



**International Day of Families 2010**  
**“The impact of migration on families around the world”**  
**15 May 2010 (observed 13 May)**

***Background Note***

The International Day of Families in 2010 focuses on migration and its impact on families around the world.

***Migration trends***

The number of international migrants in the world has more than doubled since the 1960s and is currently standing at an estimated 214 million. Although the proportion of international migrants to total population has not increased significantly (from 2.6 percent in 1960 to 3.1 percent in 2010), the impact of migration goes well beyond those who migrate, as it affects their communities of origin and, in particular, family members left behind. Many more people move internally than across borders, with the number of internal migrants estimated at 740 million.

Deepening economic, social and demographic disparities create powerful pressures and incentives for people to move in search of gainful employment. Migration has also become easier thanks to the improved global communication and transportation networks.

Families in which some members remain at home in the country of origin, while other family members live in the country of destination are often called “transnational families”. The number of such families is on the increase with the globalization of migration world wide. Another important feature is the growth of one type of transnational family – one in which the mothers leave their families behind. Although, the number of female migrants remained constant at around 49 percent since 1990s, more women tend to migrate independently and/or as primary migrants

The current economic crisis has or will impact migration in several ways. In response to the crisis, some governments have reduced their quotas of migrants, the number of work visas available or have raised academic and financial requirements for migrants. Moreover, in response to growing unemployment, many governments have tightened services to immigrants. As jobs are being lost

and competition for work increases, there has been some evidence that working conditions and wages deteriorate. Migrants are more vulnerable in times of unemployment as they often do not have the same access to state benefits. More migrants return home, with recent examples being the workers in the Gulf States and Indonesian workers in Malaysia as well as urban migrants in China returning to rural areas.

There has also been a drop in remittances as migrants earn less money and the global increase in migration has slowed down. Estimates from the World Bank indicate that remittances to the developing world declined by about 6 per cent in 2009. However, estimates varied among countries with some (e.g. Mexico) experiencing declines around 10 per cent while others maintained the level or experienced small growth (e.g. Pakistan). Reductions in remittances in some countries have increased poverty and the trend is expected to continue.

It is important to keep in mind that the spectrum of migration encompasses not only labour migrants but refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) as well. Refugee and IDP families are at a special risk of family separation, hardship and neglect. In addition, climate change and worsening environmental conditions are driving an additional number of migrants from their home to nearby villages or neighbouring countries.

### ***Impact of migration on families***

For families, the decision to migrate is not an easy one and often taken in response to economic hardship, as a way to deal with economic shocks as well as man-made and natural disasters.

Yet migration also brings economic well-being to families. If migrants move to regions or countries with higher levels of human development than their own, as is often the case, migration can lead to improved capabilities, including better health and education, for migrants and their children. Migration can also affect gender relations and contribute to the empowerment of women, whether they migrate or stay behind.

Since migrants provide vital financial support for their families, migration can also improve the well-being of those left behind. In 2008, migrants sent \$444 billion in remittances worldwide, with flows to the developing world standing at \$338 billion. In some areas (e.g. the Pacific Islands) up to 75 percent of families report receiving remittances from overseas and in some villages remittances account for as much as 50 percent of all household income.

Financial remittances are essential for improving the livelihood of millions of people in less developed countries. Remittances improve the material welfare of family members left behind. Families with migrants tend to be better nourished and are more likely to send children to school. Remittances may also help

families to diversify sources of income and provide private forms of social protection to reduce risks when facing shocks such as political conflicts or natural disasters. In countries of origin, remittances also have multiplier effects, since they will mostly be spent on goods and services supplied by others in the community and so benefit the local economy.

Families, however, are primary providers not only of material, but emotional support as well. Separation is a painful decision with important emotional costs both for those who move and for those left behind. Children's health, education and overall development depend on the support the family is providing, going beyond monetary aspects. The migration of a parent, particularly of the mother, could offset the gains in consumption, education and health of children. The possible impacts of the absence of a parent depend on the age of the child at the time of the separation, on the familiarity and attitude of the caretaker and the duration of the separation. Research on the long-term health outcomes of separation suggests that its impacts may be negative, because the levels of preventive care are lower when one parent is absent from the household.

Moreover, a prolonged parental absence is especially difficult for children headed by single parents who migrate. The absence of a parent may result in many forms of psychological deprivation. Some national surveys indicate that the absence of both parents or just of the mother likens the frequency of depression symptoms in children. Parents' departure also represents a risk factor for deviant behaviour among children left behind. Sometimes, even a temporary migration may have an impact similar to that of the loss of a parent, either through family break-up or death.

To be sure, many parents, especially mothers try to maintain a strong and influential presence in their children's lives, regardless of the distance and it is becoming easier for families to stay connected thanks to new and more affordable communication technologies. Grand-parents and other extended family members often take over caring for children in the absence of parents and may be able to ensure adequate care in parents' absence.

Besides adapting to lengthy separations from their loved ones, migrants' family members remaining in the country of origin may also have trouble relating to the new lifestyles of their migrant relatives. Families may face new challenges relating to the role of parents or new expectations of children, as families must cope with changing expectations about gender roles, parenting and other aspects of family life.

Family reunification is critical for the well-being of families. Migrants and their families often move to places where living conditions and educational opportunities for their children are better than in their home countries. However, first generation migrants often do not have the same access to services as natives in countries of destination.

Migrants arriving in new host countries often endure great sacrifices to earn enough to send to their families. They suffer from poor working and living conditions, work for low wages, and are often discriminated against. Moreover, the very adaptation to life in a new country poses challenges in the forms of unfamiliar language, culture and daily interactions. Migrant children are at high risk of falling victim to child trafficking, child labour, conflict with the law, violence, early marriage and lack of birth registration.

### ***Migration from a family policy perspective***

Understanding the root causes of migration is important if we are to increase the benefits of migration to migrants and minimize risks they and their families face. Policies supporting families and aiming at reducing poverty so that family members do not have to migrate for economic reasons are of utmost importance. Equally important are policies ensuring family reunification in new host countries. In this respect, concerns over border controls by countries who receive migrants must be balanced with their obligation to recognize the realities and rights of families living across borders.

Recent trends, however, are not encouraging. The Global Forums on Migration and Development held in Belgium and the Philippines in 2007 and 2008 respectively, noted that governments seek to manage migration by restricting family reunification. About half of all developing countries, and one third of developed countries, do not allow family members of temporary migrants to enter the country or to work. Moreover, the existing instruments protecting the rights of migrants, including the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their families, still await world-wide ratification and full implementation among the states parties to the convention.

There is a special need to provide the resources for children whose parents migrate. Such support should range from psychological, emotional, special counseling, after-school activities, house visits and other.

As most research concentrates on the migrants' process of adaptation to life in a new country and fewer studies deal with the impact of migration on family-members left in the country of origin, more resources should also be devoted to promote comprehensive studies on the effects of migration on family members in countries of origin.

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