

Internal Migration, Poverty and Development in Asia

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Summary

Introduction

Internal migration, the movement of people within Asian countries, exists on a massive scale. It is increasing rapidly, and has enormous potential for reducing poverty and stimulating economic growth. It is diverse and complex, however, still poorly understood, and largely regarded negatively by many policymakers. This paper explores the relationship between internal migration and economic growth and development in Asia, concentrating on four countries – China, India, Vietnam and Indonesia – and looks at ways in which greatest benefit could be derived from internal migration.

Main findings

Although internal migration is by no means a new phenomenon, it has increased rapidly during the 1980s and 1990s and is continuing to do so. This is especially true of circular migration, whereby people migrate temporarily and periodically return to their original locality. It is driven by several factors including improvements in transport and other communications; the growth of labour-intensive production and services; environmental and global market conditions adversely affecting the agricultural sector; the growth of urban and manufacturing opportunities; and new opportunities for women in industry and/or because of changing social norms.

There are enormous potential benefits to be gained from internal migration. Remittances sent home by internal migrants, for instance, can reduce poverty at the household level and can stimulate economic growth in both the receiving and sending areas. Remittances may also work to reduce social inequalities. Policies have tended to discourage internal migration, however, severely restricting its potential. Migrants also tend to be stigmatised and endure poor access to social benefits.

Policymakers are starting to realise the benefits of migration in reaping gains from localised growth, but maximising its benefits while reducing the costs and risks attached requires effective partnerships between governments, civil society, the private sector and donors. Fostering these partnerships will require the acquisition of quality data on internal migration, recognising the many context-specific factors operating in migration streams.

Key research findings

- massive and increasing internal migration can reduce poverty and contribute to economic growth and development in Asia
- internal migration is complex, diverse and highly context-specific
- internal migration is poorly understood and still regarded negatively by policymakers
- cooperation is required between numerous agencies to maximise the benefits of internal migration
- research must provide data on the factors stimulating and affecting internal migration in all its forms.

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