

Migration as a driver for development



The emergence of a long-awaited global consensus on the MDGs during the 2000 United Nations Millennium Summit laid the foundations of a new era of worldwide cooperation and common development framework. With the imminent expiry of the eight time-bound goals rapidly approaching, the international

community has been actively engaged in discussions on how to advance and reshape the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015. In the light of the latest shifts in human mobility and migration patterns, it becomes clear that migration must be brought to the negotiation table. More specifically, since the adoption of the original MDGs in 2000, international migration flows have increased by approximately one third, from 175 million international migrants in 2000 to 232 million in 2013 (UN DESA 2013). The same source highlights shifting global migration trends, with a substantial increase in the global South – South migration (between developing countries) which almost equals the South –North migration (from developing to developed countries) (UN DESA 2013).

Reaching a global consensus on the adoption of the eight MDGs was a long-term process which took almost 10 years. This might account for the fact that migration – a politically controversial topic, and at the same time a goal difficult to measure – slipped away from the negotiation table. It is interesting to note the shift in perception of migration at the time of the adoption of the MDGs and its evolution up to today. The 2001 UN Road map towards the implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration refers to migration as

one of the factors contributing to the worsening of global malaria problem, and portrays migrants as “victims of discrimination, racism and intolerance” (UN General Assembly 2001). Fortunately, a departure from this point of view is to be seen in the 2005 final report of the UN Millennium Project, called “Investing in Development: A Practical Way to Achieve the MDGs” (UN Millennium Project 2005). More specifically, the report shows an evolution of the concept of migrants portraying them as agents of development in the context of poverty-alleviation. The migration-development nexus was reiterated in further conferences such as the Second Earth Summit in 2002 “Rio +20” UNGA High Level Dialogues (HLDs) in 2006 and 2013 as well (Lönnback 2014).

Why should migration be an integral part of the post-2015 development agenda?

Migration has the potential to boost both the economy of the country of origin and of the host country. Firstly, the remittances sent back home by migrants are crucial to reducing household poverty by providing an additional income which can be used in various ways in order to meet the family’s needs. According to the World Bank, remittances sent to developing countries exceed up to three times the amount of official development assistance received (The World Bank n.d.) and at the same time are comparable, if not higher than the export earnings of the recipient countries. For instance, in Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Philippines, remittances exceeded the total earnings from exports of goods and services. Another case in point is India, where in 2013 the value of remittances was higher than the earnings coming from the export services of its vibrant IT industry (The World Bank 2014).

Remittances have been shown to be an extremely powerful tool for poverty reduction in developing countries, which has been correlated with increased child schooling, especially among girls, as reported in Pakistan (Ratha 2013). Likewise, it has been shown that households which receive remittances tend to

invest more in health care than those which do not receive remittances.

In the light of the illustrated impact, it becomes evident that migrant remittances actually contribute to the achievement of the original MDGs by reducing poverty and hunger (MDG 1), contributing to an increase in child schooling, including primary education (MDG 2) especially among girls, with positive impact on efforts to achieve gender equality (MDG 3). Furthermore, migrant remittances also contribute to health care improvement, which results in reduction of child mortality (MDG 4), maternal health improvement (MDG 5) and stepping up efforts in preventing or combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, other diseases (MDG 6) and ensuring environmental sustainability (MDG 7) by improving the access to safe water and sanitation.

Secondly, it has been argued that migrants can improve also the economy of the host country by “ tackling skills shortages and labour market bottlenecks.” (Andor 2014).

A recent study (OECD 2014) shows that the financial contribution that migrants make to the host country budgets through taxes and social security actually exceeds the benefits received. In addition, claims that migrants are draining the social welfare of the host country were found to be inaccurate by a report commissioned by the EC. It was shown that unemployed migrants represent a very small share of beneficiaries, with low impact on the social budgets of the host countries (Juravle et al. 2013). Beyond the taxes that migrants pay, they contribute to the development of the host countries by stimulating trade, investments and business.

Thirdly, migration also brings about an increase in the transfer of skills and innovation. For instance, in 2013, almost half of the patents applications in the U.S. were filed by foreign-born citizens. The same is valid also for the business sector where more than half of the start-ups in Silicon Valley were set up by citizens of foreign origin (Quittner 2014). Moreover, migrants are important agents for development since they facilitate links between private and

public sectors in both country of origin and country of destination and can even act as “the basis of business partnerships, trade, and flows of investment” between the two countries (House of Commons International Development Committee 2004). By acting as the facilitators of development between home and host country, migrant further global partnership for development, contributing to the achievement of the last of the eight MDGs.

To conclude, migration can be a driver for development in both home and host country. This is not to say that migration does not pose challenges. However, if efficiently governed, it can become a win-win process for the main parties concerned, i.e. country of origin and of destination but most importantly, for the migrants themselves. In order to do so, it is necessary that the international community agrees that the migration discourse must re-shift its focus from border control policies which basically see migration rather as a problem than as a solution. Likewise, seeing migration only in economic terms will not do since migrants might run the risk “to be regarded as commodities, rather than as individuals entitled to the full enjoyment of their human rights” (The UN Committee on Migrant Workers 2005). Hence, migration should be dealt with from a holistic perspective within which human rights play a crucial role.

The post-2015 development agenda has the potential to successfully re-shift the focus from border control policies to the improvement of the quality of migration. Quality migration approach sees migration as a development enabler and hence not as a problem per se but as a solution. It implies the protection of migrants’ fundamental rights as human beings, protection of migrants’ labour rights as workers (decent work) and safe migration for potential and returning migrants. The human rights approach to migration and development should be understood in terms of quality improvement of the migration process and not in terms of increasing the number of migrants.

Given the migrants' contribution to the development of both home and destination countries and their undeniable positive impact on the achievement of the original MDGs, migration ought to become an integral part of the post-2015 development strategy. This will not only pave the way for a gradual expansion of migrants' rights but, in the words of Peter Sutherland, the United Nations Secretary General's Special Representative for Migration "[...] perhaps even more important, it could change public perceptions of migrants, so that they are viewed as a blessing rather than a scourge.'" (Sutherland 2013). This is to say that the potential of migration potential as a development enabler cannot be fully achieved unless migrants' human rights are protected and at the same time efforts are made to end the stigma and discrimination against migrants.

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