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**INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION IN EASTERN EUROPE:
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT¹**

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¹ The views expressed in the paper do not imply the expression of any opinion on the part of the United Nations Secretariat.

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A. EASTERN EUROPEAN CONTEXT

Since the fall of communism in early 1990s, international migration increased greatly in Eastern Europe, pushed mainly by economic factors. As such, in the last two decades there has been an increased number in Eastern European immigrants around the world (Robila, 2010). About 10% of legal immigrants in the United States are from Eastern Europe, representing about 70% of all contemporary European immigrants in US (U.S. Dept of Homeland Security, 2008). European immigration is even larger. For example, in the United Kingdom, in 2006, 37% of arrivals were from the Eastern European countries that joined EU in 2004 (Home Office Report, 2008). While the research on Asian and Latin American immigrants has registered a rapid growth in the last decades, the literature on Eastern European immigrants is very limited, although their numbers increased considerably.

Eastern Europe is an area with major population movements, determined mainly by opening the borders with the West and by the economic difficulties of the post-communist transition. After spending decades under basically the same political authority and central economy, the transformation phase began in all the ex-communist Eastern European countries, with the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in 2010 varying from \$27,200 in Slovenia, to \$11,500 in Romania, and \$2,400 in Moldova (U.S. GDP per capita: \$45,800) (CIA, 2010). While many of the issues normally accompanying the transition from a centralized to market driven systems have been ameliorated in some countries by their admission in common European structures (such as European Union, NATO, etc.) Eastern Europe continues to be associated with significant economic struggles, such as high unemployment rates and low wages.

The financial struggles determined many people to work abroad for higher wages leaving their children in the care of the other parent, grandparents, and other relatives. At least 17% of Moldova population left the country in search of work, leaving behind an estimated 150,000 to 270,000 children without either a mother or a father, and around 40,000 being separated from both parents (Lozinski, 2006). This economic migration, in Moldova resulted in about 30% of children living without one or both parents (Sarbu, 2007). The situation is common across Eastern Europe. Neighboring Romania has approximately 20% of the 10-15 years old children (170,000) with one or both parents working in another country (Toth, et al., 2007).

Migration brings significant opportunities and challenges at the family and society level. The following sections explore the benefits and difficulties determined by international migration for sending countries and the paper ends with a set of recommendations for social support program development.

B. EASTERN EUROPEAN MIGRATION: OPPORTUNITIES

Remittances, money sent home by migrants, represent one of the main benefits of migration because they can help family members lead better lives back home, being able to buy household items and services (e.g., IOM, 2007). For Eastern Europe, the size of remittances is very significant. For example, the remittances represent more than 20% for Romania's and Bosnia and Herzegovina's national income (IFAD, 2006; Mansoor, & Quillin, 2007). The highest recipients of remittances in Europe include Russian Federation with 13,794 (US\$ million),

Ukraine - 8,471, Romania - 4,795, Poland -4,760 and Serbia and Montenegro - 3,642 (IFAID, 2006).

Economic migration is a very important process in some of the countries in the region such as Moldova, where in 2006 about one quarter of the economically active population was employed abroad and the remittances sent home represented about one third of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). With more than US\$ 1 billion in remittances, Moldova has the highest ratio of remittances to GDP in the world (IOM, 2007). These remittances have greatly contributed to poverty reduction for Moldovan households, from 40% of migrant and non-migrant households in 1998 to 20% of migrant households in 2006 (while poverty only decreased to 32% of non-migrant households) (IOM, 2007). When asked what the main effects of migration are, 85% of members of immigrant household indicated the increased income, 26% the lack of parental care, and 22% emotional stress. Data indicate that for most households the remittances received are used primarily for daily needs such as food, clothes or rent, a second priority is represented by consumer durables (TV, computers) and the rest for home renovations, cars, investments or education (IOM, 2007). Similar results can be obtained in other Eastern European countries.

C. EASTERN EUROPEAN MIGRATION: CHALLENGES

The challenges of economic migration on Eastern European families and children are not yet understood due to the very limited research on this issue (UNICEF, 2008). Most of the migration policies in migrant sending countries such as the ones in Eastern Europe focus on developing advantageous labor contracts with the receiving countries. There is not much attention paid to the psychosocial impact that migration has on children and families and the support they need to adapt to this process. Consequently, a major problem is the lack of social support programs in schools or communities for children and parents in migrant families. In the last few years, there have been an alarming number of children who committed suicide due to parents leaving them at home for long periods of time (Dabija, 2006). This situation indicates the urgency in understanding of how parental migration impacts child development and outcomes.

Moreover, the media portrays this phenomenon in a negative light, presenting migrant parents as uncaring and neglectful of their children (e.g., Dabija, 2006). For the majority of families with a migrant member, the remittances represent the only way out of poverty. Many of these parents sacrifice themselves by accepting positions that are lower than their educational credentials only to be able to provide for their children. Moreover, emigration of workers has a positive impact on their countries of origin, in particular by easing the pressures on their local labor market or in the form of remittances (Fratini, 2007). As such, these highly motivated parents need to be supported in their efforts by the society.

Previous research with other migrant groups indicates that parental migration poses several challenges (e.g., Cortina, 2006). For example, studies with Mexican parents migrating to the US to work while leaving their children with relatives in Mexico, indicate that the lack of mother's or father's presence for a long period of time have lasting negative consequences on children, on their social, psychological, or academic functioning. Due to lack of parental monitoring and constant support, children left behind by their migrant parents represent a vulnerable group with

higher risk of psychological (e.g., depression) and behavioral problems (e.g., violence). In many cases their academic performance is also affected, dropping out or having lower grades, but also presenting a higher risk of being abused or becoming victims of human trafficking.

D. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MIGRANT SUPPORT PROGRAMS

The increase in the recent Eastern European migration poses new opportunities for the study of this group's adaptation to this phenomenon. A major problem in these migrant sending countries is the lack of structures and expertise at community level to tackle the problems of migrant families. Migration has been noted as one of the major contemporary policy concerns. It has been recommended for governments to integrate a family perspective in international migration policy and to develop effective family-friendly migration policy that will help maximize the opportunities and minimize the challenges of migration (Robila, 2009; In Press). Given that migrants are part of family systems, a family perspective is recommended to be used in developing policies regulating international migration.

There are a variety of ways in which support to migrant families could be provided. Several types of support programs for migrant families are in order, targeting the migrant themselves, the family left behind (spouses, children, the child-caregivers such as grandparents) and the stakeholders interacting on constant basis with migrant families and their members, such as the school system.

One type of program should be targeted to the migrants themselves while preparing to leave the country, in order to increase their knowledge about the destination country, such as, for example, navigating through the health system. Informing them about the rules and regulations in the host country, helping them to have realistic expectations or providing information on organizations that could support them at the destination would prepare migrants for this process. The research with immigrants in the hosting countries indicates that immigrants express consistently "wishing they were more prepared to immigrate", having more information about the laws in the host country or knowing the language better (Robila, 2010). This type of program would also increase immigrants' awareness on the impact that migration might have on their families and children and to provide some ways in which potential challenges could be prevented. One of the challenges of international migration could be a decrease in the quantity and quality of spousal or parent-child communication which could have negative consequences on couple dynamics, child's emotional development or academic achievement. This could be prevented through specific, effective, and creative strategies of maintaining communication between partners, and between parents and children.

Another type of program should target the family members remained at home. Specific programs as such *individual counseling or support groups* could be offered to *wives of migrants* in order to provide similar experiences and coping strategies.

Support programs are also necessary for *children who live in migrant families*. Specific programs targeted to different age groups and gender should be developed. For small children play therapy programs could help the child to express his/her emotions regarding missing the parent. For older children, having a support group would give them an opportunity to share their

challenges and how they cope with them, giving them a chance to learn from each other. Research has indicated that immigration has diverse effects on individual family members that vary depending on their gender. For example, boys become less adaptive in adolescence while girls become more adaptive, perhaps due to their increased ability to identify social support systems that promoted adaptation (Lamb, & Bougher, 2009). As such, targeted help for boys and girls is also recommended.

Child-caregivers represent another category that might benefit of social support. There are many situations in which both parents migrate and the child is cared by a family member, most likely a grandparent. In Eastern Europe, grandparents are very involved with their grandchildren even when parents are at home. However, being a grandparent raising a grandchild full time brings up some challenges such as requirements for higher level of energy and more responsibilities (e.g., Goodman, 2008). Having *support programs for caregivers* are beneficial in providing source of comfort and release of anxiety.

Finally, the third type of *programs supporting migrant families* should be targeted to preparing *school and community officials* to support the children who have migrant parents. Given that a child's universe is mostly focused on school, it is very important for the school personnel to be prepared on how to support these children. There is evidence that sometimes the teachers' are not supportive but rather poignant about migration, underlining only the negative consequences of migration and approaching these children as "being neglected by their parents". Instead a more supportive attitude and efforts to reach out to parents abroad (e.g., by email) to inform them about child's progress, is recommended

Societies should make these programs available to migrant families in order to support their success. Given the high impact of remittances and economic benefits brought by international migration, the governments should provide these types of strategies that would increase the benefits of migration and diminish its challenges.

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