

Mobility Transitions within a Global System: Migration in the ESCAP Region

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Migration, particularly undocumented migration, will become an issue of major political conflict

Migration is an outcome of economic and political change. Economic growth creates disparities in wealth among countries and among areas within countries. These disparities stimulate movement from places of limited opportunities to those areas with higher levels of opportunity. Other migration flows, such as refugee movements between countries or movements of displaced persons within countries, result from political conflict.

Although global forces increasingly contribute to a homogenization of development experiences, the societal transformations that affect migration are felt in different ways by different countries. This situation results in what are referred to as "mobility transitions". The use of the plural is meant to stress that there is no single mobility transition. A variety of migration patterns evolve in the process of development, but these patterns emerge within an overall system that provides some coherence and regularity in these changes.

This article focuses on the context within which migration occurs in the ESCAP region. The discussion links this context to outcomes for migrants and society. The article concludes with a discussion of possible trends in mobility patterns in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. At the outset it is important to stress that considerable variation exists among ESCAP countries in their levels of economic development, demographic composition and political structure. This variation is related to differences in migration patterns. It is beyond the scope of the article to provide an adequate treatment of all the variations in migration patterns in the region. Furthermore, there are many forms of migration, each of which could easily be the focus of its own review paper. Therefore, this article deals only with geographical and mobility variations at a very general level.

Mobility transitions

Economic development in relation to migration has been treated in the migration literature as a "black box". While considered crucial in structuring migration flows, the processes of development that affect migration are typically not specified. For example, the influential model of the mobility transition proposed by Zelinsky (1971) links levels and types of migration to demographic and development changes, but does not specify in any detail the demographic and development processes underlying these links.

Skeldon (1990) has built upon the work of Zelinsky by being more specific about the processes in development that generate clear patterns of migration over time. He describes the mobility transition as a systematic sequence of change in the spatial patterns of mobility over time. He argues that movement shifts from local short-distance migration, to massive rural-to-urban migration (mainly to the largest cities) but still temporary, to a situation where mobility becomes more permanent. Later, commuting becomes dominant and there is some decentralization of urban areas with migration to smaller urban areas. The mobility transition is linked to transformations in production relations.

The work of Skeldon is closely related to the work of world system theorists (see Portes and Walton, 1981; Portes, Dore-Cabarral and Landolt, 1997). Within this framework, it is not necessary to examine the motivations of individuals to understand emerging migration patterns. Instead, what is crucial is how institutions change during the processes of development. Individuals are constrained in their behaviour by the choices available to them and these choices vary according to the institutional framework. In particular, it is institutionally constrained opportunities for employment and housing that shape migrant flows.

Recent developments in migration theory have included much more attention to the contextual factors that shape individual and community migration responses to the global integration of markets and the associated trends towards homogenization of culture (see Massey and others, 1994). Localized patterns of development and societal norms and values interact with more generalized processes of global development to produce migration patterns that are broadly similar among countries but that demonstrate regional and country variations.

Patterns of migration in the ESCAP region

Most countries in the ESCAP region are undergoing mobility transitions. These transitions stem from multiple causes and this is reflected in a variety of patterns of mobility. To understand these patterns it is necessary to locate these transitions within the demographic, social and economic changes that transformed the ESCAP region in the second half of the twentieth century.

Many countries in East and South-East Asia have completed the demographic transition — the movement from a

situation of high fertility and mortality — and have also experienced rapid export-led economic growth. The majority of countries in South and South-West Asia are in the midst of their demographic transitions and have pursued models of economic growth that have been more focused on import-substitution. North and Central Asian countries generally have relatively low levels of fertility and mortality, but they are also experiencing difficulties in terms of economic restructuring in a period of political and social transformation. Finally, many of the small island countries and territories that comprise the majority of societies in the Pacific are heavily dependent economically on the more developed countries in that subregion (see ESCAP, 1998).

Internal migration

Although international migration is receiving increasing attention in the ESCAP region, migration within countries makes up the vast majority of moves. Although census estimates of internal migration for countries in the ESCAP region typically suggest movement over a five-year period of less than 10 per cent of the population aged 5 years and older, more accurate survey-based estimates can be two or more times this level (for Thailand, see Chamrathirong and others, 1995).

As a broad generalization, it can be stated that: (a) the level of internal migration in countries in the ESCAP region is increasing, (b) internal migration increasingly comprises movement from rural to urban places, (c) the movements involve a high proportion of temporary migrants and (d) migration flows include a significant proportion of females. Each of these trends and characteristics of migration is a direct outcome of models of development that have been followed by countries of the region.

Because of the high levels of migration among the young, the demographic situation of countries has a large effect on the level of migration. For the ESCAP region, it is projected that between 2000 and 2010 the population in the young adult years of 15-24 will continue to expand (ESCAP, 1998). This has been, and will continue to be, a major factor in increased levels of migration, especially rural-to-urban movement. The result is that urban areas will become increasingly "young" in their demographic profiles. South and West Asian countries in particular can expect upward pressure on migration rates through rapidly expanding numbers of young entrants to the labour force. In East and South-East Asia, the situation is different. In many countries in these subregions, the numbers of young adults have begun to decline. This situation will contribute to a stabilization, or perhaps even a reduction over the long term, in levels of internal migration in those countries (Skeldon, 1991).

Another factor that sets the South-East and East Asian countries apart from most other countries in the ESCAP region is the high level of female migration, especially in terms of rural-to-urban migration (Singelmann, 1993). Evidence from several countries shows that the level of female migration has increased over recent decades (Hugo, 1993; Lim, 1993; Skeldon, 1998). In many rural-to-urban migration streams, the majority of female migrants are young and unmarried. This situation results in urban populations that include large numbers of young unmarried females, usually living away from their families. The concentration of young adult females in urban areas is particularly pronounced in the "megacities" of East and South-East Asia (Guest, 1994).

Although levels of female migration in ESCAP countries and areas outside the East and South-East Asian subregions are generally lower, there is evidence that even in these contexts there has been increased female mobility, particularly of young unmarried women. Using census data, Pathak and Mehta (1995) describe the increasing proportion of single female migrants in internal migration streams in India and note that most of this increase is directed towards large urban centres.

A major factor in the rise in female migration has been the transformation of the structure of the labour force that has resulted from government policies that have promoted export-led development. These policies have centred on the establishment of free-trade zones, encouragement of foreign investment, investment in human resource development and considerable efforts devoted to maintaining a labour environment free of industrial activity. Many of these economic policies are conducive to high levels of female labour force participation.

Another feature of internal migration movements in the region is the large proportion of temporary moves. In Thailand, temporary moves, which include both seasonal movement and other forms of short-term moves, have been estimated to account for one third of all migrations with a duration of one month or more (Chamrathirong and others, 1995). These movements are also common in China — with temporary migrants, i.e. the "floating population", outnumbering registered migrants by approximately four to one — as well as Indonesia and Viet Nam. They are particularly prevalent in the movement to large cities. All studies reviewed indicate that in Asia temporary migrants are likely to be older, male, have lower levels of education, be married (but have left behind their families in the area of origin), live in poor conditions and remit more of their income compared with more permanent migrants. The main purpose of their migration is to earn cash in order to support their rural-based households.

It has been argued that the extent of temporary migration will diminish over time as employment structures change to a situation where the demand for skilled labour increases faster than the demand for unskilled labour. The experience of many ESCAP countries suggests that the transition from temporary to permanent migration is not yet happening. Rural development policies that have encouraged existing patterns of smallholder agriculture while at the same time utilizing agricultural surpluses to fund urban-centred industrial development have contributed to the establishment and subsequently the maintenance of temporary migration flows. Other factors, such as the development of transport infrastructure, have led to increasing integration of rural and urban areas (Jones, 1997) and have reduced the risks and costs of temporary migration.

Urbanization

Globally, only in Asia were there consistent increases in levels of urbanization over the three-decade period from the 1960s through the 1990s (United Nations, 1996). Gilbert (1993) argues that this regional variation has resulted from slower growth, or even a decline, in urban employment opportunities in Latin American and African countries, but rapid expansion of urban employment in many Asian countries. Within Asia, there is considerable variation in the levels of urbanization, with growth in urbanization being most rapid in East and South-East Asian countries and areas.

Rural-to-rural migration still numerically dominates internal migration in most Asian countries because of the high proportion of the population living in rural areas. However, the share of this form of migration has been decreasing, while the share of rural-to-urban migration has been increasing. Recent analyses by the United Nations (1996) indicate that in the decade of the 1980s migration contributed slightly over half of urban growth in Asian countries. The contribution of migration/reclassification to urban growth was generally lower in South and West Asian countries compared with East and South-East Asian countries. The large contribution of migration to urban growth in East and South-East Asia during the 1970s and 1980s can be attributed to the economic dynamism of the subregions, most of it centred on the large cities. This has increased the attractiveness of city life to rural dwellers (Rondinelli, 1991; Jones, 1997).

Large populations, geographically concentrated patterns of economic development and expanding economies have contributed to the growth of megacities in Asia. The ESCAP region now contains more than half of the world's megacities and this proportion is projected to grow in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Another emerging feature of the growth of large urban populations in Asia is the expansion of the influence of large cities into their peripheries. This has been accompanied by a change in migration patterns away from large cities to areas adjacent to these cities. The issue of the emergence of extended metropolitan regions and the role they play in the urban hierarchy is not fully understood and needs to be further explored (see Gilbert, 1993; Drakakis-Smith, 1995; Jones, 1997).

International migration

The broad features of international labour migration in the ESCAP region have been well documented (see reviews by Skeldon, 1992; Hugué, 1995; Pongsapich, 1995; Battistella and Skeldon, 1999). Most of the countries of East and West Asia act as receiving countries, while Central, South and South-East Asian countries are generally exporters of labour. Most of the Pacific island countries are labour exporters, with most of the out-migrants moving to North America, Australia and New Zealand.

Demographic transitions also have an impact on international migration. Hugo (1998) notes that the emergence of a labour market based on transfers of labour among countries in the region has evolved, in part, because of the proximity of countries with very different demographic structures. Countries such as China, India, Pakistan, the Philippines and Viet Nam are identified as major regional source countries of out-migrants and are also countries that have had considerable growth, and potential for growth, in their working-age populations. Other nearby countries, particularly the "tiger" economies of East Asia, are facing declining population numbers in the labour force ages and need to augment their labour forces by accepting migrants from neighbouring countries and areas (see Skeldon, 1999).

Within the ESCAP region, it is important to distinguish between legal and illegal migration, long-term and contract labour migration, and labour migration and refugee movements. Much of the long-term migration from the region is of migrants leaving for settlement in countries such as Australia, Canada and the United States. These migration streams have included significant numbers of migrants from economies such as Hong Kong, China; Malaysia; the Philippines; Singapore; and many Pacific island countries and territories. Substantial numbers of students also study outside the region. However, it is labour migration on short-term contracts and undocumented migrants that constitute the main flows of migrants.

Historically, in the latter part of this century, contract labour migration involving the region was to the oil-rich countries of West Asia (Hugué, 1995). The major exception was Viet Nam, where large numbers of contract workers were employed in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and in eastern Europe during the 1980s. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were over 4 million contract workers of Asian origin in the Middle East. Indians comprised the majority of these workers, followed by workers from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Indonesia in that order. Commencing in the 1980s, and increasing in pace after the Gulf conflict at the start of the 1990s, was a shift in the destination of contract migrants. The rapidly developing economies of East and South-East Asia, such as Brunei Darussalam, Japan, Singapore and Taiwan Province of China, became major destinations.

The South-East Asian countries that have relied most heavily on the export of contract labour — Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand — experienced rapid economic growth during the 1980s and 1990s. It was assumed that they were well on the way to a migration "turnabout" where these countries would change from mainly exporting labour to importing labour. This argument was buttressed by the large inflows of undocumented migrants into Malaysia and Thailand during the 1990s. However, the recent economic crisis that has occurred in East and South-East Asia has seen calls for both the forced repatriation of the undocumented migrants in those countries and government initiatives to try to increase the number of contract migrants going overseas (Skeldon, 1999:8).

It is undocumented migration that most concerns the governments of those countries that import labour. The extent of

undocumented migration is difficult to estimate. Martin (1996) notes that, although the number of undocumented workers in East Asian economies such as Japan, the Republic of Korea and Taiwan Province of China are high, the numbers in Malaysia and Thailand dwarf them. In 1997, it was estimated that there were approximately 1 million undocumented foreign workers, mostly Indonesian, working in Malaysia. The estimates for Thailand are also approximately 1 million, with most of the illegal workers being from Myanmar.

The Asian region has been the site of large volumes of involuntary migration over the last half-century. Some of this movement has clearly been refugee movements, with host governments going to great lengths to limit interaction between the refugees and the local population. For example, the flows of migrants from Viet Nam in the 1970s and 1980s and those from Cambodia during the 1980s were clearly refugee movements, although the flows undoubtedly contained some who were migrating solely for economic reasons. Other large-scale displacements, such as Chinese into Hong Kong, China, Laotians into Thailand, and Burmese and members of ethnic minorities into Thailand from Myanmar, often combine features of both labour migration and refugee movements. Recent conflicts in West and Central Asia have added to the numbers of refugees in the ESCAP region.

In general, international migration flows in Asia are dominated by males (see Skeldon, 1998); however, there are exceptions. For example, migration of contract labour from Indonesia and the Philippines includes as many or more women than men (see Gulati, 1993). These women work mainly as domestic servants. A significant number of women from the Philippines also go to work abroad as "entertainers". The emergence of East and South-East Asian countries as migrant destinations has also contributed to increasing the proportions of international movers who are female. The further development of these migration networks will help to reduce risks of migration and can therefore be expected to contribute to increased levels of female international migration.

Impacts of migration

Most of the development impacts of labour migration at the micro-level are based on the hypothesized change of economic roles resulting from migration. These changes can result from new skills learned during migration or may be an outcome of the productive use of savings to develop new economic activities upon the return of the migrant. It is very clear that the vast majority of migrants, both international and internal, benefit economically from their moves. Most studies of internal migration show that migrants have higher levels of labour force participation than non-migrants, usually have a job arranged before they move or, if not, spend little time looking for a job, and earn much more than they would be able to earn undertaking equivalent work in their areas of origin (Guest, 1998). Even though rural-to-urban migrants do make more money than they would if they had not moved, they still make up large segments of the urban poor. Jones (1997) argues that much of the poverty can be traced to institutional denial to migrants of access to credit and other resources.

Given the concern about the economic benefits of migration to female migrants, it is also important to note that, although many women are placed in vulnerable positions because of their migration, they and their families typically benefit economically from migration. Skeldon (1998), in a review of the literature on migration and women in the ESCAP region, argues that women are generally empowered by migration and that, instead of trying to restrict their movement, more attention should be placed on eliminating those factors that contribute to their vulnerability.

The development benefits of migrant remittances are well documented (Abella, 1993). The volume of these remittances can also be very large. For example, Battistella (1994) quotes International Labour Organization figures to show that in 1993 the value of remittances for the Philippines was over US\$ 2.2 billion, and \$983 million (1991) for Thailand, \$446 million (1992) for the Republic of Korea, and \$218 million (1991) for Indonesia. Although largely undocumented, remittances from internal migration are also large and can have a significant impact on development, particularly in rural areas.

Skeldon (1997) argues that rural-to-urban migration is particularly beneficial as a means of alleviating poverty in rural areas. He notes that remittances from temporary migrants provide rural families with cash incomes that can be used to sustain their rural way of life. Guest (1998) uses data from two linked surveys of migration in Thailand to show that remittances provide an important supplement to household income. The use of remittances has important multiplier effects on the economy, with many of the major items of expenditure, for example construction materials and labour, being obtained locally. Guest (1998) also found that remittances helped to reduce the levels of intra-rural household income inequality.

Compared with economic impacts, there is much less consensus on the social impacts of migration. In a summary of comparative studies from several Asian countries on the social impacts of labour migration, Pongsapich (1995) argues that the social effects are conditioned by the structure of societies where the movement takes place. For example, she argues that, although spousal separation owing to international migration has negative implications for relations between spouses in a patriarchal society such as Pakistan, in societies such as Thailand, Sri Lanka or the Philippines, where there is more flexibility in gender roles, the separation of spouses does not result in major adjustment problems for spouses. She argues that the process can indeed be quite positive, with a heightened value of family relations deriving from separation.

Future transitions

What will be the patterns of migration in the ESCAP region over the first quarter of the twenty-first century? To answer this question with any degree of certainty would require knowledge of the political and economic developments that are likely to

occur within the region. Although that is impossible, based on developments over the previous quarter of century we feel relatively confident in making the following predictions.

There will be increases in migration numbers and rates, and decreases in migration selectivity. It is likely that these changes will occur for both internal and international migration. Higher levels of migration will occur because of increased spatial concentration of economic development. Within countries, this will occur through concentration of investment and employment growth in large urban centres, and increasingly, in extended metropolitan zones. Improved transportation links will operate to change the structure of mobility, with increasing proportions of the labour force being able to engage in long-distance commuting, further contributing to the blurring of the boundaries of rural and urban areas.

One factor that may alter the predicted changes in internal migration patterns, especially in East and South-East Asian countries and areas that have aggressively followed export-led development strategies, is the economic restructuring that has followed the economic crisis that developed in 1997. For the sake of contrast, in a number of Latin American countries that were forced to restructure their economies in the 1980s, migration patterns underwent considerable change, including declines in rural-to-urban migration, with particularly large declines in moves directed towards primate cities (Portes, Dore-Cabral and Landolt, 1997). However, the current low levels of urbanization in most ESCAP countries are likely to mean that the effects of the restructuring on migration patterns will have a more limited impact compared with the Latin American situation.

A slowing of economic growth and subsequent economic restructuring may also have an impact upon international migration. Governments will come under increasing pressure to limit the numbers of workers entering their countries, and to repatriate many of those already residing in their countries. However, there is also increased pressure to migrate for those living in traditional labour-exporting countries. Furthermore, the increasing political, trade and aid ties between countries in the region will contribute to higher levels of migrant flows and reduce the political will of labour-importing countries to act too harshly in trying to stop in-migration. Martin (1996) believes that all factors — demographic, economic and political — indicate increased flows of both legal and undocumented migrants in the Asian region. Kim (1996) also argues that greater economic inter-dependence within the Asian region can be expected to lead to increased levels of international migration in the future.

Decreased selectivity of migration will result from a reduction in the risk and cost of migration. This is occurring because of improvements in transportation and through the development of migration networks. As migration risk decreases, more women will become involved in migration (Hugo, 1997). We can also expect to see a reduction in the age concentration of migration, and more family migration. Because international migration typically entails a higher risk than internal migration, the decreases in migration selectivity will be less pronounced for international migration than they will be for internal migration. The interaction between cultural values and patterns of development affects the level of minimum acceptable risk. Therefore, levels of female migration, for example, are unlikely to rise in South and West Asian countries to the levels that will be observed in East and South-East Asian countries.

Temporary migration will (a) remain a major form of migration for some countries of the region, (b) emerge as a major form of migration in some countries, and (c) decline in importance in other countries. Temporary migration is most likely to occur in those countries where a system of smallholder agriculture is encouraged within a context of rapid urban development. A country such as Viet Nam would fit this pattern. In this situation, which occurs in many countries of the region, temporary migration provides households with a mechanism for maintaining a rural base while at the same time providing an abundant and relatively cheap labour force for urban-based development. A shift away from temporary forms of mobility will emerge in those countries where a combination of demographic and economic factors operate to reduce the growth of the rural labour force. Thailand has the potential to reduce markedly the levels of temporary migration over the next quarter of a century.

Even though movements from one Asian country to another were relatively unimportant for most of the twentieth century, the regional migration system that became established during the 1990s will develop further, and most international migration in the region over the next 25 years will occur within this system. Both demographic and economic forces are likely to continue to make East Asian countries and areas the main destinations of migrants. Within this regional migration system, subregional systems will also evolve. Most of these systems will build upon existing flows, for example, between India and Nepal, or between Thailand and neighbouring countries. But as countries such as China and Viet Nam, and the newly independent countries in Central Asia, continue their transition to market economies, they will provide large new source areas for migrants. Small Pacific island countries, their economies heavily dependent on larger more developed nations, will continue to experience high levels of out-migration.

The current migrations within the region are largely the product of forces that lie outside the control of any single government. They are part of the processes that have come to be included under the rubric "globalization". Globalization essentially involves increasing interdependence between economies and, as a concomitant of this increasing interdependence, greater flows of investment capital and technology and the development of a global culture. The increased intensity of exchanges is supported by international financial institutions and by economic powers pursuing national interests. However, an undesired outcome of this process has been increases in the levels of undocumented migration.

These increases have resulted in a growing recognition that there is a need for governments in the region to be flexible in their approach to migration (Archavanitkul and Guest, 1999; Battistella and Skeldon, 1999). However, this form of movement poses sensitive questions about national security throughout the region. The sensitivity of migration makes attempts at regional cooperation extremely difficult. Migration, particularly undocumented migration, will become an issue of major political conflict. This will revolve, as it has in the last decade, around the conflict between the efforts of labour-exporting countries to

utilize migration as a development tool and to protect the rights of the migrants, and the desire of most labour-importing countries to minimize the social and economic cost of migration. Attempts have begun at the regional level to seek solutions to these problems, but the complexity of the issues will mean that progress will be slow.

One area where progress can be expected is related to human trafficking. Migration increasingly is a business dominated by commercial interests and, to some extent, organized crime. The smuggling of workers across borders has become big business in Asia (Martin, 1996). The extent of trafficking is enormous. Skeldon (1998) cites sources which estimate that worldwide up to 4 million persons a year are trafficked and that the majority of these are women and children. Many of these flows occur in Asia and involve prostitution. Labour contractors are also an integral part of labour recruiting, both legal and illegal. While many governments attempt to control labour contractors through systems of registration and through the setting of maximum fees that can be charged, the regulations are often flouted and many migrants are victims of this system. Governments in the region are increasingly motivated to address these issues.

In conclusion, the first 25 years of the new century will see migration come to the forefront as a demographic, economic, social and political issue. The variation in and complexity of migration patterns that are found within the region will increase as global development processes interact with the unique cultural and social context of each country. These developments in the area of migration will require intensive programmatic and research efforts to understand and shape the evolving migration patterns.

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