Bellagio paper- overall commentary

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Migration is one of the key demographic forces that shapes countries, regions and continents and affects the lives of millions. Even those who do not migrate themselves may be affected by the forces of migration that shape the societies in which they live. Among those millions who do migrate are children who are either moved within their countries, across boundaries or left when parents migrate. The effects they experience may range from simple and transitory to complex and long-lasting. Migration may affect any number of dimensions of their lives and bring about positive or negative results. Of course, the most likely conclusion is that there is a range of outcomes, some positive, some negative and that seeking to depict the “problem” of migration would be shortsighted. Rather, what are the effects that on their own appear positive and what are effects that convey some risks, risks that societies and families might mitigate?

A resounding conclusion from these papers is that there is a lack of comprehensive data that would allow us to more precisely define the issues, including the magnitude, nature and effects. Data to address these issues are not simple to gather, but it is also clear that it is easy to ignore an issue when there are so little data to describe it. The costs of complete data for a wide array of countries would be significant. Perhaps one challenge for the Bellagio group would be to make short, medium and long term goals for data collection that could better frame the issues and provide a starting point for a robust research agenda – a research agenda that could be the basis for sound policies and practical policies.

Clearly, if the understanding of effects of migration on child development is to improve, it will require better data sets than currently available. Having said that, the authors then lay out the many challenges of developing such data. Ideally panel data would be available, but migration by its very nature implies movement which makes the capture of panel data more challenging. Also, movement across borders would imply that researchers would want data from more than one country, and comparable data at that. Since migration into any one country may come from many others, the challenges grow. Add the diversity of languages that may be involved and the difficulties could appear insurmountable. Is this simply too complex? Probably not. But, a little simplification would go a long way. Is it possible to simplify without losing the overall purpose of the research?
From the perspective of the topics in need to study and the designs that might be used, it could be possible to identify some domains of inquiry which would then guide the types of data collect that would be needed. For example, for children who migrate there are questions of their short term adjustment and whether such challenges to child wellbeing are truly transitory. Perhaps such questions could be addressed through a portfolio of location-specific studies. Background material might be obtained from parents or other adults who migrated with the child or from other sources of information about the sending location. Panel data would still be valuable, but could be more localized.

For children who migrate without parents or other adults, there may be substantially different types of circumstances and challenges to their wellbeing. However, a diverse portfolio of situation-specific studies might create a valuable window into the effects of such movement on children. Children displaced by war, trafficked for economic or sexual purposes, and other specific situations may have extraordinary challenges to their wellbeing and development. Again, it is hard not to yearn for panel data to be able to address question of resiliency in children and identify situations that foster healthy development.

Broader studies of the general effect of the process of migration – whether it be the child migrating or being left behind – will eventually require substantial data sets that address a variety of background factors as well as an array of child outcomes. Perhaps there are lessons from the US experience with the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. This panel survey of young adults provided a rich array of information about the lives of young people as they pursued their education, entered the laborforce and began their families. As the members of the survey began their families there was the obvious opportunity to understand more about how the events of the young parent’s lives affected the development of their children. The process of developing some consensus among child development researchers led to a set of measures that had broad use. Also, by bringing together child development measures with a well established set of measures of family social and economic characteristics – and in a large panel study – it created a complex data set that forged a bridge between disciplines. Perhaps a similar bridge between migration researchers and child development researchers could be forged.

While migration is an experience that disrupts daily life, there is no reason to believe that it is necessarily negative in its effects on children. However, understanding the effects can help us assess the circumstances where children are put at risk; and where societies might address such risks. Guidance to families would also be beneficial. It is unfortunate, that so little is provided on the internal family dynamics related to migration. Who makes the decision to migrate? Who is left in the household? One parent or a large and extended family? How abrupt are the breaks with family? Do families visit, stay connected, or does migration mean a major break with relatives and friends?
The review of the potential effect of migration on child development seemed rather dissociated from other research traditions that could possibly shed light on the effects or at least provide valuable frameworks for considering effects on children. The bodies of research on the effects of marital disruption could prove useful as could at least some of the literature on the effects on children of mothers’ employment. Perhaps comparisons with child separation due to military deployments could be useful as well. There, the family has not migrated, but when one parent is deployed for military reasons for long periods of time there could be some opportunity to learn from that body of inquiry.

It was interesting to see how much better the case was for the process of migration and effects on children when the work was focused on Mexico. This may reflect the maturity of the research enterprise in Mexico, the robustness of the migration streams as well as the proximity to the well development research community in the US. Some areas facing considerable migration – Sub-Saharan Africa for example – may be much more difficult settings for broad based research endeavors.

Virtually all of the global population growth for the next 25 years will be in developing countries; and in urban areas. A significant percentage of that will be in informal or slum settings. These cities may well cease to reflect improved health and welfare for families as the growth occurs in slums or informal settlements or simply overwhelms local and national governments. (climate change may also create new threats to rapidly growing cities near coasts). Also, urban to urban migration can mask a lot of variability. Moderate sized stable cities may be a very different environment for children – and adolescents – that mega cities with massive slum areas.

There is a significant growth in the child population to come, especially in sub-saharan Africa and the importance of understanding how migration affects this population is clear. However, it is also clear that the literature that might inform policies, practices, programs and individual and family behavior is sketchy. This would be an opportune time to create some structure around such a research agenda and shape it to make a fairly rapid translation to the “practioner” community, broadly defined. Some suggestions follow.

Increasingly programs are being decentralized and it is not sufficient to have data at the national level. This is especially true in the case of migration, but the implications are that research – as well as the bridge to the policymakers – should operate at a subnational level. The growing access to mapping techniques at the stage of data collection and at the point of reporting findings should be encouraged. This could make it possible to understand how out-migration could be affecting the social and economic structure of specific areas as well as giving a framework to think about areas that are affected by significant in-migration. The challenge of communicating the policymakers is significant and an investment in new tools should be made.
Distressing to me was the lack of attention to specific ages of children. The effects on toddlers may be mediated by the effects on mother’s wellbeing, economic and health wise. The effects on slightly older children may be through their commitment to and involvement in school. The effects on adolescents may be quite different. For some, a move could take them away from harmful traditional practices, could create new opportunities for them for education and employment, or could present them with unspeakable risks for sexual exploitation. I find it hard to think of the group under age 18 as a single block, despite the increases in data and research challenges. From a child develop standpoint, gross age categories are a serious handicap. Every effort should be made to collect data with single years of age of children. Yes, there will be errors in reporting, but an analyst can always aggregate data after the fact.

These papers highlight a topic of considerable size and diversity. The number of children experiencing migration in some form or another is very large and the potential for the migration experience to materially affect their lives is considerable. It is apparent that existing data collection efforts do not provide adequate “raw material” for such a research undertaking. It is also possible to imagine data sets of such enormity, complexity and cost that the problems seem unmanageable. However, it is also plausible that a set of research questions could be articulated that would map to a more feasible set of data collection and research efforts. Hopefully, such an agenda would begin with appreciation of the need to make whatever findings there are accessible to policymakers as well as to a range of practioners and researchers.