Brief Comments on the conference thematic-synthesis papers

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I found both papers to be long and careful (sometimes tedious) treatments of their subjects: North-South (and perhaps North-North) migration in Harttgen and Klasen (HK), and South-South migration in Rossi (R). R’s primary focus on children left behind, HK examine the status of migrant children in destination regions, primarily—in fact overwhelmingly—in Europe. My comments are brief as I look forward to learning as well as contribution to this meeting.

HK’s views of immigrant children in communities compared to the native-majority yields a bleaker view of the consequences of migration than I think is warranted, especially if one moves beyond the EU and considers the history of the big three migrant nations: Australia(AU), Canada (CA) and the USA. Surely EU immigrants work for lower wages than natives and live in segregated communities, but most have come to stay and clearly prefer the EU as is to homelands where opportunities are likely more limited. Bob Lerman’s perspective of comparing to immigrant incomes to those of “comparable stayers” is flawed, but the notion that most migrants come for a better life for themselves and their children, and indeed find it, cannot be ignored. Borjas points out the fact that young Mexicans who have some high school earn high multiples (5-7 times as much) in the USA as in Mexico suggests that he ricks of migration may well be worth the rewards. Is this also the case in the EU?

Studies from the AU, CA and USA suggest that immigrants may be socially excluded—or more likely willingly live with one another for comfort and support as well as social connections. But in one or more generations they seem to catch up with natives and participate more fully in mainstream society, ‘assimilate’ and gain access to citizenship and reduced social discrimination. The experiences and perspectives from the big three and their differences should be more systematically included. I expect Miles Corak and Peter Saunders will say more about their nations as I believe they offer much as models for other nations to follow. More attention ought to be paid to these nations.

More attention also ought to be paid to the central and eastern European nations such as Poland who are both immigrant destinations (from central Europe) as well as immigrant source countries (especially to England)

Both papers focus on international (cross-border) migration, and that is fine. But they must be careful to talk about what migration to what place and by whom. R argues that the impact of internal migration on children is as important those associated with international migration and he may be right. But internal migration within the EU is different than within China or within Africa (see Angel paper about Ghanese in the EU leather trade in Parsons and Smeeding, 2006 book). In the same way African migration to the EU is different from central Asian and eastern
European migration to the EU, and both are different from Asian migration to the big three (AU, CA and USA).

Moreover many EU datasets lump together immigrants and minorities – making analysis difficult. The simple questions: Were you born here? If not where? and When did you migrate? make it much easier to distinguish short and longer term migrants. The latter category — longer term migrants seem to me to be better identified as minorities; the newly arrived should be migrants. Of course this might mean that the EU has to develop an official definition of “immigrant” or “migrant, which may help clarify a number of issues!

The HK paper ought to be more about equality of opportunity and if so, this leads to a different set of indicators which will be needed, especially for the older immigrant youth of Europe, first or second generation. It seems to me that African migration to the EU, especially France and now Netherlands, are interesting cases. In both societies immigrant children become educated and have access to the health care systems and welfare states of both nations as children (including ‘ecole maternelle’ and similar integrative experiences). They seem to do well in terms of education in a short time (see Schnepf in Parsons and Smeeding). But when it comes time for youth to find their way into the formal job markets, the lack of social networks has blocked many of them from good jobs. The consequences of jobless youth are similar in the French case, the Dutch case and even (to a more dramatic end) in the Middle East. We need to know more about how youth assimilate beyond education into the formal job marks in all these nations, especially in the ‘job poor’ EU.

R’s paper highlights findings which show that “children left behind” in developing countries do better children without migrant parents. Indeed one wonders about the role or remittances and strong family networks. Jason DeParle’s (Summer 2007 NYT magazine) excellent article entitled “a good son is one who leaves “ (one that does NOT stay behind) suggests the importance of remittances in nations such as the Philippines, where young immigrants are now moving to Korea and Thailand and China as well as Australia. Migrant parents or siblings may raise their children’s aspirations for schooling and a better life whether left behind or moving with parents. Parents or siblings want their children to have better education and better opportunities which are available in the destination country, or even in the country left behind. Thus while remittances are fairly well studied we need to know more about them and their effects on recipients (including children in home nations) as well as on senders.

I only hope participants find these remarks useful.