

# **MOBILISING MIGRANTS' SKILLS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN THE MENA REGION**

## **Making the most of young migrants skills**

**Jointly organised by the OECD and UNFPA**

**Tunis, 13-14 May 2013**

**Opening remarks**

**by**

**Stefano Scarpetta**  
**Acting Director for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs,**  
**OECD**

Your excellence Prime Minister **Ali Larayedh**, Minister Khalil Jaziri, Minister Khalil Zaouia, State Secretary Houcine Jaziri, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour and a great pleasure for me to welcome you all on behalf of the OECD to this conference jointly organised by the OECD and the UNFPA on *Mobilising Migrants' Skills For Development In The Mena Region: Making the Most of Young Migrants Skills*. We are grateful to UNFPA for having managed so well the practical organization of this event and to the Tunisian authorities for the warm hospitality. I would also like to thank all the countries represented here today for supporting, through their presence and I'm sure active participation, this important event.

The MENA region is key for the OECD in many ways, but in particular in the field of international migration. Migration from and within the MENA region is an old phenomenon which is gaining importance. Given the recent economic and political developments in the region and the challenging labour market conditions as well as the persistence of labour shortages in ageing OECD countries, emigration is likely to persist and grow further. In this context, the main question is how MENA can and OECD countries, as well as migrants and their families, mutually benefit from international migration?

The ambition of this conference is precisely to create a space for dialogue between origin and destination countries, building on sound economic and demographic analyses, in order to find practical ways to improve the international mobility of skills in the region and beyond. In particular, it is of great importance to identify key strategies both in origin and destination countries to promote the accumulation, utilisation and mobilisation of skills, knowledge and competencies required by today and tomorrow's labour markets.

Despite continuous growth in many countries of the MENA region, higher education levels of youth and continuous efforts by the governments, the labour market prospects of the young generations remain limited. Unemployment rates of youth are today twice to four times as high as those of adults and in Jordan and Tunisia one out of three young persons is unemployed. About 40% of youth in MENA have weak or no links with the labour market and these figures of joblessness and exclusion are even higher for the high-skilled and women in general.

Youth represent about 20% of total population in the MENA region, and this share keeps growing, versus 13% in OECD countries. Emigration is seen as an opportunity to better labour market and living conditions for all but even more so for the youth and the most educated among them.

Indeed, the Middle East and North Africa represents a stable source of migration to the OECD. In 2010, emigration from the region counted for about 7% of total inflows to the OECD (380 000 in 2010). This represents a 34% increase compared to the early 2000s. Leading sending countries include Morocco (124 100 persons in 2010), Iraq and Iran (48 000 and 40 000 respectively). Migration flows from the region is strongly concentrated towards a limited number of destination countries. The main countries receive two third of total emigration from the region to the OECD (Spain receives about 20% alone, Italy, France and the US about 12% each).

In total, there are about 7 million migrants from the region living in OECD countries, of which about 2.3 million persons are from Morocco and 1.4 million from Algeria. The numbers would be much larger if second and third generation migrants were taken into account. The MENA Diaspora tends to be more highly-educated than that of other regions: 36% of MENA migrants in the OECD have a university degree, versus an average of 33% for all migrants.

However, despite these characteristics, migrants from the region residing in OECD countries tend to have weak labour market outcomes. An overall employment rate of 48%, a female labour force participation of 43% and an over-qualification rate of 33% suggest that the migrants' skills and potentials are not fully utilized in destination countries.

In other words, a great source of talent is out there and countries may not be benefiting from its full potential. It is crucial to understand the factors limiting the international transferability of skills and to find ways to improve skills recognition and reward.

The region is also characterized by a large number of international students in OECD countries. In 2010, there were about 170 000 students from the MENA region in the OECD and many of them tend to stay on after the completion of their studies. They represent an important source of skills for the region but actions should be taken to ensure that these young graduates can consider the opportunity to return and contribute to the development of their region if they wish to do so. It is important to understand the factors that hinder return and to identify the conditions needed to attract these migrants back and ensure an effective and rewarding utilisation of their skills.

Migrants have competencies and which are not only confined to their universities degrees. Many of them have technical and language skills, particularly valuable in both origin and destination countries. Hence, it is important to assess the Diaspora's contribution not merely in financial terms or as inputs of skilled labour, but also by its ability to build bridges between countries of origin and destination, bridges which help stimulate not only economic activity, but also cultural and exchanges of ideas, knowledge and norms.

The MENA and the mediterranean region are characterized by large demographic and economic imbalances. Migration, if well managed, has the potential to contribute to mitigating these imbalances and to generate mutual benefits. Too often omitted from trade negotiations and multilateral frameworks, migration could actually be the cement of our common future.

This future can start today if we are able to identify practical means to lift the obstacles than hinder international transferability of skills and to design sound recruitment channels that would help to foster mobility in both ways. I and my colleagues are looking forward to rich exchanges, ideas and concrete proposals to meet this ambitious objective over the next two days.

Prime Minister, Minister, ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude by thanking you all for your presence today, and to our partners for this fruitful collaboration which is extremely valuable to us at the OECD.