Comments by Kathleen Newland on draft papers for discussion at Conference on Migrant Youth and Children of Migrants in a Globalized World, Bellagio, April 24-26, 2008.

Comments on Well-Being of Migrant Children and Youth in Europe., Harttgen and Klasen

I found this paper much too general in its discussion of international migration in general rather than zeroing in on the migration of children and youth, or the impact of migration on children left behind. Because it covers such a vast terrain, such as the impact of migration on countries of origin and destination, it is almost impossible for it to do justice to these broad topics. As result, the paper attempts both too much (on migration generally) and too little (on migration’s impact on children and youth). My general comment is that the paper would be more useful if it were both streamlined to focus on children and youth, and fortified to tell us more about findings on that particular topic.

The overly broad approach leads to some generalizations that border on misleading. For example, I think it misrepresents the news economics of migration as presenting migration as a development strategy, rather than a livelihood strategy for families/households and a revenue raising or unemployment-reduction strategy for governments. Consider the Philippines, for example. It has a carefully managed program of labor migration, but it has no development strategy, and decades of massive, organized labor migration have produced very little in development gains—though quite a bit of poverty reduction (860,000 families lifted out of poverty so far this decade, according to government calculations). It is also not quite accurate to present migration as a solution for population aging (migrants age too) rather than a short-to-medium term patch that may allow time for more fundamental adjustments (unless a state is willing to accept huge and continuous inflows of migrants).

The section on migration and poverty seemed to miss the forest for the trees. Migration almost always reduces poverty for the migrant, at least as long as residence abroad continues. It almost always reduces poverty for the families of migrants, too. Migration can be part of a vicious cycle of depression and depopulation, but it doesn’t start it. Absolute or relative lack of opportunity is the root cause (or, from a structuralist perspective, migration is one of the mechanisms by which peripheral regions are incorporated into the global system—at the bottom.)

Some of the most interesting points in the paper are buried—for example the fundamental point about migration for education on page 12, which
deserves more than a passing mention. Others are not as strong as they could be because no supporting evidence is cited. What evidence shows us that migration flows have shifted away from the US toward Europe? (p. 12). It would be useful to show us graphically the age breakdown of migrants to support the statement that child and youth migration are important because these age groups make up such a large share of international migration. What is a ‘very high” risk of prostitution, and what evidence shows that women who migrate illegally face it?

There is a fundamental and inaccurate conflation of smuggling and trafficking on page 6. Trafficking may be considered in the same category as other kinds of forced migration (and indeed some of the remedies are analogous for this reason), but smuggling is a contract entered into voluntarily, even though the “product” may not be exactly as advertised.

I won’t go into other questions and quibbles with the sections that deal with migration generally, since I think they should be radically pruned to leave more room for discussion of issues specific to children and youth. Several of these issues that seem fundamental to me are not discussed, or are given very little space.

- I have already mentioned migration for education, including below the tertiary level. Also, prohibitions on migration of girls is often an obstacle to their pursuit of education, for example when the high school or college is too far away for a daily commute and families are reluctant to let girls live way from home.
- Marriage migration, often arranged with only perfunctory consent of the child or youth, is common, and has been identified as a public policy problem in some European countries. Denmark for example, has responded by changing its legislation on family unity for spouses under 25. But when does this kind of thing constitute interference in cultural norms? The migrant child becomes a particularly valuable “commodity” on the home-country marriage market where family unity norms attach a green card or equivalent to a marriage contract
- Detention and conditions of detention, for child migrants. The Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children and other members of the Detention Watch network have done good work on this that could be cited.
- Quasi-adoption, fostering or apprenticeship arrangements that are seriously abusive of child migrants, such as the *rest-avec* system in Haiti or the “apprenticeship” of Ghanaian children to fishermen on Lake Volta. Migrant child labor in general doesn’t get adequate discussion in the paper. These practices are more common in the South, but abuse of children in domestic servitude is not unknown in Europe as well.
• The gender section really needs reinforcement. The girl child occupies the intersection of gender and age vulnerabilities, and is often the battleground for symbolic cultural values as well (like the wearing of headscarves). Providing protection without constraining her life options is a challenge.

I will end with a few more general points.
1. I think the paper relies too heavily on IOM as a source of data. IOM does not generate its own global statistics, and it isn’t always reliable. Better to rely on the UN Population Division or the World Bank—which is probably what IOM is using.
2. I would love to see the discussion of the agency of children expanded and deepened.
3. Related to the previous point, I think it is essential to make a distinction between children (under 12/15?) and youth (over 15), as their status as agents of their own migration is quite different, as are their protection needs.
4. The question of child welfare as a factor in parents’ decision-making about migration is underplayed. Parents migrate sometimes to avoid specific dangers to their children (conscription, genital mutilation) or to access opportunities (education, medical care) or to earn money to support their children. The discussion of the damage done to children by missing a parent often seems a bit patronizing, as if parents are not capable of making the best decision for their children out of a very constrained set of choices.
5. The paper would be strengthened by some greater reference to the legal framework for protection of child migrants—and, especially, on legal frameworks that lead to separation of families or delay reunification.
6. The focus at the end of the paper on the contribution of migration to the development of the country of destination is quite outside the mainstream of the migration and development debate.

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

The paper is well-thought out, logically structured and clearly written. It provides a very good introduction to the topic. I appreciate the fact that definitions of key terms are not only given early in the paper, but the choices of definition are discussed and the logic behind them revealed.
Having said that, I found the definition of forced migration (p. 12) too vague, as untenable circumstances may include things like persistent drought, that would not in most uses of the term put someone into the category of forced migrant. But this is a matter for discussion.

The author makes the key point that children affected by migration are not only child migrants and children of migrants, but all children who live in a society that is strongly affected by in- or out-migration. This raises an important question about the parameters of this workshop's discussion, which we should clarify early on.

The author includes an important discussion of the role of extended families, and points out that migration of parents and the resulting separation from children is normal in many societies. Nonetheless, there seems to be a bias in the paper in favor of the nuclear family, as in the statement on page 25 that “unfortunately, the evidence of family disruption’s negative impacts upon children’s access to the realization of their rights is often anecdotal...” If the evidence is not solid, how can we be sure that the impacts are negative? Parental absence due to migration should not be pathologized in the absence of convincing evidence.

I was somewhat taken aback by the comment that increasing household income (through remittances) can increase women’s propensity to “consume more leisure time.” (p. 27) Given the extremely high workloads—double and triple shifts in waged or farm labor, household maintenance, and community roles—of most poor women in developing countries, this seems at best a little insensitive. Maybe it’s just economy of expression, but I would try to find another way to put this Reducing female labor may not be negative at all, but a significant addition to the quality of life.

These are relatively peripheral comments on a very fine paper. I appreciated the section on empirical challenges and data requirements, in particular the discussion of the definition of household membership in a migration context. I don’t think Unalan’s definition solves the problem, but it should stimulate a thoughtful discussion of the ‘virtual household” spread across two or more countries. Rossi brings home the problem of inadequate data on South-South migration very forcefully.

I don’t think either paper really addressed to my satisfaction the question of what factors influence whether migration has a positive or negative effect on children and youth, in comparison to children who don’t migrate in the country of origin or children in the place of settlement.
Factors such as the composition and strength of the individual family, the attitude of parents and other adults to migration, education, culture, available resources, and so forth all seem to make a difference in whether the child regards migration as a good thing, a mere fact of life, or a threat to well-being.

Issues of inter-generational is an issue of enormous importance to migrant children, and children of migrants. The educational opportunities afforded by remittances, or available in the country of destination, often seems to be an important motivator for migrant parents. Mobility can be up or down, of course, and downward mobility across generations as migrant youth assimilate into the underclass in a country of destination might also be addressed in these papers, along with what I think is the more common pattern (?) of upward mobility across generations.

I was concerned that neither paper gave much attention to the possible psycho-social gains from migration, like development of broader cultural competence, self-confidence in negotiating new situations, greater independence from traditional cultural expectations, more choices among role models, and so forth. Maybe there is not data on any of these things (and Rossi mentions the virtually complete absence of data on the mental health of child migrants in developing countries), but I would have thought it worth mentioning some of these benefits as possibilities.