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## Rural-Urban Migration in China: Lessons from an Empirically Based Framework of Positive Impacts on Rural Development

ULI KLEINWECHTER

*University of Hohenheim, Agricultural and Food Policy Group, Germany*

### Abstract

In contemporary China, rural-urban migration takes place at considerable scale. While unfolding a number of positive development impacts on migrants' communities of origin, migration happens in a context of official restrictions and is characterised by a high importance of social networks on which migrants rely to coordinate their movement. Due to these attributes – its scale as well as the particular institutional, administrative and social context – studying the case of migration in China can reveal important lessons on how policies can be designed in order to enhance positive impacts of migration on source communities.

Relying on a review of literature from sociology, geography and economics on rural-urban migration in China, this paper collects empirical evidence on development impacts of migration on source communities, the migration process itself and the institutional, administrative and social context in which migration takes place. Interactions between the latter and the two former are highlighted and points of interactions are identified, providing a guideline for potential policy interventions. The detailed analysis of the interactions between the migration process and its positive effects on the one hand and determining factors on the other hand reveals that a reduction in the barriers of migration may not necessarily lead to a full exploitation of the potential of migration for rural development, but rather unfolds ambiguous development impacts. While barriers to migration, such as the Chinese household registration system, restrict out-migration and keep marginal returns to labour as well as potential flows of remittances and return migration at a lower level, they also drive migrants to maintain stronger ties to their home communities and thus ensure a high level of return flows. This policy dilemma may require the identification of an optimal level of barriers to migration. Finally it is argued that observing the Chinese central government's activities regarding migration offers a perspective which is missing in ongoing international migration negotiations, as it has to reconcile the conflicting interests of both migrant sending and receiving regions.

**Keywords:** China, international migration, migration, rural development, rural-urban migration