Policy recommendations to improve educational equity for migrant children in Bihar, India

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1. INTRODUCTION

The central government of India has made notable strides in recognizing and attending to the educational needs of marginalized children. Policymakers have invested significant effort and capital to change legal frameworks and to establish Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), the national Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD)’s flagship program to achieve Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE). Bihar Education Project Council (BEPC), the state-supported agency designated to implement SSA in Bihar, has taken great pains to target Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Muslim minority communities, and girls. However, these institutions and the current educational system in rural Bihar fail to address the additional dimension of distress migration. Also called seasonal migration, this particular form of migration has historical roots in the largely agricultural economy; generations of poor families leave their home villages to find employment opportunities during the lean season between harvests. Accompanying their parents, migrant children leave their rural communities and move to larger towns within Bihar (intra-state migration) or migrate to other states (inter-state migration) for weeks or months. Migrant children often eventually drop out of school at an early age – before they achieve basic literacy and numeracy – and are forced into low-wage labor in construction, domestic work, and agriculture (UNESCO and UNICEF, 2010).

The SSA’s efforts to achieve UEE have led to a marked increase in enrollment throughout India. However, current enrollment data do not reflect high drop-out rates that accrue as migration cycles overlap with the academic year. A policy that effectively improves equitable access to education for child migrants must consider the diverse challenges associated with chronic seasonal migration within a Bihar-specific context. This paper briefly highlights the prevalence of distress migration, as well as its impact on children’s education in Parts 2 and 3.
Part 4 assesses alternative education practices developed by education non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in other Indian states for comparative perspective, while Part 5 applies Reimers, Cooc, and Hashmi’s analytic framework to examine the contextualized transfer of these approaches in Bihar. Part 6 moves beyond alternative education practices and underscores the importance of retaining migrant children in the formal educational system. Finally, Part 7 provides specific policy recommendations that leverage existing institutions and organizations in a multi-dimensional framework that emphasizes evidence-based decision-making and stakeholder engagement to improve educational equity for migrant children in Bihar.

2. DISTRESS MIGRATION: A GROWING PHENOMENON

Despite the central government’s constitutional obligation to “provide free and compulsory education to all children” between the ages of 6 and 14 (Constitution of India, 2002), the MHRD has devoted minimal attention to child migrants and lacks “data with respect to this category of children, let alone a strategic plan in place to address related concerns” (Smita, 2008, p. 6). Information deficits regarding migrant children in Bihar therefore have begotten significant education policy gaps at the national and state government levels.

UNESCO and UNICEF estimate India had at least 15 million child migrants in 2010. Limited evidence suggests children between the ages of 0-14 years may represent one-third of the total migrant population in India; within this group, conservative assessments count nearly 6 million migrant children in the elementary school age group (6-14 years old) (Smita, 2008, p. 5). A study by Deshingkar, Kumar, Chobey, and Kumar suspects out-migration from rural Bihar may be greater than anywhere else in India, but does not indicate what proportion of the out-migration constitutes children (2006, p. 9). Though little qualitative or quantitative data
regarding Bihari migrant children is available, existing literature reflects a general expectation that distress seasonal migration – and the number of child migrants – will grow.

Furthermore, the American India Foundation (AIF) describes this form of migration as a “universal yet invisible phenomenon” that largely affects the most marginalized families of poor, rural communities (Srivastava and Dasgupta, 2010, p. 4). This invisibility is partly due to the difficulties of collecting information on migrant laborer populations. UNICEF notes, “One key level of disaggregation in an equity-focused situation analysis is geographic – that is, mapping where disadvantaged populations live” (2010, p. 6). However, there is significant variation in migration patterns and durations, as many impoverished families move from job to job before returning to their home villages while other families migrate year-round (Smita, 2008, p. 7). Outsiders in their villages and destination areas, migrant adults are unable to participate in elections and census data collection (Smita, 2008, p. 4). Additionally, migrant laborers are not usually present for gram sabha (village assembly) meetings, during which government welfare programs identify beneficiaries (IOM, 2008, p. 120). Effectively disenfranchised and unable to effectively utilize public education and other services, distress migrants are an invisible sector of society and live in the periphery.

**Implications for policymaking**

Policies concerning intra-national child migration are generally neglected in comparison to policies that address international child migration (Schapiro, 2009, p. 53). This reality, in combination with the difficulties of providing a transient and invisible population equitable access to education, has produced a serious situation that is expected to worsen as the rate of distress migration increases in Bihar. Effective action is clearly and urgently needed to address the educational needs of migrant children.
To move forward, policymakers must first consider the impact of seasonal migration on children’s learning outcomes; Part 3 examines the difficulties child migrants face in accessing educational opportunities throughout the migration cycle. Policy recommendations in Part 7 emphasize the importance of overcoming information deficits to address migrants’ invisibility, as well as the centrality of evidence-based decision-making.

3. IMPACT OF DISTRESS MIGRATION ON EDUCATION

Among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable populations in India, migrant families possess little education or skills. In the absence of employment opportunities in a collapsed rural economy, parents of migrant children must rely on distress migration as a last resort strategy for survival (Smita, 2008, p. 4). Duration of the migration cycle is dictated by the livelihood’s demands; for example, migrants seeking agricultural work must adhere to planting and harvesting seasons. Ranging from a few weeks to a few months, migration cycles may occur multiple times a year (Srivastava, 2012, p. 16). Lacking the means to ensure their children’s care in their absence, some migrant parents pull their children out of school and bring them to the destination site when the migration cycles begin (Smita 2008).

During the migration cycle, boys often join their parents and work in agriculture, construction, or brick kilns to supplement the family’s income (Deshingkar et al., 2006, p. 4). Girls, on the other hand, are expected to assist with household responsibilities and childcare (UNESCO and UNICEF, 2010). Though migrants have the constitutional right to send their children to government schools at the destination site, in reality, many parents are unable to do so. Thus, migrant children are not likely to have equitable access to education after leaving their schools in their home villages.

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1 Part 2 discusses distress migrants’ inability to access public services, as a result of their invisibility and effective disenfranchisement.
Missing weeks or months of the school year to accompany their parents to the destination site, migrant children lose educational gains that had been made prior to their departure. Upon returning to their home villages, migrant children face multiple difficulties in resuming their education:

1. Parents may not view the continuation of their children’s education as a priority or a worthwhile endeavor: though basic education is free, school attendance incurs the cost of school-related supplies, as well as the loss of assistance in the household (Whitehead, 2012, p. 117). The resulting inaction is compounded by the fact that schools do not seek out their returning students, even though the students’ names remain listed in school rolls (Smita, 2008).

2. Schools require documentation, such as exam records, which migrant students do not have and cannot submit (Smita, 2008).

3. Migrant children experience learning difficulties that result from attendance disruptions. Educational gains that had been made prior to the migration cycle are lost after prolonged absence. Teachers in the rural schools neither provide extra support to students who have missed weeks or months of class, nor consider such special education duties their responsibility. Additionally, these students are often blamed, explicitly or implicitly, for falling behind (UNESCO and UNICEF, 2010) (Smita, 2008).

4. Most students are forced to repeat the same grade, regardless of their age or learning needs, due to inflexible school procedures and the absence of remedial classes that address students’ learning deficits (UNESCO and UNICEF, 2010).

Over time, these factors aggregate and reinforce each other; for example, the insensitivity and inflexibility of the school and teachers may confirm a parent’s conviction that education
should not be a priority. As a result, many migrant children eventually drop out of school, due to the educational system’s inability to address the chronic disruptions associated with migration.

*Implications for policymaking*

Policymakers must consider the unique challenges presented by seasonal migration when addressing educational equity for migrant children. Approaches to recover lost educational opportunities following the migration cycle – that is, overcoming difficulties stemming from frequent or prolonged attendance disruptions – are necessary but insufficient. Consequently, a dominant strand of research has focused on improving access to education at the destination sites, thereby providing an opportunity for child migrants to continue learning during the migration cycle (Schapiro, 2009, p. 42). However, a comprehensive policy must also attempt to avoid attendance disruptions and to ensure children remain in the educational system by discouraging distress migration altogether. Part 4 describes the innovative practices developed by education NGOs in India to provide migrant children a range of educational opportunities.

The attitudes of migrant parents toward education, as well as the attitudes of rural schools toward migrant children and their learning needs, underlie behaviors that ultimately contribute to the high dropout rates of migrant students. Part 7 stresses the engagement of key stakeholders at the school level – parents, teachers and administrators – during policy design and implementation.

4. ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PRACTICES OUTSIDE BIHAR

The first efforts to provide educational services for child migrants in India were offshoots of programs targeted toward migrant laborers; since then, a few NGOs have developed approaches that are dedicated to providing migrant children access to educational opportunities (Smita, 2008, p. 24). Emphasizing flexibility around migrant students’ time commitments, grade
levels, and the language of instruction, the following approaches are meant to be supplementary alternatives that eventually channel child migrants to the government schools in their rural villages (Schapiro, 2009, p. 53) (Smita, 2008, p. 27).

**Seasonal hostels**

To increase child migrants’ access to educational opportunities, an NGO called Sankalp in the Indian state of Rajasthan established seasonal schools in rural villages that experience significant distress out-migration. The hostels provide an opportunity for children to remain in their home communities and to continue their studies while their parents leave during the migration cycle (Smita, 2008, p. 24) (Schapiro, 2009, p. 54). AIF, which educates over 30,000 migrant children in three states\(^2\), strongly prefers the use of seasonal hostels as an intervention, due to hostels’ ability to ensure the continuity of attendance at the local government school and to keep children away from the harsh work environments of the destination sites (Srivastava and Dasgupta, 2010, p. 17). Additionally, AIF notes the children’s ability to stay in the home village helps to foster “trust and assurance” of the community towards the hostel itself (2010, p. 17). Though the literature lacks quantitative studies that confirm the effectiveness of seasonal hostels in India, NGOs in migration-endemic regions report demand for hostels has been rising every year (Smita, 2008, p. 26).

**Site schools**

In cases where children must migrate with their parents, informal schools are established in destination sites that receive significant migrant populations. Several NGOs in Maharashtra have targeted brick kilns, sugarcane cutting sites, and stone quarries, where migrant parents are employed and children themselves work, offering flexible hours and school-related resources (Smita, 2008, p. 25). Though the size and quality of the site schools vary, they seek to give

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\(^2\) The Indian states of Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Orissa.
children the opportunity to learn and play in a safe and clean environment (Smita, 2008, p. 26). The efforts of ActionAid and AIF, in particular, extend beyond building informal schools at the destination sites; these NGOs facilitate dialogue between the state governments where inter-state migration has been identified (Smita, 2008, p. 25) (Srivastava and Dasgupta, 2010).

*Bridge courses*

In order to provide educational opportunities for migrant children who are unable to stay in a seasonal hostel and migrate to a destination site without an alternate school, bridge courses are provided in some rural villages. Upon their return at the beginning of monsoon season, child migrants can seek remedial support for lessons missed during the migration cycle (Smita, 2008, p. 26). AIF’s bridge courses are designed to help children re-enroll in their local government schools for the next academic year; however, the effectiveness of this practice hinges upon retaining the children in the seasonal hostels and local schools during the next migration cycle (Srivastava and Dasgupta, 2010, p. 17).

*Emerging model*

All the three practices – seasonal hostels, site schools, and bridge courses – must be available simultaneously to ensure comprehensive coverage; however, AIF and other NGOs give primacy to seasonal hostels over site schools (Smita, 2008, p. 26) (Srivastava and Dasgupta, 2010). Smita notes, “Bridge courses and work site schools/centers are transient measures by nature, whereas seasonal hostels are a longer term solution for migration-prone geographies” (2008, p. 27). The centrality of seasonal hostels is reflected in their adoption by various government entities in India. Under the aegis of SSA, the seasonal hostels for the children of migrant laborers have operated in Orissa for the past few years; furthermore, the Rajiv Gandhi
Prathamik Shiksha Mission in Madhya Pradesh opened over 700 seasonal hostels to discourage child migration in 2005 (Smita, 2008, p. 25).

**Implications for policymaking**

The establishment of seasonal hostels and site schools, as well as the provision of bridge courses, constitutes today’s “best practices” in improving the educational equity for Indian migrant children. It should be noted that these practices are among the recommendations of UNICEF and UNESCO’s 2012 policy brief, “For a Better Inclusion of Internal Migrants in India: Internal Migration and the Right to Education.” Given the support of Indian education NGOs, the international development community and the SSA, the adoption of these practices is a highly attractive option for policymakers in the state government of Bihar. However, the “naïve transfer of educational practices” without regard for context is likely to produce “disappointing results” and “implementation failures” (Reimers, Cooc, and Hashmi, 2011, p. 416 and p. 410).

The following section, Part 5, examines the contextualized transfer of these suggestions in Bihar and its associated challenges.

5. CONTEXTUALIZED TRANSFER OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION PRACTICES

The experiences of NGOs and government entities outside Bihar provide an important comparative perspective; however, Reimers, Cooc, and Hashmi argue that the promotion of educational equity requires “innovation supported by contextualized transfer of education outside the education system” (2011, p. 417). To reconcile the structure of this paper with the five-step framework described by Reimers, Cooc, and Hashmi, please note the following alignment:


policies and practices” (2011, p. 410). The transfer of best practices from elsewhere in India therefore requires an analysis of the differences between contexts, as well as the modifications needed as a result of contextual dissimilarities.

**Contextual differences**

Before transferring innovative practices from Maharashtra, Gujarat, Orissa, and Rajasthan, policymakers must recognize the contextual differences between the aforementioned states and Bihar. It is worth noting that Bihar is the third most populous state in India; its population of 104 million is nearly equivalent to the Philippines, the twelfth most populous country in the world (Census Organization of India) (Central Intelligence Agency). Though Maharashtra has a larger population as the second most populous state, it is also India’s wealthiest state and boasts a literacy rate of 82.34% (Census Organization of India). Bihar, on the other hand, has the lowest per capita income among the major states (Deshingkar et al., 2006, p. 10) and its literacy rate of 61.80% is the lowest in the country (Census Organization of India). Gujarat, Orissa, and Rajasthan fall between Maharashtra and Bihar in population size and literacy rates. Thus, policymakers in Bihar must anticipate the difficulties of working with fewer financial resources for a larger population, and adapt accordingly.

Furthermore, the particular livelihood engaged by migrant parents has significant implications on the implementation and suitability of seasonal hostels, site schools, and bridge courses. Bihari migrants do not necessarily engage in the same industries as migrant laborers from Maharashtra, Gujarat or Orissa; as such, transfer of the aforementioned practices requires modifications that reflect contextual differences. This can be illustrated vis-à-vis the variation in the timing and duration of migration cycles: AIF’s efforts in Maharashtra align with the migration cycle of the sugarcane harvest, which begins in November and ends between March
and May (Srivastava and Dasgupta, 2010, p. 22); though Bihari migrants participate in agricultural labor as well, most are recruited to harvest rice for a shorter period of time (Deshingkar et al., 2006, p. 18). Clearly, the design and implementation of seasonal hostels and site schools in Bihar must reflect the scheduling demands of the situation at hand.

Additionally, the environments of certain destination sites may not be appropriate for the establishment of site schools. The harsh and dangerous conditions of salt-pans, as well as the short duration of the migration cycle, posed major challenges for AIF in Gujarat (Srivastava and Dasgupta, 2010, p. 24). Noting that the “only sustainable solution for childcare and education” required the prevention of child migration to the salt-pans, AIF shifted its focus to retaining children in seasonal hostels (2010, p. 24). Keeping the limited financial resources of Bihar’s state government in mind, the decision to transfer site schools must hinge upon suitability of the practice and its relative effectiveness within workplace conditions.

Limitations of alternative education practices

This paper strongly advocates the contextualized transfer of alternative education practices to Bihar as a policy recommendation; Part 7 anticipates challenges in relation to evidence-based decision-making, as well as stakeholder engagement and ownership. However, as mentioned in the beginning of Part 4, the interventions developed by education NGOs and adopted outside Bihar are merely supplementary measures that are not meant to replace government schools in the home villages. In other words, despite the contextualized transfer and implementation of seasonal hostels, site schools, and bridge courses to Bihar, these practices will not provide equitable access to education to every child migrant. Consequently, systematic strengthening of the formal educational system and the concomitant discouragement of child migration must remain at the forefront of policy design. The following section, Part 6,
IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY FOR BIHARI MIGRANT CHILDREN

considers the importance of retaining Bihari migrant children in government schools to improve educational equity.

6. RETAINING MIGRANT CHILDREN IN THE FORMAL EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Policymakers must understand that the success of seasonal hostels, site schools, and bridge courses does not supplant the educational system’s obligation to retain migrant children. Thus, an assessment of methods to improve educational equity for migrant children should also consider approaches that minimize separation from the formal educational system. This section highlights nascent practices that seek to simplify the process of enrolling in government schools and to minimize children’s risk of becoming migrants. Finally, this paper recognizes the primacy of improving the quality of government schools in rural, isolated communities.

Migratory cards and progress cards

As discussed in Part 2, bureaucratic obstacles for enrollment and re-admission to government schools are among the many factors that contribute to high dropout rates. In response to distress migrants’ inability to access educational opportunities at destination sites, the state government of Gujarat has issued migratory cards and progress cards that allow migrant children to bypass bureaucratic barriers and to enroll in government schools located near work sites (Smita, 2008, p. 25) (Deshingkar and Sandi, 2012 p. 73). In addition, the migratory cards and progress cards are designed to ease the re-enrollment process in the child migrant’s government school in the home village. This practice seems to be a recent development (Deshingkar and Sandi, 2012, p. 73); if proven effective, policymakers should consider the contextualized transfer of this innovative approach.

NREGS to discourage maternal and child migration
Diane Coffey’s quantitative analysis of data from a similarly poor, rural region that borders the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh identifies the following two relationships:

1. Non-migrating and migrating children exhibit a clear divergence in educational trends and outcomes.

In addition to the negative impacts described in Part 3, distress migration prevents children from developing the necessary relationships with teachers and classmates that help them progress through school, and it “may simply break the habit of going to school” (Coffey, 2013, p. 21).

2. Child migration is strongly linked to the migration of their mothers.

Using data collected on 1,980 children, Coffey claims the variable “that best explains whether or not a given child migrated in the past year is whether or not her mother migrated” (2013, p. 11). That is, among children who migrated in the past year, eighty-five percent had a mother who also migrated (Coffey, 2013, p. 11-12). Coffey’s explanation for this phenomenon, the likely burden placed on relatives who care for the children left behind in the rural villages, reinforces qualitative descriptions of migrant parents pulling their children out of school during longer migration cycles.

Given these findings, Coffey contends take-up of government-sponsored work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS)\(^4\) may help to provide the wages

\(^4\) Established through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005, NREGS is a public employment program that seeks to enhance “livelihood security of the households in rural areas of the country by providing at least one hundred days of guaranteed wage employment in every financial year to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work” (Ministry of Law and Justice, 2005).
needed by migrant families and to allow the mothers\(^5\) of migrant families to remain in the home villages with their children. She hypothesizes that “reducing mothers’ migration could help bridge the gap in the education of migrant and non-migrant children while leaving them in the care of parents” (Coffey, 2013, p. 22).

Coffey’s conclusion that discouraging child migration will improve migrant children’s learning outcomes reflects the rationale underlying seasonal hostels. However, Coffey’s theory of change recognizes and integrates the influence of maternal migration in a child’s decision to remain in school. The following diagram utilizes Carol Weiss’ causality framework to illustrate the rationale for employing the NREGS as a means to improve the educational outcomes of the children of seasonal migrants:

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NREGS provides employment opportunities
for mothers of migrant families in rural villages
↓
Mothers choose to participate in NREGS-sponsored work,
to remain in their home villages with their children
↓
Children remain in school in their rural villages
(and therefore maintain access to educational opportunities, unlike their migrating peers)
↓
Children experience improved educational outcomes
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Though providing alternate employment opportunities for migrant mothers – and mitigating the effects of Bihar’s collapsed rural economy – may appear to lie beyond the scope of improving migrant children’s equitable access to educational opportunities, this proposal warrants attention from policymakers. It is worth noting that this mechanism leverages an existing national welfare program and may not be as resource-intensive as the establishment of new seasonal hostels and site schools. However, deeper analysis is needed

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\(^5\) Coffey notes NREGS wages are significantly lower than the migration wage. It appears that wages offered by NREGS are not sufficient to discourage fathers from migrating to higher paying employment opportunities outside their home villages.
before policymakers commit to this approach, including additional research into the unintended consequences of splitting families who previously migrated together. Deshingkar et al. recognize that women and children who are left behind in the rural communities tend to “suffer from loneliness, anxiety and vulnerability to sexual exploitation” (2006, p. 32).

School quality

Efforts to retain migrant children in the local educational system depend upon the quality of the schools themselves. Government schools in rural, isolated regions are generally inadequate with long-standing deficiencies in “school functioning, including teacher and text book shortages, low levels of teacher and administrative accountability, low levels of performance, lack of supervision, and above all, low learning levels” (Smita, 2008, p. 27). Without significant and continuous investment in school infrastructure, information systems, teacher quality, and classroom pedagogy, migrant children will continue drop out of school. Thus, stakeholders must keep the systematic strengthening of local schools at the center of future policies aimed at improving educational equity for migrant children.

The overall strengthening of rural government schools – for migrant and non-migrant children – is a daunting task, and one that requires its own analysis. In order to adhere to the scope of this paper, Part 7 focuses only on policy recommendations that directly contribute to improving migrant children’s equitable access to education.

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BIHAR AND ANTICIPATED CHALLENGES

The preceding assessment of distress migration in Bihar, its effects on children’s retention and learning outcomes, as well as the use of alternative education and retention practices in other Indian states has revealed multiple, interrelated policy gaps. In recognition of the complex interaction between stakeholders, institutions and interventions, this section
structures the following policy recommendations as a multi-dimensional framework of long-term goals guided by immediate objectives rather than a list of disconnected action items. Additionally, this paper strongly recommends that policymakers leverage existing institutions, social welfare programs, and implementation mechanisms whenever possible.

**Long-term goal: Establish a culture of evidence-based decision-making**

Improving educational equity for migrant children in Bihar is especially difficult to address, given the invisibility of a marginalized, transient population and the limited resources available to the state government. A crucial first step is the prioritization of context-specific research to fill basic information gaps and to enable evidence-driven decision-making.

Determining the patterns, timing, and duration of Bihar-specific migration cycles will allow policymakers to target interventions effectively; continuously efficient interventions will rely upon the collection and analysis of up-to-date information that accurately reflect constant changes in rural villages and destination sites. The necessity for research-based decisions is further deepened by the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders, from NGOs implementing alternative education opportunities in rural communities to policymakers in the Bihar Ministry of Education. The following recommendations provide guidance to help overcome information deficits:

*Mapping of distress migration in Bihar to enable targeted interventions*

UNICEF and UNESCO, SSA, and the existing literature uniformly call for the mapping of the locations, routes, and durations of specific livelihoods’ migration cycles; however, the BEPC\(^6\) does not explicitly delineate the mapping of distress migration patterns among its strategies for educational equity in Bihar. **In order to target education interventions**

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\(^6\) Bihar Education Project Council (BEPC) is the state-supported agency designated to implement SSA for the achievement of Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE) in Bihar.
effectively, education policymakers in BEPC and Bihar Ministry of Education must prioritize the mapping of rural villages that experience high rates of out-migration, as well as the destination sites that receive the most migrant families.

However, it must be noted that this paper departs from UNESCO and UNICEF’s recommendation to:

“Undertake detailed mapping of type, pattern, scale and geographical and sector-wise spread of child migration across and within states (to be carried out by the Panchayati Raj Institutions with the support of schools)” (2010).

Unfortunately, this particular tactic fails to consider the weak governance of panchayats (village-level bodies), as well as the dysfunction of most government schools in migrants’ poor and isolated communities. The panchayats and government schools in the relevant regions of Bihar generally lack sufficient resources and training to carry out the technical and painstaking process of data collection (Smita, 2008, p. 20). Continuous mapping will require a general investment in improving local government capacity. Civil society organizations with an established presence in Bihar, such as the Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project (BRLP) or Pratham, are much more likely to have the technical capacity, networks, and financial resources to fill information gaps.

Increased frequency of enrollment tracking

Efforts to address migrant students’ educational needs must reflect the fluidity that characterizes distress migration. The adoption of the District Information System for Education (DISE) in Bihar has significantly reduced the time lag in the availability of educational statistics from 7-8 years to less than a year at the national level, and a few months at the state and district

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7 BRLP is a joint project of the World Bank and the state government of Bihar.
8 The largest NGO in India, Pratham seeks to provide quality education to underprivileged children throughout the country.
9 The District Information System for Education (DISE) was created in response to the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP)’s need for a school information system.
levels (Kaushal and Patra, p. 2). Nationwide data collection occurs once a year on September 30 and includes enrollment, as well as information concerning “school location, management, teachers, school buildings and equipment, environment by gender and age, incentives and the number of disabled children in various grades” (Kaushal and Patra, p. 3). However, given the prevalence of distress migration and the diverse timing of migration cycles, an annual “snapshot” of student enrollment in rural schools is grossly insufficient. **In order to measure constant changes in student movement in a timely manner, collection of attendance data in government schools must increase in frequency.** Ideally, government schools should report enrollment data on a monthly basis to capture attendance trends that are dictated by overlapping migration cycles from various livelihoods.

Though this policy recommendation utilizes an existing school information system, implementation of more frequent data collection may be problematic due to the weak capacities of rural government schools. **In anticipation of possible difficulties, the Bihar Ministry of Education should provide capacity building opportunities for school administrators and make data collection resources available at the district level.** Conditional on the outcomes of initial enrollment reports, the ministry may elect to increase or decrease the frequency of data collection in order to produce meaningful and appropriate information.

*Feedback mechanisms in seasonal hostels and site schools*

Like government schools in the formal education system, seasonal hostels and site schools must be flexible and respond to changing migration trends in the rural villages and destination sites. **The contextualized transfer of seasonal hostels and site schools to Bihar therefore must include the implementation of feedback mechanisms into program design, implementation, and evaluation processes.** Building monitoring and evaluation mechanisms
into alternative education programs will enable evidence-based midcourse corrections and site-specific adjustments that ultimately improve efficiency and ensure continued effectiveness.

**Database for information sharing across districts and states**

This policy recommendation builds upon AIF’s call for a database on “migration and affected children” (Srivastava and Dasgupta, 2010, p. 45). The NGO notes that its studies of sugarcane cutters in Maharashtra and salt-pan workers in Gujarat provide important data and insights into livelihood-specific migration in the regions. However, the surveys do not reflect aggregate migration inflows and outflows, and provide only a “segmented and partial view of the problems at hand” (Srivastava and Dasgupta, 2010, p. 46). The myopic perspective currently available to academics, governmental officials and non-governmental educationists is further distorted by the occurrence of inter-state distress migration, which requires additional coordination.

**Given the prevalence of distress seasonal migration across India, this paper recommends the establishment of a nationwide database that organizes livelihood-specific studies, surveys of migration endemic regions, up-to-date enrollment trends in government schools, and best practices established within seasonal hostels and site schools.** This database is intended to make much needed information available to a range of stakeholders – who may or may not be directly seeking to improve educational equity for migrant children – and to facilitate dialogue between the local and state governments in identified cases of inter-district and inter-state migration. As the MHRD’s flagship program to achieve UEE, the SSA is likely most appropriate entity to house a nationwide database; however, implementation of the policy requires the participation of multiple state ministries of education, resource-limited educational systems in rural communities, civil society organizations, and NGOs. In addition to the
coordination of numerous stakeholders, maintaining the database with quality, up-to-date data will be a challenge.

Long-term challenge: Inculcating culture takes time

The aforementioned recommendations emphasize the use of targeted interventions in areas that experience significant distress seasonal migration, as well as the implementation of frequent feedback mechanisms, in order to overcome information deficits and maximize effectiveness in an ever-changing context. The development of mapping and monitoring mechanisms, in addition to the strengthening of school information systems, will help to affirm the importance of research based design and implementation. However, USAID notes that the culture of evidence-based decision making is “a deeply personal process as well as an institutional one that is reinforced and deepened over time” (2010, p. 21). Inculcating this culture and continuing progress toward educational equity for migrant children will depend upon stakeholders’ continuous engagement and ownership of reform efforts.

Long-term goal: Engagement of stakeholders and ownership of efforts

The effectiveness and sustainability of alternative education practices, as well as efforts to strengthen rural government schools, depends heavily upon stakeholder engagement and ownership. Improving the educational equity of migrant children in particular requires the involvement of multiple actors within the formal educational system: parents, teachers and administrators at the school/district levels, in addition to policymakers in the BEPC and Bihar Ministry of Education. Establishing and maintaining alternative educational opportunities requires the support of rural communities, employers at the destination sites, and NGOs as well. The following policy recommendations seek to highlight stakeholders who may be overlooked during planning and implementation processes:
Civil society and non-governmental organizations

This paper has already recommended the involvement of civil society organizations to help fill information deficits. To build upon this proposal and to help ensure continuity notwithstanding electoral turnover in the Bihar Ministry of Education, policymakers are strongly encouraged to seek the resources and expertise of education-focused NGOs and livelihood-focused civil society organizations.

Much like the BEPC, the Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project (BRLP) is the implementing agency for a national poverty alleviation initiative. However, unlike the BEPC, the BRLP appears to have established extensive networks in migrant families’ isolated, rural communities. Given the BRLP’s robust networks and the primary influence of livelihoods in distress migration, collaboration with the BRLP will leverage local resources and strengthen continuous commitment to migrant children.

Largely recognized as a leader in the educational needs of migrant children, AIF and its local partners have experience in expanding alternative education practices to new geographies in three states. Furthermore, AIF’s own assessment explicitly considers an “enlargement of similar interventions to more geographies in a few more states, using if possible a consortium approach” (Srivastava and Dasgupta, 2010, p. 67). Depending on the capacities of Bihari education NGOs and BEPC, AIF’s participation may be limited to an advisory role.

Migrant communities

As stated in Part 2, the indifferent or negative attitudes of migrant parents toward education underlie behaviors that ultimately contribute to the high dropout rates of migrant students. The success of alternative educational practices and retention in the formal educational system depends upon migrants’ demand for and uptake of quality education opportunities.
It is important to note that alternative educational practices require a greater degree of community involvement and support than efforts to retain children in the formal education system. India and China both experience a form of rural-to-urban distress migration; however, migrant communities, rather than education NGOs, often establish site schools in China (Tan, 2010, p. 34). In India, on the other hand, most migrant parents and children must be convinced that the benefits of attending school outweigh the opportunity costs (Srivastava and Dasgupta, 2010, p. 33).

For planning and advocacy purposes, AIF engages migrant parents and local community leaders in a needs assessment to ensure migrants’ willingness to leave their children in seasonal hostels and to determine the community’s ability to support the hostels (Srivastava and Dasgupta, 2010, p. 37). By involving migrant communities during the planning process, policymakers simultaneously advocate for their educational interventions, activate interest in the rural villages and destination sites, and may promote a sense of ownership that contributes to demand for educational equity.

In addition, policymakers are encouraged to engage migrant communities in order to identify village-specific constraints. Special enrollment drives are held at the beginning of the academic year; incentives for student registration include free textbooks, uniforms, stationary supplies, and meals (Kaushal and Patra, p. 10). However, these incentives are clearly insufficient to retain migrant children throughout the academic year. Quantitative and qualitative surveys may find that scholarships tied to student attendance, for example, may help overcome the opportunity costs of staying in a seasonal hostel.

Employers of distress migrants
AIF’s experience in destination sites also underscores the need to engage the employers of migrant laborers. The implementation of site schools often requires employers’ consent to the use of land, infrastructure, and basic facilities (Srivastava and Dasgupta, 2010, p. 33). Therefore, employers must be recognized as a key stakeholder in efforts to improve educational equity for migrant children. Indeed, some employers may be resistant to efforts to establish site schools on their grounds or to transport migrant children to nearby government schools. In these cases, NGO-driven advocacy may not be enough and require the intervention of the BEPC.

Teachers and administrators in the formal educational system

The effectiveness of educational equity efforts hinges greatly on the buy-in of the teachers and administrators in the formal educational system. Technical fixes, such as the contextualized transfer of migratory cards and progress cards\(^\text{10}\), will remove bureaucratic obstacles to re-enrollment and retention in government schools; however, teachers in rural communities currently lack the pedagogical skills to address the unique challenges of distress migration. In order to effectively the learning outcomes of migrant children, this paper affirms AIF’s emphasis on prioritizing and incentivizing professional development for teachers in migration endemic regions. More specifically, content concerning pedagogy and sensitivity toward migrant children’s educational needs should be informed by the experiences of AIF and other NGOs who hold teacher trainings at site schools (Smita, 2008, p. 27) (Srivastava and Dasgupta, 2010). By giving teachers the skills needed to improved migrant children’s learning outcomes, this policy recommendation also seeks to change teachers’ attitudes toward the educational needs of migrant children and to bolster the long-term sustainability of other educational interventions.

\(^{10}\) Migratory and progress cards are discussed in Part 6. Retaining Migrant Children in the Formal Educational System, pg. 12.
Furthermore, teachers and school/district administrators must engage closely with organizations tasked with planning and implementing alternative educational practices. Collaboration between teachers in rural government schools and destination sites will ensure curriculum coordination and credit transfers that help migrant children transition from alternative to formal educational institutions following the migration cycle (UNESCO and UNICEF, 2010). Equally important is a partnership with the local seasonal hostel to track student enrollment throughout the academic year.

Policymakers must anticipate implementation challenges that stem from overall weak capacity in the rural educational system, as well as the resource limitations that may inhibit full implementation in the most isolated communities. In this sense, this paper recommends specific interventions that are meant to be “understood and strategized in the context of longer-term goals and trends” that includes improvements in school infrastructure, school resources, as well as teacher and administrative quality (USAID, 2010, p. 1).

Long-term challenge: Government commitment

As with many policy interventions, the support of stakeholders relies upon immediate success to reinforce the merit of contributing time, effort, and limited financial resources. Measureable improvements beget continued commitment, while mediocre results often lead to a loss of momentum. Government entities – in this case, the BEPC and Bihar Ministry of Education – are no exception to this phenomenon. In order to maintain government interest and sustain pressure for reform in the educational needs of migrant children, other stakeholders should rely upon the rights-based approach that underlies the SSA and other existing institutions.
8. CONCLUSION

Providing migrant children equitable access to education in Bihar requires a developmental process that engages multiple stakeholders, rather than a series of disconnected policy interventions. However, by identifying specific objectives that enable the contextualized transfer of alternative educational practices and increase the retention of migrant children in the formal educational system, this paper seeks to encourage a sustainable culture of evidence-based decision-making and stakeholder engagement. Furthermore, these recommendations attempt to leverage existing institutions and organizations whenever possible in order to address the diverse challenges associated with chronic seasonal migration within a Bihar-specific context.

In the most basic terms, improved educational equity can be measured by the retention of migrant children in the educational system and increased literacy rates in Bihar. However, child migrants should not merely be expected to complete their primary education without dropping out. Meaningful educational equity requires the educational system to manage the challenges of chronic migration, to provide quality instruction beyond basic literacy and numeracy, and to cultivate skills and competencies that allow migrant children to break the vicious cycle of inter-generational poverty.
9. REFERENCES


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