

CHAPTER 5

MIGRATION

Tightening Borders and Threats to Food Security

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KEY FINDINGS

- Politically motivated arguments for immigration restrictions are increasingly common but not supported by evidence on economic and employment impacts, crime, or fiscal costs associated with migrants.
- Voluntary migration can improve food security both for migrants and for the families left behind by raising incomes and reducing pressure on resources. Migration provides a critical option for poor rural and urban families.
- Conflict is driving increasing involuntary migration. Despite concerns, refugee camps can benefit local communities by stimulating incomes and entrepreneurial activity.
- Further research is needed on the links between migration and food security, but evidence suggests a net positive impact for migrants, their families, and the communities accepting migrants.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Improve mechanisms for seasonal migration. Helping farmers to migrate within countries to find alternative work during the lean season can boost food security.
- Reduce international migration costs at the source. In the face of increasing restrictions abroad, migrant source countries can lower domestic obstacles to migration and support participation of members of poor communities in legal migrant work programs.
- Develop innovative financial products to facilitate migration. Migration can be costly, but new technologies and related financial products may offer ways to lower costs for the poor.
- Intensify use of technology to improve services before and during crises. New information and communication technologies are improving early warning systems and management of crises and refugee camps.



Recent changes in the political landscape in the United Kingdom and the United States have put tighter borders and migration restrictions on the agenda.¹

Concerns about unchecked migration have also risen in mainland Europe, as migration by boat to Italy from Libya grew rapidly after civil war broke out in the country in 2014. Meanwhile, protracted violence in Central America, the Middle East, and the Lake Chad basin has led to increasing flows of people out of their homes and farms into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps and refugee camps in neighboring countries. Governments in receiving countries have responded to the increasing voluntary and involuntary movement of people out of developing countries and conflict zones either by raising the rhetoric on border enforcement or reducing the number of voluntary migrants and of refugees they are willing to absorb. Yet overall flows of refugees, or forced migrants, may increase in the future. Models of climate change suggest that environmental displacement will increase pressure for migration from environmentally threatened areas of developing countries.² And while accurately predicting migratory responses to either environmental degradation or climate change is difficult, recent work definitively links temperature changes to changing migration patterns across countries.³

MIGRATION AND TIGHTENING BORDERS

When borders are tightened, food and nutrition security are potentially threatened in several ways. First, it is well established that migrants who leave voluntarily enjoy higher living standards after they migrate.⁴ Migrants who were food insecure prior to leaving therefore have a better chance of being food secure postmigration; restrictions on migration would leave them food insecure. Second, households that migrants leave—source households—also tend to become better off on a per capita basis as a consequence of migration. This improvement occurs either because of remittances sent home by migrants or because the gain in consumption on a per capita basis outweighs the loss in household production. If family members cannot migrate, such households are more likely to be food insecure. Third, in the context of forced migration, reduced opportunities for permanent resettlement can expose refugees to prolonged food or nutrition insecurity and strain donor resources used to support IDP and refugee camps in protracted crises.

Though in theory a clear connection should exist between migration and food and nutrition

security, the literature does not explicitly link the two concepts. Research on migration tends to neglect food security outcomes, while the food security research tends to neglect migration.⁵ From the perspective of migration analysis, it is difficult to demonstrate how migration affects food security for those who leave or for those left behind, as unobservable factors affecting the migration decision may also affect food security.⁶ From the perspective of food security analysis, many of the surveys that collect information on food security at the national level neglect international migration because it is a “rare event” and not deemed sufficiently important to include in either censuses or labor force surveys.⁷

Here, we look at what we know about the links between migration and food security, evaluate the political rationale for immigration restrictions, and consider the implications for voluntary and involuntary migration and food and nutrition security.

THE “RATIONALE” FOR TIGHTENING BORDERS

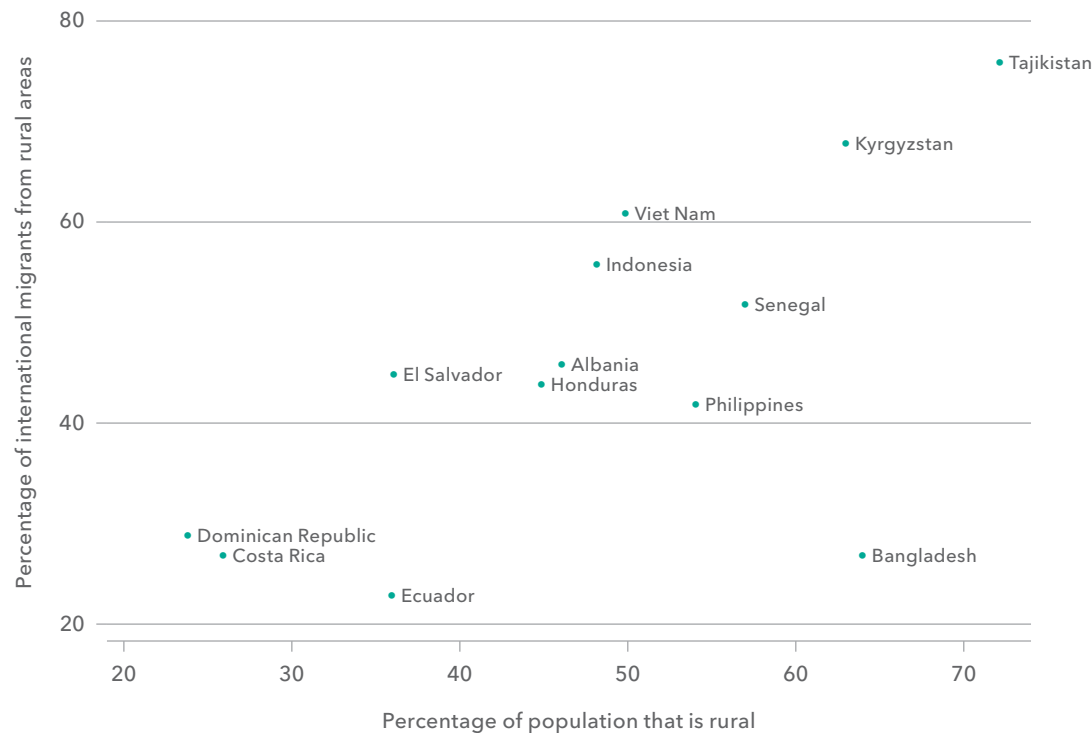
Proponents of increased restrictions on immigration and refugee resettlement make three main arguments. First, they are concerned that increasing immigration and refugee populations will reduce the wages of native workers. Evidence suggests that the size of the migration flow matters—only quite large refugee flows appear to negatively affect outcomes in labor markets among natives. For example, the Mariel boatlift in 1980, an influx of Cuban refugees into Miami that increased the labor market by about 7 percent, did not affect natives’ wages, even among high school dropouts.⁸ Substantially larger refugee flows, however, can affect employment outcomes among natives. Preliminary research demonstrates that the influx of Syrian refugees into Turkey, numbering 1.7 million by mid-2015, displaced natives from the informal sector, while increasing formal-sector opportunities among less-educated native men.⁹ Similarly, in Colombia, the displacement of rural residents from conflict-affected areas to urban areas led to lower wages among unskilled workers in cities unaffected by violence, as the share of internally displaced workers in the urban labor force rose as high as 12 percent.¹⁰ However, immigration can have positive effects on wages among

subgroups of the population; for example, the notable increase in women’s participation in the US labor force over the past 50 years might not have been possible without immigrants available to provide labor for domestic tasks.¹¹

A second argument relates to immigrants and crime. Proponents of restrictions suggest that immigrants and refugees commit more crimes, and public opinion is often swayed to this belief.¹² The fear that refugees and other immigrants may be linked to terrorist organizations has exacerbated this concern. Studies in both the United States and the United Kingdom suggest small increases in property crime but no differences in other crime rates as a result of immigration. In the United States, perhaps the best available study uses a policy change in Arizona to examine the impact on crime of a reduction in the presence of Mexican immigrants. Immigrants were found to be associated with increased property crime, but this effect can be almost fully explained by the gender and age composition of Mexican immigrants in Arizona, who are predominantly young and male.¹³ Similarly, a study of two immigration waves into the United Kingdom from Eastern Europe found only a small increase in property crime after the first wave and a decline following the second wave.¹⁴ Moreover, there is no evidence to substantiate the notion that immigrants have a greater proclivity to engage in terrorist attacks than other citizens.

Third, proponents of restricting immigration and refugee resettlement point to the fiscal costs of immigration, often neglecting the tax contributions made by immigrants. Since 1995, immigrants as a group have made a positive fiscal contribution to the United Kingdom, while natives, on net, cost the government more than they pay in taxes.¹⁵ In the United States, a 2017 report prepared by the Department of Health and Human Services, but not released by the current administration, estimated the 10-year net benefit of refugees to the US economy at US\$63 billion; much of that benefit is attributable to long-term refugees who come from countries such as Viet Nam and Cambodia and earn on par with natives.¹⁶ Finally, a consensus report from the US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine concludes that immigrants not only add to fiscal revenues but also help to grow the overall economy.¹⁷ Clearly migrants and refugees can be positive contributors to their destination countries over time.

FIGURE 1 Proportion of international migrants from rural areas, selected countries



Source: A. de Brauw, "Migration and Development: Implications for Rural Areas," presentation prepared for the JRC-IFPRI Conference on Food and Nutrition Security Measurement, Brussels, November 2017.

VOLUNTARY MIGRATION

Linking voluntary international migration to food and nutrition insecurity is complex. Although both urban and rural areas are affected by voluntary migration, poverty and undernutrition, precursors of food insecurity, are concentrated globally in rural areas.¹⁸ However, the effect of emigration on food security in rural areas is often overlooked due to the preconception that international migrants tend to come from urban areas. To estimate the share of migrants from rural areas, we compiled 13 comprehensive data sources from developing countries that include information about family members living abroad.¹⁹ In general, with the exception of Bangladesh, the proportion of migrants who left rural areas for international destinations was roughly equivalent to the proportion of the population living in rural areas (Figure 1), meaning that international migration is clearly linked to rural poverty.

Decisions made by rural households to send out migrants are interrelated with other decisions that affect their food security.²⁰ Households must weigh

the expected benefits of migration against all the costs, including financial, psychic, and job-search costs. Among households at risk of food insecurity, those costs may be substantial and difficult to overcome, particularly for international migration.²¹ Once a rural household member leaves, his or her labor is no longer available for household agricultural production; however, remittances sent back by migrants may compensate for that loss and can be used for consumption or invested in agricultural or non-agricultural production. Remittances may arrive with a time lag as migrants establish themselves and pay off loans related to the journey. Thus the impacts on food security and nutrition are complex for source households, particularly as rural households receiving remittances may substitute food purchases for home production.

Establishing a causal link between migration and improved food and nutrition security requires several steps.²² The first is to show that migration affects household agricultural production or incomes among source households, depending on whether households rely primarily on their own production

or on markets for food. Next, it must be shown that either increased production or income leads to increased food consumption on a per capita basis; households may choose to sell any production in excess of consumption needs, or to save any additional income generated through migration, rather than boosting consumption. If regular food shortfalls occur during the year, the increase in income may not be enough to increase food and nutrition security; additional income or product must be available during times when households normally fall short of food.

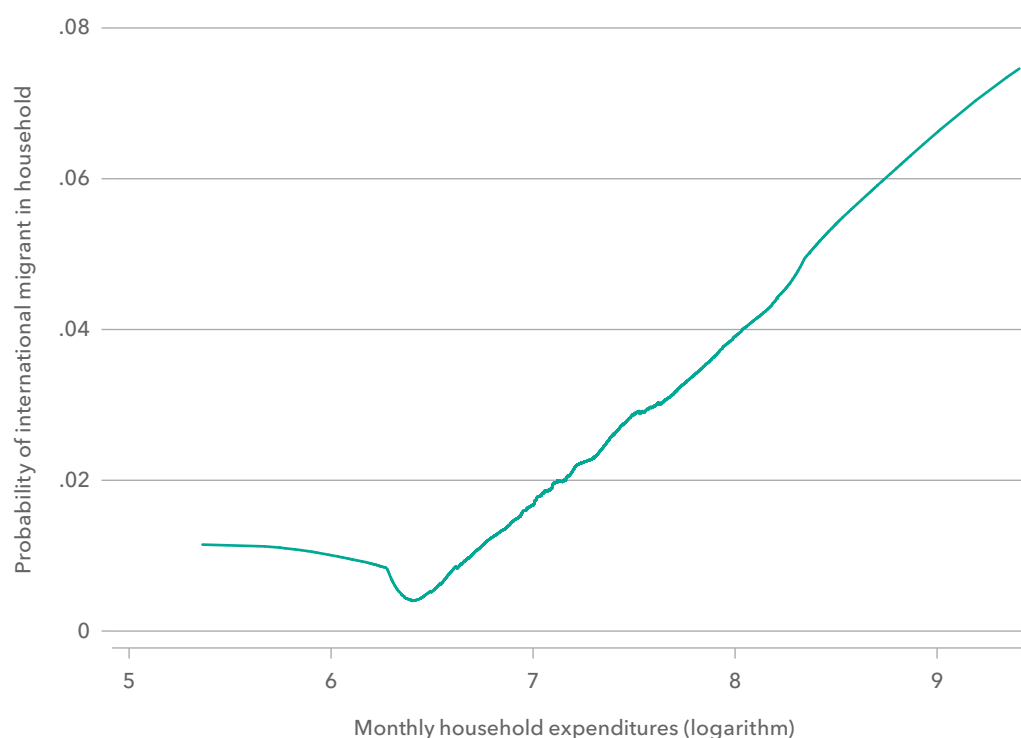
In fact, little direct evidence links migration and standard measures of food security. However, the available indirect evidence in countries with high levels of food insecurity suggests that, across several different contexts, migration leads to greater food security among those who are left behind when migrants voluntarily leave households. For example, in Guatemala and El Salvador, stunting prevalence among children under five appears to be lower among migrant source households than non-source households.²³ A study from Tajikistan suggests that left-behind members of source households have

higher per capita kilocalorie consumption than non-source households.²⁴ International migration likewise tends to increase the incomes of source households, largely through remittances.²⁵

Internal migration can also increase food security. A program that gave food-insecure households in northwest Bangladesh money for bus tickets—less than US\$9 per potential migrant—during the hungry season led to permanent increases in seasonal migration as well as in per capita consumption among migrant households.²⁶ However, because migration entails large costs, the poorest of the poor are often unable to leave, limiting the scope of impact on food security despite increases in consumption among the better-off poor households.

Tightening restrictions on migration only serves to increase both monetary and nonmonetary migration costs, with monetary costs disproportionately affecting those potential migrants with the fewest resources. Increasing migration costs to specific destinations would either reduce the migration rate among relatively poor potential migrants, or change the set of potential destinations for these households. To illustrate, Figure 2 shows the propensity

FIGURE 2 Household income and probability of international migration, Bangladesh



Source: Authors, based on data from the Bangladesh Integrated Household Survey 2015.

to migrate from rural Bangladeshi households; the probability is low for the poorest households and then increases rapidly at higher income levels. If migration costs were to rise, the entire curve would shift to the right, reflecting greater difficulty for people from relatively poor households to migrate, and therefore potentially increasing the incidence of food insecurity.

Important migrant flows that affect food security in source countries are those from Central America to the United States and from South Asia to the Middle East. In migrant source countries with large remittance inflows, such as Bangladesh, El Salvador, and Guatemala, between 10 and 15 percent of the population is considered food insecure. Increased migration restrictions imposed by the primary host countries could exacerbate food insecurity.²⁷ Proposed increases in the forced removal of migrants already abroad, particularly in the United States, would only exacerbate these negative impacts, as rural source communities would have to absorb returning migrants while no longer receiving remittances.

INVOLUNTARY MIGRATION

The number of refugees and IDPs doubled between 2007 and 2016, to around 64 million people.²⁸ In the presence of conflict, people risk personal or familial safety if they choose to stay. But if they choose to leave, they might face dramatic uncertainty about their food and nutrition security, at least in the short term. Of course, food insecurity can also play an important role in sparking conflicts in the first place.²⁹ When conflicts arise and people begin to flee, the United Nations is called upon to provide food and/or cash aid to refugees to mitigate food and nutrition security risks. As emergency food aid is planned and distributed, it can have both a direct effect, which is a transfer, and an indirect “insurance” effect, as the anticipated aid effectively ensures food security.³⁰ As the world’s displaced population has grown, more crises have become protracted, stretching the resources required to stave off food insecurity among refugees. Donor fatigue can set in, creating greater risk of food insecurity. One solution is to integrate more refugees into economies able to absorb them through resettlement programs; however, this requires countries willing to receive those refugees.

Given the proposed and existing restrictions on refugee resettlement programs, a primary policy question for developing country governments that host refugee or IDP camps is whether these camps increase or reduce food insecurity among local residents. Despite concerns that refugee camps may stretch local resources, studies suggest that the camps stimulate incomes and entrepreneurial activity among locals living nearby. Research on Kagera, Tanzania, which hosted refugees from Rwanda and Burundi, found that proximity to camps was welfare-increasing on average, though agricultural wage workers faced additional competition for jobs.³¹ Similarly, Kenyans within 10 kilometers of the Kakuma refugee camp in northwest Kenya have a consumption rate that is 25 percent higher than similar Kenyans who live farther from the camp.³² And models of two refugee camps in Uganda suggest that potentially substantial economic benefits arise among households within 15 kilometers of the camps.³³ In the Kenya and Uganda studies, food aid provided by the World Food Programme factors into the impact of the camps on nearby households; these benefits create employment and therefore increase economic activity among both refugees and locals. Without such aid, local economies could suffer.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The perception of migrants is increasingly negative in receiving areas, whether for economic reasons or not, and politicians in some migrant destinations are either reducing or threatening to reduce immigration and the acceptance of refugees. Migration restrictions will raise the cost of migrating to some destinations, so that, in the short term, poorer, less food-secure households will be less able to send out voluntary migrants. Restrictions on the resettlement of refugees could lead to prolonged stays in camps or returns to unsafe situations where food insecurity is high. In the current global political climate, what can be done to mitigate these effects and support the food security benefits of migration?

IMPROVE MECHANISMS FOR SEASONAL MIGRATION

Among farmers who are food insecure, the value of their labor on the farm fluctuates with the agricultural season. There are times during the year when agricultural laborers can leave the farm with little or no consequence for farm productivity. One policy

option is to promote seasonal migration, as in the successful experiment in northwest Bangladesh.³⁴ Evidence Action, an international nongovernmental organization, is currently testing a scaled-up version of this program in both Bangladesh and Indonesia, providing a US\$20 transportation subsidy to farmers to catalyze migration during the lean season.³⁵ Seasonal internal migration is not subject to the same political challenges as international migration, but can offer many of the same benefits. In addition, nongovernmental actors could implement similar programs designed to make existing cross-border seasonal migration programs, such as New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer program, more accessible to food-insecure households.

REDUCE INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION COSTS AT THE SOURCE

While developed countries may seek to restrict migration from developing countries in the near future, developing countries can act unilaterally to increase access to migration opportunities for their most vulnerable residents. Bureaucratic obstacles such as high passport costs can be removed. And in countries such as the Philippines that operate legal contract-work programs with countries with labor shortages, migrant recruiters could be required to also target relatively poor rural areas.³⁶

DEVELOP INNOVATIVE FINANCIAL PRODUCTS TO FACILITATE MIGRATION

Costs related to directly financing migration and initial adaptation to the destination may limit the ability of food-insecure households to pursue migration as a coping strategy. Migrants must often turn to

costly informal channels to finance these expenses, yet new migration restrictions will only serve to increase such expenses. Due to reduced costs both of managing accounts through mobile phones and of monitoring credit, it is now possible for financial service providers to develop new products. Mobile technology can also be harnessed to allow migrants to remain better connected to their home country, which would allow poorer potential migrants access to necessary capital at a lower cost.

INTENSIFY USE OF ICT TO IMPROVE SERVICES BEFORE AND DURING CRISES

Resources for forced migrants and refugees are not likely to increase in the near future, so it is essential to be as efficient as possible in providing aid to refugees in need. Newer information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as remote sensing, data collection on mobile phones, and improved connectivity, can be used both to help warn of crises before they occur and to manage them after they occur. The integration of early warning systems and social protection can help mitigate crises before they occur.³⁷ Developing improved methods of tracking resource use and flows into or out of IDP or refugee camps can contribute to better standards of living and improved nutrition for long-term camp residents. These strategies can also increase the capacity of camps in terms of number of refugees and quality of services offered in situations where opportunities for permanent resettlement are limited. ICT use need not be limited to tracking flows of people and resources; technology can be used to improve management and monitoring of crises and responses more broadly.

The background of the image is a solid blue color. Overlaid on this is a white-bordered rectangle containing text. In the background, there are faint, light blue silhouettes of several people, likely migrants, carrying large bundles or bags over their heads and shoulders. They appear to be walking over a low wall or barrier. The overall tone is somber and informative.

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