Commentary on Rossi, “The Impact of Migration on Children in Developing Countries”

The paper is quite admirable in its comprehensiveness and thoughtfulness. It takes a broad approach to migration, considering all forms of migration, space- and time-wise, considers the diverse set of effects of migration, and is quite attentive to analytical issues in evaluation research, selectivity in particular. The couple of things that emerge from my reading of the paper is that (a) even though different forms of migration are considered, the one that seem to dominate our thinking about the effects of migration is international migration, and (b) even though different types of effects are considered, the effects that are best documented are the economic effects (remittances more particularly), perhaps because they are more likely to pass the bar of meeting the analytical requirements of evaluation research.

I find that the imbalance toward economic effects in our knowledge-base on the impact of migration on children is unfortunate (a statement about the field, not about the paper at hand). The findings by Frank and Hummer (2002) are quite suggestive of the importance of these non-economic effects. Namely, they report that household income does not present a significant effect on low birth weight, whereas remittances always do. Clearly, migration does more than provide more income (the argument for migrant family members’ increased health knowledge is plausible, but entirely proven at this point.) The issue of “social remittances” is quite fascinating and in my view, deserves to be a priority in further studies. More generally, our lack of understanding of non-economic factors hampers our ability to fully comprehend the migration decision-making process (which is key to understanding who migrates and who doesn’t, and in turn, is key to addressing selectivity issues). By and large, the decision to migrate involves trade-offs between expected economic benefits (at least in the mid- to long-term) and non-economic hardships that maybe worse during the migration from one place to another, but some of which remain in the long-term (physical separation from close family members).
Our understanding is also hampered by the imbalances in our knowledge-base on migration with respect to the type of migration with respect to space. I would venture that this imbalance originate in the fact that migration has attracted a lot more attention as a phenomenon and a topic of research as it was becoming more international, and at the domestic level when it was becoming more rural-to-urban and concern over “unchecked” urbanization grew. Stepping back from a problem-driven approach a little, I would speculate that rural-to-rural migration has the longest tradition, and that households began considering migration decisions and migration impact on dependents first in a context dominated by rural-to-rural migration. There might not be a large literature on these migration decisions, because migration wasn’t such a topic of attention at the time. There is, however, a relatively large literature on kinship and living arrangements. The prevalence of child fosterage in sub-Saharan Africa is a case in point, and allowing a parent to take a job away from the child residence has long been recognized as one of the primary reasons for the reallocation of children across households. Even if there are other reasons for child fosterage, including parental death, findings from this literature on the impact of child placement could inform our thinking about the consequences of migration on children left behind.

Following are a list of additional comments:

- Assessments of the educational impact vary in their outcome measures from drop-out rates, accumulated years of schooling, or grade for age. Drop-out rates can be difficult to interpret in contexts were grade repetition is common, as staying in school may indicate difficulties in achieving a particular grade rather than be an indicator of success.

- The paper provides several examples where the effects vary by current age of the child, or by age at the time of migration. This is conceptually consistent with studies in a very different context: the welfare reform of the late 1990s (PRWORA) which show a positive income effect across all-age children, but a negative effect of parental absence that varied with age.
- Children seem to fare better with their mother when the father is away and sends remittances that the other way around, in part because mothers spend more than fathers on items that benefit children. This is consistent with a lot of research on women’s role in spending decisions and benefits for children (health-related expenses in particular). As mothers remit a larger proportion of their income than fathers do, however, is it possible that the smaller share that fathers allocate to items that benefit children most be compensated by the larger total remittances they get from mothers?

- The author mentions the 14 non-OECD countries included in PISA. Another international research program on education is TIMSS, which has its limitations too, but has a much broader geographical scope at this point (in the order of 40 non-OECD countries).