

Migration 2.0: A time for action at the UN Summit on Migration and Development

Peter D. Sutherland¹

In October this year, for only the second time in its history, the UN General Assembly will focus on international migration. Nearly a billion people rely on migration as the best way to increase their personal liberty and to improve health, education, and economic outcomes for their families. If the right policies are put in place, there is clear evidence that states can magnify these positive outcomes, while also generating significant financial and social gains for countries of origin and destination.

To succeed, October's summit must generate action on how to reduce the economic and human costs of migration. It also must determine how states and other stakeholders can deepen their cooperation in solving migration-related problems—all while avoiding the political axe-grinding typical of most migration debates.

The portents were not positive as the first-ever UN summit on migration approached in 2006. Knife-edged rhetoric on human rights and national sovereignty prevailed over substantive deliberations on how to improve the lives of migrants. Old animosities pitted north versus south, countries of origin against countries of destination. But beneath this political posturing lay a pent-up desire to begin addressing the problems and opportunities created by international migration—challenges that require cooperative action.

So when Kofi Annan and I proposed the creation of a Global Forum on Migration and Development, the conversation shifted. The Forum—informal, non-binding, and designed for policymakers rather than politicians or diplomats—was evolutionary and unthreatening. Critically, it framed migration in a positive and practical light by twinning it with development. This allowed all states to feel they had something concrete to gain by working together.

The Forum's value is now self-evident: over 150 countries gather every year to consider joint action that addresses common challenges—from ensuring that migrant workers are paid fairly and treated decently, to cracking down on smugglers and traffickers, and changing public perceptions of migrants. It is a safe harbour in which governments build trust and a common understanding. In addition to the advent of the Global Forum, the 2006

summit also produced the Global Migration Group, which brings together 14 UN agencies, IOM and the World Bank to coordinate their migration-related work.

It all adds up to more than just talk; recent years have seen real, if gradual, progress.

Take remittances: Average fees charged by banks on the USD 401 billion migrants sent home to developing countries in 2012 fell to 7 per cent, from 12 per cent a few years ago—a savings of USD 20 billion for migrants and their families. In some corridors, money transfer fees are approaching zero. More countries are engaging diasporas by tapping their knowledge, networks, and capital to advance health, education, and economic goals. Normative progress is also apparent: The Domestic Workers Convention enters into force this September, creating the potential for an estimated 50–100 million home workers (mostly migrants) to be protected under national labour laws. Some countries, meanwhile, have been mainstreaming migration into national development strategies, while also making more vigorous efforts to protect their workers abroad.

In October this year, after seven years of intensifying international engagement, the UN's 192 member states will convene again to discuss migration. This time the summit must produce more than new processes like the Global Forum and the GMG. It should deliver an action-oriented agenda for how to create a safer, more transparent system of international mobility that protects the rights of migrants, serves shared economic interests, quells public anxieties about migration, and helps cast migrants less as scapegoats and more as vital members of our communities.

It's a very tall order. But the prerequisites for progress are in place—and missing this opportunity would be shameful. Migrants suffer unconscionable abuses, from the shocking—38 domestic workers from Indonesia are believed to be on death row in Saudi Arabia, many for questionable reasons—to the mundane—the typical Nepali labour migrant to the Gulf loses a third of his wages to exploitative recruiters. Attacks and discrimination against migrants are growing on every continent, while anti-immigrant politicians are gaining adherents. And tens of millions of families endure the hardship of separation that is an inherent, painful aspect of migration.

¹ Peter D. Sutherland is the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Migration.

We can—and must—do much better than this. If the right policies are in place, we can ensure that migrants move, work, and live with greater dignity and security, and that our neglect of migration does not enable political extremists.

All together now: The four pillars of growing cooperation

Four significant trends have converged that should raise the odds that the upcoming UN High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development, to be held October 3–4 this year, produces meaningful results.

First, the number of states with a stake in international migration has exploded. One telling metric is membership in the International Organization for Migration, which stands today at 151 states, versus 90 in 2001. In parallel, the dividing line between countries of origin and destination has blurred. States that a decade ago considered themselves origin countries, like Mexico and Turkey, now are home to large numbers of migrants. Meanwhile, in just a generation, countries like Greece and Spain have gone from being countries of emigration to countries of immigration—and back again.

An important trend in these evolving flows is that migration is no longer mostly about poor people moving to rich countries. Movement is now quite evenly divided, with about a third of migrants going from one developing country to another, a third going from developing to developed countries, and the balance moving within the developed world. South–South migration, moreover, is accelerating.

In total, there are an estimated 214 million international migrants, from just 150 million in 2000; this number is projected to exceed 400 million by 2040. Yet even that larger figure fails to reflect the true impact of migration, as it excludes the hundreds of millions of people who rely on the income of migrant family members. It is safe to say that nearly a billion people rely on migration as the best way to increase their personal liberty and to improve health, education, and economic outcomes for their families. If the right policies are put in place, there is clear evidence that states can magnify these positive outcomes, while also generating significant financial and social gains for countries of origin and destination.

All this means that more and more states have an interest in thinking and acting holistically about migration, rather than seeing it only from the vantage point of an origin or destination country. Their points of view are slowly converging, creating greater potential for common action.

The second trend can reinforce this bent toward cooperation: The emergence of a solid evidence base on how migration impacts development, and on which

policies work best. This will not completely quiet debates about brain drain and the other ill effects of migration; but it makes it harder for policymakers not to take cost-effective actions they know can benefit migrants and the communities they support. Evidence also allows states to share a common understanding of migration grounded in fact, thus deflating the mythology and theology that distorts the debate.

It is hard to understate how critical this growing evidence base is in moving governments to act. Many national policymakers and development agencies had long seen migration as a sign of failure, rather than as inherent to the human spirit. In their eyes, if development policies succeed, then people should not need to migrate. In other words, migration has been seen as a problem to be solved—not as a solution to a problem. By thinking this way, development actors squandered a valuable opportunity to design policies that might have magnified the benefits of migration and better protected the rights of migrants.

Those narrow-minded days are over. Over the past year, migration stakeholders—led by Sweden, Switzerland, Bangladesh, and several international organizations—have catalysed an effort to ensure that migration is given full consideration in the post-2015 development agenda. Their arguments—built as they are on solid evidence—should resonate as the successor framework to the Millennium Development Goals is constructed in the coming years. I am fully supporting their efforts.

The third trend is the proliferation of conversations about migration among policymakers at the regional level. From Bali to Budapest, Abu Dhabi to East Africa, governments gather regularly to work on migration challenges that affect their regions. Today, two dozen such regional consultative processes (RCPs) exist. Countries that were once silent on migration in international debates, such as the Gulf States and the Russian Federation, are now vigorous participants; South–South cooperation, a rarity in the past, also is growing through such processes. RCPs are laboratories where ideas can be tested, potentially gaining global relevance. They are also where states build trust and habits of cooperation with each other.

The search for partners also extends to non-state actors, which have become crucial actors in efforts to create a safer, fairer international migration system. The activation of such non-state actors—which include employers, NGOs and philanthropies—is the fourth trend that should abet international cooperation on migration in the coming decade.

These stakeholders play several crucial roles: They compensate for the attenuation of governments, whose capacity to contend with migration has diminished due to the global economic crisis—at the very moment when migration is growing rapidly. Second, NGOs

live and work daily with migrants and can alert us to incipient problems. Third, civil society actors are risk takers, able to act when governments are too fearful to do so. Employers, meanwhile, not only determine how migrants are treated in the workplace, they also can be effective advocates for reform—as we are seeing in the current US immigration debate.

The strengthening of these non-state actors in the migration debate is part of a broader trend—reflected not only in the human rights movement but also in the acceptance of principles such as the Responsibility to Protect—that helps bring the interests of individuals to the fore in policymaking. Migration has long been the exclusive domain of states. Migrants, especially the undocumented, have had almost no voice in shaping policy. Today, that is changing.

These are all hopeful trends. But there are countervailing forces at work, too. For instance, the *criminal* private sector—smugglers, traffickers, and exploitative recruiters—also has been empowered in recent years. This makes it even more urgent for us to make the most of the HLD next autumn.

The shape of success at the High-Level Dialogue

A Post-2015 consensus: First, UN Member States should forge a consensus position on incorporating migration into the next iteration of the Millennium Development Goals. Migration's inclusion in the post-2015 development agenda is the best way, in the short term, to formally bring migration under the UN umbrella—a goal that is dear to many stakeholders. This also would help reshape public perceptions: Migrants might gradually be cast as agents of positive change, rather than as desperate people fleeing failing states.

The evidence is clear. Data from 74 developing countries suggests that remittances have a strong impact on reducing poverty, including its depth and severity. Migrants use their earnings to support families and communities, pay for education and healthcare, and invest in productive enterprises. Because they are stable and often anti-cyclical, remittances also contribute to the stability of recipient economies. In 2009, in the wake of financial crisis, remittance flows fell 5 per cent; by contrast, foreign direct investment to developing countries plunged 89 per cent.

Remittances improve health outcomes for families and children left behind: The higher incomes and better health knowledge associated with migration have a positive influence on infant and child mortality rates. When it comes to education, children in households with a migrant family member are more likely to be enrolled in school and to complete more years of schooling, and less likely to leave school. Girls in particular often benefit. A migrant who moves from a less developed country to

an advanced industrial one sees a 15-fold increase in income, a doubling in educational enrollment, and a 16-fold reduction in infant mortality.

The bottom line is that migration has been instrumental in achieving several of the current MDGs, including poverty reduction, gender equality, the prevention of infectious diseases, and environmental sustainability.

The contributions of migrants to destination countries, meanwhile, are obvious and manifold. The world's 105 million labour migrants are the safety valve in the global economy, helping meet critical needs for labourers. Migrants are the backbone of health systems in many OECD countries. There would be no 2022 World Cup Qatar without millions of mostly Asian migrant construction workers. The inventiveness of migrants is also invaluable: US data shows that a 1.3 per cent increase in the share of migrant university graduates increases the number of patents issued per capita by 15 per cent—without any adverse effects on the innovative activity of natives.

The next generation development agenda is being fiercely contested—advocates for dozens of causes are fighting for space on what will be a limited list of post-2015 goals. But even if the efforts of migration stakeholders fall short of the loftiest expectations, their hard work already is paying dividends. They have had to systematically and more precisely assess how migration contributes to development; this will lead to smarter, more effective policies. They also have had to learn to make their case to development actors (not an easy crowd to please!) and to the broader policy arena.

Already, we have the outlines of what might be dubbed Migration Development Goals. These could be built around the targets of lowering the costs of migration, such as fees that go to visas, recruiters, and banks; raising its quality, by mutually recognizing credentials, making pensions more portable; increasing safety; and reducing discrimination.

Some measures are commonsensical and relatively simple to implement. The Mexican Government, for instance, created the Remesamex website that allows remittance senders to compare fees—a model that should exist in every country. A partnership between the US Federal Reserve and Banco de México, meanwhile, allows remittances to be sent to any account in Mexico for just USD 5 fee, regardless of the amount.

Other fixes, while more complex, are also feasible. Only 20–25 per cent of international migrants, for example, can take their social security benefits with them when they return home. Yet some countries are far more successful than others in protecting their workers: The majority of migrants from Morocco (89%), Algeria (87%), and Turkey (68%), to take three, are covered by

bilateral portability agreements. There is no reason why this cannot be a global standard.

All this needs to come together at the HLD, when migration stakeholders must speak with one, powerful voice to the powers that will shape the post-2015 agenda.

Action on migrants in crisis: A second goal for the HLD involves a commitment by states to help some of the most vulnerable migrants—those affected by acute-onset crises, such as the conflicts in Libya and the Syrian Arab Republic or natural disasters like the floods in Thailand. Hundreds of thousands of migrant workers were stranded by the Libyan war; their employers were not obligated to repatriate them and their countries of origin either did not have the means or the will to do so (some countries did an excellent job, such as the Philippines, China, and Turkey, many with the direct assistance of IOM in evacuating more than 200,000 of their citizens to safety and helping them reintegrate back home).

We need to have plans in place that clarify who will come to the aid of migrants when tragedy strikes and to ensure that emergency relief laws apply equally to all residents of a country. When Hurricane Sandy struck the United States last autumn, for example, emergency health and housing aid (to take two examples) was blind to immigration status.

I have urged stakeholders to create a framework for action on assisting migrants in such situations. The HLD could endorse this initiative. While it only addresses a small fraction of vulnerable migrants, it is important in several ways. It takes global cooperation from the realm of rhetoric to that of action. It expands the conversation beyond the strict migration and development framing, in the same evolutionary way that the Global Forum catalysed international cooperation in 2006. It compels more complex coordination that involves not only international agencies, but primarily states, as well as employers and civil society. IOM's Migration Crisis Operation Framework, endorsed by IOM Member States in 2012, is a critical contribution in this regard.

And if all these actors begin to act in concert to help migrants in acute crises, there is no reason why they will not eventually be able to assist other vulnerable migrants.

A redoubled commitment to the Global Forum and GMG: Third, states should acknowledge the success of the Global Forum by committing to its long-term sustainability, including by providing predictable financial support. Similarly, states should herald the efforts of the Global Migration Group to create a more robust infrastructure and a multiyear agenda. An important part of the GMG agenda should involve

capacity building on data collection related to migration and immigrant integration, without which policymakers will be seriously hampered (especially in states that are relatively new to mass immigration).

Forging a forward agenda to solve problems: Finally, and perhaps most important: States should arrive in New York City next October fully prepared to discuss the migration-related challenges that they are committed to solving together. A vigorous debate can be the first step in helping define a set of priorities for the next decade. By mapping where the political will lies, we can then better understand what changes we might need in the global governance of migration and in the institutions that oversee the movement of people across borders.

The list of challenges is daunting. Beyond those related to migration and development, we also must face up to the appalling levels of discrimination and abuse we are seeing against migrants. The omens are disturbing: from South Africa—where new research last month found that a majority of citizens believe undocumented migrants should not receive police protection—to Europe—where anti-immigrant extremists are gaining favor from Sweden to Germany to Greece. Bias against immigrants is often fed by misperceptions.

Publics also consider immigrants to be prone to criminal behaviour, when, in fact, the data does not support that conclusion. One major reason why this myth persists is that countries everywhere place migrants in detention, or even deport them, for non-criminal offenses—a fact that cements public views of migrants as miscreants. Appallingly, many migrants, including children, are held in solitary confinement.

As the Secretary General's Special Representative, I will be listening carefully to what states and other stakeholders have to say in October, in order to develop recommendations for setting priorities on migration and on what institutional changes might advance those priorities.

All these are modest but important steps. They signal a commitment by the international community to act rather than just talk.

Bottom up, top down: Mutually reinforcing strategies

The biggest risk facing the HLD is that a practical, incremental agenda is derailed by the desire of some stakeholders to focus on grander moves—drafting a new international convention on migration, for instance, or creating a body that might evolve into a global migration agency empowered to regulate cross-border movements.

These goals are admirable. Their supporters should continue to advocate for them, making their case as

persuasively as possible. However, there is little sign of a consensus to carry forward such larger ambitions; too many states are simply too protective of their sovereignty, and are also hemmed in by the toxic domestic politics of migration.

Working from the bottom up, by solving practical problems related to migration, will eventually enable broader normative action. Smaller groups of states, banding together in a kind of mini-multilateralism, can trail-blaze solutions to common challenges that might eventually become global standards. This will only speed the way to a normative future.

The bottom-up practical approach and the top-down normative one share a common cause: To improve outcomes for migrants and our societies. The pursuit of grander goals should not undermine more incremental efforts; polarization between these two approaches would jeopardize all progress. States must eschew the short-term satisfaction of scoring political points in favor of working hard at cooperation.

We are on the threshold of a new era of international cooperation on migration. Let's make sure we cross over it in October.