

Editorial

Looking at the Bigger Picture in Migration

By Brunson McKinley, IOM Director General

This year more than others, the issue of irregular migration has dominated the headlines and political agendas across the world. The constant media coverage in particular of African migrants arriving on the Canary Islands has overshadowed the bigger migration picture on this side of the Atlantic. But what is the bigger picture?

Migration is a catalyst for change and development, and in a world that is changing at a lightning pace, not harnessing the power of migration is shortsighted.

When IOM was established in 1951, its constitution underlined then that migration and economic development went hand-in-hand. Many countries, such as the United States, have been built on immigration while traditional emigration countries, such as Ireland and Italy, are witnessing boom economies thanks largely to migrant labour.

Nevertheless, the arrival of more migrants in search of work in the developed world, particularly those without work permits, continues to cut deep social and political schisms – even in countries with a long history of immigration.

Irregular migration is a symptom of the failure to adequately address migration in the globalization equation. The freedom of movement for capital and goods does not apply to the global labour market except for those with skills and professions.

We know that people today are prepared to travel much larger distances using more complicated and convoluted means and routes in search of a better life. We also know that a lack of legal migration options has driven many to use an ever-increasing number of smuggling networks to realize their dreams – even if they lose their life in the process.

Irregular migration also means social problems in host countries where low-skilled migrants compete with native counterparts for jobs, while their irregular status leaves them open to exploitation and forced to exist on the margins of society. It is a situation that does little to enhance social cohesion at a time when security is of major concern to all.

For IOM, however, a key issue is labour migration. The challenge is the creation of a more open global labour market where it will be possible to effectively match the supply and demand of labour globally using a medley of policies and approaches. This includes the use of temporary migration schemes and the encouragement of circulatory migration which would see the return of skills and human resources home to promote greater development in a migrant's country of origin. To do this, issues of demography, market dynamics, social integration and cultural identity have to be tackled.

There is no disputing that the developed world has already entered an era of labour shortage. In Europe alone, the workforce is expected to decline by another 20 million by 2030. Similar forecasts for other developed regions including countries like Japan, South Korea and the Russian Federation, contrast sharply with projections of growing populations in much of the developing world. The global work force of the future, if not already the present, will largely be drawn from the second and third world countries and is a fact of life that developed countries have to take on board in their economic and social planning.

Some already have. The battle among developed countries for an insufficient pool of skilled migrants, such as in the health and IT sectors, has been raging for many years. However, there is also a mismatch in the supply and demand of low-skilled workers – a group essential to any economy but less readily acceptable to host societies.

IOM has already been looking at how best to address this issue of matching supply and demand. Together with various governments, we have carried out several programmes doing exactly this in specific sectors in various countries such as Italy, Canada and Spain.

The success of these and the clear need for something on a larger scale has led IOM to take the bull by the horns and develop an ambitious initiative which it presented with the support of the World Bank at the UN's High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development in New York this September. The International Migration and Development Initiative (IMDI) aims to get to the very heart of labour migration by starting to tackle the "unfinished business" of globalization.

At its core would be a mechanism that would facilitate the matching of labour demand and supply by enhancing global knowledge of labour market trends, labour force profiles and labour migration trends through research and the creation of databases. It would also create a centralized and transparent information source on regional and national migration laws and regulations for individuals, businesses and countries to use to help them in their migration and recruitment processes. Being able to compare different legislations could also be a decisive factor in a migrant's choice of where to go and work.

Governments could also be helped to formulate national employment policies responding to the needs of a domestic labour market factoring in immigration as well as the emigration of workers. Such policies would also incorporate the development of human resources within a country to better address both the internal and external demand for labour in the present and the future. All of this is critical to tackling the challenges and benefiting from the opportunities presented by the global labour market.

Crucial also to the success of such an enterprise is the committed involvement of all key players, including the private sector, whose knowledge and expertise has all too frequently been neglected in the migration debate until recently. The private sector is instrumental in helping to identify the global labour market of the future.

By involving business, greater strides can also be made in promoting ethical recruitment

standards which would limit the brain drain factor in developing countries. It would also help ensure that migrants in host countries are treated fairly and humanely.

Cracking the labour migration nut would have a domino effect too appealing for many to ignore. Irregular migration would be curtailed and the need for smuggling networks currently doubling up as de facto recruitment agencies would decline.

With so many potential benefits to solving the labour migration question, the world can ill-afford to continue with a fragmented, uncoordinated and ad hoc approach. A creative and fresh look is what is needed. At IOM, it is a challenge we have taken up as the Organization looks to the future.