



THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ASPECTS OF MIGRATION

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Conclusions

by

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CONCLUSIONS OF THE SEMINAR ON THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ASPECTS OF MIGRATION

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Migration is a complex but highly stimulating issue, and the very fact that this conference on the economic and social aspects of migration is being held shows the growing importance that governments attach to this issue in an unfavourable demographic context of stagnating or declining populations. The enlargement of the European Union from fifteen to twenty-five countries has only heightened the need to analyse migration in greater depth in order to provide accurate information for public debate and to help develop public policies in this field.

The wealth of information contained in the documents presented at this conference and the ensuing discussions have made it possible to identify major implications for migration policy. This is a policy area that covers a number of fields. It can target objectives that are humanitarian (refugees and asylum seekers) or family-related (accompanying family or family reunification), but it can also – and this was the main theme of this conference – be focused on economic and social goals.

In the short term, temporary immigration is often considered as a variable for adjusting the labour force to labour market needs, but matters are not so simple, for it is not easy to define labour shortages precisely and thereby determine the size of the needs for immigrant labour. Nor is it easy to implement selective policies that will meet the immediate needs of the labour market. It is impossible to control all entries, in particular those involving families and illegal immigration flows. The same is true of outflows, which are most often poorly evaluated, and which show that migrants are more independent and mobile than is generally believed. All these factors are limitations that can reduce the effectiveness of migration policies aimed at meeting labour market needs.

In the longer term, immigration can help offset the process of the ageing of the population in OECD Member countries and its impact on potential growth and on retirement systems. However, we have seen that flows required in this regard involve orders of magnitude that are unrealistic for many EU countries, including future Member countries. Consequently, other policies will have to be found to solve this problem, such as mobilising the resources available within the labour force (e.g. young people, women and the elderly). We must also raise productivity, in particular by investing in human capital, reforming pension systems and reviewing family policies. In short, we cannot count on migration to solve our long-term economic problems.

Does this mean that immigration has no role to play? Obviously it does not, for there have always been population movements between countries, driven by push and pull factors. It is clear that we will continue to rely on temporary foreign labour and that foreigners will decide to come and settle on a more lasting basis in our countries. In the light of these considerations, three major lessons can be drawn from the exchanges and discussions that have marked this conference.

It is important to address all dimensions of the issue of migration

We cannot simply consider immigration as consisting merely of individual contracts between employers and foreign employees, for, as some certain participants pointed out, “nothing is more permanent than a temporary worker”. It is therefore important to focus on the social dimension of immigration and especially on the integration of immigrants, not only into the labour market, but also into

society as a whole. Similarly, the issue of ensuring that migration policy is consistent with development policy was raised on a number of occasions.

Can we really be certain that by attracting highly skilled foreigners we are not contributing to the brain drain, thereby impairing developing countries' capacity to grow and catch up with the developed countries? The question remains open and is of course complex, for immigrants send money home and in some cases even return to their country of origin with valuable new experience that they can use for the benefit of their country. Consequently, this is an issue that deserves to be studied in greater depth.

Successful integration policies must be able to tackle many problems simultaneously and require a holistic approach that can cover a wide range of fields

In this regard, the EU countries might follow the example of the policies implemented in certain settlement countries, such as Canada, in particular as regards the comprehensive legislative framework established to combat racism and discrimination. Education and training are one of the key tools for integration, as is shown by the differences in performance of the children of immigrants or from an immigrant background. Similarly, steps must be taken to ensure the recognition of immigrants' diplomas and qualifications. We must also stress the importance of policies in the field of housing, health care, etc., but if these policies are intended to promote social cohesion, they must remain of a general nature and not be specifically targeted at immigrant populations any more than is necessary.

However, what seems most interesting and innovative is the importance being given to community building policies and programmes, as is the case in Canada, which encompass all aspects of citizenship. This is an important area to be explored in the future, and it should be mentioned that Canada will be organising towards the end of the year, with the participation of the OECD, a conference on the role of social capital in the integration of immigrants. The key role played by immigrant women in this social capital should also be underscored in this regard.

Although the EU can provide a general framework and promote these policies, the precise definition and implementation of policies must be left to Member States

Immigration and consequently integration processes are concepts that are intimately linked to national identity. Each European country has its own immigration history and the situation of immigrants differs greatly from one country to another. As a result, it seems difficult to develop a "one size fits all" policy that would meet the needs of all countries, particularly at a time when the EU is entering into an important phase of enlargement. It is therefore necessary to create a general framework with which each country must comply while being able to adapt it to its own labour market needs and its own capacities to integrate immigrants.

Lastly, in conclusion, governments would stand to gain from placing greater importance on communication on the issue of integration. Only when a wider public has been informed objectively of the results of serious research and analysis of the real costs and benefits of immigration and of the reasons and justification for the policies in the field of immigration that we have discussed will it be possible to dispel all the stereotypes and groundless fears that are still all too prevalent among the population of many countries.