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Migration, debt and resource backwash: how sustainable is Bangladesh-Gulf circular migration?

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Abstract

This paper investigates international labour migration financing processes and related resource backwash – the flow of resources away from the migrant household which continue sometime after the initial migration event. Using customised survey data from four villages in Comilla and Chandpur districts, major migrant source regions in Southern Bangladesh, this paper assesses different dimensions of what is effectively a debt-financed migration strategy or resource backwash that accompany this process. The findings suggest that although migration has become an essential livelihood strategy for many households in rural Bangladesh, households deplete significant resources in terms of land and other precautionary assets in order to gain access to migration opportunities in the Gulf and emerging Asian countries. This paper shows that debt is a critical component of the migration system in Bangladesh, and the

findings further suggest that although households adopt a migration strategy to counterbalance income uncertainty, the migration system itself creates extreme precarity, as households become riddled with migration related debt. Tragically it often takes the entire migration episode to service the debt. This argument has profound implications for the debate about migration's role in supporting sustainable development.

Keywords:

International migration

resource backwash

debt

migration cost

Notes

1. Precautionary savings and assets are resources that protect against risk. Precautionary savings and assets result from the knowledge that the future is uncertain (Carroll & Kimball, [2006](#)).
2. Some surveys of migrants earning in GCC countries show that Bangladeshi migrant workers earn significantly less than migrant workers of other nationalities. For example, using survey data from 1189 migrant workers in Qatar, Gardner et al. ([2013](#)) shows the mean earnings of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Qatar is QR 1050 (US\$400), which is the lowest among different nationalities in GCC.

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