

Rural-to-Urban Migration and Its Implications for Poverty Alleviation

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Policies that accept the wider mobility of the population are likely to accord with policies that will enhance the well-being of greater numbers of people

Over 71 per cent of the world's poor were to be found in the ESCAP region in the mid-1980s and the vast majority of these were living in the rural sector (World Bank, 1990:2). Although urban poverty is hardly insignificant, the absolute numbers of poor and the incidence of poverty tend to be greatest in the rural sector. It might therefore be concluded that programmes to eradicate poverty must necessarily focus on that sector. While this article would not seek to dispute the general thrust of this conclusion, it will attempt to highlight the significant interactions between urban and rural that suggest that any programme that focuses solely on the rural (or the urban) sector is ignoring very real forces that can help to reduce poverty. To view either the rural or the urban sectors as discrete policy targets is a recipe for policy failure.

The ESCAP region, in common with other parts of the world, is becoming more urban. In 1990, Asia (excluding Japan) was 29 per cent urban, up from 20 per cent in 1970, and it was the only major world region to show an increase in its rate of urban growth between 1965-1970 and 1985-1990 (United Nations, 1996:172-177). Population migration is not the only, or necessarily the most significant, component of urban growth. Natural increase and reclassification of rural areas to urban areas are also important, with the former often being the most important component of growth.

Yet we know that there are major weaknesses in many of the data that are used to measure the size of urban populations and their rates of growth, and urban populations are often significantly underenumerated. In particular, short-term migrants tend not to be included in urban population figures. It might be thought that these short-term migrants need not be included as they are not permanently in the towns and cities. Nevertheless, although the individual migrants may not be permanent residents, as a group they make up a permanent sector of the urban population that still requires basic services. Also, in practice, it is virtually impossible to separate longer-term and more permanent migrants from shorter-term and circular migrants: those who come for only a few weeks may secure a job and remain, and those who have spent one or two years in the city may return permanently to their villages. For an in-depth discussion of the issue of measurement of migration in developing countries, see Skeldon (1986).

The magnitude of short-term migration can be significant. In China, for example, it has been conservatively estimated that there may be a "floating population", that is, short-term migrants, of some 70 million in the cities who do not appear in the official urban population figures (Chan, 1994:267). While atypical in terms of absolute numbers, the case of China is quite representative in terms of relative importance of short-term movers. The basic point is that the existing data on rural-to-urban migration usually underestimate the real volume of rural-to-urban population movements. One of the clearest indicators of the underenumeration of migration in Asia comes from the National Migration Survey of Thailand, which showed that estimates derived from the population census, upon which policies are usually based, could be doubled or even almost tripled when various measures of short-term migration are incorporated (Chamrathirong and others, 1995).

Given that most of the poor are to be found in the rural sector and that there is considerable, and underestimated, rural-to-urban migration, the key questions revolve around the following:

Can rural-to-urban migration improve the well-being of the rural areas of origin of migration, or are these areas further impoverished through the rural exodus?

Can rural-to-urban migration improve the well-being of those who move to the cities, or are they pauperized and degraded by the experience?

Is the rural poverty simply transferred to the urban sector?

What are the gender implications of the migration, in terms of the experience of women as migrants and in terms of the women left behind?

Each of these questions raises numerous and often contentious issues and the evidence is still not sufficient in order to derive definitive conclusions. Nevertheless, we are perhaps now moving more towards a consensus than a few years ago. One of the most significant shifts in thinking about the process of migration and development in recent years has been "an acceptance that urbanization in developing countries is inevitable" (McGee, 1994:iii, emphasis in the original). This article will briefly attempt to answer the above questions in the context of the Asian region and come to some policy implications of the impact of rural-to-urban migration on poverty alleviation.

Migration and rural poverty

Except in cases of forced migration due to political or ecological factors, all the evidence suggests that it is not the poorest who move. There appears to be a level of poverty below which migration is not possible (see Arlacchi, 1983). The

move itself requires some resources, not just the cost of the passage, but also to support the migrant at the destination until either friends or regular or part-time employment can meet those expenses. However, there are other factors involved. Those who move tend to be from among the better educated in any community: from those families who can afford to remove their children from the household labour force and send them to school. Thus, the wealthier groups in any community send their household members to pursue their education and they are precisely those who will be among the first to move out. The better educated are those who can more readily respond to information concerning opportunities in other areas and are those best prepared to meet them. The earliest migrants from any community are almost invariably from the local elite: that word is used advisedly as it clearly must be seen in relative terms. Those that make up the elite in an isolated village in northern Pakistan, for example, are quite different in wealth and status from the rural elite in Sind Province.

Thus, the poorest are likely to be among those left behind. Migration might thus be seen to exacerbate rather than to alleviate poverty in the rural sector by depriving the villages of their most energetic and best prepared members. This argument, it might seem, would be a strong case for programmes of poverty alleviation to focus on the village to improve conditions there so that people will not wish to leave and/or to alleviate the living conditions of those left behind. This is a logical and perfectly understandable policy alternative. However, it tends to ignore certain critical aspects of the development process. One of the very few universal generalizations that can be made about human migration is that young adults are the most likely to move. Over the long term, the reproductive capacity of a community may wane through migration. However, this interpretation does not take into consideration the importance of circulation and return to the villages, or of the importance of monies sent back to the villages in the form of remittances.

Remittances tend more to be associated with international migration, but cash and goods in kind are every bit as important in the context of internal migration for the families of the migrants. At the macro-level, there are indeed differences in the impact of remittances, depending upon whether the source is internal or international. In the latter case, the funds are obviously earned overseas and have an impact upon foreign exchange earnings and are thus of great interest to governments in developing countries. In the former case, there are no such direct macro-level linkages, although there is much concern over how the monies received in the villages are used. There is an impression that they are used primarily for consumption, which may favour imported goods and lead to a deterioration in foreign exchange earnings.

Accurate data on remittances are extremely difficult to obtain, particularly where there are exchanges in kind. Nevertheless, a consensus appears to be emerging that there is no clear demarcation between investment and consumption. For example, conspicuous consumption on house construction and improvement, which is a common use of remittances, stimulates the local construction industry, not only generating employment but favouring investment in expanding these industries to meet the increasing demand. An interesting case comes from southern India, where increasing remittances in Kerala State led to the immigration of skilled craftsmen from neighbouring states to participate in the construction boom (Nair, 1989:353). Even more obvious cases of consumption such as the support of wedding parties or religious festivals can have positive feedback economic effects in local agricultural production or the employment of musicians, as well as the more nebulous impact on the preservation and promotion of local cultural life.

While, almost certainly, the impact of remittances has favoured those families with migrant members, it has also increased wealth differences within rural communities. Those without migrants are excluded from direct access to the new wealth, and to this extent some families may become relatively more deprived as a result of the migration. That said, however, it appears that some non-migrants should be able to improve their status through the provision of services to the migrant households. Return migrants from the towns and cities are also among those who can introduce new ideas into otherwise conservative communities, promoting new agricultural techniques, entrepreneurial activities and even new attitudes towards family size that may encourage programmes of family planning, thus easing dependency burdens.

Although migration to urban centres can indeed have negative consequences for sending communities, on balance the net impact appears to be positive. The urban sector, through human rural-to-urban circulation, becomes but one more resource niche in the economic base of the rural household (which can be conceptualized as an urban "field" to be harvested on a regular basis) that can extend local resources and help to protect the household against risk. The urban sector, in effect, acts as a support for the villages, sustaining them during times of profound change. Thus, initially at least, rural-to-urban migration itself can act to alleviate poverty in the rural sector and policies that are aimed at restricting population migration may very well be counterproductive and not in the best interests of the rural poor.

Policies that are aimed at trying to incorporate non-migrants into the circuits that can provide services to wealthier migrant households, through training in appropriate services for example, may be more effective in alleviating rural poverty, as would be programmes to support the activities of returned migrants. For a review of the case material on migration on which many of these conclusions are based, see Skeldon (1990).

Migration and the transfer of rural poverty to urban areas

Although the migrants from any village may come from the wealthier and better educated groups in that village, they are likely to be poorer and less educated than the vast majority of urban residents. Do they therefore become pauperized in the city and join the legions of the urban poor, unemployed and unemployable? Here the evidence appears to be much clearer: migrants in urban areas tend to have higher labour force participation rates than non-migrants. While there is some information to suggest that women in particular enter extremely low-paying jobs, migrants in general enter a wide range of activities in view of their wide range of skill levels reflecting those from primarily urban backgrounds through to those from

isolated rural backgrounds. Studies in India's Punjab State show that migrants are not necessarily thrust into those most poorly paid jobs and, more generally, there appear to be few overall migrant/non-migrant differences as far as the nature of employment is concerned (Oberai and Singh, 1983).

The informal sector has often been seen as a refuge for poor migrants eking out a living on the margins of the largest cities. This sector, primarily of services, petty trading and small-scale industrial activities, lies beyond government control and is usually viewed with suspicion by officials. It has often been seen as an undesirable transitional step on the way towards incorporation in more regulated employment within formal government or the private sector. Here again this viewpoint is distorted. Studies in New Delhi have shown that earnings in the formal sector are only about 9 per cent higher than in more informal activities (Banerjee, 1983). Also, the informal sector, with no taxes or deductions for social security and with flexible working hours, may have greater appeal for urban workers than the bureaucratic formal sector. Workers may thus choose to opt out of formal sector activities and go into the informal sector.

Not too much should be made from a clear division between formal and informal sectors. Those employed in formal government employment may also "moonlight" in the informal sector to improve their salaries, and private companies often use petty traders to extend their markets into niches that might otherwise be closed to them. Thus, there are close linkages between formal and informal sector activities. What does seem incontrovertible, however, is that formally generated employment cannot keep pace with the demand for jobs in the rapidly expanding urban centres in the developing world. It is the informal sector, with its capacity to create an almost infinite variety and number of activities, that absorbs most of the growth of the labour force. In the Philippines, for example, it has been estimated that 73 per cent of non-agricultural activities were informal in the early 1980s (Chickering and Salahdine, 1991a:188). This process can be seen as "involution" (Armstrong and McGee, 1968), in which the informal sector is like a sponge, constantly absorbing labour and providing employment, and the point at which the marginal productivity of labour becomes zero is continuously postponed.

This key role of the informal sector in providing at least the basics of a livelihood in the urban sector is reinforced by the presence of social networks that have led to the segmentation of the labour market and the provision of some form of protection for the workers. These networks are often, although not exclusively, based upon place of origin. The informal sector is not, it must be emphasized, the sole preserve of migrants, although they indeed make up a large share of that labour force; native urban workers are also to be found in large numbers in informal activities. The common pattern is that people from one particular area will control access to one particular occupation. This means that people from the same area can be provided with employment when they arrive in the city -- often, when jobs become available, word is sent back to the village to make sure that someone will come to fill it. The idea of an open search process for urban employment is false, particularly at the lower skill levels for which the informal sector is known. These social networks are often institutionalized into associations that can assist the migrants in the city, making sure that they have accommodation as well as a familiar environment in which to socialize.

The essential point is that the majority of migrants to the cities of developing countries are generally absorbed into the economic and social fabric of the cities; they are not necessarily thrust into poverty. The principal reasons for this situation revolve around the support mechanisms that the migrants themselves create. There is a wealth of energy, organizational skills and talent within these communities and the informal sector that governments can tap to their own advantage, as well as to the benefit of the migrants themselves. Allowing, and facilitating, the migrants to help themselves in terms of generating employment, organizing transportation, arranging security and building homes is likely to be the most cost-effective way of improving conditions in the largest cities in the developing world. Finding ways to cut "red tape" and to support, rather than discourage, informal housing or employment is likely to prove a more effective approach. Thus, if the rural migrants are provided with an environment that allows them to make use of their energy and skills, they will not be pauperized. These ideas are well outlined in the important work of de Soto (1989), and his ideas are examined for Asia in Chickering and Salahdine (1991b).

Gender implications of migration and poverty

It is clear that, in many parts of the world, the incidence of poverty is greatest among women. Their levels of literacy, education and labour force participation tend to be significantly lower than those of men in all but the most developed countries of the ESCAP region (see table). Without access to basic training, their participation in income-earning opportunities is limited and universally women work longer hours for less remuneration. Initially at least, development tended to favour men in generating income-earning opportunities more appropriate for them. Women were often left behind in the villages as men moved to plantations or towns in search of work and female-headed households tend to have higher incidences of poverty than those where both parents are present.

In terms of migration, with the exception of Latin America, women, until recently, were seen mainly as being left behind in the home areas or to be primarily followers in migration. Over the last 50 years, however, one of the basic characteristics of the migration system has been the increasing participation of women in population movement, to the extent that women now dominate the flows in many countries and regions. For example, more women than men now move in the Philippines, the Republic of Korea and Thailand. As part of the new international division of labour, light, labour-intensive industries have been diffused out of the most developed countries to the periphery, initially to what are now known as the newly industrialized economies (NIEs), of Hong Kong, the Republic of Korea, Singapore and Taiwan Province of China, and, later, much more deeply into other developing areas. The NIEs have now developed to such an extent that they would be better known as the

newly de-industrializing economies, as they move into primarily tertiary, service activities. Labour-intensive industrialization, and later service activities, created employment opportunities for women. This did not inevitably lead to an improvement in their status as many of these jobs were temporary, with no security, and were extremely low-paid. The female labour force was docile, non-unionized, vulnerable and easily exploitable. Many other women went early into low-paying service occupations such as domestic servants; some became involved in degrading activities such as prostitution (commercial sex workers). Women often had to accept a double burden: family provider as well as income earner.

Yet, despite the real and widespread exploitation, a comparison has to be made in terms of conditions back in the areas of origin and prior to migration. Both women who move and those who are left behind are placed in new situations which often require independent decisions. It is becoming increasingly clear that women are moving independently of, and often despite the wishes of, fathers and husbands (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). Those left behind need to take decisions regarding the running of the household without the advice of absent husbands. Although there is considerable variation among the countries of the ESCAP region, and even within each country, the process of migration can act to improve the position and status of women. Women left behind can find themselves playing key roles as entrepreneurs in investing or divesting remittance income or running a bazaar economy based on the sale of remittances in kind (Brown and Connell, 1993). These activities act to alleviate poverty in the villages.

Women, through migration, can be provided with opportunities that they otherwise would not have had. Where large numbers are involved in independent movement to towns and cities their average age of marriage is likely to rise, thus contributing to a decline in fertility. The increasing demand for women in urban service activities is a demand for more highly educated women and, over time, the differences in level of education compared with men are likely to decline, as can be seen in the cases of the NIEs in the table. Although there is unquestionably abuse, over the longer term the incorporation of women into the labour force can but improve their status and bring greater "empowerment". The women remaining in the rural areas, linked to a wider economy through migrant husbands, are likely to have to act more independently in their absence and to have access to additional sources of income from remittances. Thus, migration can be a means towards the improvement and empowerment of women in developing countries.

Table: Selected ESCAP countries and areas: female-male economic and social status differences (Females as a percentage of males)^a

Country/area	Literacy		Primary enrolment		Secondary enrolment	Tertiary enrolment	Labour force participation ^a	Life expectancy at birth
	1970	1985	1960	1987/88	1987/88	1987/88	1988	1990
Afghanistan	15	24	13	52	70	18	9	102.4
Bangladesh	33	43	39	87	48	25	7	98.8
Cambodia	-	40	-	-	-	-	64	106.0
China	-	69	-	97	74	55	76	104.6
Hong Kong	71	85	85	99	107	-	59	107.2
India	43	50	50	97	56	47	34	100.6
Indonesia	64	79	67	98	81	-	52	105.9
Islamic Republic of Iran	43	61	48	93	71	43	21	101.3
Japan	-	-	-	-	102	76	61	107.6
Lao People's Democratic Republic	76	-	47	80	71	60	81	106.2
Malaysia	68	78	77	100	102	87	45	106.1
Myanmar	67	78	85	98	92	94	60	105.9
Nepal	13	32	5	51	40	-	51	97.9
Pakistan	37	41	28	55	42	46	7	100.0
Papua New Guinea	62	53	12	86	63	39	64	102.7
Philippines	96	99	95	102	100	-	46	106.1
Republic of Korea	86	93	90	100	94	48	51	109.2
Singapore	60	85	93	100	104	-	61	107.8
Sri Lanka	81	88	90	100	109	68	33	106.1

Thailand	84	92	90	-	-	82	106.4
Viet Nam	-	89	-	94	93	-	88

Source: UNDP, 1991.

Notes: a All figures are expressed in relation to the male average, which is indexed at 100. The smaller the figure, the bigger the female-male gap; a figure above 100 indicates that the female average is higher than the male.

bLabour force participation rates are not strictly comparable because of differing definitions across countries/areas.

Migration, poverty and policy

Migration policies in developing countries are aimed, almost without exception, towards limiting the volume of movement. Very seldom are there policies to encourage internal migration, unless that movement is away from the cities and towards areas of agricultural resettlement, as in the cases of the transmigration programme in Indonesia or of the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) in Malaysia. Governments tend to be concerned about the rapidly expanding city and the concentration of perhaps disaffected migrants in urban areas. Urban elites traditionally have feared the rural masses: the wealth of the few feels threatened by the poverty of the many. Yet, cities bring prosperity. There is not one highly developed country or area that is not very urbanized.

As emphasized previously in this article it is now widely accepted that urbanization is inevitable. The experience of policies to limit migration to the largest cities has been one of abject failure. Apart from short-term success in China during the 1960s and early 1970s, few policies in the non-socialist world have made any significant impact on urban growth. Even in the socialist world these may have had only a limited effect. For example, the implementation of the reforms from 1979 in China that has led to rapid economic growth in coastal provinces has been accompanied by fast urbanization and massive internal migration. Thus, the control of migration, even in such a centrally planned economy as China, could only be sustained over the relatively short term. Of the more market-oriented economies in Asia, Malaysia was among those to pursue most aggressively programmes of rural development. Over the last decades, however, Malaysia has seen very rapid rates of urbanization indeed, with Kuala Lumpur emerging as one of the mega-urban regions of Asia. Control of urbanward migration is a control on the expansion of the labour force. Such a limitation of the labour market is not going to attract the kinds of labour-intensive industries which enable countries to embark upon rapid programmes of development and which, in turn, can ultimately alleviate poverty.

Thus, there is a basic contradiction between attempts to control migration towards cities on the one hand and poverty alleviation on the other. The conclusion to be drawn from the evidence summarized above is that migration, on the whole, acts to alleviate poverty in both the urban and rural sectors. Policies therefore need to accommodate to this reality, perhaps not actively to promote migration towards the urban sector, as this will occur anyway, but to deal appropriately with the consequences of the migration. Attempts to promote informal activities in both the urban and rural sectors, the latter based upon remittance income, are likely to be far more effective in alleviating poverty in both the urban and rural sectors than any attempt to restrict migration or to limit the informal sector.

The thrust of this article is certainly not to recommend the abandonment of existing programmes of rural development and to encourage more people to move to the cities. Quite the reverse, rural programmes require strengthening and deepening. And this article in no way denies the very real problems, both social and economic, that can occur upon the movement of people to cities. What it does advocate strongly is that programmes of poverty alleviation need to focus on these social and economic problems in the cities. It recognizes the inevitability of migration towards urban centres and argues that governments must plan accordingly. Policies that are most likely to be effective are those that accept existing trends rather than those that seek to reverse them. Policies that accommodate, rather than seek to control, the existing situation are more likely to meet with success.

In the context of the urban sector, the critical policy areas revolve around how to manage large cities most effectively, rather than controlling their growth. This counsels neither enhancement nor abatement of migration. In the rural sector, the critical policy areas revolve around opening a greater range of opportunities to village people: many of these will be local but others may well be in urban or even overseas destinations. Thus, the real policy options may lie in how to promote the most beneficial systems of rural-urban interaction.

There still appears to be a reluctance on the part of many governments and experts to recognize the key roles that both migration and informal sector activities can play in improving the quality of life and alleviating poverty. Although, unquestionably, there can be negative consequences to these activities, and generalizations are difficult to make, on balance the contribution that migration can make towards poverty alleviation appears to be positive. Policies that accept the wider mobility of the population are therefore likely to accord with policies that will enhance the well-being of greater numbers of people. It is likely that the poorest of the poor do not migrate at all as they cannot afford to do so, and means need to be found to draw them into local and regional circuits of migration in order to increase their options and choices. Poverty, ultimately, is a function of the lack of choice and the provision of choice will involve both rural and urban options.

The weight of the evidence, therefore, demonstrates that rural poverty is not transferred to the city. Rather, migration allows the circulation of goods, money and ideas, as well as people, between urban and rural sectors. It concentrates a

population that has considerable potential for self-organization which, given a favourable policy environment, can create a dynamic economy and society. That dynamism will involve both a return to, and interaction with, the rural sector that is likely to improve the welfare of both sectors over the short term. Migration is an integral part of development and, ultimately, of the alleviation of poverty, but its important positive role in this process remains largely unappreciated.

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