

Migration and Mobility: The Critical Population Issues of Our Time

*Migration may no longer be the stepchild of demography
but it remains the most complex and intractable of the population
variables from both an analytic and a policy point of view.*

By Ronald Skeldon*

We have come a long way since 1960 when the American sociologist, the late Dudley Kirk, called migration the “stepchild of demography”. In the intervening 45 years, that stepchild has become richly endowed indeed with, particularly since the late 1980s, a torrential outpouring of articles, books and research on the topic.

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Our empirical knowledge has certainly expanded greatly, but whether theoretical and conceptual understanding has seen equivalent refinement might be a matter of some debate. Unquestionably, today, migration has gained a much greater public awareness with government departments in countries in both the developed and the developing worlds, as well as several international organizations, moving the subject towards the top of the political and the policy agenda. Developing countries fear that the loss of their educated and skilled citizens will prejudice their chance of reaching higher levels of development. Developed countries need labour to do certain types of jobs but fear that importing labour will create both social stress at home and conflict with their development policy abroad by “poaching” the best and the brightest. International organizations try to work out how best to manage the flows in the interests of both countries of origin and countries of destination, as well as of the migrants themselves.

Ironically, the very success in bringing down the demographic variable that was seen to be at the root of the population “problem”, fertility, has exacerbated the whole issue of migration. Sustained fertility decline has led to slow and, in some developed economies, negative growth in prime labour-force cohorts. Not all labour-intensive activity can be moved offshore, and not all labour can be replaced with automation, leaving the importation of labour as the only realistic alternative. As Asia has developed, so, too, has the demand for labour, both skilled and unskilled, that creates a tension with slowing growth in domestic labour forces. In a globalizing economy, the interchange of labour is an integral part of development as not all skills can be generated domestically. Economies such as Japan, the Republic of Korea; Taiwan Province of China; Singapore; Hong Kong, China; Malaysia; and, increasingly, Thailand have seen a shift towards the importation of greater numbers of migrants. At present, the number of workers in those economies alone is probably around 6 million.

Migration, rather than being a failure of development is thus a direct result of development and the issue of migration in Asia is going to take on ever greater importance. While most governments in the region, and around the world, welcome skilled migrants, they are reluctant to welcome unskilled migrants. The former are likely to go home or move on, while the latter may be more likely to stay on, particularly if they entered illegally or overstayed their conditions of entry. Clear linkages exist, however, between skilled and unskilled migration. Skilled workers are likely to generate menial jobs that domestic labour with higher levels of education and aspirations is unlikely to want. Computer engineers generate openings for routine assembly workers, for packers of the finished product and for drivers to take the product for export, and so on. Highly paid bankers require

restaurants, coffee shops and office cleaners. Thus, to promote participation in globally competitive markets implies the importation of labour at all skill levels.

Governments in the Asian and Pacific region face several dilemmas. With the exceptions of Australia and New Zealand, they have no recent traditions of immigration, and virtually no government in Asia actively pursues permanent settlement. Migration is assumed to be temporary. Programmes to regularize illegal entrants and overstayers certainly go some way towards protecting the migrants and giving them legal access to basic services, but they also allow host governments to push for the turnover of workers. While it can be argued that those legally in the country can have the right to go back and forth to their country of origin, it leaves the migrants in a kind of spatial limbo. Can governments risk allowing migrants to bring their families? Arguably, workers with their families will enjoy a higher quality of life than those separated from them and are likely to be more productive. The constant turnover of workers in all but the most menial of jobs is likely to increase training costs, decrease loyalty to employers and lower productivity. Migrants will marry local partners and establish transcultural families. Should they be allowed to stay? The alternative to, perhaps the direct outcome of, temporary immigration programmes and a constant turnover of workers is the establishment of long-term or permanent migrant communities, as the experience of France and Germany has shown. Even a concentration on temporary migrant programmes creates a permanent community of temporary workers and workers who are likely to be less content and less productive than long-term workers. They can never be, to use current discourse, stakeholders in the host economy. Governments in the region need to “think the unthinkable”, not in terms of pursuing an “open borders” policy because such a policy would be politically and economically irresponsible, but to move towards the creation, gradual expansion and the integration of permanent immigrant communities. These could come to play a full and constructive part in the social and economic life of the State.

Management of migration needs to be much more than just exclusion and limited and temporary entry: it needs to be forward-looking, proactive, innovative and comprehensive. However, again countries in the Asian region may be influenced by the experience of Europe where immigrant communities have come under suspicion as being fertile recruiting grounds for groups seeking to undermine the nature of the State and economy. However, the numbers of migrants so involved are tiny and it would be short-sighted and unfortunate if the behaviour of such a minority of migrants and their descendants were to drive migration policy. There are costs as well as benefits to migration and some of these are the

result of a lack of integration of migrant populations. The alternative for destination economies is restriction or unsustainable long-term programmes of temporary migration. Both are likely to lead to slower economic growth.

Not all economies in Asia are confronting immigration pressures. Others face very different issues: those associated with relatively low rates of economic growth and high rates of growth in labour force. Here, the dilemmas are quite different and revolve around whether governments can create the conditions that will retain potential migrants to be the key personnel to facilitate domestic development or whether they can train people who can access overseas markets and send money home as remittances that can stimulate development. The latter strategy has found favour in economies such as the Philippines although, in the case of skilled migrants, all the more developed economies in Asia are contributing migrants at both the global and the regional levels. The globalization of education and training should ultimately eliminate the current problems of accreditation that lead to skill wastage.

Clearly, a strategy to target overseas labour markets makes sense in the context of the immigration pressures in the more developed economies discussed above. Remittances currently estimated at over US\$ 53 billion a year to Eastern and Southern Asian countries are a significant source of foreign exchange for many of the lower-income economies in the region. More important, they put money directly into the pockets of migrants' families. However important though remittances are, they are not a panacea for development and there is a danger that they be seen as a substitute for official development aid or other forms of investment. Nevertheless, the diaspora communities of migrants overseas do form one important source of finance and expertise that origin countries can tap into in the quest for development.

Such has been the recent concern for movements across international boundaries that sight has almost been lost of the vast majority of people who move: those who migrate internally within the borders of their own country. One of the great transformations of the past century has been the shift from an essentially rural society to one dominated by cities, in which migration has played a critical part. Temporary migration between village and town, monies sent back home and the loss of the best and the brightest in origin communities are as significant domestically as they are internationally. After a burst of concern in the 1960s and early 1970s, internal migration has taken a back seat in research and policy concern to international migration, although signs exist that a resurgence of interest in internal movements is occurring. It would be wrong, however, to assume that internal and international migrations are separate entities: there are significant

linkages between the two that are as yet poorly understood. Whether migrants arriving in the largest city in a country are likely to spill over into international movements or whether people leaving to go overseas generate internal movements to fill the resultant vacuum are but two intriguing research and policy concerns. However, if a central concern is to see how migration is related to development and given that most migrants move internally, any programmes to manage migration for the benefit of the poor must incorporate internal migration, not just movements across international boundaries.

Finally, it is apposite to consider whether some “World Migration Organization” might be established to integrate and promote the management of migration. Several international organizations already exist whose mandate it is to deal with the various dimensions of the movement of population: the International Labour Organization, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the International Organization for Migration being among the most prominent. It is difficult to see what yet another layer of bureaucracy might achieve particularly given the great range of topics and areas of responsibility touched upon in this brief viewpoint. Also, policy solutions are unlikely to emerge immediately at the global level: regional solutions are perhaps a best mid-range alternative to the variety and variation in types and patterns of migration. Here, with adequate vision and leadership, the regional commissions of the United Nations might surely play a facilitative role. Migration may no longer be the stepchild of demography but it remains the most complex and intractable of the population variables from both an analytic and a policy point of view. It is the critical population issue of our time.