Migration and aging

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The interrelationship between aging and migration is a widely neglected issue. Yet it has major implications for the health and social sectors, and calls for the urgent attention of international, national and nongovernmental agencies.

Old people as refugees

Wars – and to a lesser degree, natural disasters – have provoked massive population movements in the recent past. Relief operations have been centred on children and young people, but the work of HelpAge International, a nongovernmental organization based in London and specialized in issues related to older people, has made a rare and very worthwhile effort to assist older displaced people.

Recent studies have indicated that older adults suffer most from these human tragedies. In Bosnia, for example, a survey conducted by the University of London Institute of Child Health concluded that the most vulnerable age group was people in old age; for instance, weight loss among them was more severe than in any other group of refugees. And in Mozambique the return of refugees from neighbouring countries included vast numbers of elderly people who, once back home, realized that they could no longer contact their families. They are now homeless, and without the immediate support they had expected from their relatives.

Old people as contributors

Some countries, particularly in South Asia and Central America, rely heavily on remittances sent home by “guest workers” in other, richer countries. Examples include workers from Bangladesh, Egypt and Pakistan in the Gulf States, Filipinos in Japan, and Central American migrants in the United States. These migrant workers are young and often cannot take their families with them. If it were not for their elders looking after their children, such opportunities would not be feasible, yet this contribution made to society by elderly people is commonly overlooked in the statistics.
Old people left behind

The highest proportion of elderly people in Brazil is to be found in the north-east. This is because the young migrate to the south, leaving behind elderly people – usually in conditions of extreme poverty. In the big cities of the south, unemployment is rampant and those unqualified migrants from the north-east end up in the slums, unable to find jobs, still less to support older family members left behind.

Aging in alien cultures

Mass migration is now leading to many millions of adults aging in alien environments. For a great many, “retirement” means a long life of close-to-poverty subsistence in a society which is often hostile and intolerant of older foreigners’ needs and practices. This situation can be worse for elderly women who are isolated while their children adopt the values, education and lifestyles of the host country.

Older people returning home

Once they reach retirement age, migrants often opt to return to their country of origin. In the 1950s and 1960s, thousands of young people from Barbados were actively recruited by British industries. Many of them are now back in Barbados but their return often proves to be traumatic. The country has changed over the years and the new reality does not always fulfil their expectations. Given the very low fertility rates that prevail and the continuing emigration of young people – now mostly to the USA – the population is shrinking. Barbados is expected to become one of the “oldest” countries in the world by the beginning of the 21st century; by 2020, a third of the population will be over 65 years old. Financing health and other services for so many old people will prove a major challenge for Barbados and similar countries elsewhere.

Life in the sun after retirement

For many years, people have selected special regions within their home country as being ideal places to live after retirement. This applies to Florida, parts of California, southern England and the Côte d’Azur of France. In Spain, the authorities estimate that over one million properties along the Mediterranean coast are owned by foreigners, mostly people aged over 50 from northern Europe. This search for “Eldorado” started in the 1960s and reached a peak in the early 1980s. At first it was all great fun as people enjoyed the pleasures of life that their (then) comfortable pensions could afford. However, years later, the increasing cost of living in Spain, combined with the depreciation of their incomes in real terms, and increasing health problems are bringing economic difficulties. Providing care for such international “old migrants” has become a major problem for local authorities. Consulates of northern European countries in Greece, Portugal, Spain and elsewhere are increasingly playing the role of welfare agencies.

These six dimensions of migration and aging are neglected issues. They all have major implications for the health and social sectors, and demand the urgent attention of international, national and nongovernmental agencies.