

Fundamental Rights Forum: Panel “Fundamental rights-compliant sustainable growth”

Speech by Mr Michael Spindelegger, Director General, ICMPD

Check speech against delivery

Vienna, 23 June 2016

Excellencies, Distinguished Colleagues and Friends,

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to address you today at the Fundamental Rights Forum as the newly elected Director General of the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD). The Fundamental Rights Agency has been a very much appreciated partner in many of our initiatives from the early days of our organisation and throughout all the years. I truly hope that this excellent cooperation will continue or even deepen in the future.

As we know, European governments are at the moment fully occupied with the so-called “migration and refugee crisis”; with regaining control over migration flows and with finding common ground for functioning European responses. There was some progress in recent months but we are still quite far away from durable solutions on international protection, European solidarity and cooperation with external partners.

But the so-called crisis should not overshadow all other important aspects of migration. Its contribution to sustainable growth is one of them; the question how growth can be fundamental-rights compliant is another. In my new capacity as Director General of ICMPD I should of course focus on the issue of migration. I want to use the short time of my statement to present three examples why I think that rights – fundamental rights, residence rights, labour rights etc. –are key in the context of migration and sustainable growth.

As you know, the world leaders adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015. The Agenda includes a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to end poverty, fight inequality and injustice, and tackle climate change. Goal 10 aims at “facilitating orderly, safe, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies”. And we as ICMPD think that fundamental rights and migrants rights have to play a very central role in this respect.

Let’s start with the question of growth and rights in the context of low-income countries, which often are countries of origin of international migration as well. Goal 8 of the SDGs sets a target of 7% GDP growth/year for them. In case of Pakistan, for example, it is estimated that migrant remittances were at 20 billion in 2015, representing a remarkable 7.0% of the GDP. There are

an estimated 7 – 8 million labour migrants from Pakistan working abroad, many of them in the Gulf States. And we know that – despite all efforts of governments in the region and the International Community – they are regularly exposed to abusive labour practices, poor living accommodations, non-payment of salaries, restrictions to organise and bargain collectively, sexual abuse and violence. It is a fact that the denial of rights reduces their incomes, the amounts they can remit and the development impact of their migration. Granting them fundamental and labour rights would boost this impact and would bring Pakistan a lot closer to the annual GDP growth envisaged by the 2030 Agenda.

When we look at the richest countries in the world, we also see the link between migration, rights and sustainable growth. First of all, all available research suggests that immigration is positive for the economies of migrant receiving states, raises GDP and GDP per capita, enhances total employment and does not lead to the displacement of the domestic and resident population on the labour market.

But it is not only about economic growth and labour markets. In the highly developed European welfare states, for example, growth will only be sustainable when we manage to maintain these systems. In view of demographic ageing, this will be difficult. Today, about 72 % of the European population are in working age, while 28 % are older than 65 years. In 2080, this ratio will be 50:50 - with immigration. Without immigration the picture will look a lot bleaker. It will take a broad range of measures to deal with this challenge but functioning immigration will have to play its role as well.

If we want to ensure that immigration plays this positive role, we have to make sure that future immigrants have access to legal employment and are protected against exploitation. This is very much in our own interest. As our populations grow older, we have to ensure that those who work also pay taxes and welfare contributions, otherwise our systems will fail. But migrants can do that only when they have access to decent work, when their labour rights are protected and when forced labour is truly eradicated as laid down in the SDGs. If we continue to allow that migrants are pushed in illicit jobs and that whole segments of our labour markets shift to the shadow economy, we do not only hurt the rights and interests of migrants, we hurt our own interests and put our future at stake. Integration, anti-discrimination and safeguarding migrants' rights are fundamental pre-conditions for ensuring our own sustainable growth – and this cannot be said often enough.

When it comes to migrants' rights we do not have to point the finger. We just have to look at our own doorsteps and in our own backyards. Let us just take the example of Moldova. It is estimated that about 25% of the population has emigrated, more than 1 Mio people. It is believed, however, that only 1 out of 10 Moldovan emigrants stays legally in their respective country of destination. These migrants do not burden welfare systems, they do not take away jobs from the domestic population and they do not engage in criminal activities. They head to Russia and other CIS countries and work in construction. Or - when they are female - they move towards EU countries like Italy and Greece, and work in households or domestic care. Most of them have no legal status. They cannot move freely between Moldova and their destination country. This means that an estimated 100,000 Moldovan children are "left behind" and have to

grow up with grandparents or other relatives but without their mothers and fathers. Just imagine the situation – your child is sick and you cannot come to see it. You cannot see it because you cannot run the risk of travelling without a visa and losing your job.

There is a silent crime against humanity right before our eyes and it is about time that we do something about it. Article 33 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights says that the “family shall enjoy legal, economic and social protection”, we should not forget about that. As I have said before – much of today’s irregular migration is labour migration which is needed. It is needed by emigration countries which depend on migrant remittances - in Moldova, for instance, remittances are believed to represent more than 26% of the country’s GDP. But countries of destination need these migrations as well. They do not find enough people on their labour markets who are willing and capable of doing the hard jobs their economies need to be done. It is about time to acknowledge this need. We have to honestly discuss how to make these migrations legal and give proper residence and labour rights to those migrants engaged. This would be for the benefit of all parties involved and also help to ensure sustainable growth.

What can we do concretely? I think we should use every opportunity, every framework and every channel to lobby, to inform and to enlighten. Fundamental rights and sustainable growth are not contradicting each other. On the contrary, in our modern world, rights are a precondition for growth. The great German philosopher Immanuel Kant said some 200 years ago that "*Right must never be accommodated to politics, but politics must always be accommodated to right*". We can say the same thing about rights, the economy and growth. Thus, it is not only about the morally right, it is about solid practical arguments. And this is the message we should spread.