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Policy Briefs: Where to return to? Rural urban interlinkages in times of internal and international labour migration

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SUMMARY

Economic and social activities of migrants transcend internal and international as well as rural and urban divides. Migration circuits are not bipolar but rather develop towards a multi-local network of family members putting into question “return” as an often assumed conclusion to a successful migration.

This briefing explores the multi-local migration patterns of Kyrgyzstan’s mobile population placing return in a wider context and providing recommendations how to facilitate circular migration and ties to places of origin and new places of work and living.

THE PROBLEM

In Kyrgyzstan labour migration of the young (rural) population is mainly perceived as temporary and return is often seen as the successful conclusion to a migration. Migrants however, return only under certain circumstances and not necessarily to the rural areas where they originally come from. That calls for policies acknowledging increasing complex multi-local settings of households transcending the rural-urban and national and international divide.

BACKGROUND

Defining return and the migration development nexus

Despite the impact of remittances on consumption and investment, return migration is supposed to hold huge potential for human development and positive social change. “Return” often implies that the cycle of migration will be ended and people will be economically and socially better off. But in many cases the “return” is the beginning of a new or an extension of the existing cycle as migration patterns in Kyrgyzstan show.

Up to 20 % of Kyrgyzstan’s population seeks better economic opportunities in Russia and Kazakhstan, sending remittances worth 30 % of the GDP especially into rural areas

(Zentralasienanalysen 2008). What is often overseen in this international migration discourse, that international movement is strongly linked to internal rural to urban migration mainly from the South to the North, the capital Bishkek and its surroundings. In addition people of different age groups or generation reveal different ideas and plans where to exactly return to in Kyrgyzstan. While elderly often naturally expect a return to their home villages, especially younger people increasingly place their identities and perspectives for future at urban places rather than the village where they were born. Only with the age of retirement they could imagine a return to their rural place of birth. People with enough income send remittances to their family members. Remittances are invested in daily survival, life-cycle events, cars, housing, cattle and land. Although investment in cattle and land in rural areas is also a fallback strategy for migrants themselves they also invest in city centres or in areas with more fertile land within Kyrgyzstan. Often they do it step-wise, leading to an even more diverse pattern of internal and international migration. Thus multi-locality becomes part of peoples' life. Even if migrants have no finances for investments but decide to return, Bishkek would be a first choice. Having relatives in the urban Bishkek also provides networks for accessing medical care and social services.

Problems of return

While it is generally acknowledged that the return of migrants can be beneficial for the development of countries of origin it is likely to be so only under specific circumstances. Most of migrants wish to return to Kyrgyzstan, but reasons not to return to rural areas include: lower salaries and poorer economic opportunities, frustration with business climate, concern about corruption or different way of doing things in rural setting, lack of social, medical and training services, shopping facilities and technical infrastructure, traditional settings and rules but also inadequate savings to be able to return and to be able to invest in consumption and production.

Among the small number of migrants who permanently returns to rural areas are successful ones who mainly managed to invest in livestock and a future living on it.

The other part of returnees - who are less likely to contribute to development - has also been described in many other studies. They return home disappointed, ill, and often un-

expectedly because of deportation, problems with family members or sudden need for work force at home.

Nevertheless, the majority of migrants do not plan a definitive return but keeps on working in Russia and Kazakhstan and in many cases try to establish a mid- and long-term place to live and work in Bishkek. Under these conditions a number of socio-economic and politically induced factors become problematic, having segmented migrants and non-migrants, national and international and rural and urban areas alike.

Brain gain and/or brain drain

Despite remittances the international “brain drain” is seen as significant obstacle to achieve national Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and equitable poverty reduction in Kyrgyzstan (UNDP & CIS 2005). Post-socialist countries such as Kyrgyzstan share a characteristic different from the usual “low-skilled” migration discourse. Educated and skilled people from the rural South of Kyrgyzstan work now undocumented in cities of Russia and Kazakhstan and are not able to practise their skills. Many younger people interrupted their educational career by the sole need to earn money for survival. Therefore migration caused a lack of labour force in all ranges of jobs in the source region. Although often argued, that migrants will return with new ideas and skills (“brain gain and circulation”), the decision to work abroad is overwhelmingly economic with little intention to learn new skills or acquire new profession. Remittances however are partly spend in children’s education and especially young internal migrants try to combine work and study in Bishkek. However, quality and fees for colleges and universities vary enormously, and achievements of degrees but also acquirement of a job position do often require bribe. In any case, it remains unlikely that young people find employment in their rural homes and rather stay in Bishkek or as in many cases end up migrating to Russia or Kazakhstan.

Social protection for the non-migrating population

Young and middle-aged men and women who migrate to Russia or Kazakhstan do leave their children with their parents or parents-in-law. It is the old and very young population who does not migrate. Existing migration regimes make it hard for parents to have re-

course to other family members and especially children back home. Those migration patterns have changed the structure of the family care relationship. Caring at distance involves relying on older children, grandparents and relatives and absence of parents for longer periods of time. First studies indicate long-term negative impacts on family separations such as decrease in school enrolment and performance, medical care and general psychological consequences. Another concern is who is in the long run going to take care about elderly if also the traditional set-up of the youngest son staying at home breaks declines. It is also not clear yet, if the full responsibility towards parents and elderly family members may hinder the younger generation from investing in their own children, family and businesses.

Social protection for migrants

The current international migration regime combined with an increasing overlap of legal and illegal practices and a flourishing grey economy let migrants overwhelmingly work under unauthorized conditions including all vulnerability, risks and stigma that “illegality” implies.

Insecure working and living conditions make it hard for migrants to recover financial costs associated with migration (debts, placement fees, travel), secure support of the family back home and save enough money to invest in the future. In the absence of secure employment alternatives, strategic employment planning and tactical migration management in countries of origin, migrants prioritize improving their immediate conditions.

CRITIQUE OF CURRENT POLICIES

Kyrgyzstan so far has no clear policy to encourage circularity and creating positive incentives for migrants to maintain ties with their countries of origin.

The current securing of borders fails to prevent unwanted migration while resulting in a number of negatives consequences such as forcing migrants to invest in high amounts of overcoming barriers to migration and discouraging return and circular migration.

For migrants in lower-skilled jobs policy prescriptions mainly focus on time-limitations of stay and narrow or in many cases non-existent-pathways to permanent status. In reality

workers do not leave the country and often continue to work without authorization. They lose their legal status and are subject to arrest and deportation.

Generally many past development strategies by policy makers as well as (international) donors have been based on a spatial dichotomy between the national and international the same as the urban and the rural. That paradigm has contributed to the fact taking remittances as granted backbone for the rural economy without questioning the mobility patterns behind. A large share of the population resembling the future of the country is absent in processes of trainings, capacity building and infrastructure rebuilding.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Effective circular migration arrangements call for policies that strengthen ties to places of both origin and destination including foreign countries as well as rural urban linkages within the home country.

Flexible programmes for investments back home

Rather than placing the burden for co-development on single migrants, investment in community and migrant networks is seen as the better option, as not all migrants are ideal candidates to become development agents. Therefore flexible programmes for accessing the positive contributions that can be made by diasporas and potential returnees should emerge.

Facilitating circular migration

Facilitating circular migration requires the removal of disincentives to circulation, primarily by providing flexible residency and citizenship rights, portable benefits, and access to information. Those open borders are coupled with internal control systems mainly left to the labour market, while demands to the welfare state are strictly tied to contributions such as social security payments, pension accounts, taxes. Once registered people could not arbitrary be excluded from the territory reducing irregular migration and human trafficking. It allows migrants to limit expenses associated with migration and save the money and the skills found critical in more successful return. (E.g. IOM initiative Framework for a Central Asian free movement of labour provides positive directions)

Building skills and entrepreneurship

For migrants going abroad: Policy makers and private sector should facilitate skills and vocational training in making temporary workers more competitive. Those skills also facilitate them to make informed decisions concerning their rights, obligations and options. (E.g. Eurasia Foundation Central Asia is planning such a project, personal information)

For non-migrants and migrants who wish to return: Helping rural development effective and sustainable vocational education systems play a major role. People have to get knowledge, skills and attitudes to manage private farms, as well as other businesses, helping to raise the incomes in rural areas. Ongoing initiatives (e.g. Agricultural and Rural Vocational Education Project by Helvetas, Tacis Income Generating and Social Inclusion Projects) should specifically address migrants and potential returnees.

Strengthening urban – rural interlinkages

Policies should support urban-rural integration and provide public investment to encourage flow of goods and resources across sectors and locations. A more integrated economy offers more choices and allows individuals and households to pursue their own best paths out of poverty. Circular, less-permanent and less risky internal rural to urban migration provides rise to a more diversified non-farm economy and can thus result in positive transformation rather than a desperate coping strategy.

Development of small towns and investment in rural infrastructure and services

Small and medium-sized towns are important intermediary points along rural to urban continuums, linking both urban and rural areas. Combined with vital rural infrastructure they provide social and economic services that not only make a return of migrants more likely but also enable non-migrants access to health care, childcare and education.

Migration mainstreaming

Mainstreaming migration means systematically taking migration-specific factors into consideration in the planning, implementation and evaluation of programmes, projects

and measures and encouraging collaborations among institutions that are formally in charge of migration issue and others who are not.

Monitoring and evaluation

The permanent settlement paradigm not only still defines policy but also data collection systems. Thus data systems have to capture contemporary movement of people (internally and internationally) providing the basis for safe policy making and monitoring and evaluation.

CHALLENGES AND TRADE OFFS

None of the recommendations is targeted at significantly reducing migration or a complete lifting of migration controls. Rather the proposal suggests new policy mixes of policy instruments and control tools, shifting from physical exclusion and border securing towards facilitating circular migration within and outside of the country. Even more the recommendations take a life-time perspective on migration and acknowledge the multi-local settings of many households and the different generations involved in Kyrgyzstan. Taking into consideration the complexity of migration trade-offs between policy recommendations and realities are unavoidable. For example, accepting migration as a reality and encouraging circular migration negative impacts on integration and family life do not dissolve but need to be facilitated in the best possible way. Moreover temporary migration programmes may fall short when incentive structures change, family ties are newly established or a second and third generation of migrants occurs. However, even if innovative policies might not be able to fully solve some of the major dilemmas of current migration regimes it reduces social and economic costs of migration for individuals and administrative control mechanisms and paradoxical consequences of current regulations alike.

What is also needed and a challenge to achieve is a broad consensus on goals and instruments of migration policy, which implies agreements on regional and global scale.

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