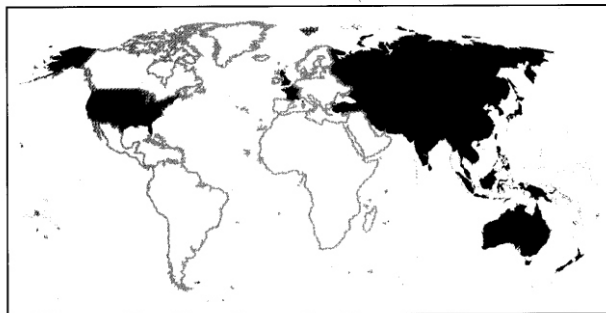


Looking into Pandora's Box: The Social Implications of International Migration in Asia



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Preface

International migration has become a structural element of societies and economies in Asia and the Pacific. In 2005, the region was home to over 30 per cent of the world's estimated 191 million international migrants. Remittances sent in 2007 to countries in the ESCAP region exceeded \$121 billion, improving the quality of life of millions of poor households and sustaining national economies, financing balance of payments and increasing foreign exchange receipts. However, although the benefits of international migration are apparent, its costs remain an area of great concern. Furthermore, as much of the migration debate centres around economic dimensions, the social dimensions of the phenomena have received marginal attention.

Therefore, the focus of the present article is to explore the social implications of international migration and to provide an overview of the debate surrounding this issue. The paper focuses particularly on trends and issues that have raised concerns, namely: (a) the increasing scale of female migration and its consequences in terms of the protection of women migrants and the impacts on the families left behind; (b) the migration of highly skilled and professional migrants, with a focus on the migration of health workers; (c) links between migration and health; and (d) the protection of migrants' rights.

These trends represent significant challenges and require the attention of policymakers. It is hoped that the article will help bring much-needed attention to this emerging facet of the global phenomenon of international migration.

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Introduction

Close to 40 years of uninterrupted international migration has transformed this hitherto extraordinary experience into a fact of life in the Asian landscape. People have taken to crossing borders for various purposes, including to work, to study, to marry, to flee from conflict or to experience a different environment. Thus, the idea of working or living overseas is now part of many an Asian's imagined future. In some countries where international migration has been very pervasive, a culture of migration has sunk deep roots into their societies. One example is the Philippines, a principal source country of workers for the global labour market, where the idea of working abroad someday has figured into the plans and aspirations of young people, thereby setting the stage for further migration in the future (Scalabrini Migration Center and others, 2004; Asis, 2006a, 2006b). China, which was closed to the outside world until the 1978 reforms, did not take long to warm up to international migration in the post-1978 period. The interest in going abroad among the Chinese has been likened by the media to catching a "fever" (Teo, 2003). A combination of individual aspirations and an array of structural factors, which the Global Commission on International Migration (2005) has summarized into the "3 Ds", namely, demographics, development and democracy, translate into actual migrations. According to the most recent estimate, as of 2005, some 53.3 million migrants, or 28 per cent of the world's 191 million international migrant population, are in Asia, making the region second only to Europe (34 per cent) in hosting international migrants (table 1) (United Nations, 2006).

Table 1. Stock of international migrants by region, 2005

Rregion	Total population 2005	Migrant stock 2005		Number of refugees (thousands) 2004
		Number (thousands)	Percent of total population	
Africa	905 936	17 069	1.9	3 023
Asia	3 905 415	53 291	1.4	7 704
Europe	728 389	64 116	8.8	2 068
Latin America	561 346	6 631	1.2	36
North America	330 608	44 493	13.5	562
Oceania	33 056	5 034	15.2	76
World	6 464 750	190 634	3.0	13 469

Source: United Nations (2006). *International Migration 2006* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.06.XIII.6).

A large part of international migration in and from Asia involves the movement of workers. The Asian Regional Programme on Governance of Labour Migration¹ noted a three-fold increase in the number of Asians migrating for employment every year, from about 1 million in the 1980s to some 3 million in recent years. Most of this movement occurs within the region. In East and South-East Asia, the hubs are Brunei Darussalam; Hong Kong, China; Japan; Malaysia; Republic of Korea; Singapore; Taiwan Province of China and Thailand, drawing migrants from the developing countries of South and South-East Asia. In some subregions, such as South-East Asia, a great deal of cross-border migration is essentially regional migration (Wong and Anwar, 2003) because it occurs between countries (or parts of countries) that have a long history of people exchange and shared borders, for example, between Indonesia and Malaysia, or between Myanmar and Thailand. West Asia, which initially consisted of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and afterwards included Israel, Jordan and Lebanon, forms another cluster of destination countries that attracts migrants from South and South-East Asia.

These intraregional flows confirm the vital role of migration in regional integration processes, particularly in synchronizing the different resources and needs of countries in the region. Labour-rich

¹ The International Labour Organization Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific is implementing the programme in partnership with the United Nations Development Fund for Women, with support from the European Commission (Europe Aid).

but capital-poor countries provide human resources to labour-poor but capital-rich countries (table 2). Ideally, this interdependence should imply mutual benefits for both the labour-sending and labour-receiving sides, but in an unequal world the inequalities between countries of origin and countries of destination result in different balance sheets for the countries concerned and for migrants and their families.

Table 2. Demographic and economic indicators, selected origin and destination countries in Asia

Region and country or area	Mid-2007 population (thousands)	Annual growth rate ^a (percentage)	Total fertility rate (per woman)	Percentage of population aged		National poverty rate ^b	Human developm- ent index ^c
				0-14	60+		
East Asia							
China	1 328 630	0.6	1.7	21	12	4.6	0.768
Japan	128 191	0.1	1.3	14	28	..	0.949
Hong Kong, China	7 051	0.8	1.0	14 ^d	16 ^d	..	0.927
Mongolia	2 629	1.0	1.9	27	6	35.6	0.691
Republic of Korea	4 456	0.5	1.2	18	14	..	0.912
South-East Asia							
Brunei Darussalam	390	2.1	2.3	29	5	..	0.871
Cambodia	14 364	2.0	3.4 ^e	36	5	35.9	0.583
Indonesia	231 627	1.2	2.2	28	9	27.1	0.711
Lao People's Democratic Republic	5 859	1.7	3.3	38	5	38.6	0.553
Malaysia	27 124	1.8	2.6	30	7	15.5	0.805
Myanmar	48 798	0.9	2.1	26	8	..	0.581
Philippines	88 462	2.0	3.2 ^f	35	6	36.8	0.763
Thailand	62,829	0.5	1.6	22	11	13.1	0.784
Singapore	4 543	1.3	1.3 ^f	18	14	..	0.916
Viet Nam	85 590	1.4	2.1	29 ^g	9 ^g	28.9 ^g	0.709
South Asia							
Bangladesh	158 665	1.7	2.9	34	6	49.8	0.530
India	1 169 016	1.5	2.8	32	8	28.6	0.611
Nepal	28 196	2.0	3.3	38	6	42.0	0.527
Pakistan	163 902	1.8	3.6	36	6	32.6	0.539
Sri Lanka	20 105	1.1	1.9	23	11	25.0	0.755

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