

*Editorial*

**Migration in the Post-Crisis World**

**A**s OECD countries are recovering slowly from the crisis, international migration is at a turning point. The economic downturn marked a decline in permanent regulated labour migration flows of about 7%, but it was free-circulation movements (within the European Union) and temporary labour migration which saw the biggest changes with falls of 36% and 17%, respectively, for 2009 compared to 2007. With the first signs of economic recovery, however, there seems little doubt that migration for employment purposes will be picking up again.

At the same time, the global changes that are affecting the world economy have not left migration untouched. The emerging economies of China and India now occupy the first and third places on the list of the main origin countries of immigrants to the OECD area, while South Africa is the main destination country for asylum seekers. As economic growth in developing Asia outstrips that of OECD countries, regional migration flows are gaining importance. South-South migration already accounts for about half of global movements and the competition for talent goes well beyond the OECD area. Ongoing geopolitical changes in Africa and in the Middle East may also have a significant impact on both regional and intercontinental migration flows. Future migration movements are thus unlikely to mirror completely the patterns of the past.

Given the severity of the economic crisis, migration movements have not declined as much as one might have expected, however. This may partly reflect the impact of current demographic trends, notably in European OECD countries, which point to increasing labour needs, at all skill levels. It also illustrates that family and humanitarian migration are less affected by economic downturns than labour migration and tend to maintain themselves. As economies get back on their feet, the effects of ageing populations and workforces will begin to reassert themselves, and recourse to increased international migration will again look attractive as a way to help fill shortages and to help finance health and pension systems in deficit.

But are our societies ready for what is ahead? Recent elections, in the context of difficult economic conditions, have revealed a discomfort on the part of many voters in OECD countries with the prospect of increasing levels of international migration.

How should governments confront these various challenges?

- **First, it is important to get the facts out in the public domain.** Migration, both legal and irregular, cannot be considered to be out-of-control and governments have shown that slowly but surely, they can improve its management. However, recent events in North Africa have shown that geopolitical changes can rapidly change the picture. OECD governments cannot afford to be complacent and need to show that they can adapt quickly to changing circumstances and to manage disruptions to international migration flows in an effective and co-ordinated manner. They also need to recognise that the great majority of migrants are well integrated into their economies and societies. Asserting the contrary helps no one, least of all the immigrants themselves and their children, who need to invest in education and to find both jobs and employers willing to hire them.

- **Second, labour migration management needs to be reinforced** by a broadening of co-operation between OECD countries and origin countries, as well as between governments and employers. The latter need to respect the rules and recruit legally from abroad, rather than illegally off-the-street, if they cannot easily fill a job vacancy. This implies that legal labour migration systems must be in place and functioning well, in response to real labour market needs, both skilled and unskilled. At the same time, emigration, especially via irregular channels, will continue to have high pay-offs as long as prospects for development in origin countries seem dim. To be successful, migration management needs to support origin countries in improving governance and economic development.
- **Third, integration efforts should be strengthened further.** Although most immigrants are well integrated, it would be false to claim that there are no problems. Integration has to be seen as a long-term investment in the future of our societies rather than a short-term cost. A rapid integration of recent arrivals into the labour market is important, but for the medium term, so also are the educational outcomes of their children. Too often, excessive geographical concentrations of disadvantaged and low-educated immigrants have been allowed to develop, with often devastating effects on local school environments and on schooling results. Relegating immigrant disadvantage to certain neighbourhoods and schools does not address it; it merely perpetuates it, as well as maintaining social differences. Governments have been slow to realise this and need to better address this.
- **Finally, it is important that everybody has a fair chance in society to make their way.** Employers should not exclude candidates for employment who are immigrants or children of immigrants because of where they live or how their origin group is perceived. Such behaviour has itself an unfavourable effect on outcomes and in turn reinforces the negative perceptions that led to exclusion in the first place. Naturalisation should be facilitated and encouraged, to guarantee equal rights for all. The public sector should be equally accessible to both children of immigrants and children of the native-born. Equal opportunity policies are good for everyone. In the ageing world that is upon us, OECD countries cannot afford to neglect the skills of a significant percentage of their populations and the economic benefits which these can bring.

John P. Martin



Director for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs