Pensioners on the move: social security and trans-border retirement migration in Asia and Europe

Established migration theories have long asserted international migration to be a venture of the young and healthy. The workshop ‘Pensioners on the Move’, however, focused on another group exhibiting quite different migratory behaviour: they do not move from low-income to high-income countries but vice-versa; they don’t move to work, but to not work. This mobility is neither tourism nor migration, but shares elements of both.

Social implications

What does the increasing mobility of pensioners mean to the receiving communities? The coming of pensioners certainly brings in new income, which may improve national health services and in turn spread services to the larger population. Unlike tourists, migrant pensioners remain in a community and fuel the local economy instead of spending on foreign-owned hotels and tour operators. But there is also evidence that the migration of pensioners siphons off medical resources in the receiving community and has negative impacts on health equity, particularly for lower classes and rural populations. The loss of skilled health professionals from the public medical sector can be significant. In Europe, too, as pensioners tend to migrate to certain regions, they may strain already limited resources. Other social implications include the globalisation of the health care work force and the emergence of a transnational care industry. At the local level, some migrant pensioners work as volunteers in the host society, which not only keeps them healthy but helps integrate their ethnic communities (including non-pensioners) into mainstream society. Some workshop participants were critical of the congregated residential model for migrant pensioners in Europe and Asia, believing it reflects and reinforces unequal international relations.

The three-day workshop concluded with a field trip to Penang, Malaysia, where participants observed retirement communitie first-hand. Throughout the workshop, lively comparative discussions revealed that the subject has still greater theoretical potential. Though we all enjoyed the meeting, we depart quite humbled by the holes in our knowledge. Our pendulum was swinging: we were migrating back home to more work.

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