

IOM COUNCIL MEETING – INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE ON
MIGRATION –

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THE IMAGE OF MIGRANTS IN SOCIETY – KEYNOTE
INTRODUCTION BY PROF.DR. RITA SUESSMUTH, MEMBER OF
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When preparing for this conference, I was wondering whether it would be possible to describe THE image of migrants in society in just a few words. Then, I learned about the plans of the organisers to view a multimedia presentation with its eye-catching picture showing a migrant with all kinds of scapegoat qualities attributed to him: the male Muslim criminal asylum-shopping social welfare abuser possibly planning the next atrocious terrorist attacks and how to best suppress his wives. Well, I have to say, it is a very expressive picture of one of the stereotyped characteristics of migrants. I would propose that, if we are to show the stereotype of a migrant in these days, we should add at least one other feature of the migrants' image – the wishful-thinking image. That is, the migrant as the tax paying, intelligent, qualified, language proficient, integrated, healthy, single, successful businessman bringing economic growth, innovation and jobs – and, when work is done, returning to his country of origin.

What we need to work on, however, and I think IOM as international operating Organization co-operating with governments and many other stakeholders holds a strong capacity and responsibility in this,

is to promote a realistic image of migrants. Such image would clearly emphasise that the vast majority of the migrants finding their way to European countries – out of which increasing shares are actually female – are motivated by the prospect of finding a decent work. They are ready to take on those jobs, which we as nationals of these countries do not want to deliver, or for which we do not bring the required qualifications. We need to communicate that the vast majority of migrants, if allowed to, are active on the labour market, are contributing to our economic growth, are indeed paying taxes and did certainly not come to “migrate into our social welfare systems”. Moreover, we need to understand and accept, that some of those migrants, who, after half or even a whole lifetime in our country call it their home and are not returning to their country of origin.

Thus, the characteristic of the image of the migrant seems to me to be a very supple one, adjusted according to the context, the country, the time, the needs and the setting of the respective political agenda, but which we are also capable of shaping.

Let me develop this idea a little more. I say, there is no single image of migrants in society and it is neither consistent nor clear-cut. First of all, one needs to make a distinction between the perception of migrants in the host and in the sending society. Focussing on the perception of migrants in the host society, another distinction is required. In traditional countries of immigration, immigrants in their very quality as persons leaving one country to seek a new life and settle in another form part of the myth and reality of the nation

building process. This is not to deny the increasing derogation of the positive picture of new-coming migrants even in those countries. However, the public awareness of owing much of the countries' achievements to the ancestors' success stories as immigrants does not seem to be completely submerged and still seems to carry some appeal to the host society. Such awareness, or history, then favours a basically positive image and perception of migrants.

In European countries, often described as “new” immigration or, until recently, self-declared non-immigration countries, immigration has for many years been understood as a rather exceptional phenomenon. This has, of course, an impact on the general view of society on the presence of migrants – foreigners – in such countries. There are historical differences between European countries, indeed, in their definition of nation, of belonging and not-belonging, and in certain migration patterns as result of past events and policies – important ties due to colonies as in France or due to large-scale displacement or settling combined with an ethnic definition of nation as in Germany -. Even today, different ways of perception and acceptance of immigration persist. However, let me be quite clear about the fact that differences in the perception of migrants in society are not based on one country or society being more “friendly” or “hostile” than another.

Variation in the perception of migrants is merely related to the respective need or imperative of immigration and the accompanying public and political discourse. In times when migrants are needed,

and when communicated that way, the readiness of society to accept immigration for the sake of development of the whole country can be quite high.

In contrary, when unemployment rates are increasing, economic growth slows down or even stagnates, and a certain degree of uncertainty spreads among the population of a country, affected societies tend to turn more exclusive and even dismissive towards immigration and migrants. Foreigners are more easily depicted as scapegoats for all kinds of negative development in society. A short example in this context: when the Iron Curtain came down, the first migrants from the East (German or of German descent) were celebrated as freed people in Germany. A couple of years later, when the labour market situation changed and many migrants stayed, and stayed different and segregated, resentment developed against those migrants, even though they had the “blessing” of being “German”, which was of course a mixed one – but that is a story to tell on another occasion.

It is in such situations that we can observe a change in climate in a society. “Migrants are taking our jobs”, “migrants immigrate in order to abuse our welfare system” or “welfare parasites”, “illegal asylum seekers”, “health tourists” or in the specific German context “over-foreignisation” (also translated with “inundation”, which is not as clearly depicting what is actually meant)... These are not even examples representing the extreme right, and I am sure, everyone of you already came across such and other infamising statements in press, public or political debate. With such statements, the image

of migrants in general is deteriorated, distinction between those visibly different and others is more strongly pronounced, and hostility is chiefly directed against the most vulnerable of the immigrant population, those who need protection by the host society, asylum seekers and refugees.

That is, even within one country, there is a differentiation between different groups of migrants. Migrants are distinguished according to their origin, to the duration of their presence in society, according to the area they live in, as well as according to the respective problems or achievements that are highlighted in the context of certain migrant groups. In Germany, for example, Greek and Italian migrants are much more accepted than Turkish migrants are.

Now, inquiring what trend is true for the European countries today, we have to realise that it is a somewhat curious and certainly an ambiguous one. On the one hand, almost every European country, just as most of the industrialised countries altogether, are on the demand side for labour migrants. Demographic changes in terms of ageing populations and a declining work force impede on the established welfare standards and would be, to some extent, alleviated by foreign workers. Further, needs of the labour market, which are not met by the native work force are of concern, as such shortfalls may impede considerably on economic growth and competitiveness. As recently in Germany, many industrialised countries are experiencing at times urgent needs for labour migrants, be they high or low skilled workers. These needs should,

according to what I said earlier, lead to the enhancement of a positive image of migrants.

On the other hand, ever since many European countries did have to detect that integration of immigrants did not turn out to be a smooth and unobstructed process, fears and dangers have been formulated in relation to migrants: concerning ghettos, segregation, parallel societies, the failure of multiculturalism and increased crime rates among migrant communities. Even the long and controversial debate on Muslim head scarves in public spaces held in many European countries added to the negative image of migrants. This trend was amplified especially since the catastrophe of September 11 2001, the assault of March 11 this year in Spain as well as developments such as currently occurring in the Netherlands. Immigration, migrants and (non-)integration are ever more closely linked to social disruption and security issues such as criminal activity and the threat of terrorism.

Such association combined with in many countries high rates of unemployment has a visible impact on public debate and the image of migrants in society and even translates into migration and integration policy throughout Europe. It makes it difficult for many countries to justify the needed immigration, leads many governments to restrictive measures towards foreigners and enhances highly controversial debates, even in those countries known as traditionally liberal.

Increasing restrictiveness and general suspicion of migrants representing a threat to the cohesion of society is counteracting the

will and the need of many governments to meet the challenges of the labour market with, as one of the necessary measures, the help of immigrants, as well as to comply with its humanitarian responsibility. In addition, it is not conform to the reality in most European states, where migrants are in great demand in the service sector, as health care personnel, as personnel for hotels, restaurants etc., for domestic services, and in certain sectors as high qualified experts.

Many countries – including Germany with its new immigration law combining legislation on immigration with legislation on integration – are realising that close consideration of new and altered approaches to immigration and integration is required. In order to allow for successful long-term policy aims in the area of migration, it is necessary that the respective society is supportive. This, in turn, is very much depending on the public image of migrants in the host society. But do not get me wrong: I do not think that political decision makers are helplessly subjected to public opinion regarding their scope of action. Political will is of chief importance to public perception and changes in society.

How then, may the image of migrants be improved? I think what is needed for promotion of a positive image of migrants in host societies is a holistic, a co-operative – and not an ethnic – approach. Political decision makers, the media, educational personnel, public figures, the civil society including migrants associations as well as researchers need to promote education and

clarification on issues related to migration, to integration, to different cultures as well as to benefits and risks of immigration and of attempts of its prevention.

More practical recommendations – I want to give only some examples. Integration, needs to be understood as an enduring continuous process. Language is always depicted as key to integration. Though, it is not the only element of integration. Of equal significance is integration into the labour market. Gaining their own life and experiencing recognition and social interchange is essential to the migrants themselves and supports, at the same time, a positive perception of migrants in general.

For the promotion of a fair and balanced coverage without victimisation nor demonisation of migrants and without – at times deliberate – confusion of terminology or categories of migrants (as the one mentioned above “illegal asylum applicants”), co-operation between the media, NGOs, Governments as well as research institutions should be strengthened. Even tabloid press and commercials should respect diversity in society and should definitely avoid to further stigmatising migrants. Commercials, such as the one by Nokia in Scotland recalled in April this year, featuring the site where an asylum applicant has been beaten to death, with the title “this is where I had a good beating”, have to be condemned.

Educational personal, be it in primary, secondary, professional or high schools, should mainstream the respective subject with regard to migrant students and their integration.

It is moreover imperative that political debate is sensitive to its influence and avoids fanning the flames by involving in politicised debates related to immigration.

Finally, success in integration efforts should be attractive for the migrants, for the host society and for stakeholders offering integration measures.

The discussion of the different aspects and determining factors of the image of migrants in society is a very challenging one. More important even are the questions and answers on how we, you, anybody may contribute to change the existing image of migrants to a more balanced and positive – realistic – one. I am glad that the whole afternoon is devoted to exactly these issues and am most curious to learn about your perspectives.

Thank you.