

**The impact of adult children's migration on wellbeing in later
life: voices from Moldova**

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Abstract

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 Moldova has experienced significant levels of migration, both internally, from rural areas to the cities, and also internationally. Today is estimated that around 600,000 Moldavians out of a total population of 4.3 million are earning a living outside the country. Thus around one in seven of the population are living abroad. Migration can be a challenging experience for migrants but it can also have repercussions for non migrants, especially the family members who are left behind. This paper presents the views of older people with regard to the benefits, or otherwise, of migration. Data from a series of focus group discussions and in depth interviews conducted in Moldova during the period November 2008 to March 2009 highlight that older people view recent trends in migration as a mixed blessing. On the one hand many older people recognise migration as inevitable - the result of low pay and high unemployment in Moldova - and see it as the only way for their children and grandchildren to improve their lives. Moreover they recognise the benefits of remittances, although highlight that these are not always reliable. On the other hand, the migration of adult children is perceived to be accompanied by high costs in terms of emotional loss, isolation and lack of physical care; as well as increased responsibility for grandchildren - practically, emotionally and financially. In many cases, these losses appear to outweigh the gains.

Key words: Older People, Migration, Poverty, Remittances, Moldova

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Introduction

Following independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 Moldova suffered a deep and sustained recession. In the three years between 1991 and 1994, real GDP per capita halved. Although economic growth resumed by the year 2000, recovery has been weak in comparison to most other former Soviet states (World Bank, 2004). In 2007 real GDP per capita was still only three-quarters of its 1991 level at just \$516 per person (in constant 2000\$ prices) (UNICEF, 2009). With the contraction of both industrial and agricultural sectors many working age people have sought better employment opportunities through migration. Today it is estimated that around 600,000 Moldavians, or one in seven of the population, are now earning a living outside the country (IOM Moldova, 2009). Migration can be a challenging experience for migrants but it can also have repercussions for non migrants, especially the family members who are left behind. For the community and indeed the state, the migration of labour and the remittances that accompany it may be seen as a panacea in the circumstances of widespread unemployment and poverty. However, in this paper, based on the findings of qualitative research conducted with older people in Moldova from 2008 to 2009, we will argue that the migration-remittances package is far from unambiguously positive.

Most migration literature focuses either on the migrants themselves or on the receiving communities (Taylor 2003). The analysis of costs and benefits of migration often consider those only in relation to migrants and the communities they join, leaving out any calculation of the gains and losses for the wider family, community or society of origin (Buckley 1995). However, there is now a growing literature about those 'left behind'. This literature has largely focused on the consequences for children and their wellbeing, (for example Battistella and Conaco, 1998), or the impact on spouses, both negative and positive (for example Hadi, 2001). Research has also been conducted with a focus on *populations* left behind in terms of lost human capital, often know as 'brain drain' (for example Katseli, Lucas and Xenogiani 2006). In spite of the important roles played by many older people in facilitating the migration of working-age adults, the ramifications for older people of being 'left behind' are less often considered.

Out-migration of adult children is often seen as having negative consequences for ageing rural parents, being accompanied by increased loneliness, isolation and loss of practical and economic support (UN, 2002). It is argued that older people may be more vulnerable to the depletion of social networks as a result of out migration, and that this may be poorly ameliorated by formal systems of support. Interestingly, however, amongst the sparse literature on older people ‘left behind’ in low income countries, several studies have found evidence that non-migrant family members benefit from migration through remittance, and that this offsets the loss of physical support. A study in China found that that older people living in rural areas who adult children had migrated to urban areas expressed similar levels of wellbeing to those older people whose family remain, with the loneliness of those left behind being outweighed by the significant improvement in satisfaction brought about by even small levels of remittance from the city (Biao, 2007). Also in rural China, Silverstein et al (2006) found that the receipt of remittances softens the impact of living at a distance from children. However they stress the cultural significance of an ageing parent living with an adult child. This type of cohabitation is seen as a sign of respect and confers status, and they argue that that remittances can never truly offset the loss implied by the absence of an adult child with whom to cohabit.

Knodel and Saengtienchai’s study of older age parents with migrant children in rural Thailand offers further support to the notion that migration of children to urban areas positively contributes to the well-being of their elderly parents who remain in rural areas. Their findings suggest that the negative impacts of migration on social support have been ameliorated by improvements in communication and transport and that increasingly families find adaptive ways to maintain contact (Knodel and Saengtienchai 2007). A further study of older parents aged 60 and over in western Thailand found that out-migration of all children compared with out-migration of some or no children was independently associated with *less depression* in parents. This surprising finding in part reflected a selection effect, with pre-existing advantages in families sending more migrants. However the association remained after taking account of social support, parent characteristics, health and wealth. Parents with all children out-migrated received more economic remittances and perceived support to be as good as that of those with children close by (Abas et al 2009).

In contrast, recent research in Albania found that although migrant remittances had a positive impact on material wellbeing, older people suffered significantly as a consequence of being geographically separated from their children and grandchildren (King and Vullnetari 2006; Vullnetari and King, 2008). Interestingly they highlight that the impact on older people has been further compounded by the disruption of the welfare state, which prior to 1990 provided extensive benefits to all sections of society. It is clear that out-migration can result in both positive and negative outcomes and the impact of migration on those 'left behind' is likely to be context specific, depending on the local culture and the importance of kinship networks as well as the social and legal arrangements between sending and receiving states (Miltiades 2002). Remittances may play an important role in helping make ends meet financially but other aspects of welfare such as practical and emotional support, social standing in the community and the coverage of formal systems of social protection may be equally important.

Study Context

Moldova is the poorest country in Europe (World Bank 2004) and has the highest proportion of rural inhabitants (Prohntitchi et al 2006). As part of the process of dismemberment of the Soviet Union, Moldova became an independent state on the 27 August 1991. Soon afterwards conflict erupted in the region known as Transnistria with the result that the autonomy of this territory, not recognised by the Moldovan state, was unilaterally declared by Transnistria's leaders in Tiraspol (Roper 2001). Following independence Moldova entered the state of change and adaptation known as 'transition'. Unfortunately, this was accompanied by a collapse in economic production, with the withdrawal of subsidies from Moscow and interruption of traditional trading partners. Moldova, in common with the other post socialist states, experienced a prolonged period of economic crisis and instability.

Older people in Moldova today find themselves in a position possibly unique to the former state socialist societies. During the Soviet period a comprehensive pension scheme was established, although peasants were excluded until 1964. In keeping with Soviet ideology, pension levels were calculated to reduce inequalities, with the result that lower paid workers received a pension at a higher replacement level than did the higher paid. Furthermore, retired persons could continue to work *and* receive a pension without penalty. In addition, pensioners benefited from a number of free or subsidised

services, which were not insignificant in financial terms. Hence the income of a pensioner in the Soviet Union could allow for a relatively comfortable existence. Although older people no doubt welcomed the support of their families in many respects, they were not expected to *rely* on family members for their existence. Soviet ideology placed the responsibility for the financial support of older people on the community, not the individual (Mitchell 1983). In the urban setting in particular, society had moved from what Kagitcibasi (1996) has called a culture of ‘relatedness’, featuring high levels of intergenerational dependency, to a culture of ‘separateness’, where the state is expected to provide material support and adult children are left to give affective support.

During early years of the 1990s immediately following independence, the value of personal savings was decimated by rampant inflation (World Bank 1996). Although the pension system remained largely unchanged, the purchasing power of pensions plunged (Dobronogov 2003). Furthermore, it became common for pension payments to be delayed or paid ‘in kind’ rather than in cash (Cashu 2000), a position that has only recently been reversed. Pensions in Moldova are now paid on time and in cash but pension levels remain low. In 2006, the average pension was less than half of the state defined minimum subsistence level (National Bureau of Statistics of Moldova 2009). In many other low income countries older people might never have had, or expected, a decent pension and would therefore be unlikely to expect a life of hardship during working life to blossom into a life of easy old age. However, in Moldova older people had a justifiable expectation that life as a pensioner would be supported by a reasonable state pension and cushioned by subsidies (HelpAge International 2002). Instead pensions have failed to keep pace with prices and many other subsidies have been withdrawn. In 2008, the minimum monthly pension for those who qualified with 30 years of coverage was 406 lei (approx \$36) i.e. just above \$1 a day, whilst the social pension paid to citizens of pensionable age who do not satisfy the qualifying conditions of an old-age pension was just 70.88 lei a month (equivalent to around \$6.30 a month) (US Social Security Administration, 2009). Furthermore, informal support mechanisms have been put under enormous stress as families, especially those with children, have themselves been impoverished by the transition to a market economy and the withdrawal of state subsidies (HelpAge International 2006). So, at the very time when there may be more pressure on families to support older members, the capacity of families to do so may be significantly diminished.

Inequality within and between nations drives migration as labour moves in search of enhanced opportunities and higher rates of pay (Osaki 2003). People of working age migrate to 'richer' countries in search of opportunities, especially in employment (Taylor 2003). These migrants may send money, or remittances, home to support their families. Spouses, children and older people typically benefit from this support (De Haas 2005). In the absence of comprehensive pension schemes or where pension levels are low, remittances are thought to be vital for the survival of many older people throughout the low income countries of the world (United Nations Programme on Ageing 2002).

Migration is nothing new in Moldova. As a consequence of nearly 50 years of Sovietization, traditional family relationships, and their associated obligations, were challenged. Labour was moved from rural areas to urban centres according to the needs of the command economy (Guins 1952). Family ties were tested further when workers were moved between Soviet republics. The multi ethnic character of the population of Moldova today is testament to these earlier population movements (National Bureau of Statistics of Moldova 2009). In Soviet ideology there was a clear distinction between 'socialist migration' and capitalist migration'. The former was, at least in theory, planned and managed and was considered scientific. Migration in the market economy was seen as disordered and likely to produce social problems. Freedom of movement for the individual within the Soviet Union was constrained by the administrative strategies of the internal passport, effectively an identity card, and the 'propiska', which was a residence permit (Buckley 1995). Travel outside the Soviet Union was unusual. It was only the collapse of the Soviet Union which enabled a level of geographical mobility not witnessed in Moldova for 50 years.

An element of the Soviet command economy was the system of the provision of jobs. At least in theory, no one could be unemployed. An element of the market system is that the individual must seek employment. During the 1990s job-seeking must have been a frustrating process as both agricultural and industrial sectors were in a state of collapse. As a consequence many of those in the working age population have migrated to seek employment elsewhere, either in the cities of Moldova or abroad. This has been described as an 'adaptive reaction' to poverty of opportunity in Moldova (Ghencea and Gudumac 2004). Although migration is not a new phenomenon the *scale* of migration is

probably unprecedented. It is estimated that between half a million and one million people are working abroad, out of a population of just over four million (International Organisation for Migration Moldova 2004) and that approximately one-third of these are irregular (i.e. illegal) migrants (Prohnitchi, Oprunenco, Lapteacru, Botan and Gotisan 2006). Thirty-one percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) of Moldova in 2008 was made up of remittances from international migrants, making Moldova the top ranked country in Europe, and third in the world, in terms of the proportion of GDP accounted for by remittances (Ratha, Mohapatra and Silwal, 2009).

Data and Methods

This paper presents the views of older people with regard to the benefits, or otherwise, of migration drawing on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Moldova during the period November 2008 to March 2009. The research was conducted as part of a more extensive investigation into the living conditions and sources of finance and social support (both state and family) amongst older people in the former Soviet states of Central Asia and the Caucasus. The study combined secondary analyses of household survey data in the six poorest countries of the FSU (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Tajikistan) with in-depth interviews in three case study countries of Kyrgyzstan, Moldova and Tajikistan. The qualitative research was conducted in order to illuminate older people's quality of life from the perspective of older people themselves. The aim was to paint a picture of the lives of older people and to gain insight into how older people in the region have been affected by the massive societal changes of the last 15 years and how they are coping with the impacts of these changes. At the start of the fieldwork, it was not envisaged that migration would be a major focus of the research. However migration related issues arose *throughout* the focus group discussions and the in-depth interviews, with migration emerging as one of the key issues shaping the current lives of older people in Moldova. A separate paper explores the more general living conditions of older people (Falkingham et al, 2010).

'Older people' were defined in the study as those of pensionable age i.e. the age at which a person is entitled to a state pension by virtue of age, whether or not that person is actually in receipt of a pension. In Moldova, state pension age is currently age 62 for men and 57 for women. There are, however, a number of exceptions, with civil servants and people who were employed in 'hazardous or arduous conditions' being allowed to

retire up to five years earlier (US SSA, 2009). Thus for the purposes of the study, respondents were asked to self define whether they were ‘pensioners’.

Previous studies have highlighted differences in the experiences of older people living in urban and rural areas. As the capital city is distinct from other urban areas, three data collection sites were identified: the first site was the capital city (Chisinau); the second was a small town in the semi-autonomous region of Gagauzia; and the third was a village in the *raion* (administrative region) of Cimislia, one of the poorest *raions* in the country. Respondents were selected purposively in order to incorporate the experiences of different sub sections of the target population. Respondents therefore included both men and women, and members of the Moldovan, Russian, Ukraine, Bulgarian and Jewish populations.

A series of focus groups and in depth interviews were held in each location. Table 1 below indicates the breakdown of focus groups and interviews by location and gender. Each focus group typically comprised 6-8 people. Women tend to outnumber men as a result of both the higher proportion of women in the population at older ages but also due to the greater willingness of women to take part in our research. Both interviews and focus group discussions were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. Data were managed, coded and analysed using the computer assisted qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA 2007.

Table 1: Sample composition

Data Collection Site	Focus Groups	Gender	In-depth Interviews	Gender
Capital (Chisinau) Nov/Dec 2008	5	1 male 1 female 3 mixed	11	2 male 8 female 1 couple
Town Nov/Dec 2008	4	1 male 3 female	8	3 male 5 female
Village March 2009	6	2 male 4 female	8	4 male 4 female
Total Moldova	15		27	

Themes and questions

The break-up of the Soviet Union and the subsequent transition to market-led economies has been accompanied by a decade of economic and social upheaval on an unprecedented scale. There is now a substantial body of literature detailing the impact on the population of the decline in economic and social well-being in the new Republics of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) during the 1990s (Alam et al, 2005; Dudwick et al, 2002; Falkingham, 2001, 2004, 2005; World Bank, 2000). However, older people have been largely invisible in this literature, particularly in the poorer countries of the CIS in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The research aimed to shed light on older people's experience of everyday living. Particular focus was put on exploring the changing role of the state and the extended family in providing economic and social supports. The in-depth interviews used life narrative approaches to investigate how older people adjusted to societal change following the fall of communism, how this has affected their social networks and subjective well-being, whilst focus groups discussions explored the meaning of poverty and how this has changed over time, the role of the state (past and present) and the views and priorities of older people today.

According to official government estimates, more than 600,000 Moldovans are living and working abroad, although the actual figure differs according to different sources and some estimates exceed one million (IOM 2009). During the fieldwork, the recent mass emigration from Moldova and its impact on the country and the local community as well as the immediate lives of older people emerged as a recurrent concern in both the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The unprecedented scale of recent out migration was a anxiety for many, with one older male stating that no one in the early 1990s expected that “...*an army of people would depart abroad*” [FGD6 village, Moldovan male, 72 years, former Kolhoz (collective farm) worker]. Respondents spontaneously discussed the consequences of the migration of the working age population at the level of the individual, the community and the nation. Although some of their concerns were for themselves as individuals and for older people in general, the respondents were equally troubled by the ramifications of migration for other sectors of society and, in particular, children and young people. Respondents reported that the scale of migration was an issue as it meant nearly all families were affected, that villages were empty of working age people, and the nation was missing a substantial proportion of its human capital.

The next section presents the key findings regarding the impact of migration on older people organised according to six major themes:

- financial need, migration and remittances;
- the emotional costs of separation;
- concerns over care;
- increased responsibilities of older people;
- the emergence and impact of ‘empty’ villages;
- and the wider impact on ‘the Nation’ itself.

The section starts with some background on the extent and nature of migrations.

Results: Older people’s view on the impacts of migration in Moldova

With somewhere between one in seven and one in four of the population living abroad, most older people reported having first hand experience of migration. Of the 27 older people interviewed, 22 (81%) reported having at least one relative living abroad. All of those interviewed in the village location (8/8) had one or more family member living and working outside of Moldova and in many cases they also had relatives who have moved internally, usually to the capital city of Chisinau. When respondents spoke of the migration of a family member they were generally referring to an adult child, sometimes moving with a spouse and children. However, a small number of older people discussed other migrant relatives such as siblings, nieces or nephews. Some migrants had moved within Moldova, but the majority had gone abroad. Our respondents reported that family members had departed for Italy, Russia, the Ukraine, Turkey, Germany, Portugal, Greece, Romania, Israel, Canada, and the United States. The single most commonly cited destination for work was Moscow.

There were also people who reported relatives who had moved prior to 1991 and who now found themselves living in separate countries. Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was considerable migration between the different member states. In 1989, there were 28 million persons residing in a republic other than the one in which they were born – around 10 percent of the total Soviet population (USSR Census Results 1989). Thirteen percent of the population of Moldova in 1989 was born elsewhere in the USSR. Where migrations to, for example, Russia or the Ukraine, were once internal

moves within the Soviet Union, migrants remaining there are now in a separate country, a phenomenon Mansoor and Quillin (2007) have called ‘statistical immigration’. A Russian woman living in the capital explained it this way: “... *our relatives live abroad; I mean we turned out to live in different countries after the collapse of USSR*”. [IDI9 capital, Russian female 63 years, former printer]. This is important in terms of the increased costs and bureaucracy involved in visiting as international travel requires passports and expensive air and rail tickets instead of subsidized soviet travel.

Financial need, migration and remittances

Respondents were almost universally agreed that young people in Moldova are *compelled* to migrate in order to survive, and the most common reason reported by older people for the migration of their relatives was *financial*. The underlying reasons cited for this were twofold. The first reason was associated with the paucity of jobs locally due to the collapse of industry and the failure of the conversion of collective farms into private concerns. The second, and related, objective was to secure employment which paid, at a minimum, a living wage. Respondents emphasised that it was virtually impossible for people to find jobs in Moldova which would enable them to support a family and that this is especially so in rural areas and in smaller cities. Thus most people migrated internationally, although there was also movement from the countryside to the major cities.

It was also recognised that some young people were ‘pulled’ into migrating through the promise of greater prosperity. Older people described migrants sporting “fancy cars, beautiful clothes and building big houses”, encouraging others to aspire to the same material manifestations of success. Ironically, these fruits of migration may contribute to the body of imperfect information to which prospective migrants refer. Seeing the material benefits gained by some migrants, prospective migrants may assume that migration is the road to riches. Migration which has failed to result in a substantially improved financial situation may not be displayed in the same way, so that prospective migrants do not see the full picture. Interestingly, many respondents recognised the uncertainty associated with migration and highlighted that migrants’ plans were subject to the context and labour market at their destinations. Respondents cited cases of both failed migration, where the migrant had returned when job opportunities were not as anticipated, as well as migrations that had begun as temporary but become permanent as

the migrant established a settled life abroad. Uncertainty is a recurrent theme, colouring many older people's views and experiences of migration.

According to the World Bank, Moldova is the first in Europe in terms of the size of remittances in proportion to GDP, with remittances of \$1.9 billion in 2008 (World Bank 2010). The majority of respondents reported that they received remittances from family members working elsewhere and some older people spoke of being unable to survive without this help. Furthermore, migrants send money to spouses, children and siblings which may have an indirect effect on older people by relieving them of the responsibility to subsidise these other family members. However, in most cases the remittances received were infrequent and not relied upon to meet daily needs. Of the 22 older people interviewed in-depth about their sources of income and coping strategies who had relatives who had out-migrated, only two highlighted that support from their adult children abroad had made an appreciable difference to their lives. One woman, living in the small town, had both a son and daughter working abroad. The son, leaves for 6 weeks and goes to Moscow to earn money and then returns and his wife and daughter have remained in Moldova. The daughter is also living abroad and '*buys everything, despite I refuse*' including a modern washing machine [IDI3 town, Ukrainian female, 69 years]. Even though she benefits from remittances from her children, the older woman still works and has a small business selling honey and other produce from a small-holding and would not be able to survive on her and her husband's pension.

A number of older people said that they would receive money, if they asked but that they did not want to do this:

My sons don't give me any money. It's not because they're bad, it just happened so. My son has been abroad for more than 10 years... He has family there. And I don't get any money from him. I don't know how much he gets, and I don't ask. Because I don't want to depend on him. I've been working for 42 years not to be dependant on anybody, to get a good pension. And another son is in Moscow. He has no work so far. [FGD3 capital Russian female]

It was recognised that working abroad may be no more stable or profitable than working in Moldova and this may make it impossible for the migrant to send remittances regularly, if at all. Unfortunately, some migrants are exploited to the extent that they can

barely cover their own living expenses or are defrauded of pay so that they return home with empty pockets and outstanding debts. Respondents explained that, in many cases, migrant family members needed all of their wages to manage and could not afford to send money home. In order to move in the first place, respondents highlighted the need for the prospective migrant to secure money for travel and a place to stay. In addition he or she may need to pay for documents whose cost will be significantly higher if purchased to enable illegal entry to another state. These expenses may be covered by a loan taken out in advance of travel but will have to be repaid when the migrant has secured employment as explained by this respondent from Chisinau: *My daughter has recently gone to Israel. Some years ago my granddaughter was departed. There were no sources for living. My daughter has borrowed some money to go. Now she has to work hard to give this money back. Only after this she would start to earn for herself.* [IDI1 capital Ukrainian female, 67 years, former cook]

In some instances the flow of money is actually from the older parent to the migrant adult child ‘*He goes to Moscow. My pension is as little as it is but he comes to ask money from me. I give him. What can I do? Me? I don’t have so much to live...*’ [FGD2, village, Russian woman, former school teacher]. Others stated that they sometimes received more than at other times. The general picture that emerged was one of irregular income and often without predictability. Older people with migrant family members may not be able to anticipate how much they may receive, or when, and the result of this is an inability to effectively plan spending and the lack of a sense of financial security. Thus, although financial needs seem to be the main driver for migration, older people also recognised that migration was not always the path to financial security, either for their adult children or themselves. Remittances were important for many but were not seen as a reliable source of income and indeed many older people did not wish to ask their children for money, expressing the wish to remain independent.

Emotional costs of separation - missing migrants and staying in touch

Respondents spoke with sadness, regret and often tears, of family members who had migrated, especially those who were abroad. They conveyed their feelings about migrant family members in terms of loss verging on grief and their feelings were particularly acute when discussing their children and grandchildren. Marris argues that such feelings

can be experienced as a response not only to bereavement but also to “any situation where the pattern of life has been radically disrupted” (1986 p 3).

A key concern that arose repeatedly was the fear that adult children would not be able to return home to comfort a dying parent or to attend the funeral. One man, with two sons living abroad who had not seen them since leaving, seven and nine years ago said ‘*Sometimes they would call once a week. And I tell them off, I tell them to come home, come home because when you come, you will find only locks* (metaphor for ‘everyone will be dead’) [IDI1 village Moldovan male, former tractor driver]. The same theme came up in the focus group discussions. ‘*Sometimes it happens that parents die and their children can’t come to the funerals*’. [FGD4 village Moldovan female, former agricultural worker]. ‘*They have departed illegally and can’t come back. If they come back to Moldova, they wouldn’t be able to depart again*’. [FGD3 village Moldovan female, former kolhoz worker].

This fear where migrants were geographically distant was of an older person dying and his or her children being unable to be there to provide comfort in the final days, or not being able to attend the funeral has also been discussed by Miltiades in the context of older people in India. This is not just a fear for those left behind, as Izuhara and Shibata (2002) and Baldock (2000) also report the fear of being unable to attend a funeral or family emergency, but in these cases from the perspective of the migrant. The older people interviewed in Moldova also expressed fears for their children and grandchildren abroad. These fears centred on the physical safety of migrants and their perceived vulnerability, the stress involved in their work and migrant status, and their financial security. These fears are not unfounded, especially when migrants are ‘illegals’ who are much more vulnerable to exploitation and unsafe working practices (Human Rights Watch 2009). Furthermore, migrants may be at risk of racist and xenophobic attacks such as those reported by Matthews and Nemtsova (2009). One respondent from Chisinau reported her own experience when her children and grandchildren migrated to Russia:

(crying) When they come here, when they call me, I ask them every time to come back. My son works there, but doesn't get much. They are treated there so badly! They hardly make ends meet. And for the first 4 years it was awful. They hardly survived. I was crying every time they called. And my grandson - he's a very

smart boy... But at school he was treated so badly. They said he was an immigrant so he didn't have any rights. [FGD3 capital, Russian woman]

A village respondent spoke of the stress and exhaustion she observed in returning migrants, this time from Israel: *They go there young and come back old and exhausted.* [FGD4 village, Moldovan female, former agricultural worker]

Older people missed the physical presence of their family members, highlighting that contact with migrant family members is vital to them. Knodel and Saengtienchai (2007) have suggested that progress in technology and transport has made geographical proximity less important in terms of communication between migrants and those left behind and in so doing has attenuated the negative aspects of migration. However, respondents in our study highlighted that, although contact is usually in the form of telephone calls, speaking on the telephone was not enough. Furthermore the cost of telephoning was often unaffordable, and many older people had to wait for the out-migrant to call them rather than the other way round. One woman with a sister in Sevastopol (Ukraine) another in Tyumen (Russia) and a third in Vinnitsa (Ukraine) said she mainly keep in touch by writing letters but *'even the envelopes are expensive'* [IDI2 town Bulgarian female, former secretary].

For some, the sadness of having family migrate was, in part, mitigated by visits. One village respondent spoke of a visit from her daughter as *'warming her soul'* [FGD3 village, Moldovan female, former kolhoz worker]. An older woman in the town stated that a visit from her daughter was *'like a holiday'*. A number of respondents reported that they could visit their children abroad but very few respondents said that they could do this regularly. For other respondents visiting their families abroad was difficult or even impossible. One hurdle was the difficulty in obtaining a visa for certain destinations. The key issue, however, was the cost of travel, which was prohibitive for many. *My daughter lives in Russia. Unless she pays for my trip I cannot go there.* [FGD1 capital Russian]. Even for respondents in the town or village, the trip to or from the capital, Chisinau, was expensive in relative terms due to the price of petrol (which affects both car owners and users of public transport). A respondent from the village stated:

If the salary was bigger in Chisinau she (her daughter) could come to see me more often. But how can she afford to come to me? My money is also not enough

to go to see her. It's not so far but I don't have the money for it. [FGD3 village, Moldovan female, former kolhoz worker]

One way of resolving the problem of family separation would be to migrate together. As one respondent from the village says:

People go away and leave their children alone (the grandchildren of the older people). It would be good if they took us, older people, with them too. We speak to each other only over the telephone and cry. [FGD4 village, Moldovan woman, former agricultural worker]

However, this was not seen as a viable option by most of our respondents. The cost of migrating was seen as one barrier. However, other issues included the issue of identify, of belonging in Moldova, being responsible for the family home and the lack of acquaintances abroad:

They invite me (to Russia), but I'm a Chisinau citizen, I was born here... (showing the picture of a three story house, which belongs to his son) There's a room especially for me. Everything's equipped. I don't go there. I can't leave from here, first of all... I have to pay for everything, take care of things. If I go – who would take care of the house? That's first. Secondly, I go there – they all work there. I stay alone. They leave and I stay - me, the dog and the cat. I don't know anyone around there. [IDI4 capital, Russian/Jewish male, 87 years, former engineer].

King and Vullnetari (2006) in their study of the impact of migration on older people in rural Albania highlighted the social price of the separation of family members and how this has interacted with other socio-economic changes to heighten the sense of depression and abandonment many older people there feel. Just as in Albania, the 'loss' of a family member through migration may be just one of a series of losses sustained by older people in Moldova. Since independence they have witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union, the separation of Transnistria, and the economic turmoil of the early post Soviet period. Jobs, and indeed entire industries, were rendered obsolete under the new order. Many older people have found themselves battling to survive in a confusing new landscape practically denuded of familiar support structures. The cumulative effect of all

of these 'bereavements' may overwhelm the older person's capacity to adapt and cope (Marris 1986).

Concerns over care

Another common theme to emerge from the fieldwork was concern that when younger people migrate their older family members may be left in a vulnerable situation, whether in need of regular care or just occasional instrumental help. Respondents, such as this older woman from town, explained that it is difficult to manage without the support of children: *Older people are alone. Their children go to other countries – who is going to help them here?* [FGD1 town, female]. This is particularly poignant when the migrant is caring for an older person in another country: *Our children go to look after other persons, but nobody can look after us! They pay money there! We raised them but we remain alone.* [FGD3 village, Moldovan female, former kolhoz worker]. The out migration of their adult children leaves older people feeling vulnerable and occasionally bitter when migrants are paid to care for older people abroad. The issue of international care drain also arose, in the Albanian context, in the research of Vullnetari and King (2008), who suggest that the migration of women from poor countries to care for older people in rich countries results in the deprivation, in terms of care, of families and elderly parents.

In communities bereft of younger adults older people are increasingly supporting other older people. In the village, with the assistance of Help Age International and a local NGO 'Pro-Democratie', a team of local volunteers had been established to help older people who are alone, including those whose adult children have migrated. Many of the volunteers previously worked on the kolhoz (collective farm) or were teachers in the village. One older woman who had worked as a primary school teacher in the village for 37 described how she got involved: *“After being pensioned I’ve worked 2 years more. I couldn’t stay at home. I’ve found a place to work with old people.... I help with their questions. I was healthy enough, but my health is getting worse. And I think in this way: If I work with old people then somebody will work with me too. So, I got involved in this work with old people, because I like to listen to them, to see their problems. After being pensioned people used to think: “I’m at pension, I have to prepare myself for death.” And the road goes to the cemetery. Now thanks to our work with them we show them some concerts prepared by our volunteers. I don’t work alone, I have more 20 volunteers.*

They were more, but not everyone liked it. Each volunteer takes care of 3 -2 vulnerable old persons, or maybe 4 persons, depending on neighbourhood. They look after persons living nearby to visit them often”.

An ex kolhoz worker described her volunteering work: *“I look after an old lady. Her name is Galea. She’s lonely. She has two children. They are in Moscow. What can they do here? They don’t have place to work and they had to go. And now she’s alone. I visit her. Yesterday I visited her. On the next day after the 8th of March I visited her. She said me that her daughter had called her and asked: “- Mom, with who do you celebrate 8th of March [Women’s Day]”? - With whom can I be? With TV!”*[FGD3 Female, ex Kolhoz worker].

However, the fact that the volunteers are ageing too is causing some anxiety about what will happen in the future if the migrants do not return. *‘Who can help me if everyone is old like me? We are all in the same situation.’*

In the village, the church was also an important source of support. *“The church in our village has given some aid to the old people – the priest has called us, gave us two sacks of wheat flour, told us to each take some and distribute to those who are ill, to take it to their homes. And so we did – we divided it among us evenly, and took it to the old people. It is good that the church is in the village, we come and go [as we please], and we don’t have to walk hills and valleys. Thank God we have a good priest. If we need to, we call him in the middle of the night, day and night, he walks, he doesn’t wait for a car, doesn’t look for anything. He only asks where you live and comes – at 6am – at 6am, at 5am – at 5am. Whenever you need him, even in the morning when it’s still dark”.*

Older people in the urban areas reported fewer sources of community support, although they were more likely to mention contact with the formal social assistance system and several of those interviewed said that they received help from social workers. Such support did not however fill the emotional gap left by the physical absence of children and grandchildren.

Increased responsibilities of older people

When younger people migrate, previous research has found that older people are often left ‘in charge’ and one of the responsibilities typically placed upon older people is the

care of grandchildren, often ‘in loco parentis’ (Biao, 2007). As a high proportion of the working age population in Moldova has departed the countryside, many have left their children in the care of grandparents and some respondents mentioned cases where this responsibility was rendered permanent when migrants ‘disappeared’. This is a difficult situation for older carers. Whilst they express their love and feelings of responsibility for their grandchildren and want to do everything they can to support their children, our respondents spoke of financial hardship in addition to the strain of providing emotional support and practical care for children left behind.

Older people rarely characterized the task of caring for grandchildren as an onerous one, perhaps because this might be interpreted as disloyal. However, one grandparent from the capital, speaking of the childcare roles of her peers, described the task as ‘*crushing*’. Many older people are supporting their grandchildren financially, in addition to caring, suggesting that remittances are insufficient for their grandchildren’s needs (cf Schröder-Butterfill, 2004). Some of the costs involved are significant especially when pension levels are taken into account. Furthermore it can be difficult to budget effectively when some payments expected of grandparents are ‘informal’ as detailed by this grandmother from the village:

I went with my granddaughter to school. In the beginning of the school year I had to pay 400 lei but my pension is 420. They needed curtains at school. I told them I didn’t have money. “How is it possible you don’t have?! You are sending your child to school!” So, from all my poverty I gave money so that my granddaughter would not be without education. [FGD3 village, Moldovan female, former kolhoz worker]

Grandparents take on the daily practical tasks of raising youngsters at the same time as dealing with the emotional needs of children who are missing their parents. Many respondents commented that this arrangement did not always work well as older people struggled to cope with children as they developed. Respondents spoke of children being ‘out of control’ and remarked that it was easy to tell which children were being raised by grandparents and which by their own parents. The issue of children receiving money directly from their parents abroad was an additional concern as explained by this respondent from Chisinau:

They get money from their parents abroad but they are not earning it and this is not a good lesson for life. [FGD supplementary, capital]

A respondent, also from Chisinau, reiterated this worry:

The young people are now a generation of consumers. They receive money from their parents and live as they like. Their parents pay for their studies, for everything ...for me it's a tragedy. [FGD4 capital, Moldovan female, former teacher]

It is important to note that it is far from uncommon for grandparents to be left looking after their grandchildren. A recent study by UNICEF on the impact of migration on children estimated that almost 1 in 7 children in villages and 1 in 2 in towns live with their grandparents (UNICEF, 2008). When so many of the younger population have migrated the 'skipped generation' family (Knodel and Saengtienchai 2007), consisting of grandparents and grandchildren, has become the norm in some communities as illustrated by this comment from a grandparent in the village:

At school if children broke something they [teachers] used to say before: "You should come with your parents." Now they say "You should come with your grandmother." [FGD3 village, Moldovan female, former kolhoz worker]

There is some recognition that migration, in combination with other economic and social pressures is changing the shape of the traditional family, as illustrated in this exchange from one of the focus group discussions.

P.6: We need that government gives jobs for young people that they could work. If young people had work they would have money to help us, old people. If young people don't have jobs they leave us...

P.2: There is little childbirth...

P.4: Last year just 9 children were born.

Ps: And how many died? A lot! The village is getting older.

P.7: I want to say this. If the family is young, then the husband goes abroad. The mother remains at home with the child. And this child grows up alone. The family is not full. If the child is a girl than she needs a brother, if he is a boy – he needs a sister but they can't afford more than one child. And a child grows up alone because parents can't afford more children. The demographic problem is very

serious in Moldova. The number of death is much bigger than the number of births.

P.2: Many young persons depart. They remain in Russia, Portugal. In Italy many remain. [FGD2, village, education women, mixed ethnicity]

Older people whose adult children have migrated acknowledge that caring for their grandchildren can be burdensome but the other alternative, where grandchildren migrate with their parents, is viewed by many older people as equally unattractive when there is the risk that contact with grandchildren would be limited. What they ideally wish for are employment opportunities that enable their children and grandchildren to continue to live in Moldova.

'Empty' villages

As the last quote in the previous section suggests, in addition to talking about the impact on their own lives, older people also spoke with a good deal of emotion about the void remaining in communities when so many working age people had left. This was especially seen as a problem in the village situation. One respondent, who had moved to Chisinau five years previously, described the village situation in this way:

Where I lived I was alone as Robinson Crusoe on his island. All my neighbors died. Five houses were around and there no one was living. In this situation I decided to move to Chisinau. [IDI11 capital, Moldovan female, 75 years old, former science teacher]

Respondents stated that the villages contained only older people and children (those left behind by migrant parents) and expressed concerns about the vulnerability of the older people remaining. One respondent in the village stated:

In my neighbourhood just one old woman lives. Nobody else! You can die in your own house and nobody will find you. [FGD3 village, Moldovan female, former kolhoz worker]

In a similar vein, older people talked of their grief that the land and the soil were being left to become overgrown. They portrayed themselves as peasants for whom the land and the soil are like blood. They were angry that, while the land is being abandoned, Moldova is importing agricultural produce and, when this produce reaches the market, it is beyond the budget of older people. The neglect of the land is seen as sacrilege and the

import of produce from other countries as an insult to those who have worked the land all their lives. Asked about the number of fields left fallow a male village respondent said:

A lot of the fields lie waste. Who is to work them? The vineyards are covered by the overgrowth; it's a pity nobody wants to work this fine land. [IDI7 village, Moldovan male, 77 years, former kolhoz driver]

Women in the village stated that their land should be used to grow vegetables and yet they are imported:

Our land is very fertile, but nobody works it! Our tomatoes, sweet pepper, cucumbers... But it's all imported [FGD4 town, female]

A woman from the village described the feeling for the land:

You can't leave the land (uncultivated), because you feel sorry for it, you know. I have been working on the land all my life and I like seeing wheat grow. But we are not so strong any longer. (FGD4 village, Moldovan female, former agricultural worker)

Respondents suggested that the government should play more of a role in promoting the produce of Moldova. However they perceived the main problem as the very low rates of pay that could be earned in the agricultural sector, which forced the working age population to migrate for work. Respondents from the village explained that having access to land was not sufficient to keep workers in the village:

The land is not enough for them. They have been given land, but they leave it and go to Italy. Our village is big, but there are not many people who live here. [FGD5 village, Moldovan male, former manual worker]

Older villagers also expressed their concern that skills were not being passed down to the next generation and that soon no one would be able to use the agricultural equipment in the village:

I'd say that in five to six years there will be nobody in the village who knows how to drive a tractor. [FGD6 village, Moldovan male, former manual worker]

Many in the village and the town felt a strong connection to the land and spoke of their disappointment, even anguish, that so many homes were empty and fields left overgrown.

The exsanguination of rural communities served to undermine older peoples' sense of continuity and acted as a daily reminder that an entire way of life is coming to an end.

The Nation

In addition to discussing the consequences of migration for individuals and communities older people in the study also raised issues which have impacts at the level of the nation. Although respondents were aware of the benefit of remittances for the national economy - with more than one respondent accurately stating that remittances contribute one third of GDP- they were concerned that other consequences of migration were not so benign. Primarily, there were concerns that people working abroad did not pay taxes in Moldova, resulting in fiscal problems in paying pensions. Other issues at the national level were raised without respondents making clear whether these were positive or negative, for example one respondent explained that migration reduced the level of unemployment whilst another stated that when 'progressive elements' migrate the Government is freed of critics.

One of the recurrent issues raised concerned the proportion of human capital lost to the country on either a temporary or permanent basis. Respondents expressed concerns that even the highly educated could not find decent jobs in Moldova, for example a respondent stated that there were no young people working in the Academy of Science as they had all gone abroad seeking higher salaries. The investment made in and by Moldova was being lost when migrants, with their education and skills, were working in and for other countries. An older man in Chisinau stated: "*... a young and talented person is working for another country, not for his homeland*" and another in the village had this to say: "*Look, all our Moldovan youth is abroad. What will there be left for Moldova?*" [FGD1 capital, Russian male]

A related issue of concern to respondents was that of deskilling. Numerous respondents reported cases where someone with a specialist skill or university degree was working abroad at a much lower level in the employment hierarchy, as described by respondents in Chisinau:

*...as for my sister, she is working there (Italy) as a labourer. And she's a PhD!
What is she doing there? She is building a house! ...She is now 56 years old...*

In our country professors are almost beggars... Our professors leave the country, but they do not teach there, they work as servants there... They clean someone's flat, work as baby-sitters. And they say that they get a lot of money. But why don't they understand that they used to be specialists? And now what? But I do not criticise them, because they are forced by circumstances to do so... [FGD4 capital, Moldovan female, former teacher]

Respondents explained that they thought it was wrong that someone with a high level of education is working in such an inferior position. However they also expressed concern that if and when these highly educated migrants return they will have forgotten their training, allowed their skills to fall into disuse, and will be unable to work as specialists when they return. The result once again is that the nation has invested in the education and training of 'professionals' but will not be able to reap the benefits of this investment.

Aware of the demographic situation of Moldova, with its low fertility rate and high rate of out migration, respondents also revealed fears about the future of the 'Moldovan Nation' as an ethnic and linguistic group as articulated by an older woman in Chisinau:

I think that migration is a tragedy for our people. Our people had their traditions, customs, language. About a million people left the country. And it is clear that they will never come back... But we need people to remain in the country. We do not want to disappear as a nation. We are Moldavian people... [FGD4 capital, Moldovan female, former teacher]

From this it is clear that older people feel that the unprecedented wave of out-migration goes to the heart of the community, with fears that the very existence of Moldova itself was at risk, particularly where migrants were accompanied by their children and did not plan to return to Moldova.

Discussion and concluding comments

Older people in Moldova did not view the question of migration solely in terms of themselves as individuals, nor in terms of 'people in older ages'. On the contrary, our respondents voiced more concern for the migrants themselves and young children left behind, and also expressed fears of the impact of migration on 'the Nation'. Migration involves gains and losses but for our respondents the losses appear to outweigh the gains. Although migration offers opportunity for migrants and remittances can be vital for families left behind, older people in Moldova tended to express negative attitudes to migration and to report negative outcomes.

In general, respondents assert that the out migration of working age people is inevitable as a result of the low pay and poor job prospects currently available in Moldova, especially outside the capital. When workers migrate, older family members left behind must reconsider and restructure their lives in order to accommodate new social realities. They may be raising young children again, acting as caretakers for family property, enjoying the benefits of remittances, or coping without the material and emotional support of their adult children.

It is clear that older people in Moldova want the very best in terms of opportunities for their children and grandchildren and many speak of accepting the sacrifice necessary to promote the interests of their offspring. This is consistent with findings in Kyrgyzstan (Abelzova, Nasritdinov and Rahimov 2009), Albania (Vullnetari and King 2008), India (Miltiades 2002), and China (Knodel and Saengtienchai 2007). Rather than seeing care as reciprocal, where a parent's care for a child is repaid when that child reaches adulthood, our respondents tend to view their own responsibilities to their children and grandchildren as continuing. Furthermore they expect their adult children to devote their resources and their energies to the next, not the previous, generation, in a type of care chain, which Aboderin terms a "transitive order" (2005 p10).

An important question for the future, from the level of the family right up to the top echelons of the state, concerns the sustainability of migration as a coping strategy. If migration releases pressure in terms of unemployment and remittances support families and the national economy is there a danger of dependency on this one strategy? What are the consequences then if the migration valve is turned off?

Although Moldova has experienced modest economic growth since approximately 2000, it may be some years yet before local job markets can compete with those elsewhere in Europe, both in terms of opportunity and salary. Sustained inequality would therefore lead to sustained or even increased pressure to migrate. However, the recent global economic downturn is unlikely to leave Moldova unscathed. Although remittances are thought to be relatively resilient in times of economic crisis, and more resilient for example than aid (De Haas 2005), remittance levels are predicted to fall (Ratha, Mohapatra and Silwal 2009). A second and related repercussion of recession could be the return of economic migrants. As a consequence of ‘economic nationalism’ (Cable 2008, Economist 2009) and in competition with local jobseekers, migrants may be forced to return home. Our data were collected during the months of November 2008 to March 2009 when the economic crisis was beginning to bite and respondents were already expressing concern about the consequences for Moldova. The return of economic migrants might be a source of relief for older people who yearn for their family members to come home. On the other hand the extra money from remittances could be missed and many migrants may return with empty pockets. From the point of view of the state, out migration performs a useful purpose as a safety valve, reducing the number of jobless and the head of pressure that a high level of unemployment can create. The return of disaffected migrants in large numbers could create unwelcome scrutiny of, and demands upon, government. A further consequence of recession could be the creation of a cohort of ‘frustrated migrants’ (Maddock and Ramguttee 2009 p17), those for whom opportunities to move abroad for work are constrained by economic downturns in receiving countries. The situation of these ‘frustrated migrants’ is likely to be exacerbated by rising competition for jobs as a result of return migrants (Maddock and Ramguttee 2009). In view of the civil unrest following national elections in April 2009 (Halpin 2009, Harding 2009) the possibility of further disturbances fuelled by those without jobs cannot be discounted.

A further concern, and one voiced by our respondents, is the future pensions of today’s migrants. Where contributions are non existent or insufficient, how will today’s migrants be supported in their own retirement? Although some migrants will be working in the formal economy and making contributions in their host countries many are not. Those who are not members of any pension arrangement will have to build up enough capital to fund retirement; seek access to social protection or social pensions not linked to

contributions; continue to work beyond retirement age or rely on informal sources of support. However, tomorrow's older people may have a more restricted support network, at least in terms of children. The fertility rate has been in rapid decline since independence with a total fertility rate of 2.4 in 1990 falling to 1.3 in 2007 (UNICEF 2009). Some of today's older people can have migrant children as well as those who stay nearby. However very small family sizes in the future might mean that this is not an option.

Ideally, migration would cease to be an imperative for Moldova. However, notwithstanding the sequelae of the economic crisis, migration is likely to continue to be a feature of economic and social life in Moldova. Given this, it is important for policy makers to focus on what can be done to ameliorate its impact upon older people. Interventions to help older people to maintain contact with migrants would help to ease the pain of separation. Methods of maintaining contact would need to be affordable and accessible, perhaps put in place as a 'public good' available to the whole community. Social associations and self help groups such as those supported by HelpAge International could help to enlarge older people's social networks when these are depleted by the migration of family members (HelpAge International 2006). Older people left in charge of grandchildren could derive benefit from material support but also practical help with the task of raising grandchildren.

It is clear that migration and the resultant physical separation of older people from family members will continue into the future. With the increasing uncertainty of remittances as a result of the economic crisis the imperative for the government to put in place robust systems of social protection for older people, both in terms of income security through adequate pensions and other social assistance benefits and the provision of social care remains. Older people are currently largely invisible in official policy documents relating to the reduction of poverty and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. This research highlights the importance of their voices being heard.

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[http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1110315015165/RemittancesData_Inflows_Apr10\(Public\).xls](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1110315015165/RemittancesData_Inflows_Apr10(Public).xls)