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# 'We urgently need more data on internal migration'

On international migrants day, it is important not to forget the millions who move within countries and face many of the same challenges as migrants who cross borders

Mark Montgomery, Sarah Engebretsen, and Miriam Temin  
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Demographic and health surveys suggest that up to 80% of urban girls in Ethiopia are recent migrants. Photograph: Isabelle Cadet/AP

No one questions the economic and political significance of international [migration](#). However, internal migration – moving within a country – is a much larger phenomenon that affects the lives of far more people, and one that is given much less attention.

According to the UN, globally there are at least 740 million internal migrants; compare this with only 232 million international migrants. Internal migrants face many of the same challenges – including social isolation, discrimination, forced evictions and poor working conditions – and have the same needs and [human rights](#) as international migrants. And yet internal migration is seldom studied or considered at the international programme and policy level.

The dearth of evidence about internal migration was highlighted for us when we gathered data for a 2013 [Population Council](#) report, [Girls on the move: adolescent girls and migration in the developing world](#). More information is urgently needed about the lives of internal migrants, including girls, who are especially vulnerable. We need to know more than we currently do, for example, about the scale of migration.

For Girls on the Move we studied 60 microsamples of population censuses from the [IPUMS](#) collection at the University of Minnesota, which gave estimates of between five

and 30% of urban adolescent girls being recent migrants, that is, having arrived within five years before the census. Yet when we looked at the [demographic and health surveys](#), which are conducted in more than 90 countries, we found much higher percentages of girls classified as migrants, as high as [80% of urban girls](#) (pdf) in the case of [Ethiopia](#). Why the discrepancy? These sources use different criteria to define moves. Also, censuses ask about the specific location (administrative region) where a migrant formerly lived, whereas the DHS asks whether that place was urban or rural but not about its location. Neither source gives the full picture.

Unfortunately, questions about migration have since been removed from the DHS (although that decision is being reconsidered). Unicef's [multiple indicator cluster surveys](#), another valuable source on information on the wellbeing of adolescents, children and adults, has never included migration questions. Without such basic information, we cannot understand the life circumstances of internal migrants, and lack the evidence we need for effective policies and programmes to improve their lives.

Ideally, both surveys and censuses would include at least three simple questions on migration: How long have you lived here? Where did you live before? What type of place was it, urban or rural?

Data generated by these inquiries will provide a powerful tool for us to answer some critical questions about the lives of internal migrants. For example:

### **What kinds of places are migrants leaving behind?**

Answering this question will help us identify locations that may be in need of more attention for economic development, and show where remittances are being sent to support the local population. Remittances are one of the ways by which migrants drive development. Recent [research](#) supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation reveals that in sub-Saharan [Africa](#), it is far more common to receive remittances from family members who are internal migrants than it is to receive international remittances.

### **Are people migrating to locations with less or more environmental risk?**

Migrants are drawn to urban areas in search of schooling and economic opportunity, but many large and growing cities are at high risk of devastating extreme weather events. By moving in search of opportunity, internal migrants may be placing themselves in harm's way. However, without more specific information about internal migration flows, we cannot assess this risk.

### **Is climate change inducing migration?**

There has been a lot of speculation that hardships caused by climate change are leading people to migrate. Until we really know where people are migrating from, it is impossible to say for sure. As [Girls on the Move](#) demonstrates, adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to displacement for a variety of reasons. This includes catastrophes related to extreme weather events, which are anticipated to increase in frequency in the coming years. It is therefore crucial to understand the intersection between climate change and migration.

The gaps in data about internal migration are not difficult to fill, and they must be filled if programmes and policies are to be properly grounded in evidence, not myths and misconceptions. On [International Migrants Day](#), when the UN raises awareness about international migrants, we must not forget the needs of internal migrants. Crafting a small, easily manageable set of questions to be included in censuses and demographic surveys would go a long way toward helping us better understand and improve their lives.

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