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PEOPLE ON THE MOVE: NEW POLICY CHALLENGES FOR INCREASINGLY MOBILE POPULATIONS

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Population mobility within poor countries has increased worldwide as better roads and communication networks offer people employment opportunities in distant locations. High levels of mobility either within rural or between rural and urban areas help to strengthen the livelihoods of those mainly dependent on selling their labour, and in some areas mobility seems to have more than compensated for declining returns from the commons. Yet official statistics continue to overlook this phenomenon and governments remain reluctant to support people on the move. The case of India offers new policy opportunities in a context where poverty reduction programmes have hitherto been premised on the notion that populations are sedentary.

Policy conclusions

- The determinants of increased population mobility are complex and include improved access to roads, information, employment opportunities and social networks in urban locations but also a lack of work availability in remote rural areas.
- Official census and sample surveys tend to underestimate the extent of temporary migration and commuting by poor people.
- Policymakers see migration largely as 'distress'-driven, whilst for some, it has become an escape route out of poverty.
- Numerous aspects of policy (ranging from voter registration to the distribution of transfers) remain predicated on a supposedly 'sedentary' population, so that migrants have little access to basic entitlements.
- Policy needs to become more flexible to provide services to people who are on the move, including, e.g. access to crucial information on labour markets and rights, as well as basic services in health, education, shelter and food.
- Similarly transport and information policies need to take into account the needs of poor commuters.

1. Introduction

Rural livelihood strategies are becoming increasingly multi-locational. Drought, the degradation of the commons, and their increasing privatisation act as 'push' factors in some areas. But on the 'pull' side, almost everywhere there has been a sharp increase in population mobility in the last decade due to new developments in markets, urbanisation and the removal of restrictions on population movements. In Vietnam, for example, migration from upland to lowland areas has expanded to service the growing export-oriented agro-economy (Winkles, 2004). In Bangladesh (Afsar, 2003), rural areas are now supplying most of the labour for work in urban construction. Recent field studies in Indonesia also show increased circular migration and commuting from rural to urban areas (Hugo, 2003). Examples of increased population movements due to a lifting of controls include Ethiopia (EFSN, 1999) and China.

In this paper we are concerned with two important manifestations of population mobility, namely temporary migration (rural-urban) and commuting by poor labourers from villages to small and medium towns and cities. Urbanisation and the opportunities it offers to people from remote areas is an important determining force in this process. Urbanising areas include larger villages and peripheries of urban areas with high levels of non-farm activity. The case of India is discussed here as an illustrative example of increasing opportunity but sluggish policy responses.

We begin with a discussion of urbanisation trends and rural-urban income differentials both globally and in India. We then discuss the case of India and show how official statistics fail to capture temporary population movements and lead to the continuing perception that people are sedentary. We conclude by arguing that policy needs to understand why many choose to diversify through migration and commuting and to respond appropriately.

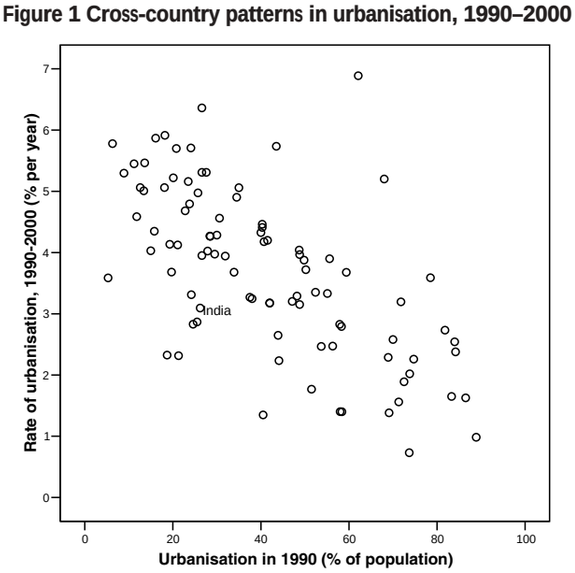
2. Rates of urbanisation

The evidence suggests that all countries are converging towards a situation in which the majority of their population are based in urban areas (Figure 1). As each country approaches this level, proportional increases in the urban population get smaller.

Of course, there remains a lot of variation in rates of urbanisation around the world, even when allowing for differences in starting points. Attempts to explain this variation typically find that, although the *rate* of economic growth shows little correlation with the rate of urbanisation, the *pattern* of economic growth does. In particular, growth based on the expansion of the manufacturing industry is associated with higher rates of urbanisation (after allowing for starting levels), while growth based on the expansion of agriculture is associated with the reverse. This has important implications in terms of future urbanisation prospects (see section 7).

In India, rates of urbanisation have been declining in recent decades, from 3.8% in the 1970s to 2.7% in the 1990s (Kundu, 2003). This is in line with the broad cross-country

Figure 1 Cross-country patterns in urbanisation, 1990–2000



Source: World Bank (2003)

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pattern identified in Figure 1. Nevertheless, rates of urbanisation in India remain lower, by about 1% per year, than in other countries with similar levels of urbanisation. Furthermore, the level of urbanisation in India – in 2000, 28.4% of the population were estimated to live in urban areas – is also lower than in other countries with similar levels of per capita GNP, by about 15%. The reasons for these differences remain to be established, but they may include sluggish public investment in urban infrastructure and policies aiming to stem migration.

Within India, the most urbanised of the larger States in 2001 were Tamil Nadu (44%), Maharastra (42%), Gujarat (37%), Karnataka (34%), and Punjab (34%). These states also urbanised more rapidly in the 1990s than other (large) States with initially lower levels of urbanisation, including Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar (the 'BIMARU' States). This contrasts with the cross-country pattern identified in Figure 1, suggesting that the much higher rates of economic growth in the urbanising States are of overriding importance.

3. Trends in rural-urban inequalities

Rates of urbanisation influence, and are in turn influenced by, differences in income and living standards between rural and urban areas. On the one hand, increased migration and commuting from rural to urban areas will tend to reduce wage gaps between urban and rural areas, by increasing the supply of labour in urban areas. On the other hand, increases in the demand for labour in urban areas will tend to raise wage gaps between urban and rural areas, and cause migration to rise, depending on the ease with which people can move (the classical 'pull' theory).

Patterns in wage and income gaps between urban and rural areas vary across countries and over time, and it is difficult to generalise. Nevertheless, IFAD (2001) suggest that rural-urban differences in average incomes and poverty rates rose in many South and East Asian countries during the 1990s, especially in China, and that those differences fell in most African countries over the same period.

In India, average incomes rose more rapidly in urban than in rural areas between 1993 and 2000, implying a widening of gaps in average incomes (Deaton and Drèze, 2002). This was true of the majority of (large) Indian States. There is, however, no simple correlation between trends in rural-urban inequality and the rate of urbanisation. One possible explanation is that there are significant differences across Indian States in the ease with which people can move in response to new opportunities.

4. Is rural-urban mobility decreasing or increasing?

National data sets are notoriously inadequate in capturing internal labour movements. This is partly because of poor definitions: for instance official Indonesian data do not differentiate between urban and rural origins of migrants, nor can they detect R-U movements within provinces (Hugo, 2003). But it is also a matter of methodology: single-shot questionnaires tend to cover secondary occupations, sketchily, if at all. This may be why the latest census and National Sample Survey figures in India show a slow down by 1.5% in permanent or long-term R-U migration rates, despite increasing inter-regional inequalities (Kundu, 2003).

However, a number of recent village studies from different parts of India show a sharp increase in population mobility, including long term and temporary migration as well as commuting, particularly from drought-prone locations (e.g. Karan, 2003 in Bihar; Rogaly et al, 2001 in West Bengal). The reasons for increased mobility include deteriorating employment opportunities at home, better prospects in urban areas and vastly improved communication and road networks.

Box 1 The mainstream view of migration and ground level realities

Mainstream view:

- migration is a symptom of rural distress;
- it cannot lead to poverty reduction either for the migrants or the source villages;
- it is a politically and socially destabilising process: it overburdens urban areas and deprives rural areas of productive members, and destabilises family life.

Ground-level realities:

- migration is a routine livelihood strategy and not simply a response to shocks;
- migration can lead to accumulation of wealth, particularly where there are marketable skills or established employment relationships;
- inadequate skills and resources, but also processes of social exclusion prevent people from moving from low-return and insecure migration to more rewarding types; and
- accumulative outmigration can occur from poor areas and distress migration can occur from well-endowed areas.

5. Population mobility, development and poverty reduction

Although population movements have been an integral part of the development process globally for several decades there is still no consensus on the determinants, magnitude or impacts of population mobility.

But there is increasing evidence that migration and commuting can lead to accumulation. A majority of immigrants and commuters are absorbed into the unorganised sector, which is characterised by low productivity and limited prospects for exiting poverty. This has prompted some to highlight the exploitative roles of middlemen and contractors, and argue that migration ensures no more than bare survival.

Others suggest that migrants have been able to escape poverty, even by remaining in the unorganised sector. Gupta and Mitra (2002) in a study of migrant labour in Delhi slums found that, with experience, migrants are likely to move into higher income, regular jobs. Rogaly and Coppard (2003) observe that wage workers in West Bengal now view migration as a way of accumulating a useful lump sum, rather than, as in the past, simply surviving. Deshingkar and Start (2003 – see also www.livelihoodoptions.info) document accumulative migration streams in both farm and non-farm work which have allowed numerous lower caste people in Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Andhra Pradesh (AP) to break out of caste constraints (which are especially strong in rural areas), find new opportunities, and escape poverty.

Seasonal migration as a livelihood strategy appears to be far more important, in terms of returns, in MP than AP. In AP earnings from work outside the village accounted for nearly a sixth of household income, against more than half in MP. Commuting contributed slightly more to household incomes in AP (6.5%) than MP (5.5%) but there was more variation in AP. Households in villages near urban areas earned 7–14% of their income from commuting but the two most remote ones earned less than 2% of their income from commuting. In both States, the availability of products from the commons has declined over time, with non-timber forest products accounting for about 3% in MP and even less in AP, against almost 25% noted in village studies in the 1970s. This bears out to some extent the thesis that a deterioration in the productivity of and access to the commons goes hand-in-hand with increasing outmigration.

Regardless of the returns, living conditions for migrants are tough and can remain that way for decades even if people go back to the same city or town every year. Poor migrants usually stay in slums or roadside accommodation with very poor access to clean water, sanitation or electricity. Even

those who earn reasonable amounts face constant threats of eviction, disease, sexual abuse, underpayment and police harassment. Aside from these difficulties in their destinations, seasonal migrants must also cope with depleted family labour at home, including an increased feminisation of agriculture. This has potentially adverse implications for asset management, agricultural productivity and household decision-making.

Migrant workers have no access to subsidised grain at their destinations and spend a sizeable proportion of their wages on basic food supplies. Spending on rents is also substantial. One of the more serious social costs of migration is on children's schooling. When entire families migrate, children stay behind to do household chores while the parents work.

6. When do people commute, migrate seasonally or migrate more permanently?

A short-term move is not necessarily a step towards a more permanent move. For many, commuting and seasonal migration offer the chance to combine the best of a rural, village-based existence with urban opportunities (Box 2).

The Livelihood Options project cited above, a three year DFID-funded policy study in Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh, helps in understanding under what circumstances people commute, migrate seasonally or move away altogether.

MP is characterised by poor roads and underdeveloped communication networks. Non-farm options within and around villages are limited as there are few towns. With rainfed agriculture and forested areas offering limited employment opportunities, there is no other option but to move away for work. Figures collected across nearly 1300 households show that temporary migration rates here were several times higher than Andhra Pradesh. On average, nearly 47% of the households had at least one member migrating, with over 64% in the remote villages, against an average of 25% overall in AP. But, even here, one drought-prone AP village recorded 78%.

A majority of the households who were migrating were poor lower caste and uneducated. But they were certainly not the poorest. Small and marginal farmers migrated more than those with smaller landholdings because a minimum level of assets is required to make the initial investment that is needed for migration. Many of these households cultivated one rainfed subsistence crop. For reasons outlined in Box 2, few migrants chose to settle permanently. In addition, many recognised that to keep one foot in the rural economy provided a safety net. A major attraction for the poor working in the farm sector is the part-payment in cooked food. Although this has been perceived as exploitative by some, the labourers themselves see it as an important way of coping and surviving during economically lean times when casual work in the cities may be scarce.

Commuting was more widespread in AP with 12% of the households on average sending one person to work in a nearby urban location. There are plenty of non-farm opportunities near villages in AP as it is a much more developed state with good roads, communication networks and urbanising pockets (larger villages, urban peripheries, small towns). Commuting offers the dual advantage of higher earnings in non-farm work while keeping one foot in the farm economy and reducing both the risks associated with longer term migration, and the outgoings on food, shelter, healthcare and schooling. Where available, it was the preferred 'mobility' option. However, commuting was not simply a matter of work availability and adequate, cheap transport. It also depended to some degree on the ability to adapt traditional skills to new markets. For instance, barbers found it relatively easy to set up hairdressing salons in towns or on highways, as did potters to start work in brick-kilns. These have a higher level of skills than the majority of commuters who are dependent on unskilled, casual labouring.

Aside from travelling to find work, rural people are now increasingly mobile for a variety of other reasons (Box 3).

Long-term migration (more than one year) was also more common in AP, with 12% of the households reporting at least one member who was away. Long-term migration was highest in the poorest village and also the two relatively wealthy coastal villages but the reasons were altogether different. In the former case, livelihood options had become severely limited locally due to persistent drought and near-total absence of non-farm activities close by, but also because of its relative proximity to Hyderabad which is just half a day's journey away. On the other hand, in the coastal villages there had been significant outmigration of richer persons belonging to the dominant castes to high income non-farm occupations in Hyderabad and outside India. In MP, only 7% of the households reported long-term migration, with the highest incidence in well-connected villages from which people had settled in district headquarters, the medium and large towns of MP and the neighbouring state of Gujarat.

7. Future prospects

The experience of other countries, discussed above, suggests that urban populations in India will continue to grow rapidly in future decades, even if those rates will tend to slow (in relative if not absolute terms) as the level of urbanisation increases. One interesting question is how current and prospective agreements through the World Trade Organisation will affect rates of urbanisation (Stevens et al., 2004). We saw in Section 2 that the sectoral pattern of economic growth – i.e. whether it is based on the expansion of agriculture or

Box 2 Why people prefer temporary mobility to a permanent move away from the village

- Seasonal migration and commuting provides a route to diversification into non-farm work which is rarely available in smaller, more remote villages, and this helps to spread risks.
- However, employment in the urban unorganised sector is insecure and many prefer to keep rural options open; agricultural labour and marginal farming remain important safety nets for the poor and vulnerable.
- Supporting a family in the village is cheaper especially if the bread-winner is earning in a town or a city.
- In areas with good roads and transport services people can travel back home easily for peak agricultural seasons, festivals and ceremonies.

Box 3 Other rural-urban links

Health and education: It is now commonplace for rural residents to travel to the nearest town to access specialised healthcare and higher education. As government health provision continues to be fraught with bureaucratic procedures and inefficient services, more and more people are choosing private sector alternatives that are located in small and medium towns.

Political: In a situation where the legal and administrative system is prone to delays and irregularities, the fastest way of getting results is to approach a politically influential person for a reference. Trips to the block headquarters to meet revenue officials or even the district headquarters to meet MLAs or MPs are undertaken routinely by those wishing to resolve disputes over loans or land, or access poverty-focused schemes.

Social: A sign of rising affluence is for families to cast the net wider when they are searching for a groom. Recent trends from Krishna district with the highest farm incomes show that a town- or city-based groom fetches a higher dowry in the marriage market than the son of a large farmer of similar income. This is a clear indicator of how villagers perceive future prospects in rural and urban livelihoods.

manufacturing – affects the rate of urbanisation. To the extent therefore that changes in trade policy affect the sectoral pattern of growth, they will also affect the rate of urbanisation – slowing it in some countries, and accelerating it in others.

A strong possibility is that countries such as China, whose comparative advantage lies mainly in labour-intensive manufactured products and who have in the past tended to receive few trade concessions from rich countries, will see an acceleration of rural-urban migration, both temporary and longer term, following trade reform. The driving force will be the expansion of labour-intensive exports, which will boost the demand for labour in urban areas, and raise wage gaps between urban and rural areas. India's manufacturing base is smaller than China's, its comparative advantage instead lying in the export of skilled services related, e.g to the IT industry. Additional urban demand for unskilled or semi-skilled work of the kind that migrants from rural areas can offer might therefore be secondary – i.e. generated by the construction and other work derived from such industries – rather than direct.

8. Rethinking policies on rural development

Although not stated explicitly, many rural development programmes aim to strengthen *in situ* development and so stem mobility. The underlying rationale can be found in the literature on common property resource management, watershed management and agricultural development that is replete with statements of expected declines in migration flows due to successful employment creation and resource regeneration.

In India, for instance, the development of rainfed areas has been given high priority, with generous financial outlays, some US$500M/yr being allocated, for instance, to microwatershed rehabilitation in the late 1990s. But there have to be questions over whether more could be done to facilitate the mobility of the population given the massive scale of investment needed to install even basic infrastructure in remote rural areas and the growing search for jobs in urban areas. Experience has shown that the prospects of strong agriculture and NR-based growth in the more drought-prone areas can continue to be poor even with infrastructure in place.

Current trends in population mobility and urbanisation suggest that policy needs to become more flexible to provide services to people who are on the move. New arrangements that can provide migrant workers with access to critical information on labour markets and rights as well as basic services in health, education, shelter and food are needed. A system of identity cards may help migrants when dealing with the police,who challenge them at railway stations and on street corners. ID cards have been used with very positive results in MP under a migrant support programme implemented by the Grameen Vikas Trust, an NGO. Similarly transport and information policies need to take into account the needs of poor commuters. Investing more in smaller towns could have far-reaching impacts on increasing livelihood options and reducing poverty. In parallel, the existing laws that have been designed to protect poor workers need to be better enforced through the involvement of civil society organisations.

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