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IRREGULAR MIGRATION AND REGULAR PATHWAYS: WHAT WE REALLY SHOULD DO

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For 2015, the McKinsey Global Institute estimated that international migrants contributed about 6.7 trillion USD or 9.4 percent to the global GDP although they represent only 3.3 percent of the world population. For 2016, the World Bank estimated the global volume of migrant remittances at more than 600 billion USD. The session's issue brief estimates that app. 150 million or 65 per cent of all international migrants work and have higher labour force participation than non-migrants. Immigration enhances economic growth, does not lead to job displacement, does not impact wages negatively, benefits public finances and welfare spending, and strengthens economic development in sending countries. Despite these positive effects, labour migration is loaded with misperceptions and met with scepticism.

Thus, and in absence of conceptual clarity and robust data, it is impossible to estimate the size of irregular migration and employment. But all available indicators suggest significant quantities and there are good reasons to place the issue of irregular migration firmly with the issue of creating more regular pathways. There is no evidence that more legal migration opportunities automatically lead to less irregular migration. However, there is also not enough awareness that irregular migration patterns develop over time and in an environment without sufficient legal opportunities.

Issue brief six lists a total of twenty recommendations on irregular migration, labour mobility, skills recognition and development, skills matching and fair recruitment and employment. Taken together, they have high potential to create a significantly improved system for managing global labour migration and mobility. Hence, this blog does not attempt to add fundamentally different views but to emphasise those areas where specific attention is needed. Labour migration is a complex issue. It differs according to world region, labour market demands, legal traditions and regulatory density, skills levels or quantitative dimensions. It is challenging to address labour migration in its entirety while acknowledging the specificities of the specific situation. Nevertheless, generalisations can be made and this blog argues that there are a number of areas which the global compact should view as priorities. Namely, it should be a starting point for addressing labour migration in the overall

context of social cohesion, for real cooperation on skills matching, for the development of new approaches on low-skilled migration, for becoming serious about migrant rights and employer sanctions, and for incorporating regional dimensions into global thinking.

Address social cohesion as the sine qua non for functioning labour migration

This blog stated that all evidence confirms that in general migration is economically beneficial. Nevertheless, immigration is met with scepticism in most societies and the notion that some of them would embrace immigration with open arms is more of a myth than a reality. In reality this reluctance is not so much linked to migration but to the effects of social and economic change. Change causes fears and immigration is perceived as a cause irrespective of the fact that in reality change comes from entirely different directions. Anti-immigrant sentiment is mostly found among those who are in fear of losing their jobs, livelihoods and social positions. Telling them that migrants are not to blame will not change their minds no matter how true such a statement is. Ultimately, more acceptance for immigration can be achieved only through policies that make sure that nobody is left behind, that create jobs and prospects for everybody and promote cohesion for the whole society. Holistic policies have to be honest about the benefits and costs of migration. More importantly they have to benefit all parts of the population but have to pay particular attention to all vulnerable groups among them, namely those who run the risk to fall behind as economies and societies go through change, and - that is the point - regardless of whether they are immigrants or not.

Get serious on skills matching for creating a globally mobile labour force

Governments increasingly acknowledge the need for foreign workforce in view of economic pressures or demographic change. As a result a number of sophisticated labour immigration systems have emerged on the international scene. The problem with these systems is that they hardly provide measures addressing the existing skills mismatch between the demand and supply sides. Functioning labour migration eludes any simplistic approaches. A sheer opening of labour markets is neither likely nor desirable. Each country needs the right kind of immigration with the right kind of skills, qualifications and characteristics. Those labour markets with high degrees of specialisation and formalisation require equally high degrees of formal and practical qualifications from those who want to enter them. At present these standards are taught almost exclusively on the domestic level. It is hardly surprising that most prospective labour migrants have no real chance of obtaining the necessary qualifications while they are at home. If they want to take up work on formalised labour markets they have to belong to the small segment of high skilled migrants, apply for low qualified work under a seasonal scheme or work in informal niches of the labour market, perpetuating deskilling and

brain waste. Skills matching is a linchpin for enhanced labour migration between the world regions. The key is to implement policies on the basis of joint and mutually vocational training standards, including language skills, while they are still in their home countries. This would create a real triple-win situation. Joint but higher vocational training standards would empower graduates with significantly enhanced opportunity on global markets but also in their home countries. In case of migration, they would benefit not only from the opportunity to follow legal channels but also from higher incomes that would raise levels of remittances. Countries of origin would benefit from higher remittances and from enhanced legitimacy as more of their citizens would see their rights protected while abroad. Countries of destination would benefit from a workforce that is capable of filling existing and evolving skills and labour market gaps by way of legal and orderly migration, from contributing to economic development in countries of origin and by enhancing the readiness for cooperation in areas of mutual interest. Active policies on skills matching are new instruments. First pilot initiatives have been conducted and have shown positive results. The global compact should look further into them and complement them with labour market and migration strategies, labour market reforms and active labour market policies.

Acknowledge the need for “low skilled” labour migration

In the debate on labour migration governments tend to emphasise high skilled and skilled migration. It seems to be easier to find public and political support in these areas. Notwithstanding this, globally there might be an even higher demand for so called low-skilled or low-wage labour. This segment, however, is subject to the strongest restrictions, linked to structural exploitation of migrant workers and prone to irregular migration. Some scholars argue that restrictive policies and rigid schemes for this type of labour migration are counterproductive as they virtually force migrants into permanent settlement and that more liberal approaches would allow migrants to respond more flexibly to the ups and downs of the economic cycle. Voter scepticism, labour market protection paradigms or security concerns - as they exist in countries where labour migrants represent large shares of the resident population - make such openings rather unlikely. The realistic option is to bring together the economic need for this type of labour migration and the political need to regulate in a better way. Bilateral and multilateral agreements, seasonal schemes or quota systems have the potential to achieve this goal. But they have to become more realistic regarding quantities, more specific regarding the demands they should cover and more pragmatic regarding the requirements they put on migrant workers. Most of all they have to avoid exacerbating the vulnerabilities of low-wage migrant workers and perpetuating their structural exploitation. The global compact should emphasise the development of more sophisticated and more

rights-based bilateral and multilateral labour migration agreements. It should collect existing Good Practices, further expand them and develop their features into general principles guiding global cooperation on labour migration and mobility.

Grant migrants rights and impose employer sanctions to curb irregular labour migration

Labour migration helps to fill labour shortages but also the bottom positions in the job hierarchy in sectors with labour-intensive, low-skilled and low-paid jobs. Cut off from access to legal labour market and limited to specific economic sectors of the informal labour market, many migrants are ready to engage in such occupations despite not having the permission to enter the country, risking high fines or losing their residence status. Labour migration policies which ignore the need for such work push immigrants towards illegal employment and foster the emergence or enhancement of informal labour markets. And what's more, they push whole segments of the labour market into informal niches; which perpetuates irregular migration. The debate focuses too much on migrants themselves and does not pay sufficient attention to a very basic fact. For each irregular migrant worker there is at least one employer who employs him or her and there will be no change without finally addressing those who economically benefit from it. Employer sanctions - or clear incentives for legal employment - and migrants rights go hand in hand. More and better migrant rights will make it much more difficult and much less lucrative to exploit them. This will also slow the continuous shifting of formal jobs into informal ones. Granting rights to migrant workers is not so much a question of altruism but of economic wisdom and political foresight. Turning a blind eye on the demand side of irregular foreign labour in the interest of powerful lobbies and quick economic gains will backfire when whole sectors of an economy are pushed into informal segments and governments lose out on taxes and other contributions. It is the countries who grant the most extensive labour rights who are also the most productive and competitive ones. Rights promote development and the global compact should strongly emphasise this link.

Address the regional dimension in global approaches

States differ not only regarding their migration policy interests but also regarding their overall integration in global migration processes and the degree of interconnectedness with other states. The global compact needs to take into account these links and the regional particularities of migration flows and processes. Regional organisations should be given a central role in promoting global standards but also in devising regional approaches of cooperation on labour migration. There is a large gap between national interests that dominate labour migration policies of today and a globally shared understanding that should drive the policy framework of tomorrow. Regional organisations, as well as the formal and

informal regional migration dialogues and frameworks, have the experience and know-how to bridge these gaps, to bring together countries with divergent interests and to promote cooperation between stakeholders with at times fundamentally different views and perceptions. ICMPD supports a number of related capacity building activities in different world regions such as the [FMM West Africa Project](#); the [MIEUX initiative](#) or the [Silk Routes III project](#). They aim at the development of labour migration policies and administrative capacities, labour migration strategies, or the establishment of a labour market and migration information systems, all of which will improve the basis for better global cooperation on labour migration and mobility.

Conclusion

A world where a globally mobile labour force obtains universally applicable skills and qualifications, benefits from univocally accepted rights and moves within controlled yet reasonably open and flexible channels is still a vision. But it is a feasible one, and the global compact process can contribute a lot to making it a reality.

The views expressed here are those of the author, and not necessarily those of ICMPD.

On 12-13 October 2017, the global migration compact process continues in Geneva with the sixth informal thematic session on irregular migration and regular pathways, including decent work, labour mobility, and recognition of skills and qualifications. UN Member States, intergovernmental organisations, non-governmental and civil society actors will gather to collect input and recommendations on these topics to inform the development of the global compact on migration.

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