Position Paper on “Future directions and possibilities for developing a child-centric perspective of migration”

This brief position paper begins with a couple of general comments about the state of our knowledge on the impact of migration on children, based on the two background papers. It continues with another couple of points on developing a conceptual framework toward a child-centric perspective of migration. Finally, it ends with three empirical directions for contributions to that child-centric perspective.

A) Current knowledge

1) Different evaluation benchmarks

The two review papers make it clear that two alternative benchmarks can be used to assess the impact of migration on children wellbeing. While children left behind are compared to children of non-migrant parents in the same setting, migrant children can be compared either to children of non-migrant parents in the setting of origin, or to non-migrant children in the setting of destination. Both benchmarks are relevant, but serve different purposes. While the comparison at destination refers to an important equity perspective, the comparison in the setting of origin is arguably more relevant to understanding the impact of migration on children. First, it allows for the inclusion of both children who migrated and of those who stayed behind, providing an additional dimension to compare children and assess the impact of migration. Second, that benchmark is likely more important for understanding the comparison base and decision making of would-be migrant parents. As illustrated in the reviews, understanding this decision process—who is migrating, and why—is essential to our understanding of the impact of migration (e.g., endogeneity of migration decisions).

2) Imbalance in our knowledge base

The reviews are quite thorough in considering a variety of potential impacts on children, but the effects that are best documented appear to be the economic effects (remittances more particularly). Measurement issues for non-economic effects make this imbalance understandable,
yet unfortunate nonetheless. This imbalance hampers our ability to fully comprehend the decision-making process of potential migrants to the extent migration decisions involve trade-offs between expected economic benefits (at least in the mid- to long-term) and non-economic hardships for both migrants and their close family members (e.g., physical separation).

B) Child-centric conceptual framework

1) Evaluation: Age-specific developmental process

An evaluation of child wellbeing should benefit from recognizing that childhood developmental processes are age specific. This is particularly important in the context of migration, because it typically involves short-term hardships and deprivations toward expected future benefits.

Concretely, this requires viewing child wellbeing in a time-dependent framework rather than by simply adding child-relevant dimensions (e.g., school enrollment) to a static approach of current wellbeing similar to that used for adults. There are surely different ways of incorporating that important difference between adult and child wellbeing, but a possible organizational framework is to assess the wellbeing of children in terms of (a) current, childhood wellbeing, (b) trajectory toward adult wellbeing, and (c) sustainability of that trajectory. Arguably, enrollment in school is an indicator of the trajectory rather than of current wellbeing. An example of sustainability indicator might be whether a child’s family is becoming indebted in order to pay for children education.

2) Mechanisms: Children as dependents

Child wellbeing is the joint responsibility of two institutions, the family (nuclear or extended), and increasingly, the State (Furstenberg 1997). Family influences are widely recognized and assessed, but less so is the role of State. However, States affect child wellbeing directly (e.g., funding for public education) and indirectly, that is, through parents who draw the resources that their children need from a larger environment that includes the labor market as well as government policies (McLanahan 2000). As international migration involves a change in institutional context,
understanding its impact should benefit from appreciating these interactions between parents and States.

Again, there are surely different possible frameworks to articulate the determinants of child wellbeing, but a possible organizational framework to encompass those determinants follows. Child wellbeing depends on (a) individual characteristics of the child, (b) characteristics of child’s household, (c) the child’s position relative to adults in that household, (d) the larger institutional context in which the child’s household operates, and (e) the position of adults in the household within the society in which they operate. This comprehensive framework could help appreciating the potential trade-offs of migration decisions. For instance, migration may benefit children left behind by improving, through remittances, the conditions of the household in which children live, but also affect their position in the household as foster children rather than as own children of the household head. “Positional” effects may also include differences noted in the review papers that referred to the gender of the parent that stays behind with the child. For children who migrate with their parents, migration may benefit children by providing a more supportive institutional context for their development, but may also devaluate the position of their parents in this new environment compared to their original environment (low status of immigrants).

C) Empirical Directions

1) Build on existing knowledge about related processes

To this somewhat-of-an-outsider, migration seems to have attracted attention mostly because of concerns over “unchecked” international migration to the developed countries and urbanization in the developing countries. Stepping back from this problem-driven approach a little, one might speculate that rural-to-rural migration has the longest tradition, however, 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 *per se*, but there is a relatively large literature on kinship and living arrangements.

Relatively common child fosterage in Western Africa is a case in point, allowing parents to take better-paid but remote jobs, children to study away from parental home, and families to cope with unforeseen crises (e.g., Isiugo-Abanihe 1985; Madhavan 2004). We can probably learn from these studies of children not residing with both parents, even if not due to migration. In particular, these studies have shown the continuing importance of non-co-residing parents as they typically continue to interact with foster parents. Evidence suggests that the wellbeing of fostered children continues to depend on the wider social relation between biological and foster parents (Bledsoe 1990).

2) **Bridge knowledge across different types of migration**

A strict distinction between voluntary and involuntary migration might not be easily maintained, nor perhaps useful. To the extent different constraints may result in migration being classified as voluntary or involuntary, comparing the two “classes” might shed light on the endogeneity of migration decisions. Voluntary migration might select on original residents in an area with specific individual characteristics, while involuntary migration might also be selective, to be sure, but perhaps on different characteristics that maybe shared by a whole community (e.g., “environmental” refugees).

Another possible source of variation might be deportees. In recent years, the U.S., for instance, has deported “back” relatively high numbers of immigrants, including among the so-called 1.5 generation (e.g., children of Cambodian refugees who arrived in the U.S. in the early 1980s). While a concern from an equity perspective, this recent initiative may provide new insights on the impact of migration and return migration.

3) **Compare across national settings**

While the comparison of migrant children with their peers in the origin country presents more logistical challenges than the comparison with peers at destination, the former remains quite
desirable and should be attempted. Some of the most compelling evidence on the impact of migration comes from studies of migrants both in their Mexican community of origin and U.S. community of destination (e.g., Frank and Hummer 2002, cited in Rossi’s background paper).

Cross-national surveys (such as PISA and others cited in Hartgen’s and Klasen’s background paper) can also shed light on key aspects of the national institutional context in which migrant families operate at destination. Experience with such surveys suggest, however, that each individual survey is particularly well designed to measure its outcome variables of interest (e.g., educational achievement), but are typically less impressive with respect to the list of background characteristics that they provide. The Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS), for instance, provides no less than 10 “plausible” values of a student’s math and science achievement, but has no variable for household income, as the study designers only included items regarding the assets thought to affect learning directly (e.g., number of books, personal computer at home). Imputation methods and the overlap between questionnaire items across these cross-national survey programs, however, can circumvent some of these limitations.

References (not cited in background papers)


