

The Links Between Migration, Globalisation and Sustainable Development

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Increased migration is one of the most visible and significant aspects of globalisation: growing numbers of people move within countries and across borders, looking for better employment opportunities and better lifestyles. Although migration is usually seen as problematic, it contributes to sustainable development. For households in poor areas, remittances improve security and, with the support of appropriate policies, can contribute to local economic growth. In industrial countries with ageing populations, migrant workers are an increasingly important part of the labour force and support national welfare systems. National and international policies need to reflect the contribution of migration to sustainable development, and to explicitly protect the rights of migrants which are all too often ignored in attempts to curb their movement.

Migration, both across borders and within the same country, is not usually seen as desirable. Internal migrants are held responsible for the unmanageable growth of megacities in the South, and international migrants are often thought to increase unemployment in industrialised countries by undercutting local wages, and to benefit from welfare systems to which they seldom contribute.

But despite increasingly stringent immigration controls and the difficulties of making a living in the cities of the South, people continue to move. In part, this is because they have always moved: migration has long been a strategy to reduce risk by diversifying income sources, and in many countries it is not unusual for family and kin to maintain strong links across long distances. People also move in a variety of directions: between different rural areas, from towns to countryside, from one town to another.

International migration is difficult to quantify, because of the often large number of undocumented migrants, and estimates of internal migration are similarly problematic. However, the consensus is that movement has increased and intensified in the last two

decades, and that 'new' groups of migrants are emerging, such as young, single women who move independently rather than for marriage and/or under the authority of older relatives and men.

Policies designed to curb international migration usually only benefit illegal smugglers and employers who hire undocumented migrants to avoid complying with existing pay and working conditions regulations. Policies which attempt to restrict internal migration by making it difficult for migrants to gain access to urban housing and basic services, are also usually unsuccessful. More often than not, policy makers simply ignore the fact that mobility is an important part of people's lives, for example when land redistribution policies and credit initiatives assume that household members live all together in one single place.

Three aspects of migration are especially important: first, the factors related to global changes in production and trade, which influence migration; second, the opportunities and constraints specific to different groups (for example women and men, younger and older people); and third, the contribution of migrants to their home areas and to their host communities.

KEY CHALLENGES:

- **Controls and restrictions on undocumented migrants are not the answer to the increase in 'informal' labour markets in the North. Policies should address how to increase labour markets' flexibility while maintaining and strengthening workers' rights and improving working conditions.**
- **Remittances are important for households and communities, but are often ignored in development policies. Better support in the form of services, training and infrastructure improves the capacity of migrants and their households to make productive investments in their home areas.**
- **Educated migrants have better jobs and earn more. Equitable access to assets such as land makes it easier for migrants to invest and return to their home areas, where they contribute new skills.**

A better understanding of these can lead to more effective policies for sustainable development.

International migration and globalisation

The global reorganisation of labour markets has an important impact on migration. In the North, demand is high for semi-skilled and unskilled workers, such as cleaners and housemaids, and for seasonal agricultural workers. The 'underground economy' or informal sector is the largest employer of undocumented international migrants. Much of it consists of small-scale enterprises in the textile/clothing and building/civil engineering industries which act as subcontractors for larger firms. The latter increasingly rely on outsourcing rather than hiring employees. Outsourcing reflects the need for more flexibility and adjustment to irregular production patterns in certain industries; however, outsourcing firms are not responsible for the recruitment practices of their subcontractors who tend to recruit undocumented migrants to minimise costs, especially those related to welfare and taxation.

Undocumented migrants are not the cause for the existence of informal labour markets in Northern countries, and illegal migration benefits employers more than migrants. What is necessary is an increase in the flexibility of labour markets while maintaining and strengthening workers' rights and improving working conditions. This is a far more complex challenge, but one which has to be faced: especially in Western Europe, immigration can contribute to moderate the negative impact of the ageing population, as the decline in fertility rates will result in a much lower ratio of people in employment to pensioners. Documented migrants, whose employers pay full non-wage contributions, are an asset in supporting pension and health systems, and policy-makers need to take this into account.

Internal migration and globalisation

Another important aspect of globalisation is the relocation of manufacturing in countries where labour is cheaper, and the increasing number of international tourist resorts in Southern countries. In many instances, workers are migrants from the rural areas, often women. Globalisation has an impact on internal migration as well as on international movement. Moreover, it has an impact on who moves – and the number of young women migrating independently is unprecedented.

While wages and working conditions in these sectors are often below international standards, they are attractive to migrants for two different reasons. First, there is increasing need for cash incomes in rural areas, as user fees are now prevalent for most basic services such as health and education. However, economic reform has hardly benefited small farmers, whose income is often not sufficient to cover anything but the bare necessities. Especially in sub-Saharan countries, opportunities for rural non-farm employment are limited, and migration becomes inescapable. These constraints need to be addressed by policies aiming to increase incomes from farming and non-farm rural employment.

Second, while economic motives are the most important reason for migration, other motives should not be underestimated. For young people, both women and men, migration is a way to experience the wider world and to gain independence – both financial and personal – from their parents and community elders. This is the outcome of improved access to information and of the emergence of employment opportunities previously unthinkable. Sometimes this attitude is deeply entrenched in whole communities: in southeast Nigeria, young men who do not migrate to town are considered to be 'lazy' and often derided by their communities. This reflects significant social and cultural changes which policy-makers cannot ignore.

The contribution of migrants to their home areas

Depending on their income in their host country or town, migrants' contribution to their families and communities of origin can be significant. For low-income households, remittances are often the only way to make ends meet. For better-off households, they can be invested in agriculture or in other non-farm activities, or in improved housing.

However, as migration is ignored by policies, so is the flow of remittances. In the rare instances where remittances have been considered as an important resource, they have played a major role in improving farming. For example, a tractor hire service can be paid for with the money from remittances, and this can compensate for the reduced number of workers due to out-migration. At the household level, however, the same amount is only sufficient to buy very basic equipment, if any.

But not all migrants do or can send the same amounts. Unskilled migrants tend to earn significantly less than those who are skilled, or just literate. Education is thus an important element of successful migration. In Nigeria, much international migration is now for education, showing disillusionment with the national system.

Especially young migrants, and more especially young women, are subject to social pressure to look after their relatives. But where women have equal access to land and will inherit it, they are more likely to invest in their home areas. Migrants also contribute new skills and open-up non-farm employment opportunities for other villagers, if and when they return. But whether they do so depends on whether sufficient infrastructure exists.

In conclusion, migration has always been an important part of livelihoods. This is likely to increase because of the number of new opportunities. Policy-makers should recognise this state of affairs, and appreciate the potential and actual contribution of migrants to sustainable development and poverty reduction in host and home areas. Policies should then concentrate not on migrants themselves, but rather on ensuring that migration is a choice and not the only option. This means reducing the constraints which force people to migrate, ensuring that migrants' rights are respected in host areas, and recognising and supporting migrants' contributions and their rights in home areas. ●