

Uneven migration and the shortcomings of 'migrant entrepreneurship' in Sri Lanka

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The last decade has seen a marked change in the global-level discussion on temporary labour migration, most notably with the promotion of circular migration regimes as delivering a 'triple win' for sending countries, receiving countries and migrants themselves. At the heart of the most contentious of these wins, that of the labouring migrant, resides a neoliberal logic rooted in the outsourcing of developmental accountability from the state to the migrant entrepreneur. Armed with social and monetary remittances, migrants are expected to channel their foreign begot skills and income into income-generating activity – generally in the form of self-employment or small business – and thus make sustainable improvements to the socio-economic circumstances from which they originally fled. Quite aside from the asymmetry of a rendition of development rooted in migrant entrepreneurship, the empirical basis supporting the transformative impact of social and monetary remittances on sustainable income-generating activity is insufficient at best. Drawing on experiences of temporary labour migration in Sri Lanka, this paper challenges the assumptions underpinning the logic of a 'triple win', specifically by scrutinising the impact of social remittances on the livelihoods of migrant returnees in Colombo and four other locations across the country. The research findings indicate that Colombo returnees found greater employment benefits upon returning to Sri Lanka than did their rural equivalents, highlighting uneven processes of development that have progressively concentrated economic opportunities in the Colombo metropole and nearby export processing zones (EPZs) since the country's 1977 neoliberal turn. Within this landscape of lopsided development we contend the existence of uneven migration, wherein neglect of the rural economy has catalysed both internal and international migration and similarly frustrated returnees' attempts to improve their circumstances. Additionally, we advocate careful attention to the internal geography of migration and the practice of multi-site research as a more nuanced method of assessing migration-development.