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Labor Migration from Mountainous Areas in the Central Asian Region: Good or Evil?

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Nowadays labor migration plays a very important role in the mountainous areas of countries such as Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Pakistan. The quality and direction of migration as well as its economic, social, and cultural impacts on the life of communities have changed, along with the increase in the numbers of migrants. There are conflicting opinions about whether temporary labor migration promotes or hinders the development of mountainous regions. While traveling along mountain roads in Central Asian countries, we investigated whether

labor migration stimulates the development of mountain regions, interviewing local inhabitants, migrants, businessmen, authorities, and local representatives of international organizations. The data collected on our travels was used in an International Organization for Migration (IOM) research project on labor migration in Central Asian countries, Russia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan in 2004. The present article summarizes the results of our research and highlights a number of issues related to the economic and social impacts of labor migration.

Not a new phenomenon but a new dimension

The Pamirs, Tien Shan, Hindu Kush, Karakorum, and Himalayas are not only the highest mountain ranges on the Eurasian continent but also the home of many different ethnic groups, including Kyrgyzis, Tajiks, Pashtuns, and Punjabis. For centuries, seasonal migration of local inhabitants was a common element of survival strategies in mountain regions of Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The main causes of seasonal migration were labor migration to lowlands for additional income, the practice of driving cattle to seasonal pastures, and shifts in labor demand in mountain regions. Traditionally, poor conditions for agricultural pro-

duction and lack of other employment opportunities drove the inhabitants of mountain regions to seek temporary employment in lowlands, or sometimes to permanently emigrate from their homelands. But there was also drastic population growth in most mountain regions in these countries in the past 100 years, resulting in great shortages of arable land. As a result, many highlanders were forced to seek employment in urban areas in their respective countries and, as they faced unemployment, to travel abroad.

Today, however, exported labor has become a widespread phenomenon. This has been a factor of radical change in mountains; another has been the influence of the outside world, both through improved access and through advances in



FIGURE 1 Sea of migrants in Parvon province, Afghanistan: displaced persons due to military conflict. (Photo courtesy of the International Organization for Migration, Dushanbe office)

modern technology. Modern road-building techniques, electricity, widespread use of mobile phones, radio and television, the availability and use of the Internet—all have contributed to the end of centuries-long isolation of these populated mountain regions.

Further reasons for migration away from mountain areas have been military conflicts and natural disasters. These include permanent conflict in Afghanistan, the civil conflict of 1992–1997 in Tajikistan, earthquakes, and political and military instability in mountain regions of Pakistan (Figure 1). Since mountain regions in the Central Asian republics depend greatly on food supplies from the lowlands, military conflicts undermining food production in the lowlands have led to widespread famine in mountain areas. To avoid famine, many highlanders have been forced to emigrate abroad. For instance, even now in mountain regions in Afghanistan, there are food shortages from 2 to 6 months a year. Moreover, the results of our study showed that in Gorno-Badakhshan province in Tajikistan, about 32% of all children were permanently undernourished in 2005.

Thus, in addition to traditional causes of migration from mountain regions such as the lack of employment opportunities, high birth rates, and low agricultural production, additional catalysts have triggered powerful waves of emigration from mountain regions in recent decades. The scale of this phenomenon can be observed by considering labor migration statistics from Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan for 2004: 350,000–500,000 from Kyrgyzstan, 650,000 from Tajikistan, 1.5 to 1.7 million from Afghanistan, and 4 million from Pakistan.

Characteristics of migration

Levels of education

Levels of education vary by country. Laborers from highland regions of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have high levels of education. We found that 32% of labor migrants from mountainous Badakhshan province in Tajikistan at least had university degrees. Nevertheless, these laborers are rarely able to find jobs corresponding

to their professional skills. The majority of them are employed in Russia (Figure 2).

By contrast, the level of education of migrants from Pakistan and Afghanistan is usually low. Laborers from mountain regions in Afghanistan and Pakistan are predominantly occupied in dangerous, manual, low-skilled professions, ie in transportation, construction, cargo services (especially in the seaport of Karachi), brick-producing factories, chemical enterprises, and oilfields in Iran and other countries of the Persian Gulf. These laborers receive about 20%–30% of the usual salary earned by their local competitors.

Altitudinal origins

There is a direct correlation between the type of migration from highland regions and the altitude profile of locations from which migrant laborers come. Significant numbers of migrant workers come from mid-altitude regions such as the Rasht valley (Tajikistan), the Osh and Batken regions (Kyrgyzstan), the Parvon region (Afghanistan), and Northern Punjab (Pakistan). Labor migration from these regions is dominated by seasonal workers with relatively sophisticated professional skills. A significant number of “shuttle-traders” and seasonal employees in trade and commerce are also among them.

Labor migration from high-altitude areas such as Mountainous Badakhshan and Yaghnob (Tajikistan), Chatkal and

FIGURE 2 Seasonal labor migrants from mid-altitude mountain areas of Central Tajikistan board the train for Russia. (Photo courtesy of the International Organization for Migration, Dushanbe office)





FIGURE 3 Migrants from Badakhshan in Afghanistan have hardly any other option than to accept low-level jobs in Pakistan. (Photo courtesy of the International Organization for Migration, Dushanbe office)

Alay (Kyrgyzstan), Badakhshan and Nuristan (Afghanistan) has different characteristics. It is dominated by younger, single individuals with less sophisticated professional skills or no skills at all. We also found that there were more female laborers than the average among migrants from these regions. In addition, a smaller number were involved in trade and commerce, and more in low-skilled occupations requiring heavy manual work (Figure 3).

Social cohesion

The most significant differences between these groups were related to duration of stay in host countries and amount of remittances they are able to transfer to their families at home. Labor migrants from the mid-altitude highlands are primarily males who seek employment on a seasonal basis (usually from March to November). Most of these laborers are married and leave their households in the hands of male teenagers or male relatives during the time they are employed abroad. When they return back to their respective households, they are employed at home. Thus, in addition to remittances,

labor migrants from mid-altitude areas play an active role in productive activities in their respective households. In addition, labor migrants from mid-altitude areas are able to save more money due to lower expenditures on transportation to and from their home areas and a shorter winter season. The most important advantage of labor migration from mid-altitude areas is the ability of laborers to preserve close ties with their families and, therefore, to retain strong incentives to transfer as much of their earnings as possible to their families in mountain regions.

By contrast, labor migration from high-altitude areas is characterized by a significantly longer duration of time spent in host countries, weaker links with laborers' own households, and, as a consequence, less remittances sent to families in mountain regions. Our data showed that in the past 5 years, more than 22% of the male population of Gorno-Badakhshan province left their families and only 2% returned for a temporary stay.

Effects of remittances

As a rule, labor migrants from Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan strive to send as much of their earnings home as possible, and remittances serve as a basic source of cash income for many families in mountain regions. Income from remittances stimulates demand for consumer goods and improves living conditions. For example, remittances from migrant laborers are a basic source of income for 50–60% of all households in Gorno-Badakhshan province in Tajikistan.

Little modernization of agriculture

Generally, the availability of additional income from laborers abroad does not reduce the efforts made by other household members to seek employment (Figure 4). On the contrary, they have been observed to work harder and sometimes even hire additional workers to compensate for absent household members. Nevertheless, surveys of households in mountain areas in Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan show that labor migration leads to deterioration in the quality of the remaining labor force and

eventually to “depopulation” of villages in mountain areas.

The production of agricultural products in mountain regions is labor-intensive. Therefore, to compensate for absent workers, the remaining household members need to introduce more capital-intensive methods of agricultural production. However, our survey indicated that migrant families spend incomes from remittances predominantly on food, insurance, family events, and durable goods. Only 4.5% of migrants from Tajikistan spent income from remittances on agricultural machinery, tools, and highbred cattle. Thus, the absence of predominantly male laborers does not result in introduction of modern technologies, but in more intensive employment of women and children in the agricultural sector, which in turn impedes modernization of this sector and undermines opportunities for future development in highland regions.

Regional differences in impact on business development

Labor migrants from mountain regions do not use their remittances to start up their own enterprises. About 80% of laborers from Gorno-Badakhshan province expressed their conviction that it is pointless to invest in starting enterprises at home because they are almost certain to go bankrupt in competition with more powerful firms from the lowlands and urban centers such as Osh (Kyrgyzstan) and Dushanbe (Tajikistan). The laborers also indicated that they have insufficient startup capital, and lack long-term loans as well as the expertise and experience to open up their own businesses.

We were able to establish an indirect connection between labor remittances and business development in mountain regions in Afghanistan. The source of business expansion in these regions is the informal credit-money transfer system known as *havala*—the Persian word for remittances. In the absence of banks, the use of *havala* to transfer migrants’ earnings from abroad appears to support employment, since increased income for local families stimulates consumer demand, which in turn stimulates the development of local production, trade,

transportation, and services. In our opinion, the emergence of an increased number of marketplaces in Badakhshan over the past 20 years is related to the persistent flow of earnings from labor migrants abroad, which are channeled through the *havala* system. In this respect, remittances in Afghanistan serve as the sole legal source of business expansion. Aside from this, the income generated from employment abroad in Pakistan and Afghanistan is primarily used to satisfy basic consumption needs and to improve household living conditions, with little effect on business development and private investment.

Short-term strategy

We found that income from laborers abroad was distributed among all family members, even including members of extended families. For example, in Tajikistan three-quarters of the households with labor migrants gave help in cash or in kind to several other kindred households. As a consequence, income from labor migrants does not serve as a source of rapid improvement in wellbeing nor does it contribute to income inequality in mountain areas. In this regard, labor migration from mountain areas in Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan can be viewed primarily as a short-term survival strategy.

Making migration a more positive development factor

The impact of labor migration on living conditions in mountain societies is mani-

FIGURE 4 While her husband is working as a migrant in Russia, a woman runs a small shop in the Bazar in Khorog, Gorno-Badakhshan, Tajikistan. She is trying to make a living for their children. (Photo courtesy of Professor Sohrab Behdad, Denison University, Ohio, USA)



FIGURE 5 The International Organization for Migration's objective is to inform migrants about laws in the country of destination and the risks of migration. The IOM Resource Center in Dushanbe distributes information materials, pamphlets and instructions among migrants—here to a migrant from Pamir Aria. (Photo courtesy of the International Organization for Migration, Dushanbe office)



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fold and often contradictory. On the one hand, remittances can expand trade and employment opportunities, which is visible in the development of marketplaces and trade links in Badakhshan province in Afghanistan. On the other hand, income from labor migrants is not a source of private investment, business expansion, and technological modernization in the agricultural sector. Very few migrants are willing to invest their earnings in household improvement (according to our results, only 4.5% of Tajik migrants and 13% of Pakistani migrants invest earnings from employment abroad in household improvement). Massive migration of the male labor force has resulted in the widespread employment of women and children in agriculture. As a result, agricultural output per worker has declined considerably in mountain regions.

We can conclude that the positive effects of labor migration prevail over the negative effects only in mid-altitude mountain regions, where milder natural conditions permit more effective participation of women, children, and older people in agricultural production. In addition, because labor migrants perform heavy-duty agricultural and household work during their time back home, they contribute to the wellbeing of their respective families.

In high-altitude mountain regions, however, predominantly male labor outmigration has been leading to a gradual reduction in local food production and diminishing household living standards.

Remittances from laborers abroad appear not to compensate for the lack of an active labor force. Thus, we witnessed widespread depopulation of villages in high-altitude areas. For example, in the past 15 years as a result of permanent emigration from the high-altitude region of Yaghnob, the number of villages has dropped from 28 to 16, with only 2–3 families residing in each remaining village. In the 1990s virtually the entire population of high-altitude Chatkal region in Kyrgyzstan abandoned their native villages and moved to the lowlands. Generally, mountain villages that are accessible by road have a chance of survival, while the most isolated areas, which have no road access and no communication links, are likely to experience permanent outmigration, followed by depopulation.

We also found that when labor migrants do not maintain close ties with their families and do not return to their households on a seasonal basis, they are likely to stop sending their earnings home or send an insignificant share of what they earn. As a result, the remaining household members, primarily women, children, and the elderly, are forced to seek better living conditions in lowlands and to abandon their villages. To conclude, we believe that it is necessary to make efforts to preserve the diverse and unique populations of mountain regions in Eurasia by supporting ways to improve living conditions in high-altitude and isolated regions and to reduce the negative aspects of labor migration (Figure 5).