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International Dialogue on Migration 2014  
Human mobility and development: emerging trends and new opportunities for partnerships  
**Intersessional Workshop • 7 and 8 October 2014**

## **MIGRATION AND FAMILIES**

### **Summary of discussions**

The workshop “Migration and families” was held in Geneva, Switzerland, on 7 and 8 October 2014 in the framework of IOM’s annual International Dialogue on Migration (IDM), which in 2014 was guided by the overarching theme of “Human mobility and development: emerging trends and new opportunities for partnerships”, as selected by the IOM membership.

The workshop was the second in a series that examined human mobility trends and the implications for human development, as well as scenarios for future approaches to the constantly changing social, political and economic context. It focused on family migration and on the differential and challenging impact of migration on the family unit and its members.

The workshop was attended by approximately 260 registered participants from around the world including policymakers and practitioners specializing in immigration law, social and family affairs, health and development, as well as civil society and media representatives active in areas related to various dimensions of family migration.

The workshop featured a keynote address by H.E. Ana María Baiardi Quesnel, Minister of Women of the Republic of Paraguay, who highlighted the consequences of migration for children and called for more attention to the reality of female migrants and their key role in the family, as well as agents for development. In keeping with the practice of providing a forum for migrants themselves to be heard, the workshop featured a “Migrant’s Voice” session, in which testimonies of a young migrant and a representative of female migrants were presented.

The discussions were divided into five sessions and were led by 32 speakers, selected according to geographical and gender balance and representing countries from various regions and backgrounds.

This document summarizes the main conclusions and key ideas for action that stemmed from the discussion.

**1. Due to its magnitude and impact on human and economic development, family migration and its implications for the family unit and society require greater consideration from policy makers and researchers.**

- Participants recognized that human mobility affects and increasing number of families, their structure, life-style, well-being and cohesion. A proper assessment of multifaceted impacts and effects of migration on the family unit requires more studies and research, as well as a better understanding of the vital link between migration and families.
- Participants pointed out that migrants and their families contribute greatly to the development of destination and origin countries through their human, cultural and economic potential. Despite this evidence, research and policy debates tend to either focus on individual migrants rather than on the family as a unit, or approach family purely from an economic perspective. There was a call for increased attention and cooperation on family migration at the local, national and international level.
- Many participants agreed that given the considerable impact migration has on the families, it is clear that migration has to be a family decision.

**2. Specific data on the migration of families and its impact on family members, their communities, and society overall is very limited.**

- Incidence of migration on people varies from impacts on the life of migrants themselves, non-migrant members of their families and people from their communities, and societies at large. An assessment of the wide range of effects and impacts of migration on families is jeopardized by limited data.
- Participants shed light on the multidimensionality and complexity of family migration and reiterated that there is a lack of statistics concerning family migration, in particular concerning those most vulnerable, such as women, unaccompanied children and the elderly left behind.
- On the larger scale, a comprehensive assessment of the impacts of family migration should go beyond focusing solely on the migrant or the person who moves to include others affected directly or indirectly by this mobility -- particularly the children and women who remain behind.
- It was pointed out that available data on the impact of migration on family members tends to focus on the positive aspects and thus overshadows the many adverse and negative emotional, psychological and social impacts. An objective assessment of the situation requires a balanced approach that avoids prioritizing.

**3. There are still many gaps and challenges in protecting migrants and their families.**

- While migration can have a positive impact on families, it may also put them in more vulnerable situations with risks of abuse, abandonment, and exposure to exploitation. Access to basic services including education and health care remains a challenge for migrant families and unaccompanied children, especially those with irregular status and cut off from support and protection services.

- The complex nature of family migration exacerbates the challenges of protecting these already vulnerability-prone groups. Providing a clear and holistic interpretation of the family migration phenomenon and a comprehensive data base is necessary to better address these protection challenges. Participants called for the implementation of appropriate strategies and programmes tailored to family migration's specific needs and circumstances.
- Information available indicates that unaccompanied or separated children are particularly at risk in places of immigration detention, and often unable to claim their fundamental human rights. Speakers underlined that detention has long-term mental and physical health implications for children and thus all possible efforts should be undertaken to end child immigration detention.
- Challenges linked to the protection of migrant families require particular attention and a better coordinated response from governments, international organizations and civil society. Appropriate policy responses need to take into account the multiple challenges of family migration and include the gender perspective as an essential component, since women and girls are most vulnerable and most likely to face all kinds of exploitation.

**4. Family reunification policies, when well managed and coordinated, contribute to strengthening orderly and regular migration and help to facilitate the integration of migrants into the societies where they are living while maximizing the positive impact of migration on these families and societies.**

- Family unity and the child's right to reunification with parents, non-discrimination, equality of treatment, and non-refoulement are essential human rights that ought to be respected during the implementation of migration policies. More research on family migration is needed to analyze the impact of migration and the implications for the family unit. This will provide evidence for the development of migration laws and rights-based policies that address protection concerns of families and children.
- The workshop also provided the opportunity to take stock of the current legal frameworks concerning family reunification and migrants' rights. Participants emphasized that fulfilling migrants and their families' rights could be a complementary driver of development and, consequently, government policies should be guided by a rights-based and migrant-centred approach.

**5. Youth account for a large share of today's world population and international migration flows and hold great potential towards positive development. In the absence of appropriate policy responses, migration risks can reduce the potential of these youth and expose them to significant human rights violations.**

- The debate revolved around the fact that migration represents an important step towards achieving a sustainable life for youth and their families, providing young people with opportunities for human and economic development. However, the long term absence of parents, excessive burden of supporting their family, lack of schooling, unemployment, discrimination, marginalization, and risk of abuse and psychosocial problems risk outweighing the opportunities migration provides.

- Protection needs and vulnerabilities of youth are not dissimilar to those of children, yet youth more than 18 years old do not fall within the purview of some international treaties and are consequently exposed to a number of human rights violations. Legislation and policies addressing the rights, protection, support, and awareness of youth impacted by migration could benefit youth well-being and support them towards becoming key actors in their communities and societies.
- Several participants showed that where youth are mainstreamed into national and development strategies, they integrate more easily into society and are more likely to contribute positively to their own human development and the economic development of their society.

**6. Adapted responses founded on concerted efforts between relevant States and non-State actors, based on better and more direct communication with affected families, are required to address the negative impact migration has on those family members remaining behind.**

- Public health experts confirmed that long term separation caused by the departure of family members can have negative developmental, emotional and health effects on family members who remain behind. A grass-root community approach is necessary to respond appropriately to the psychosocial needs of these family members.
- The increasing number of female migrants demands a new policy approach and greater consideration for the social and economic impact of this trend on female migrants and their families. In the case of female migration, the absence of the mother or wife can significantly alter men's traditional role within the family unit and society at large, with repercussions on the health and well-being of families and particularly on children who may feel abandoned.
- Participants stressed that while the role of the elderly in migration of families is increasing, very little is known about the real impact of migration on this group. A correct assessment of the needs of these family members who remain behind, often acting as the only means of support for young family members separated from their migrant parents, could promote effective policies and tools to respond to the many associated risks. The well-being of the family members who are left behind is ultimately dependent on the health and well-being of the elderly.
- Many participants pointed out the absence of an adequate collaboration mechanism between countries - transnational cooperation between State and non-State actors is crucial in order to minimize the social costs and maximize the gains of family migration. There was a call for an advanced dialogue and cooperation on family migration issues at the local, national and international levels in order to promote coherent programmes and policies targeting families affected by migration.

Based on the deliberations summarized above, it was concluded that family migration, the severe challenges surrounding family migration, and development implications have been, on the whole, neglected for too long and thus deserve further attention and discussion.

While there are no "one-size-fits-all" responses to challenges related to migration of families, neglecting the high cost of migration for migrants and their families could offset the positive impact of migration. Understanding the realities of migration for families ultimately contributes to enhancing and improving

the well-being of migrants and members of their families. This is an IOM objective, as illustrated by its latest flagship publication issue dedicated to the well-being of migrants and its information campaign aimed at improving the public perception of migrants.

IOM will continue to work with its partners, addressing this increasing and important trend of family migration and raise awareness of the significant implications of this trend for local, national and international development, especially within the context of the post-2015 development agenda discussions and including at the upcoming High-Level Conference on Migrants and Cities.

Geneva, 8 October 2014