The Costs of (Ir)regular Migration

Key lessons

- While a lot of emphasis has been placed on the ills of irregular migration, particularly from the perspective of policymakers in the countries of destination, irregular migration is also costly to residents in the country of origin. In our research context, many residents were suffering from psychological trauma because of the disappearance of their sons in either the desert or on the high seas.

- Regular migration also often has hidden costs. Wives in particular spoke about the social and emotional costs of living with an absentee husband which access to information and communication technologies could not erase.

- While both regular and irregular migration frequently have economic benefits, this can come at great social cost to individuals.

- Policymakers in migrants' countries of origin should therefore create the context that makes it less likely for people to choose to migrate out of economic desperation.

Overview

This Policy Brief provides insights into the costs and benefits of (ir)regular male migration from the perspective of both parents and wives. In recognition of the pervasiveness of information and communication technologies (ICTs), our study, on which this Policy Brief is based, sought to explore the extent to which these technologies bridged the physical distance between migrants and their families, thereby mitigating the social costs of migration. The study finds that in spite of the potential benefits of migration, the social costs of migration are quite high and cannot easily be resolved with the use of ICTs. We thus recommend that all stakeholders make efforts to minimise the potential for the average Ghanaian to seek greener pastures elsewhere by providing both the needed training and opportunities for utilising their training in appropriately rewarding jobs.

Our research question

According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, as at 2017, the share of international migrants in the world's total population was 3.4 per cent. This percentage is not significantly different from what it was a century ago. What has changed markedly over this period, however, is technology. As compared to the past, migrants of today have access to ICTs that enable them to stay in constant communication with each other, friends, and family at home. This is especially so if they are in a financially secure position to send money home regularly and thus can keep in touch with family members back home without feeling the shame of not having achieved much. This research

project primarily explored the changing ways in which men, women, the young, and the old are affected by migration even as ICTs allow families spread across continents to maintain fairly regular communication.

Methods

The study was undertaken in Nkoranzaa, Brong Ahafo Region, Ghana – a town well known for its male migrant population. Multiple qualitative research methods were employed including ethnography, a 'river of life'[1] approach, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews with a range of actors including opinion leaders, male and female returnees, partners left behind, community members, and families with migrants as well as families without migrants. Data collection was undertaken in three phases over a period of nine months. In all, a total of four opinion leaders, 11 partners left behind, ten returnees and 16 same-sexed pairs of parents and children in migrant and non-migrant families were interviewed. In addition, we held five focus group discussions and 20 'river of life' sessions with both young people and adults in the community. The data collected were translated, transcribed, and analysed using the qualitative software package NVivo.

What we found

The allure of migration

In the early 1980s, four young men left Nkoranzaa and headed for Libya. A couple of years later, they returned bearing goods of all kinds including agricultural equipment, cars, and money to build houses and set up their families. Their success abroad set off a process of chain migration from Nkoranzaa to Libya. It is estimated that 80 per cent of Ghanaians living in Libya come from this particular community and its environs (Bob-Milliar and Bob-Milliar 2013: 66). An adult female participant in a focus group discussion affirmed the central role this community plays in migration to Libya: 'When we were young,

this town was referred to as Libya airport. Even those from Accra who wanted to migrate to Libya came here.' Another participant opined: 'It's still the same today. There are no households where there are no migrants from Libya.' Although the latter statement is an exaggeration given that we interviewed individuals in households without migrants, there is no doubt that migration, and to Libya in particular, is a fairly ubiquitous phenomenon in this community. Young men in Nkoranzaa described migration as a sort of rite of passage, one required of every young man in the town. As one young man told us in a focus group discussion, 'Six out of ten of my friends always say, I want to travel abroad, I want to travel abroad'. The desire to travel abroad has not abated even with media reports and first person accounts of the horrors of living in present-day Libya. Citizens of this community continue to migrate to Libya in their numbers. In fact, we were told that every Tuesday morning, a bus headed for Libya departs from this community.

A major reason why people head for Libya is economic, as a young man explained to us:

All families here support their children to migrate to other places. This is because apart from farming, there is nothing to do here. People are not so educated too that is why they migrate to Libya in search of greener pastures. No family will go against a member's decision to migrate.

Parents' perspectives on migration

Although parents generally approved of migration because of its potential to change the economic fortunes of both the migrant and the family left behind, a fair number of the parents we spoke to were also apprehensive about the potential risks of – in particular – irregular migration. One such parent was 69-year-old Baba Ayamga, a father of six children, two of whom had gone to Libya in the last ten years. Baba's oldest child took off for Libya when he was aged 19 against the wishes of his parents. He had sold the roofing sheets his father

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[1] The 'river of life' approach is a qualitative data collection tool that allows participants to reflect on their personal experiences, highlighting the factors that have (de)motivated them in their personal lives. In the case of this project, we explored the ways in which the migration of family members had impacted on the lives of interviewees.

had bought to roof his house and used the proceeds to fund his trip, and has not been heard from since. The failed attempt at migration had cost Baba and his family financially, but also – more importantly – emotionally. They all lived with the uncertainty and emotional distress of his disappearance.

The Ayamgas represent one of many families who had lost family members either crossing the desert or on the high seas in their quest to reach the proverbial paradise of Libya. As a result, many of these parents disapproved of migration in spite of the potential benefits it could bring to a family. One mother who had not heard from her son for a decade said:

I will not allow any of my children to go anywhere. We will all stay here. My son is nowhere to be found, how can I let another child go? You don't let the flock out to graze when the ones you sent out earlier have not yet returned.

Wives' perspectives on migration

Wives generally disapproved of long-term migration. A key reason for their disapproval was the fact that migration disrupted family life and made it impossible for emotional bonds to develop between father and children as well as between parents. Ama, one such wife, said: 'I wish their father were here to help raise the children. As a lone parent taking care of the children, it is difficult.' Abena opined,

I wish my husband and I lived in the same place. I wish I could meet him anytime I close from work. I wish we could talk face to face and I could see him play with his children. Unfortunately, that's not what it is and so I view our marriage as quite poor.

The quality of migrant marriages being perceived as poor was a fairly common theme in our discussions with wives left behind. For the majority of these wives, the social cost of migration trumped the economic benefits. As Yaa put it,

In my opinion, it is better to have your partner with you. Even if he only gives you one cedi a day to cover the costs of feeding the family, it is better than one whose husband sends her one

hundred cedis from abroad every month. At least you can see him every day.

While a few wives were of the view that ICTs mediated the physical distances between a couple, the majority thought otherwise. Oparebea was a typical example of the wives who considered that ICTs minimised the potential misery they would feel with their husbands being so far away: 'There are video calls. When I see him all the time, it is satisfying. It's okay. It will suffice. It is better than nothing.' The majority, however, did not share this view and said that ICTs – whether it be voice or video calls – could not replace the physical presence of a partner. As Akyaa put it, 'I don't care about the fact that he calls me. All I want is for him to be physically here.'

Conclusion

Although male migration to Libya from the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana is a fairly pervasive phenomenon, opinions are divided as to its appropriateness. Parents value the economic security that migration can bring, although increasingly, they tend to caution against the journey to Libya because of both the perilous nature of the journey and the instability in the country post-Gaddafi. Wives, on the other hand, are far less likely to view migration as beneficial. They value the affective ties between parents and children, as well as among couples, and disapprove of migration because of the ways in which it undermines the sustenance of such ties.

Recommendations

Both government and non-governmental agencies should invest in the provision of quality education across the country to ensure that all young people who graduate from secondary school have the requisite skills to pursue higher education and ultimately careers in the formal sector of the economy if they so desire.

The state should provide an enabling environment and support for private sector companies that operate in the less urbanised areas of the country so that individuals can earn a decent living no matter where in the country they reside.

Further reading

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