

Event Report

Why Migration Is Key To India's Development

EIAS Briefing Seminar

26 June 2018

According to the Ministry of Home Affairs of India, about 314 million people within India have been reported as migrants, with 85% of the migrant population being classified as intra-state migrants. However, the current available data is incomprehensive and doesn't reflect the dynamic and fluid nature of migration within India. There is a large gap between the insights from official data sources and those from field studies.

Rural-to-urban migration has been an on-going trend in India. According to the 2011 Census, the urban population in India stood at 377 million, a figure likely to increase to 600 million by 2030. There is also an increasing share of female involvement in the informal sector, involving intermittent employment in both rural and urban areas. Migration has provided a source of labour for economic growth and productivity. To the European Union, Indian migrants would be a supply of labour to address the labour shortage in European industries. Meanwhile, migrants usually face barriers and harsh milieu. Given the scale and complexity of Indian migration, there is an urgent need for India to generate more comprehensive data, research and policies related to migration, and to continue dialogue with the EU.

Opening Remarks by

Mr Frédéric Carlier, Senior Associate, European Institute for Asian Studies

Mr Frédéric Carlier opened the conference by emphasizing that the importance of immigration is widely acknowledged amongst European countries. Yet, resulting from populist fear-mongering, the migration crisis has been a highly divisive issue in Europe, with migration increasingly being associated with negative issues. Meanwhile, in India, due to the massive scale of interstate migration, there is a need to better quantify and understand the nature and the impact of migration in order to shape the public debate. Migrants are moving to Indian cities from rural areas, and within and across states. Often, migrants work as unskilled labourers and experience little upward labour and social mobility. Mr Carlier concluded by stressing that the cooperation of the European Union and India on migration is critical and should be continued.

Panel discussion

Mr Varun Aggarwal, Founder & Lead, India Migration Now

Mr Varun Aggarwal opened his remarks by stating that the Constitution of India guarantees freedom of movement for all citizens. Hence, migration has been a key part of India's national development. Mr Aggarwal then introduced migration as a multi-dimensional and context sensitive concept that is not being fully captured by the government's current segmented approach. Whilst rural distress is often cited as the reason for internal migration to cities in India, this is not entirely accurate. An inclusive approach is needed to understand the relationship between migration and development in India.

Moving on to the state of migration in India, Mr Aggarwal outlined the shortcomings of the two nationwide sources of migration data in India. They are as follows: the lack of a single definition to identify migrants; the discrepancy between the estimates of migrants in the field studies/regional level studies and the nationwide sources of migration data, namely the Census and NSSO; the lack of coverage on migration by illegal means; the misrepresentation of the relationship between poverty and migration. Nonetheless, the stock of migrants in India has been on a rise over the last three censuses, especially in inter-state migration and urban migration. The 5.2 million immigrant population in India makes it the 12th largest immigrant population in the world.

In terms of the urban dimension of development in India, migration started to decelerate at a time when the urban population was well below 25 percent of the total population, and has continued to decelerate over at least three censuses. Nonetheless, driven by other factors, the urban population in India is likely to reach 600 million by 2030. Mr Aggarwal highlighted that economic growth is positively and strongly linked to urbanisation. Therefore, a shift in the labour force from rural to urban activities has been a dominant source of growth across the world. However, this movement has not been supported in India, resulting in numerous rural migrants experiencing hardship upon arrival in urban areas. Mr Aggarwal urged for a better understanding of both the profile and barriers of migration to Indian cities empirically and anthropologically.

In terms of the gender-related dimension, according to the national databases, there has been a growing trend in women's migration that has largely been ascribed to marriage-

related or associational migration. Meanwhile, the workforce participation of women who moved due to marriage is largely underplayed by the national databases. Micro-level studies reveal a huge and growing trend of temporary and circular migration among women employed in various sectors of the economy, including the informal sectors. Mr Aggarwal sent a message to Indian policymaker by saying “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”

Mr Aggarwal argued that the lack of effective policy to address the realities of migration in India has resulted in their being an urgent need to generate better data, research, and policies for migration within the country. India Migration Now (IMN) is a project that aims to address the issues highlighted throughout Mr Aggarwal’s presentation. IMN is developing a series of projects, such as the IMN Data Collaborative where participants from different sectors will provide data on migration from across India; the India Migration Policy Index that will compare all the states of India based on their integration policies by a large basket of indicators; and the IMN Migration Remedies Platform where participants from different sectors could coordinate and create effective solutions needed to make migration a beneficial choice for migrants, their households and their hosts. In conclusion, Mr Aggarwal hoped that the research conducted by IMN would contribute to help lower the costs of migration in India.

Dr Priya Deshingkar, Research Director and Senior Research Fellow, Sussex Centre for Migration Research

Dr Deshingkar opened her remarks by arguing that the government’s apathy and neglect of the poor is the reason behind the lack of policy implementation in support of migrants. Dr Deshingkar urged that the government’s attitude to the underprivileged has to be changed in order to protect the interest of the most vulnerable.

In spite of the hardships, obstacles and length of the migration process, in the long run, migration provides prospects for upward mobility and a change of lifestyle. For instance, some women may migrate to get away from the social restrictions and hierarchy’s in rural areas or to avoid oppression associated with religious restrictions. A recent study of migrants from Bangladesh to the Gulf shows that even though their working condition is poor, migrants saw it as “a beginning to something better”. The non-monetary aspects of migration remain largely unseen by the policymakers both in India and other countries. This is accountable to the “disaster stories” that are commonly and mistakenly associated with the migrants.

Dr Deshingkar claimed that the risks and obstacles that migrants face evolve from the lack of pro-migrant policies and the strong anti-migrant stance of governments. Elitism and hierarchy within the political system are responsible for fuelling the anti-migrant atmosphere and for curtailing the economic prospects of development.

From her own experience, internal migration is very diverse, and national statistics don’t reflect the reality accurately. However, no effort has been made to improve data systematically. There is a need to address this issue because internal migration is vital to poverty reduction and economic development. A study has estimated that the sum total of internal remittances in India is around \$10 billion, mostly flowing into poor communities. Dr Deshingkar challenged the notion that remittance always creates dependency, citing studies that have shown how remittances are often invested in things such as children’s education, leading to upward mobility. Dr Deshingkar also responded

to the critique of conspicuous consumption resulting from remittance, explaining that the conspicuous consumption is often linked to complex social structures that outsiders don't fully understand.

Moving on to the issue of gender, Dr Deshingkar stated that there has recently been a tremendous increase in autonomous female migration as opposed to marriage-related or associational migration. This is significant because the independent source of income generated by autonomous female migrants can help break constraints imposed by social norms. Meanwhile, the policy response to such phenomenon has been weak. For instance, though domestic work is considered to be the most important occupation amongst the female population, governments in countries such as Nepal and Ethiopia have imposed restrictions on migration for domestic work. Regardless of national restrictions, women continue to migrate unofficially and illegally to the Middle East. Hence, the government ban that aims to protect women often in fact increase the risks and costs of these already vulnerable migrants.

Dr Deshingkar concluded by arguing that realistic assessment are likely to take place because many countries, including those in the European Union, need migrants despite the widespread hostility towards migrants manifested in government policy and public opinion. Internal migrants are needed by the industrialists in India. There has to be a more mature and balanced approach to migration policy which is more in sync with the needs of individual states. For India in particular, there is a need for greater political commitment to understanding the lives and trajectories of migrants in order to provide them with better support.

Report Prepared by Yat To Yeung

European Institute for Asian Studies – EIAS a.s.b.l.
26 Rue de la Loi, 10th Floor, 1040 Brussels/Belgium
Tel.: +32 2 230 81 22 E-mail: eias@eias.org Website: www.eias.org

 EiasBrussels

 European Institute for Asian Studies

 @EIASBrussels