SEMINAR REPORT
Migration and Development Series

Migration and the Millennium Development Goals

Organized jointly with IOM, UNFPA and the MacArthur Foundation
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BACKGROUND

In September 2000, world leaders came together at the United Nations Headquarters in New York and adopted the far-reaching Millennium Declaration. Heads of State and Government committed their countries to achieving eight specific development targets by 2015, collectively known as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs aim to: 1) end extreme poverty and hunger, 2) provide universal primary education, 3) achieve gender equality, 4) reduce child mortality, 5) improve maternal health, 6) combat HIV/AIDS, 7) ensure environmental sustainability and 8) develop a global partnership for development.

In view of this year’s MDG Review Summit (20 to 22 September in New York), the Migration and Development Series, organized by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the MacArthur Foundation, organized a half day seminar to examine the inter-linkages between migration and the MDGs.

OBJECTIVES

This half-day seminar intended to inform participants about the inter-linkages between migration and the MDGs. In particular, the seminar looked at capacity-building in developing countries and the use of remittances – financial and social – to enhance opportunities associated with migration for the achievement of the various goals enshrined in the MDGs. Specific policy recommendations were drawn from the presentations and discussion among participants at the end of the seminar.
SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

The presentations and discussion primarily addressed the connections between migration and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the development impact of remittances and how this impact can be leveraged, and the South-South perspective on migration.

Prof. Ronald Skeldon (University of Sussex) argued that, rightfully, migration is not an MDG, since member states would never agree on specific targets, neither would it be sensible to have universal targets. Although both topics are connected, he pointed to the sensitivity of the issue and the impossibility that states would find a common position on migration issues. Given the underlying political dynamics and reality, most countries are reluctant to discuss migration in a multilateral setting, considering it an issue that has to be dealt with at the national level. However, he emphasized the important role of international organizations for setting human rights and other standards for migrants.

Skeldon stated that since Migration and the MDGs are related, migration must be an integral part of policies to achieve the MDGs. Based on his research findings, he made three propositions:

- First, immobile populations reflect stagnant economies and poor social groups. Or, the other way round, economic development leads to more migration, at least in the short term: Once the level of development rises, the volume of migration also does at first. This forces us to rethink two common “myths” of migration: that economic development will “control” migration and that only the poor migrate. The poor actually move only very short distances.
- Second, the increase of migration and the reduction of poverty are linked.
- Finally, migration is not only South-North. For instance, the United Kingdom has only a few percentage points less migration recorded than the Philippines.

Prof. Skeldon underlined the importance of internal migration and noted that this kind of migration can greatly facilitate the MDGs, for example the impressive improvements in terms of poverty reduction and standard of living made in China (even though he also acknowledged that this was primarily linked to the liberalization of the economy). In that context, he emphasized that it was difficult to determine exact numbers when it comes to internal migration since it depends on what is defined as “internal migration”. The distance an internal migrant moves away from his hometown is only an imperfect measure since countries vary greatly in size.

Migration is often highly concentrated in certain population groups. Using the case of Bangladeshis in the United Kingdom as illustrations, he noted that 95% of them originate from one town in the Northeast of the country. Furthermore, it is not the poorest who migrate but mostly the educated ones. In other words, migrants are positively selected from their places of origin. Prof. Skeldon also stressed that poverty is not homogenous and that there are many different kinds of poverty, for example rural vs. urban. This has implications on how aid is allocated. He made the case for a more differentiated approach to poverty. In the end, he underlined the importance of circular migration, and that countries such as China, Singapore and India have developed as they did only because their leaders and parts of the population migrated and later returned skilled and trained. Accordingly, he said labour migration should be liberalized and temporary working agreements with third countries encouraged. Prof. Skeldon concluded that migration is important for all parties
and he would like to argue for a ninth MDG: reducing the fear of migration and changing public opinion about migration.

Mr. Sanket Mohapatra (World Bank, Migration and Remittances Unit) gave a presentation on remittances and their development impact on countries and populations. Beginning with stylized facts, he noted that only 3% of the world population are international migrants, that 93% of them are migrating because of economic reasons, and that South-South migration is as high as South-North migration. Studies have shown that migration benefits all parties. On the one hand, the host countries increase their welfare gains. On the other hand, the reduction of poverty correlates with remittances to the country of origin, hence fulfilling one of the MDGs. However, he agreed with Prof. Skeldon that migration and the positive effects of remittances are often limited to certain districts and towns. Hence, he underlined the importance of breaking up the information asymmetries and educating more people so that they are capable of seizing the opportunities.

International remittances tend to be larger in amounts while internal remittances are smaller but are more likely to reach the poor. Remittances have also a positive impact on the macro-level by improving the sovereign creditworthiness of the country of origin. Remittances have increased substantially over the past few decades and they haven proven to be resilient to the current economic crisis: Since the crisis started in 2008, remittance flows have remained very stable compared to other foreign currency flows, and only a renewed recession could significantly disrupt the flows. The reason is that remittances are sent by accumulated stocks of migrants, not by last year’s migrants. But there are also downsides to remittances, such as currency appreciation and dependency on these flows.

Leveraging remittances for the benefit of development has several policy implications:

- First, better monitoring, analysis and projection are needed.
- Second, retail payment systems have to be improved; including reducing the costs for money transfers. For instance, after the earthquake in Haiti, US banks and institutions such as Western Union and Moneygram reduced their fees significantly for money transfers to facilitate diaspora support.
- Third, remittances should allow better financial access for households, such as bank accounts.
- Fourth, remittances should improve access to capital market for institutions.

Mohapatra concluded that all parties benefit from migration, thus generating substantial welfare gains and reducing poverty. Remittances play a key role in this process.

Mr. Laurent De Boeck (IOM/ACP Observatory on Migration) focused on the South-South perspective and capacity building regarding migration in the African, Caribbean and Pacific states. He agreed with the two previous speakers that South – South migration is as important in numbers as is South-North migration, but also emphasized that we still lack data on this phenomenon. De Boeck sees positive links between migration and MDGs and underlined that more research and policies should be made regarding this issue. The ACP Observatory aims at collecting data, building capacities and developing networks between governments, civil society and other relevant groups in the South. De Boeck criticised that the links between migration and MDGs are only slowly recognised and that there is a lack of coherence and consistency. For all eight MDGs, migration and remittances are playing a role in achieving them. For instance, reducing the risks of an HIV/AIDS infection for migrants would contribute to prevent the disease from spreading. Furthermore, migration has a significant impact on family and society, for example in transforming and changing the
traditional roles of women and men. In conclusion, migration has a positive impact on MDGs but to leverage the potential of South-South migration, capacities need to be built in the South for research, data collection and analysis, and cooperation between researchers and policy-makers encouraged.

The most important recommendations emanating from the presentations and discussion were:

- Conduct more research and advocacy on internal migration related to the achievements of the MDGs, since most migration is *internal* not international.
- Countries should adopt policies that promote a positive link between migration and the MDGs such as: Policies that allow people to move legally across borders, including temporary labour migration agreements; policies that work to reduce the transaction costs of sending money home; policies to reduce urban poverty since most migrants end up in large cities; policies that pay attention to female migrants.
- Break up information asymmetries on migration so the gains of migration are not restricted to certain population groups only.
- Build capacities in the South for research, data collection and analysis on South-South Migration, and encourage cooperation between researchers and policy-makers to integrate migration into development plans.

UNITAR New York office is responsible for the content of this report