

Commission for Social Development

Forty-second session

Item 3(c) Emerging issues, trends and new approaches to issues affecting social development: International migration and migrants from a social perspective

Introductory remarks by Jacques Baudot, Coordinator of the International Forum for Social Development

10 February 2004

Thank you Mr Chairman,

Allow me to present this summary of the findings of the third meeting of the International Forum for Social Development that took place last October in New York on the topic of “International migrants and development”, around three themes:

- First some salient features of international migration and the situation of migrants;
- Secondly, some of the reasons why the status-quo is considered highly undesirable;
- And third, the contours of a strengthened international cooperation on international migration from a social perspective.

Movements of people across borders and continents are indeed not new, but some features of the present situation deserve special notice.

- International migration is increasingly diversified. In terms of the North-South division of the world, people move from the South to the North, but also within the North, within the South, and from the North to the South. A number of countries are predominantly of immigration, and others are predominantly of emigration, but more and more are both –they receive immigrants and send emigrants abroad – and are also countries through which people transit in their search for work and security.
- International migrants constitute a very heterogeneous population. There is the growing minority of emigrants who are sought for their skills, and the also growing majority of emigrants, or candidates to emigration, who are seeking a place to live and work. In this majority

are the many victims of international migration, those who are forced to leave their country, those who are exposed to smugglers and traffickers, and those who are exploited, sometimes under conditions reminiscent of slavery. In addition, it is well-known that, for various reasons, the distinction between emigrants in search of work and emigrants in search of protection and asylum, is increasingly difficult. Also, a growing number of women are migrants in their own right, seeking work opportunities, and not simply moving abroad for “family reunification”.

- International migrants are not homogeneous either in terms of their intentions and expectations. The “long-term migrant”, desirous to settle definitely, or at least until retirement, in his or her country of adoption, still exist, of course, but it seems that an increasing number and proportion of international migrants are looking for short term stays, for periods of work abroad limited in time, and eventually repeated in the same or in different countries.
- The result of this growing diversification and complexity of international migration, is that the concepts and related data and information used to capture and understand the phenomenon, and the policies designed to address its various aspects, are often lagging behind a rapidly changing reality. This gap appears to exist at the national, regional, as well as international level. And this is a situation in which the emotions and sometimes passions that the issue of international migration generate can easily flourish.

Second point: the reasons why the status-quo might be considered undesirable. This was definitely a conclusion shared by most participants in the Forum: a continuation of current trends regarding the management, or lack thereof of international migration, and of current trends regarding the situation of international migrants, is undesirable; some would say, intolerable for the individuals concerned, unhealthy for the countries involved, and dangerous for the world. Truly enough, said the participants, current forms of bilateral and regional cooperation should be pursued and strengthened. In particular, the regional processes that have emerged in the last decade or so are extremely useful and ought to be encouraged. They are generally informal, they involve governments, organizations of the civil society, and the relevant regional and international organizations, and they yield good results. But that may not be enough, for the following reasons:

- A world economy characterised by an increasingly free circulation of capital, goods, technologies and information, will have difficulties

maintaining strong restrictions on the movements of people across national borders.

- As poverty, insecurity, and simply differences between countries and regions in terms of opportunities for work and social advancement, are unlikely to be reduced in the near future, the “pressure” for immigration will continue; so will restrictive controls and so will the number of illegal or undocumented migrants; and the incidence of criminal activities related to migration will also increase.
- International migration appears to aggravate the various forms of inequity and inequality, between countries and within countries, which characterize the world of today. In the past, during the so-called first globalisation movement, international migration contributed to a narrowing of differences of levels of living between countries.
- The amount of human suffering involved in migratory movements is enormous, and in itself intolerable. And the social tensions associated with international migration are also mounting. Rather than contributing to the building of a world community animated by openness, tolerance and solidarity, international migration seem to feed exploitation, discrimination, racism and conflicts. And, international legal instruments do not provide the necessary protection.
- And, perhaps above all, international migration is a truly global phenomenon, in its positive as well as in its negative aspects, involving a significant number of people and a large number of countries. Such a global phenomenon calls for global forms of cooperation, calls for an international understanding that goes beyond the addition of successful bilateral and regional forms of cooperation.

This strengthened international cooperation, said the Forum, should proceed step by step. It should lead to a progressive understanding of the objectives and modalities of an “orderly regime” for international migration that is the key element of the normative framework advocated by the United Nations since the Cairo Conference. It should involve different viewpoints and perspectives, and notably a **social perspective**, the contours of which are the following:

- An involvement of the immigrants themselves, who currently have no voice in international forums.
- A consideration of international migration through, as indicated in the Background note before you, the perceptions it generates - and there are currently a number of misconceptions and myths concerning

migration - through the well-being of international migrants themselves, and through the effects of international migration on the social fabric of the societies concerned.

- The well being of migrants involve a decent work yielding a sufficient income, a secure and legal status, and access to social services and social benefits.
- The effects of migration on the fabric of the societies concerned can be looked at from several angles, including the question of social cohesion and social integration, but are perhaps best captured by the question: *are migrations a source of enrichment or impoverishment of the societies concerned, and why?* In economic terms, in cultural terms and even in moral terms.
- The Background Note list examples of subjects and issues that could be usefully subjected to a more active international cooperation through a social perspective. To the five domains listed – status and mobility of migrants, their social integration, the relations between migration and poverty, the contribution that a social perspective on migration could make to the building of an “orderly regime” for international migration, and the participation of migrants in such a regime – one could add contribution to knowledge and information and therefore contribution to a more rational and more human climate that should inform and animate debates and policies regarding this important feature of the world society.