Policy Brief

Solving the Migration Data Puzzle

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The Context

The states are the theatres of development action in India. The key sectors that drive human development: agriculture, industry, education, health, labour, and public order are with some caveats, the responsibility of the states. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the migrant worker crisis across major states in India. The extent of the crisis was difficult to assess in the absence of data on the scale and sectoral composition of the migrant work force. There is little data in any state on the number of migrants returning home, those that were stranded in the cities of their work and the pace and direction of mobility.

Estimates of government and non-government sources differed vastly as did the assessment of the nature of the humanitarian crisis. In sum, across the country, a large migrant worker population was affected as a result of the prolonged lockdown and the governments in the states of origin and destination alike were blindsided in their response, thus exacerbating the problem. The migrant worker crisis presents a challenge to the idea of India as a common market. Therefore, much of the policy concerns and data work at the subnational level in the future must focus on the causal relationship between migration and development.

The Question

How can the states solve the missing data puzzle? How might sub-national governments - the states and the local bodies - develop a robust, scientific and legally mandated data system to capture the stocks and flows of economic migrants and thus mainstream migration management?

The Problem

Internal migration as a livelihood adaptation strategy is significant in its scale and spread. The Economic Survey of India 2017 estimated that the magnitude of inter-state migration in India was close to 9 million annually between 2011 and 2016, while the Census 2011 pegs the total number of internal migrants in the country (accounting for inter and intra-state movement) at 139 million. However, a caveat would be in order: these numbers are not derived from a systematic data collection process rather, they are extrapolations and estimates. These numbers will have grown in considerable measure in the last decade, highlighting the urgency for the states to mainstream migration management into development strategies.

Data is central to answering the questions that circumscribe migration management:

- How many economic migrants are moving in search of livelihoods?
- Where do they go and where do they come from?
- What are the costs and benefits of economic migration?
- How can forced migration be prevented?
- What must the states do to ensure that the migration process is efficient, orderly and humane?
- How must states ensure that the rights of migrants are protected?

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The answers to these questions will determine, in substantial measure, the ability of the states to manage migration in the future, adopt informed praxis, respond rapidly and effectively to protect the rights of migrants and provide seamless social protection support in times of crisis. Yet, there is a paucity of timely, periodic, accurate and disaggregated data on economic migrants. Even where fragmented or sample data is generated through periodic surveys and administrative data, the absence of a formal arrangement for sharing data amongst the related stakeholders and the use of different conceptual categories and definitions compounds the problem of inadequate data.

There is therefore, an urgent need to invest in building capacities in the statistical systems extant in the states to better capture data on economic migration. This will entail the integration and analysis of often disparate sources of data as well as the development of specific new tools, to capture the mobility dimensions of the development process. This will, however, require that data collection on the stocks and flows of migrant workers, their demographic and socio-economic features and information relating to the place of origin and destination, by the key stakeholders is mandated under the relevant laws.

The Current State of Play

There is no formal data collection system in subnational governance, nor is there any standard and process for information sharing between the states of origin and the states of destination. The two principal sources of migration related data in India are drawn from the Census of India and the National Sample Survey that use different criteria to define migration - one year and six months time of the household survey.

The data generated by the Census while comprehensive and authoritative, presents practical difficulties that constrain use-case analyses and applications in developing policies and designing programmes. In brief these include:

- Migration data from the Census of India is tabulated and released several years after the survey. For instance, the provisional Table D 5 from Census 2011 that lists reasons for migration, years of residence, gender etc. was released at the end of calendar year 2016 and other Tables some years later. This simply means that administrators are compelled to make decisions on the basis of data that is often 6-7 years old, in a rapidly changing economy, rendering the data of little practical use

- The Census only provides data for in-migration with the nature and type of migrant at destination; data on out-migration by source is not available in the public domain; what is collected does not make a distinction between worker and non-worker, or on the basis of the duration of the stay.

The only migration-specific survey undertaken by the National Sample Survey was the 64th Round in 2007-08 which was part of the Employment and Unemployment schedule. The migration data generated from other surveys since 1999-2000, under the various NSS rounds are piecemeal, limited in scope and incidental to other-purpose surveys and hence has little use in migration management praxis.

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The Framework for a Migration Data Management System

The framework for a migration data management system in the states must be developed on a 'government-wide' basis. From a migration data management perspective, it would be useful to develop a roadmap to include:

- Mapping of existing data collection infrastructure, legislative frameworks extant and the significant data gaps in the states and at the level of the local bodies
- Establishing an institutional coordination mechanism, with a technical working group supporting it
- Finalising the prime statistical indicators on the basis of which migration related data will be collected and also developing a process framework that defines the sources, the periodicity and the level of disaggregation of the data
- Assigning a focal point to serve as the central registry, to which all migration data collected as per the prescribed indicators and as per the prescribed procedure, will be and aggregated
- Agreeing on a data dissemination model for placing it in the public domain, for undertaking analyses and for generating policy and programme specific reports.

Over a medium to long term, this process must be automated through an interoperable IT platform, by integrating the diverse agency data bases and to provide for a joint interface for generating data analytics reports; an important prerequisite for integrated migration management.

A good starting point is to review the process of collecting administrative data and redesign it with the application of new tools and instruments to generate disaggregated data on economic migrants. The data management framework should be anchored by the Department of Planning and Statistics in the state and focus on six key departments at the state level: Labour, Employment and Skill Development; Rural Development; Urban Development; Agriculture; Industry and Commerce and the Revenue Department.

The Future Directions

The first principles that must circumscribe the framework include:

- Data base must centre on economic migrants defined as those that leave their place of residence (origin) and move to another place (destination) for purposes of livelihoods, for longer than one year
- Migrants need a unique identity that is portable with their mobility and can serve as the basis for delivery of social protection benefits. Therefore, the Aadhaar number must be the basis for data management
- Data management systems must generate timely, accurate and consistent data of the migration flows as well as the stocks
- Data must enable seamless delivery of migrant-essential services: food and affordable housing; healthcare; education and skill development and social security protection.

Experience from the Census and NSS data and the anecdotal evidence generated by the migrant worker crisis resulting from the prolonged lockdown triggered by COVID-19, point to specific data fields necessary for evidence based and informed migration management, and include migration data by:

- State of origin specifically to distinguish between intrastate and interstate migrant workers
- District of origin and the city of destination for intrastate migrants
- Period of stay to distinguish between short term temporary migrants and long-term permanent migrants
- Sector and occupation to analyse the changing composition of the migrant work force, over time and space
- Demographic profile, including gender, age, and skill levels.

The laws and regulations extant must be used to provide the legal basis for and the mandate to generate the data in a prescribed manner, periodically. In most states there are laws that can provide the legal bases necessary to prescribe new data collection instruments, standards and processes; as also to mandate the periodicity of the data collection, the levels of aggregation, and the manner of integration across departments.

Besides the administrative sources for migration data collection, the states must look ahead to design periodic statistical sources for migration data collection through household surveys. A basic starting point is to undertake a state migration survey once every five years, coinciding with the decennial census survey and at the midpoint between two censuses respectively. This should be supplemented with a biennial employment and unemployment survey, in which migration data collection constitutes an important part.

The Conclusion

The states will do well to act in a mission mode over the next two years, with 2022 as the horizon year, to operationalise a migration data management system, even if a rudimentary one. This should rank as the foremost priority if states have to succeed in achieving the SDG 8 goal - ensuring productivity inclusiveness to drive economic growth, and enabling decent work for all. The devil, though, is in the details and getting them right must engage the administration in the states. The idea of India as a common market will be predicated, in no small measure, on the intent and resolve that the states demonstrate to address this need.

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.*