



# United Nations High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development

ISABEL STEINWEG

## Summary

During a two day High-Level-Dialogue (HLD) on International Migration and Development the UN General Assembly discussed various aspects of this global issue, including its close connection to human rights and development. While this first-ever High-Level-Dialogue addressed failures of the international community to foster development strategies in migrants' emissary countries, as well as the protection of migrants and their families, a comprehensive global policy strategy still seems far away.

## Facts and Figures

The various cross-border movements worldwide can be divided into several principal migrations flows. The two most important of them, which are nearly equal in figures, are South-North migration flows and South-South migration flows.<sup>1</sup>

In many cases, South-North migrants are highly skilled students, health workers, engineers and entrepreneurs, moving human capital from their countries of origin to developed destination countries, a process often referred to as brain-drain. Countries like Angola, Kenya, Burundi and Mozambique have lost between 33% and 55% of their highly-educated population to OECD countries. However, poverty and underdevelopment are also main drivers for South-North migration.

The reasons for South-South migration are various and range from better employment opportunities, discrimination, persistent poverty and other human rights violations in source countries. The lack of reliable data and information makes it difficult to

<sup>1</sup> North-North and North-South migration, which also play a certain role given the scale of their figures, will not be further analyzed in this report. Further information: [www.un.org/migration/desa-analysis.pdf](http://www.un.org/migration/desa-analysis.pdf)

analyze these migration flows. Moreover, many countries in the Southern hemisphere are sending, receiving, and transit countries at the same time.

**Table 1:** International Migration

Countries hosting the largest share of migrants	Percent of the country's population (2005)
Australia	19,6
Canada	18,9
United States	13
Regions hosting the largest share of migrants	Figures in millions (2005)
Europe	64
Northern America	45
Western Asia	22

**Source:** UN DESA international migration and development figures, press release September 12, 2006

Remittances are an important aspect of migration as they provide a significant share of developing countries' income. Remittances have risen sharply, reaching \$173 billion worldwide in 2005. Compared with official development assistance and foreign direct investment, remittances go directly to private households and are mainly used for consumptive purposes. While it is understood that remittances can play a crucial role in the alleviation of poverty, their long-term effects seem to be less clear.

## UN High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development

Given the international dimension of rapidly growing migration flows and their direct linkage to the issue of development and human rights, in December 2003 the General Assembly of the UN decided to devote a High-Level Dialogue to the subject of International migration and

Development.<sup>2</sup> This dialogue, scheduled for September 2006, was intended to discuss the benefits of international migration for both host and source countries and to develop strategies aiming at reducing its negative impacts.

An important input for the HLD was provided by the independent Global Commission on International Migration, an intergovernmental body that was, encouraged by the UN Secretary-General, created in December 2003. The Commission's 2005 report calls for better cooperation between the different multilateral organizations that often act in a disconnected manner. It also requests governments to create coherent migration strategies on the national level to overcome the competing short-term priorities of different branches of government. The report further demands concrete measures with regard to the strengthening of diasporas, the facilitation of remittance flows, as well as the need to establish incentives for successful, highly-skilled migrants to return to their countries of origin. The commission also stressed the need to address human rights issues such as irregular migration, trafficking and labor exploitation.

#### Issues and Stakeholders

Both the preparations for and the HLD itself made clear that international migration is still treated as a delicate issue laying bare the failure of the international community to promote development and decent work in many poor sending countries while at the same time having relied on a labor supply-focused approach on the subject of migration for too long. The lack of a rights-based approach, which would make migration a free choice instead of an economic necessity, and the call for the protection of permanent migrants' working and social rights in receiving countries, has only recently received broader attention within the international community. Yet human rights and labor rights groups have called for a rights-based approach to migration based on a normative framework of existing international legal instruments to contain human trafficking and the exploitation and discrimination of migrants in receiving countries. Developed countries are rather hesitant to implement measures that would guarantee migrants' rights to decent work and social security. Instead, major receiving countries often emphasize enhanced border security and efficient regulation policies, as these countries fear massive irregular migration and negative impacts on domestic markets. The influence of the private sector should not be underestimated: These actors highlight the benefits of temporary migration for both well-trained migrant workers and receiving domestic markets, however, without addressing the issue of permanent migration as a result of poverty and human rights violations. Although the UN-HLD succeeded in pointing out major challenges, divisions within the international community remain. While the report of the SG on

International Migration<sup>3</sup> addressing the HLD urged member states to develop national and regional migration strategies, many poor countries call for more active support by the international community. Yet the absence of a decision-making process at the end of the HLD makes it difficult to concretize the future of the issue.

#### Key challenges and the Way Forward

In May 2006, the Secretary-General suggested continuing the intergovernmental voluntary and consultative dialogue within the new Global Forum on Migration and Development. The government of Belgium offered to host the Forum next year. In the debate, migration should be seen as an opportunity and a positive force for development. Towards this end, several key challenges need to be addressed:

- Securing migrants' rights by combating human trafficking, exploitation within transit countries and discriminatory treatment in receiving countries. Women and children should receive special protection.
- Promoting existing international legal instruments, i.e. the International Convention of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Families, which has a very low ratification record so far.
- Coordinating policies within regional consultations and their supplementation by long-term national labor migration strategies.
- Using remittances efficiently as means to improve welfare in receiving countries, by reducing transfer costs and helping receivers to handle their savings.
- Fostering foreign entrepreneurship in the host country, as well as inciting successful migrants to promote investment in their country of origin.
- Strengthening of diasporas to create social and cultural dialogue, enriching both sides in the long term.

#### Further Reading

- UN High-Level-Dialogue on Migration, <http://www.un.org/esa/population/hldmigration>
- UN Statistics Division, <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sconcerns/migration/default.htm>
- Global Commission on International Migration, [www.gcim.org](http://www.gcim.org)
- International Organization for Migration, [www.iom.int](http://www.iom.int)
- United Nations Populations Fund, [www.unfpa.org](http://www.unfpa.org)

<sup>2</sup> GA resolution 58/208 of 23 December 2003

<sup>3</sup> Report of the SG on International Migration and Development A/60/871