Development Research Centre on

Migration, Globalisation & Poverty

Migration and Development: Building Migration into Development Strategies
Migration DRC Conference, Royal Society, London, 28–29 April 2008

Session Two: Poverty and Livelihoods

Overview

Research carried out by the Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty (Migration DRC) has indicated that both international and internal labour migration can act as a mechanism to provide poverty relief to poor individuals and households. However, while migration may provide access to improved livelihoods, it can also lead to new risks both for migrants who leave home to find work and for migrants' families, who are often left behind. What is more, labour migration may only provide a temporary reprieve from poverty, and in some cases migrants may undertake multiple journeys in order to supplement their income. This points to the need to tailor policies to better serve the needs of families who depend on migration to supplement their incomes.

Integrating social protection and migration processes

Migration, whether it occurs internationally or internally, has emerged as a major livelihood strategy in many parts of the economic south. Remittances sent home by international migrants have become an important dimension of developing countries' economies, with total remittances to the developing world estimated at US $239.7 billion in 2007, according to the World Bank. While many of the poorest residents of developing countries do not have the resources to migrate internationally, they often seek greater economic security through seasonal or temporary migration within their own countries.

Such migration creates new risks for migrants and their families – and new challenges for states seeking to provide social protection for their citizens. Migration can expose migrants to hazardous circumstances, such as abusive employers, exploitation by middle men, and risk of injury or illness. Where families are left behind, they may face a range of problems arising from the absence of key earners. The extent to which this kind of migration provides a successful route to greater economic security depends on what actions migrants and their families take to protect themselves against new forms of risk, and on the degree to which governments, non-governmental organisations and community and voluntary associations contribute to migrants' social protection.

International migration: an escape from poverty?

A Migration DRC study in North East Bangladesh indicated that international migration has become a widespread strategy of acquiring additional income, especially for male heads of household. This is part of a nationwide trend in Bangladesh. Migration to states in the Gulf – especially to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait – and to South East Asian countries – including Malaysia and Singapore – has become common since the early 1980s.

Jobs that international migrants are contracted to carry out involve diverse forms of employment. Men who migrate out of the country typically work in the construction, farming, cleaning or maintenance sectors, while Bangladeshi women, who have also been increasingly migrating abroad, work as garment workers, cleaners, nurses, factory workers or informal domestic workers. The type of employment that migrants acquire determines how long they are away from home, with absences ranging from a few months to several years. However, international migration often provides only temporary relief from poverty, with migrants sometimes travelling outside the country on repeated occasions to pursue work.

Increased vulnerability of migrants' families

A Migration DRC case study in the rural village of Jalpara, India, where men often migrate seasonally to look for work, showed that some families who were left behind struggled to cope, as food stocks and cash reserves often ran out before migrants returned. In such instances, ill health among family members who stay behind can be a significant burden, as families struggle to pay for medical expenses. Here, local health programmes largely focused on diseases such as polio, measles and diphtheria but neglected treatment of other health ailments. To meet these and other needs,

families left behind employed a variety of strategies, including women and children seeking wage work, and wives borrowing money or relying on favours from other families in order to make ends meet.

A Migration DRC study of migrant workers in the Ghanaian pineapple sector found that the risk and vulnerability for workers and their families varies depending on migrants' employment and migrant status. Primary migrants (who had moved in search of employment) were older, more skilled and concentrated on large farms providing better employment security and protection. Secondary migrant workers (who were born to or brought with migrant parents) were younger, less skilled and more concentrated on small farms with less employment security or protection. There was a perception amongst primary migrants that secondary migrants and local workers had better local networks of protection reciprocity in times of need or employment shock – which is a major risk for workers in the pineapple sector. Primary migrants were more likely to shoulder greater family responsibilities than secondary migrants, as there was often a greater expectation on them to remit earnings to their families than their younger counterparts. Secondary migrants, by contrast, often felt they were unable to meet expectations for remittances, which potentially diminished their connection to their home communities.

Informal employment

In some cases, labour migration may be undertaken by more than one member of the same family. In Bangladesh, for example, about 800,000 women and girls work in the capital, Dhaka, as domestic workers. A Migration DRC study which interviewed 100 domestic workers from villages in North East Bangladesh found that 40 percent came from families in which at least one other person was a migrant worker. Most of these female domestic workers were employed informally.

While the wages that domestic workers earn are typically lower than those paid for factory work, they sometimes provide a key source of liquidity for their families, aiding in the purchase of land or livestock, facilitating home construction and helping pay for marriage dowries. In addition to this, domestic workers in Bangladesh are usually provided with food, clothes and medicine by their employers.

These benefits are dependent on individual relationships with employers in Dhaka, however, and our study also revealed that domestic workers sometimes suffer abuse or maltreatment at the hands of their employers. A Migration DRC study on international female migrants working as informal domestic workers in Egypt pointed to similarly exploitative conditions, showing that about 60 percent of these workers had suffered verbal abuse from their employers, and that a number of such workers had also experienced physical or sexual assault.

Seasonal migration and livelihoods in South Asia

Internal migrants, like the Bangladeshi workers seen here, often migrate seasonally to boost their incomes.

Photo courtesy of Md. Azmal Kabir.

Pathways for policy

Migration DRC research suggests that policies are needed in order to provide better social protection for labour migrants and their families, including:

- policies that acknowledge the circular nature of most migration, whether internal or international, and facilitate such circulation;
- cooperative measures between sending and receiving countries that are designed to better regulate the recruitment of international migrant;
- policies which ensure that remittances can be invested for the benefit of localized development;
- policies that ensure access to services for families left behind by labour migrants.

For more information

To find out more about Migration DRC's research please email us at migration@sussex.ac.uk. Access to Migration DRC's working papers is available at www.migrationdrc.org.

Photos used in cover logo are courtesy of Dorte Thorsen and Md. Azmal Kabir