



CARTOGRAMS

COUNTRY FILE

BY BENJAMIN HENNIG

Within the next five years rural living will have reached its climax. According to the *United Nations World Urbanization Prospects* (a biennial publication from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs), rural populations will have reached their absolute high in 2022 with approximately 3.38 billion people. This is only slightly up from the current 3.37 billion people, showing how the number of people not living in cities has flattened

since the turn of the century and comes after a period of continuous growth since the 1950s when only 1.78 billion people lived in the countryside. The current long-term projections see this number going slightly down to 3.2 billion people by 2050.

While the rural population has become a minority globally (at approximately 46 per cent), the majority of those are increasingly concentrated in the poorer parts of the world. Sixty-nine per cent of people in the least developed countries live in rural areas, while this number is at only 20 per cent in higher-income countries.

This month's cartogram shows how the distribution of rural populations compares in absolute and relative terms. The large, main map shows the countries of the world resized according to the total number of each's rural population as of 2016. The varying green shades show the proportion of a country's total population that live in a rural area (see key, bottom left).

East Asia dominates this cartogram with its large overall populations. India and China, as the countries with the largest rural populations, particularly stand out. While India is projected to slowly lose rural populations

(six per cent between now and 2050), China is set to do so at a much faster pace (47 per cent). The most significant increase in rural populations, however, takes place almost solely on the African continent, where nine out of ten of the largest growing rural populations are located.

The two smaller cartograms look at these developments over a longer time span, showing the absolute changes in rural population between 1950 and 2050. These cartograms are distorted by absolute rural population decline and growth respectively.

Here the above described regional trends become visible in their absolute extent. Most of the absolute decline over that period takes place in countries that today are predominantly urbanised. Only China and mostly Balkan countries in Europe are among the slightly less urbanised countries that are seeing considerable declines in rural populations.

Significant rural population increases, by contrast, are mostly concentrated in those countries that have rural populations of over 50 per cent.

Migration into cities is one major reason for declining rural populations. However, these maps highlight that this

affects overall rural population numbers less significantly in some of the poorest parts of the world. Here natural population growth keeps rural regions growing in absolute terms. By contrast, China's active intervention through the Hukou residence registration system and the one-child policy influenced these developments considerably, making its developments differ from other countries in the region.

Overall, declining rural populations in already very urbanised countries have become a complex governance issue. This is mostly the case in the wealthier parts of the world, especially in Europe. Modern rural flight in the past six decades and its projected continuation well into the 21st century requires rethinking rural development to ensure a balanced economic development between the growing urban and shrinking rural regions.

Benjamin Hennig (@geoviews) is Assistant Professor in Geography at the University of Iceland and Honorary Research Associate in the School of Geography and the Environment at the University of Oxford. He is involved in the Worldmapper project and is author of www.viewsoftheworld.net.