

## **OPENING REMARKS**

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**International Dialogue on Migration in New York**

*Youth and migration: Engaging youth as key partners in migration governance*

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It is with great honour that I welcome you here today for the first session of IOM's International Dialogue on Migration in 2019. We are here in New York to speak about a very important topic: the role of youth in determining the future of migration governance around the world.

I say this not because I am young myself – however much I might wish to be so again – but because the political, economic, social and demographic challenges that we face in the world today will have a defining impact on the next generation. Thus, it is essential that we ensure that the 1.8 billion young people in the world today -- aged between 10 and 24 years old -- can be agents of that impact and determine their own futures.

The United Nations Youth Strategy, welcomed by IOM, sets out a number of ways that young people can be empowered. But when we witness schoolchildren from every continent of the world protesting inaction on climate change, it is clear that many young people are already finding their views and their voices. On their own. The question is whether we are ready to listen, and act.

When it comes to the issue of migration, we tend to think first about the effect of rapid demographic change on young people. And indeed, there are huge continental disparities with respect to the proportion and situation of young people worldwide that policy-makers in every country will need to grapple with.

In some regions of the world such as China, Japan and Central Europe, there are a declining number of young people relative to their older cohort, with deep implications for future economic growth and development, as well as placing disproportionate pressure on young people themselves.

Elsewhere in the world, a rapidly growing young population has given rise to a different kind of pressure. The International Labour Organisation estimates that youth unemployment in North Africa is expected to exceed 30 percent in 2019; young people in this region are more than three times more likely to be unemployed than their adult counterparts.

It is easy to reach for migration as a solution to these challenges. Indeed, many young people are longing to find better opportunities overseas, and willing to take extensive risks to do so. While risk-taking is a characteristic of the young, and one that drives our societies forward with each new generation, such risks should not be taken at the cost of lives or livelihoods.

Increasing the opportunities to move for young people will be an important driver for development and empowerment. But migration needs to be an integral part of broader efforts to create jobs and, critically, improve educational opportunities for young people which can bring choice to their lives, rather than a single route of escape.

Ensuring broader access to formal education, including tertiary education, can offer young people more opportunities, but also reduce their vulnerability. Increasing critical thinking and whether making decisions amid disaster or reducing susceptibility to smugglers who seek to persuade them to take unreasonable risks. This is particularly the case for women and girls, for whom education can offer a route to independence and agency.

But for young people around the world, traditional education is increasingly a necessary, but insufficient, foundation for success. The world is transforming at an accelerated rate: labour markets are shifting with the impacts of new technologies and demands, communities are managing rapid population turnover, and external shocks – from conflict, instability, natural disaster, or slow-onset climate change – are ever more frequent.

This generation, and the next, will need to be resilient to this change, and capable of adapting their skills and expectations, and be willing to change careers and locations far more than their predecessors. In many ways, young people with migration experience have already acquired these traits and have demonstrated their ability to adapt to alien environments and new languages, communities and expectations.

While migration can offer young people new opportunities and horizons, new skills and experiences, their ability to exploit them depends hugely on their host communities, and governments. Too often, young migrants are denied access to training opportunities – vocational as well as academic – or access to all parts of the labour market in countries of destination. This is particularly problematic for those who have had their educations and careers disrupted by conflict and instability, and who must then recapture years of learning whilst in limbo, and catch up to their generational peers.

But more perniciously, many young migrants experience discrimination – in their schools, or in their communities – that reduce their prospects for growth, as well as their self-esteem. This is a dangerous cycle that we must avoid: unduly limiting the potential of a generation who encapsulate a diverse experience and skills. Governments must work to welcome those who are in their societies regularly, and ensure that they are treated equally, and with dignity and full respect for their human rights.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, giving voice to youth is important. Amplifying the voices of migrant youth is essential, in part because those voices may have been stifled in the past. Today we begin an important exercise in what I hope is a change in that discourse, developing channels for dialogue that can empower young people on the move, and I invite you all to actively contribute to our discussions here today, whatever your age.