

Internal migration patterns and issues in Sri Lanka

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Literature on the pattern of inter-district or inter-provincial in-migration, out-migration and net migration in Sri Lanka over the decades suggests that these migration patterns are shaped by a number of push and pull factors (i.e. demographic, socio-economic and political factors). From the development perspective, disparities in the level of development between origin and destination are significant determinants of the migration flow to a particular area. As such, internal migration increases or decreases create diverse issues for the origin and destination communities. Thus the main focus of this paper is to examine the recent patterns in internal migration dynamics in Sri Lanka to address policy implications.

The paper is based on the published data of population and housing censuses, 1981 and 2012 conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics in Sri Lanka. Internal migrants are identified by using data on place of usual residence and on place of previous residence. The patterns of inter-district migration are compared with data pertaining to 1981 and 2012.

The findings reveal that a significant volume of internal migration of the country has been observed at both inter-provincial and inter-district levels in 2012. It is noted that one in every seven persons (2.7 million or 13.4% of total population) is an inter-provincial migrants while one in every five persons (4.0 million or 20 percent of total population) is an inter-district migrant. It is also found that the Western Province still remains as the most popular migrant destination of the country and all three districts, Colombo, Gampaha and Kalutara reported net in-migration rates in 2012. In fact, 40 per cent of total inter-provincial migrants are living in the Western Province which reflects the existence of provincial-level disparities in infrastructure development, employment opportunities, educational opportunities and access to other facilities in the country. This finding is also supported by the finding that dry zone settlement districts such as Polannaruwa, Monaragala and Anuradhapura which had reported positive net migration in 1981, have shown significant decrease its popularity by 2012. At the same time the highest rates of net out-migration have been observed from the districts such as Vavunia m Matara Nuwara Eliya, Badulla, Galle and Kegalle in 2012. Due to the 30 years of civil war and deficiency in development in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, there is a significant out migration pattern observed in the same area. These results suggest that numerous challenges and issues are created in both in and out migrant areas due to unequal distribution of human and physical resources which need to be given priority in policy making in the future.

Key words: Internal migration, internal migration patterns, internal migration dynamics

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