

Bellagio Conference Report

Migrant Youth and Children of Migrants in a Globalized World

April 24-26, 2008
Bellagio, Italy

I. Purpose and Scope

This seminar convened a group of experts in two fields that seldom intersect, namely child development and migration and economic development, to explore the possibility of forging a child-centric perspective of migration. The rationale for this undertaking was elaborated in a background paper authored by one of the conveners while in residence as a visiting scholar at the Rockefeller Foundation.¹

The overarching goals of the seminar were to evaluate the state of knowledge about a highly fragmented field with important policy implications for children and youth and to assess the prospects of producing two international volumes of *The Future of Children* dedicated to children and youth with migrant backgrounds. Stated as questions, the seminar sought to address: How do migrant children and children of migrants fare in their new host countries (if they move—with or without parents); are there any lessons about the necessary and sufficient conditions for positive development, or alternatively, conditions that result in adverse consequences?

To structure the seminar, we first commissioned two background papers that address the state of knowledge and available data for industrialized and developing nations, respectively. Stephan Klasen (Department of Economics, University of Gottingen, Germany) and Andrea Rossi (Kennedy Center for Human Rights, Harvard University, USA) were charged with assessing the scientific literature about children's involvement in migration flows and the consequences of migration for their social, economic and physical well being. The authors were also asked to identify leading experts on various aspects of migrant youth development; to assess the existence and suitability of existing cross-national data for studying well-being of youth with migration backgrounds; and to suggest promising research and program interventions.

II. Participants and Conference Format

Conference participants were selected to represent a diversity of disciplinary perspectives and experience, including different regions of the world and substantive expertise. Appendix A provides the list of final participants and their institutional affiliations. The disciplines represented included economics, sociology, demography, developmental psychology and public health. Participants included a broad range of professional

¹ This paper was distributed to all participants and posted on the seminar website.

experience, from the United Nations Population Division to a European foundation and the academy. Eight countries were represented across four continents.

The conference was structured to maximize discussion in a semi-structured way. (See Appendix B) The first day was dedicated to the two overview papers. Before the conference, each participant was asked to read and write specific comments on the two overview papers, which were distributed in advance via a website dedicated to the seminar. Rather than ask authors to present their own papers, they were summarized by one of the seminar organizers and the authors were expected to respond to the written comments (which also were to be used by authors for revising the drafts).

In addition, each participant was asked to write position papers that discussed their views about how we could build a new field focusing on migrant children and youth. The two review papers along with the critiques and position papers were posted on the web prior the conference which gave participants a chance to digest and reflect on the ideas of their colleagues before the face-to-face meeting. We found this format to be highly productive both in generating new ideas and in providing useful comments and additional references to the authors of the review papers. Appendix C contains the critiques and position papers provided by the participants.²

The second day was devoted to a discussion of the position papers. Kathleen Newland from the Migration Policy Institute chaired the session, and discussion was structured by discipline. This session was highly productive of ideas because the position papers were distributed in advance and participants were allowed time to summarize their key ideas. Many participants used PowerPoint slides, which were subsequently posted on the seminar website.

III. Substantive Lessons

The first two sessions focused on the review papers and stimulated a number of important discussions. The major points from these discussions are summarized below.

The papers were organized around the distinction between south-to-north migration and south-to-south migration, on the assumption that most migrants come from countries in the southern hemisphere. Some participants argued, however, that a better organizing principle would be one that distinguished between children who migrate and those who are left behind. According to this view, children left behind represent half of the impact of migration. Remittances are the key to understanding the impact of migration on children left behind. (This issue is discussed at length in the Rossi paper)

A related debate focused on the importance of the geographical dimension of migration; which was more important – south -to-north or south-to-south? The consensus of the participants was that we should focus attention on south-to-north migration (at least in the

² The two synthesis papers are currently being revised based on comments provided by the participants and the two organizers. The requested revisions of the draft papers are summarized in Appendix D.

short term) because the data available to conduct comparative work is more plentiful for this type of migration.

A good deal of attention was given to the construct of wellbeing, how to measure it, and which measures would be of greatest interest to policy makers. *Asset building* emerged as an overarching theme of the kind of indicator that policy makers care about. There was general agreement about the important of disaggregating indicators, whatever outcome is chosen.

Participants agreed on the need to differentiate among the causes of migration. Migration for economic reasons is different than migration for political reasons, just as parent absence by death is different from absence due to migration. An interesting discussion arose about how the process of adapting to migration and parent absence might differ depending on the cause of migration.

A key issue is the importance of the family as the **decision-making unit** in migration. Questions in this area are: (1) who makes the decision to move, (2) what factors are at play in the decision (reunification, adoption, marriage), (3) what is the contexts of reception in terms of implications for child outcomes (access to education, health services, safety, and employment may differ at origin and destination), (4) how important is the legal status of the child in terms of access to services such as education and health care?

Understanding the decision process underlying migration is essential for understanding the causal impact of migration on child wellbeing, both for children who move and for those left behind. Without a clear understanding of this process and how it affects the selection of different kinds of people into and out of different countries, researcher will not be able to make causal inferences about the effect of migration on children and youth. Nor will they be able to make sound policy recommendations.

There was general agreement that although internal migration may be as disruptive for children as between-country migration, border crossing makes a big different from a policy standpoint. In this vein, participants noted that Europe provides a good case study of a 'natural experiment' before and after EU formation. Comparisons of the experiences of European youth who moved before and after EU blurred boundaries would be informative with respect to the effect of policies. In addition, treating the experiences of youth from "south" countries as a control group during both periods would provide further insights.

A final issue was whether a research on the wellbeing of immigrant children and youth should be organized as a subfield of child development or migration? A child-development perspective would be sensitive to the importance of children's age-specific developmental needs and the importance of child's age at the time of migration. A migration approach would be sensitive to the context of the origin and destination countries, including the policies and practices that affect child and youth wellbeing. The consensus of the participants was that grounding migration as a subfield within child

development was likely to be more productive as long as the migration context is taken into account

IV. Lessons on Information/Data Needs

Conference participants agreed that without data on the numbers and places and consequences of migration for children and youth, policy makers are unlikely to take a strong interest in the topic. Several participants argued that better use could be made of existing data, including the IPUMS which are publically available and could be used to make cross-national comparisons. Descriptive statistics on how children and youth are doing in different countries would provide the basis for motivating more nuanced questions. Researchers expressed the need for coordinated efforts to mine specific data and to do so in ways that clearly differentiate between children and youth. Researchers also commented on the lack of nationally representative data for topics such children's behavior and health.

V. Policy Issues

From the outset, participants considered why and how a child centric focus on international migration differs from that of internal migration. Internal migration may be more pervasive, but international migrants face several circumstances that differ from within country moves and also have important implications for child well being. The most salient include:

1. Internal migration policies determine who is allowed to enter and when;
2. International migration flows usually require language and cultural adaptations;
3. International flows of complete families often require role reversals between parents and children, which pose tensions and risks for normative development;
4. Except for China, where internal migration is regulated, international flows can take place under clandestine circumstances, which heighten vulnerability of children and youth (especially if they are directly involved in unauthorized cross-border movements).
5. Countries differ in their modes of reception and migrant integration policies; moreover, these evolve as the volume of migration increases and in accordance with economic cycles.

Several issue involving policies and policy makers were discussed at the conference. Participants emphasized the importance of getting the "facts" straight. Pointing to the example of the UNICEF report on child wellbeing, they noted that country comparisons could be highly influential in drawing the attention of policy makers. They also noted that the 'country report cards' that are beginning to emerge are better suited for advocacy than for policy. Participants also discussed the need to collect better data on the range of policies and regulations that exist in different countries and that are expected to influence outcomes for migrant children and youth.

VI. Next Steps

On the last day of the conference, participants discussed what could be done to move the new field forward to the next level. Based on this discussion and the comments summarized above, the main ideas to emerge are:

1. Conduct cross-national comparisons using the IPUMS data, which have sample sizes sufficient to compare country-specific flows of young people from major destinations. Comparisons should use similar measures and methods and should be disaggregated according to population characteristics of immigrants and destination populations. Smeeding (Syracuse University) illustrated the great potential of mining these data to address basic unanswered questions, such as how many children and youth are involved in migration? What are the major sending countries to specific destinations? We anticipate establishing a network of researchers to plan these empirical tabulations and execute comparative analyses of the IPUMS data.
2. Gather data on cross-national variation in policies and practices toward immigrants. Both Jacqueline Bhabha (Harvard University Committee on Human Rights Studies) and Hania Zlotnik (UN) underscored the importance of clarifying country-specific variation in admission and settlement policies. This is a second foundation need that can be outsourced via a commissioned paper.

VII. Follow-up Activities

We would like to use the carryover funds to pursue the suggestions outlined in the previous section. We propose to organize a working group from the subset of participants to use the international public use micro-data samples that are being assembled at the University of Minnesota population center. We also propose to commission a review of policies toward immigrant children and youth in developed countries with large immigrant populations (EU, North America and Australia). These papers would be vetted at a small workshop at Princeton in the summer of 2009.

Future of Children. In our original proposal, we noted that we were interested in producing a special volume of the *Future of Children* that would focus on migrant children in international perspective. Part of the motivation for the Bellagio conference was to determine whether the existing empirical research based is sufficiently strong to support such a volume. At this point we are still unclear as to whether this research base exists. There is some research that uses data from the TIMMS and PISA surveys to make cross-national comparisons of children's school performance. A conference focusing on the IPUMS data would be most informative in terms of moving the research base forward. If, after the workshop, we decide that the research base is not strong enough to merit an entire volume, our plan is to include a couple of international chapters in a volume that focuses on the US where the data is much richer and more extensive.