

Benefits and challenges of labour migration

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Migration of people to other countries in search of employment has occurred all through history and it is by no means a new phenomenon. For many of migration workers, migration is a real lifeline, but all too often, they still face exploitation and abuse. Forced labour, low pay, bad working conditions, virtually no social protection, and denial of freedom of association and trade union rights, discrimination, xenophobia and social exclusion - these are just some of the woes that rob migrants of the benefits they could have gained from working abroad.

The countries in question can be classified according to their status as sending or receiving country in correspondence to their level of social and economic development. Workers move between them, cascading from poorer to richer countries. In each of the countries, they mainly take jobs in labour-intensive sectors with low skill requirements and low pay. These are most of all construction, agriculture, hotel and catering as well as domestic services.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Migrants defines a migrant worker as a “ person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a state of which he or she is not a resident”. But there is considerable conceptual difficulty in defining a migrant. Migration of labourer takes different forms. In one end, the place of working and residence of the labourer may be different, and the distance covered by daily commuting.

At the other end, the worker’s may move permanently from their places of birth or usual place of residence, maintaining little or no contact with their

places of origin. Between these two ends, people move away for differing periods of time. Based on how long they are away from their place of origin, the migrants are distinguished as ' permanent', ' semi-permanent' and ' temporary'. Labour migration belongs to temporary migration, which is likely to stay away from their places of origin for more than a few months in a year. The temporary migrants are also known as ' short duration' migrants, ' seasonal' migrants or ' circulatory' migrants.

The decision to migrate for economic reasons can have both positive and negative consequences. Migrants may secure a better income, have access to better social services, and be able to provide a better education for their children or benefit from the enrichment of becoming a member of a transnational community at ease in different cultures. However, migration may also cause family disruption when family members have to stay behind, and may involve sacrificing a familiar lifestyle and becoming a " stranger" in a new country.

The complexity of the present day migration stream has intensified with distinctions between migrant workers, trainees, tourists, refugees and displaced persons becoming increasingly blurred. The term " migrants" appears to be broader than the term 'migrant workers' and is increasingly used in international discussions of human rights. The traditional explanation of migration as a movement from poor to rich nations is too simplified. There are both economic and non-economic factors affecting these flows.

International migration has contributed to growth and prosperity in both host and source countries. Migrant worker remittances represent the second

largest international monetary trade flow, exceeded only by petroleum.

Migrants also provide a valuable source of semi-skilled and unskilled labour to many industrialising countries and provide a source of highly skilled labour to advanced countries, thereby assisting the latter in maintaining economic competitiveness.

Labour migration policies differ from other migration policies directed at migration flows that may also have an impact on labour markets, for example refugee and family reunification, in the sense that they do not have humanitarian objectives but apply economic criteria with a view to responding to labour market needs. Governments at all points on the migration spectrum increasingly recognize the potential of regulatory mechanisms to maximize the positive impact of labour migration. Many sending and receiving countries are developing their regulatory capacities to manage labour mobility by considering the interests of respective governments, societies, and the migrant.

Positive tensions for receiving countries:

- raise total output and incomes in the rich, host countries;
- increase efficiency in the use of the world's resources all around, in rich and poor countries;
- increase the supply of entrepreneurship and stimulate the creation of small business;
- increase savings, investment, and human capital formation in the rich countries;
- accelerate the pace of innovation;

- increase the flow of remittances to poor countries;
- alleviate the economic problems associated with the aging population in rich countries.

Globalization is a major driving force of international labour migration.

Globalization has made migration much easier through better communications, dissemination of information through mass media and improved transport.

Countries are at different stages of demographic transition, with developing countries typically having younger populations than developed countries.

One of the most frequently cited costs of migration is so-called 'brain drain' — the loss of educated workers with valuable skills, which can impose large losses on governments that bear the costs of education and training.

Brain drain is potentially a concern for all economies, both developing and developed, with some developed economies experiencing significant rates of skilled emigration. The greatest global concern in the area of international labour migration is the unprecedented rise in irregular forms of migration that has occurred in recent years. The numbers of unauthorized migrant workers are increasing in virtually every part of the world.

A large proportion of labour migration occurs illegally, aided and abetted by a clandestine and often criminal industry. Increasingly, governments of both sending and receiving countries are developing regulatory mechanisms to manage labour migration. These include selective recruitment policies by countries needing labour, and strong marketing and overseas employment strategies by countries supplying labour.

Migrant workers benefit host countries in a number of ways. The overall economic impact of all migrant workers to the UK for example suggests that they make a positive net contribution of around £2.5 billion to the public accounts.

There are huge implications for sending countries as a result of out-migration, the most crucial of which are the loss of expertise and skills. This brain drain is particularly acute in developing countries, especially where the move abroad is permanent. Public services, such as health, education and social services, are losing large numbers of skilled workers to migration. Structural changes and decreasing investment in the public sector has increased the pressure on public sector workers to migrate, as shown by trends in the health and education sectors.

Although many economic migrants work in relatively low-paid jobs they regularly send money home to their families and relatives. However, it is difficult to estimate the scale of these remittances to sending countries because of the often informal manner in which they are returned, but there is little doubt that they contribute to the national income of the countries involved, and act as a stimulus to longer-term economic growth.

Migrant workers who return home bring experience and knowledge from working in another country. This benefits the home country as a whole by adding to its pool of talented workers, particularly where the skills are relevant to the needs of the home economy and the migrant workers are willing to use them upon return. It also benefits the individual worker who will have developed through contact with people possessing a range of

human, intellectual and professional skills. Access to educational and language courses in the host country should open up opportunities for career promotion at home and assist the personal development of each worker.

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