

16th Coordination Meeting on International Migration
Panel III: *International migration: A tool for global development?*

Thursday 15 February 2018

Presentation by Gemma Adaba, Global Unions representative
to the UN global migration compact process

Portability of skills, qualifications and competences: A Global Unions' perspective

I am speaking on behalf of the Council of Global Unions whose membership includes the International Trade Union Confederation, Building and Wood Workers' International, Public Services International, Educational International, UNI Global Union, International Union of Food and Allied Workers, and partners: the Solidarity Center. Collectively our members are at the forefront of labour migration, representing migrant workers, or engaged as migrant workers in a broad range of sectors: construction, public services, health, education, banking and retail trades, transport, agriculture and domestic work. Collectively, we represent over 200 million workers worldwide. Naturally, from our perspective, the stakes are high for a Global Compact that delivers positive labour market outcomes, and safeguards the workers' rights of all migrant workers, regardless of their migratory status.

We welcome the fact that skills recognition and skills development are dealt with in Objective 18 of the zero draft of the Global Compact, in which Member States are urged to "Invest in skills development and facilitate recognition of skills, qualifications and competences." There is no specific mention of portability of skills, however, although the notion is implied in paragraph 32.j which talks of ensuring the recognition of documents in various jurisdictions. Thus portability of skills is a thematic and operational area which needs to be strengthened in the text.

But let me begin by framing the discussion on skills recognition, development, and portability within the broader context of key guiding principles from the zero draft, as well as the New York Declaration which calls on Member States to address the drivers of migration by implementing "the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development whose objectives include creating conditions for balanced, sustainable and inclusive economic growth and employment," so that migration becomes a choice, and not an economic necessity. And with respect to key guiding principles, according to the zero draft, migration policies should, among other things, be *people-centred*, *gender-responsive*, *human rights-based*, and informed by the *whole-of-society approach*.

I think, therefore, that the starting point for good policies on skills recognition and development is ensuring that the drivers of crisis migration are properly addressed. We have concerns with the notion that migration is a tool for development. We believe that the answer to development is not migration, but adequate investment in skills and productive capacity in origin countries, in social and physical infrastructure and in developing active labour market policies that promote decent work, thereby enabling developing economies to make full use of the talent of their citizens.

What we see now is too often a brain drain and 'care drain', with the higher skilled care workers filling the labour market shortages in the developed world while leaving their children behind without parents, and their societies without nurses and doctors. Even in what we might term, for

want of better language, the lower skilled end, we see millions of women leaving their homes and families to take up poorly paid, insecure and often highly exploitative work as domestic workers.

Countries of destination must stem their desire for a cheap and disposable labour force that fills their skills gaps and labour shortages, often through temporary and circular migration schemes, without their having to invest in their local or already present migrant workers. With regard to the global compact's skills recognition and development agenda, up-skilling of the present group of migrant workers and matching them to niches where they are needed, thus become a humane, people-centred alternative to returns. Thus skills development of migrants in destination countries and effective labour market matching should be important sub-themes under Objective 18 as outlined in the zero draft of the compact.

Serious needs assessments for skills development programmes must be carried out, and there is a need for fair cost-sharing arrangements in the context of bi-lateral agreements between origin and destination countries.

Of equal importance is the need to overcome the mismatching of skills with jobs that is so detrimental to migrant workers' prospects for decent livelihoods. Poor skills matching or the non-recognition of qualifications increases the risk of deskilling or "brain waste". The persistent underemployment and unemployment of migrant workers negatively affect their ability to integrate fully into their communities and in society.

Trade unions and migrant workers witness first hand, and know all too well what happens when skills recognition schemes are not put in place, and when skills mismatching is rife:

- highly qualified migrants find themselves doing work for which they are overqualified and underpaid, and where their qualifications and years of experience are not taken into account;
- downward pressures are placed on wages and conditions of work in some sectors and industries;
- the objective of decent work gets short shrift in this scenario;
- occupational health and safety standards may deteriorate.

So a lot hinges on the recognition of skills and qualifications in the context of realizing the decent work agenda. In this regard, we welcome the commitment in the zero draft "to invest in innovative solutions that facilitate recognition of skills, qualifications and competences of migrant workers at all skills levels..., [including] non-formally acquired skills, ...and promote skills development for the full employability of migrants in labour markets in countries of origin and destination". Clearly, a focus on skills recognition and development is important for the full integration of migrants into the labour markets of destination countries. This would allow migrants the flexibility and opportunities to move to comparable jobs without loss of job status due to lack of recognition of skills. Visa portability is an important accompanying measure to ensure such labour mobility. Skills training for employability and job mobility must be a part of the skills agenda, and this must include on-the-job health and safety training, to minimize the risk of work accidents.

Moreover, the skills recognition and development agenda must be situated in the broader policy context of strengthening labour market institutions and labour inspectorates to monitor compliance with fair workplace practices for migrant workers, with a view to building sustainable labour migration regimes. This requires that labour market and employment policies be well aligned with migration policies, to ensure that the latter, including skills recognition and development, responds effectively to destination countries' needs, and the livelihood interests of migrant workers.

Of particular importance is the involvement of social partners (employers and trade unions), in the formulation and implementation of measures for the recognition of skills and qualifications. Participation of the social partners should go beyond mere consultation, allowing for their active involvement in the design, implementation and monitoring of initiatives. Migrant workers must also have the possibility to exercise their right of voice and participation in the decisions affecting them, through their representative trade unions. This speaks to the principles of freedom of association, the rights to membership in trade unions, and to collective bargaining. (ILO C87 and 98).

There is growing awareness among origin and destination countries within some migration corridors of the need for proper skills recognition and matching, in relation to labour market needs, although a great deal still needs to be done to address the serious decent work deficits prevailing in many of these corridors. Worthy of note with respect to skills recognition and development, however, is the initiative of the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries. The Fourth Senior Officials' Meeting of the Abu Dhabi Dialogue in May 2016 recommended a programme of work for the GCC, focused on multilateral cooperation on skills development, certification and recognition of occupational skills, in the context of formulating model admission and mobility policies.

On the labour side, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) is engaging in EU-level discussions on the subject, and has proposed that attention be paid to the question of the recognition of skills of refugees and migrants, with a view to their rapid integration into the labour market and the society. The ETUC has proposed a "Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals" to support early identification and profiling of skills and qualifications of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. The ETUC emphasizes the important role that social partners will need to play in ensuring that the skills recognition and matching agenda is successfully developed and implemented.

Let me conclude by reiterating that my objective in this brief presentation has been to outline what skills recognition and development schemes would look like if they adhered to some key guiding principles. Notably, they would be people-centred, and human rights-based. They would consider the best interests of migrants in terms of their full integration into labour markets, and their access to opportunities for decent work, through schemes for skills recognition, and up-skilling, including programmes with language and health and safety components. They would integrate mechanisms for proper matching of skills to labour market needs, and they would prioritize alternatives to temporary and circular migration, and returns, including provisions for visa portability with options to change employers, to have long-term residency as well as pathways to citizenship and family unification.