

## Seasonal Migration: How rural is rural?

Priya Deshingkar

Migration has been seen as a symptom of rural distress associated with many social and economic evils and a process that should be discouraged.

However, earlier this decade, ODI found – as part of a separate livelihoods project in India - that internal migration was increasingly being used as a temporary expedient for raising cash. Huge numbers of people were migrating for part of the year from agriculturally underdeveloped areas to towns and cities and also to other agriculturally prosperous regions. The point was positive: to earn money, rather than just a drought-coping mechanism.

This started a search for similar cases in India and elsewhere, which yielded evidence from many marginal areas showing that temporary internal migration is increasing. It also revealed that rural-urban migration is the fastest-growing type of temporary migration in countries such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia and Vietnam that are experiencing rapid urbanisation and manufacturing growth. The evidence comes mainly from village studies undertaken by universities, rural development agencies, labour research institutes and NGOs.

Official statistics tell a completely different story, often of a slowing in migration rates, because they cannot capture part-time and seasonal occupations.

A key finding of ODI's research is that rural livelihoods are more multi-locational than is commonly understood: even though people are supposedly earning most of their income through agriculture, many in fact are away for part of the year in different occupations. Most temporary migrants come from agriculturally underdeveloped areas, variously termed 'remote', 'difficult', 'weakly integrated', 'marginal' or 'less-endowed'. They travel to towns and industrial centres and find jobs in factories or prawn/fish processing plants or working as porters, domestic servants, bus conductors, rickshaw pullers, street hawkers, petty traders, and construction workers. The work is usually characterised as underpaid, dangerous and insecure but it



*Seasonal migrants: an invisible force driving economic development (©ODI)*

is very attractive to those from marginal areas where wages are too low to make a living.

Evidence from South Asia, Southeast Asia and China shows that migrant households often have more disposable income and are better able to pay off debts and save money. Funding is being sought for work on migrant support in Vietnam, and comparative studies between Asia and Africa are also being planned. ODI's current work also includes understanding the role of remittances in post-Tsunami recovery in Sri Lanka.

---

**'Temporary internal migration needs to be recognised in poverty reduction programmes and national plans'**

---

The way money sent home is used varies according to place and circumstance. Its use for straightforward consumption has been criticised but this, too, can have a positive impact, exerting a multiplier effect on the economy, in turn leading to a virtuous circle of poverty reduction and development in the countryside, thereby helping to reduce regional inequalities. Substantial remittances can also offset the effects on agriculture of the loss of labour that many analysts fear.

**ODI OPINIONS are signed opinion pieces by ODI researchers on current development and humanitarian topics.**

**The views expressed are those of the author and do not commit the Institute.**

**ODI OPINIONS may be cited or reproduced with due acknowledgement.**

For further information contact ODI Public Affairs office on +44 (0)20 7922 0394 – [opinions@odi.org.uk](mailto:opinions@odi.org.uk)

None the less, migrant labourers are highly vulnerable. Being a migrant is expensive and risky for the poor, especially women and children. Such workers often live in insecure, unsanitary conditions and rarely qualify for pro-poor schemes that are reserved for those legally resident in urban areas. Even though migrant labour is an important driving force behind economic growth (most construction activities, road-laying and peak season agricultural tasks in South Asia are performed by migrant workers), governments remain hostile to them, while employers routinely disregard laws designed to protect their rights and needs.

Such findings have policy implications.

Temporary internal migration needs to be recognised in poverty reduction programmes and national plans. Many of these, instead, attempt to control or reverse migration, thus choking a major livelihood opportunity available to those in marginal areas. Demographic and employment surveys need restructuring to ensure that they record incidences of part-time and seasonal occupations.

Ways need to be found to support migration and protect the rights of these workers. Priority areas include reforming pro-poor policies based on residence, skills enhancement and migrant-friendly insurance schemes. Those left behind

could be better helped by programmes which make it easier to send money home and which take account of the special requirements of de facto female-headed households.

The link between migration and marginal areas raises important questions about the course of future poverty reduction efforts. The dominant approach to rural poverty reduction in such areas has aimed at increasing per capita earnings through increased agricultural investment. It has been argued that increased public investment in roads, agricultural research and education in these less-favoured areas may generate equal or greater agricultural growth than comparable investments in high-potential areas. But the reality on the ground is that agricultural growth remains low: less than two per cent a year on aggregate, which is too slow for poverty reduction in many rural areas. The connection, if any, and of what kind, between this and growing mobility needs to be better understood.

[www.odi.org.uk/rpeg/research/migration/](http://www.odi.org.uk/rpeg/research/migration/)

Priya Deshingkar ([p.deshingkar@odi.org.uk](mailto:p.deshingkar@odi.org.uk)) is a Research Fellow at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). She is based in Hyderabad.