

Remarks by Leo Nupolu Johnson: International Dialogue on Migration

Topic: Youth and Migration – Engaging Youth as Key Partners in Migration Governance

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I arrived in Canada in 2006 as an unaccompanied minor after spending nine years on refugee camps in Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana separated from my family. As a young person who lived through the war in my home country Liberia and then two refugee camps, I couldn't understand the level of suspicion and distrust towards young migrants as it relates to their ability to understand the complexity of migration in their destination countries. As a result, I painfully watched as an observer as decisions and discussions were being made about my future without any input from me.

By default, this approach overlooked or discounted the possibility of leveraging my experience to impact issues of strategic interest in my country of origin. My friends, this is the experience of millions of migrant youth around the world.

Despite the early challenges faced, I have been able to use my experiences surviving the journey as a refugee and maneuvering war zones to make a direct impact on the lives of thousands of young refugees and migrants in Canada over the last ten years. The impact of my experience was so grave that I made a conscious choice to dedicate my life to understanding how to best empower migrant youth in their destination countries as a catalyst for making positive impact in their countries of origin as appropriate. I was aware that lives depended on it, so I started Empowerment Squared as an organization in 2008 to mobilize resources and cultivate the power of people in finding solutions to youth migrant and immigration crisis. Today, Empowerment Squared is building a world where everyone is empowered with the tools and opportunities to thrive and contribute to society. We do this by empowering newcomer and marginalized youth and communities in Canada and across the world to succeed through mentorship, access to post-secondary education, information literacy, and sports and recreation. Furthermore, I joined the Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council, an effort by the City of Hamilton to facilitate community partnerships for collective impact thereby enhancing the coordination and delivery of services to newcomers and immigrants. This effort also brought together stakeholders to influence policies and decisions through an evidenced – based approach incorporating the input of immigrants and newcomers including migrant youth. The vision of the council acknowledges that newcomers and immigrants are supported through strong community partnerships that foster responsive, welcoming and inclusive communities as well as continuous research and knowledge sharing.

Based the work at the council and our experience at Empowerment Squared, I would like to make the following observations to be considered by the International Organization of Migration as we navigate this unprecedented crisis involving the migrant of youth under some of the most dangerous circumstances ever seen in the history of our existence.

- That the widely accepted definition of youth based on age (15 – 29) be reconsidered for policy frameworks and engagement of migrant youth. Instead, the context of

experiences and complexity of reality of migrant youth be used as the yard stick, thereby requiring the inclusion of migrant youth in the effective governance of global migration. For instance, many migrant youth between the ages of 15 – 29 have been living the realities beyond the imagination of many adults and continue to so.

- When examining migrant youth, the evidence suggests that their mental health status often plays a significant role in their overall well-being and can be a defining factor for survival. Therefore, inclusive and innovative partnerships for effective global governance of migration must include the input of migrant youth and other stakeholders specially relating to mental health. Many underlying factors impact the mental health of migrant youth ranging from personal experiences to other attributes regarding gender, age, skill level, education, and health. In addition, the complicated and traumatic experiences involved in migration or asylum compound the negative impact of pre-existing issues faced by migrant youth. In general, the experience of migration and the length of time it takes varies from individual to individual, however, for many migrant youth and others fleeing civil strife, violence and political prosecution, their situation is often more complex compared to others. They must deal with significant personal losses, often including the violent deaths of family and friends. They frequently bear the scars of traumatic experiences; many are survivors of torture and refugees are also more likely than other immigrants to arrive without their immediate families, having been forced to separate in flight from persecution. As a result, they often suffer depression, sleeping disorders, nightmares, fatigue, inability to concentrate and severe mental health challenges.
- It is important to distinguish between economic and humanitarian migrants, however, as it relates to migrant youth specifically, a process of streamlining migrant youth based on needs should be a responsive process rather than relying on the assumption that all economic migrant youth are wealthy and humanitarian migrant youth are vulnerable. This is important because many migrant youth find themselves crossing borders in search of better opportunities because entire villages and communities have rallied and place their hopes of survival on their shoulders, a burden that they feel responsible for.
- Migrant youth face barriers in their quest to make positive impact on the countries of origin due to dysfunctional systems or the lack thereof to facilitate opportunities for engagement. There is a need for innovative partnerships that empower migrant youth by developing and facilitating intentional pathways to enhance specific engagement opportunities as incentives for global engagement with emphasis on countries of origin. For example, mobilizing resources and organizing activities to facilitate innovation of migrant youth and full participation in the global governance of migration.
- Creating an accountability framework for implementing the Global Compact for Migration. Member states must be held accountable for the compact by demonstrating

efforts to implement the impact in good faith through collective a collective framework. In so doing, member states have the authority to contextualize implementation according to their realities at the same time can be held accountable through an established uniform framework setting out guidelines and markers for measurement. The compact as a non – binding agreement in isolation is not enough if we all agree that the youth migrant crisis is a ticking time bomb and youth specific policies should be prioritized by member states in concert with the agreement.

- The youth migrant crisis is a matter of urgency and as such, we must find innovative ways of implementing the compact through non – governmental stakeholders to provide a catalyst for member states. We applaud member states who are making efforts to tackle the crisis, however, we are yet to see the sense of urgency required given the ongoing and unfolding global catastrophe that is the youth migrant crisis.
- Policies and decision-making mechanisms should acknowledge that the voice of migrant youth at the highest level is the critical missing piece in this dialogue, we are not asking for anything more than our rightful place at the table, a right that has been denied for so long. I am encouraged that there is a consensus in this room about the resilience, perseverance and innovation of migrant youth, let us take one step further. Let us also trust them with the decision making of their future, a future that many of you may not have to deal with.
- I also want to applaud member states and stakeholders for recognizing the unwavering entrepreneurial ability of many migrant youth, frankly, I don't know why it took you all so long because that ability has always been present. Nevertheless, let me caution you all, entrepreneurship is not for everyone. It requires very specific set of skills and lifestyle that are unique to certain people. So, let's not expect all youth to be entrepreneurs, in fact, many of them are not.
- As we navigate the global economic crisis confronting many member states, let us refrain from scapegoating youth migrants as the cause. In fact, let us promote the reality that the survival of our nations depends on our ability to integrate and empower the growing population of migrant youth as productive citizens and members of our societies.

Your excellences, member states and other stakeholders, as we young people, we learn by observing and taking cues from your actions. Unfortunately, the actions of many leaders and the political rhetoric been propagated by many of you does not only scare and mislead us, it is a recipe for conflict and a major disincentive for young people to engage. We want to trust you when you say you care, we want to believe you when you say you are acting in our best interest, all we ask is give us a seat at the table, so we too can take up our responsibility in building a future where we all belong. Do not be afraid, we did not come to take, we came to build even though ours was stolen from us.

Thank you