

Seasonal Internal Migration: A Coping Strategy for Extreme Poor Households

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Temporary migration, a relatively under-explored topic in the migration literature of Bangladesh, is an essential livelihood strategy for many extreme poor households in a village of northwestern Bangladesh. With irregular and unstable employment opportunities for the unskilled population in this region, the strive for daily food security and crisis or debt management leads to short term migration to urban as well as to other rural areas. This paper focuses on individual temporary migration of this nature in a village of northwestern Bangladesh. Using primary data collected for BRAC's Ultra Poor Program in 2005, followed by qualitative work on migrant households, the paper identifies the main determinants, conditions and consequences of seasonal migration.

There are some general determinants and conditions that guide the decision to migrate. Migrants come from households that have relatively high dependency rates, irregular income sources and at least one able adult member to look after the family during migration. Crisis is also a determinant of temporary migration. However, migration is possible only when the household has assured physical and food security when the migrant is away. Although migration provides opportunities for higher income, most of the earnings are spent on household consumption. The qualitative study suggests that extending the duration of the stay at destination brings in higher income. Social networks play a central role in providing security for the household as well as access to employers in the place of destination.

The households of migrants face a number of challenges. The absence of an able member of the household affects the household enterprise operations. Women in households with no other male member have to change their work patterns and cope with physical insecurity and social scrutiny when the men are away.

The paper suggests that low cost banking services would ensure safe delivery of remittances and allow migrants to extend the duration of migration and manage their households more efficiently. Several issues are highlighted for further research and policy interventions. Migration literature mostly deals with the social and economic problems created at the place of destination, ignoring the social and financial conditions at the place of origin.

There is an immediate need for formal institutions that would facilitate and provide insurance for these migrants. Health and social services targeted towards migrants in the place of destination as well as to their households at the place of origin would reduce the cost of migration.

Options such as capacity development based on demand for labor in the places of destination as well as in-sourcing certain activities during the seasonal famine period (both for men and women) can benefit these households significantly. Facilitation and business consultation, usually offered for international migrants, could be tailored and delivered to the internal temporary migrants as well to improve gains for both the migrants and the employers.