



# Migration policies and the Millennium Development Goals

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## Migration policies and the Millennium Development Goals<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

With migration being one of the most obvious consequences of globalisation, it is understandable that international migration has emerged as one of the key areas in the global policy and development debate at the beginning of the 21st century. The Global Commission on International Migration, launched in 2003, the High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development, convened by the then secretary general of the United Nations in 2006, and the ongoing state-led Global Forum on International Migration and Development, have been just three of many activities giving migration a high profile, nationally and internationally.

Yet, despite all the attention to the topic, the real impact of migration on development—and of development on migration—is still poorly understood. Certain things do appear clear:

- Migration can help to reduce poverty;
- Immobile populations reflect stagnant economies and generally poor populations;
- While the poor do move, the poorest generally move less frequently and over shorter distances than wealthier groups.

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However, whether policy intervention can influence migration in a way that can bring about development is not so clear. What can be said with some degree of confidence from the available evidence is that migration

and development are positively correlated: that is, as levels of development rise, the volume of migration also rises. Hence, any idea that by promoting development in areas of origin the amount of out-migration will cease is misplaced. Over the longer term, as fertility declines, the volume of migration may slow; but over the short term, as levels of welfare and prosperity rise, migration also tends to increase. While development is therefore clearly a driver of migration, whether migration can be a driver of development is not so apparent.

### Migration as an MDG

Migration is not a MDG and it is right that migration is not a MDG. International agreements on targets for migration would have been unlikely in the way that targets for reducing poverty, infant or maternal mortality, gender inequalities or increasing primary enrolment could be achieved. Nevertheless, it is virtually impossible to envisage progress towards achieving the existing MDGs without some kind of migration. Studies of households in village communities in the developing world show the importance of incorporating additional “resource niches” away from the traditional rural way of life. Among the poorest, minimising risk rather than maximising return will help to achieve better welfare, and such an “off-farm” strategy helps to

1. Specific attributions to sources are given in the text and readers are directed to the references at the end of the paper. Additionally, the issue of refugees and conflict-induced migration was deemed beyond the remit of this paper, which focuses primarily on “voluntary” and labour migrations.

reduce the vulnerability of poor households. Activities range from seasonal work on commercial agricultural estates to longer-term work in cities.

### Policy, the MDGs and the majority of people who move: the internal migrants

Hence, the first policy recommendation would be to allow poor people to move to diversify their household resource base. Such a recommendation immediately introduces a central issue that has been almost entirely missing in the current migration development debate: the importance of internal migration.

The current debate is concerned almost entirely with international migration, in which origin and destination states can bilaterally seek to implement migration policies that can benefit both states as well as the migrants themselves. However, the number of international migrants in the world in 2005, according to the best, if flawed, estimates, was 195 million, or about 3% of the population. Certainly, some countries are more affected than others, and those 195 million are linked back to their home through family ties to many more millions of people. Nevertheless, an examination of origin-destination flows reveals that they are dominated by movements among the developed countries themselves and by a relatively small number of mostly middle-income developing countries. The vast majority of people who move do so within the boundaries of their own country.

Migration policies that are geared towards international migration alone are unlikely to reach the majority of people who move, and it is an improvement of the conditions among the majority and the poorest that will make the greatest impact on achieving the MDGs. However, bringing internal migration into the equation introduces a series of complications. First and foremost, such policies are the responsibility of individual sovereign states. Second, the experience of countries with policies of redirection or restriction on internal flows over all but the short term have generally been shown not to be effective.

None the less, the last United Nations enquiry into world population policies in 2005 showed that almost three-quarters of governments in the developing world thought that they should implement policies

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to reduce internal migration into urban agglomerations. Over half of governments in the developing world thought that a major change in the distribution of their population was desirable, the implication being that a reversal of migration from cities should be implemented.

Hence, a significant amount of advocacy on internal migration in the developing world remains to be done. The dangers of attempting to disallow the poor from broadening their resource base appear to be accepted as part of policy in many parts of the developing world. Migration need not imply a permanent move from rural to urban, but is more typically made up of

complex systems of short-term movements or circulation among villages and towns and between rural and urban areas.

### Policy implications

Freedom of movement is enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which although non-binding does have moral authority, particularly when it is clear that controls on movement are likely to act against the achievement of the MDGs. Two policy recommendations therefore emerge: that no active policy intervention should be introduced to prohibit or redirect these types of movements; and that internal migrants should be accorded the types of protections that most developing countries wish for their citizens abroad. Advocacy on labour law and access to basic services in destinations would be integral parts of any such policy implementation.

Furthermore, the concentration of populations in urban areas, estimated to reach 53% of the world's population in 2015, 48% in the less developed countries of the world and even 31.6% in the least developed countries, places urbanisation in the centre of the population and development debate.

Of particular importance to policymakers is therefore the urbanisation of poverty. Recent evidence suggests that, while the number of urban poor has been reduced by about 100 million through the transfer of some 150 million rural people to the urban sector, this has been counterbalanced by a slower-than-average poverty reduction in urban areas.

In many ways, the urban sector, and migration to that sector, is becoming the fulcrum around which the success of achieving the MDGs will revolve. This concentration of population should make access to basic health and education services easier, as well as improving access to clean water and sanitation (four of the MDGs). However, programmes to reduce poverty need to be increasingly focused on populations in urban areas, even if these programmes might have the result of bringing about a further increase in urban growth.

### International migration and the MDGs

Although international migrants make up a very small proportion of the total number of migrants, they can and do play an important role in their countries of origin, although whether they can actually influence progress towards achieving the MDGs remains to be proven. The debate on international migration and development has not focused specifically on the MDGs, but mainly on three areas that are seen to be important for the development of countries of origin:

- Remittances;
- Skilled migration and brain drain;
- Diasporas.

These areas are not mutually exclusive but form a useful division in order to examine the policy debate.

## Remittances

Remittances have been the source of greatest attention, and the reason is not hard to fathom: their sheer magnitude. The annual value of global remittances is second only to foreign direct investment as a source of external funding, and remittances are now much larger than the total volume of official aid flows. Recent estimates place the volume of remittances flowing only to developing countries in 2005 at \$US167bn, an amount that has doubled since 2000. Certainly, part of the increase can be accounted for by improved reporting and statistical systems, but the total amount reported referred only to remittances flowing through formal banking channels. An equal amount may flow through informal channels.

While the precise amounts of money sent back by migrants as remittances remains unknown, there can be little question about their importance for countries of origin. Hence, policies to liberalise the temporary migration of labour take on significance. Estimates suggest that if developed economies took in an additional number of labour migrants equivalent to just 3% of their labour force—through GATS mode four, for example—annual gains in remittances of US\$150bn might result. This would almost double the present official volume.

Leaving aside the political issues of achieving any such programmes through GATS, other issues relate to the impact of remittances on the achievement of the MDGs. The debate on remittances tends to ignore important aspects

Remittances are likely to contribute to a widening of inequalities between and within developing countries and to reinforce existing inequalities

of the process of migration. Migrants in general, and international migrants in particular, are not randomly selected from the populations of origin countries. They tend to come from very specific places of origin and the remittances are therefore flowing back to a quite limited number of places and social groups in countries of origin. Also, these countries of origin may not be among the poorest. Remittances are likely to contribute to a widening of inequalities between and within developing countries and to reinforce existing inequalities rather than raising the overall improvements implied by the MDGs. Although, over the long term, such an outcome need not necessarily be negative for development, the danger over the short term is that governments respond to the flows of remittances by redirecting their own allocation of aid away from remittance-receiving countries to the detriment of the poorest in those countries.

Nevertheless, remittances can help to reduce poverty in specific populations. It has been estimated that the massive labour migration from the state of Kerala in southern India to the Gulf states has contributed to a 12% reduction in poverty in that state. Convincing evidence of the impact of remittances on poverty alleviation is also available from Latin America. Yet, despite the volume of remittances received by Kerala, the state has not experienced a parallel increase in

economic growth, but instead actually declined in rank by gross state domestic product between 1980 and 1998.

Furthermore, remittances may improve human capital but, in doing so, may lock certain populations into dependence upon further migration. A proportion of remittances are used to fund the costs of the migration of others, either direct bureaucratic and transport costs or illegal payments to traffickers to circumvent the legal process. Remittances can enhance human wellbeing, but, in certain areas at least, may simply act as a holding mechanism that ultimately leads to further migration and population redistribution rather than sustaining economic development in areas of origin. Rarely do remittances go to the poorest people or to the poorest areas among developing countries of origin.

Nevertheless, even given all the caveats specified above, policies that work to reduce the transaction costs of sending monies home must be welcomed as they will benefit the families of the migrants. Innovative methods of transfer using modern and simple electronic systems such as mobile telephones appear to have considerable potential in this area. However, whether they can significantly influence the progress towards achieving the MDGs is more questionable.

### Skilled migration

The policy focus in this aspect of the debate has been on the impact on developing countries of skilled emigration. This issue has taken on greater significance as most developed economies have implemented immigration policies that are geared towards the recruitment of the highly skilled.

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Much of the emphasis has been on the health sector, particularly because the presence of health professionals is seen to be of fundamental importance to the achievement of at least MDGs four, five and six. Perhaps the

most overt policy to be introduced in this area is that of codes of practice, in which developed economies were prohibited from actively recruiting health professionals from the developing world, except in cases where government-to-government agreements had been secured. This policy was implemented by the United Kingdom's Department of Health from 2001, and proposals exist to extend the practice through multilateral agencies.

An evaluation of the code in the UK, while noting a reduction in the recruitment of health professionals from developing countries, was ambivalent about any simple causal relationship between the reduction in number and the implementation of the code. Two broader issues emerge. First, it is virtually impossible to attribute any decline in basic health indicators in developing countries to any loss of personnel. Second, the introduction of a barrier to the free migration of trained personnel seems questionable at best. Most of the skilled health professionals who leave will do so irrespective of the existence of barriers to their movement.

If they are not allowed to be recruited legally, it is likely that they will turn to irregular channels of migration through which they will not be able to practise their profession on arrival at destinations, leading to brain waste.

Rather than focus on policies to limit the movement of skilled migrants, and health professionals in particular, a shift in emphasis towards developing the most appropriate types of training for the needs of a specific developing country seems more appropriate. Those selected for training in small towns and rural areas and given basic health training appropriate for local needs are likely to have higher retention rates than those selected in cities and trained for global markets. This does not mean that students in developing countries should not be allowed to pursue the best medical training, only that the types of available training need to be diversified and that public funding needs to concentrate more on basic training. A large proportion of those trained to global standards will always leave, irrespective of barriers to movement placed in their way.

## Diasporas

It is from the community of migrants from any country abroad, the diaspora, where the remittances come, and it is in the diaspora that the best and brightest of a country of origin's population are likely to be found. Thus, the idea emerges that the diaspora can be mobilised or "leveraged" for the development of the home country; ie that money for development can be sourced in the diaspora and that the educated will return to work for the nation.

Unquestionably, although they were not the cause of development, the return of thousands of students to the tiger economies in east Asia, mainly from the United States, from the 1970s onwards played a major role in the development of these economies. Current programmes to foster the return of skilled migrants such as the Transfer of Knowledge through Expatriate Exchange (TOKTEN) of the United Nations Development Programme, or the Africa-specific Migration and Development in Africa (MIDA) of the International Organisation for Migration, tend to involve a small number of returnees and to be expensive. Critically, something has to exist in the home country for returnees to return to and, if these opportunities do not exist, the chance of success for such programmes seems slim.

Also important is the tendency to see the diaspora as a homogeneous entity. Migrant communities are generally highly factionalised and not all are actively working to support the government in power in the country of origin. Hence, considerable care needs to be taken when viewing the diaspora as a source of development capital to bring about the MDGs.

## Other policy areas

Several other important areas exist in the migration and development debate that have implications for policy formulation. These revolve around the areas of gender and irregular migration, both of which impinge upon the issue of migrant protection.

## Gender and migration policy

A notable characteristic of the global migration system has been the feminisation of migration flows, both internal and international. As the process of migration has evolved over time and space, increasing numbers of women enter the population flows, initially as followers and then, increasingly, as movers independent of fathers, brothers and husbands.

In the literature, much attention has been given to the issue of trafficking, particularly of women and children, and women are too often seen as victims in the process of migration. Clearly, some are, and this issue is elaborated in the following section, but migration also empowers women. Those trafficked do not represent the majority of women who migrate. As migrants themselves, women are often moving out of patriarchal structures in communities of origin into places where they are less circumscribed by custom. Even in exploitative situations such as are found in the sex sector, many women are escaping abusive conditions in home areas with little choice but to enter potentially much higher paying work in more distant towns and cities in order to feed their families. Where women are left behind upon the migration of their husbands, they are thrust into positions of responsibility in the household quite different from the traditional.

Hence, the MDG to reduce gender inequality will be facilitated in those places where there are fewer restrictions on migration, and where bans on the movement of women in particular are lifted. Policies that seek to protect women through the limitation of their movement are counterproductive as far as achieving the MDGs are concerned.

## Irregular migration

A proportion of the migration across international borders today does not occur through formal channels but results in what is termed “irregular migration”. This can come about in a number of ways, including:

- Clandestine entry, bypassing all formal channels;
- Legal entry to a country, as a tourist perhaps, but subsequent illegal entry into the labour force;
- Legal entry, again perhaps as a tourist or student, and staying on after the expiration of the validity of the visa;
- Entry using fraudulent documentation.

These methods of entry are generally facilitated through brokers, traffickers or smugglers, who may or may not have links to organised crime. Government policy generally aims to reduce the number of irregular migrants, and the standard response is increased control and surveillance. This is despite the fact that, in many parts of the world, irregular migration is prevalent precisely because formal channels of entry are few, restricted and strictly controlled.

Nevertheless, the converse—that a broadening of formal channels will lead to a reduction in the number of irregular migrants—is not necessarily the case. The United States, for example, with

the largest formal immigration programme in the world, is still home to over 12 million irregular migrants. The policy solution must be a compromise between opening the number of legal channels, including a number of temporary entry programmes, while maintaining control of the borders; that is, the establishment of a clear, efficient and transparent immigration policy backed up with effective border management.

This difficult and complex issue has several dimensions but, in terms of the MDGs, policies to reduce the number of irregular migrants is a given. Clearly, the aim to reduce vulnerability and increase protection in destination areas must be the priority for the migrants themselves. However, their transition to legality will allow them to maintain much closer ties to home areas in terms of sending remittances, temporary return and transferring knowledge and ideas back to home communities that may help to achieve the MDGs.

A cautious welcome is therefore given to extending programmes of non-permanent entry, or temporary worker policies, which may provide one way forward to promote this circulation between origins and destinations to the benefit of both areas and help to reduce the number of irregular migrants.

### The importance of responsive migration policies

Perhaps the greatest pitfall in the area of migration and the development of policy is the danger of the reification of migration into a “thing” that exists separate from the economic, social and political factors that generate it. Direct migration policies are necessary but may not be the most efficient way to bring about either the management of migration or development. Policies designed to affect, or “harness”, the volume and direction of movement may not be the most effective options. The experience of policies directed at internal migration urges this degree of caution.

However, policy is important, and particularly those policies that are responsive to existing and projected patterns of migration. It can be argued that “migration impact statements” should be made integral parts of all development policies to sensitise decision makers to the likely outcome of specific policies on population movements. While the likely implications of infrastructure projects, such as road or dam construction, on migration may be fairly obvious, the impact of trade, industrial or specific policies designed to achieve the MDGs might not be so clear.

The accession of China to the WTO, and the termination of the multi-fibre agreement, for example, have had impacts on migration not just within China itself but also among the labour forces in other countries in Asia and Africa. Direct impacts of migration can also be seen in the spread of diseases such as HIV/Aids and malaria—it is not so much that labour migrants or most other types of migrants spread infection but that certain high-risk groups of frequent movers operating along specific corridors of mobility spread the disease (MDG goal six). More generally, it is virtually impossible to envisage the implementation of policies designed to increase school

enrolment, reduce child or maternal mortality or reduce gender inequalities without some impact on human population movement. Hence, policies need to be designed to meet particular migration situations.

Overall, it is argued that policies such as these that are designed to respond to rather than control, promote, redirect or stop migration are likely to provide the most effective response both nationally and internationally. The critical need, therefore, is for data that can be used to map out present and projected migration so that adequate policy responses can be designed.

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