
DE-POPULATION AND HILL COUNTRY DEVELOPMENT

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The Ascent of Man T.V. Series traced the evolution of civilisation and clearly established that a necessary ingredient in the process was a degree of specialisation to improve productivity and to permit a degree of urbanisation. This process has continued to the present day, aided by major technological advances in transportation, communications and the expansion of trade. It is a world wide phenomenon and as a generalisation the more highly developed the economy the greater the degree of urbanisation. Many attempts have been made in many countries to retain population in rural areas. The EEC has a detailed regional development programme, including a wide range of subsidies and price supports for hill-country farms in Wales and Scotland. This has still failed to check the out-flow. The drift from the North and West to the South and East has been a feature of post-war Britain.

In New Zealand there has been the growth of Auckland and the general population drift from South to North, and within that general drift a movement from farm to factory and from rural to town living. The pressures to leave rural areas will increase because the real cost of moving goods and services, especially by road in New Zealand will rise under the user pay principle and higher labour and fossil fuel prices.

In order to attract population to any area it must contain resources that are sufficient to generate a sustained income flow to support a larger population. Historically gold mining has established thriving townships that fade as gold recovery drops — more recently major hydro-works have had similar results. To maintain population and therefore a minimum of essential services, requires either viable regional industries or permanent subsidies and incentives. This implies a higher value of output per unit area of land—either heavier stocking rates, higher valued crops or a greater degree of processing of existing products. If there is no way of reorganising a district's resources to generate a flow of income great enough to sustain an acceptable population density, then depopulation will and in my view should occur.

The Land Development Encouragement Loans have tended to favour the more remote hill country areas, as does uniform pricing policies. To the extent that the user pay principle becomes more widely adopted the cost of servicing these areas in the future will increase steeply. Areas concerned with depopulation must ensure that unnecessary obstacles to rural living are removed. Access to a proprietary interest in land is a high priority and an acceptance of the part-time of stepping stone farm essential. If the momentum of horticultural exports can be maintained and emulate the success of kiwifruit certain favoured areas will see a net gain in population → but the

overall trend in the more extensive pastoral counties will be a gradual loss of population and associated services. Perhaps a strategic argument exists for the establishment of small scale ethanol plants to meet the needs of small rural communities and to provide employment in addition to ensuring mobility to the vital export industry.