I. THE PROBLEMS

Until recently, research on rural–urban migration in less developed countries has been largely dominated by the work of geographers, demographers and sociologists. For the most part, economists have preferred to ignore migration while operating within the confines of their traditional ‘two-sector’ models. In the case of a ‘closed’ economy these sectors usually consisted of the agricultural and the industrial with the implicit understanding that one could substitute ‘rural’ for ‘agricultural’ and ‘urban’ for ‘industrial’. Emphasis has been placed on traditional economic variables such as output growth rates, terms of trade, savings and investment, and relative efficiency. The efficient allocation of human resources between sectors, if discussed at all, has been assumed to be a natural out-growth of a self-adjusting mechanism which functioned to equate sectoral marginal productivities. Rural–urban migration was portrayed as a manifestation of this self-adjusting mechanism (with its implicit full-employment assumptions) and, as such, was not deemed to be of sufficient intrinsic importance to warrant detailed theoretical and empirical investigation.

The discouraging record of the 1960s in relation to rapid urbanisation and growing levels of urban unemployment in developing nations, however, has underlined the inadequacy of treating migration as a phenomenon of secondary importance. If nothing else, it has shaken development economists out of their complacency and faith in the ‘long-run’ allocative efficiency of the market mechanism and has forced them to question the applicability of their traditional economic models to the realities of the social, economic, and institutional environments of contemporary less-developed nations. The evidence is clear. Urban areas have grown extremely rapidly and, in many cases, at unprecedented historical rates. Between 1960 and 1970, for example, the population of urban areas
is estimated to have grown by 60 per cent in Africa, 52 per cent in Latin America, and 51 per cent in South Asia, while rural areas grew by only 16 per cent in the same decade (Stolnitz, 1973, Tables 36–7). Simultaneously, urban unemployment and underemployment emerged as a problem of utmost importance and concern to politicians, planners and researchers alike. Without question, the phenomenon of accelerated rural–urban labour migration has been the principal cause of both the high rates of urban population growth and the rising levels of urban unemployment. In many African cities in particular, urban growth rates of 7 to 10 per cent per annum are not uncommon and are not likely to diminish in the coming decade.

Thus, the study of the causes and determinants of rural–urban migration and the relationship between migration and relative economic opportunities in urban and rural areas is now of utmost importance. Since migrants comprise the majority of the urban labour force in developing nations, the level of rural–urban migration has been and will continue to be the principal determinant of the supply of new job seekers. And, if migration is the key determinant of the urban labour supply, then it stands to reason that in order to understand the nature and causes of urban unemployment (which in essence represents an excess of job seekers over job opportunities), it is necessary to better understand the process of rural–urban migration. Government policies to ameliorate the urban unemployment problem must be based, in the first instance, on knowledge of who comes to town and why.

In this paper, we shall attempt to review some recent literature on the economics of rural–urban migration with special emphasis on what appears to be a growing theoretical consensus. We shall then summarise the emerging quantitative data on migration from selected country studies in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Our overall intention is to indicate where we now seem to stand on this crucial issue both in terms of completed and ongoing theoretical research and its policy implications.

II. THE MIGRATION PROCESS AND THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MIGRANTS

The factors influencing the decision to migrate are varied and complex. Since migration is a selective process affecting individuals with certain economic, social, educational, and demographic characteristics, the relative influence of economic and non-economic factors may vary not only between nations and regions but also within defined geographic areas and populations. As pointed out above,