Potential Implications Of China's 'One Belt, One Road' Strategies On Chinese International Migration

By Raya Muttarak, Wittgenstein Centre For Demography And Global Human Capital (Iiasa, Vid/Oaw, Wu), International Institute For Applied Systems Analysis, Laxenburg, Austria

Abstract

Along with the flows of China’s foreign direct investment following the newly implemented ‘One Belt, One Road’ strategy by the Chinese government will likely generate movements of state employees, entrepreneurs, workers and accompanying family members to respective countries along the Belt and Road. It is not clear how large Chinese migration flows into these countries will be, who they are, how the public reception of the host society will be and how well the migrants will be integrated in the destination country. Based on extant data and literature on current Chinese migration, this paper describes trends and patterns of recent Chinese migration in Africa and Asia, analyses host country public perceptions on China and investigates integration patterns of Chinese migrants. Given that the ‘One Belt, One Road’ strategy has only been officially endorsed in 2015, it is still early to analyse its impacts on Chinese migration in the respective countries. Considering earlier Chinese overseas migration in the past decades, this paper presents potential migration and integration patterns one may expect following the Belt and Road initiative.

Conclusion

No doubt, it is too early to draw any conclusions on the implications of ‘One Belt, One Road’ strategies on Chinese migration. Drawing upon the experience of the ‘Going Out’ strategy which results in increases in China’s foreign direct investment and trade overseas, one may expect a subsequent rise in international migration of Chinese laborers and entrepreneurs in the OBOR countries. How these migrants will be integrated in the OBOR countries are likely to depend upon many factors both individual characteristics of the migrants themselves and contextual characteristics of the host society. In order to pinpoint the consequences of the OBOR strategy on Chinese migration requires improvement of current research on Chinese migration and Chinese overseas. Identifying the research gaps such as the lack of accurate data on the distribution and composition of Chinese emigrants and scarce empirical studies on Chinese migrants integration thus can help develop relevant research questions and improve research design for the new research on Chinese migration in the Belt and Road countries.

In particular, to understand the trends and patterns of Chinese migration as well as how migrants in the OBOR countries fare require better official migration data and more precise estimates of migration flows which also account for undocumented workers. Digital records, social media data or mobile network data can potentially be an
alternative source to capture mobility patterns and social networks of migrants. It is equally important to know the composition and distribution of the migrants. This information is fundamental for studying how the members of the Belt and Road countries perceive Chinese migrants and how integrated the migrants are in the destination country. Given that economic activities associated with the OBOR strategy will involve not only the large-scale publicly-fund projects but also private and small-scale enterprises as well as individual economic migrants, this diversity needs to be taken into account when studying the implications of Chinese migration in the Belt and Road countries.

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