



MIGRATION AND YOUTH: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES*

Introduction

International migration has become the face of globalisation – a symbol of the world’s growing interdependence¹. At the same time, the largest generation of youth in history demands attention: they are highly connected through technology and social networks, they need education and decent jobs, and they want a say in their future. Empowering young people is one of the top five priorities of the UN Secretary-General’s Five-Year Action Agenda.²

Although human mobility has gained increasing international attention in recent years, migration by young people has been mostly absent from global policy debates and national policies.

The Global Migration Group (GMG) is convinced that with the right policies in place, youth migration can represent a triple-win, benefiting young migrants, the countries they depart from, and their countries of destination. The policy responses advanced in this report can transform youth migration from a challenge into an opportunity, empowering today’s youth – tomorrow’s students, workers, entrepreneurs, parents and leaders – to achieve their full human potential.

UNICEF (United Nations Children’s Fund), the GMG chair for the first half of 2011, proposed a joint GMG thematic report analysing the positive and negative impacts of international migration on young people from a rights and gender perspective. UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), in its capacity as the next GMG chair, assisted in launching the process. The report would build on the outcomes of the GMG Symposium *Migration and Youth: Harnessing Opportunities for Development*, held in New York on 17-18 May 2011.³ The purpose was to provide a common GMG policy and advocacy platform from which to support policy-makers, civil society and other stakeholders to design and implement evidence-based policies that maximise the positive effects of migration and help young migrants to realise their rights.

The resulting report provides a broad compilation of data, research findings and experience from GMG member agencies and academia, offering an extensive evidence base for policy and practice. The report is intended to be user-friendly and practical, and includes key messages and concrete recommendations for policy-makers and other stakeholders.

The report was a collaborative effort. GMG member agencies prepared chapters on youth migration concerns in their areas of competence, and academic specialists were invited to prepare several chapters. Civil society organisations contributed text incorporated in various chapters. The present document is a summary of the full GMG report.

YOUTH MIGRATION

Today, there are approximately 232 million international migrants, according to the 2013 UN estimate of global migrant stocks (measuring the number of migrants at a particular point in time). Around 12 per cent of international migrants (roughly one out of eight) are youth (defined here as those between 15 and 24 years of age). Data on migration flows – the change in the number of migrants over a period of time, as distinct from stocks – is generally less reliable and age-specific.

Acknowledging that it is difficult to determine with precision the drivers of youth migration, the report notes that young people’s motivations are often linked to the search for sustainable livelihoods, due to lack of employment and/or under-employment, absence of decent working conditions, and poor economic prospects in countries of origin. Furthering education, family reunification or formation, and escaping from regions affected by war, persecution, humanitarian crises, or natural disasters are also important drivers. For women, gender-based discrimination, including violence or restrictions on their rights, is another motive.

WHY YOUNG PEOPLE?

This report focuses on youth in the context of migration: persons aged 15-to-24 years as defined by the UN (“without prejudice to other definitions by Member States”)⁴. This cohort represents a specific category of migrants whose unique needs, rights and challenges are not being adequately addressed by the larger migration policy debate.

On occasion, the report refers to other age groups, notably children (0-to-17)⁵ and adolescents (10-to-19).⁶ The age range covered by “youth” sometimes overlaps with that of childhood and adolescence, periods during which individuals face specific vulnerabilities and have additional protection needs that are often ignored or placed at risk during the migration process. Because of this overlap, several chapters of the report refer to adolescents as well as youth, and stress that all those under the age of 18 who are

impacted by migration in countries of origin, transit and destination, regardless of status, are protected by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Youth is a pivotal stage of human development during which young people make the transition from childhood to adulthood and from dependence to independence and interdependence. This transition (social, economic, biological) is fundamental to safeguarding, shaping, further developing, and deploying their human and social capital. It is during this period that young people make important decisions about their lives – particularly their ethical, social, economic, cultural, political and civic positioning and role – setting the stage for adulthood. While it is during adolescence that the investments and gains of early and middle childhood come to fruition, these gains must be sustained and consolidated to ensure an effective transition to adulthood.⁷

Young people's choices and the way they decide to pursue them have a significant impact not only on their own lives and opportunities for human development, but also on the lives of their societies and communities, both in the medium and long term. The youth years pose both challenges and opportunities. They represent a period during which the efficiency of interventions throughout childhood and adolescence can be tested, assessed and, as a result, further improved or re-considered. At the same time, policy decisions affecting this age group can either maximise or hamper the return on investment in earlier stages of the life cycle.

A positive migration experience can set young migrants on a successful path toward capitalising on their accomplishments and developing economic and social assets for their future. However, if the circumstances are negative, migration can have particularly dire and traumatic consequences for young peoples' short and long-term future. Not only they lose a valuable opportunity for full human development, but their countries of birth and destination stand to lose an enormous potential contribution to social, economic and cultural development.

Getting today's youth migration policies right also means planning for the future. By 2025 – when the global population is expected to reach 8 billion⁸– countries around the globe will feel the impact of today's demographic changes. The majority of the next billion people will be born in low- and middle- income countries.⁹ While developed countries are simultaneously facing low fertility rates, ageing populations and declining workforces, many less- developed countries continue to experience higher birth rates and a significant

'youth bulge'.¹⁰ The former need workers, while growing numbers of young people in less-developed countries need jobs. Migration will be an increasingly important factor influencing the response to these trends.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG MIGRANTS

Young migrants are generally resourceful, resilient, adaptable to new environments, and able to learn and speak new languages. Many have skills and qualifications and are familiar with new technologies. As noted earlier, for some young people migration is a way to escape from chronic poverty, violence, gender-based discrimination, or the impact of climate change.

For most young people migration represents an important step toward achieving a sustainable life for themselves and their families.

Adolescent girls in developing countries are migrating in ever greater numbers. While migration can be risky, it can present adolescent girls with new opportunities that are unavailable in their home villages and towns – provided necessary safety nets and resources are in place. When migrant girls can take advantage of the benefits, they can be a powerful force for change in the developing world – improving lives and reducing poverty in their communities and countries.¹¹

In countries of destination, equality of treatment and opportunity allows migrants, including young migrants, to contribute as productive members of their communities: as workers, students, entrepreneurs, artists and consumers. If migration becomes a productive and empowering experience and opens up new opportunities, young migrant women and men can gain more skills through education and/or work experience and earn higher wages, allowing them to support their families and contribute to the development of their communities of origin, as well as the societies in which they live and work. For young women, migration can also be a socially empowering experience: as the recipient of remittances or as breadwinners or students in a new country, young women may gain decision-making power and experience greater personal autonomy.

In all countries, a conducive policy environment that respects human rights principles and standards can enhance young people's energy, propensity to innovate, and familiarity with new technologies, thereby helping to revitalise national economies. The young and

mobile represent human resources and development potential for both the countries where they were born and those to which they migrate.

Young migrants' engagement in community life and organizations where they reside and their participation in policy making and implementation is key to mobilizing them to realize –and often to enhance –the opportunities migration gives rise to.

The United Nations 2013 World Youth Report offers further perspective on the situation of migrant youth, highlighting concerns, challenges and successes experienced by young migrants told in their own voices.¹²

SPECIFIC NEEDS AND VULNERABILITIES OF YOUNG MIGRANTS

Risks faced by migrants are exacerbated in the case of youth, especially those under 18 years of age, particularly when they are in irregular situations and face threats of exploitation, trafficking, exclusion, detection, detention and deportation. Young migrants, especially girls and young women, are vulnerable to human rights violations such as child marriage, sexual exploitation, violence and unpaid labour. Many young migrants face deskilling and precarious employment in so-called 3-D jobs (dirty, dangerous and degrading), despite having higher educational or skills-training qualifications.

Unaccompanied minors and children and adolescent asylum seekers, refugees, and stateless persons commonly face absence of international protection, exposure to detention, non-respect for their 'best interests' in treatment and procedures, and lack of access to essential services and national child protection systems.

During the migration process young people can lose their social networks and may also be without parents or family members to provide guidance and care. Due to their age and developmental stage, young migrants are more vulnerable to migration experiences that result in isolation, exclusion and insecurity. They may be particularly affected by xenophobia and discrimination, and suffer further marginalisation due to lack of fluency in the local language, new and different cultural norms, and insufficient information about laws and regulations in their new country. To overcome these risks and enhance their development potential and contributions to their countries of origin and destination, young migrants need to be able to realise their rights without discrimination, including their right to education, health, work, family life, and participation in decision-making and community life.

YOUTH, MIGRATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

In framing the report, GMG member agencies acknowledged that migration is not a panacea for achieving development, nor can promoting migration substitute for appropriate public policies. However, migration is a global reality that, if addressed wisely, can benefit all concerned.

GMG members share the premise that the migration experience can be beneficial to youth if, and only if, migration policies are anchored in a system that protects young migrants' human rights, including labour rights, and enables meaningful engagement in decisions and processes that affect them.

With the arrival of 2015, the target year for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set in 2000, global debates revolve around establishing development goals for the post-2015 era. The UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda acknowledged migration and mobility as important enablers for inclusive and sustainable development and growth.¹³ Global consultations on population dynamics also called for integrating migration into the new development framework.¹⁴

The GMG report contributes to discussions about the post-2015 UN Development Agenda through its comprehensive and exclusive focus on the impact of migration on youth. It complements and supports a GMG Position Paper on Integrating Migration in the Post-2015 Development Agenda.¹⁵ The challenge is not only how to make youth and migration relevant to the global agenda, but also how to make that agenda relevant to youth and the realities of global mobility and interconnectedness.

NOTES

¹ Peter Sutherland, Migration is Development, 15 March 2013, Project Syndicate, available at:

<http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/migrants-and-the-post-2015-global-development-agenda-by-peter-sutherland>

² See: http://www.un.org/sg/priorities/sg_agenda_2012.pdf

³ See: <http://www.globalmigrationgroup.org/news/gmg-symposium-migration-and-youth-harnessing-opportunities-development-17-18-may-2011-new-york> The Symposium was organized ahead of the Informal Thematic Debate of the UN General Assembly on International Migration and Development and during the International Year of Youth.

⁴ United Nations (1981), Report of the Advisory Committee for the International Youth Year, A/36/215, Annex, United Nations, New York

⁵ The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) defines a child as “every human being below the age of 18 years” (CRC Article 1). Children may be granted certain rights and responsibilities at different ages by national legislation; however, there is international consensus on the legal definition of a child stemming from the CRC.

⁶ Adolescence is defined as the period following the onset of puberty during which a young person develops from a child into an adult. Therefore, it is very individual and there is no scientific or legal consensus on a specific age definition. The United Nations uses the age cohort 10-19 when referring to adolescence. However, individuals may experience some of the key physiological and psychological changes from an age earlier than 10, and later than 19 years. The upper boundary of adolescence is often raised to 21 or 25 years of age in contexts dealing with physical, social and mental health and development, with reference to on-going development during these years. Adolescence itself is not usually defined in legislation, though definitions are often linked to national laws setting the age of majority and legal ages for additional rights and responsibilities associated with adulthood.

⁷ UNICEF (2011), The State of the World's Children. Adolescence – An Age of Opportunity, New York

⁸ United Nations, World Population Prospects: The 2012 Revision, UN Population Division, New York, 13 June 2013. Report, press statements and related documents available at: <http://esa.un.org/wpp/Documentation/publications.htm>

⁹ Danzhen You and David Anthony (2012), Generation 2025 and Beyond, UNICEF, New York

¹⁰ ILO, The Youth Employment Crisis: Time for Action, Report V: 101 International Labour Conference, June 2012, ILC.101/V, Geneva. Available at: http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_175421.pdf

¹¹ See: Temin M, Montgomery MR, Engebresten S and Barker KM (2013), “Girls on the Move Adolescent Girls and Migration in the Developing World”, A Girls Count Report on Adolescent Girls, New York: Population Council. Available at: http://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/2013PGY_GirlsOnTheMove.pdf

¹² United Nations (2013). Youth and Migration; World Youth Report 2013. New York. Available at: <http://www.unworldyouthreport.org/>

¹³ UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda (2012), Realizing the Future We Want for All. Report to the Secretary-General. United Nations, New York, June 2012. Available at: http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/Post_2015_UNTTreport.pdf

¹⁴ See for example, United Nations Development Group (2013), A Million Voices: The World We Want. Available at: <http://www.worldwewant2015.org/bitcache/cb02253d47a0f7d4318f41a4d11c330229991089?vid=422422&disposition=inline&op=view>. See also the 2013 Dhaka Declaration on Global Population Dynamics. Available at: <http://www.worldwewant2015.org/node/319783>

¹⁵ GMG (2013), Integrating migration in the post-2015 UN Development Agenda: Position Paper, September 2013. Available at: <http://www.globalmigrationgroup.org/uploads/news/GMG-position-paper-Migration-and-post-2015-Development-Agenda.pdf>