ELEMENTS OF A FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY OF MIGRATION AND CHILDREN

A. Groups of interest

For purposes of understanding the effects of migration on the younger segments of the population, I propose that the following groups be considered:

1. Children: Persons who have not reached the age of majority and are therefore legally dependent on their parents or guardians. In most countries, the age of majority is 18 years. The age of majority is the threshold of adulthood as it is conceptualized in law. For purposes of studying the impact of migration on children, at least three distinct groups should be considered:

   - Infants and young children (pre-school children): Infants are children under one. The group of young children could include all children aged 0-4 (from birth to exact age 5). These “pre-school” children who are very dependent on adults for care.

   - Primary-school children: This group would include children aged 5-12 (from exact age 5 to just under exact age 13). The age range includes the ages over which children normally start formal schooling (perhaps with pre-school) and complete primary education. Although in some countries this age range may overbound the primary-school years, the aim is to focus on children for whom school enrollment matters the most because it establishes the foundation for future attainment.

   - Teenage children: This group would include children aged 13-17 (from exact age 13 to just under 18). Teenagers who have not reached yet the legal age of maturity constitute a distinct group because: they undergo the transition to puberty; they have distinct educational needs; social gender differentiation becomes more marked; teenagers are more prone than younger children to have a say on what they wish to do (study, work, migrate, marry).

2. Youth or young adults: This group, which should not be conflated with that of teenagers, would include persons aged 18-24 (from exact age 18 to just under 25). Persons in this group are more likely to make decisions independently. Depending on context, marriage, formal entry into the labour force, and migration are common among persons in this age group. Legally, once majority is reached, young adults are natural persons before the law and may act on their own in all spheres of life: entering into contracts, voting, making wills, marrying.

B. International migration

In considering the effects of migration on children or young persons, it is important to distinguish between at least the following types of migration because they condition the ways in which children may migrate and shape the consequences of such migration.
1. Legal migration

Generally, persons who have not attained the age of majority need parental approval to migrate legally. There are the following possibilities:

**Migration of children as part of the nuclear family:**

- *Migration is contemporaneous with that of parent:* Children are admitted as dependants of the primo migrant and migrate together with the primo migrant (usually a parent, most often a father).

- *Migration follows that of parent:* Children are admitted as dependants of the primo migrant but migrate after the primo migrant. Therefore, a period of separation between the child or children and at least one parent precedes the children’s migration.

**Migration of children as part of the extended family:** Child goes abroad to join a relative other than a parent.

**Migration of child alone:** Child goes abroad on his or her own (usually to study or obtain training).

**Migration for the purpose of adoption:** Child is adopted from abroad and is admitted for the purpose of adoption.

2. Undocumented migration, forced migration:

Under these forms of migration, children may cross borders without having the explicit permission or approval of parents or guardians. While recognizing that undocumented migration and forced migration are different, in both the following types of “scenarios” may arise:

- *Migration of child without parents:*
  - Children leave without parents, either alone (unaccompanied children) or accompanying other relatives
  - Children are forced to leave parents behind in order to escape persecution or because they are victims of trafficking.

- *Migration of child is contemporaneous with that of at least one parent:* Children accompany the parent who migrates first or both parents when they leave.
• Migration of child follows that of parent: After a period of separation, children join parent(s) who have gained a foothold in the country of destination.

3. Non-migration

When one or both parents migrate, children may be left behind in the country of destination. The following family arrangements often ensue:

• Children stay with the parent who does not migrate
• Children stay with other relatives because both parents migrate
• Children stay with other relatives because they only have one parent (they are orphans or “abandoned” by one parent)

C. Policy-relevant questions regarding children and migration

1. Pre-school children

a. How is the health status of pre-school children affected by migration (their own migration or that of their parents)?

Answering this question usually involves focusing on outcomes in terms of:
• Nutritional status
• Mortality
• Morbidity
• Access to health care
• Cognitive development

b. How is the socialization and education of pre-school children affected by migration?

Possible outcomes to focus on:
• Language acquisition
• Participation in educational activities at an early age
• Segregation in particular child-care institutions

2. Primary-school children

a. How is school performance and educational attainment of primary-school children affected by migration (their own migration or that of their parents)?

In addressing this question attention should be given to differential outcomes by sex of child. Types of outcomes to focus on include:
• School enrollment
• Academic performance
• Performance in standardized tests
• Incidence of learning problems
• Type of school attended
• Issues of segregation or differentiation

b. How is the socialization of primary-school children affected by migration (their own or that of their parents)?

Once of more, considering differences associated with the sex of the child is important. Possible outcomes to focus on:
• Language acquisition
• Types of children they relate to
• Expectations and goals for the future
• Behavioural changes

3. Teenagers

a. How is school performance and educational attainment of teenagers affected by migration (their own migration or that of their parents)?

For teenagers, studying differences in outcomes by sex of child is very important. Types of outcomes to focus on may include:
• School enrollment (tendency to drop out of school)
• Academic performance
• Performance in standardized tests
• Incidence of learning problems
• Type of school attended
• Issues of segregation or differentiation

b. How is the socialization of teenagers affected by migration (their own or that of their parents)?

Possible outcomes to focus on, always from a gender perspective, include:
• Language proficiency
• Relations with peers
• Restricted or open peer group
• Goals for the future
• Behavioural problems, unruliness, antisocial behaviour
c. Is the transition to adulthood affected by migration (their own or that of their parents)?

Elements of the transition to adulthood to take into account include:

- Labour force participation
- Type of employment for those who work
- Initiation of sexual life
- Knowledge and attitudes regarding sexual matters, including use of contraception and prevention of STDs
- Incidence of pregnancy and early marriage
- Prevalence of single motherhood

4. Young adults

Young adults are major players in international migration as primo migrants. Therefore, focusing on their experience does not necessarily demand a different approach from that required to study migration in general. Nevertheless, because over the age range 18-24, pursuing an education is still an important activity in the lives of young adults, it may be of interest to assess to what extent migration plays a part in improving or reducing their chances of remaining in school. To do so, one would need to consider to what extent alternatives, such as pursuing full-time employment or, in the case of women, marrying and dropping out from the labour force are options being pursued.

D. Analytical approach and the relevant comparison groups

1. Studies based on cross sectional data focusing on the current situation

Migrant children in country of destination: If the focus of the analysis is to understand how migrant children fare in the process of adapting to or integrating into the receiving society, comparisons should be made between them and similar non-migrant children in the country of destination. In doing so, it is important to control for the time of arrival in the country of destination since the degree of integration is expected to improve over time. If the focus of the analysis is to assess whether migration has benefited migrant children or not, the appropriate comparison group are similar children in the country of origin.

Children left behind: The impact of migration on children left behind is generally studied by comparing them with children in the country of origin whose parents are not migrants. Often children left behind are studied in contexts where parents do not have the option of having the children with them abroad (when, for instance, parents are migrant workers in countries that do not allow family reunification). In contexts where some children remain at origin and other children accompany their parents abroad, it might be enlightening to compare the situation of these two groups of children.
2. Studies based on longitudinal data

Children in country of destination: Longitudinal studies that follow migrants for a certain number of years after arrival in the country of destination make it possible to assess whether and to what extent age at arrival conditions outcomes for migrant children. In this case, the groups compared might be those belonging, at the time of arrival, to the three categories of children identified earlier.

Children left behind: Although, to my knowledge, no longitudinal study has been made of families separated by migration and the children left behind, longitudinal information may be useful in ascertaining how fast and in what way children adapt to the absence of parents. Such information might also shed light on how children of different ages are affected by the absence of parents.

3. Studies based on retrospective data from a cross-sectional source

Retrospective data on the migration, education, employment and family history of young persons may provide useful insights about the process of integration. Having similar retrospective data on education, employment and family histories of the children of migrants and the children of non-migrants by the time both reach young adulthood would permit to tease out how migration shapes outcomes for each of these two groups. Those data would also allow consideration of whether there are marked differences between the two groups usually included in the “second generation”, namely, migrant children of migrants and non-migrant children of migrants.

From the perspective of the country of origin, retrospective data could permit the analysis of outcomes for “return children” (i.e. children who migrated and have returned), children left behind by their migrant parent(s) and children not affected by migration.

E. The articulation of micro-level studies with macro-level questions

The study of migrant children or the “second generation” has been prompted by the perception that, as these children reach adulthood, they are not properly prepared to join fully the society in which they live. Although many second generation migrants integrate fairly well, there are important and visible groups that present problems of adaptation often associated with low educational attainment, lack of skills and poor employment prospects. If migration is not to fuel social marginalization, strategies to prevent such poor outcomes are required. Micro-studies can provide insights into the nature of the differences observed and their causes.

Concern about “children left behind” relates less to marginalization as to poor educational outcomes and the creation of a “culture of migration” where children’s main
aim is to leave the country of origin as their parents did. Micro-studies can provide insights about whether this culture of migration is being generated or sustained by the children of emigrants.