Bellagio migration paper on developing country migration and children

Wendy Baldwin Ph.D.
Population Council

This is a nicely prepared paper that not only brings together the literature about effects of migration on children, but does it in a discriminating way. The sad fact that there is scant literature should focus us on the challenges of generating such data and the likely uses of it.

Rossi takes a broad view of migration which is good and her clear structure makes it easy to navigate the different forms such movement can take. She makes excellent points in cautioning us not to assume that international migration is more challenging than internal migration; a rural area to an Asia mega-city may be more daunting than a move from a medium sized city in one country, to one in a neighboring country.

Let me raise some specific questions:

1. page 6 the groupings used by different researchers is maddening and makes comparisons difficult. She attributes such groupings as reflecting practical, rather than theoretical reasons. “data are disaggregated according to the interest of the researchers, rather than according to international standards or conventions”. But it seems likely that researchers are more likely to group ages to suit their theoretical framework than to international standards. Is it theory or is it taste?

2. Given the lack of broad data sets and even much robust research, it seems uncharitable to critique the research that is presented, except as a way to help shape future research agendas. But I shall. Clearly, the present research has given too little attention to age itself in this inquiry. Understandably, the work reviewed uses the international definition of under 18 to define “children” and yet that fails to distinguish the nursing infant from the school child, from the near adult of 17. To do so, however, would have placed even greater demands on the scant data that exists. To shape future research it seems that it would be helpful to have an assessment of the ways age affects vulnerability to make designs more efficient and results more useful.

3. One area that is touched on, and returned to, is remittances. Remittances are a major economic force in developing countries today. Estimates of international remittances have long been underestimated, and internal remittances ignored. Yet, they provide a major global financial flow and one that can be a conduit for a number of effects on children of migration. It does appear that remittances that are under the control of the mother (either because she sends them and controls who gets them or more typically she is the recipient) serve a greater benefit to children. Perhaps she is more likely to invest in “social capital” or perhaps the fathers have uses for the funds that do not support a child’s wellbeing. In any case, this is an interesting finding that could reflect on other social programs. In Mexico, much has been made of the
value of Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) and there are now even tests of UCTs, or unconditional cash transfers. The initial logic had been that you could provoke desired behavior through the cash transfer, behaviors that were typically designed to benefit children (health care, education, etc). yet, it is possible that putting the money in the hands of the mothers achieves those ends without specific requirements to do so. One would hope that the conclusion of such work would be to support the ability of women to earn money and control the earnings. Such policies could have major effects on not only her welfare, but the welfare of her family. In order to clarify the impact of remittances there needs to be more attention paid to who has control over the funds and how they are spent.

4. Hints that effects are found among the poorest lead to questions. Is migration a last resort when opportunities are limited in one’s own country? How does migration change the views of the country of origin? Is there any evidence that a change in the view of one’s heritage have an effect on children?

5. There are repeated references to migration disrupting family life; but for some it may take a difficult parent out of the house. For others it may be an opportunity for women to have greater autonomy. For children it may be a way to see that there is a path to a better future; even if they do not want to follow that path (although clearly many do), it can still change their world view about whether paths even exist.

6. There is a useful distinction made about potential effects being dependant on rural or urban residence. Children left behind may face different impact depending on where they live. For example, how is the effect on children contingent on the nature of the child work children can do if left behind? Does the work itself put them at risk? Does the absence of the parent affect their ability to continue in school, positively or negatively.

7. There is one observation about how received funds lowered employment for the recipients; but they may have been working too much to begin with. That is not useful without knowing what their level of work was to start with.