Possible future directions for work on migration, youth and children

Mark Collinson, 23 March 2008

Introduction

Migration is becoming recognized as a dominant force shaping family livelihoods and well-being throughout the developing world. Migration shifts people across space and time and can influence life chances and opportunities for children, either if they are migrants themselves or if they are left behind by one or both migrant parents. For advancing the field of study in migration and children we need conceptual frameworks, questions, data and as many detailed case studies as possible, preferably with cross national comparisons.

Unlike the other components of population change, namely fertility and mortality, which are driven by physiological and pathological processes, migration is a repeatable and reversible event driven by social, cultural, economic, political, and environmental factors. Measuring migration requires both geographical and time scales. Furthermore, whilst it is generally agreed that migration involves a change in the usual place of residence, there is no consensus on the temporal and spatial dimensions over which migration is measured and the definition of usual place of residence varies between studies, countries and continents.

In an attempt to compare internal migration patterns between countries Martin Bell and his colleagues argued that a four dimensional analytical framework is needed, namely ‘migration intensity’, ‘distance’, ‘connectivity’ and ‘impact’, and that indicators are needed for each of these dimensions (Bell,Blake et al. 2002).

In the study of migration impacting on children and youth we need to examine a range of migration types: internal and cross-border, permanent and temporary, voluntary as well as forced migration. The types of migration studied are often limited by the structure of data available. Data is often cross-sectional and uses boundaries imposed by the data collection authority to define migration. We need longitudinal data to examine changes caused by migration and also to address the impact of changing circumstances on migration patterns. Furthermore, we need comparable data and multi-country studies to determine the extent to which context influences migration outcomes.

---

1 A paper prepared for the conference, “Migrant Youth & Children of Migrants in a Globalized World”, April 24-26, 2008, Bellagio, Italy
Conceptual requirements

The two overview papers written for the conference do an excellent job of outlining the concepts needed to define migration and measure outcomes in child health and well-being and household socio-economic status. The overview won’t be repeated here, but when considering the field of study in the sub-Saharan African context some aspects need to be emphasized and others need clearer definition. Two primary points will be made. Firstly, the field of study needs to include internal (within country) migration, since the overviews focus on international migration. Secondly, we need to elaborate circular migration (such as labour and seasonal migration), because these types of moves are often concealed by existing data and can have a major impact on the life chances and opportunities of children.

There are many conceptual overlaps in the study of internal and international migration but there are also important differences. International migration tends be more tightly regulated and requires more investment from the migrant and their family. International migration also tends to involve longer distances, both spatially and culturally, although this is not always the case. The connectivity between the migrant and their household of origin can be stronger in internal vis-à-vis international migration. Within the same country it usually easier to travel, communicate, and to transfer financial, material or social remittances. Some concepts don’t translate easily between internal and international migration studies. Child trafficking tends to be exclusively a cross-border issue, whereas child fostering occurs mostly within the same country. Step-migration, and the growth of towns and secondary cities, tends to be exclusively an internal migration issue. On the other hand, some concepts occur in both literatures such as the characteristics of migrant-sending households, the occurrence of certain migration types, such as labour migration, and the role of social networks in sustaining migration flows.

It is argued here that the field of children, youth and children should include internal migration because there are possibly important differences that hinge on the heightened regulation of international migration and the distance/cost required. Thus, referring to Bell’s four dimensions, internal migration can have more intensity (particularly of child migration), shorter distances, and more connectivity between the migrant and their home base, all of which may result in different consequences for children.

If we have established that internal migration is necessary to incorporate in the study of children, youth and migration then the second conceptual development needed is temporary, circular migration. A similar notion is defined in international migration studies because the links between the migrant sending communities and places of destination are defined in transnational migration, whereby “multi-stranded links occur between settlements of origin and destination”. In sub-Saharan Africa, mobility is often woven into cultures and livelihoods (Van Dijk, Foeken et al. 2001. ). There is usually a strong connection between people that reside apart through temporary migration; in particular, the migrant remains a household member even though they are away for substantial periods (Oucho 1998). This type of temporary migration has been called circular migration. Although the distinction between temporary and long-term or
permanent migration is often blurred, there are several features that distinguish temporary migration, including short duration, the intention to return to the place of origin and the maintenance of households in the destination and origin settlements (White and Lindstrom 2005). This type of migration is often masked in cross-sectional datasets, even in surveys that aim to record migrations. Temporary migration is better modeled as a resident status, i.e. a repeatedly updated status of a person who moves, as opposed to a migration event which occurs when a boundary is crossed in a particular direction on a particular date. The main reason to supplement the conceptual arsenal in the study of children, youth and migration is that the impacts of circular migration may be different to the impact of migration of a more permanent nature (Collinson, Tollman et al. 2006).

Key questions

As this field of study develops the following questions need to be addressed:

1. What are prevailing patterns of migration on different continents and in different migration systems? It is important to examine cross-national comparisons by gender and age group.

2. What are the consequences of migration for children and youth left behind by one or both parents, and also for migrant children and youth themselves?
   a) What are the outcomes in health and education for migrant child and youth compared to non-migrants?
   b) How does migration affect the socio-economic status of households left behind and how does this relate to child/youth well-being?

3. Do different settings produce different impacts of migration?

4. What are implications for national and local policy that enhance the benefits of migration and limit negative consequences?

5 What is the best method of collecting and analysing longitudinal migration data?

A Possible Data Source

Too often we examine migration using cross-sectional data, which provides us with snapshots in time, but gives limited perspective on the families and communities linked by the migration process (Bilsborrow 1998; Montgomery, Stren et al. 2003). Prospective monitoring of migration is needed to address questions of impact for children and youth. One possible source is the INDEPTH Network2, which has a working group on migration

---

2 The INDEPTH Network (International Network for the Continuous Demographic Evaluation of Populations and their Health in Developing Countries) is a network of Health and Demographic Surveillance System sites.
and urbanisation (MUWG)\(^3\) who are jointly developing the capability of using surveillance data in the study of migration. Prospective, longitudinal tracking of family demographic, economic and health events is needed to examine the dynamic relation between migration and children/youth, for themselves and their families. In the INDEPTH system, sites regularly visit all households in the defined area, keeping track of all changes in household composition (due to births, deaths or migration), as well as the temporary movements into and out of the household. Many sites also track changes in income and economic activities. While the focus of prior work has been on the health and mortality of those residing in the communities under surveillance, for the first time the MUWG is looking at the migrants themselves, those who move into and out of the households in the surveillance areas and individual and household level impacts (Collinson and Adazu 2006). The participating sites have been tracking migration and health events for several years, thus there is a depth and richness of information on migration and health interactions not available to the usual cross-sectional or “snapshot” views of migration and its outcomes in less developed countries. Not only is it possible to look at migration (in or out), but this migration can be subdivided according to the spatial and temporal dimensions of the move. Demographic and health characteristics of the household can be assessed before, during and after the migration, as well as when the migrant has returned from a temporary move. Thus, with INDEPTH data it is possible to examine migration, economic, and health interactions as they unfold together over time. The first MUWG output will be a scientific volume published in 2008 by Ashgate Publishers using data from ten health and demographic surveillance sites in Africa and Asia. Some chapters in this volume will focus on child and youth mortality and morbidity; other chapters focus on adult mortality, and others on household livelihood strategies; all in relation to migration. A possible future direction for the study of children/youth and migration is to collaborate with INDEPTH and the MUWG to conduct a multi-country study using the prospective, surveillance data from these sites.

**Conclusion**

This short paper has aimed to discuss new possibilities in the study of child and youth migration, and the impact of adult migration on children and youth. In particular it has focused on four aspects. Firstly, the continent of sub-Saharan Africa deserves a special focus due to the high intensity of migration within and between countries and the dynamic links to other countries and continents, especially Europe. Secondly, the case has been made to incorporate internal migration in the scope of child-centric work on migration. Thirdly, in the study of internal migration in sub-Saharan Africa, the relevance of temporary, circular migration has been highlighted. This is by no means the only type of migration requiring a focus, but it is easily overlooked due to existing data structures, and possibly has a tremendous impact on children and youth. Lastly, in tandem with the overview papers, this paper has highlighted the need for longitudinal data and suggested that the INDEPTH Network is a possible source for this kind of data in Africa, Asia and Oceania. There is also now an INDEPTH site in Nicaragua, Central America.

---

\(^3\) The network operates via theme-specific working groups and Collinson has led the Migration and Urbanisation Working Group (MUWG) since 2003.
Collectively the sites have the potential to deepen our understanding of migration in remote rural communities and deprived urban settlements that host Health and Demographic Surveillance Sites (see the web-site ‘http://www.indepth-network.org’). Such comparisons not only make it possible to determine whether the migration rates of a particular sites are high or low, but the prospective nature of the data lends itself to examining impacts. This multi-site perspective can help to identify generalizeable patterns that could be used to inform theoretical propositions. However, when making these comparisons it must be remembered that there are some methodological inconsistencies between sites. The most notable being the lack of standardized definition of migration. There are also different data structures in sites that record temporary migration. Another variability is the structure of migration data instruments. Nevertheless, demographic surveillance requires a record of people entering or leaving the study population and on this basis we can target studies on the impact of various types of migration on the health and well-being of children and youth in remote settings of the developing world.

References


