Background

There is common agreement that migration can foster development under the right circumstances. Migration can also contribute significantly to social change. Despite growing concerns over security and the preservation of a cohesive sense of national identity, there has been increased recognition, in recent years, of migrants’ positive contributions towards the development of countries and communities of destination. The focus of international thinking has shifted away from a predominantly negative view of the link between migration and development, which emphasized the need to eradicate the root causes of migration, brain drain, labour force depletion and rural exodus. Without minimizing some adverse social effects, there is however a greater acknowledgment of the positive consequences and potential – often not fully realized – of migration for development.

As agents for development, migrants can bring substantial community-level and macro-economic benefits to destination countries through the alleviation of labour shortages, the enrichment of human capital and the creation of job opportunities and accompanying wealth resulting from migrant entrepreneurial activities. These are factors which can increase the flexibility and productivity of the economy and contribute to growth. In their countries of origin, migrants act as agents for development through the transnational networks they create through which they can promote the positive impact of their financial and “social” remittances on poverty reduction, knowledge and skill transfers and investment.

Beyond the “typical” development gains, migrants can act as agents for social change: migration has the potential to enrich not only economies and communities, but also, and perhaps equally important, the culture and societies of both countries of origin and destination. Besides financial remittances, “social” remittances, including the transfer of ideas, attitudes and social capital are key factors that contribute to social transformations in countries of origin and destination. Through migration and exposure to different social norms and values, migrants are able, to contribute more significantly to capacity development, democratization and respect for human rights in both countries of origin and destination. This has been seen to have a transformative effect, sometimes positive, sometimes negative, impacting norms and ideas related to race, class and gender in both the countries of origin and destination.
The migration process can also lead to the transfer of social capital, through an informal learning process in which migrants build and nurture interpersonal relations and social ties in a variety of socio-economic, cultural and political contexts. Migrants also contribute significant resources to the countries of destination, a fact which is not always recognized by some host societies and indeed the migrants themselves. In this respect, the role of the media in raising public awareness and shaping public opinion on the contributions of migrants to the host society, both economic and cultural, is significant. At the same time, migration transforms notions of national and personal identity.

The challenges for policymakers are to:

a. look beyond national borders in analyzing the scope, purpose and impact of their policies.
b. look beyond the traditional separation between social/employment policies, integration policies and migrant flow policies in order to take into account their interrelated effects. This will in turn enable a long-term cost-benefit analysis, benefiting host societies, sending countries and migrants.
c. aim for longer term impact of their policies and emancipate the policies from short term political and electoral stakes. This is necessary to go beyond the loss of coherence and efficiency in integration policies linked to political alternation.

Transnational connections between societies resulting from migration necessitate the formulation and implementation of appropriate policy interventions by States. Firstly, the reason for this is that migration policies in a transnational context are likely to produce an impact outside the domestic sphere for which they are primarily intended. Secondly, the success or failure of those same policies will also be determined, to varying extents, by the local contexts in which these policies are implemented. How can multilevel stakeholders make the best of the potential for social change and development in order to foster respect and cooperation between people beyond cultural differences?

Questions for discussion

The panel is meant to:

1. Discuss ways in which migration and migrants impact social change and development in migrants’ sending and destination countries;
2. Identify ways in which a wide range of stakeholders can further the potential of development and positive change through migration and examine how policies and specific efforts to promote social cohesion can ease tensions between communities;
3. Explore ways in which migrants can retain ties to their country of origin which contribute directly towards fostering development gains.
4. Discuss ways in which integration policies can help foster migrants’ contribution to development and change and identify challenges and constraints.
5. Explore how faith-based organizations can contribute to the international agenda of cooperation and direct engagement with migrants, to ensure that migration contributes to development.

Organizing partner

International Organisation for Migration (IOM)