

INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT: PAST AND PRESENT ACTIVITIES

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Four phases can be distinguished in the work programme of Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in the area of international migration:

Phase one, the early nineties: During this phase work was limited to a few, unplanned activities. These activities were implemented in response to needs resulting from the chaos prevailing in the region immediately after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. They consisted in publishing some reports designed to address the emerging issue of returnees, forced to return to their country of origin, particularly the Yemenis who left Saudi Arabia, the Jordanians from Kuwait, and the Egyptians from Iraq. The reports concentrated on the social and economic challenges posed by return migration, which increased as a result of the second Gulf War.

Phase two, the late nineties: In the work programme of 1999-2000, international migration was fully part of the work plan and addressed by a special expert group meeting. The Population Team in the Social Development Division (SDD) was responsible for organizing a three-day Expert Group Meeting (EGM) in October 1999, at the UN-house in Beirut. The meeting focused on "International Migration in the Middle East: Patterns and implications for sending and receiving countries". The purpose of the meeting was to bring population and development experts together to discuss and share their perspectives on: economic change and its impact on migration from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe during the nineties; the dramatic changes in population movements in the region, especially during the aftermath of the second Gulf War; and the subsequent changes in population policies. The EGM was designed to review and to discuss the ways in which the contemporary socio-economic and political forces were influencing the process of international migration in the Arab region, and to propose the most favourable framework for policies that serve both sending and receiving countries. Thus the old migration regime, which treated migrant labour as a form of human capital, and explained international mobility of labour in terms of market forces of supply and demand for labour, was revisited and evaluated against the political forces imposed by the Gulf War.

Phase three, in accordance with the work programme of 2000-2001, ESCWA published a book entitled *Migration and Population Policies in the Arab Region* (E/ESCWA/2001). The book contained four papers in Arabic, namely:

1. *International migration and the Arab labour market, changes and challenges.*
2. *Reassessing the economic implications of labour migration in some Arab countries.*
3. *Revisiting migration policies and the shaping of a regional migration regime.*
4. *International migration in the Arab countries.*

Phase four: in accordance with the work programme for 2002-2003, an activity was planned to analyze the linkages between population growth and development within the context of globalization and economic growth. Thus a study entitled "Responding to globalization: trends, challenges and labour market policies and population dynamics" is being carried out to highlight the importance of new labour market policies and strategies that can balance the supply and demand of labour in the context of globalization and population dynamics. The publication is designed to study: (a) current labour market policies in relation to population dynamics, economic growth and migration; (b) future changes in population age structure, its implication for economic growth and poverty, and (c) the initiation of new labour market policies that curb migration while responding to globalization.

The study will examine the migration process in the region from two perspectives: a positive one according to which Arab countries have the potential to benefit from changes in the population age structure because of

the soon to appear “demographic bonus” which, in turn, may curb worker migration; and a negative perspective according to which worker migration will increase due to economic policies that are incompatible with changes in the age structure, thus further exacerbating the problems related to labour migration.

Lessons learned

No matter how limited the number of activities that dealt with the subject of international migration, ESCWA has learned some very important lessons, essential for developing future activities. These are:

The inertia in the work of scholars and the academic community in the Arab countries. In spite of the dramatic changes that have taken place in the international and regional arena, and in view of the fact that migration has been at the forefront of public concern in the 1990s, very few studies are available on the region and the number of scholars who are engaged in studying international migration is lower than it used to be in the 1970s or 1980s. This situation can be attributed to:

- The absence of a well-developed theoretical framework to adequately interpret the current regime of international migration;
- The lack of reliable and comparable statistical data on international migration in the Arab region;
- The lack of surveys to provide empirical evidence on the migration process;
- The lack of mechanisms to monitoring repatriation;
- The inadequate definition of a migrant;
- The absence of networking mechanisms that could increase collaboration among experts from various Arab countries;
- The limited financial resources allocated to research and development in the region;
- The inadequate financial allocation provided by international and regional donors to initiate inquiries on international migration in the region.

Changing paradigms. The conventional neo-classical thinking that treats migrant labour as a form of human capital and explains international mobility of labour in terms of market supply and demand is no longer appropriate to interpret the sudden shifts in the organization of the labour migration system that accompanied and followed the 1991 Gulf War. Due to the wars:

- The structure and character of the Middle East migration system collapsed during the 1990s, and the Gulf War left in its wake immigration policies based chiefly on security concerns;
- The Arab region has experienced all types of migration, return migration, temporary and permanent migration, labour migration, and forced migration.
- The large exodus of returnees has put tremendous pressure on the productive capacities of the countries of origin. This raised many questions on the effectiveness of remittances. In theory, remittances were effective in increasing the productive capacity of a country. In practice, the pressure of returnees on countries of origin has shown that, while the transfer of labour during the 1970s and 1980s did not increase economic efficiency, the inflows of remittances did not stimulate productive investment either;
- Furthermore, many countries have realized that out-migration not only deprived them of their best human resources, but also that the cost to the educational system in most of the countries of origin was enormous. This predicament influenced negatively the social rate of return and created a situation of high opportunity cost to investment in education.

In view of the current situation, the following actions appear to be of primary importance for:

ESCWA's work in the area of international migration in the region:

1. Promoting dialogue among scholars by establishing regional networks of interested scholars to facilitate information exchange and the development of a new regional paradigm on international migration.
2. Carrying out surveys to provide evidence on the causes and consequences of international migration in the Middle East.
3. Publishing a newsletter or a periodical on international migration issues in the region.
4. Developing a regional database with information on all types of migration (return migration, temporary and permanent migration, labour migration, and forced migration).
5. Considering the incorporation of the subject in its regular work programme through the activities of the Statistics, Social and Economic Policies Divisions.

The work of Arab Governments on development:

1. Integrate population policies in sustainable development. Since the welfare of people is the purpose of development, efforts should concentrate to avoid the possible trade-off between population size and economic growth. Sustained economic growth ensures the minimization of the unemployment problem and thus reduces labour migration in labour surplus economies.
2. Dissemination of statistical data. A regional survey on the characteristics of international migrants is recommended for, without it, studies would be difficult to prepare given that the number and characteristics of international migrants have changed markedly in the past decade.
3. Improving the research agenda by adding: (a) globalization and its effect on migration in the region, (b) the role of family networks in supporting migration flows, (c) the effects of migration on women and families, (d) the effect of migration on the feminization of societies in sending countries, (e) migration and human rights, (f) migration and its effect on culture and identity, (g) the consequences of the decline in temporary migration compared to permanent migration.

ESCWA's Future activities

1. In line with the aforementioned recommendations, and in view of the fact that peace is an important ingredient to development, ESCWA is currently switching into a more pragmatic approach by acknowledging and addressing the current political instability and its causes and consequences in the region. Since poverty elimination and population stabilization are two factors recognized to be influential for achieving stability and curbing the stimulus of all forms of migration, the population team is planning to organize a one-day symposium in Beirut to initiate dialogue among scholars and to review and discuss the possibility of establishing regional networks of interested scholars to facilitate information exchange and to promote the initiation of a new regional paradigm that establishes the linkages between "Political stability, development and population movement". However, the implementation of this activity depends on the availability of funds.
2. In line with the statistical needs, the Social Statistics Team is planning for an expert group meeting to take place in the next biennium.