

THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH-LEVEL DIALOGUE: SUGGESTIONS FOR THE AGENDA

The International Metropolis Project

The United Nations High Level Dialogue, scheduled to take place in 2006, offers a rare opportunity for the United Nations to discuss migration and its effects on societies, be they societies that send migrants, receive migrants, or through which migrants travel on their way somewhere else, a passage that may take either a short or long time. The United Nations' entry into this field is at once courageous and risky. It is courageous because for years the call to organize an international conference on international migration has not been widely accepted. It is risky because the United Nations initiative depends for its success upon the same Member States whose divergent positions seem to have prevented until now the holding of an international conference. Additionally, the United Nations faces the challenge of there being already a large number of organizations in the migration field whose work is recognized as of excellent quality and against which the contribution of the United Nations will be judged on whether it adds value or not. The Metropolis Project supports this particular entry of the United Nations into a holistic migration discussion and offers the comments in this paper as suggestions for ensuring that the High-Level Dialogue has beneficial results, both for Member States and for the United Nations itself.

In preparing for the High-Level Dialogue, the United Nations ought to plan for the long-term, not just for this one event. It ought to consider one of its principal objectives as being to position itself as an effective forum for multilateral debate on international migration. The planning, including setting the agenda, must strive to avoid an outcome on which Member States may be deeply divided and which would show that the United Nations was ineffective in this field. Such an outcome would have serious long-term consequences for the desire of the United Nations to contribute to the migration debate. The agenda of the High-Level Dialogue, we therefore recommend, ought to create the *realistic possibility for progress, even if that progress is minor*. It would be better by far to achieve only a little than to accomplish nothing but an erosion of confidence on the United Nations itself on this issue.

What this suggests is that the agenda be designed to produce a discussion of interests that are commonly held by large numbers of Member States, one that avoids pitting State against State on issues that will not be resolved by this specific meeting. If a measure of confidence in United Nations discussions on international migration can be achieved, then future meetings can tackle the more difficult issues. This proposes then that what the United Nations should primarily try to achieve in these first discussions is to establish itself as a credible body in the migration policy field. Metropolis supports the United Nations engagement in these issues and wants above all to see the High-Level Dialogue succeed even if its substantive accomplishments are minor. In what follows, the paper suggests agenda items around which some agreement could be achieved and some measure of trust amongst the participants could be developed. Some of the most often discussed migration issues are not mentioned here as they are very unlikely to be solved in the High-Level Dialogue and, we would suggest, would damage the potential that Member States might see in the United Nations a vehicle for profitable discussion. Some examples of issues best left *off* the table include:

- *A right to migrate*, meaning any right by which non-nationals of a country would have a right to enter or work in another country;
- *Compensation* for the “brain drain” that is said to result from the recruitment or acceptance of migrants, especially those with scarce skills, by a country of destination;

- Agreements whereby migrants not admitted or who are present without legal rights in a sovereign State can be rapidly returned to their country of origin with the guarantee of that country that they will be re-admitted to it.

These are some examples of issues around which progress will not likely be possible at the High-Level Dialogue of 2006 and which, in the best interests of the United Nations, ought to be left off the agenda. *The agenda, as far as possible, ought to be designed with the future viability of the United Nations as a forum for discussing and settling migration issues firmly in mind.*

A. THE HIGH-LEVEL DIALOGUE AGENDA

1. Migration and development

This paper suggests that the agenda be dominated by the issue of the relations between international migration phenomena and the economic and social development of the poorer countries in the world, whether these are countries that “send” migrants or that “receive” migrants. The issue is not only an empirical one of whether there are developmental effects, positive or negative, associated with migration, but whether international migration can be *managed* in such a way that it increases its positive effects on development, especially for poor countries, whether they are the origin or the destination of migrants. Both inflows and outflows of migrants can have development effects on society; the question is whether these effects can be altered in positive ways by effective management. This question related to policy: how to manage migration so that it promotes development?

This set of issues has become highly fashionable, particularly from the point of view of countries of origin. However, it has been dominated by discussions of a relatively small set of phenomena, primarily the brain drain and its effects on development, about which little is known, and the flow of remittances and its effects on development, about which a great deal is known. Not only has the issue been so dominated, but its discussion has to a large extent been driven by both assumption and myth. The High-Level Dialogue would benefit from access to facts and evidence. As far as possible, therefore, the discussion at the High-Level Dialogue should focus on the interrelations between migration and development on the basis of evidence.

Under this topic are many sub-issues that could be profitably brought to the attention of the discussion. Some of them are:

- Financial remittances: reducing the costs of transmission; providing incentives for their use for broader economic and social development in addition to family benefits.
- Intellectual remittances: how the knowledge, skills, and attitudes acquired by migrants in countries of destination can be used to support economic, social and political development in their homelands. Note that poorer countries receive large numbers of migrants, some of whom may be able to transfer valuable knowledge to support development.
- Migration and the spread of democracy and effective governance: a specific use of intellectual remittances.
- Migration and the transfer of knowledge about the effective management of administrative structures, governance structures, elections, anti-corruption measures, infrastructure development and maintenance.
- Transnational relations and trade: how trade links can be strengthened by the activities of members of diasporas.

- Migration and business development including the role that businesses and industries in countries of destination can play in the responsible development of businesses and industries in countries of origin.

Many now speak of the migration-development issue as one whereby the international community can produce a win-win-win situation for migrants, countries of origin and countries of destination. With persistence, this may indeed be realizable. It is incumbent upon the High-Level Dialogue organizers to pursue this issue from the point of view of promoting a win-win-win result. There are others, however, who would urge other approaches to migration and development, including one whereby development aid would be offered provided that the country receiving the aid agreed to manage migration flows in a way that would help the donor country meet its migration goals. For example, a donor country might insist that future development assistance would be forthcoming only if the country receiving the aid agreed to curb illegal migration flows and to accept returned illegal migrants or rejected asylum-seekers. This paper will be silent on the merits of this approach except to say that discussion of it should be reserved for another day. The High-Level Dialogue, again, should work towards an agenda of items where all sides can recognize benefits from the discussion and any agreements that might some day arise from it.

2. Protecting vulnerable migrants and their families

Of some migrants it is nearly universally thought that they are vulnerable and in need of protection or measures to help assure their well-being. The alleviation of suffering is a goal that the United Nations can safely discuss in the current context of international migration. There are some issues that ought to be considered by the High-Level Dialogue under this general title, issues where international co-operation could make a significant difference.

a. Trafficking in women and children: Although recognized in international instruments as requiring concerted action, remains a very serious and growing phenomenon. Some research has indicated that trafficking profits now exceed those of migrant smuggling. Trafficking is carried out by transnational organized crime and is a phenomenon that by its very nature requires international co-operation to address. The High-Level Dialogue could examine how to implement more effectively the international instruments now in place.

b. Protecting irregular migrants: A discussion of the responsibilities of sending, transit, and receiving countries would be useful. Irregular migration is usually regarded as an infringement on the sovereignty of the States of destination, a problem to be solved through law enforcement. Where there is discussion of international co-operation, it usually has to do with co-operation on law enforcement and the acceptance and re-admission by source countries of their nationals who have been intercepted by the legal system of the country of destination or transit. At the present time, there would be little potential to deal effectively and globally with irregular migration. However, the limited issue of safeguarding the well-being of vulnerable migrants provides safer ground, and the political importance of their irregular status can be overcome by limiting of the scope of the discussion to the responsibilities of sending, receiving, and transit States to help reduce the most severe harms caused by irregular border crossings. Some of these measures could themselves serve to reduce the frequency of irregular crossings.

c. Women who migrate and are in vulnerable occupations: Many migrant women are domestic workers or are employed in occupations at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy. The working conditions of migrant women in these occupation are often poor, with a corresponding neglect of their rights as workers and as human beings. Some countries are vigilant in protecting the interests of their migrants, including those of female migrants. Discussion of best practices with respect to this issue could be a profitable area for discussion at the High-Level Dialogue.

d. Protecting the well-being of the families of those who engage in migration, especially circular migration. Circular migration for employment purposes can bring severe risks to family members both when the migrant leaves and when the migrant returns. Those with low skills often leave the family in a vulnerable situation that results simply from the loss of an adult family member. The emigrant, while in the country of destination, is at an elevated risk of, among other dangers, contracting AIDS, tuberculosis, and other severe medical conditions, becoming an abuser of alcohol and other drugs, becoming part of a criminal network, or becoming a serious gambler. The family members may, therefore, suffer again when the migrant returns, sometimes devastatingly if there is a transmission of AIDS or other serious medical condition, perhaps suffering from violence due to alcoholism, and so on. There is room for such problems to receive attention, and governments in sending, receiving, and transit countries can all develop responses to prevent or to ameliorate the problems.

3. Managing migration: The analogy between migration and trade in goods and services

The idea that there ought to be a body to manage the flow of migrants on analogy with the World Trade Organization is one that has captured the imaginations of many and found strong resistance in the minds of others. Clearly there is far from sufficient agreement to pursue this idea today. However, there might be merit in examining just what is meant by the analogy between the World Trade Organization regulatory systems and a possible world migration organization. The United Nations might consider setting up an ad hoc body to examine the options with care, to report back to the General Assembly at a subsequent meeting.

What is the migration analog of free trade? Some fear that it means open borders and a right to migrate, that is, a right to enter another sovereign State. However, it must be noted in the pursuit of the analogy that free trade is in fact highly regulated trade. Accordingly, the analogy would be with the regulated movement of people, and the questions to answer would concern what sorts of regulations would produce the sorts of movements that are desired by States. Labour migration and its management are the most profitable types of movements to consider for global regulation; it might be useful for the United Nations to seek out the best regulatory practices with respect to temporary worker programmes and full immigration programmes.

4. Social effects of migration: successful integration

As States increasingly accept the inevitability of international migration and cease entertaining the false hope of bringing it to an end, they are turning their attention to managing the social effects of the presence of migrants who bring with them a diversity of cultures, ethnicities and religions. When stocks of migrants become sizeable, social well-being depends on how well the “host” society responds to their presence and how it endeavours to integrate them or provide them with a meaningful membership in society. There are numerous approaches to the social integration of migrants, some that are clearly more successful than others. Furthermore, there is always the question of whether an approach that is successful in one setting can be successful in another, but the depth of social problems is such that a dissemination and comparison of effective policies would be useful.

Two points need to be stressed to emphasize that this is not merely an issue of domestic policy. First, we ought to recognize that there is often a role for sending countries to play in facilitating the social integration and the well-being of their nationals abroad. Second, this is not only an issue of the integration of migrants. Ultimately the issue is of social stability. The number of States whose civil unrest is rooted in ethnic, religious, racial or cultural differences is large. Many believe that the means to securing stable relations between a host society and the migrants in its midst are the same as those needed to secure stable relations between citizens of diverse backgrounds. In other words, issue of social integration can be linked to the issue of achieving peace and stability.

B. CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE METROPOLIS PROJECT

The Metropolis Project is a multinational network of policy makers, academic researchers, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations. It encourages academic research on migration issues that is useful to policy makers, and it convenes meetings and arranges other communication fora whereby discussion amongst these groups can take place, all with the aim of improving migration-related policies. The Metropolis Conference has become the world's largest annual conference on migration, attracting members of the world's key migration organizations to discuss the current issues facing the migration community. Its meetings are particularly attractive in that they offer a neutral meeting space for participants who are able to put issues on the table without risking their political positions. The Metropolis Project is governed by the Metropolis International Steering Committee, and day to day operations are managed by the Metropolis International Secretariat with offices at the Department of Citizenship and Immigration in Ottawa, Canada, and at the Institute for Ethnic and Migration Studies at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands.

Metropolis will continue to contribute to the international discussion of the issues that will be taken on by the High-Level Dialogue. Its conferences feature plenary sessions on precisely the topics suggested with speakers representing the most senior ranks of Government, academe, international migration organizations, and non-governmental organizations. The most recent conference, held in September 2004, brought to a plenary session the senior members of the Global Commission on International Migration to describe their work and organized a number of private meetings for more intense discussion behind closed doors. The conferences also include large numbers of workshops (over 80 in recent years) that bring small groups together to discuss specific issues in the field. In addition, the Metropolis Project highlights these issues in academic publications (the *Journal for International Migration and Integration*) and in more generally accessible publications that inform its constituency of recent developments and discussions. Recent issues of the *Metropolis World Bulletin* have included contributions about the Global Commission on International Migration, on replacement migration as a means to manage the demographic deficits facing many of the world's developed countries, on migration and health, on trafficking in women and children, and on migration and development.

Metropolis plans to invite the Global Commission to its 10th anniversary conference, scheduled to take place in October 2005 in Toronto, Canada, to report on its work and present its recommendations. It also plans to bring the issues of trafficking in women, social integration and social capital, and the feminization of migration to the discussion. Metropolis will be pleased to offer its continued support to the preparations for the High Level Dialogue of 2006.