Policy Brief

Mainstreaming Migration Management in Subnational Governance

Gurucharan Gollerkeri

The widespread migrant crisis across India resulting from the prolonged lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the urgency to mainstream migration management in subnational governance and transform inter-state and intra-state economic migration into an efficient, orderly, and humane process. There is a need for a migration management system in the states - of origin and destination alike - to establish:

• A scientific migration data management system to capture the stock and flows of economic migrants and for sharing information between the states of origin and destination
• An efficient migration management institutional architecture, supported by a progressive migration policy
• A seamless migrant-essential service delivery framework, including for social protection and humanitarian services in times of crisis.

The overarching objective must be to address the migration governance challenge, enhance the quality of interventions to maximise the development impact of migration for the migrants, their families and the community and take a strategic medium to long term perspective to best serve India's development needs.

The Context

Internal migration has acquired a sense of urgency in India in recent years. Migration flows are growing in volumes; the composition of the emigrants is composite and complex and migration is becoming increasingly political, influencing important changes in the manner in which migrants are perceived and the circumstances under which they live and work. The migration pathways are changing within the country and the effects of migration are impacting states differently. For some states, migration has contributed to and continues to contribute to important goals - economic development, social dynamism and cultural diversity. For others, the sense of urgency comes from questions on how to adjust to new migratory situations and develop effective policy responses to emerging challenges. Since the states are the theatres of development action in India, migration management cannot be left to uninformed discourse or ad-hoc and fragmented interventions.

In recent years, extreme climate events have intensified these migration cycles. Much of this mobility is semi-permanent, characterised by wage earners, from places of origin that are endemically backward and facing environmental degradation moving to large cities in search of work, leaving behind women and children. The vast majority of the migrants are poor, uneducated and unskilled and are compelled to live and work in peri-urban areas of large urban agglomerations already stressed by the weight of numbers and facing resource constraints. This poses a complex governance challenge to sustainability, while placing at risk the livelihood resilience and quality of life of millions of people at the places of origin and destination alike.

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India is on the threshold of a transformation that will see two processes unfolding in tandem over the next decade - demographic transition and economic transition - that can be expected to result in a significant growth in both inter-state and intra-state migration. By 2025, India will become the world's youngest nation with the largest workforce projected at over 830 million in the working age group (18-59) as compared to 660 million today. This experience of the first stage of the migration transition is causing a youth bulge in many states in India, notably, the states in North and East India - Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, W. Bengal and Orissa. Several factors will converge at that time influencing who will migrate, why and where. Chief among them will be the intra-state and inter-state inequality and income disparities; extreme climate events, agrarian distress and rural displacement and rising education standards and the rapid economic growth in other parts of the country. More people amongst the aspiring population will be willing to take the risks and meet the costs of migration to seek jobs in the more developed states including Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Telangana, and Kerala.

The Question

How might sub-national governments - the states and the local bodies - develop a scientific and legally mandated migration management system and develop a coordinated institutional response for the delivery of migrant-essential services?

The Problem

The patterns of rural-urban migration surrounding the large urban agglomerations in India - undertaken by millions of people as livelihood adaptation strategies - are resulting in unsustainable and sub-optimal outcomes. The unintended but long-term consequence of such large-scale mobility is to render the individual, household and the community more vulnerable and less sustainable, at the place of origin and destination alike. If not interrogated as a challenge that necessitates a 'step-change', it will jeopardise achievement of the SDG 1 – 'End poverty in all its forms everywhere', SDG 10 – 'Reduce inequality within and among countries'; and SDG 11– 'Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable'.

Mainstreaming migration management is no more an option; it is an imperative at the sub-national level. The knowledge divide between the workers moving out of agriculture and the skill sets necessary in the urban non-farm sectors and the spatial divide between the location of the centres of surplus labour and the cities where jobs are available, constitute two important factors that further compound migration management. In mainstreaming migration management in their development strategies, the states need to integrate some broad principles: protection of migrants' rights, including portability of social protection, on the principle of equal treatment; access to safety and security, healthcare, education, affordable housing and other civic amenities and opportunities for

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economic advancement, including skill development for the migrant work force. This will be central to responding, in a sustainable manner, to the growing migrant worker crisis across India.

However, the fact that migrants and their families are often subjected to exploitation, discrimination and prejudice is sometimes lost sight of. No state in India has a clearly articulated migration policy, at least not embedded in the development strategy. The first principle to enhance India's capacity for migration governance is to engineer a paradigm shift in the roles and responsibilities of the principal actors engaged in the process. The states have the opportunity to rethink the role of the state and the market; implement a migration praxis framework that marshals the capacities of local governments, the private sector and civil society and establish best practice standards that can serve as the model for the future of migration management in India.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the economic disruption that it has brought in its wake has highlighted the vulnerability of migrants and their families as well as pointed to the importance of the preparedness of the states of origin and destination alike to cope with large scale return of migrants, as a result of crisis and to extend social protection and humanitarian assistance where they remain stranded. Though the prolonged lockdown and the economic shock of the COVID-19 pandemic have reduced the migration flows, this can only be a temporary hiatus and with appropriate interventions should return to pre-pandemic levels, in the immediate future.

Elements of a Migration Management System

To understand the principal drivers for emigration from India, it is necessary to go beyond the 'push-pull' factors. As economic growth in some of the poorer states in the North gains pace, it will provide people with the resources and the ability for mobility In these states, the high fertility rates will result in large cohorts of a young working age population more likely to pursue their dreams outside their home states. With significantly higher outflows of migrants from new and non-traditional states, it is necessary to infuse a strategic medium to long term perspective. The assumption that this is a central subject and ought to be handled only by the government of India is no longer valid. It will be necessary for the state governments to engage as well as build partnerships with other major stake holders in the process. This will require a more coordinated approach to deal with the movement not just of goods and capital but people as well.

The migration management system in the states must be built on the principle of restructuring existing institutions and resources, and developed on a 'government-wide' basis. The laws and regulations extant; the institutions currently dealing with labour and employment, and the field formations, including urban and rural local bodies must be used to provide the legal bases to mandate migration management in a prescribed manner. In most states there are laws necessary to prescribe new standards, processes, and data collection instruments; as also to mandate migration management related functions across departments.

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A good starting point is to review the migration management process extant, even if rudimentary and build on it. The state governments must:

- Develop and implement a progressive migration policy
- Redesign and restructure the administrative apparatus for effective migration governance
- Enhance migration governance capacities through training and capacity building.

The migration management framework should be anchored by the Department of Labour, Employment and Skill Development and the focus for the policy and programme design should be on six key departments at the state level: Planning, Statistics and Programme Implementation; Rural Development; Urban Development; Agriculture; Industry and Commerce; and the Revenue Department. These steps will help mainstream migration management, and thus transform the migration process into a virtuous cycle that helps the migrants and their families, and maximise the benefits of migration and development in the state of origin and destination.

Central to the migrant management framework will be to establish a state migration centre as an independent, autonomous, policy-making body that gives strategic direction to both out-migration and in-migration and more specifically set the State on a sustainable migration management pathway that can open myriad opportunities for the young, skilled and trained women and men who choose to migrate. It will also play the role of the apex institution to make the migration process simple, efficient, orderly and humane; guiding and directing every stage of the migration life-cycle.

The Migration Life-cycle

The work on migration management at the subnational level must integrate six broad principles:

1. Develop a progressive migration policy and prepare a migration profile
2. Expound a scientific and legally mandated migration data management system that captures the stock and the flows of migrants by state of origin, period of stay, sector and occupation and demographic profile. The data must enable seamless delivery of migrant-essential services: food and affordable housing; health care; education and skill development; and social security protection
3. Introduce an integrated (vertically and horizontally) institutional architecture for migration governance comprising a state level migrant resource centre and migrant information centres in the districts, to

provide information, counselling, and support services. This must include an online information system linking all data to a central registry

4. Facilitate a unified system of skill training and pre-departure orientation for imparting skills through formal institutions on select job skills in chosen sectors. The existing pool of public and private skill training providers will need to be used with suitable restructuring. This will have to be coordinated by the state skill development agencies

5. Enhance regulatory oversight and monitoring of the migration process, protection and welfare of workers and other legal compliance requirements. This can be done by the offices of the Labour commissioners in the states

6. Undertake empirical, analytical and policy research to generate evidence and data that will guide policy practice (Praxis) and interventions periodically to maximise the benefits from Migration and Development.

The Conclusion

A sense of urgency must inform migration governance reforms in the states of origin and destination alike. The ongoing migrant worker crisis has demonstrated that in the absence of coherence in policy goals and coordinated action, only adhoc and fragmented responses, are possible. The need for policy harmonisation to foster cooperation amongst the states of origin and destination on the one hand and greater policy coherence amongst various departments of the state governments, is central to manage migration better. It also highlights the fact that the state, the market and the community need to work in tandem for seamless delivery of public services to mobile populations in the future.

The Author

Gurucharan Gollerkeri, Director, Public Affairs Centre, *retired from the IAS as Secretary to the Government of India. He has represented India at several bilateral and multilateral fora on migration. He established the India Centre for Migration, a migration think tank under the Ministry of External Affairs, and served as its first CEO during 2010-2013. He is the author of 'Migration Matters: Mobility in a Globalising World', OUP, 2016.*