



South Asian Network for Development  
and Environmental Economics

# POLICY Brief

Number 10-05, November 2005

## UNDERSTANDING MIGRATION – DO THE COMMONS MATTER?

**Across South Asia people are on the move – migrating in search of work and to escape hardship. Understanding the circumstances that compel migration in arid areas is particularly important since environmental constraints can drive rural households into making decisions that place them in even deeper poverty. What factors motivate people to move? In particular, does degradation of natural resources matter for migration decisions? And, do the poor in the region follow the same path as the wealthy? A recent SANDEE study looks into some of these issues by studying migration in three districts in Gujarat in India.**

In dry areas of Gujarat migration is a common phenomenon. Roughly one third of the households studied report that a family member had left the region. In this water-scarce region, access to irrigation is singularly critical to rural livelihoods and allows people to stay put. The study finds that degradation of common village lands is linked to short-term migration decisions. Better management of the commons is likely to strengthen the livelihood base of traditional herder communities and limit migration among middle-income households. But what about the poor? The study finds that the poor in Gujarat have neither the assets nor the skills that can help them migrate. In this context, investments that improve local demand for landless labor offer the best pathway out of poverty.

### LOOKING AT MIGRATION

Amita Shah from the Gujarat Institute of Development Research, Ahmedabad, conducted the study. She analyzed migration data gathered from a survey of over one thousand households. The survey gathered information on a number of social, environmental and economic variables – including information on land degradation. In order to assess whether the rich and poor had different patterns of migration, both the landed and landless were interviewed. The aims of the study included finding out the extent of migration from the region and discovering which environmental and social factors contributed to short- and long-term migration.

### MIGRATION – A COMPLEX PICTURE

Migration-related research has frequently examined questions such as ‘who migrates?’ and has investigated why and how migration influences income or well-being. There are, however, some obvious gaps and weaknesses in this field of research. These stem from the fact that a lot of the theory relating to migration has emerged from the experiences of the early industrializing countries with well-developed labour markets. Another problem is that the information available in most developing economies does not capture the complex factors that can force people to migrate. This latter issue is key, since migration may be caused by a complex combination of distress and precautionary issues. Further, migration decisions are influenced by past decisions as well as potential plans for the future.

There are many examples of the complex interplay of factors at work. For example, one can observe the phenomenon of “chain migration” where the initial migrant works as a catalyst to pull kith and kin from the same community. In recent years, such complexities in the analysis of migration have led to refinements in the classic “push-and-pull” theories that have tried to explain it – for example, some researchers see migration as a “safety-valve mechanism” that may help prevent a further decline in livelihood status. Others distinguish between survival and subsistence-driven migration. Increasingly, migration is viewed more as an integral part of a household’s livelihood strategy and is seen within a dynamic context rather than as a one-shot decision.

This policy brief is based on SANDEE working paper No. 10-05, ‘Land Degradation and Migration in a Dry Land Region in India’, by Amita Shah from the Gujarat Institute of Development Research, Ahmedabad, India. The full report is available at [www.sandeeonline.org](http://www.sandeeonline.org)



Shah found that land degradation of both private and common land in the Gujarat region is widespread. Land-owning households reported that between nine and 43 percent of their land was degraded. Over thirty percent of village pastures and other common property land resources were degraded. This number varied from between 12 to 64 percent among the study villages. Such degradation is important since village common lands can support different livelihoods.

Migration is also widespread. Roughly one-third of all households reported that at least one person from their family had left the region. Villagers in general felt that migration is not a choice they would choose to make. But a large proportion of the households saw it as something that they would not be able to avoid in the future (i.e., in the next ten years).

### WHY DO PEOPLE MIGRATE?

Shah found that a household's migration decisions are determined largely by what its members think about the long-term viability of farming in the region. A large number of households looked to migration as a coping strategy to sustain their livelihoods.

She also found that there were some differences between the percentage of rich, middle-income and poor people who migrate. However, more significantly, the

**Table 1: Distance and Duration of Migration**

Distribution of Migrant Households/ Workers	Household Categories			
	Landless	Landed with upto10% irri.	Landed with >10% irri.	All
Households with short term migrants (as a % of migrant households)	74	55	28	58
Households with long-term migrants (as a % of migrant households)	26	45	72	42
Average number of months spent out by short-term migrants	6	7	4	6
Households who migrate out of the district (as a % of migrant households)	88	80	76	82

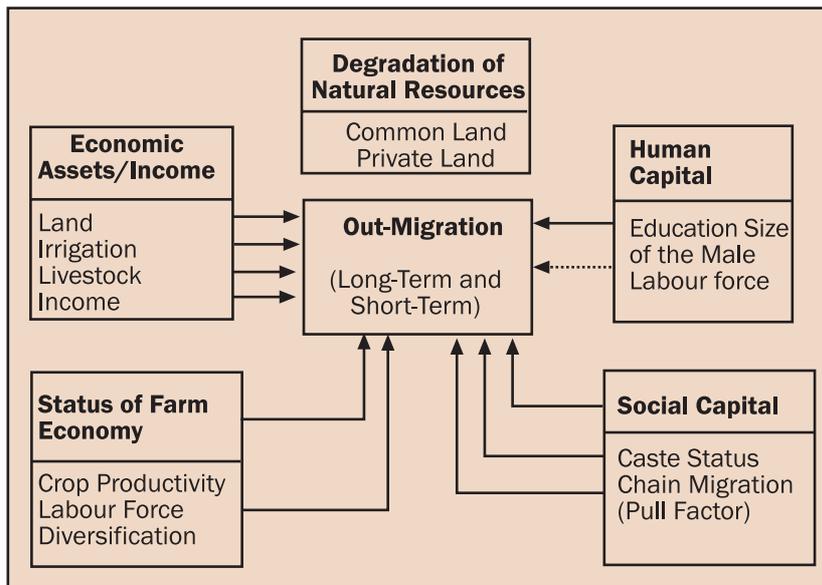
rich, poor and middle-income groups in the study area migrated in different ways.

It is clear that the rich people in the Gujarat region – if they migrate – tend to undertake long-term, precautionary migration. This can be explained by the fact that they have the assets, skills and social capital that allow them to settle elsewhere and prosper.

Many of the short-term migrants from the region were from the middle-income bracket and for these people it is likely that short-term migration does provide an economic incentive. The very poor, on the other hand, do not often have the minimal assets or knowledge needed to make even short-term migration a viable proposition. Instead they generally discount migration as an option and seek casual work within and in close proximity to their villages.

### VILLAGE COMMONS AND IRRIGATION MATTER

Environmental issues have a significant impact on human migration in the Gujarat region. In particular village-level environmental degradation appears to motivate short-term migrants. One of the main areas that are being degraded are village commons. These are used as pastures and they form a significant asset for middle-income livestock herder families. This suggests that short-term migration is predominantly carried out by traditional herders seeking less-degraded pastures for their animals.

**Chart: Factors Influencing Out-Migration in Dry Land Regions**

One other factor that has a profound affect on people’s migration decisions is irrigation. Approximately, 40 percent of landed households have access to irrigation. It was found that households that can use irrigation to increase land productivity are less likely to migrate – and this is true for both short- and long-term migration. Overall, it was found that access to irrigation, rather than land ownership is likely to deter migration.

**Table 2: Degradation of Private and Common Lands in Sample Villages**

Study Villages	Gross Irrigated to Gross Cropped Area	% of degraded private lands	% of degraded common lands
Dudhai	32%	26%	18 %
Dudhia	41%	9%	12 %
Veraval	21%	21%	28 %
Vaghania	3%	19%	39 %
Susiya	7%	44%	64 %
Liliya	2%	26%	47 %
All Villages	23%	26%	32 %

## HOW TO TACKLE MIGRATION

If irrigation is so critical, then improving irrigation could provide an answer to the migration challenge. Unfortunately, there are many barriers to improving irrigation. Depletion of ground water is a common problem in Saurashtra. Information collected at the village level indicated that water

## THE STUDY AREA AND DATA

This study is based on primary data collected from six villages in three districts in a dry land region of Gujarat called Saurashtra. Gujarat is a particularly interesting region for this study because, although its land and water resources are being degraded, it has a dynamic and growing economy. The districts studied are some of the most drought-prone areas in the state. In each district, two talukas representing relatively high and low levels of land degradation respectively were selected. Subsequently, one village representing each taluka was identified based on multiple criteria, including: soil type, extent of irrigation, village size, distance from a large urban or industrial center, and the presence of reasonably successful watershed programmes. The survey villages represented three different types of land degradation: coastal salinity (Jamnagar district), aridity (Surendranagar district), and shallow soils (Amreli district). Collection of primary data involved a complete listing of the 1227 households that inhabited the study villages. A household survey was then undertaken to obtain information about migration decisions and other household variables.



## SANDEE

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*This policy brief is an output of a research project funded by SANDEE. The view's expressed here are not necessarily those of SANDEE's sponsors.*



tables have dropped dramatically in recent years and that most villages have, in fact, reached a level where further depletion of ground water may well be impractical due to salinity problems.

Policy changes therefore need to be oriented towards the development of water resources. Policies, of late, have already recognized this by bringing watershed-development to the center stage of development. However, more needs to be done to make such moves more equitable and sustainable.

Policy changes should also be directed at the regeneration of village commons. This would, in particular, strengthen the livelihood base of traditional herder communities.

### MIGRANTS CAN HELP SOLVE THE PROBLEM

Resources for watershed management and land regeneration are key barriers to progress in rural Gujarat. However, among the positive impacts of migration are the remittances that migrants send back to their families. Unfortunately, remittance-related investments in soil and water conservation measures tend not to be as large or effective as they could be. Ex-residents who send money back 'home' need to be persuaded to focus their giving on development and sustainability. One possible way forward is to link state-supported initiatives for watershed development and soil conservation with private initiatives. With proper planning this could result in migrants helping solve the problems that drove them away from their homes in the first place.

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