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O
d as it may seem, the movement of pensioners across international borders is on the rise in both Asia and Europe. While there is a growing literature on this topic in Europe, particularly on intra-EU movement, the trend in Asia has only just begun to receive academic attention. The workshop brought together scholars from East and Southeast Asia and Europe, to review experiences in Europe, explore developments in Asia, and deepen our general understanding of the new migration trend through comparison. Seventeen papers were presented, covering pensioners who migrated as a result of reunification policies (Russian Jews to Germany); retired labour migrants who moved back to their home countries (Turkish and Moroccan elderly from Europe); and most significantly, pensioners from wealthy countries seeking a better retirement life (Japanese to Southeast Asia, Singaporeans to Australia, Europeans to southern Europe).

It's not just about ageing
The workshop opened with presentations by demographers who identified the root cause of pensioners’ mobility. In countries like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, the pace of ageing is even faster than it has been in most European countries. In Japan, for example, the proportion of the population aged 65 and over is projected to rise from 15% in 2005 to 28% in 2025. While more people are getting older, fewer elderly live with their children. This trend began in Europe, but wealthier Asian countries are quickly catching up. In Japan, the percentage of persons aged 65 and over living with children fell from 77% to 54% between 1970 and 1995; in South Korea, from over 86% in 1970 to 45% in 2000. There are many reasons for this: pensioners today have fewer children, fewer daughters-in-law see it as an obligation to look after the elderly, and national pension schemes – though far from generous – make it possible for the elderly to live independent- ly, all of which created more potentially mobile pensioners. With the baby boomer generation approaching retirement, the number of migrant pensioners is likely to increase in the coming years.

Researchers from other disciplines provided more nuanced analysis. One of the workshop’s insights was that pensioners’ mobility in both Asia and Europe must be understood in relation to state policies and the commodification of elderly care. Legal experts from Europe reviewed how the mobility of pensioners is a gendered phenomenon, though the gender bias seems to be more salient in Asia than in Europe. For example, a high percentage of single males is found among Malaysia’s Japanese elderly.

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 class- es and rural populations. The loss of skilled health profes- sionals from the public medical sector can be significant. In Europe, too, as pensioners migrate to cater 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 commodifi- cated compounds that are more popular with middle-income migrants than the ‘long-stay’ tourism abroad. On the receiving side, many Asian countries see the coming of foreign pensioners as an opportunity to restore local economies after the Asian eco- nomic crisis, and have launched programmes to promote it. In Malaysia, under the ‘Malaysia My Second Home’ pro- gramme, foreign retirees receive five-year multiple entry visas once they deposit a minimum of RM 100,000 (about €32,000) in a Malaysian bank account, or if their monthly income exceeds RM 7,000 (€1,519). The Philippines, Thai- land and Indonesia have also launched similar schemes by creating special visa categories for retirees.

One thing countries and continents appear to have in common is the pendulum pattern of pensioner mobility. To enjoy the best weather, to stretch their pensions or to keep in touch with their families, many pensioners move back and forth between their native and adopted countries. This was just one way the workshop showcased the elderly to be anything but passive. The elderly are active agents: navigating existing institu- tions, pushing for policy changes, generating new life styles and creating new transnational communities.

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. To live in individual houses dispersed across communities, rather than living in congested residences (for example, gated compounds) that are more popular with middle-income groups.

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