Since January 2020 Elsevier has created a COVID-19 resource centre with free information in English and Mandarin on the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The COVID-19 resource centre is hosted on Elsevier Connect, the company's public news and information website.

Elsevier hereby grants permission to make all its COVID-19-related research that is available on the COVID-19 resource centre - including this research content - immediately available in PubMed Central and other publicly funded repositories, such as the WHO COVID database with rights for unrestricted research re-use and analyses in any form or by any means with acknowledgement of the original source. These permissions are granted for free by Elsevier for as long as the COVID-19 resource centre remains active.
Letters on Urgent Issues

Distress migration and employment in indigenous Odisha, India: Evidence from migrant-sending households

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Asia
India
Odisha
Indigenous areas
Distress migration
Livelihoods
Public works

ABSTRACT

We convey responses from migrant-sending households in western Odisha from interviews on migration conducted during the lockdown. The majority of migrants are indigenous (referred to as Scheduled Tribes or STs in India), come from very poor households and have little or no education. Prior to the lockdown, the majority of migrants engaged in seasonal, temporary migration—working in dangerous, informal, low-skilled odd jobs for low wages for a few months to supplement incomes at home the rest of the year. Lack of local employment alternatives is cited as the primary reason behind migration. After the lockdown, in the absence of income from migration, households with former migrants hope to earn a livelihood locally—with assistance from National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), India’s public works program. Besides providing employment, NREGA works can include physical and health infrastructure which improve connectivity of health workers. NREGA works can also include community assets, such as facilities for irrigation, rainwater harvesting and plantations as well as child-care centers under India’s Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program. We posit that in the long run, this can improve health, education levels and livelihoods of the local communities, addressing not only the immediate need for local employment but also distress migration in the future.

Letter to the Editor:

We present responses from migrant-sending households in rural western Odisha from interviews conducted during the lockdown. Odisha has a significant indigenous population (referred to as Scheduled Tribes or STs in India), with over 9 million STs calling it home (GoO, 2020, GoI, 2011). Studies show that seasonal, informal migrants—a common feature among Odisha’s STs—are the most vulnerable among India’s internal migrants (Srivastava, 2020, GoO, 2020, Gram Vikas and CMID, 2019, CMLS, 2014).

From our interviews, we find that most migrants had gone for few months—leaving family members at home—to other Indian states, where they often did not speak the local language. They had little or no formal education or marketable skills. The majority of households have official Below Poverty Line (BPL) status. Lack of local employment alternatives, cited as the primary reason behind migration, left migrants susceptible to manipulation and mistreatment, and made them acquiescent of dangerous, informal, odd jobs at low wages (about INR 275/day or USD 3.6/day on average).

Given the uncertainty behind reopening of worksites, many migrants are returning home. But their main reason behind migrating—lack of local employment opportunities—still stands. In the absence of local employment options and income from migration, migrants and their households hope to earn a livelihood locally with assistance from a more effective National Rural

1 The interviews were conducted in May 2020 with the help of the indigenous development NGO Agragamee in Rayagada, Koraput, Nabarangpur, Balangir and Khandhamal. These districts all have significant indigenous populations. Because of the lockdown, urban worksites were closed and migrants were returning home. However, since most migrants had not arrived home and were not contactable at the time the survey started, their households were interviewed. Purposive sampling was used to select sample households.

2 In India, STs number 104 million, and comprise about 9% of total population. Among social groups, the ST group ranks at the bottom for all development indicators. Because of the lockdown, urban worksites were closed and migrants were returning home. However, almost all the survey districts are in what is commonly referred to as the KBK region, after the former district names, Koraput, Balangir, Kalahandi. This region has the poorest districts of Odisha (GoO, 2020).

3 Since BPL status in India is very restrictive, it indicates that a household is very poor.

4 The World Bank’s cutoff for extreme poverty before adjusting for Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) is USD 1.90/day. For monthly wage reports, daily wages were calculated by dividing these by 30. We assume 30 workdays in a month and no holidays, as is the case for these temporary workers. We use INR (Indian Rupees) 75 equivalent to 1 US dollar as the exchange rate.
Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), India’s flagship public works program.\textsuperscript{v}

Bance and Gentilini (2020) discuss how during previous epidemics, public works programs in regions with poor infrastructure successfully combined employment with building infrastructure. Since the survey districts are characterized by poor physical and health infrastructure (GoO, 2020), in the short-run, NREGA can provide employment and income while building infrastructure to improve access to patients by first responders and connectivity for health workers. New medical infrastructure could also enable access to treatment of other pressing medical issues. NREGA can also provide assistance for constructing community assets, such as facilities for irrigation, rainwater harvesting and plantations and anganwadi centres (child-care centers, under India’s Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) program). This can improve health, education levels and livelihoods of STs in the long-run, addressing not only the immediate need for local employment but also distress migration in the future.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest.

References

Bance, Paul, & Ugo, Gentilini. 2020. “Suspended until further notice”: is there a role for public works in COVID-19 (Coronavirus) response. World Bank: Jobs and Development. Posted 2020, April 27. https://www.jobsanddevelopment.org/suspended-until-further-notice-is-there-a-role-for-public-works-in-covid-19-coronavirus-response/

CMLS (Centre for Migration and Labor Solutions) Studies. 2014. Stories and a Canvas: Seasonal labor migration and migrant workers from Odisha. Centre for Migration and Labor Solutions, Aajeevika Bureau. Rajasthan, India. Available at https://www.humandignity.foundation/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Odisha-State-Migration-Profile-Report.pdf.

GoI (Government of India) 2011. Population Census. Government of India. Available at https://www.census2011.co.in/pdf

GoO (Government of Odisha), 2020, Odisha Economic Survey 2019-2020. Planning and Convergence Department, Government of Odisha. Available at https://pc.odisha.gov.in/Download/Economic_Survey_2019-20.pdf.

Gram Vikas and CMID (Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development). 2019. Challenges of migrants and families left behind: Insights from Thuamul Rampur. Gram Vikas, Odisha and Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development, Kerala, India. Available at http://cmid.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Challenges-of-Migrants-and-Families-Left-Behind-Insights-from-Kalabandi-2019-Gram-Vikas-CMID.pdf.

Srivastava, R. (2020). Vulnerable internal migrants in india and portability of social security and entitlements. WP 02/2020 IHD-CES Working Paper. Centre for Employment Studies, Institute for Human Development, Delhi. Available at https://www.ihdindia.org/Working%20Papers/2020/IHD-CES_WP_02_2020.pdf.

Ruchira Bhattamishra
E-mail address: r.bhattamishra@gmail.com
Accepted 13 June 2020

Available online 6 August 2020

\textsuperscript{v} Under NREGA (commonly referred to as MNREGA or MGNREGA, given the full form of the program—the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), the national government guaranteed a wage of INR 182/day for 100 days/year in 2019-20. To address distress migration, the Odisha government increased NREGA wages to INR 286 for 200 days in 4 districts in January 2020. However, poor livelihood options and delayed NREGA payments have led to continuing distress migration from these and other districts in Odisha with a high proportion of ST migrants. Effective from April 2020, as part of the COVID-19 relief package, the Indian government increased NREGA wages to INR 202.