In a world defined by profound disparities, migration is a fact of life and governments face the challenge of integrating the health needs of migrants into national plans, policies and strategies, taking into account the human rights of these individuals, including their right to health.¹

Migration and health risks

There are an estimated 1 billion migrants in the world today of whom 214 million international migrants and 740 million internal migrants (UNDP Human Development Report 2009).² The health implications of this sizeable population are considerable. Migration flows comprise a heterogeneous group of individuals, each with potentially different health determinants, needs, and levels of vulnerabilities.

Global processes such as economics, trade, civil security, as well as climate change and environmental degradation are some of the factors that will continue to trigger migration. Migration is essential for some societies to compensate for demographic trends and skill shortages and to assist home communities with remittances.

Most migrants are healthy, young people. However millions of migrants face multiple health risks, including poor access to health care, poverty and exploitation. This is particularly true for migrants in an irregular situation and migrants who need to flee disasters and human rights violations. Other risk factors include stigma, discrimination, social exclusion, language and cultural differences, separation from family and socio-cultural norms, administrative hurdles and legal status – the latter often the determining factor for access to health and social services. Lack of social security and protection can lead to excessive costs for migrants who may pay out of pocket for health services and to the exacerbation of health conditions which could have been prevented if services had been available.

Paradigm shift

Policies and strategies to manage the health consequences of migration have not kept pace with growing challenges related to the volume, speed, and diversity of modern migration, and they do not sufficiently address the existing health inequities, and determining factors of migrant health, including barriers to access health services. Traditional approaches are often based on the principle of exclusion of migrants with certain health conditions, using security and disease control as the primary rationales. Governments increasingly recognize the need to move to an inclusive approach that focuses on reduction of inequalities and social protection in health based on multi-country and multi-sectoral collaborations.

Addressing the health needs of migrants improves migrant health, avoids stigma and long term health and social costs, protects global public health, facilitates integration, and contributes to social and economic development.
Public health strategy

Basic principles for a public health approach to address the health of migrants and host communities are:

• avoid disparities in health status and access to health services between migrants and the host population;
• ensure migrants’ health rights. This entails limiting discrimination or stigmatization, and removing impediments to migrants’ access to available preventive and curative interventions;
• put in place lifesaving interventions to reduce excess mortality and morbidity among migrant populations. This is of particular relevance in situations of forced migration resulting from disasters or conflict;
• minimize the negative impact of the migration process on migrants’ health outcomes. Migrants can be exposed to hazards/stressors arising from displacement, insertion into new environments and return to home communities.

Resolution on the health of migrants

During the Sixty-first World Health Assembly (2008), WHO Member States endorsed a Resolution on the health of migrants, asking Member States and WHO to promote migrant sensitive health policies and practices, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders and to encourage multi-lateral cooperation and intersectoral action.

Accordingly, WHO, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Ministry of Health and Social Policy of Spain, organized a Global Consultation on Migrant Health in Madrid in March 2010. The consultation took stock of the actions taken by Member States and other stakeholders and reached consensus on priority areas and strategies to improve the health of migrants as reflected in the below operational framework.

Political commitment and the concerted involvement of all stakeholders will be essential to ensure improved monitoring of migrant health, policy reorientation, effective use of legal instruments and the development of health systems reflective of the diversity of today’s societies.

Operational framework, global consultation March 2010

Monitoring migrants’ health, priorities

• Ensure the standardization and comparability of data on migrant health.
• Increase the better understanding of trends and outcomes through the appropriate disaggregation and analysis of migrant health information in ways that account for the diversity of migrant populations.
• Improve the monitoring of migrants’ health-seeking behaviours, access to and utilization of health services, and increase the collection of data related to health status and outcomes for migrants.
• Identify and map: 1) good practices in monitoring migrant health; 2) policy models that facilitate equitable access to health for migrants; and 3) migrant-inclusive health systems models and practices.
• Develop useful data that can be linked to decision-making and the monitoring of the impact of policies and programmes.

Policies and legal frameworks affecting migrant health, priorities

• Adopt and implement relevant international standards on the protection of migrants and the right to health in national law and practice.
• Develop and implement national health policies that incorporate a public health approach to the health of migrants and promote equal access to health services for migrants, regardless of their status.
• Monitor the implementation of relevant national policies, regulations and legislation responding to the health needs of migrants.
• Promote coherence among policies of different sectors that may affect migrants’ ability to access health services.
• Extend social protection in health and improve social security for all migrants.

Migrant sensitive health systems, priorities

• Ensure that health services are delivered to migrants in a culturally and linguistically appropriate way, and enforce laws and regulations that prohibit discrimination.
• Adopt measures to improve the ability of health systems to deliver migrant inclusive services and programmes in a comprehensive, coordinated, and financially sustainable way.
• Enhance the continuity and quality of care received by migrants in all settings, including that received from NGO health services and alternative providers.
• Develop the capacity of the health and relevant non-health workforce to understand and address the health and social issues associated with migration.

Partnerships, networks & multi country frameworks, priorities

• Establish and support ongoing migration health dialogues and cooperation across sectors and among key cities, regions and countries of origin, transit and destination.
• Address migrant health matters in global and regional consultative migration, economic and development processes (e.g. Global Forum on Migration and Development, Global Migration Group, RCPs, United Nations High Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development).
• Harness the capacity of existing networks to promote the migrant health agenda.

1. Migration today involves migrants in regular and irregular situations, as well as asylum seekers, victims of trafficking, refugees, displaced persons, returnees, and internal migrants. For ease of reference only, they are all referred to as “migrants” in this document.