

Connecting Migrant Remittances and Food Security in Jamaica

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Executive Summary

Migrant remittances play a crucial role in supporting households in Kingston, Jamaica, particularly in mitigating the effects of poverty and food insecurity. However, while remittances improve household food security, their impact on reducing inequality and contributing to inclusive social development is more complex. Wealthier households are more likely to receive remittances, and the overall impact of remittances on broader economic growth and food security at the national level remains limited. This brief explores the relationship between remittances and food security in Jamaica within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a focus on SDG 10. It highlights the role of remittances in addressing food insecurity, the disparities in who benefits from these transfers, and the potential for remittances to contribute to inclusive social development in Kingston.



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Introduction

Migration is widely recognized as a key driver of economic support for families left behind in countries of origin, with remittances playing a vital role in alleviating poverty. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognize the importance of migration in achieving global development objectives, particularly SDG 10, which emphasizes reducing inequality within and among countries. Specifically, target 10.7 of the SDGs calls for orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people as a way to facilitate development.

In the Jamaican context, migration has long been a cornerstone of the country's socio-economic fabric. Remittances from Jamaicans living abroad are an essential lifeline for many families, contributing to household income, education, housing, and healthcare. However, the connection between remittances and food security, as well as their role in promoting inclusive social development, has received less attention.

This policy brief draws on a study of Kingston's urban households to assess the role of remittances in addressing food security and its potential to contribute to broader social and economic development. It highlights the key challenges, examines the disparities in remittance distribution, and offers policy recommendations for enhancing the impact of remittances on food security and inclusive growth in Jamaica.

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Key Challenges

1. Food Security and the Role of Remittances

Food security is defined as having reliable access to enough affordable, nutritious food. In Jamaica, many urban households rely on remittances from family members abroad to meet their basic needs, including food. According to the study, cash remittances were the second most important income source for households in Kingston, with approximately one-quarter of households receiving remittances regularly.

Remittances help alleviate food insecurity, particularly among poor households, by providing additional income to purchase food. The study found that remittances were crucial for households struggling with irregular employment or those with limited access to social protection programs. In many cases, remittances were used to pay for daily expenses, including food, utilities, and housing.

Despite their importance, remittances alone are not enough to eliminate food insecurity. The study found that remittance-receiving households still faced significant food insecurity, particularly those in the lowest income quintiles. While remittances helped mitigate the most severe consequences of food insecurity, they did not completely resolve the issue, suggesting that other factors—such as income instability and high living costs—continue to impact food access in Kingston.

2. Inequitable Distribution of Remittances

One of the key findings of the study was the unequal distribution of remittances across different socio-economic groups in Kingston. Wealthier households were more likely to receive remittances than poorer households, reflecting the fact that higher-income families often have better access to international migration opportunities. For example, 43% of households in the upper income quintile received remittances, compared to only 21% of households in the lowest income quintile.

This unequal distribution raises important questions about the role of remittances in reducing inequality and promoting inclusive growth. While remittances can provide critical support to low-income households, the fact that wealthier households are more likely to receive them suggests that migration and remittances may not be effective tools for

addressing inequality. This disparity limits the potential for remittances to contribute to inclusive social development, as the households most in need of financial support are often the least likely to benefit.

3. Remittances and Inclusive Social Development

The potential for remittances to contribute to Jamaica's broader development goals, including those related to food security and inclusive growth, remains limited. While remittances provide critical financial support to individual households, their impact on national economic growth and social development is less clear.

The study found that only a small proportion of remittances—approximately 15%—was used for investment, business, or savings. Instead, most remittances were spent on immediate needs, such as food, utilities, and housing. While this spending helps improve the quality of life for recipients, it does little to promote long-term economic growth or reduce structural inequalities.

Moreover, remittances alone cannot address the systemic issues that contribute to food insecurity in Kingston. Factors such as high unemployment, low wages, and rising living costs continue to pose significant challenges for poor households, even those receiving remittances. Without broader structural changes, including efforts to increase access to formal employment, improve social protection, and address the high cost of living, remittances will remain a stopgap solution rather than a sustainable path to food security and inclusive growth.

Recommendations

1. Expand Social Protection for Vulnerable Households

To enhance the impact of remittances on food security and inclusive growth, the Jamaican government should expand social protection programs for vulnerable households. This includes providing targeted support for low-income households that are less likely to receive remittances, as well as ensuring that remittance-receiving households have access to safety nets during periods of economic instability.

Programs such as cash transfers, food vouchers, and housing subsidies can help mitigate the impact of food insecurity for poor households, complementing the financial support

provided by remittances. Expanding these programs would ensure that more households benefit from social protection, reducing their reliance on remittances and improving their overall food security.

2. Promote Remittance-Linked Savings and Investment Programs

Encouraging households to use remittances for savings and investment could help maximize their impact on long-term economic growth and food security. The government and financial institutions should develop programs that incentivize remittance recipients to save a portion of their remittances or invest in small businesses, housing, or education.

For example, creating matched savings programs, where the government matches a portion of the funds saved from remittances, could encourage households to invest in their future and contribute to broader economic development. Similarly, offering low-interest loans or grants to remittance-receiving households could help them start businesses or invest in income-generating activities, reducing their reliance on remittances for day-to-day expenses.

3. Address the Structural Causes of Food Insecurity

While remittances play an important role in supporting food security, they cannot address the root causes of food insecurity in Jamaica. High unemployment, low wages, and the rising cost of living are all significant barriers to achieving food security for many urban households in Kingston.

Policymakers should focus on addressing these structural issues by creating more formal employment opportunities, particularly for low-income households. Investing in skills training, education, and job creation programs can help reduce unemployment and increase household incomes, making it easier for families to afford nutritious food.

Additionally, efforts to reduce the cost of living—such as improving access to affordable housing and reducing food prices through subsidies or price controls—would help alleviate some of the financial pressure on poor households. By addressing these underlying causes of food insecurity, the government can create a more stable and sustainable path to food security and inclusive growth.

4. Strengthen Data Collection and Research on Remittances

To better understand the impact of remittances on food security and inclusive growth, there is a need for more comprehensive data collection and research on remittance flows and their use at the household level. Governments and international organizations should prioritize the collection of disaggregated data on remittances, including information on who receives remittances, how they are spent, and their impact on household well-being.

By improving data collection, policymakers can gain a clearer understanding of the relationship between remittances and food security and develop more targeted interventions to support vulnerable households. In addition, research on the gendered impacts of remittances, particularly on female-headed households, could provide valuable insights into how remittances can be leveraged to promote gender equality and inclusive social development.

Conclusion

Migrant remittances are a critical source of financial support for many urban households in Kingston, Jamaica, helping to mitigate the effects of poverty and food insecurity. However, the unequal distribution of remittances across socio-economic groups and the limited use of remittances for investment and savings constrain their potential to contribute to inclusive social development.

To maximize the impact of remittances on food security and inequality reduction, the Jamaican government must expand social protection for vulnerable households, promote remittance-linked savings and investment programs, and address the structural causes of food insecurity. By taking these steps, policymakers can ensure that remittances play a more significant role in achieving the SDGs and promoting long-term, inclusive growth in Jamaica.

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