Policy implications of NCCR North-South research

- Migration policies should separately address the different stages of migration: life in the home country, pre-departure preparations, and travelling to as well as working and living in the host country. The lives and movements of low-skilled workers (mainly from rural areas) should be systematically addressed when planning, implementing, and evaluating development programmes in home and host countries. There should also be greater cooperation between institutions that are formally in charge of migration issues and others that are not, such as migrants’ associations or local microfinance groups.

- Facilitating beneficial circular migration requires elimination of disincentives to such circulation, primarily through flexible residency and citizenship rights. This would not only reduce irregular migration and risks of human trafficking, it would also allow migrants to limit expenses associated with migration, enabling them to save money and acquire the skills needed for a more successful return.

- Efforts must be made to improve migrants’ social and economic security through stable access to pension funds, health insurance, and opportunities for career development. Mitigation efforts must also address the vulnerability of family members who remain behind. Researchers point out the need to improve rural populations’ living conditions through greater access to health care, childcare, and education; and through more investment in rural infrastructure such as transport and communications systems.

- Policymakers and the private sector should make migration safer and more beneficial for migrants by providing adequate information on the migration process and the destination countries. Before leaving, workers should be given the opportunity to receive training in the skills required by host countries’ labour markets.

Further reading


Policy Message

- Labour migrants in the low-skilled sector have a strong potential to be development agents in poverty alleviation.

- Considering migration in development means taking into account the different stages of migration, from departure to return. For example, information and vocational training benefit migrants before they leave the country.

- Circular migration should be facilitated by governments with measures such as flexible residency, citizenship rights, and portable benefits.

- The migrants’ social and economic security and the impact on families left behind should be considered.

In a globalising market, labour migration in low-skilled sectors plays an important role. A growing number of poor people move between their villages of origin, capital cities, and international destinations, while financially sustaining their families and home countries. The positive role of remittances for alleviating the poverty of sending countries is widely acknowledged. However, migration also leads to a growing imbalance between rural and urban areas and certain unfavourable societal changes. Drawing on case studies in Central and South Asia, this issue of evidence for policy examines the challenges of making migration safer and more beneficial for low-skilled workers.

Circular migration

Worldwide, more than 214 million people live outside their countries of origin. About half of these are labour migrants, making significant contributions to the economies of both receiving (host) and sending (home) countries. This has resulted in widespread recognition of the advantages of migration. Policymakers and development agencies now consider labour migrants as new development agents. For example, the UN has initiated a High Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development (since 2006). Or in the case of Nepal, the government recently drafted a national “Foreign Employment Policy 2011” – this policy is the most relevant national norm governing international labour migration out of Nepal.

Despite increased international and national awareness of migrants and their economic contributions, much remains to be done in terms of clarifying and improving their legal status. NCCR North-South research on migration in Asian countries has shown that due to their perceived temporary status and high mobility, migrants’ rights as citizens as well as their living
Alleviating poverty
The positive role of remittances and their potential contribution for poverty alleviation has been recognised across South Asia. Bangladesh and Pakistan have set up separate ministries for the welfare of their migrant communities abroad. In rural communities with little cash income, even small transfers of money are highly valued as they reduce vulnerability to risks such as crop failure, food shortages, or disease. For Nepali migrants and their families, having family members in neighbouring India assures access to medical treatment and education. It also means there are fewer family members strain ing the household budget.

Economies that have grown dependent on remittances, however, are vulnerable. Researchers have found that unreliable remittances are a major financial threat to households in rural NWFP, Pakistan. Further, remittances alone cannot replace the overall contribution made by family members to their family (e.g., through parental or family care) or made by citizens to their state (e.g., through participation in the political process or social movements).

Countries’ shifting migration role
South Asia is not just a region that sends migrants elsewhere. It is also an important receiving and transit region. For example, though known globally as a migrant-sending country, Nepal itself hosts many Bangladeshi and Indian workers as well as Tibetan and Bhutanese refugees. Due to differing national migration policies in the region, certain countries continue to act as transition hubs and meeting places for professionals of different nationalities. For example, while there are strict prohibitions in place that limit migration between India and Pakistan, both Indians and Pakistanis can easily migrate to Nepal. In this way, Nepali and other migrant workers (e.g., domestic workers) have become favourable meeting and transition hubs for migrants from other countries in South Asia.

Rural-urban divide
The interdependence between internal and international migration is closely associated with the rural–urban divide. A driving factor of migration is the lack of economic and social opportunities and a lack of social or medical services. Social change
Migration redefines the division of labour and responsibilities. This affects migrants themselves and those who remain behind. In Pakistan, agricultural work has become increasingly feminised due to male outmigration. Nepalese women have continued to migrate from Nepal, often using irregular channels that expose them to even greater risk. While a recent policy amendment ended Nepal’s total ban on female labour migration to Gulf countries, women under the age of 32 are still restricted from doing so. In Pakistan, female labour migration was completely banned for many years. Now, for the first time, a new draft policy currently under discussion would enable broad-based female labour migration.

Social and economic protection
While migrants’ remittances are welcomed by their home countries, the migrants themselves are rarely considered in policies and development interventions. In the host countries, migrants’ mobility is often restricted, their livelihoods are left vulnerable, and they themselves are harassed by the authorities. Lack of adequate education, lack of knowledge about the host country, and insecure working and living conditions make it hard for migrants to recover the costs associated with migration (e.g., debts, placement fees, travel). Harsher their ability to send remittances to relatives back home, and prevent them from saving enough money to invest in the future. Many migrants live from hand to mouth.

The female face of migration
National migration policies are often gendered and limit the international migration of women. Nepal, for example, has restricted women’s labour migration to specific countries, such as the Gulf States. This was supposedly done in the name of “positive discrimination” – in order to protect women from being exploited as domestic workers. However, women have continued to migrate from Nepal, often using irregular channels that expose them to even greater risk. While a recent policy amendment ended Nepal’s total ban on female labour migration to Gulf countries, women under the age of 32 are still restricted from doing so. In Pakistan, female labour migration was completely banned for many years. Now, for the first time, a new draft policy currently under discussion would enable broad-based female labour migration.

Need for infrastructure development in Kyrgyz migration areas
Small and medium-sized towns are important intermediary points between rural and urban areas in Kyrgyzstan. They provide social and economic services that not only make a return of migrants more likely but also enable non-migrants to obtain access to health care, childcare, and education. Scholars call for policies that support urban-rural integration and provide public investment to encourage the flow of goods and resources across sectors and locations. A more integrated economy offers more choices and allows individuals and households to pursue their own best paths out of poverty. The rise of a more diversified non-farm economy can thus result in positive transformation.