

## Rural migrant workers in China

In today's China, about 220 million rural migrant workers are on the move – this is more than two thirds of the US population – and their number is set to increase in the course of the country's urbanisation process. At a rate of 47 percent, still below global average, and against the backdrop of a marked rural-urban divide, urbanisation is not only an effect of rapid economic development, but also forms part of the Chinese government's economic development strategy. Yet, with an apprehensive eye on Latin America, urbanisation shall be moulded as a 'guided' and 'orderly' process, one that shall avoid slums, mitigate social conflicts, and provide for government control. In the light of the Harmonious Society agenda, this also entails a strengthening of rural migrant workers' rights, which had been largely neglected over decades.

The rural-urban divide is a result of an urban-biased development path which dates back to the early years of Communist China. The divide was matched by a two-tier system of social rights, with a state assuming comprehensive responsibility for the welfare of its urban citizens, while "enjoining rural people to practise collective self reliance" (Cheng, Tiejun / Selden, Mark; 1994). The centrepiece was, and to some extent remains, the 'hukou' system: the Chinese system of household registration based on socio-geographic origin. At individual level, it was precisely a person's *hukou*, in particular whether a person had agricultural or urban *hukou*, that defined his or her access to welfare provision and considerably determined life opportunities. At the level of political economy, the *hukou* system backboneed urban-biased development by means of population movement controls in a predominantly agrarian society with a significant labour surplus.

Having assigned responsibility for agricultural production to the household (instead of the collective) in the early 1980s, the urban-rural income gap narrowed significantly for a short period. However, it has widened ever since, thereby creating strong incentives for labour migration. Indeed, under the conditions of market

reforms and economic growth, labour mobility was increasingly accepted (since the mid-1980s) and in the course of time even encouraged (Wang, Dewen; 2008). Yet, the welfare function of the *hukou* system remained intact, thus leaving rural migrant workers without relevant rights in the cities. Irrespective of their length of stay, rural migrant workers were perceived as temporary migrants, who would sooner or later return to their countryside (Solinger, Dorothy J.; 1999). And within the institutional setting that shape urban-rural relations, many did and still do today.

### ■ Strong ties to rural homes remain

The lack of social access in the urban areas on the one hand and the household-based land use right system with a 30-year tenure lease on the other have tied rural migrant workers to their land, with the latter being a principal source of social security in rural areas. Hence, it is not surprising that family migration has been rather the exception for decades. Lacking access to urban public services, including children's access to schools, and the need to cultivate the land have resulted in family separation and a gendered pattern of migration (Fan, C. Cindy; 2008). Female migrant workers often return to the countryside after marriage or upon the birth of a child to assume agricultural and care work. In other cases, grandparents take primary care of children for a certain period. Income from migrant work, that is savings and remittances, has become a major source of income for rural areas. At the same time, the struggle of left-behind family members is an increasing concern of public debate.

Against the backdrop of the Harmonious Society agenda, the Chinese government has un-

dertaken or initiated several reforms to improve the social and legal situation of rural migrant workers (e.g. Labour Contract Law, Social Security Law). Aside from improvements in particular areas, recent debate has shifted to a more general emphasis on the need to equalise basic public service provision, with basic public services encompassing a variety of goods and services including public health care services, subsidised housing and education, access to qualification measures, etc. The embracement of urbanisation as a development priority seems to have contributed to a greater willingness to ease permanent and family migration with its prerequisites of children's access to primary education and affordable housing. It remains to be seen how effective and at what pace new regulations and calls for inclusive public service provision will be implemented.

It is widely acknowledged that the most recent cohort of rural migrant workers has no intention of returning to the countryside and that family migration is increasing. With many problems still to be tackled in the cities in order to prevent social exclusion and segregation, it is clear that the ongoing transformation of one of Chinese society's most fundamental structures, the rural-urban divide, is full of challenges for the countryside, reaching from food security to welfare provision under conditions of demographic change, which is very tangible in today's rural China.

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*Family migration is gaining in significance in China.*

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