

High-Level Panel – Migration: Opportunities and Challenges

International migration has become a major issue on the world political agenda. Improvements in communication and transportation technologies and ever-developing economic networks as part of ongoing globalisation have decisively shaped both the scope and basic characteristics of present day cross-border movements. Since 1980, the number of migrants has more than doubled to reach 200 million people worldwide. Almost half of these migrants are women. States and non-governmental actors have become aware of the major opportunities and challenges presented by international migration. There is a growing consensus among states and other stakeholders that a successful approach to migration issues needs to be based on international cooperation among countries of origin, transit, and destination, and that it has to include transparent objectives entailing the participation of migrants as well as host societies.

Changing the perspective on migration

There is a tendency among public opinion leaders in many industrialised countries to view migration solely in negative terms and to stress arduous issues such as irregular movements, trafficking, or insufficient integration. Usually, debates on migration are heavily influenced by security concerns and a lack of trust. These issues are often at the centre of tense public controversies and have been successfully politicized. While problems resulting from migration should not be ignored, a comprehensive and global approach to the issue should also highlight numerous positive aspects of the process.

Migration as an economic, social and demographic force

The economic, social and cultural benefits of migration are undeniable: in Switzerland one in four workers does not have a Swiss passport, representing an important factor for economic growth. Countries such as USA, France, Germany and Italy would hardly maintain their economic leadership without a foreign workforce. Migrants not only occupy labour sectors neglected by locals, but also account for additional growth (as the case of Spain shows) and supply skills to promising branches that cannot be developed without qualified manpower. In the future, migration from the South could come to play a crucial role in demographic terms in developed countries where birth rates tend to decline.

Integration

Cases of successful individual and collective integration are numerous, but they hardly attract public attention. While cultural diversity induced by migration entails various positive aspects, such as enhanced economic productivity fostered by industrial creativity, it may also be considered as a challenge to social cohesion. Indisputably, successful integration relies on reciprocity, involving tolerant receiving societies as well as open-minded

attitudes from immigrants, who respect the culture and values of the receiving countries they wish to live in.

Migrants as agents of development

Countries of origin also benefit from the economic activities of migrants through remittances. Indeed, money transfers tend to play a key role in reducing poverty in home countries and contribute to their economic development and growth. When returning for short visits or permanently, migrants bring with them new skills, contacts and experience that can prove vital. Remittances may however place developing countries in a position of dependency in relation to their own emigrants.

Knowledge transfer is a vital development issue for most countries in the world. Thus, the emigration of highly skilled individuals penalizes particularly developing countries where expertise is lacking or undervalued. However, skilled migration can also entail opportunities as highly skilled migrants may bring contracts and know-how back to their countries of origin.

Migrants' rights and duties

When discussing migration policies, it is important to constantly keep the migrant as an individual in mind. Migratory flows have become more complex and diverse in the last few decades and it is vital for states to respect migrants' basic human rights. In its 2005 report, the Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM) stressed that the main obstacle to the protection of migrants' rights is not the absence of laws but rather the failure of states to abide by the conventions and agreements they have ratified.

The lack of protection bears serious threats not only to migrants, but also to receiving societies at large, although this aspect is often underestimated. There is plenty of empirical evidence showing that crucial problems such as clandestine work leading to disloyal competition, social dumping and tax losses, human trafficking, criminal activities and the resultant insecurity are all exacerbated by a lack of clearly defined migrants' rights and can thus hardly be combated solely by repression. In the end, it is in the very interest of receiving societies to better protect migrants' rights in order to avoid the above-mentioned shortcomings and related social conflicts.

Migrants also bear responsibilities and duties. To facilitate integration, migrants are called upon to actively engage in this process. They should further respect the rules and customs of their host countries without being forced to give up their roots. In order to foster social cohesion, migrants should be informed of their rights, as well as their responsibilities towards the receiving society.

Feminisation of migration

Over the years migration patterns have evolved and women, mainly moving from Southern countries to the North on an independent basis, now represent a high proportion of migrants. However, this tendency is difficult to assess on a more global level as it partly concerns irregular movements. Because they often migrate under difficult conditions, women are at risk of being exploited, particularly when forced to work isolated in a private realm, exposing them to the expropriation of their economic gain and the risk of sexual abuse.

But women are also carriers of what we might call social remittances, such as ideas, skills and knowledge. These remittances are passed on to the next generation by interaction be-

tween mothers and children. Migration has changed, and will continue to change, gender roles and equality in many societies, by giving women a new independence, both financially and socially.

Future challenges

Security issues and the increased fight against trans-national terrorism have revitalised the need to reconcile the protection of the population with the basic principles of open democratic societies. Likewise, the compromise between economic liberalism towards trade and tourism from China and India for example and political closure motivated by fear of migration from those places will become an increasing concern in the future.

Climate changes have a direct impact on migration patterns and may become a recurrent migratory challenge. Indeed, phenomena such as sea-level rise could cause major South-North population displacements. The status of so-called economic migrants still has not been precisely defined and does not fall under the 1951 Refugee Convention. The phenomenon is also debated among researchers, as migration usually is not the result of one single cause. However, in Switzerland, the Federal Council may grant subsidiary protection (so-called provisional admission) on the grounds of a natural disaster.

With regard to the connection between migration and development states are certainly still at the beginning of a road full of potential and possibility. Naturally, migration is not the long-sought solution to all development problems. Nevertheless, this connection must be further pursued. A framework for migrants must be created to become agents of development, and for states to interact on a basis of true partnership.

Targeting a sustainable migration policy

Due to different historical, economic and political circumstances, each state has a different institutional framework to address these issues. Most countries, however, have in common a lack of inter-ministerial coordination and of long-term policy. Coherence at national level is vital in order to attain greater international cooperation. To do so, states need to set priorities and goals that simultaneously address issues such as prevention of irregular migration, integration, protection of migrants' rights and protection of refugees. Migration partnership is one of the instruments they may use when trying to set up a coherent migration policy. Dialogue is not only necessary between governmental ministries, agencies or departments but also between governments, civil society, including migrants' associations, media and researchers. Each of them can contribute a fresh perspective that may prove vital in order to improve migrants' integration and to bring more transparency to the debate.

There is a need for more pro-active policies and a long-term vision, which would help to overcome major conflicts of interest that are particularly salient in a short-term perspective. Effective data collection, policy analysis, research, monitoring and evaluation must be part of the approach leading to a less politicised and more evidence-based debate. On a global level, a comprehensive migration policy should focus on the conditions that will encourage people to migrate by choice, and not by necessity, driven by poverty or insecurity, and highlight strategies contributing to a sustainable and positive migration environment.

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