



**Is Migration the Solution to Poverty  
Alleviation in Kenya?**

**Rural-Urban Migration Experiences of  
Migrants from Western Kenya to Kisumu  
and Nairobi**

John O. Oucho, Linda A. Oucho and Vollan Ochieng'

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Migrating out of Poverty

Arts B, University of Sussex

Falmer, Brighton BN1 9QN, United Kingdom

tel: +44 (0)1273 873535

email: [migrationrpc@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:migrationrpc@sussex.ac.uk)

web: <http://migratingoutofpoverty.dfid.gov.uk/>

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## Abstract

Out-migration from western Kenya to Kenya's urban areas dates back to the colonial period and remains a reflection of regional inequality, as migrants try to move out of their poorer origins to destinations with promising economic opportunities. Out-migration in Western Kenya, mainly from the Siaya and Vihiga counties, is directed towards the regional city of Kisumu and the national capital of Nairobi city, which for long has been the country's primate city. Underdevelopment in western Kenya and the desired lifestyle of the cities drive both rural-urban migration and rural-rural migration to the county's economic hubs that rely on commercial agriculture. Siaya and Vihiga are two contrasting counties. Siaya has vast landscapes wallowing in poverty due to subsistence agriculture whereas Vihiga is unsuitable for agriculture because of large boulders occupying much of the cultivable land. Using mixed qualitative methodology consisting of key informant interviews, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, the study found that although Kisumu is closer to the region of origin than Nairobi, the latter has the greater attraction. The migrants fare much better in urban destinations where they maintain strong contacts with their origins, to where they send remittances for relatives left behind. At the end of a migratory life, the vast majority of migrants expect to return to their homes to try and lead better lives than non-migrant folk, and to develop their communities as well as their counties of origin. The findings of the study corroborate findings of previous studies in Kenya that underscore the contribution of rural-urban migration to poverty reduction.

## Table of Contents

1. Introduction and Background to the Study.....	5
1.1 Background to the Study .....	5
1.2 Literature Review and Rationale for the Study .....	6
1.3 Aims, Objectives and Research Questions .....	9
1.4 Methodology and Approaches of Data Collection .....	9
2. Findings of the Study.....	10
2.1 Out-Migrants’ Demographic and Socio-Economic Profiles .....	10
2.2 Drivers of Out-migration from Rural Western Kenya.....	11
2.3 Impact of Migration on Poverty .....	14
2.3.1 <i>Migration as an impediment to development and the resultant poverty</i> .....	14
2.3.2 <i>Migration as a panacea for development and poverty alleviation</i> .....	20
2.4 Migrants’ Suggested Action Points.....	22
3. Recommendations: Migration and Rural Poverty Alleviation .....	22
4. Conclusion .....	23
References.....	24

### Figures and Table

Figure 1: Kenya’s Internal and International Migration Routes.....	8
Table 1: Distribution of IDIs, KIIs and FGDs.....	10
Figure 2: Reasons for Out-Migration.....	12

### Plates

Plate 1: Boulders on Farmland in Vihiga County.....	13
Plate 2: Sanitation near Informal Settlement in Nairobi.....	17

### Boxes

Box 1 .....	13
Box 2 .....	19
Box 3 .....	22

## 1. Introduction and Background to the Study

This Working Paper is the first in the series on the recently accomplished research project 'Rural Out-migration to Urban Uncertainties in Kenya'. The research aimed to investigate the push and pull factors of migration from rural western Kenya to two urban destinations, with a focus on linking migration to poverty at the origin and whether the migration process reduces or increases poverty at the destinations. The study primarily adopted qualitative methods that were geared towards revealing the phenomenological experiences of migration from Siaya and Vihiga counties in western Kenya to the cities of Kisumu and Nairobi, in relation to poverty. The data collection tools used were in-depth interviews with migrants and non-migrants (335), key informant interviews (34) and focus group discussions (16), divided equally between the origins and destinations.

### 1.1 Background to the Study

Rural-urban migration in the context of development and rural-urban links has attracted considerable research in Kenya, yet seldom related to poverty, which since the country's independence in 1963 has been one of the 'transitional problems of development'.<sup>1</sup> Since 2000 poverty has been singled out as one of the country's most important Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and is being addressed in the Kenya Vision 2030 (Republic of Kenya 2007).

Western Kenya is the most prominent net out-migration area in the country's rural-urban migration system. During the 1960s, female out-migration was low (Ominde 1968: 118), but decennial censuses indicate since 1969 it has increased to equal, and in some instances even exceeds, male out-migration. The 2009 Kenya Population and Housing Census revealed that the proportion of out-migration by gender has more or less equalled in the two defunct Nyanza and Western Provinces (NCPD 2013:203).

The region's other statistics reveal the relevance of a study on migration and poverty. In a recent study, the head count index of poverty (i.e. the proportion of individuals below the poverty line) was 38 for Siaya County and 39 for Vihiga County (KNBS and SID 2013b: 10). Sixteen per cent of the Siaya population had an education at secondary level or higher, compared to 20 per cent of Vihiga's and 51 per cent of Nairobi's population (KNBS and SID 2013b:26). Ironically, unemployment levels were extremely low, at 5.2 per cent in Siaya, 9.2 per cent in Vihiga and 11.3 per cent in Nairobi (KNBS and SID 2013b:29). The two counties are not among the country's ten counties top-ranked or lowest-ranked according to these socio-economic indices.

This brief background begs the key question of this paper: is migration the solution to poverty alleviation in Kenya? This paper highlights the findings of the research on rural out-migration from western Kenya to the regional city of Kisumu and to Nairobi city, the country's national capital. The paper analyses the urban uncertainties that await these out-migrants as

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<sup>1</sup>The *Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965 on African Socialism and Its Application to Kenya* (Kenya 1965) identified three transitional problems of development: illiteracy, disease and poverty. While the country has achieved a lot on the first two, the latter persists. It aimed to institute political equality, social justice, human dignity including freedom of conscience, freedom from want, disease, and exploitation, equal opportunities, and high and growing per capita incomes, equally distributed. Yet, most of these were not achieved or achieved below expectations.

inevitable, given that migrants seldom know what to expect at the two urban destinations. In addition, within Kenya and other African countries that were former British colonies, rural out-migration became a rite of passage due to the opportunities being created at major destinations, particularly in Nairobi, which used to be the hub of in terms of economic and cultural development. Since independence, rural-urban migration has increased due to the removal of colonial policies that initially restricted migration, especially of women, children and the elderly.

## **1.2 Literature Review and Rationale for the Study**

Over the years, there has been copious literature on rural-urban migration in Kenya as a response to the dual economy that the colonial government established in the country in the closing decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The literature reviewed here can be divided into four broad categories: conditions at rural origins that propelled out-migration and those at destinations that spurred urban in-migration; the drivers of rural-urban migration identified in the two settings; the impact of the migration system on individual migrants, on the relationship between migrants and non-migrants, on households, and on communities both at origins and destinations; and policy recommendations emanating from the findings.

The colonial administration of Kenya saw a symbiotic relationship between the development of a dual economy focused on a developed modern sector in urban areas (as well as certain rural economic nodes) and an underdeveloped traditional sector in rural areas. While the modern sector consisted of commercial agriculture in the Kenya Highlands (where urbanisation grew fastest in the country), the traditional sector became the reservoir of cheap labour procured for the modern sector and, consequently, four types of internal migration emerged: rural-rural, rural-urban, urban-urban and urban-rural, including return migration (Ominde 1968). Western Kenya emerged as a dependable source of migration, particularly with regards to rural-rural and rural-urban migration, and up to now remains a major out-migration region in the country. Central Kenya also became an out-migration region, but more involved in rural-rural migration for agricultural land colonisation, especially since the country's independence in 1963 (Odingo 1967, 1971; Ominde 1968; Oucho 1984, 1996). Eastern Kenya, especially its southern part, is another out-migration region, with migrants destined for the urban locations of Nairobi and Mombasa. The exceptions are the Rift Valley and coast regions, which all previous censuses found to be net in-migration areas because of their commercial agriculture and coastal economic enterprises. North-Eastern Kenya is a unique region which oscillates between net out-migration and net in-migration as well as exchanges population with neighbouring Somalia.

Previous studies have identified western Kenya as an important origin of rural out-migration, both to rural economic nodes as well as to urban areas (Mooock 1976, 1978; Ominde 1968; Oucho 1981, 1996; Oucho and Mukras 1983; Rempel *et al.* 1970). The results of this study suggest that the nature of rural-urban migration has changed significantly. Although the colonial period witnessed a high influx of male migrants from the rural areas to larger urban areas (notably Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu), the majority of these migrants did not settle in these urban centres due to the stringent colonial laws, which forbade even the migrants' spouses to visit with them in their places of work. The migrants stayed in destinations only for as long as they could find or remain in employment. The colonial government implemented policies that discouraged permanent establishment of Kenyans in urban areas (Elkins 2005).

Thus, migrant labour was recruited on a temporary basis and the migrants were paid low wages to discourage family reunification in the urban destinations. Accordingly, accommodation for migrant workers was provided in the form of 'bachelor quarters' or 'boys' quarters'. This resulted in migrant labour circulation between rural origins and urban destinations for as long as the migrants worked, a phenomenon known in migration literature as 'circular migration' (Oucho 2007; Owuor 2004), which still persists among first-generation urban migrants in Kenya (Oucho 1996).

A recent population situation analysis of Kenya (NCPD 2013: 190) notes that:

The colonial administration regarded towns as non-African areas in which Africans came only to work temporarily as labourers...as the bases for colonial administrative and commercial activities, not centres for permanent African settlement and participation...Kenyans still perceived the town as a place where people come to work, to accumulate 'wealth' and eventually retire 'back home...' To many, a town ...is common for urban Kenyans to identify themselves with an 'urban house' and a 'rural home'.

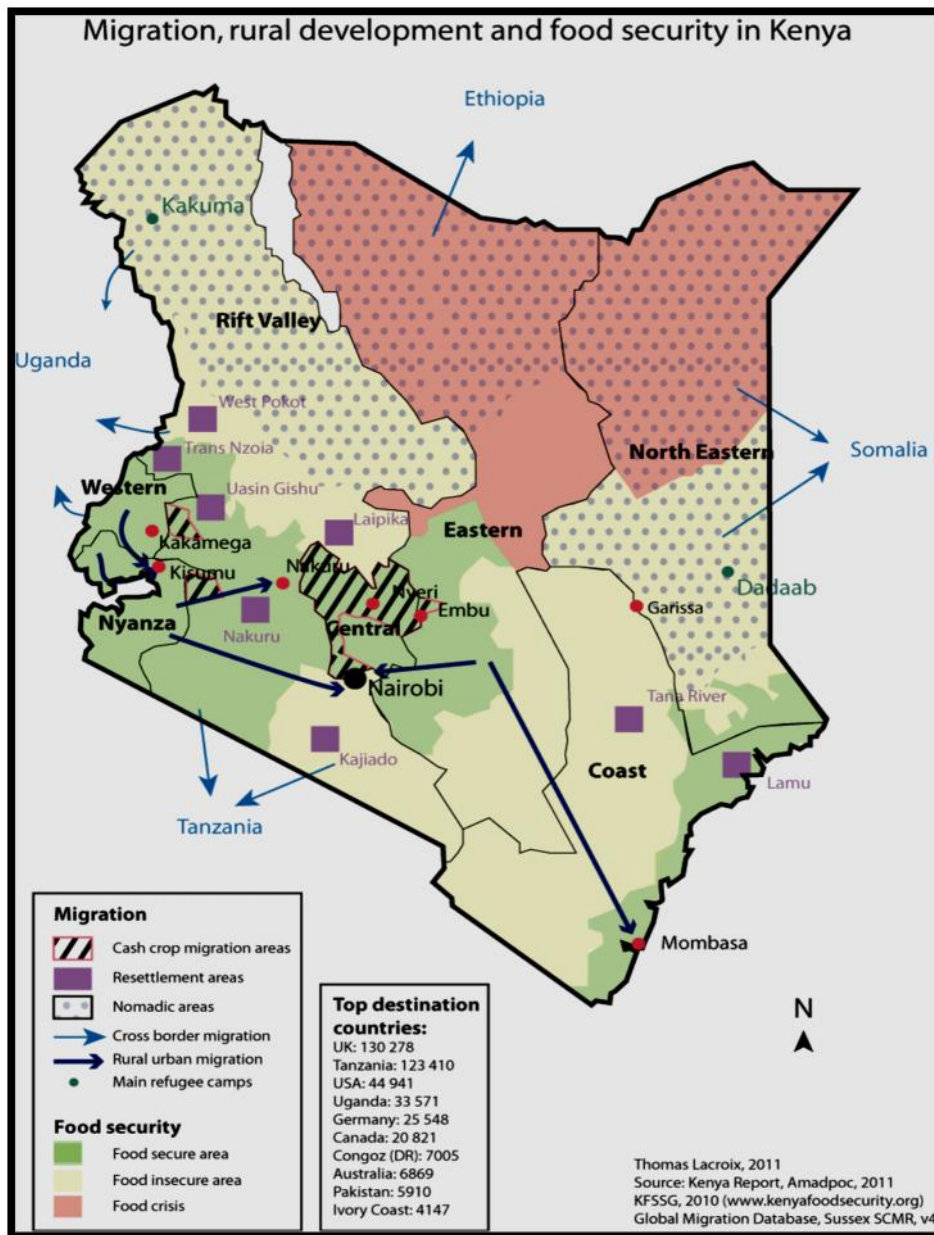
In the interest of space, this brief literature review concentrates on the Kenyan setting where migration research was first undertaken in the context of land acquisition and utilisation (Ominde 1968), attracting subsequent studies on rural-urban dichotomy and links (Moock 1978, 1979; Oucho 1996; Rempel *et al.* 1970; Ross and Weisner 1977; Weisner 1972), determinants of internal migration (Knowles and Anker 1977, 1981), and the changing rural livelihoods in the country (Francis 2000). Seldom considered are: migration as a household decision (Agesa and Kim 2001; Sly and Wrigley 1985); how migration enables poor people to become richer (Collier and Lal 1984); migration as an aspect of spatial population change (Oucho 1988); and the migration-development nexus from a regional perspective (Gould 1985; KNBS and SID 2013a; Mukras and Oucho 1985; Oucho 2007).

Two shortcomings can be detected in the literature. First, the literature reviewed reflects the situation several decades ago when the country enjoyed an economic boom in the early years of the independence era. Second, apart from analyses based on census macro data, systematic recent research on internal migration in the country has been lacking. Rather, interest has shifted to international migration, in particular emigration and diaspora issues. Yet, despite these shortcomings, the literature provides perspectives that resonate with migration and poverty interrelations in the country today, following the government's poverty eradication programme in the context of the Millennium Development (MDG) and the Kenya Vision 2030 (Republic of Kenya 2007).

Kenya has a distinctive rural-urban dichotomy that has engendered regional inequalities in the country (Bigsten 1978; KNBS and SID 2013a; SID 2004, 2006). The simplest way to appreciate the rural-urban dichotomy in Kenya is through the evolution of the country's dual economy, which was characterised by the neglect or marginalisation of rural areas and the concentration of commercial agriculture in rural nodes. These developments of commercial agriculture led to the emergence of urban centres, alongside other urban centres concentrated around the railway and road transport systems in the country (Obudho 1983; Owuor 2012; Soja 1968). It should be noted that rural areas experienced two types of dispossession: firstly, of large chunks of land that were expropriated in the Kenya Highlands (or the 'White Highlands' in the

colonial days) for commercial agriculture and, secondly, of labour that was procured from the poorer rural areas to work on the commercial farms as well as in the urban areas that jugged out of them. Figure 1 outlines the migration routes from different parts of the country.

**Figure 1: Kenya's Internal and International Migration Routes**



Source: T. Lacroix (2011: 3)

Agesa and Kim (2001) note that there are few opportunities for formal employment outside the cities, given the government's concentration on developing the urban economy over the rural areas. Wages are also significantly higher in urban areas, perhaps due to the existing workers' trade union representation and collective bargaining agreements, which are lacking in the rural areas. Over the years, these benefits have acted as a strong motivation for many rural dwellers to migrate to the cities in search for employment. The temporary nature of this type of migration is manifested by the number of migrants who return to their rural homes, whether because they failed to secure employment or to retire (Oucho 1996). The situation



has not changed much over the past several decades, given that the development gap between rural and urban areas has kept widening.

### **1.3 Aims, Objectives and Research Questions**

The overall objective of the research was to investigate out-migration from Siaya and Vihiga Counties in western Kenya to the cities of Kisumu and Nairobi. The purpose was to ascertain the major causes and consequences of migration, considering the migrants' characteristics, to explore pertinent links between migrants and non-migrants, and to analyse the impact of migration on poverty reduction. The findings form the basis for prescribing suitable recommendations for formulating appropriate migration policies and strategies for both national and devolved governance in Kenya, in order to synchronise rural-urban interdependence in tackling migration-poverty relationship.

This working paper: (1) analyses why out-migration from western Kenya to a regional city and to Kenya's capital takes place; (2) highlights the migrants' demographic and socio-economic characteristics at the time of and after migrating; (3) examines the nature and extent of the migrants' upkeep of linkages with their origins; (4) assesses the impact of migration gender roles and relations; (5) analyses the benefits of rural out-migration on migrant households at the origin; and (6) hypothesises prospects for migration scenarios in Kenya's new system of devolved governance.

### **1.4 Methodology and Approaches of Data Collection**

Three different approaches of qualitative methodology were used in order to explore the research questions and understand the nature of rural-urban migration in relation to poverty. First, in-depth interviews were held with migrants at the destinations, and with both migrant and non-migrant households at the origins. This allowed the research to capture both the experience of migrants and of those without a history of migration. Second, focus group discussions were conducted in order to try to elucidate the differences in migration experiences between groups. The focus groups were homogeneous in terms of age and gender. Finally, key informant interviews were held with experts and stakeholders in matters related to internal migration, in particular rural-urban migration and poverty. Table 1 presents the data collected through these different approaches in the different sites. One shortcoming is the absence of data on non-migrants in Vihiga County.<sup>2</sup> That aside, the data collected were of high quality and the overwhelming responses far exceeded the researchers' expectations.

The selection of the three categories of respondents relied on net migration of sub-counties (districts) in the four research sites to distinguish net out-migration from net in-migration areas. Subsequently, judgemental sampling was employed whereby the local administration and a wide range of development stakeholders helped the research team to identify migrant and non-migrant households. From the previous census data, it was possible to identify areas of heavy out-migration from the two counties. Whilst visiting those areas, the researchers worked with the local administration to distinguish between migrant and non-migrant households. The sample was drawn from selected households in different locations. In urban areas, the researchers worked with the local administration (chiefs) to identify in-migrants

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<sup>2</sup>The data collected were of such poor quality that they were discarded.

from Siaya and Vihiga counties, selecting a sample reflecting their origins from different parts of the counties. In addition, a sample of non-migrants or urban natives (born in urban areas) was selected in the same or adjacent households. The final samples turned out to be larger than envisaged before fieldwork, in order to cover for the unviable data that was eventually discarded.

**Table 1: Distribution of In-depth Interviews (IDIs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in all the Research Sites**

COUNTY	MIGRANT	NON-MIGRANT	TOTAL IDIs	KIIs	FGDs
Siaya	64	37	101	5	4
Vihiga	92	-	92	12	4
Kisumu	38	12	50	5	4
Nairobi	69	23	92	12	4
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>263</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>16</b>

In-depth interviews were conducted through an open-ended questionnaire that was administered among migrant and non-migrant households in the four research sites. The local administration helped with the identification of the households and encouraged respondents to cooperate in the exercise. Key informant interviews were conducted with individuals (local chiefs, government officials, NGO and CBO operatives) who were knowledgeable about migration and non-migration in the four research sites. Key informants were selected on the basis of relevance, functions and involvement in migration and poverty issues. Finally, focus group discussions were conducted in all four sites; these groups were formatted with the help of key informants. Key informants were interviewed at their places of work or residence, in-depth interviews were conducted at the respondents’ residences, and the focus group discussions were held in local schools nearest to the participants. On average, each of the in-depth interviews took about 45 minutes, key informant interviews took about 45 minutes, and each focus group discussion lasted about an hour.

## 2. Findings of the Study

### 2.1 Out-Migrants’ Demographic and Socio-Economic Profiles

The *Kenya Population Data Sheet* (Population Reference Bureau, 2011:6), based on the 2009 Kenya Population and Housing Census, reports that western Kenya had a population of 4.3 million, made up of 2.2 million (51.2 per cent) women and 2.1 million (48.8 per cent) men; this gives a sex ratio of 95 men per 100 women, which implies male out-migration from the region.

Analysis of responses to the research instruments suggests some interesting developments. For instance, at the time of out-migration, 62.5 per cent of migrants were males and 25 per

cent were females aged 15-29 years. Regarding marital status, 62.5 per cent of both sexes reported being single at the time of out-migration, 32.5 per cent were married and 5 per cent were separated/widowed/divorced. This distribution verifies heavy out-migration of those yet to raise families. With regard to employment status, 80 per cent of out-migrants reported that they were unemployed at the time of out-migration, a proportion that declined slightly to 75 per cent after migration, as some of them had already secured employment. This implies that most out-migrants remain unemployed after migration. These statistics lie at the core of the drivers of out-migration from western Kenya.

## **2.2 Drivers of Out-migration from Rural Western Kenya**

As mentioned in the literature review, some of the drivers of migration from rural western Kenya have been linked to lack of development, which leads to unemployment in the region (Figure 2). Although Siaya County has an abundance of fertile land that can sustain the household economy, only a fraction of it is actually cultivated. Hence, the youth who could participate in farm work (albeit often detest it), prefer out-migration, away from a life that they consider at odds with their potential.

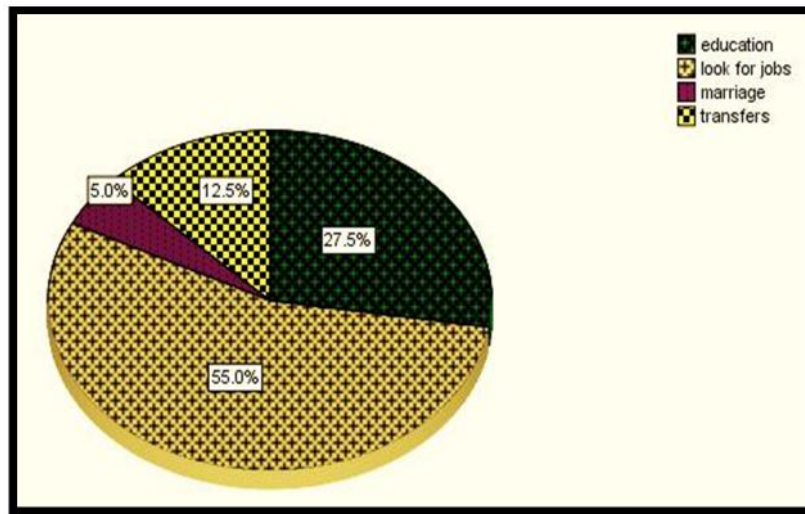
### *Education in the face of unemployment:*

One of the drivers of out-migration is the youth's high levels of education (completed high school) within western Kenya in the face of rampant unemployment, which stimulates youth out-migration to urban areas, where they expect to have better opportunities for college or university education, career development and employment.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, rural areas do not offer young high school or college graduates employment opportunities besides the limited farming options, which is work that many of the youth detest anyway (Osborne 2012:18). Moreover, as Min-Harris (2010: 160) observes, the education the youth receive is geared towards employment opportunities in the urban areas, adding that 'as a compounding factor, education can be cost prohibitive and sometimes viewed as unnecessary in an agricultural society that is dependent upon farm working'. Results of our study reveal that quite a number of rural residents migrated for the purposes of seeking further opportunities such as education and employment (Figure 2).

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<sup>3</sup>It has been noted that whenever population censuses are held, these youth are missing in western Kenya's count as they would have migrated and, because of the de facto enumeration adopted by Kenya, are outside the region; for details, see Oucho (1979) and data on educational attainment of migrants in Nairobi by areas of origin (Oucho, 1988, KBNS and SID, 2013).

**Figure 2: Reasons for Out-Migration from Western Kenya**



*Poor living conditions and oppressive cultural practices:*

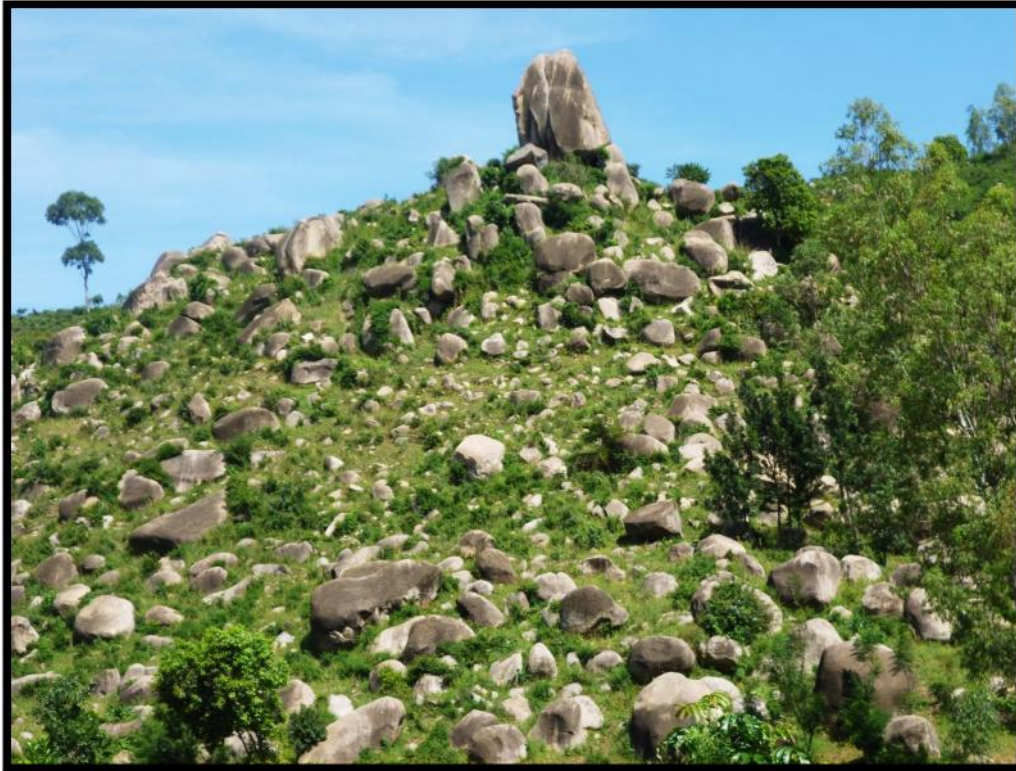
Apart from citing lack of opportunities and poor living conditions, some respondents out-migrated due to oppressive cultural practices (e.g. witchcraft and widow succession). Others complained that since they were not in a position to inherit or own land they were unable to engage in any income-generating agricultural activities. Therefore, they had no option but to migrate elsewhere.

*Undependable arable land and crop yields:*

Vihiga County is known to be the most densely populated and one of the poorest areas in Kenya, which has been attributed to 'limited land, high poverty levels, limited off-farm income and non-adoption of recommended technologies' (Nyangweso *et al.* 2011:56). The responses from the study showed that inhabitants are unable to engage in farming due to the large boulders occupying the land, which compels them to embrace out-migration (see Plate 1).<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the reasons for recent out-migration have not changed markedly from those reported by those who migrated several decades ago (Ominde 1968). Cultivable land is simply inadequate for the rapidly growing population of Vihiga County. Siaya County, on the other hand, has abundant land but is inadequately farmed and often experiences erratic rainfall. The contrasting situations in the two counties result in a common outcome: persistent underdevelopment spurring out-migration.

<sup>4</sup>Inhabitants of Vihiga County have out-migrated not only to urban areas, but also to the less densely populated defunct Nyanza province (in particular Migori area which borders Tanzania) land settlement areas in the defunct Rift Valley where abundant land has been available.

**Plate 1: Boulders on Farmland in Vihiga County**



*Photo: Linda Oucho*

*Superior urban amenities:*

Respondents underlined the pull of better-quality urban access to basic amenities, better health care and other vital services that are often unavailable or not as advanced in the rural areas. The inhabitants of western Kenya highlighted that maternal and child mortality are extremely high due to poor rural health infrastructure and lack of health personnel, which leaves them with no other choice but to migrate to urban areas to access better health facilities. This was the case for a 27 year-old woman (Box 1) whose decision to migrate was linked to lack of medical care and services in her area.

**Box 1:**

**A pregnant woman's migration to Kisumu city for maternal health care**

A 27 year old woman who was due to give birth to her first child was dissatisfied with the services available at Siaya County. She initially went to the city of Kisumu to access better medical attention, upon which she gave birth safely. Instead of returning to her local county, she decided to stay and search for a job in Kisumu. Her response suggests that her migration was prompted due to the lack of social services in her area.

Perceptions on rural-urban migration vary and usually people who decide to migrate may do so in response to their environment and/or situation. As such, migration becomes a solution for the migrant to access their needs. Most rural out-migrants are able-bodied persons who are in search of better opportunities away from their home areas or who may lack access to

the relevant resources anyway. However, while most rural residents favour rural-urban migration for different reasons, including a perception that urbanites always lived better lives, some, particularly those in non-migrant households, hold a contrary view. Some rural non-migrants warned that cities actually harbour several vices: they are usually over-crowded, they offer few to no opportunities, thus do not provide security, and they provide unhealthy food, including non-organic foodstuffs. Hence, whereas our study shows that some drivers of out-migration act as pull factors, other drivers push out migrants to the cities.

### **2.3 Impact of Migration on Poverty**

This section provides both positive and negative impacts of migration on poverty outcomes. The negatives relate to migration as an impediment to development that causes poverty, while the positives underline the role of migration as a panacea for development and consequently poverty alleviation. For instance, Lacroix (2011) asserts that migration has ambiguous consequences for rural development as it may be a factor in and/or an obstacle to poverty alleviation. To shed more light on this paradox, sub-section 2.3.1 addresses the drawbacks of migration, while sub-section 2.3.2 highlights the gains derived from migration. In the latter sub-section, the concluding paragraph captures the ambiguity inherent in the consequences of migration. Migration, therefore, is only beneficial when its cons (rural-urban transfers, brawn drain, internal brain drain and family disruptions) result in gains in the rural origins, in the short and long run.

#### ***2.3.1 Migration as an impediment to development and the resultant poverty***

Migration has impacted development in Kenya in various ways, both positively and negatively. Much of the available literature on the relationship between migration and development has drawn attention to the positive impacts of migration at the expense of the negatives. This section focuses on the thesis that migration is detrimental to rural development.

A World Bank (2007) study identified Kenya as an agriculture-based economy, with slightly more than half (53 per cent) of Kenyans living below the poverty line. The *Kenya Economic Report 2013* (KIPPRA, 2013) shows that the country's GDP growth is highly dependent on the agricultural sector, which (though with 26 per cent added value) contributes to food production, rural employment and rural incomes. Changes in climatic conditions – lack of rainfall in north-eastern Kenya and both heavy and short rainfalls that result in flash floods in western and central Kenya – have had a negative impact on the agricultural sector, including loss of livestock and human life. Other conditions that hampered growth in the agricultural sector include the necrosis disease, which affected the production of maize that led to losses of between 10-60 per cent (KIPPRA 2013:74). The results of the KIPPRA study indicate that the unstable agricultural sector has created a situation where half of Kenya's population is food-insecure and one-third undernourished. In addition, some of the responses from migrants indicated that they did not own land and/or livestock, nor did they have access to these resources, which implies their inability to engage in farm work as a dependable source of both food and income. Women, in particular, indicated that they cannot inherit land or property from their family, a constraint linked to the cultural stereotype held about women not owning or inheriting land among the Luo and Luhya of western Kenya. As a result of out-migration, especially of the working age population, rural land has been left to the aged and the very young, as well as to women who have now taken over as household heads while the men out-

migrate. The elderly have limited resources and energy at their disposal to make the most out of rural resources (land and livestock), which results in the dismal performance of agriculture, even if it is only for subsistence.

*Employment prospects:*

Rural-urban migration in no way guarantees enhanced prospects of securing employment. Some migrants stay for extended periods before getting employed whilst others completely fail to secure jobs and, consequently, opt to return home. The time and energy wasted by such returning migrants could have been put to use in rural development in the farms if they had stayed at the origin. A respondent in Vihiga County noted that 'my son has not found a job in Nairobi and he is not willing to come back and help me on the farm.' There could be a range of reasons why he has an unwillingness to return to the rural area including lack of interest in farming (Osborne, 2012), attributable to the neglect agriculture suffers in Kenya's education (Min-Harris 2010). The situation whereby only the elderly, children and women are left to manage farms as young, able-bodied and most development conscious persons out-migrate, has resulted in different priorities for agricultural production for those left behind. It has led to modest to poor crop yields and the resultant food insecurity in the rural areas, which can also be linked to inconsistent climate conditions in the area (KIPPRA 2013). In such a situation, out-migration becomes a more viable option, even when it is potentially riddled with uncertainties such as unemployment.

In some cases, male out-migration precipitates other uncertainties. It results in the break-up of marriages and/or families, especially where the out-migrant men seldom return home to visit, sever links with the origins, or enter into new relationships with women at destinations. In a study on 'split migrants', de Laat (2005: 3) detected a number of problems for married couples. Men 'forget' their wives and become sexually active with other women and/or consume alcohol. The married men were similarly suspicious about married women who were 'left alone' in the rural area, as they might get boyfriends or use part of the remittances on private goods such as nice clothes for themselves. Moreover, as polygamy is a strong tradition in Kenya (with previous Kenya Demographic and Health Surveys showing western Kenya to be leading in it), polygamous marriages or 'come-we-stay'<sup>5</sup> arrangements among male migrants with spouses left behind are not uncommon.<sup>6</sup> With more mouths to feed from a meagre income, most of these migrants neglect their rural homes and concentrate on their 'nearby' families at the destinations. Subsequently, the abandoned rural households plunge into deeper poverty. This is a situation replicated in most Kenyan rural areas, where out-migration has been seen to negatively impact development of the area. Some non-migrants interviewed in Siaya County confirm this view. An elderly non-migrant stated that out-migration 'causes destabilisation and one side develops at the expense of the other', while a young male non-migrant in the county fervently stated that migration is 'not good because it denies rural areas of services that were being offered and farms are not attended to'. However, many non-

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<sup>5</sup> This is an expression that signifies 'a marriage/potential marriage formation in which a man and a woman get together in a union that would formerly be deemed legally, culturally and religiously unacceptable. In this arrangement, a male and female live together, with or without the knowledge or blessings of parents or guardians, or the community in general' (Wawire and Jensen 2013: 10).

<sup>6</sup> Results of the *Kenya Demographic and Health Survey (KDHS) 2008/09* show that over 20 per cent of population in the two defunct provinces of western Kenya were in polygamous marriages: 23 per cent in Western and 21 per cent in Nyanza; the two provinces ranking second and third respectively to the defunct North-Eastern province with a predominantly Muslim population (NCPD, 2012).

migrants suggested that there were some benefits to migration, especially in terms of offering more opportunities of employment, improving the migrants' skills as well as enabling them to access better services. In this regard, a male non-migrant from Siaya noted that 'it is good due to exposure, when those in cities come back here, their standards of living have improved compared to those who remained in rural areas.' This finding underscores why out-migration from Siaya County is a persistent feature of Kenya's internal migration dynamics.

#### *Proliferation of urban slums*

At the urban destinations, rural-urban migration is mainly responsible for the proliferation of slums where poverty reigns as civic authorities cannot respond adequately to the provision of varied migrants' needs. Interviews carried out in Nairobi provided evidence of migrants leading worse lives in slums than in rural areas; unsanitary conditions, crime and other vices are the most common features in slum settlements (see Plate 2). Some of the migrants noted that rural poverty has been exported to urban areas – in their own words, 'rural poverty has increasingly become urban poverty' – as the rural poor increase the size of the existing urban population. The urban squatter settlements, variously called 'slums' or 'informal settlements', suffer under high levels of unemployment and under-employment, and extremely poor environmental conditions that are deteriorating due to the surplus population they support (Tacoli 1998). Resources that civic authorities could have channelled to other development projects are inevitably directed to accommodating the needs of the massive urban population influx, and could be higher than estimated due to other costs incurred. This trend has had a negative impact on urban economic growth that fails to generate adequate employment opportunities for urban migrants, most of whom are unable to get jobs in the formal sector and thus have to take on informal sector employment with low incomes that land them in poverty. A 21 year-old male migrant from Siaya interviewed in Nairobi stated that 'there are more job opportunities in urban areas, making it easy for a job search; yet, the reality was the difficulty in securing employment.' Adding to the toll is the increased number of poor and undernourished people in urban areas, in particular children. In our study, most migrants from rural western Kenya said they did not travel with their children; usually they left the children behind with a family member whom they sent remittances for their children's upbringing.



## Plate 2: Sanitation near Informal Settlement in Nairobi



*Photo: Linda Oucho*

To sum up, poverty has shifted to cities and major urban centres; a phenomenon UNHABITAT (2007) dubs 'urbanization of poverty'. Contrary to the migrants' belief that by moving to urban areas they would be migrating out of poverty, in reality most of them are moving into poverty, meaning that they move from the place of origin that offers them basic amenities such as shelter and food to a location where their desire is to secure a job in order to afford the basic amenities. For instance, one key informant interviewee, a business woman, claimed that '...it takes them [migrant youths] time to settle down hence most of them end up in the slums for cheap accommodation where there is minimal security.' Another male community worker echoed the same sentiments when he said that '...in the urban [areas], they lack jobs, they stop going to church and they just congest in the city.'

The implication here is that most youthful migrants who migrate to the cities often get disappointed in their job search and end up settling in worse-off areas than their places of origin. For example, one male migrant from Siaya stated that settling down in Nairobi and thereafter getting a job was challenging, and that accommodation was expensive as cheaper accommodation was available only in the insecure areas.

Due to limited and constrained resources at the disposal of both the national and county governments, little has been done to improve slum conditions in Kenya's urban centres. This is an argument that UNHABITAT has underscored in several AMADPOC meetings, seminars and conferences, and suggested as an appropriate research topic. UNHABITAT cautions about the presumption that rural-urban migration necessarily moves migrants out of poverty. Rather, it causes some migrants to move out of poverty whilst as others plunge into it.

### *Rural-urban transfers*

Migration also enhances rural poverty when the already strained rural resources flow back to urban centres; a form of rural-urban transfers. This was found more than three decades ago in a study of rural-urban migration and urban-rural links (Oucho and Mukras 1983). Oucho (1996: 109) found that urban-rural transfers accounted for 73.3 per cent of criss-crossing transfers valued at 85.4 per cent of transfers. From interviews carried out in western Kenya, a number of respondents in our study stated that they sent money and food stuffs to their relatives in urban areas. These forms of assistance were meant to help new migrants cushion themselves as they settled in cities and went about looking for employment. Such support also helped college and university students to pay fees and to meet related costs. Even as the migrants eat into financial and food resources of their already strained rural relatives, they acknowledge such support as imperative in the early stages of urban in-migration. The findings highlighted verify that the rural areas lose a significant population of its young labour force that would otherwise help develop or support the agricultural activities on the farm or fishing in the lake. A male high school teacher interviewed in the study as a key informant stated that:

Most of the professionals and family breadwinners lack expertise in rural areas and low circulation of money...Migration aggravates poverty as most of the professionals move to the towns where they can easily access services.

In the same breath, a male community worker underscores this point by observing that:

Yes, in the rural areas, most of the land is not tilled because all energetic youth are in the city [and]... lack of farming brings hunger in the village.

There are also changes in gender roles in rural households as women assume positions of authority during the absence of their spouses. Empowerment of women has occurred as the women left behind make decisions on household matters that require immediate or emergency measures. This is positive for women as they are assuming a decision-making position within the household. However, it may be perceived as negative by male household and community members who still maintain the cultural patriarchal view of women and their roles within the household.

### *Loss of labour/brawn drain*

Departure of a family member causes output to fall proportionately more than household size (corrected by age) as those left behind have to forgo out-migrants' services, skills and expertise that cannot be provided either by hiring another worker or the left-behind family members doing extra work. In addition, the urban-rural remittances cannot compensate adequately for the loss of labour, remittances can never acquire/hire the services to replace the out-migrants' contribution, and, in certain cases, recipients of remittances divert them to uses that initially were not intended. Indeed, a community experiencing such predicament suffers net labour loss that eventually constrains agricultural revenue and stimulates more out-migration (Oucho 1996: 113-4). In our study, many migrant households stated that the able-bodied members had left, leaving behind very young children and the elderly who are unable to engage in the labour-intensive farm work.

### *Internal brain drain and brain waste*

Although the two concepts are often applied to international migration of highly educated, skilled or professional persons, it can also be applied to internal migration to explain the rural-urban movement of that calibre of migrants. Brain drain has a ripple effect on rural areas because, as Byerlee (1974:546) and others noted, the highly skilled have a higher propensity to migrate. A case in point is the health sector. Most skilled personnel in this sector opt for either rural-urban migration or migration abroad, as opposed to working in rural areas. Evidence from our study suggests that health educators were often appointed to higher positions in the city with better benefits, and invariably preferred rural-urban migration. Health is a prerequisite for vibrant labour activity, without which production is in jeopardy. Therefore, the exit of health practitioners from rural areas causes a big blow to rural development. Evidence from population census data over the last five decades (1969-2009) clearly shows that western Kenya remains a region of incessant brain drain, giving the false statistics that population with secondary education in western Kenya is lower than in other parts of Kenya that actually have much lower school attendance rates (KNBS and SID 2013a; Oucho 1979). Nonetheless, people will continue to seek further education and training opportunities, as long as financial resources permit. If return migration picks up, especially because of devolved governance and the opportunities it presents, western Kenya could reap the benefits of 'brain gain' and enhanced investment potential.

Non-migrants interviewed in Siaya and Vihiga counties acknowledged the fact that their educated youth had nothing keeping them in the villages when they could look for and secure employment in urban areas. The non-migrants approved of migration because of the benefits the migrant and his/her family may gain from migration. The scenario described in Box 2 below by a female non-migrant, underlines the situation of the youth.

#### **Box 2:**

##### **A non-migrant's approval of youth out-migration from Siaya County**

A 46-year old female non-migrant in Siaya argued about the virtues of youth out-migration. She believed that the youth must migrate to have opportunities for sharing ideas with their peers in urban areas in the hope of returning with bright ideas for developing the county. By remaining in the rural area, the youth would fall behind their peers in contemporary pursuits and would fail to develop themselves. This expectation of the non-migrant and those who subscribe to her view suggests that migration confers special attributes on migrants to enable them return to and develop their rural origins.

In other scenarios there were cases of 'brain waste', as some of the migrant respondents had college or university qualifications from their counties, but lacked work experience or familiarity with life in Nairobi, incapacitating them from securing jobs in the city. Consequently, such migrants ended up working in informal-sector jobs (e.g. as street vendors, metal fabricators or builders) in order to earn a living.

### *Family Disruptions and Gender Roles*

The non-migrant women in our study (and other out-migrants' relatives) had been left as the custodians of their rural households in western Kenya. This has had a negative impact on rural

development and entrenches poverty levels. Consequently, female-headed households tend to lag behind in varied aspects of development, a phenomenon largely manifested in societies and countries where farming is exclusively assigned to men and where women cannot own land (Taufatofau 2011:17). Migrants' spouses find it difficult to engage in other income-generating activities since they have to look after and fend for their children (Samaratunga *et al.* 2011:38). In our study, this is a problematic issue because fishing and farming are important sources of livelihood in western Kenya. Even when remittances are sent to the spouses left behind, the decision of the absent husbands is still crucial. Women wait for their husbands to perform conjugal rites necessary for the initiation of cultivation, planting seeds and harvesting crops. They cannot divert the uses of remittances without the husbands' approval and they cannot independently take charge of marriage, burial and other household-based undertakings. Some of these are oppressive cultural norms that the youth detest. For example, in Nairobi a 26 year-old male migrant from Vihiga County stated that: 'lack of jobs, running away from oppressive culture in which one must do what tradition dictates and poor living conditions have forced us to leave our homes for the city.'

Our study revealed that women were empowered as a result of their spouses' migration, as they were left behind to manage family or out-migrant husbands' assets. Traditionally, in western Kenya, it was not possible for women to inherit or buy land due to the land laws that had been developed after independence, which were based on the customary law system (FIDA Kenya and International Human Rights Clinic 2009:51). However, the passing of the Constitution of Kenya 2010 (Chapter 5, Part 1) makes it legally possible for women to buy and inherit land, thereby permitting equitable access to land irrespective of gender. Nonetheless, the cultural stereotype of not allowing women to inherit land still persists, as was revealed by some female migrant respondents in the study.

### ***2.3.2 Migration as a panacea for development and poverty alleviation***

Some researchers have underlined the point that migration promotes development and consequently alleviates poverty. Migration propagates a situation of labour shortage at the point of origin, consequently contributing to increased local wage rate in the rural areas (Hossain 2011:21). Rural dwellers who choose to stay behind often benefit from the increased wage rate due to the limited labour supply. Subsequently, the high wages for the rural folks are channelled to other development projects, helping to reduce poverty.

This paper corroborates the finding of previous studies on western Kenya that migration contributes to poverty alleviation through remittances derived from the migrants' income. This is particularly true when there are no socio-cultural barriers that adversely affect development activities in the rural areas. Remittances, whether financial or non-financial (including ideas, skills, symbols and other attributes that are brought back by migrants from their places of destination), have been instrumental in steering rural development (Levitt 1999). Studies carried out in Kenya, especially in western Kenya, have found that migrants from the region do remit a significant amount of their income to facilitate rural development in anticipation of their eventual return to the rural home. In one study, 90.2 per cent of migrants expected to return to their districts of origin for retirement, while 76.5 per cent expected to retire in their location (village) of origin (Oucho 1996: 119-121). These migrants commit a given portion of their hard-earned money to rural development, in order to prepare them for comfortable retirement once they return to the origins. These remittances are

usually channelled to development projects, such as acquisition and ownership of assets, among them land, cattle, and building materials (Neitzert 1994; Oucho 1996:93-4; Shipton 1988). This is aside from the usual culturally inherited and controlled assets, which men folk bequeath to their son(s) through the primogeniture system that holds sway in western Kenya.

Furthermore, Ross and Weisner's (1997) study of the region reveals that migrants maintain strong contacts with rural areas because they ensure their unequivocal future claim to assets due to them. Hoddinot's (1994) study found that 84.9 per cent of respondents in western Kenya who had been away for more than one year had visited their family at least once in the previous twelve months. Our study corroborates this, as the majority of the respondents, both migrants and non-migrants, argued that it is important to maintain contact with the rural households, emphasising: 'that is where they are from'. Migrants usually maintained ties through mobile phone calls and home visits during holidays, whereas home-based relatives would also visit them periodically at the destinations.

Migrants from western Kenya have stimulated development in the region in a number of ways. Generally, they send remittances to be used in various projects like the construction or renovation of rural homes/schools/churches, paying of school fees – giving back to community (*harambee*) – or for the purchasing of livestock, land and farm equipment (Oucho 1996: 95-7). All these are projects intended to uplift the socio-economic situation of the rural folks cause migration to play a critical role in alleviating poverty in rural areas, not only in western Kenya but indeed in the entire country where households and communities benefit from migrants' remittances (when they are for specific projects rather than merely for household consumption/maintenance purposes). In most urban destinations, migrants from particular origins operate within migrants' associations to pool resources that they remit to their home areas for community-level uses (Oucho 1996: 144-46).

In a nutshell, our study puts forward the conclusion that migration has bi-directional impacts on the lives of both migrants and rural dependants. Migration has both inherent pros and cons, depending on its outcomes, either reducing or entrenching poverty. Where the situation involves excessive loss of workforce (brawn drain and brain drain as mentioned earlier), migration entrenches more poverty in the affected regions. However, when remittances, women empowerment, farm and rural investment, the development of human capital and information knowledge take place, migration facilitates development, engendering poverty alleviation. Our study's in-depth interview respondents and focus group discussion participants revealed positive views about possible contributions of migration to county-level development. Box 3 summarises the view of the participants of a focus group in Kibera, Nairobi, who spoke favourably about return migration to the rural areas. Our study found these features to be the norm rather than the exception.

### **Box 3:**

#### **Views of a Focus Group in Kibera, Nairobi**

Migrants develop knowledge and skills in urban areas that they would be able to take back to the rural areas to improve the farming culture (e.g. farming with fertiliser, setting up a water pump for irrigation). In addition, they could inform rural residents about marketing strategies for their goods and customer relations. The return of these migrants could create a foundation for future generations by improving infrastructure and social services, notably schools and health facilities. However, the majority of the people who want to return only consider returning when they are at retirement age, and may be unable to engage in such practices. The rural areas would benefit from return migration of the youth for the development process to be realised.

## **2.4 Migrants' Suggested Action Points**

The migrants in this study suggested certain actions that, they believed, would enable both national and county governments, as well as other stakeholders in migration management, to help chart a meaningful way forward in consonance with migrants' views, fears and aspirations. They recommend that:

- Measures should be taken to enforce environmental sustainability in western Kenya, where widespread soil erosion and frequent floods reduce soil fertility, resulting in low crop yields and consequently cause out-migration. Although most migrants do remit money to purchase farm inputs for improved agricultural production, their efforts come to naught unless serious environmental conservation is undertaken to permit agricultural boom with greater returns to farmers, in the process reducing out-migration.
- Security of migrants' income, including decent work and social protection, should incorporate access to assets such as land, capital or resources, because lack of these assets force rural dwellers to migrate. Availability of these assets in rural areas would play a crucial role in stemming unnecessary rural-urban migration.
- Migrants' social inclusion, participation and voice are crucial in both national and county policies and programmes that have a bearing on out-migration, migrants' welfare at the destinations and return migration to the origins.

As the dust of the 2007/08 post-election violence (PEV) in Kenya, which caused displacement of persons and forced some migrants to return to their origins, settles, the return migrants could be approached to help develop their affected families and communities through their knowledge, skills and experience.

## **3. Recommendations: Migration and Rural Poverty Alleviation**

The study suggests that it is necessary to consider the recommendations of migrants and non-migrants as well as those of other stakeholders. In order to achieve their development objectives, both national and county governments need to take deliberate actions to

empower both migrants and potential migrants in a gender-sensitive context to make them forge strong working relations with non-migrants. Some recommendations made are stated below.

- Like previous studies, this study found that strong rural-urban links bolster rural out-migrants' active roles in developmental activities at both ends. Future research should explore migrants' dual roles to determine their convergence and divergence.
- Given the gendered perspectives of migration established in this study, migrants should collaborate with non-migrants to create awareness through community engagements or campaigns that highlight the rights of women and men as stipulated in the Constitution of Kenya 2010. An important aspect of the Constitution is the observance of gender equity in all appointments and participation in various activities.
- The introduction of devolved governance in Kenya since March 2013 will no doubt influence migration patterns in the country, among other things promote viable cooperation between migrants and non-migrants in making migration influence poverty reduction. To this end, county governments should conduct surveys to help identify profiles of migrants and non-migrants, including their knowledge and skills, to deploy in county as well as national development.
- Migrants' remittances as well as other transfers and predispositions for developing their origins should be carefully monitored with a view to developing rural areas and linking them to the relevant urban centres.
- As this study has confirmed that unemployment is a major trigger of rural out-migration, it is necessary to develop strategies for rural development to create more employment opportunities at the county level, and to develop infrastructure and social amenities (such as communication channels, electricity, roads, schools and health centres) to meet the needs of non-migrants and attract return migrants as well. This would render migration a choice rather than a necessity.

Given the superficial knowledge about (and lack of) capacity in handling migration in the context of poverty reduction, it is essential to provide relevant migration management capacity training for public officers in both national and county governments, in order to strengthen institutional capacity in handling migration-related issues. This would permit balanced appreciation of the migration-poverty reduction relationship.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper has shown that migration plays a key role in developing rural areas. In a developed rural setting with employment opportunities, poverty reduction would be easily realised. Results of our study underline contrasting impacts of migration on poverty status; migration inherently has pros and cons with respect to development and poverty alleviation. Migration is only beneficial to a society or community when its advantages outweigh its disadvantages or shortcomings, when its benefits outweigh the costs in rural areas, when it consolidates gender roles, and when it enhances rural-urban inter-dependence. Migration is advantageous when losses of human resources through brawn drain and brain drain as well as disrupted family roles are adequately compensated by migrants' remittances and other benefits. In light of this, we conclude that unless employment creation and infrastructure development are undertaken in the rural origins of out-migration, western Kenya will have to contend with

continued rural-urban migration without being able to reap its potential benefits. We suggest that a national rural-urban migration survey of Kenya could produce more complete results that would permit generalisation on the migration-poverty nexus in the country. While this study corroborates previous studies undertaken four decades ago, it opens new frontiers of curiosity for further research on the subject.

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## About the Migrating out of Poverty Research Programme Consortium

***Migrating out of Poverty*** is a research programme consortium (RPC) funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). It focuses on the relationship between migration and poverty – especially migration within countries and regions - and is located in five regions across Asia and Africa. The main goal of ***Migrating out of Poverty*** is to provide robust evidence on the drivers and impacts of migration in order to contribute to improving policies affecting the lives and well-being of impoverished migrants, their communities and countries, through a programme of innovative research, capacity building and policy engagement. The RPC will also conduct analysis in order to understand the migration policy process in developing regions and will supplement the world renowned migration databases at the University of Sussex with data on internal migration.

The ***Migrating out of Poverty*** consortium is coordinated by the University of Sussex, and led by CEO Professor L. Alan Winters with Dr Priya Deshingkar as the Research Director. Core partners are: the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) in Bangladesh; the Centre for Migration Studies (CMS) at the University of Ghana; the Asia Research Institute (ARI) at the National University of Singapore; the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS) at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa; and the African Migration and Development Policy Centre (AMADPOC) in Kenya.

Migrating out of Poverty

University of Sussex

Falmer, Brighton BN1 9QN, United Kingdom

tel: +44 (0)1273 873535

email: [migrationrpc@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:migrationrpc@sussex.ac.uk)

web: <http://migratingoutofpoverty.dfid.gov.uk/>

Twitter: @migrationrpc

