

Winner or Losers

Adjustment strategies of rural-to-urban migrants

Case Study: Kamza Municipality, Albania

Background

Since the 1950s the countries of the Developing World have been experiencing an unprecedented process of urbanization. But it has been only the last two decades that Albania has faced this phenomenon. The interesting fact is not the length of time rather than the intensity of the urbanization process. The last two decades mass urbanization has been among the most dynamic phenomena in Albania, result of a massive internal migration. The internal migration flows are directed from rural areas toward the main urban centers. Different backgrounds, tradition and cultural norms of rural migrants and urban population are continuously confronted while it is not an easy task for the migrants to adjust. Yet the complex issue of migrant's adjustment into urban communities is underexposed in the recent research on internal migration in Albania (Berxholi, 2006). Migrants coming in the new urban environment are expected to fully adjust to the urban lifestyle, while putting apart their traditions and culture. Chain migration, which characterizes the Albanian internal migration, triggers socio-cultural clusters in the urban areas. Therefore, social networks, kinship interaction, financial and socio-psychological support gain major importance when the adjustment process of internal migrants is discussed. As migrant population cluster in the city, they create their communities with their own lifestyle and values. Hence rural-to-urban migrants tend to adjust to the city as a whole community more than as individuals.

Goal

Adjustment is a complex phenomenon and requires both macro level and in-depth micro level research and analyses (Erman, 1998). Bearing this in mind, our focus is on migrant's perceptions, *feelings and experiences*. The goal of this paper is to explore the coping strategy rural-to-urban migrant engage in order to adjust in the city. Can we talk about an "injection" of the city life and urbanization into the migrant communities or about a reproduction of the village life in the context of the city? What are the barriers to their adjustment process and what are the coping mechanisms to surpass these barriers? What are the main factors than trigger the adjustment process? Do rural-to-urban migrants feel adjusted to their new environment? What is the role of gender and generation in the adjustment process of migrant? These are some of the questions we try answer in this paper.

Data and Methods

For this study we triangulated information from in-depth interviews, participant observation, informal interviews, and visual methods. The use of a qualitative approach allows a deep understanding of livelihoods dynamics of the population under research while yet this type of approach on migration studies in Albania is rare (Berxholi, 2006). Kamza Municipality was chosen as the case study since is considered as a spectacular case of mass internal migration in the whole country. The findings for this paper are part of a two part field work, for a total period of 10 months. We base our result on in-depth interviews, extended participant observation, many informal interviews and visual methods.

- In-depth interviews

We conducted 40 in-depth interviews in way to get more insights and explore the experiences and perceptions of migrants regarding their adjustment process. Out of them 22 are women and 18 are men. The age range of migrants varies from 18 to 65 years old. Educational level and employment status is also very different. All respondents came from rural areas to the city in the last two decades.

- Informal conversation

In order to build trust among the researcher and migrants we engaged informal interviews. We conducted more than 70 individual and group conversations. Later the use of informal conversations helped us to get deeper into understanding of household livelihoods and power relationships.

- Visual Methods and ‘Walk through the places’

Taking photographs of people, homes and places provided to be a valuable source of information. The technique of ‘walk through the places’ (Bailey, 2008) helped us to explore and understand the local context, place making of migrants, gender and generation relationships.

- Participant Observations

To capture elements that we could miss from the formal and informal interviews we engaged into participant observation technique. It turned out to be a very helpful technique to understand behavior, place making, activities, and interactions among people. I spent time in the community through daily visits and stayed in a migrant household. I attended daily gathering, participated in social activities, having coffee/tea, chatting and interacting. The participant observation contributed to provide a close understanding and insights in migrant’s lives.

- Theoretical and Analysis Approach

This paper is based on grounded theory. Key concepts and elements are expected to emerge in the process of research. We intend to generate a definition of adjustment from the migrant’s perspective. All data have been transcribed in the original language. Afterwards we analyzed the data using Atlas-ti software. We coded each interview following an inductive approach. In the next stage we looked for common patterns and categories. We group categories and sub categories to build up themes. We explored themes in a meaningful way by characteristics of respondent and by interrelations among different themes

Findings

Moving Process

Migration Strategy: Migration to Kamza is not a simple response to regional disparities regarding income and employment opportunities as neoclassical theories would predict and is neither only a migration flow of workers (INSTAT, 2004). In the case of migrants in Kamza, as for the most of internal migrants in Albania, the entire household migrates. They leave everything behind settling permanently in the destination chosen. They come to make a livelihood in the city and have not intention to return to the village.

Settling Strategy: The head of the household comes first in Tirana to choose the place where to settle. Afterwards they build the *Barrak* (kind of makeshift or sometimes a

plastic tent) to live in, while the house is being constructed. One of the daughters of the family joins at this stage in way to take care of the household chores. After the first floor of the house is built the rest of the family joins. Depending on the economic conditions and remittances the houses can vary from one to three and four floors. Once settled they try to bring their kin and friends near them. At this stage the chain migration initiates. When they have the possibility they purchase a big plot of land. After they put four stones to siege their property they subdivide and sell or give to the “trusted” migrants, meaning their relatives, neighbors and friends. The interviews demonstrate the significant role the migrant community plays in the settling process of migrants, especially at the beginning.

“We settle all together with people from our village. It was easier that way. One relative was first to come, he occupied a piece of land also for us... I remember that everything was happening overnight. People coming...bam bam plugging four lumbers in the ground and constructed a barak, just in the middle of the space. In the morning they were as mushrooms everywhere.”
Hasime 45, married

Barriers to Adjustment

First Impact: Despite the dream of a better life that triggered the migration movements from the deprived areas of the country, Kamza remains a poor and transitory area under development. You can sense transition and poverty while you walk in the area, talk to people, visit their homes, while they confess their experience. Confrontation with this reality has been difficult for the migrants. Now they had to make a livelihood in this place. At the beginning expectations were completely disillusioned.

“My God, when we first came here, I was very disappointed. It was not what I have dreamed for; it was the wrong place to be...no water, no electricity, no people...empty, cold, soundless...we wanted just to leave...but where to?”
Shpresa 37, married.

Host Society: Social networks outside the migrant’s community are poorly developed. Migrants perceived cultural differences, such as dialect, traditions, way of living, are the main reason hindering interaction. The migrants don’t feel very welcome by the host society.

“The people here in Tirana...are so full of anger or whatever with us...they were saying: what the hell want all these villagers here to suffocate us”
Astrit, 27, single.

Male migrants have wider networks expanded also in the city compared to female migrants. Women and especially older migrants have very few connections with the host society. Middle aged migrants have stronger community connections, younger migrants have higher willingness to interact to the urban community. However, all of them attribute their perceived lack of integration to the attitudes of host society

“They look down at as a call as names.” Bledi, 22, single.

Rural identity: The majority of migrants considered them self as being rural and from the village. This despite the many years they have been living in the city. The main reason of the preserved rural identity has been the strong social and cultural clusters in the destination. People continue to share the same traditions, norms and culture, making it difficult to break through these ties. On the one hand being part of these clusters is crucial first to perform and then to settle in the city. From the other hand in

time these clusters became an impeding factor towards integration into urban society. A migrant may end up spending most of the time within this networks and not interacting with the rest of the community or host society. As such, the migrants continuously identify themselves as from the village. Moreover, nostalgic feelings about origin, strong connections with family members, land and house back in the village act as a mechanism to prevent the migrant from creating an urban identity.

“I am from the village and I am proud even I know that if I say it the people will start to see me differently. I don’t care. Even the dialect I am not trying to changed at all. It seems trying to be somebody else. I am who I am and there is nothing to do about it”. Sabiti, 59, married

Coping Strategies

Economic: It is not a surprise that the better-off migrants feel better adjusted. The question is who are better-off? Having a job, owning a business and remittances are associated with economic resources. Work and emigration are seen as elements that bring not only economic benefits but also social status and psychological wellbeing. They are perceived by the migrants as very important elements of an adjustment process. Our study shows that households earning remittances and owning a business are wealthier and feel better adjusted than others. They have stronger aspirations to integrate in the urban society and to reject the rural identity.

Duration of Stay: At the beginning earning remittance was perceived as a way to cope with poverty, finance and facilitate the internal migration and settling process. Nowadays the remittances are seen more as a source of wellbeing, prestige and status.

“If the family is wealthy, meaning they work and earn remittances it has been easier to settle, easier to build a future. You can not live in the city without money. If you have economic security other things follow, the status, the better clothes, the beautiful house, the social activities, the better life, the respect of the urbanities” Fatimja, 47, Married

Physical Capital: The house is the most essential physical capital owned by the migrant households. It is perceived as a symbol of belonging, source of wellbeing, a social and economic passport, and facilitator of adjustment. The higher the quality and size of the house, the higher the social status of the household. It’s not only a matter of money and wealth but also a matter of modernization and empowerment.

Duration of stay: The value of houses in sub-urban areas has at least doubled since the early nineties. The migrants feel more attached to their place and sequentially the belonging feeling with the destination has increased.

“The people will sacrifice everything in order to build a beautiful house. What they have they invest in the house. If you have a beautiful and big house it means that you are wealthy, you have status...everybody respects you.”

Albani, 42, Married

Social Capital: Migrants perceive broader and stronger social networks as an important social and psychological support. Thus a better adjustment process, primarily in the neighborhood and further in the community and host society.

Duration of stay: All the migrants expressed the significance of the socio-cultural clusters as one of the most important assets which have played a fundamental making a livelihood in the destination, especially during early settling process. However we find that in time the life of migrants has become more individual and the importance

of social networks is growing weaker. This is mainly as result of adaption of an urban way of living.

"We used to be very dependent on each other...now the people need less each other. Nowadays I won't go at my neighbor to ask for help to go and buy a t-shirt or whatever because I know where the bus is, I know where the shop is and above all I don't want to disturb anybody" Age, 28, Engaged

The role of Gender: This study reveals that migration plays an important role in changing the position of women in the city both within and outside the household. Women migrants show a strong preference for the city. None of the migrant women in the study, despite their economic situation and position, wanted to return and live in the village. This feeling was stronger for the young women while older women were more nostalgic about the village. According to migrant women *"city life offers more comfort, modernization, and freedom"*. Women are more concerned with their social adjustment, meaning creating networks, adapting to the host society, having a job in way to have a social life. While men think that the adjustment process is more a matter of economic conditions and changing traditions and mentality.

"I think that women like it here. They come here from a closed and conservative environment. In the village they stay closed at home. The things in the city were different, the mentality was different. Women grabbed this opportunity and made the change. Men couldn't do anything at this point...just let it go." Bashkimi, 43, married

The role of Generation: There is an evident distinction among generations in their adjustment process and willingness to adapt. Younger generation, especially those who were born in Tirana feel better adjusted. They are the ones who said *"We are from Tirana"*; they are the ones who talk without a northern dialect, who interact more with the host society. This generation is perceived as modern in their way of thinking and behaving. This generation is perceived as adjusted.

"The youth is feeling more at home here. Our parents are somewhere in between, from one side pushed to follow their children and from the other side still immersed between traditions and roots of origin. Our grandparents feel nostalgic and have strong connections with the origin to give up. I believe that the ones that were born and will be born here will be the most adjusted of all" Albert, 25, single

Conclusions

Migrants perceive that their life has changed substantially in the city. There is an increased contentment among migrants with their achievements. They perceive things to get better and their life to benefit from these positive changes. One can notice also an increased awareness among the migrants that they are better informed more individualist, more open minded and confident. This empowerment of migrants has developed in time and facilitated by their experiences.

The adjustment process of migrants is perceived as a complex phenomenon which needs time and goes through various stages of development. There are numerous factors and elements that act as facilitators or barriers to adjustment process. These factors interact together to shape adjustment outcomes in different ways. This paper can be considered a contribution towards the understanding of complexity of the adjustment process, in our case of rural-to-urban migrants in Kamza.