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More Policies for Weather Induced Migrants

An interview with Kavi Kumar Kambhampati



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Kavi Kumar is Professor at Madras School of Economics (MSE). In the interview he says weather variability can induce short-term migration mostly in the poor people. As this can increase in the coming years, livelihood opportunities should be created in the urban and semi-urban areas. Lack of data about these weather variability and migrants should be generated.

According to you, which are the main countries in Asia that will be affected by climate change and migration in the coming years?

Most vulnerable are the countries from South Asia – both from agricultural distress as well as coastal inundation (due to rising sea levels).

Weather induced migration in agriculture is a major cause for short-term migration in India. But are there any large data sets in India which capture these?

As things stand now, only National Sample Survey (NSS) captures short-term migration in India. However, the household level data in this dataset does not provide enough information to connect weather variability with agricultural output.

Can we say that more males migrate than females when the reason for migration is due to climate change?

As per the available evidence – which is about weather variability (and not climate change, per se), we do observe that short-term migrants are mostly rural men, that too from lagging regions. Further short-term migrants are mostly from the poorer sections of the society.

One way to connect this to the climate change would be to think that climate change is likely to manifest through weather variability, and to that extent the mechanism of migration under climate change conditions would mimic what we are observing currently.

In your paper ‘Weather Variability, Agriculture and Rural Migration: Evidence from State and District Level Migration in India’ it is said that ‘weather-variability-led agricultural distress could lead to migration from rural to urban areas in India.’ So has our taking any measures to accommodate the growing migrants?

Firstly, it should be noted that our results suggest that the magnitude of migration response to weather variability led agricultural distress is relatively small in India compared to evidence from developed countries. However, this analysis does not account for short-term migration (as the Census data used for the analysis does not provide those details) – and in a separate analysis based on NSS data we show that weather variability does have significant role in short-term migration, but as mentioned above, it fails to provide agricultural connection. Thus, the data limitations are immense and one obvious policy response should be to strengthen data generation process.

Secondly, the rural-urban migration in India is low compared to the patterns observed in other countries. India is expected to show negative growth rate in rural population by around 2030s – in comparison, China reported negative growth rate in rural population by mid-1990s. Thus, the urbanization rates in India are relatively low.

So given the possibility of weather/climate induced migration (fuelled by agricultural distress) in future, effective steps are needed to create livelihood opportunities in the urban/semi-urban areas.

Because of the pollution in some cities people are moving from urban to rural areas. Can this increase in the coming years? But if they go back to rural areas, aren't they sacrificing employment, education and other benefits in urban areas?

As mentioned above (in response to Q4), the migration rates (from rural to urban) are relatively low in India compared to other countries. It is also true that due to poor infrastructural facilities people are forced to migrate back to rural areas from urban areas. Perhaps migration should be seen as inevitable manifestation of development and accordingly plan sustainable urban development – as opposed to the ad-hoc urban growth seen currently. Of course one can also foster development of smart villages where alternative livelihood opportunities are available to the rural population freed from agriculture, along with access to education and health facilities.

What are the important policies that the government can introduce for the short term migrants?

Most important measures include provision of welfare measures (be it PDS or direct benefit transfers) and access to health and education facilities.