

The Slow Process of International Discussions on Migration and Development

On May 17-19, New York was once again the centre of the current debates on migration and development: UNICEF, acting as the chair of the Global Migration Group (GMG) organized a two-day symposium on “Migration and Youth: Harnessing Opportunities for Development”. This event was then followed by a UN General Assembly Informal Thematic Debate on International Migration and Development. Dr. Elie comes back on those two events and their significance for the future of international discussions on Migration and Development.



Bringing together a wide range of experts and practitioners the UNICEF/GMG Symposium particularly highlighted that migrants are not just individuals on the move but rather ‘collective entities’, families which may be disrupted because of visa regulations which do not facilitate family movement and reunion. Often, those who suffer the most from this situation are the children left behind. The case of those children exemplifies how complex migration and development dynamics are: the impact of migration goes way

beyond economic indicators and it is often difficult to increase migration’s positive impacts on development and minimize negative ones. For example, policy-makers have to realize that positive impacts such as improvements in the standards of living through remittances can actually generate negative impacts by creating new vulnerabilities, especially psychological troubles in the case of children and adolescents.

At this symposium, the Graduate Institute was represented by Dr. Jérôme Elie of the Programme for the Study of Global Migration, who also attended the UN General Assembly event. This Informal Thematic Debate unsurprisingly turned out to be very formal and was hardly a debate since member states insisted in reading out standard prepared statements rather than engaging in a discussion with the panel experts. Nevertheless, it marked an important milestone (albeit not necessarily an hopeful one) on the road to the next UN High Level Dialogue on Migration and Development to be held in 2013, as well as within this year’s Global Forum on Migration and Development process. Many states expressed their interest in the future involvement of the UN in migration affairs and prospects for the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD). Some presented interesting ideas. However, in practical terms, the level of commitment and especially of financial contributions needed for the GFMD to function properly remains lamentably low. In a surprisingly strong statement, Sir Peter Sutherland, Secretary-General’s Special Representative on International Migration and Development, explained:

“Words are fine, deeds are more important. ... We have to start moving the good ideas we discuss in rooms like this into the field and we have to do so in an unprecedented scale. If we needed a reminder of the urgent need for action, the Arab spring provided it. It illuminated the many gaps in the international governance of mobility.”

Concerning the GMFD, he reminded that this process remains a “fragile plant” especially as three countries have pulled out as hosts lately and there is no confirmed chair yet for next year.

In those conditions, one may speculate about the level of achievements the GFMD is able to produce and how far it can become more than an informal ‘talk-shop’. To be fair, the informal nature of the Forum has actually made a “great deal of good in bridging regions, in fostering relationships, in producing new ideas”. It has also already led to some practical applications

which are now being assessed under the current Chair (Switzerland) through focused and action oriented meetings around the world: those regional results will be discussed in-depth at a final two-day extended meeting to be held in Geneva in early December, which will be preceded by a two-day Civil Society gathering.

In 1951, the French delegate to the Brussels Migration Conference stated:

“The meetings that have moved from Geneva to Paris, Paris to Strasburg, Strasburg to Geneva, Geneva to Naples and Naples to Brussels, are somewhat reminiscent of a team of explorers, not lacking in boldness and really eager to begin their ascent, but who have been circling round and round the mountain without being able to decide on the best way of scaling it and of getting themselves roped together, an indispensable precaution.”

Sixty years later, confronted with a “problem which stands amongst the greatest facing mankind”, it remains to be seen whether more tangible results can be achieved in the field of migration governance, especially as it relates to migration and development processes.

In the coming months, the Programme for the Study of Global Migration will continue to monitor this process and contribute with its expertise to various events organized in cooperation with the Swiss Chair of the GFMD and other important stake-holders, especially Civil Society representatives.

Dr. Jerome Elie

Useful links:

Programme for the Study of Global Migration: <http://graduateinstitute.ch/globalmigration>

Global Migration Group: www.gmg.org

Global Forum on Migration and Development: <http://www.globalmigrationgroup.org/>

UN General Assembly Informal Thematic Debate on International Migration and Development: <http://www.un.org/en/ga/president/65/initiatives/migration.shtml>

SDC Share web Migration and Development: <http://www.sdc-migration.ch>