



IOM International Organization for Migration  
OIM Organisation Internationale pour les Migrations  
OIM Organización Internacional para las Migraciones

INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE ON MIGRATION  
INTERSESSIONAL WORKSHOP ON  
**SOCIETIES AND IDENTITIES:  
THE MULTIFACETED IMPACT OF MIGRATION<sup>1</sup>**

19-20 July 2010

**BACKGROUND PAPER**

**Introduction**

The basic premise for a discussion of this subject matter is that no society is inert. Societies continuously change, adapt and evolve, responding to internal social paradigm shifts as well as external influences. Migration is a significant driver of such change, but by no means the only one. It is therefore important to neither downplay nor overstate the impact of migration on societies.

Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that modern migration produces very different impacts compared to the one-time, uni-directional and permanent movements characteristic of the past. Increasingly complex mobility patterns encompass internal and international migration, temporary and permanent moves, and regular and irregular migration. There is mobility in the high- or low- skilled ends of the workforce and of families, students and business people, among others. Labour migration, for instance, gives rise to different social outcomes compared to family migration, although the two increasingly overlap.<sup>2</sup> Who moves and how, as well as the scale and duration of movement are determinative of the social changes that ensue in societies of origin and destination. For example, the effects on society will vary depending on whether migrants are predominantly male or female as well as on their average age. Conversely, the question of who does *not* move, of who stays behind, is just as important in understanding and responding to the changes brought about by migration.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Societies and Identities: The Multifaceted Impact of Migration* was selected by the membership as the second intersessional workshop of the IDM in 2010 under the overarching theme “**Migration and Social Change.**” The first intersessional workshop was held on 9-10 March 2010 on the topic of *Migration and Transnationalism: Opportunities and Challenges*. Please see [www.iom.int/idmtransnationalism](http://www.iom.int/idmtransnationalism) for details. Notwithstanding the importance of the economic dimension, social facets are the primary focus in this paper and the workshop in line with the overarching theme of the IDM 2010.

<sup>2</sup> For more on these and other trends, please refer to IOM 2008 *World Migration Report: Managing Labour Mobility in the Evolving Global Economy*.

## Social Impacts of Migration

With nearly all countries exposed to migration in some way, social impacts are becoming more and more inevitable. Societies are realizing that the choice they are facing is not whether to manage change, but how. Coming to terms with a changing social fabric can provoke fundamental questions about the nature of a society, but also very practical considerations regarding the design, organization and functioning of public institutions, policies and regulations in order to balance the social opportunities and costs arising from migration. As a basic goal, all societies strive to establish and maintain social cohesion. This refers to the smooth functioning of a society's formal and informal institutions and networks, while also comprising elements of solidarity and adherence to laws. Such a "social contract" between different elements of society, including migrants, entails rights and obligations on the part of all, but needs to be constructed on the basis of a favourable environment grounded in mutual adaptation, the principle of non-discrimination and respect for human rights.

In this context, the image of migrants in their home and host societies is of such fundamental importance to any discussion of the social impact of migration that it deserves dedicated attention.<sup>3</sup> How migrants are defined in public and political discourse – whether, for example, they are labelled "migrants", "expatriates", "temporary overseas / foreign workers" or "illegal / irregular" – is in itself decisive for the way in which the issue is approached. Discourse and public perception are of direct consequence for a country's policy direction on migration; therefore, managing migration requires managing how migrants are perceived in society. Unfortunately, however, the overall perception of migrants in many societies tends to be negative and the line between realistic and honest debate about challenges stemming from migration and politicised stereotyping and scapegoating is often thin. Economic difficulties tend to fuel hostile attitudes towards migrants. In countries of destination or transit migrants, especially low-skilled migrants from poor backgrounds, may be seen as intruders, accused of taking jobs or blamed as a burden to the social system, sometimes provoking racist and xenophobic reactions within the host population. By contrast, the significance of migrants for the functioning of economies around the world is rarely recognized explicitly. In origin countries, migrants have occasionally been accused of abandoning their homeland in times of need or have been suspected of having subversive agendas, whereas in other cases migrants have immense and often unrealistic hopes placed in them by their families and communities. Educating the public may thus emerge as the single most important policy tool in all societies grappling with migration. Governments may work in partnership with a range of actors involved in constructing the image of migrants in society, first and foremost among them the media, to ensure fair, accurate and balanced accounts of migrants and migration and to reduce unfounded fears or resentments.

While not claiming to represent an exhaustive enumeration of all the possible impacts of migration, the following list illustrates some of the principal ways by which migration can contribute to social change in home and host countries, ranging from more measurable to more intangible aspects:

---

<sup>3</sup> The image of migrants was the focus of the IOM Council Session in 2004. Please refer to <http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/policy-research/international-dialogue-migration/council-sessions/valuing-migration-2004> for the background paper and further information.

- *Changes in population distribution*: for example, countries of origin may witness a depopulation of certain, often rural, parts of the country. In areas of destination, by contrast, migrants have sometimes contributed to the revitalization of formerly marginal areas of a country. Large cities also tend to be magnets for migration, including internal migration, where migrant inflows can lead to the formation of ethnic enclaves and residential segregation or may require responses in terms of infrastructure development.
- *Changes in demographic structure*: depending on who migrates, at what age and for how long, total population, age structure and fertility rates of societies of origin and destination can be significantly altered.
- *Changes in family structure and relationships*: especially where migration implies the separation of families, social consequences can be considerable, resulting in a redefinition of the family unit, caregiving and gender roles and relationships. Broader repercussions can ensue if certain social functions are left unattended, including in the worst case neglect of children or a heavy burden on older generations. Changing attitudes to family life in some industrialized host societies also mean that migrant domestic and care workers (usually migrant women) take on tasks previously carried out by the family (again, usually by women) such as childcare or care of the elderly. Female migration is increasingly generating a “global care chain”, with households transferring caregiving tasks down a social hierarchy based on factors such as gender, ethnicity or social class.<sup>4</sup>
- *Changes in gender roles*: the migration of men or women has differential consequences for the societies they leave and enter. For instance, where out-migration is predominantly male, women may step in to assume new social and economic roles. In societies of destination, the employment of migrant domestic workers or caregivers in private homes has enabled a greater share of native women, who traditionally fulfilled these functions, to enter the labour market, thus contributing to changing gender dynamics in host societies. Furthermore, migrants may bring with them certain understandings of gender roles which may differ from predominant views in societies of destination, which can create tensions. Alternatively, they may be exposed to different gender norms during the course of their migration which they may try to replicate in their own lives or transmit to societies back home.
- *Changes in social structures*: whether migration results in upward or downward social mobility for migrants is determined by too many factors to allow for any unequivocal assessment – both scenarios are possible. It has emerged that social class is more determinative of social mobility than national origin, such that socio-economically marginalized migrants seem to have more in common with similarly disadvantaged native groups than with other sectors of the migrant population. The effect of migration on pre-existing social structures in home countries is equally difficult to establish. Migration can actually sometimes consolidate, rather than change, social stratification and patterns of inequality in origin countries because some sections of society prefer to go abroad than wait for changing social and economic opportunities at home.

---

<sup>4</sup> Amaia Pérez Orozco, *Global Care Chains*. UN-INSTRAW 2009, Gender, Migration and Development Series, Working Paper 2. Available from <http://www.un-instraw.org/images/documents/GCC/WORKING%20PAPER%202%20-%20INGLES.pdf>

- *Changes in levels of diversity*: societies of destination in particular are seeing greater levels of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity as a result of migration. Many societies are hotly debating the value of diversity, which can represent gains and enrichment, but is regarded by some as negative when it spells the loss of perceived social homogeneity. Depending on the scale of migration, a society's cultural, ethnic and religious composition may change considerably.
- *Changes of identity*: migration challenges both home and host countries to re-evaluate the criteria of belonging to a certain society. While societies have historically defined themselves through territory and ancestry, a more mobile world by its nature occasions further reflection. Through "social remittances" (explained further below) by nationals abroad, for example, societies of origin may see subtle changes in behaviours, ideas and norms. In some cases, migration itself can become a kind of identity or culture, when the experience of or aspiration to being a migrant becomes a defining characteristic for entire communities.

The following sections highlight but a few key areas of deliberation, from the perspective of home and host countries. To the extent that a majority of countries today are simultaneously places of origin, transit and destination for migration, policymakers will find both sections relevant for their particular national situation.

### **Policy Considerations: Societies of Origin**

Often considered the basic unit of society, the impact of migration on families is particularly significant for wider society. Policymakers may need to distinguish between different scenarios, such as family separation through migration, migration by the family unit as a whole, migration for family reunification, or migration for marriage / family formation, each with its own specific implications. For societies of origin, the situation in which families are separated as a result of migration is arguably the most pressing one. This is the case especially in societies with limited social security systems in which the family is traditionally relied upon to fulfil certain social welfare functions. The migration of women in particular has been associated with a "care drain" due to women's traditional roles in many societies in raising children and looking after the elderly. To offset negative psychosocial effects, governments may consider strengthening certain institutions and services to better support family members who remain behind. Schools, for instance, are likely to be the first institution to notice the effects of parental migration on children and, with the necessary policy guidance, can devise appropriate, mitigating responses.

The impact of migration on societies of origin may also be analysed in terms of "social remittances", defined as the transfer of ideas, behaviours, identities and social capital. Such transfers occur when migrants return to live or visit, when non-migrants visit their relatives abroad, or through modern communication technologies. As a subcategory of social remittances, human capital remittances refer to improvements in the education of the children of migrants, enhancement of migrants' own skills, and transfer of skills and knowledge acquired abroad. The impact of social remittances can be ambiguous. Migrants may feed back their skills and know-how to countries of origin, or engage in politics or entrepreneurial and philanthropic activities. More subtly, through their experiences abroad migrants can influence mindsets and behaviours (regarding, for instance, established gender norms) or ideas concerning political processes. Migrants'

influences can also be deemed detrimental to the social cohesion of home societies, for instance when they spread pessimistic views about the country of origin, inducing others to see leaving the country as their only option.

Such transfers and influences are admittedly much more difficult to measure than financial remittances, but just as governments try to create an enabling environment for the receipt of monetary transfers, they may do the same for social remittances. Above all, the creation of communication channels between nationals abroad and home societies can serve to keep both “sides” informed and aware of their realities, needs and expectations. Mechanisms such as fora for the diaspora to allow migrants to engage with the political process in their home countries are another way to enhance their stake in the country of origin and reap the useful inputs and resources which migrants may wish to offer.

### **Policy Considerations: Societies of Transit and Destination**

Countries of transit experience many of the same changes as countries of destination, but in a temporary fashion, and the fluctuating nature of the migrant population makes it considerably more challenging to devise policy responses and allocate resources. Effective strategies to tackle mixed and irregular flows are particularly relevant for transit countries as these require immediate humanitarian action as well as longer-term responses.<sup>5</sup> Irregular and mixed flows are often highly visible in the media and can stir public concern, occasioning the need to sensitize host societies to prevent hostile reactions. Considerations include effective human rights protection and a level of access to basic services for migrants, in particular for migrant children. Governments may also focus on the prevention of criminal activity related, for instance, to human trafficking and smuggling. Transit countries particularly need to seek cooperation with other countries along the migration route, mainly of course origin and destinations countries. Importantly, countries should also be aware that it can be difficult to distinguish between “transit” and “destination” and initially temporary migrant populations quickly turn into permanent ones.

In countries of destination, the management of relationships between migrants and host societies is usually subsumed under the heading of “integration”.<sup>6</sup> Integration, however, can take multiple forms and even established “countries of immigration” are revisiting their understanding of integration in light of changing migration realities, including more and more temporary migration. What it means to be “fully integrated” and what kind of “integration” is required to achieve a cohesive social climate may vary significantly depending on the type of migration at hand or the way a society defines migration. Related to this are questions of conditions for granting nationality or possessing multiple nationalities.

Societies of destination often require some time to fully accept perceived “newcomers” in their midst and this process is psychological as much as it is practical. It is the role of

---

<sup>5</sup> Mixed migration flows were discussed at the IOM Council Sessions in 2008 and 2009. The background papers can be obtained from <http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/policy-research/pid/410>.

<sup>6</sup> This was the subject of discussion at the 2006 IDM Workshop *Migration and the Host Society: Partnerships for Success*. The report of the workshop is available here [http://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/site/myjahiasite/shared/shared/mainsite/published\\_docs/serial\\_publications/RB11\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/site/myjahiasite/shared/shared/mainsite/published_docs/serial_publications/RB11_ENG.pdf)

policymakers to accompany this process with measures to adapt social institutions to these new realities. In line with the earlier reference to the image of migrants, enhancing the positive visibility of migrants in host societies is essential in increasing societies' acceptance of migrants and recognition of their contribution. At the same time, extremist, xenophobic and racist tendencies are threats to social cohesion and need to be firmly combated.

In terms of practical considerations, governments may need to make certain services or key institutions available or accessible in different languages. Other public services, especially in the health sector, may also need to respond to cultural differentiation, for instance in terms of the health-seeking behaviour of migrant groups. Another area for policy intervention is the question of political participation by migrants which can take a variety of forms ranging from consultative bodies or voting rights at local or national level, all the way to decisions regarding long-term residence, naturalization and citizenship. At the local level, societies of destination may experience visible changes in settlement patterns as a result of migration. Urban planning, for instance, may have to adapt to match cultural diversity in order to manage the emergence of ethnic neighbourhoods and residential clustering / differentiation and mitigate any negative consequences that may result from segregation.

A particular focus for policymakers in this regard lies on descendants of migrants, be they migrant children or youth, the "1.5<sup>th</sup> generation" (children born in their parents' home country but who have grown up and were socialized in the society of destination), or the second or third generation. Enfranchising young people is not only essential but a long-term investment in the well-being and cohesion of a society. Implementing a coherent legal and policy framework on non-discrimination is fundamental in ensuring equal opportunities for migrant youth and descendants of migrants. In addition, the education sector is particularly relevant and institutions may have to adapt, for instance, in order to address the needs and skills of students from multilingual backgrounds. A focus on language training in educational institutions, non-discrimination measures in ensuring access to higher education and training, and recognition of foreign qualifications are just some of the steps necessary to maximize the potential of different groups in contributing to and participating in society.

## **Conclusion**

Social cohesion in societies of origin and destination need not be a static concept, but instead can benefit from the experience and contributions of migrants. Migration keeps societies dynamic, in economic, cultural, social and demographic terms. A number of cross-cutting considerations for policymakers in both host and home countries emerge: firstly, phenomena that permeate so many facets of society cannot be addressed by government alone, but require input and support from partners in civil society, the private sector, the media and others. Secondly, social changes are often most visible and acute at the local level, calling for greater involvement of authorities and stakeholders at the sub-national level, especially in cities. Thirdly, awareness-raising and sensitization are indispensable for the creation of a fair and positive image of migrants and migration and harmonious interactions between migrants and societies of origin and destination. Lastly, migrants themselves are the most important partner and agent in managing social change and fostering positive contributions.