

Good afternoon. I would like to thank the Global Migration Group and its current chair, UNICEF for organizing this symposium and this session. I also appreciate the expertise of the moderator and speakers who have preceded me for the insights gained from their research and experience.

The theme of my remarks is: *A view from the field: the impact of migration on the children and youth left behind.*

I will take a perspective from inside the homes of the families who said good bye to a father, mother, brother or sister either with anticipation of a better situation for the family as a whole or with fear and concern for what was to come or, in most cases, both of these types of feelings. My remarks stem from the visits to those families and from the experience of our members in various countries on five continents.

As we welcomed about 40,000 migrants from Mexico each year to the rural and urban areas of Northwest Ohio, we had a growing desire to meet the families of our migrants so that we could better facilitate services provided by our organization. We also wanted to better understand the motives and process of migration and the impact that it has on families that have to stay behind in the ranchos and towns of Guanajuato, Tamaulipas, Queretaro, Chiapas, Oaxaca, Jalisco, Irapuato, and Michoacan.

As we grew to know the migrant farm workers in the labor camps and the factory workers in apartments and trailer courts of Northwest Ohio, the subject of families left behind often surfaced. Conversations revolved around messages from home, occasioned by the latest phone call or perhaps a video sent of local celebrations at home. Contact information for the families left behind was shared with us and the yearly destination state for the visits was determined.

When we traveled to Mexico each January, we immediately noted the obvious improvement in family and community well being that money sent home provided.

People were happy to see us and to relate what they had been able to do with the money sent back by their relatives.

We were received into our migrant families' homes to stay for a few days or a few weeks and the families included us in very honest conversations about feelings and experiences related to the benefits of migration, its challenges, and their hopes for the future.

I will first speak about the benefits of migration for the families we met in the South, especially for the children and young people.

I will then address the challenges that they detailed. Finally I will look at some good practices which need to be explored and/or continued and, above all, some recommendations derived from convictions expressed by the families..

First, the **benefits**. Many of the migrants in the North told us that they had migrated in order to address social protection issues, some of them serious, such as a family member with cancer or a child with heart disease and also, of course, they had migrated hoping to provide basic necessities for the family. I have met adolescents who said to me "I migrated because I didn't want my brothers and sisters to go through what I did; we did not have enough to eat. The migrant worker, then, was the one who made possible a response to these needs and the family was grateful. Many migrant workers in the North were working to make a better education possible for their children who were always eager to show us what they were learning, even their English lessons! Older children that we met as we traveled appreciated the sacrifice that their fathers or mothers were making

so that higher education was possible. We also saw much evidence of homes that were being built with the money earned in the north.

Second, some **challenges**. The time that we spent in homes and in schools broadened our understanding of some serious limitations of the migration experience for the families left behind, especially in regard to the disruption of families. Since we journeyed south for several years, we noted some previously close knit families beginning to experience many challenges to family unity. These challenges included a range of responses. There were efforts to help the children remember their absent parent or sibling by phone calls, and, where service was accessible, more sophisticated electronic communication was used. However, in very rural areas (and this is where most of our families lived) there are significant barriers to communication. There may be only one phone in the community located at the small local store. Winds in the mountains can disrupt the little phone service that exists. (Six hours riding in the back of a truck in the rainy season gives one new meaning to the word “rural”) This inability to communicate on a regular basis can lead to misunderstandings and alienation. At times the distance led to permanent separation.

Often, children in the family are not a part of the decision-making regarding family separation, yet children and youth must take on extra responsibilities. The authority issue is difficult when youth must play the role of an adult at some times while at other times being subject to more strict supervision because only one parent is available. The integrity of the family, which we confirm in so many of our human rights documents, falls victim to policies which do not allow the family to accompany a worker. It was sometimes very sad during these visits to see the pain of the smaller children and young persons, all of whom were impacted by these realities.

Early in our visits, we sat in on a class of 13-15 years old students in a rural area where few fathers of families remained. The topic that day from the state curriculum featured a ten minute video on immigration. After the video was finished, the teacher paused and then said, “So, immigration is a way of solving our problems.” The students responded in a unanimous, unrehearsed chorus of “no”. The conversation that followed allowed the students to express and evaluate the family experience of missing a loved one. The students were comfortable with the teacher because her own husband, the father of their two small children had migrated north. In some homes, young people were also disturbed at the images in the destination country media, painting a picture of migrants as criminals to be pursued. Little children and youth alike were anxious about the safety of their parents or siblings upon seeing so many deaths on the border and they felt the shame of failure after a sibling or a parent’s deportation. In some instances we heard of tensions between the students in schools, some jealous of those whose parents sent money back and the migrant families embarrassed with the exposure of family breakup. Still another facet of family separation was a son or daughter’s decision to migrate.

Thirdly, **good practices and recommendations**. Family support groups, facilitation of communication between the families left behind and the migrant workers, home town organizations with youth left behind taking some leadership roles, training of teachers in schools where there are children of both migrant and non-migrant families, cash transfers, country of origin programs which prepare people for the process of migration, work

toward more transparent recruiting practices, and responsive consulates in the country of destination are among some of the ways in which the benefits of migration can be leveraged.

These and many more good practices are attempts to alleviate the absence of the protection for migrant families, to secure their well being, and to compensate for the sacrifice of family separation.

Yet, more challenging recommendations need to take a central part of the migration discourse, even if they require great effort or time. These recommendations address the convictions that we heard as well as the rights that we consistently affirm in our human rights instruments and conventions.

The recommendations are:

1. People-centered development in the country of origin which lessens the gaps of:  
a) inequality of access to basic needs and b) inequality of opportunity.
2. Trade agreements which foresee negative effects on workers in countries of origin.
3. Visa systems in countries of destination which are more consistent with the actual recruitment of workers. Visas that include spouses and children.
4. Opportunities for legal entry into the country of destination which permanently interrupts the development of an class of exploitable workers.
5. Regularization of migrants and their families, many of whom have years of working history in the country of destination.
6. Recognition that locating government migration departments in anti-terrorism units sends an erroneous message - that migrants are dangerous and should be feared. Many enforcement methods reinforce this negative message.
7. Finally, we really need to give serious attention to the “children left behind” in the country of destination.

In closing, I would like to publicly thank the members of migrant families, especially the children, who opened their homes and whose time with us led us to these recommendations, and I would like to thank each of you for listening.