



# **High-Level Policy Forum on Migration**

## **Opening Remarks**

**Angel Gurría,  
Secretary-General  
OECD**

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Minister Besson, Minister Donner, Ms Viljanen, Honourable Ministers, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me as OECD Secretary-General to open this first-ever High-Level Policy Forum at the OECD, chaired by France, on the topic of international migration. This topic is one close to my heart. I made it one of my key priorities for OECD work when I took up my present appointment as Secretary-General. Consequently, I am delighted to see so many countries present at the Forum today and represented at such a high level. The issues we will discuss over the next 1½ days are central to the human dimension of globalisation, linked to the flows of people across national borders.

Not long ago, labour migration flows were reaching record levels. High levels of migration were being recorded in the new migration countries of Southern Europe and more widely, in the European Economic Area, following EU enlargement. At the same time, the traditional settlement countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States) were also recording their highest immigration levels in recent decades.

The on-going economic crisis, however, has put a brake on these recent trends. In Australia, for example, temporary skilled migration has declined by more than 25% in the first four months of 2009. And in the United Kingdom and Ireland, migration from the new EU member countries has declined by more than half. OECD countries now find themselves locked in a very sharp downturn, with only tentative signs that a recovery could begin towards the end of this year. The latest OECD projections released last week suggest that the OECD-area unemployment rate could reach 10% by the end of 2010, equivalent to over 57 million unemployed. While no worker is immune to the risk of unemployment, immigrant workers are among those hardest hit by the downturn. In Spain, for example, the unemployment rate among immigrants was 27.1 % in the first quarter of 2009, compared to 15.2% for natives. Employers almost everywhere are more reluctant to hire immigrants and more prone to fire them. And with rising unemployment, there is more competition for jobs from local workers.

Additionally, migration policies have become more restrictive during the crisis. Numerical limits and lists of occupations in shortage have been reduced and employment tests are being applied more strictly. But not all shortages disappear during a downturn nor does humanitarian or family migration come to a halt. If there is one lesson we have learned from the past, it is that labour migration is not a tap that can be turned on and off at will. The crisis, moreover, will not last forever. With the onset of economic recovery, later this year or in early 2010, the pressures in the labour market arising from ageing and other structural changes will reassert themselves and international migration flows are likely to rebound as part of the solution to addressing these challenges. International migration will remain a prominent feature of the global economy, thus giving rise to a global competition for talent. And the challenges that were present before the downturn will still remain to be tackled.

That is why governments which have factored in longer-term issues in addressing the recession will be in a better position to mobilise the skills of immigrants in support of renewed growth and prosperity. This implies a capacity to respond efficiently to labour market needs, to reduce irregular migration and employment –or redirect it into legal channels- and to ensure better lives for new immigrants and their children.

This also means that OECD governments should strengthen their co-operation with developing countries, for example by decreasing the cost of remittances, by reducing obstacles to returns through greater portability of social rights and by addressing the risks of brain drain through responsible recruitment policies.

Designing an effective migration system, getting public support for it and implementing it effectively is a tall order. However, much of the OECD's work on international migration focuses on this key challenge. In our work, we have addressed a number of questions that will, no doubt, be at the heart of your discussions over the next 1½ days. These include how to identify labour market needs, how to reduce irregular migration, what policies work best to foster immigrant integration, how to ensure that immigrant skills are utilised effectively, what measures are effective in enhancing diversity and fighting discrimination, and how best to engage with origin countries.. This is a challenging and difficult area, where exchanges of experiences about good and bad practices can bring significant pay-offs.

This is also an area in which we need to convince public opinion that immigration need not be a threat to the livelihood and way of life of native-born workers and will not pose an additional burden to the public purse. It is all too easy to exploit migration issues for electoral ends. If we do our jobs properly, that will hopefully be more difficult to do.

As economic recovery takes place, international migration can be expected to increase again. And with the spread of globalisation, demographic and developmental differences will intensify this trend. Therefore, we should aim for a world in which immigrants have jobs, pay taxes and integrate well, as opposed to one in which many are unemployed and perceived as a drain on public budgets. This goal can be achieved with policies that take into consideration the interests of all concerned and share the benefits of migration between the countries of origin and the host countries. Now is the time to prepare that future.