

Social Protection and Internal Migration in Bangladesh: Supporting the Poorest

Summary of Key Issues

This briefing shows how migration exacerbates the difficulties that many people already face in accessing formal social protection, such as additional income or food. However, it also shows how migration itself can facilitate access to an informal form of social protection for poorer households, even if this is risky and does not always lead to positive outcomes. It also argues that rather than focusing on improving migrants access to formal social protection, which in any case is often inaccessible to the poorest households, more could be done to ensure that the effects of migration on informal social protection are secured and enhanced. This include supporting those left behind, so that they can really benefit from the social protection effects of migration and improving living conditions for migrants while they are away.

Access to Social Protection

Social protection provided by government and non-governmental organisations usually depends on people being settled in a particular place so that they can be registered for schemes. In Bangladesh such support comes in various forms, including the 'vulnerable group development cards' which entitle the holder to food rations, schooling stipends and disaster relief. However, migrants and their families may be excluded from such formal systems of social protection.

Whilst there are various types of *informal* social protection - such as the provision of loans and 'help' by richer members of the community to their poorer relatives and neighbours - these tend to be only available to people who are part of a local kin group. In-migrants from outside an area are not usually able to access these forms of social protection.

Difficult Conditions for Migrants

A study carried out by Barkat and Akhter (2003) on urbanization and internal migration in Bangladesh concluded that the internal migration streams are mainly to two big cities, namely Dhaka and Chittagong, and most migrants come for employment opportunities, while some are pushed by natural disasters, landlessness, and health problems. Most of these migrants to the cities are extremely poor and live in slums and squatter settlements, which often lack security and basic amenities. In the rural areas conditions may not be much better as migrant



Husband and wife work on natural disaster protection

agricultural labourers are forced to camp near the fields in which they work, in temporary shelters.

What is 'social protection'

This term refers to policies and approaches that assist people, households and communities to protect themselves against shocks and risks. An ODI paper for DFID defines social protection as 'the public actions taken in response to levels of vulnerability, risk and deprivation which are deemed socially unacceptable within a given polity or society' (Conway 2000). For the UN Economic and Social Council, social protection is 'broadly understood as a set of public and private policies and programmes undertaken by societies in response to various contingencies to offset the absence or substantial reduction of income from work; to provide assistance for families with children as well as provide people with health care and housing'. These broad definitions of social protection incorporate two sets of issues, which are partly overlapping but generally call for separate policy approaches. First, the emphasis on risk, vulnerability, and shocks. This recognises the dynamic nature of states of well-being and poverty, and focuses attention on the need to be prepared for crises of various kinds. Second, a focus on social protection emphasises the need to provide support to the poorest. This is often associated with social assistance and welfare/relief but may also encompass some elements of promotive measures that may, for example, provide income or consumption transfers to the poor.

Potential Benefits for Migrants

In Biswanath, Sylhet district, poor in-migrants from all over Bangladesh are attracted by the economic 'boom' caused by overseas migration to the U.K. These internal migrants live in low quality 'colony' housing on the periphery of the villages and are seen as 'outsiders'. Whilst they have benefited from

increased economic opportunities in the region, they have often forfeited the informal social protection they would have accessed in their home villages. Here, migrants from poverty prone areas of Bangladesh use temporary migration into Biswanath as a way of supplementing insecure livelihoods in their place of origin (in which case migration might be seen as an economic safety net). Since they rarely have any social links with those who live permanently in the village, who are interconnected by ties of kinship and patronage, migration may in turn lead to a net loss of social protection, both for them and the relatives they have left behind. For insiders, who are given informal social protection by their local kin and neighbours, these relationships are often underscored by power relations, in which the wealthy act as powerful patrons.

As the Biswanath case shows, what drives so many people to migrate for work is not only the lack of employment opportunities in their home villages but also the rewards in terms of income and future security that can come when things work out well. Investing in land, livestock and education are a way of investing for the future that can be attained by some through their migration efforts.

Rogaly *et al.* (2002) provide a social analysis of seasonal migration in West Bengal, India, examining the welfare/ill fare outcomes of that migration for both migrant workers and employers. In this context seasonal migration contributes to the welfare outcomes of temporary or seasonal labour market migrants. Despite difficulties in the destination area, the migrants are not absolutely powerless in the labour market. They travel in groups and maintain networks through which they are informed about particular places and employers.

Impact on Home Communities

If large numbers of people are involved in seasonal migration, there is an impact on the communities and economy of the places of origin. Given the scale of movement of temporary migrants in Bangladesh this is certainly an important consideration in many places. If men and women both migrate,

While the Migrant is Away

The family is suffering. The eldest boy sold a home-grown bottle gourd in the market at 10/- so that he could buy half a kilo of rice. His mother, he and his two siblings ate that rice for supper but they were still hungry because it was a very small amount. However, it was better than yesterday, SP's wife said, because that day there had been no food at all and they had to starve. She said that she had wept for the whole night. Today she said that she will purchase two kilos of rice because she had made some money doing earth-cutting. That will give them enough rice for two days. Last week she had gone begging in the village and had been given some rice, but she could not do that often because people had little to give.

Kabir, et al., Gaibandha research report, November 2005.

households left behind may consist only of children and the elderly. If only men migrate, women may, to a certain extent, take on men's roles. While there is some evidence that this may improve their social and economic position, women and children may be left without money for long periods of time or face harassment from others because of the absence of the male head. The male migrant may start a new family at the destination and use his earnings on them rather than the family at home. He may gradually cut ties with his rural family.

Those Who Go

In discussing the impact of migration on social protection for migrants and their families we need to distinguish between those who stay, and those who go:

Access to Formal Social Protection

- Access to government food relief programmes, old age allowance, ration cards etc (which are available to a few on an intermittent basis) depend on good contacts with officials who distribute the benefits. Maintaining these links may be impossible for migrants'.
- NGO savings and credit schemes as well as schooling support usually require one member of a family to be stationary so that they can attend regular meetings.
- Since most migrants work in the informal sector, they have little contact with formal systems of protection or the regulation of wage rates or conditions of work. The existence of legislation to protect workers has little meaning in their lives. The only contact they have with officials may be with the police. This contact is seldom positive or helpful.
- The less-poor often benefit most from access to formal schemes. NGO savings schemes are not accessible to the poorest people – pressure to repay loans makes participation in formal groups difficult. These difficulties are increased enormously when people are mobile.

Access to Informal Social Protection

- Social protection comes from migrants' resourcefulness in seeking support and making alliances with friends and employers to get help when needed. This is often difficult when migrants come from far away and are viewed as 'outsiders' by the local community.
- Travelling with others and finding somewhere safe to stay and good quality food can make a big difference to their well-being.
- Successful, long-term migrants have established routes, practices and contacts which make their migration experience bearable – even so many are reluctant migrants (Rafique, Rogaly & Massey, 2006) because the work is arduous and the way they are treated is demeaning.

Those Who Stay Behind

- Illness, harassment over loans and problems getting enough food pose formidable obstacles for many households while migrants are away.
- Accessing support from others, earning money and making resources stretch while the migrant is away all enable the migrant to be away without worrying too much about the family at home.
- Resourcefulness of wives, mothers, daughters as well as sons left behind makes a considerable contribution to the success of migration and the families demonstrate considerable ingenuity in keeping the household going, often coping with the considerable disadvantages that women face in a patriarchal society.

Migration as a Safety Net

- Our research shows that the majority of internal migrants use their earnings for day to day expenses, but some are able to invest in land and livestock. However, investments can be wiped out by unexpected events (including river erosion and dowry payments). So while migration is a way of securing the future, any benefits can easily be lost.

Moving in Search of Work and Food

In November 2004 a *monga* (a near famine when there is also a shortage of work) threatened large parts of North West Bangladesh. The newspapers contained stories of the thousands of people in the districts of Rangpur, Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Gaibandha and Nilphamari who were 'virtually starving for days together due to want of job and food'. This was not an unusual occurrence, in most years a time of scarcity follows the end of the monsoon in October and November. People's response to this crisis, to move to other places in search of work, was not unusual either; for many of Bangladesh's 140 million inhabitants temporary work migration provides an essential safety net in times of need.

The Independent [Bangladesh newspaper] 4 November 2004, p.16

Policy Implications

Work on migrant labour in Bangladesh by the Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty points to the need to:

- Differentiate between **formal** and **informal** forms of social protection. Both of these may be more readily available to non-migrants.
- Appreciate how migration can alter people's access to both forms of social protection.
- The definition of social protection should focus on the 'social' element of the protection offered – informal

social protection is reliant upon the social relations between people who are in the roles of giver and receiver and it is through these social relationships that protection is accessed and sustained. While recognising that changing the inequities that exist in society is a big challenge, it is essential to find ways to ensure that these relationships are not abusive or demeaning.

- Relationships with other gatekeepers for migrants and their families are important. Greater attention is required to stamping out corruption in the police, for example.
- Efforts to support the enforcement of a minimum wage should be encouraged but there will be continuing problems in Bangladesh with the unregulated informal sector and it is naïve to advocate 'quick fixes' for such a huge sector of the economy.
- Back in the migrant's home place it is important to support initiatives that promote development and savings/credit for the poorest people which can provide an essential source of support for women and children left behind. Attention to ways of serving women observing *purdah* or too poor or marginalised to be able to interact confidently with officials is also needed. There is a need to recognise that in some parts of Bangladesh, teenage sons may be the public face of the family while their father or older brother is away and therefore need to be given a voice and support.
- Migration can make a big difference to people's lives and is an essential safety net for many. However, given the very large numbers of people 'on the move' innovative schemes to provide registration of migrants or identity cards are not only impractical but also may be counter-productive if powerful groups misuse the lists/cards for political gain. A more modest approach would be to encourage government and civil society groups to invest in improving the places where migrants live while away, and devising schemes to support families left behind. Both would make a considerable difference to the health and well-being of migrant families.



Migrants on the way to catch the afternoon bus

Key Readings

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Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty

The Migration DRC aims to promote new policy approaches that will help to maximize the potential benefits of migration for poor people, whilst minimising its risks and costs. It is undertaking a programme of research, capacity-building, training and promotion of dialogue to provide the strong evidential and conceptual base needed for such new policy approaches. This knowledge base will also be shared with poor migrants, contributing both directly and indirectly to the elimination of poverty.

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