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Labour Migration: from absentee to key driver in a global develop- ment framework?

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Labour Migration: from absentee to key driver in a global development framework?

Bonn, Maastricht, 29 April 2013. Last week the interior ministers of Germany, United Kingdom, Austria and the Netherlands sent a letter to the European Commission demanding stronger measures against so-called 'revolving door migrants' from Romania and Bulgaria who stand accused of abusing these countries welfare system. The four ministers, thus, call for an EU discussion to determine a common interpretation of the EU's freedom of movement legislation. The predominantly restrictive measures called for once again confirm that migration is among the most sensitive and hard to manage areas of public policy. In October this year, the United Nations High Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development (HLD) will convene for the first time since 2006. Migration also receives renewed attention in on-going debates on a post-2015 global development framework. The UN post-2015 Task Team observes that migration and mobility are important enablers for inclusive and sustainable development. While this seems uncontested, the present Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) largely ignores the importance of international migration. It seems that implicitly the MDGs encourage and support people to develop themselves, but preferably without moving to another country.

The effects of the current 215 million registered international migrants on sustainable development are complex. Most of the international migrants move to find jobs and are economically active in their countries of destination. The act of crossing borders itself is often an escape from poverty, frequently though not always transforming the lives of the migrants and their families for the better. In Nepal, about 20% of the decline in poverty between 1995 and 2004 is ascribed to the country's migrants and the remittances they send home. In 2010 a recorded \$325 billion of remittances directly reached people living in developing countries, approximately three times greater than the total official development assistance (ODA)

for that year. Beyond direct impact on reducing poverty, there are observed positive effects of international migration and remittances on education, health and gender-equality.

Economies of developed, developing and emerging countries of destination equally benefit through labour migration. In developing countries such as Thailand or Ivory Coast, migrant workers have positively contributed to economic growth. The OECD states that in most of its member countries '*immigrants have made an important contribution to employment growth during the past decade*'. And there could be even greater gains if international labour movements were fully liberalised: estimates of potential global economic gains range up to 150% of current global GDP levels.

Despite the recognised potential, international migration may also entail negative implications that discussions on a post-2015 framework need to take into account. These include negative effects on the health, security and well-being of migrants due to disrespect of their rights and the nature of jobs they perform. Negative effects for sending societies can include labour shortages, reduced social cohesion or increased brain drain. Also for receiving countries there have been gains. The OECD finds that in most of its member countries immigrants of various skill levels have made an important contribution to employment growth during the past decade.

Yet, when it comes to economic impacts in both sending and receiving countries, not all countries or all groups within countries may immediately benefit to the same extent. The actual benefits largely depend on the match between skills and labour market needs and the terms of integration. Unfortunately, instead of identifying and finding this match through suitable social and legal policies, many destination countries tend to respond by placing further restrictions on migration and mobility. These trends of securitisation of migration policy hamper development in sending and destination countries alike, including the Euro-

pean Union (EU) that faces challenges relating to its graying population and costly social policies. Tackling these challenges by means of facilitating legal migration however seems difficult given the prevailing political climate in many of its Member States. This climate is perpetuated through polarised debates around socio-economic and socio-cultural problems that misrepresent both the opportunities and challenges of labour migration. Arguing for more labour migration under such a climate when also faced with growing levels of unemployment indeed represents a formidable political challenge.

The recently published European Report on Development 2013 puts forward three recommendations for elements to be considered in the post-2015 framework with regards to international labour migration of especially low-skilled migrants. First of all, little progress has been made in granting migrants rights in line with key Conventions on migrant workers by the United Nations (UN) and the International Labour Organization (ILO). Besides increased ratification of these instruments (something many EU Member States still have to do), the information on migrants' rights collected by the UN and the ILO could be complemented by a global migrants' rights index. Both instruments can help increase international pressure to hold governments accountable. Second, better and more data is needed. This includes data to better match labour supply and demand on an international scale, which could be combined with a future global agency focusing on matching skills, ensuring compliance with labour standards and facilitating visa processes. The emphasis should be on creating new legal opportunities to the benefits of migrant, sending and receiv-

ing countries. Third, more representative and formalized governance structures at national, regional and at the global level are needed to make migration an integral part of a whole range of sectoral policies.

The European Commission is currently preparing a new policy proposal on Migration and Development that will seek to inform a common EU position for the HLD. Both in the preparations of the HLD and in the post-2015 context, the EU has recognised migration and mobility as a key driver for inclusive and sustainable growth. Europe's own migration policies and practice however struggle to adequately internalise this insight, leading to a picture whereby Europe's internal policies and international positions on the topic seem to lead separate lives. Although Europe is by no means solely responsible for the past deadlocks in UN-level discussions on migration, it can strongly influence the current discussions by accepting to be part and parcel of the universal challenge of facilitating global labour migration. Before the EU can make that step, though, there is a need to move away from fact-free and polarised domestic political debates and to start reflections on the role of labour migration in shaping the future of Europe. Under the present political climate, as the recent letter from the four EU Member States illustrates, this will inevitably take time.

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