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## SEMINAR REPORT

### UNITAR Migration and Development Series: Facilitating migrants' participation in society

*organized jointly with UNFPA, IOM and the MacArthur Foundation*

3 May 2007, United Nations Headquarters, New York

#### BACKGROUND

On 3 May 2007, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the MacArthur Foundation hosted a seminar on "Facilitating migrants' participation in society" as part of the *Migration and Development Series*.

The event was held in Conference room 8 at United Nations (UN) Headquarters.

The attendees included thirty delegates from permanent missions, fifteen staff from the UN Secretariat, agencies and other international organizations; and nineteen participants from civil society organizations.

#### OBJECTIVES

The seminar was intended to: Foster a better understanding of the actors facilitating migrants' integration and participation in the host society; present ideas and good practices on how host society institutions can establish a dialogue with new immigrants and migrant communities to better accommodate the needs and aspirations of immigrants and their children; look at the role of civil society organizations and diaspora communities in facilitating the integration of newcomers; better understand the interests and impact of countries of origin in their outreach to nationals abroad; inform participants about the Report and the Recommendations pertaining to migration of the High Level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations and discuss next steps towards implementation; inform participants about existing regional mechanisms for the recognition of academic and professional qualifications and explore perspectives for cross-regional and international cooperation in this field.

Information on the seminar and the *Migration and Development Series* is available from [info@unitarny.org](mailto:info@unitarny.org) or at <http://www.unitarny.org/en/migdevseries.html>



## SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

### Facilitating migrant integration: Indicators and policy challenges

If there was an overall message during this seminar, it was that there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to integration. The situation of migrants must be analyzed in the context of the respective host society and with regard to the living and working conditions of nationals. Indeed, the facilitation of integration is often a function of proximity with local solutions and multi-stakeholder ownership being best suited to meet existing needs and demands.

However, it also became clear that international events, discourses and frameworks have an important impact on the integration of migrants and respective policies at the national and local level. There are a number of broad goals of integration that apply across countries. These include efforts to enable migrants to reach and develop their full potential, to protect the human rights of migrants, reduce their marginalization, and foster social cohesion and harmonious coexistence.

At the same time, states face a number of policy challenges, some of which were discussed during the seminar, notably the involvement of civil-society organizations and the private sector, the challenge of diversity and enhanced international cooperation on matters of integration. The discussions also touched upon other issues such as the integration of temporary migrants and migrants with irregular status.

Most speakers concurred in defining integration as a two-way and long-term *process* of mutual adaptation between immigrants and the host society that requires constant dedication. Indicators of successful integration must reflect multiple dimensions such as participation in the social, political, economic and cultural spheres of a country. They should also look at the inter-linkages between them. For example, an immigrant’s employment prospects will often depend on his or her language skills, and the residential situation of an immigrant family may affect the educational outcomes of their children.

Another important feature in the inclusion of migrants that was discussed during this seminar is the element of religion. It was mentioned that this factor has only recently been introduced as an indicator in statistical information in the UK census, for example. It was mentioned that this has already led to a more fine-tuned analysis of existing gaps in integration efforts, revealing, for example, the underachievement of Muslim children in British schools.

The role of public perceptions and discourse was highlighted by several speakers, as was the need to come back on existing stereotypes and assumptions regarding the integration of immigrants. International surveys suggest that, across countries, nationals and migrants tend to have different views of the challenges and facilitators of integration, and a number of incoherencies and paradoxes exist in public opinion on this subject.

### Fostering policy coherence

During the discussions, participants were made privy to some of the very innovative steps taken at the local level to ensure inclusion and participation of immigrant communities. A number of good practices were offered by the example of New York City with its close to 3 million immigrants. Ms. Azadeh Khalili from the Mayor’s office for immigrant affairs stated that free primary education and free access to public health care are crucial building blocks for successful integration at the municipal level. She also highlighted the importance of providing



access to public services for non-English speakers. For example, the City's service information hotline offers interpretation in 170 languages. Another facilitating factor is New York's "don't ask, don't tell" policy. Migrants are not required to provide any information on their immigration status in the context of services provided by the City. In addition, local officials are not requested to share information on the legal status of an immigrant with other authorities.

While this local policy has been in place for 20 years, and has contributed to trustful relations between the City and its immigrant communities, it has come in direct contradiction with immigration laws established at the national level in recent years. Inconsistencies and tensions between national and local policies, i.e. concerning services provided to migrants, and respective positions on immigration more generally, were reported to negatively affect interactions at the local level. There should, therefore, be greater consultation with local actors in the process of national policy formulation.

### Engaging civil society and the private sector

Despite accommodating local policies and the quite sophisticated government programmes in some countries, migrants have a tendency to look first at personal connections, e.g. families and friends who can assist them with various aspects of integration from securing an employ to finding housing, etc. Stemming from the recognition of this important facilitating role played by fellow immigrants, migrant communities and by other non-governmental actors, it is logical to look at how partnerships can and indeed should be established between these and governments in both identifying the needs and in providing services to immigrant populations. Emphasis was also placed on including the business sector into all efforts by governments and civil society when it comes to employment creation for immigrants.

SUCCESS, a Canadian agency servicing new, mostly Asian immigrants was presented as a good practice in multi-stakeholder partnership, involving government funding, active engagement of employers and the business community, and non-profit service providers, as connectors and coordinators. SUCCESS facilitates all aspects of the integration of newcomers: from the reception and information at the airport, over settlement assistance, health care and language training, to employment and career counselling, and support for business creation. It also promotes the establishment of trade links between Canada and countries of origin, notably China, by connecting Canadian businesses with recent Asian immigrants who can facilitate relationships with buyers and investors in their former homeland.

### Enhancing and recognizing skills

Ms. Ansar Cheung, in charge of the agency's settlement programmes highlighted the importance of investing in immigrants' human capital and enhancing their capacity. Addressing the barriers of immigrants in the labour market, for example by providing them with specific, technical language and skills training, allows them to re-gain confidence and self-esteem. In this context, it was called on governments to initiate systemic changes in the licensing and recognition of foreign credentials.

UNESCO provided an overview on existing international instruments for the recognition of foreign academic qualifications, including six regional conventions and the Global Forum on International quality assurance, accreditation and the recognition of qualifications, a policy dialogue that has been launched in 2002 and since then met twice in Paris and Dar es Salaam. In response to a growing global demand for higher education and a trend towards diversification



and privatization of providers, UNESCO and the OECD have published a set of Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education in 2005. An inventory of good practices in the recognition of migrants' qualifications will be published in 2009.

### Dealing with diversity

While increased economic and educational achievements of immigrants can be seen as an indicator of successful integration, cultural differences with the host society may still persist. For example, the long-standing assumption that a higher education and income will reduce the level of religious devotion has proved to be wrong. In fact, rather the opposite seems to happen.

Discussing an ongoing controversy in the United Kingdom about faith based schools, Mrs. Unaiza Malik from the Muslim Council of Britain mentioned that many parents hold these schools to provide an outlet for Muslim children to strengthen their identity and to build confidence in who they are and where they come from. In this context, it was suggested that prior trauma, but also prejudice in the public school system, especially after the events of 9/11, act negatively on the performance of Muslim students in the classroom. Mr. William Barriga from the IOM observed that the motivation of migrants to integrate is often a function of their ability to maintain a sense of their own identity.

However, the concept of faith based schools (with Anglican and Jewish schools being most numerous) has come under attack as British society is considering ways to break down religious divisions and broaden social cohesion. As the discussions in the UK illustrate, the outsourcing of crucial public services, such as education to civil society organizations can become a contentious issue. Jack Jedwab from the Association for Canadian Studies observed that there is a more general trend in Western countries to shift the focus of their policies from promoting a majority culture to emphasizing the need for common values across cultures living together within a particular state.

In line with these observations, the Acting Director of the Alliance's Secretariat, Mr. Shamil Idriss cautioned against the idea of an inherent, unchangeable antagonism of cultures. Outlining some of the findings and recommendations of the High-level Group of the Alliance of Civilizations, he stated that current trends of cross-cultural polarization should rather be understood and addressed as a function of political differences and grievances.

With regard to migration, he highlighted the role of public discourse in shaping perceptions and stressed the responsibility of political leaders and the media to convey diversity as a positive development rather than a threat. Indeed, a recent study conducted at Harvard University indicates that the portrayal of migrants and especially Muslims in the visual media negatively affects their self-perceptions, acting as a source of alienation and cross-cultural tension.

The Alliance of Civilizations will pursue a three-pronged strategy to implement the recommendations made in the High-level Panel Report. 1. The initiative aims at establishing a clearing house on best practices in cross-cultural cooperation for governments and CSOs, using the internet and the media as a platform. 2. It will launch a series of pilot projects which, in the field of migration may be dovetailed into initiatives coming out of the First Global Forum on Migration and Development to be held in Belgium in July. 3. The High Representative, Mr. Jorge Sampaio, will act as a mediator in situations of inter-cultural conflict and tensions.



## Integration and transnationalism

Broaching the international dimensions of migrant integration, the seminar also looked at measures that countries of origin adopt to trace, support and engage their nationals abroad. Indeed, the facilitation of migrants' integration can begin in the country of origin through measures such as pre-departure training, the authorization of dual citizenship, avoidance of double taxation of migrants, and the provision of services through consular networks. In this context it was mentioned, however, that decentralization processes in receiving countries present an enormous challenge to the consular services of countries of origin.

Mr. El Fatmi Bensouda from the Moroccan Ministry in Charge of Moroccans Living Abroad highlighted his country's engagement in promoting dialogue and cooperation on migration and development in the Mediterranean region and among Europe and Africa. He also presented some initiatives to connect the Moroccan diaspora abroad with the homeland. These include a national strategy for the mobilization of Moroccan competences living abroad ("FINCOME") in support of development projects at home; an annual promotion tour called the "economic caravan" providing nationals abroad with information about investment opportunities in Morocco; as well as an annual gathering for Moroccans worldwide around sports and tourism designed to familiarize the second and third generations with the country and facilitate contacts between associations of Moroccans abroad and at home. In addition, the Ministry collects data on nationals overseas, and promotes knowledge sharing through the organization of national, regional and international conferences and seminars.

Despite the many connections drawn during this seminar, it was observed that integration is still often absent from UN discussions on international migration since the value added of international cooperation in this sphere is still not evident for many states. While the degree and nature of partnerships with civil society organizations will depend on the respective national/local contexts and objectives, it was deemed important to address capacity limits that these partners tend to face, due to a lack of time, lack of finances or perhaps a lack of overall strategy. It was also suggested that further comparative study should be conducted on successful models of integration within countries, between cities, municipalities etc. and that more research and policy attention be directed towards the integration of temporary and undocumented migrants and the inter-linkages between migration and religion.

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