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Post 2015: making migration work for sustainable development

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Post 2015: Making Migration Work for Sustainable Development

Summary

Migration stands among the most politically contentious topics in the United Nations (UN) system. This is shown in the current Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which reflect an approach to human development that does not involve human mobility. Efforts made to promote discussion on the linkages between migration and development in the UN have – since the turn of the millennium – resulted in two UN High-Level Dialogue sessions, the last of which was held in September 2013. These were supported and informed by accompanying processes convening diplomats, experts and other key stakeholders.

Building on these efforts, the most recent UN General Assembly felt that migration should be “adequately considered” in the formulation of a post-2015 agenda on global development. Past policy discussions have, however, narrowed the topic of migration to its more functionalist dimensions. Such a functionalist view would involve a choice for particular non-contentious symptoms of migration (e.g. the cost of sending money overseas) and would fall short of adequately reflecting migration as a key element of sustainable development.

Although various options for including migration in a post-2015 framework are on the table – ranging from stand-alone goals to efforts to “mainstream” it throughout the framework – further progress necessitates that migration is reflected in a way that respects the sustainable development orientation that the General Assembly has called for. Therefore,

discussions should also pay attention to the following key aspects of migration, which have been overlooked or ignored in past debates.

- 1) **Migrants’ rights as well as living and working conditions:** Many UN members call for better treatment of migrants, yet fail to ratify and enforce international conventions.
- 2) **Internal migration:** A post-2015 agenda should include internal migration, given the importance for sustainable development and the high number of similarities with cross-border migration.
- 3) **Environmental change and migration:** Migration should be regarded as an opportunity for adaptation – and not as a negative consequence of environmental change.
- 4) **Low-skilled migration:** Studies show that facilitating low-skilled migration benefits both the country of origin and destination country.
- 5) **Circular migration:** European Union (EU) member states’ actions should refrain from restrictive measures that directly undermine the benefits of circular migration.

Promoting migration for sustainable development cannot be done with a post-2015 framework alone; it requires transforming global institutions. This would include (1) further discussions at the UN level, (2) considering a subsidiarity principle for migration management, (3) a migration data revolution and (4) more “informed” political debates in UN member states.

Introduction: migration and development?

Although it is difficult to imagine migration without development – or development without migration – the political sensitivity surrounding restrictions on human mobility has marginalised migration in international development policies. The current MDGs reflect an approach to human development that does not involve human mobility. In stark contrast, the prominent place of migration policy in nation-states’ domestic-policy debates creates a large community of migration policy experts and researchers.

In the past two decades, efforts have been made to unite the two communities of practitioners and researchers under the label “Migration and Development” (M&D). Although M&D has been discussed biennially by dedicated UN General Assembly committees since the 1990s, destination countries blocked an international conference on the subject.

However, efforts by the UN Secretary General led to the first High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Development (HLD) in 2006. This meeting resulted in ongoing dialogue processes within and outside of the United Nations system, which gradually facilitated ongoing discussions that fed into the second HLD in September 2013. It was hoped that the second HLD would help to improve the prospects for international decision-making on migration. Many UN members, however, sent low-level delegations to the HLD, and despite the strong rhetoric following the shipwreck tragedies near Lampedusa that same week (see also Box 1), participants adopted an unambitious outcome document that lacks agreement on concrete actions. A month later, European heads of state rejected the European Commission’s proposals to facilitate legal migration and did not want to go further than stating that action “should” be taken to prevent the loss of lives at sea.

While not agreeing on concrete steps forward, the UN members were willing to state the obvious by recognising that human mobility is a key factor for human development. Moreover, they agreed that migration should be “adequately considered” in the formulation of a post-2015 agenda on global development. This paper recapitulates the discussions so far and analyses which issues have been overlooked in the post-2015 discussions.

M&D and the post-2015 development agenda

Discussions on M&D during the 1990s and 2000s have promoted more positive notions of migration in the development discourse. Yet, policy debates frequently negate these and continue to consider migration as a security threat, or regard development cooperation as a

means to help “avoid” migration. The dominant orientation of international policy discussions, moreover, has a strong functionalist bias that results in a focus on aspects such as remittances, high-skilled migration and brain drain, as well as the contribution of diaspora communities.

This functionalist bias leads to development policies portraying migration as a means to development, as opposed to an act of development itself. This bias is accompanied by a lack of consensus on defining key aspects of migration policy, for example a lack of consensual definitions of key terms such as “migration”, “internal migration” versus “refugees”, as well as ideologically predisposed concepts such as “illegal migrants”. This feeds into a larger trend of criminalising migrants. Medium-term demographic trends in Europe and other regions, however, point to the benefits of facilitating migration for the country of origin, the destination country as well as for the migrant.

Box 1: Lampedusa: human tragedies legitimising border control?

Although they involve grave human tragedies, the October 2013 Lampedusa accidents unfortunately are not isolated incidents but are directly linked to the EU’s policies of criminalising migration to Europe. Oxford University professor Dr Hein de Haas has compared the European policies and actions to a “waterbed” approach, whereby once pressure is applied somewhere along its borders, the migrants automatically move to another spot. By forcing them to take ever more dangerous sea routes from less politically stable destinations, the EU’s policies may in fact be directly contributing to the loss of lives they lament. Whereas the Italian migration minister called for the EU to move away from this policy by decriminalising migrants, European Commission President José Manuel Barroso’s Lampedusa response mainly involved referring to the work of the European Union’s external border management and cooperation agency (Frontex) and stressed the need to strengthen search and rescue capacities and boat surveillance systems.

Based on these prospects, some stakeholders argued for including migration in a post-2015 framework that is under preparation. In recent discussions, four options have emerged as possibilities for doing so.

First of all, one could envisage a **stand-alone goal related to migration** with individual targets and indicators. Although it would give it the priority it deserves, this option seems unlikely, given the fierce competition of other goals and the fact that these other goals are less politically contentious.

A second option would be to reflect **separate (sub-) objectives for migrants and migrant populations under other goals expressed by clear targets and indicators**. This seems to be a more feasible option, but it would invite reductionist “shopping” for particular migration aspects and neglect the wider relation between migration and development.

A third option would be to view **migration as a key enabler for development more broadly**. Such an option views international migration as a cross-cutting issue relevant for several aspects for development and requires its mainstreaming. Although reflecting that migration is relevant to many development factors, it risks to “awaystream” it if there are no clear goals and targets designed.

A combination of these three options would provide for a fourth one: a goal that, similar to the current 8th Millennium Development Goal, would commit UN members to giving shape to a global partnership on international migration. The history of MDG8, however, shows the difficulties of ensuring accountability to such a goal and that it alone does not facilitate collective action.

These options have been raised in discussions about a post-2015 framework, which the General Assembly has agreed have to be merged with the ongoing Open Working Group discussions on Sustainable Development Goals. This implies that discussions on migration in relation to a post-2015 framework on development should be taken forward in a broader sustainable development context that also addresses the social, economic and environmental dimensions of migration.

It should be emphasised that the situation of migrants will not be meaningfully improved by development projects targeting issues such as circular migration, but instead requires concrete progress in international legislation facilitating human mobility. This involves facing up to non-ratified international conventions as well as dealing with the inequality in human mobility that is tied to one’s given nationality or regional background. More fundamentally, it relates to confronting widespread negative perceptions and misconceptions about migrants in receiving countries as well as the tendency of the political class to frequently exploit these for short-term gains.

Migration aspects that need to be considered

Regardless of the option chosen to include migration in the post-2015 development agenda, it should not be reduced to a functionalist view. An M&D approach that serves a universal, inclusive and sustainable understanding of development should also consider and address the following interrelated aspects.

- **Migrants’ rights as well as living and working conditions:** Reports about terrible living and work-

ing conditions for South Asian migrant workers in Qatar are only the tip of the iceberg. Worldwide, many migrants suffer from labour exploitation; insufficient housing conditions; low access to public infrastructures, educational facilities and social protection; and/or lack opportunities for societal and political participation. Only a small number of states have signed at least one of the three international instruments related to migrant workers’ rights that would commit them to do something about this (e.g. International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families). States having signed at least one of the conventions host merely a third of the total global migrant population. Furthermore, there are growing manifestations and expressions of xenophobia, racism and intolerance against migrants worldwide. Thus, an improvement in migrants’ living conditions is also about intensifying integration efforts in the destination countries. Work in this area should also involve redefining the term “migrant” (e.g. estimates of Palestinians abroad range from 1 to 7 million people).

- **Internal migration:** The global number of migrants moving within the borders of their own countries is several times higher than the number of international migrants. As is the case with international migration, internal migrants’ remittances are essential for their families and home communities, and their labour is willingly “utilised” in the destination areas. But internal migrants also face problems relating to social, economic, political and legal marginalisation, and many governments are reluctant to address internal migration politically. They should not remain off-radar in a post-2015 framework that deals adequately with migration.
- **Environmental change and migration:** Fears that climate change and environmental degradation may create millions upon millions of “environmental refugees” and related security and humanitarian concerns have turned out to be both inappropriate and baseless. In fact, recent studies have come to the conclusion that migration can be an important form of adaptation to processes of environmental change. But so far, migration has hardly been an issue in international and national adaptation policies. Rather, the times that it has featured in discussions on climate change, the defined goal has been to reduce or “prevent” migration via (other) adaptation measures.
- **Low-skilled migration:** Whereas many receiving countries welcome highly skilled professionals – as some of their economic sectors are threatened by a (future) shortage of skilled labour – the immigration of low-skilled workers is usually met with refusal. However, studies confirm that more low-skilled migration from developing to developed countries or

emerging economies would not only be beneficial for the sending countries (e.g. via higher remittances to poor households or an increase in unskilled wages due to the decreasing supply); the receiving countries can also benefit, as labour shortages likewise appear in low-skilled job sectors. Finally, facilitating low-skilled migration would be a way of mitigating the human security risks of irregular migration as well as to some extent reducing the large funds now spent on border control.

- **Circular migration:** Circular migration is said to have the potential to create “triple-win situations” since: 1) destination areas and sectors benefit, as the required labour force can be recruited for a desired period of time, 2) sending areas / countries benefit via remittances and the acquired skills and knowledge of the migrants and 3) the migrants themselves benefit from the income and experiences gained abroad. Yet, immigration regulations of many receiving countries virtually prevent circular migration, as they only allow temporary (one-time) stays instead of multiple stays. Because they do not want to lose their admission status, migrants usually tend to stay in the destination country as a result. Accordingly, the potential of circular migration cannot be excluded from the post-2015 discussions.

Outlook: broaden and intensify the discussion

The relatively basic nature of the different migration aspects presented here is indicative of the challenging nature of the ongoing discussions. An adequate contribution of a post-2015 framework towards promoting migration in a way that balances the social, economic and environmental pillars of a sustainable development approach requires more fundamental

changes to today’s global institutions, which are inadequate for this purpose. Regardless of the recent calls for a “transformative framework”, the history of the development of these institutions indicates that such an expectation is not realistic. Instead, recognition of this need should inform three incremental, yet important, steps to realise this.

- (1) First of all, the UN needs to continue its efforts to **promote the discussion of migration in a broader sustainable development context**, avoid functionalist or instrumental approaches and call for more intensive high-level discussions on the matter.
- (2) The discussions on migration and its management need to consider the **subsidiarity principle and determine an optimal division of labour between the global, regional and national levels**, as well as establish avenues to devise coherent policies between those levels.
- (3) One should not assume that actions can be informed by existing data-collection processes: if there is any area in need of a “**data revolution**”, then it is the one related to migration. Poor data on migration reflects the lack of consensus on key terms, a lack of investment in empirical research as well as absent data on aspects such as remittances, illegal migration and information on migrant rights in different countries.
- (4) The first two actions can **help promote discussions on migration in UN member states** and avoid the political exploitation of migration misconceptions, which, however, ultimately depends on governments’ willingness to take responsibility in promoting migration for sustainable development.

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