
Adaptability and Livelihood Strategies of the Migrant Workers: A Review of Empirical Literature

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Abstract

Labor migration is regarded as one of the livelihood strategies of many households in rural areas. Although labor migration contributes positively to improving the livelihoods and living conditions of households, migrant workers also face many difficulties, challenges and risks at the place of immigration. This article summarizes the difficulties and challenges that migrant workers face at immigration, while also assessing the adaptability and livelihood strategies that the migrant workers choose when facing those negative factors.

Keywords: Adaptability, livelihood, migrants, literature review, empirical literature

1. Introduction

Labor migration is considered one of the livelihood strategies for many households in rural areas [5]. There are two main types of migration, including internal labor migration from rural to urban areas and international labor migration (or labor export). Previous studies have shown that labor migration positively improves households' livelihoods and living conditions [5]. However, migrant workers also face difficulties and challenges at their destination or the negative impacts of shocks or risks in life, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. These factors can adversely affect the livelihoods of migrant workers in various aspects such as income, employment, and health.

The question arises: What difficulties and challenges do migrant workers face at their destination? How do they adapt to the difficulties, challenges, or shocks that occur at the destination? What livelihood strategies do they choose when facing these negative factors? This article aims to summarize the experimental research results on the adaptive capacity of migrant

workers and the livelihood strategies they choose to enhance their adaptability to difficulties, challenges, and risks in life at their destination.

2. Research methodology

The general method of document review and desk research is employed to synthesize experimental studies on the adaptive capacity and livelihood strategies of migrant workers. Keywords such as "adaptive capacity," "livelihood strategies," "migrant workers," "adaptability," "livelihood strategies," and "migrant workers" are utilized to search for relevant scientific articles in the Science Direct and Google Scholar databases. Based on the titles and abstracts of the retrieved articles, the authors selectively chose those focused on migrant workers as the survey subjects for content analysis. The analyzed content is then extracted into a summary table, including information such as the country where the research was conducted, the form of migration, the risks or difficulties migrant workers face at their destination, their adaptive capacity, and their livelihood strategies.

3. Results and discussion

There have been numerous studies on migrant workers conducted, focusing on various aspects such as (1) Forms of migration, (2) Factors influencing migration decisions, (3) Challenges and adaptive capacity at their destination, and (4) Livelihood strategies and economic outcomes of migrants. Table 1 summarizes the results of experimental studies on the adaptive capacity and livelihood strategies of migrant workers.

Overall, studies on migrant workers have been conducted in various countries worldwide, including Vietnam, China, India, Turkey, and less developed countries. Two common forms of migration have been examined in previous studies. One is internal migration from one locality to another or from rural to urban areas within the same country. The second form is labor migration from within the country to abroad, where workers tend to migrate to countries with a more developed economy than their own.

From a macro perspective, economic and social factors may be considered as influencing factors in migration decisions (Jiang et al., 2017). At the micro level, migration choices may be influenced by individuals' values, beliefs, personality traits, living conditions, and expectations about the destination (Jiang et al., 2017).

When migrating to different areas (urban areas or abroad), migrant workers often face many difficulties and challenges at their destination. Firstly, migrants tend to perceive and experience discrimination from natives and employers. The discrimination perceived or experienced by migrants includes negative attitudes (Kunuroglu et al., 2016); (Pham Van Quyet et al., 2022) or income inequality compared to natives (Zang et al., 2016). Secondly, migrant workers are mostly low-educated individuals, so they face difficulties in finding employment or have to accept low-paying and unstable jobs (Stark et al., 1982); (Jiang et al., 2017); (Zhao et al., 2023). Meanwhile, the cost of living in urban areas or abroad is increasing. This makes the lives of migrants even more difficult and challenging (Stark et al., 1982). Thirdly, legal regulations (such as the "Hukou system" in China) make it difficult for migrants from rural areas to access political and social

security (such as education for children, healthcare, and social insurance) in urban areas because they do not have household registration in the city (Zang et al., 2016); (Jiang et al., 2017); (Zhao et al., 2023). Additionally, risk events such as economic downturns at the destination or the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbate the difficulties of migrant workers' lives.

The aforementioned risk events or difficulties have negatively impacted the adaptive capacity of migrant workers (Vo Hong Tu et al., 2014). Generally, most previous experimental studies have reported that the level of adaptation of migrant workers is relatively low, and the level of adaptation varies among different groups of migrant workers. Migrant workers with low education, lack of specialized training, or fewer skills tend to have lower adaptability compared to those with specialized education and work experience. For instance, (Abella et al., 2020) reported that Indian migrant workers with fewer skills migrating to Saudi Arabia may experience a 21%-36% reduction in income compared to expectations under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, research by (Ghimire et al., 2023) showed that Nepalese migrants, particularly women, older individuals, those with poor health, coming from impoverished families, and comprising a large number of overseas migrant workers, tend to perceive a higher risk of COVID-19.

To cope with difficulties or risk events at their destination, migrant workers have applied various livelihood strategies. One of the most common livelihood strategies that migrant workers choose when initially facing risk events or difficulties at their destination is to cut expenses while accepting the risk of disease outbreaks to seek alternative sources of income or assistance from external sources (Pham Van Quyet et al., 2022). Some even accept reduced income to be able to stay at their destination. However, the likelihood of migrants staying long-term at their destination is not high. For example, (Jiang et al., 2017) reported that only about 39% of migrants have intentions (or self-identified capabilities) to reside long-term in urban areas. Meanwhile, most studies indicate that return migration is an option that the majority of migrants choose in the long term. However, an individual's decision to return to their home country (i.e., reverse migration) is not solely due to a single cause but the result of a combination of interrelated factors. For example, [4] concluded in a study that Turkish migrants to Western Europe decided to return home not only because they perceived discrimination or due to the economic downturn at their destination. They chose reverse migration because they were driven by the desire to return to their homeland or a sense of belonging to their "roots."

Table 1. Results of Experimental Studies on the Adaptive Capacity and Livelihood Strategies of Migrant Workers

Author	Country (Type of migration)	Risk events/ Difficulties	Adaptive capacity	Livelihood strategies/ Economic outcomes
Zhao et al., 2023	China (Rural → Urban)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of childcare for young children and the elderly - Marriage - Low wages - Illness - Hukou system - The desire for family reunification 	Moderate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reverse migration (urban to rural). - Married individuals with small children tend to return to their hometown, expecting higher minimum wages - Transition to non-agricultural work
Ghimire et al., 2023	Nepal (Labor migration abroad)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Covid-19 pandemic 	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Return migration - Migrant workers, women, older (>29 years), poor health, from impoverished families, and those with large families tend to perceive a higher risk of COVID-19.
Pham Van Quyet et al., 2022	Vietnam (Rural → Urban)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Covid-19 pandemic - Job loss - Reduced income - Discrimination 	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cutting expenses - Reverse migration (urban → rural) - Accepting the risk of disease and seeking alternative sources of income - Seeking external support
Abella et al., 2020	India (labor migration to Saudi Arabia)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Covid-19 pandemic 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low-skilled migrant workers may experience a 21%-36% reduction in income compared to expectations. - Decreased remittances sent to families.
Le Dang	Vietnam (89%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Domestic: low- 	Average	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contributing to and

Chau et al., 2019	Rural to Urban; 11% Domestic to International)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – income, labor-intensive, hazardous, monotonous jobs. – International: high initial costs, prone to debt if a job is not favorable. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – improving the living conditions of households – Restructuring household livelihood activities – Investing in human capital (health, education)
Jiang et al., 2017	China (Rural to Urban)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Hukou system – Dissatisfaction with living experience – Low skills – Low income 	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 39% intend to settle long-term in urban areas – Those with low adaptability find it difficult to settle in urban areas
Zang et al., 2016	China (Rural to Urban)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Income inequality/wages (lower by 49% compared to urban residents) and longer working hours – Wage arrears/deferred payment – Lack of labor contracts – Poor social welfare (due to the "Hukou" household registration system) 	Average	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Accepting low-paying jobs instead of investing in human capital (education)
Kunuroglu et al., 2016	Turkey (Labor migration to Western Europe)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Desire to return home – Sense of belonging to their homeland – Awareness of discrimination 	Low or high (varies between different labor groups and generations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Return migration (from abroad to domestic)

		– Economic downturn in the host country		
Vo Hong Tu et al., 2014	Vietnam (Rural areas to Urban areas)	– Low education level – Limited livelihood capital (human capital, financial capital, natural capital, social capital)	Low	– Migration to urban areas (working as laborers in factories)
Stark et al., 1982	Developing countries (Rural areas to Urban areas)	– Difficulty in finding employment – High living costs in urban areas – Higher-income in the hometown	Medium	– Reverse migration (urban to rural areas)

Source: Compiled by the authors

4. Conclusion

This article has provided an overview of the results of experimental studies on the adaptive capacity and livelihood strategies of migrant workers. The summary of literature review results has also indicated the difficulties, challenges, and risk events that migrant workers face at their destination. Generally, because most migrant workers originate from regions/countries with less developed economic conditions compared to the destination regions/countries, and they lack formal training or expertise, they often encounter inequality in terms of working hours, working conditions, income, and discrimination by employers compared to residents. Additionally, legal regulations (such as the "Hukou" household registration system in China) exacerbate the difficulties for migrant workers from rural to urban areas. This also negatively impacts the adaptive capacity and livelihoods of migrant workers. It can be observed from the summary of the literature review results that the majority of migrants tend to choose to return to their hometowns or places of origin, and this choice is often influenced by a combination of various interrelated factors.

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