



Restoring Dignity, Inspiring Change.

ICMC Secretariat
1, rue de Varembe
P.O. Box 96
CH-1211 Geneva 20
Switzerland

Tel: +41 22 919 10 20
Fax: +41 22 919 10 48
Email: info@icmc.net
www.icmc.net

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IOM Workshop on Migration and Families

Understanding the reality of the migration of families in an era of the greatest human mobility

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Introduction to the debate by Johan Ketelers

Secretary General

All debates impose their time lines, their logics and priorities. This is also true for the migration debate which appears to have paid more attention to remittances and national security than on the 'social costs of the phenomenon'. I therefore want to thank the IOM for the initiative and the Director General for this opportunity to share some of the ICMC members' findings and thinking.

While remittances seem to indicate that families are getting better off, our experience on the ground, some research and the longer term picture may well prove to indicate the opposite: migration and the conditions of migration lead to fragilisation of families. This fragilisation is amongst the highest social costs and possibly constitutes even a societal risk through the along going and rapidly changing structures and mentalities.

Social cohesion has been a fertile soil for all nations interactively fuelling a.o. the cultural identity and national pride. Yet social cohesion is today losing its bench marks and reference points: traditional cultures are rapidly eroding, raising important questions on the sense of national unity and affecting societal and political relations. The 'global village' our world is often compared to is not a village but an ever-extending reality; one that moves beyond existing borders of both geographical, social and moral boundaries and which has nothing to do with the traditional "village" or its community reference points and ties. It is about a world building on new and entirely different bench marks and reference points which prove to be much more anchored in short-term functional and temporary relations, rather than in longer term community values.

Families are the starting part and at the centre of this picture: they are a social nucleus and reference point of a community; the transmitters over generations of various community values and quality relations, a safe haven to return to or to be reproduced and multiplied; raising the young to develop solidary feelings and accept to live with differences and in diversity; the reference point in

terms of hardship contributing to resilience. They are, as expressed by Pope Francis, “an indispensable contribution to a just and united society”.

Present conditions in migration are contributing to a profound change: the family nucleus is diluted and losing the strength of its unity; the most important educational trans-generational role has in some cases been left to neighbours or grandparents, the quality relationships are built in contexts of a quest for material well-being and it is the isolated migrant family member who has become the reference point for the families and their survival instead of the other way round.

While migration will continue to become more omnipresent in its effects -it is unlikely to turn this tide- it seems of the highest importance to invest more in the safeguarding of family unity to continue its role as an important community building agent! Take the family away or cripple the family in its dynamics and it will clearly and deeply affect social cohesion, future solidarity mechanisms, cultural and therefore even national identity. I would therefore want to express the sincere hope that this workshop can prove to become another strong reminder to give the highest importance to protect and strengthen family unity.

1. The migrant family is today undergoing constant pressures.

A growing number and perhaps already the majority of today's families no longer build along traditional patterns and rules; rather, they compose; they decompose and they recompose marked by shorter term relations; they are multi-divided and exist in dispersed and widely scattered modes offering only temporary unity and it may be said that they are often built on much more material and functional values than has ever been the case. This is even more recognizable in migration; a worrying reality which may be explained because migration results not only from a clear choice but also and very often from dire necessity.

Families are incentivized to consider the opportunity of migration by at least two factors: the first is their own understanding of an escape out of poverty and into a more promising future, the second stems from the national policies encouraging migration within a “labour export” logic. Migration for economic reasons is therefore most often a family decision yet also driven by economic logics and broader interests.

Results are there: policies focusing on the commodity value of the migrant labour force keep families separated; distances then become barriers and isolators. Migrant families have become smaller and have significantly reduced and qualitatively weakened the ties with their relatives (- a paradox of reducing family ties while social mobility has overall increased and which raises the question if this greater mobility actually also serves the family). The family effort to raise its income through migration in order to pay for the upbringing of children has increased the parental ambition for their children. This generates pressure on the educational pattern and contributes to a growing gap between the results of the education (the qualifications obtained) and the social attitudes of the same youngsters. Status symbols have gained greater significance and traditional cultural benchmarks are further fading. All this is measurable within the migrant families which growingly face social problems such as increasing drug addiction, suicide, alcoholism, child labour and many other forms of abuse.

International Catholic Migration Commission members worldwide have repeatedly raised and discussed these concerns. I have just returned from last week's ICMC Congress in Taiwan further discussing the impacts of migration on family in Asia and on the need to counter some of this family decomposition including growing solitude and isolation. Migration cannot be looked upon as a sole cause of these changes but migrant families clearly show an acceleration of the process. While migration is said to improve the material situation and even the education of children, the separation and the forced absence are tragically showing the opposite results: estrangements, divorce, children brought up by grand-parents or neighbors, children migrating to carry the incredible burden of being the main -or even the sole - support for the survival of their family back home. Let me emphasize that the issue about children left behind is not only about material poverty but that it is also about moral impoverishment. We may truly question if present policies and focal points are not at risk of wasting a migrant generation or at least of contributing to the further loss of emotional, family and cultural identity.

Allow me to raise 5 major gaps that our members emphasize for deeper study and strengthened policy making:

- A gap in respect for the family unit as a first value in all societies
- A gap in support for families and family reunification processes that fully respect a universal right to family life
- A gap in recognizing family as an essential actor in the longer term community and nation building.
- A gap in the research on trends, effects and alternatives regarding the de-uniting of families
- A gap in the debate: the fragilisation of migrant families remains too much ignored in the international debates and decision making processes.

2. *The wrong emphasis*

The focal points in migration are today too much on the self-defensive attitude, the national security and the financial picture. Host countries focus mainly on the worker and on his / her labour qualities adding to development, countries of departure look at the gold mine of remittances. Both highlight the development value of this migration and in doing so insufficiently address the often dramatic situations of exploitation, the growing dependency and eroding family perspectives. While migrant labour clearly serves both the host country and the country of departure in their respective development, too many of today's policies continue to focus on short-term results, ignoring the longer-term risks in the decomposing or de-uniting of families as an alarming step in the process of losing social cohesion.

There are plenty of signals indicating how much we miss the longer-term point: in policies such as the Contract Worker System which regulates most of the labour migration in Southeast and East Asia and which constitutes a clear threat to family unity; in the migration of mothers (and increasingly both parents) which raises questions on the upbringing of children and on changing parental roles; in emergence of what can be called a 'migration mentality' that accepts migration and separation as a necessity, that children can be raised by neighbors or grandparents distant from the immediate care

and the love of their parents. (*the child's dream to become a migrant*). All of these signals need to be given the highest attention as together they contribute to a sea change in human relations, how we build our societies and intend to secure future community values.

On the ground we see those family money-makers working in unacceptable conditions but doing it for family reasons (and not for national economic interests!). When asked if they would accept these conditions if it were for themselves, they decline; when asked how they see the start of their own family, they refer to their 'duty' to those left home; when asked for their vision on their own future they shrug the shoulders. How close is this to human bondage and how long do we expect this to last? What does the burden of being held responsible for their families back home do to the mental health of this younger generation and how deeply does it affect their own integral human development; what does it do to their concept of family and human relations? How long will these appointed 'slaves' or 'heroes' of the family continue to be of support accepting up to a triple bondage: to their brokers, to their employers and to their families; the first two willingly accepted on the grounds of the third.

As time flows, we see the 'heroes of migration' turn into the builders of their own individual lives and search ways to start their own families and invest their gains in their own future. They are then no longer the fund raiser for the income home, but to become at best the occasional supporter of some specific needs the family home may have. This clashes with dependency levels that have built up over the first years making the old questions of livelihood for those still home even more urgent. The risk of generating further division is then obvious.

There is therefore a need for the nations to make the best use of this period of remittance income and to invest in new forms of economy and job opportunities at home. Offering a job at home is a first preamble condition in the protection of families. The way forward is in the investment in local economies and local livelihood systems: not in the promotion of more migrant workers but in the genuine search for maintaining unity at all social and community levels and these include the family.

If governments are serious about migration and about protecting migrants and their families they should not in first instance be controlling the borders of arrival but be at the departure lines, investing in local job opportunities and in family migrant protective policies.

3. Longer- term social risks versus short- term economic interest: a question on development value

National policies that incentivise labour export are today fuelled by high expectations to accelerate economic development. These nations are in fact building on the family need to survive. Ironically, the aim to strengthen the national economic process, invites nationals to do abroad what in some cases could really be done at home.

Separation and distance cannot be bridged by improved material well-being only and the social differences that remittance income creates lead to new gaps in society, which in turn contribute to the loss of cultural and national identity. Community cohesion is weakening, solidarity is reducing, and conflicts are growing which already drives the next migrant generation. The gap between those families who have - because of remittances and those who do not is dangerously growing. We hear

in local communities that the one who has an income from remittances tends to hide in the community not to feel guilty or obliged to the others; an important form of isolation and division in the community. Moreover, even if it cannot be denied that remittances offer a development perspective in the short-term economic results, they are also conditioned by separation, the break-up of families and they are a key driver to materialism.

There is a political responsibility in the export of labour and we all need to look much more at the longer term effects actually mortgaging the cultural identity, the moral values and even the economic gains. It may in this sense also be interesting to study how much the loss of social cohesion is becoming part of the causes for migration and therefore how much migration itself is a driver to increase migration.

While the short-term approach identifies the immediate income for the Gross National Product and confirms a development perspective, the longer-term effects include profound changes in the social layers of the countries, populations and communities, resulting in a further growing weakness of the community structures and the social cohesion and therefore opposite to development. The family is on the frontier of these two logics: responding to their own need, but paying the price in losing family unity, which was in fact the very first and core driver in their fight against poverty.

It is therefore urgent to develop the social and economic structures to better accompany labour mobility, to incentivise the return and the family unity; to protect the migrant workers and their families. And may I here again plead in favour of the ratification and better implementation of the core international human rights and labour standards that apply to all migrants, including the Convention on the Protection of Migrant Workers and their Families and the ILO Domestic Workers Convention.

To conclude:

Migration is first of all a family decision to rescue them out of poverty, offer better chances to their children and better perspectives for the well-being of the family. Conditions in which migration takes place dramatically also de-unite families; erode traditional ties and values; generate inverse effects on community building and raise fundamental questions on the longer term effects. Migration is an engine to development, yet its development effects are limited in time.

The true capital of every nation is in its people, its families and its social cohesion. Without social cohesion nations turn easily to situations of internal conflict. Family is a corner-stone in the building and the preservation of this unity. All of us need to further study this reality; to network with civil society fully involved in the grass root realities and to develop protective policies that keep families together and organize the care for families left behind; not only in response to the growing number of families in need but with the well understood vital need to safeguard this unity for community and national sake.