



ECONOMIC LENS

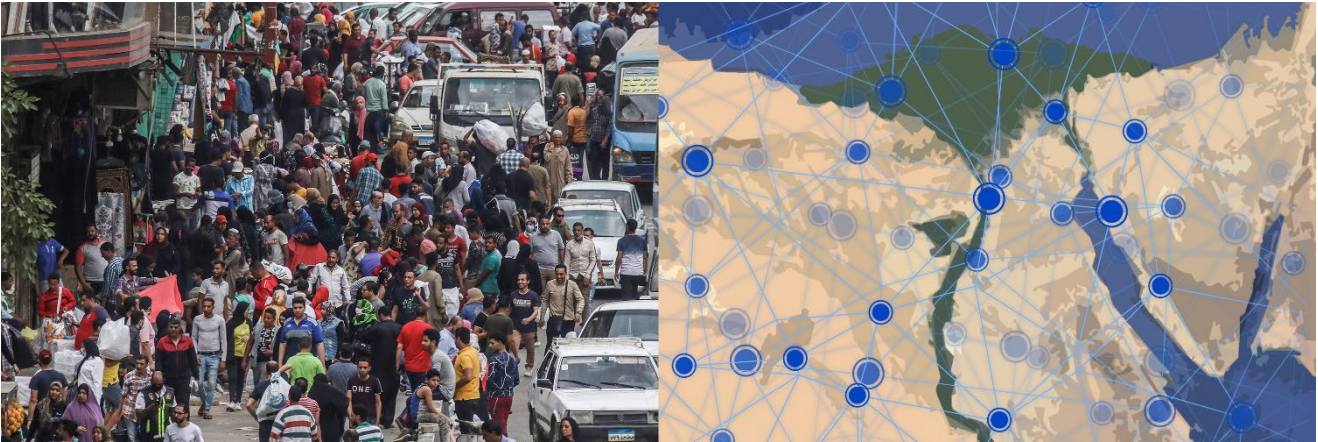
Issue 13
7 June 2026

© 2026 ECES. All Rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, mechanical, electronic, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior written permission of ECES.



Internal Migration in Egypt: A Changing Migration Landscape



Background

Why Internal Migration in Egypt Demands a Fresh Look

Internal migration in Egypt has historically been linked to the country's geographical and demographic characteristics. While desert areas account for the largest share of Egypt's total land area, the vast majority of the population is concentrated within a narrow strip along the Nile River and the Delta. This uneven distribution of population and resources has contributed to the emergence of persistent patterns of population movement across governorates, as limited agricultural land and increasing population pressures have driven many individuals to seek better employment opportunities and services elsewhere.

Internal migration in Egypt is not a new phenomenon – it has been extensively documented in the literature, with well-established patterns of movement from rural to urban areas, from Upper to Lower Egypt, and toward major metropolitan centers such as Cairo and Alexandria. Yet while these broad trends have long been recognized, the landscape of internal migration is not static. Emerging evidence suggests that both the geography and the profile of migration are shifting: new governorates are rising as destinations or sources of movement, and the characteristics of migrants themselves – their age, gender composition, and motivations – are evolving in ways that existing studies have not fully captured. It is precisely these new directions and changing dynamics that make a renewed examination of internal migration in Egypt both timely and necessary.

The Evolving Landscape of Internal Migration in Egypt

Internal migration in Egypt has expanded significantly over the past two decades. The number of internal migrants increased from approximately 4.8 million people according to the 2006 Census to nearly 8.3 million people in the 2017 Census, representing around 8% of the total population. The actual scale of population movement is likely to be even larger due to the presence of forms of migration that are not officially recorded, particularly seasonal and mobile workers. This trend has coincided with accelerating urbanization, as the urban population increased from 24.4 million in 1990 to 43.7 million in 2021, while Egyptian cities receive nearly one million new residents annually.

Although rural-to-urban migration remains one of the most prominent forms of population movement, the data indicate that internal migration has become more diverse and complex:

Table (1): Internal Migration Flows in Egypt by Type of Movement

| Type of Migration | Share of Total Migrants |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Urban → Urban (between cities) | 37% |
| Rural → Rural (between villages) | 24% |
| Rural → Urban | 26% |
| Urban → Rural | 13% |

Source: Abu Hatab et al. (2022), "Who moves and who gains from internal migration in Egypt?", Habitat International, Vol. 124.

Overall, 63% of migrants move toward urban areas, indicating that cities remain the primary destination for population movement. However, migration is no longer confined to the traditional rural-to-urban pattern.

What is particularly noteworthy in the current data is that most internal migration in Egypt occurs over relatively short distances and within the same governorate. About 73.2% of migrants moving to urban areas relocated from urban areas within the same governorate, while 81.4% of migrants moving to rural areas relocated within the rural areas of their original governorate.

This pattern challenges the conventional image of the Egyptian migrant as someone who leaves their community behind in search of work in a distant city. Rather, it points to an emerging model of migration in which economic motivation – the need to find suitable employment – is balanced against a strong desire to preserve family and social ties. In other words, Egyptians are increasingly seeking work closer to home, not because opportunities have improved locally, but because staying connected to their families and communities has become a migration decision in itself. This represents a meaningful shift in how we understand the drivers and logic of internal movement in Egypt.

The geography of internal migration in Egypt has also changed considerably over time:

Table (2); Egypt's Most Attractive and Migrant-Sending Governorates:

The Most Attractive Governorates are:

| Governorate | Net Migration Rate |
|-------------|--------------------|
| Red Sea | 7.56% |
| South Sinai | 4.67% |
| Giza | 3.73% |
| Qalyubia | 3.1% |
| New Valley | 2.84% |
| Matrouh | 1.22% |
| Ismailia | 1.19% |
| North Sinai | 0.43% |

The Most Migrant-sending Governorates are:

| Governorate | Net Out-Migration Rate |
|-------------|------------------------|
| Suez | 6.59% |
| Port Said | 4.80% |
| Damietta | 2.82% |
| Cairo | 2.71% |
| Fayoum | 0.52% |
| Gena | 0.47% |
| Beni Suef | 0.45% |
| Alexandria | 0.34% |

Source: Ma, Z., Zhang, S., & Zhao, S. (2021). Study on the Spatial Pattern of Migration Population in Egypt and Its Flow Field Characteristics from the Perspective of "Source-Flow-Sink." *Sustainability*, 13, 350

The results reveal a noticeable shift in Egypt's internal migration patterns. While Cairo and Alexandria have traditionally been the country's main migration destinations, both governorates recorded net out-migration, suggesting that population growth is increasingly moving toward surrounding governorates such as Giza and Qalyubia. The emergence of Damietta among the migrant-sending governorates is particularly noteworthy, given its long-standing reputation as a hub for furniture manufacturing and its historically low unemployment rates. Likewise, the inclusion of Suez among the top migrant-sending governorates is unexpected considering its strategic economic role and industrial base. Despite the significant development and investment projects implemented across several governorates in recent years, migration patterns suggest that these efforts have

not yet translated into sufficient local opportunities to retain population, or that the benefits of development remain unevenly distributed across different groups and areas. At the same time, governorates such as the Red Sea and South Sinai have emerged as new migration poles, highlighting the increasing importance of tourism, investment, and new development corridors in shaping internal migration flows across Egypt.

Yet the relationship between migration and economic wellbeing is more nuanced than aggregate figures suggest. Data from the Egypt Labor Market Panel Survey (ELMPS) reveal that economic returns to migration differ sharply by destination type – and in ways that challenge long-held assumptions. Rural-to-urban migration, historically seen as the default path to a better life, is in fact associated with a 2.4% decline in welfare. Higher living and housing costs, weaker social networks, and the difficulty of securing stable formal employment in cities collectively erode whatever wage gains migrants may achieve.

The more economically rewarding moves, it turns out, follow a different logic: urban-to-urban migration yields a 3.7% welfare increase, while urban-to-rural migration produces a 2.9% improvement. Together, these findings reframe the economics of internal migration in Egypt – the destination matters as much as the decision to move, and the old equation of city = opportunity no longer holds.

Beyond differences across migration streams, the data also reveal important gender disparities in the welfare gains associated with internal migration:

Table (3): Gendered Welfare Returns to Internal Migration in Egypt:

| Migration Type | Male Welfare Gain | Female Welfare Gain |
|----------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| All Migrants | 2.25% | 3.25% |
| Rural-to-Rural | 1.63% | 3.06% |
| Urban-to-Rural | 2.97% | 3.99% |
| Urban-to-Urban | 3.30% | 4.19% |

Source: Abu Hatab et al. (2022), "Who moves and who gains from internal migration in Egypt?", Habitat International, Vol. 124.

Contrary to the historically male-dominated narrative of migration for work, women now appear to benefit more from internal migration than men – achieving an average welfare gain of 3.25% compared to 2.25% for male migrants, with the largest gains among women moving between urban areas (4.19%) and from urban to rural areas (3.99%). For much of Egypt's migration history, women moved primarily as accompanying family members rather than as economic agents in their own right. The emerging data suggest a different picture – one in which internal migration is becoming an increasingly important channel for women's economic advancement.

From an economic perspective, migrants generally experience better labor market outcomes than non-migrants. The unemployment rate among migrants stands at 6.2%, compared to 9.5% among non-migrants, and falls to only 2.6% among individuals whose primary reason for migration was employment. This is partly because migrants tend to possess skills that better match labor market demand in destination areas, or because migration decisions are often made after securing a job opportunity.

Beyond labor market considerations, structural pressures in rural areas continue to play an important role in shaping migration decisions. The scale of agricultural land loss in Egypt has become a significant driver of internal migration. Egypt loses approximately 30,000 hectares of its most productive agricultural land every year to urban encroachment – and with every 100 hectares lost, around 400 jobs disappear alongside it. Land loss, in this sense, is not merely an environmental problem; it is a migration engine, systematically dismantling the economic foundations that once kept rural communities in place. The years following 2011 made this visible in stark terms: illegal construction and land encroachment consumed nearly 1% of Egypt's total cultivated land in a remarkably short period. The land was disappearing – and so were the reasons to stay.

What the Patterns Really Tell Us?

Taken together, the patterns of internal migration in Egypt tell a consistent story: movement is often less a development-driven choice and more a survival response. Most migrants do not relocate far the majority move within their own governorate, searching for suitable employment while staying close to their families. They are not chasing opportunity; they are managing its absence, as close to home as possible.

This picture becomes sharper when comparing internal and international migration. Unlike international migrants, who are more likely to accumulate financial surpluses that can be invested in productive projects or real estate, internal migrants use their remittances almost entirely to cover basic needs food, housing, healthcare, and education. This is what several researchers have termed "Survival Migration": movement that improves basic living conditions without generating the kind of economic accumulation that produces structural change. The gap widens further when considering that remittances from international migrants' flow toward urban areas at a rate three times higher than those reaching rural areas suggesting that migration, in either form, does not compensate for regional development disparities and may, in many cases, contribute to widening them.

Rapid urbanization in Egypt has not been matched by improvements in urban living conditions. While cities continue to receive nearly one million additional residents each year, essential services are struggling to keep pace – most starkly illustrated by the decline in hospital beds per 100,000 people from 14.3 in 2010 to just 11.3 in 2020. People are arriving faster than the infrastructure built to serve them.

What the data reveal is a shifting and expanding map of economic distress. The emergence of Cairo and Damietta among the leading migrant-sending governorates signals that the problem is no longer confined to historically underdeveloped regions – existing challenges are deepening faster than they are being resolved. Egyptians are moving in search of one thing: a viable livelihood, as close to home as possible. This raises a pointed question about policy priorities: addressing the structural constraints already facing existing industrial zones and local factories may do significantly more to create jobs where people actually live than continuing to invest in large-scale projects whose returns have yet to reach the communities that need them most.

Equally telling is where people choose to move toward familiar areas with existing social fabric and known labor markets, not toward newly built cities. If migrants are not moving toward Egypt's new urban developments, those projects are not solving the migration problem; they are building alongside it. Strengthening the places people already choose may prove a far more effective response than constructing new urban centers that have yet to earn a place in people's geography of belonging.

The pattern is clear: Egyptians are not moving toward opportunity, they are escaping the absence of it, as close to home as they can manage, in places the state has yet to reach.

This analysis points toward two concrete policy directions worth serious consideration. Completing the infrastructure of existing industrial zones particularly in governorates already losing population is likely to do far more to retain workers and create meaningful employment than building new cities from scratch. At the same time, expanding initiatives such as "Your Job Next to Your Home" which aim to match workers with employment opportunities within their own communities could reshape population distribution in ways that align with what the data consistently show: Egyptians do not want to leave their communities they want a reason to stay in them. Addressing both the economic driver of migration and the deep-rooted desire for proximity to family may ultimately prove more effective than any large-scale development project that asks people to move toward opportunity rather than bringing opportunity to them.