

Presentation by Mamphela Ramphele

International Dialogue on Migration

Geneva, 30 November 2004

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to begin by thanking Ambassador de Alba, Chairman of the IOM Council, and Director-General McKinley for the kind invitation given to the Global Commission on International Migration to participate in this important dialogue.

We are, of course, very pleased that you have chosen to open the International Dialogue with a special panel, dedicated to the current work of the Global Commission.

My co-chair, Mr Jan Karlsson, sends his regrets that he is unable to be here today. I am, however, very pleased that Commission members Sergio Marchi and N.K. Singh, as well as the Executive Director of the Global Commission, Rolf Jenny, are on the podium with me this morning. We look forward to hearing from them a little later.

To conclude my introductory remarks, I would like to commend the organizers of this meeting for their decision to focus this two-day dialogue on the theme of 'The costs, benefits, opportunities and challenges of migration'.

As you may know, the primary task that has been given to the Global Commission is to make recommendations to the UN Secretary-General, governments and other stakeholders, aimed at providing the framework for the formulation of a coherent, comprehensive and global response to migration issues.

There is consequently a very direct relationship between the theme of this meeting and the work of the Global Commission.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

We have a very wide-ranging agenda before us this morning, and I have only a limited amount of time at my disposal.

I would therefore like to focus the rest of my presentation on one particular dimension of international migration, namely the linkage between migration, poverty and development in the less prosperous regions of the world.

Needless to say, as a South African citizen who has worked for some time with the World Bank, these issues are particularly close to my heart.

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International migration has become an increasingly large and widespread phenomenon.

In recent years, we have witnessed a substantial increase in the total number of international migrants throughout the world. Countries that were previously unaffected or only marginally affected by

international migration are now experiencing significant movements of people out of, into and across their territory.

Migratory movements have also become increasingly complex: complex in terms of the routes that migrants take and the way in which their travel is organized; complex in terms of the legal status pertaining to migrants at different stages of their journey; and complex in the sense that the traditional distinction between countries of origin, transit and destination can no longer be rigidly sustained.

I would also like to suggest that the motivations for migration have become more difficult to identify and to categorize.

As signified by the well-known notion of the 'migration-asylum nexus', a single person or household may decide to leave their own country and to seek residence in another state for a complex mixture of economic, social, political and personal reasons which can be extremely difficult to disentangle.

But we should not get carried away with the notion of complexity.

For one rather simple conclusion can be drawn from all of the evidence available to us. And that is that the vast majority of international migrants, whether they move on a temporary or permanent basis, whether their status is legal or irregular, whether they remain in their own region or move from one continent to another, move from poorer to more prosperous states.

Poverty and inequality, in other words, are central to the dynamics of international migration. *[repeat]* Poverty and inequality are central to the dynamics of international migration.

Let me quickly qualify and expand on that statement.

For I am not referring to absolute or abject poverty. We know from long experience that the most destitute members of society often lack the resources, information and connections needed to move from one country or continent to another.

In fact, the poorest of the poor are most likely to migrate from a rural to an urban area of their own country, or to resort to alternative coping mechanisms and survival strategies.

Rather, it is the issue of *relative poverty* and *socio-economic disparity* that plays such an important role in prompting people to migrate from one country to another.

Let us explore this relationship a little further.

I would like to suggest that the linkage between relative poverty and international migration is in two respects a manifestation of the globalization process.

First, there is now a good deal of evidence to suggest that while the globalization process has had many beneficial consequences, it has also led to the growth of socio-economic disparities: disparities, within societies, disparities amongst states, and disparities between different regions of the world.

Such disparities, I would like to suggest, provide those people who have lost out in the process of globalization with a very powerful incentive to leave their own country and to move to other countries: countries that offer them new chances in life, that provide them with a higher standard of living, and which give them the opportunity to send remittances home, thereby alleviating the poverty of those family members that the migrant has left behind.

Second, as well as providing relatively poor people with a powerful incentive to migrate, the process of globalization has provided those same people with the means which they need to move from one country and continent to another.

In fact, the very success of globalization in establishing cheap and accessible communications, information and transportation networks has not only made millions of people acutely aware of the relative poverty in which they live.

It has also provided them with the infrastructure and the resources which they need to move, even if their presence is officially unwanted by the states to which and through which they move.

We see this taking place in the movement of people from the Sahel states and North Africa to the European Union. We see it happening in the migration of people from many parts of sub-Saharan Africa to my own country of South Africa. And we see the same pattern of events in the movement of people from the relatively poor countries of South Asia to the more prosperous states of South-East Asia and the Pacific.

On the basis of this evidence, we might conclude that international migration, and more specifically *irregular* international migration, is an integral part of the globalization process. Indeed, there now seems to be a strong demand for cheap and flexible migrant labour in the world's more prosperous countries. And in practice, states often seem prepared to tolerate the presence of informal labour markets which employ significant numbers of irregular migrants.

At the same time, we must recognize that the world's poorer countries – those countries from which most migrants originate – have little real incentive to obstruct the departure of their citizens, even if they are leaving in an illegal or irregular manner.

From the perspective of such states, migration reduces the need to create jobs for large numbers of unemployed and underemployed people, especially those younger people who are entering the labour market for the first time.

For the world's poorer states, international migration also brings with it the promise of remittance transfers, diaspora investment and new trading opportunities.

And these resources are of evident value for governments that are struggling to maintain their balance of payments, to enhance their economic competitiveness and to prevent the issues of poverty and economic disparity from becoming a threat to social and political stability.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to draw three conclusions from the preceding analysis – conclusions which I hope may help to frame the debate this morning and in the rest of this International Dialogue.

First, if I can introduce a somewhat controversial phrase to our discussion, there would appear to be a degree of 'common hypocrisy' in the current discourse on migration, particularly irregular migration.

As I have tried to suggest, the world's more prosperous states bear a significant degree of responsibility for the forces which have prompted and sustained the movement of irregular migrants from one country and continent to another.

And yet it is equally clear that the world's poorer countries have their own interest in sustaining such movements - as do migrants themselves.

For while they may be prompted to move by relative poverty and economic disparity, migrants are usually purposeful actors, people with an entrepreneurial spirit and a determination to make life better for themselves and their families.

Second, there is also a darker side to the role that international and irregular migration currently play in the global economy.

Despite the fact that they are purposeful actors, many migrants, both regular and irregular, have limited access to their human rights. They do not enjoy what the ILO refers to as 'decent work', and they are often marginalized in society.

This situation has some important consequences for the world's more prosperous countries. There are certainly many examples of good practice in relation to the recruitment, employment and integration of migrants. We must identify, learn from and replicate such practices.

But must also acknowledge that in many parts of the industrialized and industrializing world, international migration has become associated with a variety of negative phenomena: xenophobia and racism; migrant alienation; social disharmony; and the growth of an unregulated informal sector which threatens the ability of both migrants and nationals to enjoy decent work.

Finally, while considerable emphasis has recently been placed on the developmental potential and impact of migration on countries of origin, I feel obliged to sound a note of caution with respect to this issue.

Migration, I would like to suggest, can never be a substitute for an effective macro-economic development strategy or population policy.

Remittances may bring many immediate benefits to countries of origin, but their developmental (as opposed to poverty-reduction) impact would appear to be limited. They may also exacerbate the socio-economic disparity that exists between different households, communities and regions.

As we are seeing so clearly in my own country, migration can lead to the long-term or permanent departure of a society's brightest and best-educated young people.

And when calculating the economic benefits of migration, we must not forget to factor in the high social costs that are incurred when migrants - husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters - decide to leave their own household and community in order to work in another country.

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Ladies and gentlemen, please allow me to conclude.

International migration is an inherent and integral part of the globalization process, and is a phenomenon which seems far more likely to expand than to contract in the years to come.

We urgently need a more open and honest dialogue on this issue, and it is my hope that this meeting, and the work of the Global Commission on International Migration, will contribute to the attainment of that objective.

We can no longer afford to pretend that international migration is unnecessary and unwanted, and that it can be obstructed by the erection of increasingly restrictive barriers.

But we should be equally wary of pretending that international migration represents any kind of long-term or comprehensive solution to the challenges currently confronting the world's less prosperous states.

I believe that our vision should be one of a world in which people migrate out of choice rather than necessity, in a safe and legal manner, and in a way that contributes to - rather than detracts from - the sustainable economic and social development of their country of origin.

If this objective is to be achieved, the world's more prosperous states will have to introduce more coherent policies towards the developing world, taking full account of the close linkages that exist between the issues of trade, aid, debt relief and international migration.

At the same time, the world's poorer states have an equal responsibility to create the conditions which are required for entrepreneurship to flourish, for economic growth to take place, for poverty to be alleviated and for socio-economic disparities to be reduced. In the absence of such conditions, we know that many people will feel that they have no other choice but to leave their own country and community and to migrate elsewhere.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This International Dialogue on Migration provides us with an excellent opportunity to consider these issues in more detail, and I look forward to hearing your views.

Thank you very much.