

Round table 1: Effects of international migration on economic and social development

Thursday, 14 September 2006, 3:00 to 6:00 p.m.

Summary by the Chair

Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am summarizing today the main points from the debate that took place in Round Table 1 dealing with the “Effects of international migration on economic and social development”. I would like to emphasize the excellent and constructive spirit of our discussions. The discussion in this Round Table centred on five key points.

First, the Round Table underscored substantial positive impacts of international migration on social and economic development, while noting certain negative impacts as well. There was general agreement that the importance of international migration will increase in the future and that it was therefore crucial for the international community and for Member States to focus on maximizing its benefits while minimizing the risks associated with it. To do so, coherent policies were needed both within and between countries. We noted that countries often played multiple roles, so that it was not useful to distinguish between countries of origin, destination or transit. Migrants themselves, by creating social ties and transnational networks, were a key part of the migration process and its impacts on development.

Second, labour migration was central to the discussion of migration and development, in terms of both the motivations for international movements and their consequences for development. In particular, the discussion focused on the economic benefits which will increase if the labour markets function more efficiently. Issues like decent work and migrants' rights were also underlined in this context. Certain detrimental consequences were noted as well, particularly those due to the loss of highly skilled workers in many developing countries. These effects of the brain drain were most severe in the health and education sectors, leading to a decreased quality of such services. In some countries, the emigration of skilled personnel had been eroding human capital with potentially dire consequences for the long-term sustainability of their development. Even though many interventions concentrated on economic aspects, it was reminded that social and cultural aspects are equally important.

Third, we discussed various approaches for mitigating some of the negative consequences of migration and enhancing its positive role in development. In this context, the importance of return and circular migration was underscored, since migrants, who returned, even for short periods, are often agents for development. Returning highly skilled migrants have a lot to contribute to promote the economic dynamism and development of countries of origin. Participants considered various ways in which permanent or temporary return could be promoted. Thus, Governments were encouraged to cooperate with the private sector in establishing reintegration programmes and promoting, among other things, increased employment and investment opportunities for returning migrants.

It was acknowledged that transnational communities, diasporas, could make important contributions to the development of countries of origin. We recognised the need to foster contacts between countries and their citizens abroad, especially with the highly skilled or those who had skills in short supply in the country of origin so as to facilitate the emergence of more active knowledge networking. The important role played by remittances in supporting well being was also cited by several Delegates. But it was emphasized that it is not only the economic remittances, but also the transfer of knowledge and innovations that can play a major role.

Fourth, several participants remarked on the need for more collaboration between countries of origin and countries of destination to enhance the portability of pension benefits and ensure that migrants were not penalized for working throughout their productive lives in more than one country. A related point was the desirability of “single-taxation arrangements.” Many participants stressed that remittances should not be taxed twice.

Fifth, participants emphasized the importance of creating desirable living and working condition in countries of origin, so that migration was truly a choice, not a necessity. The importance of integrating migration policies into national development policies and poverty reduction strategies was mentioned frequently. Key factors in this regard included, inter alia, the promotion of good governance, the protection of human rights, and the improvement of labour market conditions in societies of origin. More emphasis on capacity-building is needed.

Lastly, it was noted that inter-governmental cooperation, whether at the bilateral, regional or global level was important to support many of the processes that increased the economic and social benefits of international migration. Governments were urged to find ways to enhance such cooperation.