wide variety of assignations – legally, all types of urbanization inside the city limits are referred to as the city; however, my own personal view of a small portion is also seen as the "city." In the meantime, the (physical) citification is expanding to such a degree that the notion of a "discrete object" no longer holds – the figure has disappeared in favor of an assemblage. This fabric is made up of smaller assemblages, some of which are quite figurative – a single-family house, a car, a park, and so on. [2] The new city is a vast assemblage of such "machines" – each one actionable. The convenient distinction between urban and rural has collapsed. Since the center no longer holds, megashapes, such as a freeway system, become the navigation system. For drivers, the Geographical Position System replaces the physical form of the city. For passengers, individual cities become linear constructs, unfolding around each errand. The migrant worker walking in from Haiti to the developed Dominican Republic to work for the day is not just "the last

pedestrian," but also a city dweller experiencing the city in pedestrian detail.

GH: Another example that demonstrated the complex assemblages at work was the large movement of migrant workers in India who returned to their small towns and villages during the recent Covid pandemic. The pandemic revealed previously what had remained hidden. Migrant workers, the most recent city dwellers, remain connected to the less urbanized areas through family ties; in some cases, their children stay behind and are raised by the grandparents. Portions of the migrants' income flow back into their home areas. When they get sick or can no longer work (as during the pandemic), they are forced to move back home.

German sociology differentiates the greater process of urbanization in two distinct processes: citification (Verstädterung) and urbanization (Urbanisierung). Citification refers to the change of settlement structures and to demographic change. That is, citification describes a development in the course of which an ever-greater proportion of the population lives in cities, while the proportion of the rural population declines. This process thus writes a shift in population distribution and a change in settlement structure.[3] Urbanization stands for considerable cultural as well as lifestyle changes that lead to individualization and emancipation from strong ties to the community. In other words, one could adopt an urban lifestyle while living in the countryside. While citification is a quantitative term,

urbanization is a qualitative term. For the possibility of data collection, the quantitative perspective receives the most attention and therefore seems to be the most discussed. Using the semantic distinction that you made earlier between city dweller and urbanizing dweller, could we then say that the city dweller is dependent on a city for physical access to labor markets and various services, and that the city of the city dweller represents a place for economic and cultural production? If so, what kind of resources are available for the urbanizing dweller?

LL: The key here is access. In a field of heavy urbanization, a high-income dweller has "total access." Meanwhile, a low-income dweller may have virtually zero access – both living in the same abundance. As a verb, urbanization is relative.

Citification implies that we are all city dwellers, but since access to a city's resources is relative, citification is a description of the infrastructure available – the availability of housing, the speed of the Internet, the variety of job opportunities and so on. Those who utilize these resources is another matter. The professional living on the top floor makes full use of the citification. The homeless person living in a tent on a sidewalk in Los Angeles, or a cleaner in a hotel in Delhi, living behind the garbage bin, live in the wake of citification, far away from its resources, in two of many urban lacunas. Dwelling in all its facets is always somewhat unhinged from the degree of urbanization. Deforestation in the Amazon is a

reflection of heavy urbanization, while its workers are mere cogs in the machinery. Their dwelling is probably worse than that of the forest population that they displace. Nothing new here.

The last pedestrian, whom we encountered above in the Dominican Republic, is walking daily back and forth between two levels of urbanization. They are slowly transferring wealth gained through labor in one location to another, literally performing urbanization. What is being performed is not just the transfer of money, but skill, understanding and insight.

GH: We are in the habit of dividing things, e.g., between urban and rural, and once we have done so, we consequently view them as distinct. The late Hans Rosling pointed out that our general "gap instinct" is firmly established. He objects to what he calls the "mega misconception" that the world is divided into developing and developed ends. Instead, he suggests looking at the developing world through the lens of four income levels. What I'd like to suggest is that we turn Rosling's four levels (see Gapminder's Life On The Four Income Levels) [4] into a tool for allowing us to capture the phenomenon of urbanization beyond worn binaries.[5]

LL: The Swiss astronomer Fritz Zwicky, in his work on rocket systems, effectively used a morphological box as a design tool during the Second World War. Rosling's box, defining life under four income levels, is a heuristic one; rules of thumb that can be greatly expanded in depth and breadth. Looking at

drinking water, the sudden rage for bottled water on Level 4 brings us back to Level 1, if the water is not delivered but picked up. The use of images and accompanying annotations show how versatile morphological thinking is. A plastic bucket used to fetch water on Level 1 shows how a sophisticated machine product trickled down the urbanization ladder to its last rung. In turn, this shows how some form of urbanization is now global. But also, that a distinct assemblage of resources is necessary to claim citification. One bucket does not make a city. We see Gapminder's "Life on the Four Income Levels" heuristic box as a working tool, but also as a gathering point for an integrative conversation; here, each profession, each interest can find a window, a way to join the conversation.

References

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2. Lars Lerup, One Million Acres & No Zoning (London: AA Publications, 2011).

3. Häußermann, Läpple, & Siebel, Stadtpolitik (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 2008).

4. Gapminder: Life On The Four Income Levels (link)

5. Hans Rosling, Factfulness (New York: Flatiron Books, 2018).