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EIGHTY-EIGHTH SESSION

THE IMAGE OF MIGRANTS IN SOCIETY

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1. What is the image of migrants in society today – in both host and home countries – and why is this important? As migration increases, and migration policy has become a top policy priority of governments worldwide, public perception of migrants has a direct impact on the policy direction of governments on migration. While there is growing recognition of the opportunities that migration offers for economic growth, development and stability in host and home countries, perceptions of migrants have not kept pace with changed policy understanding.

2. Historically, there has been a very mixed image of migrants. “The migrant” is frequently depicted in literature and art as the adventurer, the one who dares to move and goes where others are afraid to go, the one who seeks the new. Having arrived at the place of destination, the migrant is often the one who is the bringer of ideas and energy in his or her desire to construct a new life.

3. At the same time, there is the picture of the migrant as the exile, the other, separated from the country of departure and living a life apart. In this conception, the migrant arrives as an alien in the country of destination and the emphasis in the image is on the difference that separates the migrant from the host society.

4. Today, the image of migrants is less balanced. Indeed, the public perception of migrants seems to be overwhelmingly negative. In reality, migrants of all skill levels contribute a great deal to societies.¹ To paraphrase Wall Street Journal writer G. Pascal Zachary, migrants spawn creativity, nourish the human spirit, spur economic growth, and empower nations.² Migrants bring diversity, provide innovation and are an antidote to stagnation. However despite this reality, powerful misinformed assumptions and negative stereotypes of migrants prevail. With the growing incidence of irregular migration, migration is increasingly associated in the public mind with illegality – crossing borders illegally and working illegally. Worse, the notion of “migrant” today frequently evokes an image of “asylum seeker” which in turn too often has come to be seen as someone coming to abuse the system. Lower skilled migrants, in particular, are often seen as displacing local workers and abusing social welfare systems and become scapegoats for economic insecurity. Powerful religious and cultural stereotypes exist as well. In the extreme, migrants of Muslim origin and practice, in particular, are seen in many Western countries as potential threats to local values and identity as well as security risks linked to terrorism.

5. Why is there such a negative image of migrants in society today? Part of the response lies in the fact that patterns of migration today are broader and more diverse than previously, but these patterns are not well understood, resulting in misinformation and misperceptions. There is

¹ See “Valuing Migration: Costs, Benefits, Opportunities and Challenges”, MC/INF/276, Eighty-eighth Session of the IOM Council.

² G. Pascal Zachary, “The Global Me – New Cosmopolitans and the Competitive Edge: Picking Globalism’s Winners and Losers”, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2000.

no doubt, as well, that persons of certain nationalities and persons belonging to certain ethnic groups are frequently the subjects of stigmatization. Misinformation and misperception can perpetuate a vicious cycle, influencing government policy, mass media and public opinion, each of which then directly or indirectly influences the others, and the resulting image of migrants in that society.

6. For example, there is a common perception that international migration takes place primarily in a South-North direction, whereas current data indicates that more than 40 per cent of migration takes place between developing countries.³ This misperception in an era of growing human mobility results in increased public concern over inflows of migrants and over irregular migration, and smuggling and trafficking, in particular, and as a consequence affect the image of migrants in general. Abuse of immigration laws and systems by some easily leads to a negative image of many. “Public perceptions reflect real issues and real problems, but they also reflect ignorance, prejudices and fear.”⁴ The result is that options for policy makers may be constrained by outdated or misinformed public opinion.

7. This paper will explore the ways in which migrants are portrayed in both home and host societies, and how these images affect public opinion and policy decision-making. It will also examine the role of key stakeholders, in particular governments, the media, worker associations, international organizations, civil society, as well as migrant associations and migrants, and the ways in which these stakeholders can influence and shape perceptions about migrants in society and the options available to policy makers. Managing migration requires managing how migrants are perceived in society.

The Image of Migrants in Host Countries

8. Today most governments receiving migrants are facing increasingly sensitive questions about the value of diversity, multiple identities and how government policies and public perception can be adapted to build unity and social cohesion, and respect difference. For traditional countries of immigration such as the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, migrants have been responsible for their very formation and will continue to be crucial for their global competitiveness. Nations can preserve their traditions while embracing change, and the question for them is not whether to embrace diversity, but how.⁵ However, even traditional immigration countries are facing growing challenges on how to manage public perception regarding the image of migrants in society. These same issues are being faced on a rapidly increasing scale by countries all over the globe as international migration grows truly “global”. Particularly in areas of dense migrant populations, migrants are viewed by some as threatening to national values and national identity. The importance of public perception in these debates is key. Research has shown that the populations in urban centres, where larger numbers

³ A poll in Britain earlier this year found that people estimated the proportion of ethnic minorities in Britain as 23 per cent when the real figure is at 8 per cent.

⁴ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Commission for Social Development, Forty-second Session, February 2004, “A Social Perspective on International Migration”

⁵ Ibid.

of migrants settle, are more tolerant than in rural settings. However, intolerance arises more often when migrant communities are created within a community that tends to segregate migrants from the rest of the population.

9. Public perception often sees a causal relationship between immigration and high unemployment/economic insecurity, growing public health concerns and increasing demand on social welfare systems, despite evidence to the contrary that migrants in many host societies take jobs that would otherwise remain unfilled, are not public health risks, and contribute considerably more in taxes than they consume in services. Again, this is most in evidence in areas with a high concentration of migrant populations.⁶

10. Lack of active promotion of tolerance and understanding in a diverse community can lead to discrimination and social exclusion of migrants. In turn, socio-economic and political frustration and alienation among migrant communities can create conditions which could trigger potentially harmful situations. It is critical that managing the image of migrants be incorporated directly into policies and activities of the various partners involved in managing migration.

The Image of Migrants in Home Countries

11. In the home society, there are two principal issues which influence the image of migrants. The first is the widely accepted perception that migration of skilled professionals has a negative net effect for the home country. In reality, this assumption has yet to be properly tested. In many instances, when balanced against the financial return through migrant remittances and return investment, as well as decreased unemployment through replacement recruitment from the local labour market, the result may be more balanced.

12. The second key issue is that of reintegration, and the mixed images of diasporas and return migrants. Migrants are great sources of richness and development, through the remittances they send, the investments they make, the skills they bring, and the innovation they provide. (The Syrian Government refers to its diasporas as “our best ambassadors”.) Increasingly, labour migrants are being viewed by many countries of origin as potential agents for development, especially in terms of their potential for remitting funds,⁷ transferring know-how and creating businesses and trade networks. There is growing evidence of the benefits migrants can bring to their countries of origin. Some research has shown that public opinion towards migrants is directly related to the extent of the migrant community abroad. The larger the migrant community abroad the more favourable public opinion is in the home country towards those migrants.

⁶ The United Nations Development Programme Human Development Report 2004 finds that 59 per cent of Miami’s population is foreign born, almost half of the population of Toronto and Los Angeles are foreign born and more than 25 per cent of the populations of London, Abidjan, Sydney, Singapore, New York City and Vancouver are foreign born.

⁷ The World Bank estimates that in 2002 the officially registered flow of migrants’ remittances worldwide amounted to USD 80 billion, with over 60 per cent going to developing countries.

13. However, returning migrants often face hostility as having abandoned their home countries, and are seen as “less” of a national than those who remained. This assumption is frequently accompanied by a sense that returning migrants feel they are better than or superior to their compatriots who remained at home. They may have become accustomed to a different standard of living, absorbed different social traits or values, and may experience a sense of no longer fitting in. Occasionally returning migrants are seen as failures that could not make it abroad. Their return may be viewed as a result of an inability to get ahead in the host country.

The Role of Stakeholders in the Image of Migrants

14. Dispelling negative images of migrants in society is best done through partnerships between governments of home and host societies as well as with other relevant stakeholders such as the media, employer associations, international organizations, migrant associations as well as civil society. Informed policy decision-making based on realistic assessments of the contribution of migrants to the community can improve understanding and perceptions as well as reduce prejudices and counter negative images of migrants in both receiving and home countries. It is through the active involvement of home and host societies that the full potential of migrants will be realized and their public image enhanced.

The Role of Governments in Influencing the Image of migrants

15. International migration is now more commonly referred to as “transnational migration”. Migrants are moving more easily and more frequently between home and host countries, and their image as migrants, both at home and abroad, needs to be managed. More and more countries are actively seeking skilled migrants to offset skills shortages in a range of professions. Migration of semi- and lower-skilled migrants also fills gaps and expands productivity levels in agriculture and other sectors. In some developed countries, migration is being included as part of a policy toolbox to respond to demographic pressures. Governments in home and host countries cannot expect migration policy to work effectively without investing in managing the image of migrants in society.

16. A number of measures can be taken by governments to influence the image of migrants in society:

- Transparency in migration management, including dealing fairly and openly with abuses to migration systems, is probably the single most important factor in gaining support for migrants and migration policy-making.
- Public authorities in host countries play a pivotal role in justifying to the public the need for migrant workers and the benefits of being open to migration and educating the public, conveying positive images of migrants.
- Integration and assimilation of migrants into the job market to become productive members of the host community requires a stable and supportive environment. Mainstreaming basic services such as access to education and language training, health care and housing, as well as promoting family reunification, can help simplify

and encourage the integration and productivity of permanent and temporary migrants. Care must be taken to ensure a balanced treatment between migrants and host community members in order to avoid negative public reaction towards migrants.

- Government policies related to diversity can be developed in such a way as to promote respect of migrants and social cohesion. Issues relating, for example, to multiple citizenship, voting and ownership rights are being explored by more governments in an attempt to understand the social, political, economic and other implications this can have for States and migrants.
- More and more government programmes are being developed, aimed at improving the image of migrants in society, such as the opening by the French Government of the new “*Cité nationale de l’histoire de l’immigration*”, or European Union financing of the European Local Authority Network Against Racism (ELAINE) – the network of local authorities supporting exchange of information on ethnic minority policies in order to promote improving the image of migrants.
- It is important that the public understands that migrants not only have rights which come with their status but also obligations to comply with the national laws.
- Most traditional immigrant-receiving countries have broad anti-discrimination laws and regulations. Some countries also have sensitization training and intercultural orientation for civil servants, local administrators, employment services, entrepreneur associations and trade unions.
- Governments may seek to encourage skilled migrants to return home with the offer of employment in key positions, and other benefits to facilitate reintegration. Unless approached with sensitivity, this may have the unintended effect of developing a secondary status within the local society, providing the oft-mistaken perception that foreign training and experience is superior and can better meet local labour market needs than local training and experience.
- Some countries of origin are active in promoting the image of their migrants internationally as part of their efforts to open new employment avenues for their nationals abroad. Here migrants are viewed from the outset through a lens of success. While these efforts no doubt produce largely positive results, they may have the unintended risk of placing an additional burden on the migrants who feel they must live up to certain expectations. Publicly available accurate information on the living and working conditions of migrants and problems encountered when they are abroad would be useful to counter unrealistic expectations on the part of the home society.
- A final task is the development of appropriate national media policies that not only ensure a correct and balanced portrayal of the migration phenomena and migrants themselves, but also reflects the multi-ethnic composition of new societies, in terms of migrants’ presence in the media, and appropriate programming.

The Role of the Media in Influencing the Image of Migrants

17. The media is very influential in promoting, either wittingly or unwittingly, specific public images of migrants. The media can play a considerable role in promoting the values of the host society and reinforcing respect for human rights and dignity. “Unfortunately, the portrayal some media give of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers is often such as to perpetuate racist and xenophobic views in the public opinion ...”⁸ In most countries, the mainstream media are considered to be the most appropriate channels for information and communication for all groups in the society. However, they do not, as yet, reflect the multicultural and multireligious nature of our societies in an adequate way.⁹

18. Often migrants are portrayed in the media as existing on the margins of the society. In the case of irregular migration, superficial and sensationalist reporting, which in some ways associates migrants with criminal activities, creates a climate of fear and discrimination towards migrants.

19. There is a need to devote greater attention to the constructive role media can play in combating discrimination and racism as well as in promoting integration of migrants in host societies. Through well-informed and balanced reporting, the media can provide a far-reaching forum for public discussion and shape public opinion of migration. Such public media as national television and radio stations, as well as newspapers and magazines, can be powerful conduits for more balanced and correct information on migrants.

20. Some national professional organizations, as well as the International Federation of Journalists, have recently introduced guidelines on reporting migration and asylum-related news. The aim of these guidelines is not to limit freedom of expression, but to ensure that migration statistics are reported accurately, with adequate interpretation and in context, and that a balanced image of migrants and refugees is presented to the public.¹⁰

21. Making cultural diversity part of the reality of television and radio, both in terms of migrant journalist presence and of programming, will have a profound effect on the perceptions and attitudes of the viewing and listening public. It provides the immigrant and ethnic minority communities with positive role models, as well as information, and it provides the majority society with a more balanced portrayal of these groups and with a realistic view on the present

⁸ Council of Europe, Parliamentary Assembly, Doc. 10280 “The image of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in the media”, 20 September 2004.

⁹ In Italy, a study conducted by Censis, a respected national research institute, within the project “Image of Migrants in Italy through Media, Civil Society and the Labour Market” indicated that in 78 per cent of the cases, television news mentioned the migrant in a negative context, and that in 58 per cent of the cases reference was made to criminal or illegal behaviour. This research was supported by the outcome of a European-wide monitoring of the press in 15 European Union member States in October 2003, by OL/MCM, which showed that crime and deviance was the most important *topic* in news with an ethnic dimension, followed by discrimination and racism as the second most important topic.

¹⁰ Ibid.

multicultural society. Both aspects are of importance to ensure immigrants and ethnic minorities have a respected place in societies.

The Role of the Private Sector in Influencing the Image of Migrants

22. In a growing number of business sectors, migrants constitute a large part of the workforce, and are viewed from a variety of perspectives. On the one hand, many migrants will accept jobs left unfilled by the local population, often for lower wages and fewer benefits. On the other hand, many highly-skilled migrants are employed in fields related to their expertise and training, and are in a position to contribute, through their employment, to their host societies. Migrants in the latter scenario are often met with mixed feelings. Often skilled migrants are accepted at face value for the knowledge, experience and valuable contribution they can offer. Others may be perceived as a threat to the host society, particularly if they are involved in big business, buying out local holdings or taking over local business interests.

23. The image held of migrants in the first scenario can also be mixed. Lower-skilled migrants may be viewed by employers not as people, but as expedient (and low-cost) labour. This increases their vulnerability to victimization.

24. The private sector is slowly recognizing the benefits of addressing this image through creating appropriate working conditions for migrants. “Companies that work to understand their relationship with migrants, develop human rights policies and practices for the protection of migrant workers, conduct outreach and build partnerships with non-governmental organizations and stakeholder groups, and monitor and publicize compliance are better positioned to benefit from the growing mobility of the world’s population and the rising expectations for responsible corporate operations.”¹¹

The Role of Migrants and Migrant Associations in Influencing the Image of Migrants

25. In their interaction within the host community, whether in economic, social or cultural terms, migrants have obligations to respect authority and to comply with the national laws of society. The nature of the migrant’s interaction within the community and the respect shown by the migrant to the rules of the host society reflects directly on the image of migrants in that community.

26. Services that offer counselling and information on administrative procedures, labour market regulations and how to access mainstream services in the host countries are important for newcomers. Contacts of referral networks of migrant associations should be made available to national and local services so that migrants or migrant associations can offer relevant services with the support of funding and guidance from host governments. Migrant associations can also play an important role in improving or building the image of migrants in the host society through, for example, promoting closer interaction between host and migrant communities, and

¹¹ Business for Social Responsibility, “Migrant Labor” see www.bsr.org

promoting increased knowledge and understanding of migrant realities, the challenges they face in fitting into their new community, and the contributions they can make.

For Further Deliberation

27. The issue of *the image of migrants in society* suggests a number of key questions for discussion:

- How can national policies (i.e. immigration, integration, social, economic) in host countries have an impact on the society's attitude towards and perception of migrants?
- How can stakeholders contribute to promote the positive image of migrants?
- How can the media play a more positive role in shaping public opinion about migrants?
- How can migrants themselves be supported in promoting their image?