MIGRANTS AND CITIES

Background Paper

IOM’s New York Migration Series

This document is part of a series of background papers prepared by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to support its New York Migration Series briefings. IOM’s New York Migration Series offers Permanent Missions, representatives of United Nations (UN) agencies, civil society and other stakeholders an opportunity to gain knowledge on contemporary migration issues and to exchange experiences, lessons learned and policy solutions.

This background paper supports the event “Migrants and Cities” to be held on 11 December 2015 at United Nations Headquarters in New York. The event comes at a time when more than half of the world’s population resides in urban areas and cities are increasingly attracting many people in search of a better life, more employment opportunities and better services. Cities and local authorities remain the key interlocutors with migrants as they provide the most direct relationship between the migrant and host community. It is a follow-up event to IOM’s High Level Conference on Migrants & Cities – held as part of its International Dialogue on Migration in Geneva in October 2015 – and will also present the New York launch of IOM’s publication World Migration Report 2015 – Migrants and Cities: New Partnerships to Manage Urban Mobility.

The first session of this event “Migrants in cities – urban dynamics” will provide an overview of the trends and challenges related to migrants living in cities. The second session, “Learning from cities – best practices in migration”, will look at practical and successful examples of policies and programs focused on migrants in cities.

Migrants in cities – urban dynamics

Nearly one in five of all migrants live in the world’s top 20 largest cities (Münz, 2014). In many of these cities, migrants represent over a third or more than half of the population. However, many other cities have also seen a remarkable growth in migration in recent years, with the geography of migration flows changing in line with changes in the global economy. A much wider range of cities around the world have become destinations for migrants, and for many of them, migration has become a more important determinant of population growth and age structures than fertility and mortality (Skeldon, 2013). For example, in Asia and Africa, rapidly growing small cities are expected to absorb almost all the future global urban population growth (UN DESA, 2014). Cities everywhere are therefore experiencing a constant ebb and flow of people between urban, regional, national and global communities. In many cases, these mobility patterns to cities and urban areas are also increasingly characterized by the temporality and circularity of the internal migration process (Hugo, 2014).
Continued large scale migration to urban centres is inevitable due to the global realities of aging societies, slow and uneven economic growth both within and among nations, and environmental and climatic instability. Social networks are located in cities and newly arriving migrants can make use of these for survival and economic opportunities. It is in cities where migrant integration primarily takes place.

In policy terms, this means that cities must plan for and manage the challenges of population growth and increased diversity of cities, and should include migrants in those processes. The fast rate of urbanization, and rising migration to cities, brings with it both risks and opportunities for the migrants, communities and governments concerned. Yet, how migration and migrants are shaping cities, and how the life of migrants, in turn, is shaped by cities, has been overlooked in the global debate on urbanization and development, and has been given little attention in international discussions on migration and human mobility.

*Migrants’ contributions to cities*

Because of these dynamics, it is important to recognize local authorities in cities as significant stakeholders with respect to policies on migration. Moving to cities can greatly enhance people’s well-being. It offers an escape from the impact of the hazards of a fragile rural livelihood, and increases access to diverse employment opportunities and better health and education, all of which have the potential to reduce poverty and enhance the livelihood opportunities of the people moving as well as those who stay behind.

Urbanization clearly brings benefits, and it is rare to see sustained economic growth take place without substantial urbanization. Cities can also turn urban diversity arising from migration into social and economic advantages. Migration can help increase productivity if it is strategically managed and linked to the formal economy.

Migrants therefore make significant, essential contributions to the economic, social and cultural development of their home and host societies. But challenges can and do arise, including when migrants face discrimination or xenophobia, or when they don’t have access to employment, housing or social services.

Migrants must be recognized as a category of individuals with specific needs, but who can also be agents of development when policies are in place to protect their rights and empower their full participation. Fostering the inclusion of migrants into the labour market can have positive benefits both for the place of origin and of destination as links are maintained between the two.

Despite innovation in some cities, efforts for poverty reduction through the inclusion of migrants are not yet readily prioritized by city or municipal government authorities. Inclusive local plans, policies and measures, in particular at the city level, are critical in defining the well-being and resilience of migrants, while effective national and international instruments and institutions also need to be put in place.
Learning from cities – best practices in migration

Migration and how it is governed, should be an issue at the frontline of urban planning and sustainable development. At the global level, migration policies and urbanization policies tend to be discussed in separate forums, which results in a lack of policy coherence.

At the national level, with very few exceptions, there is a disjuncture between national and local policies. National governments may encourage migration to urban areas for economic development without sufficient coordination with local governments on the basic social service needs on the ground.

Cities, in the meantime, have taken their own initiatives to manage migration at the local level and directly interact with migrants, and even with their home communities through transnational partnership arrangements. For a small and growing number of cities, immigration policies and programmes are now integral to their urban development and management.

While some cities and local governments are attuned to the realities of migration and have policy responses that include migrants – and take migrants’ voices into account when putting forward agendas at both the national and federal levels – others have ignored this in their development planning. Poorly managed urban migration has often resulted in the development of informal solutions to address gaps in the provision of basic needs and in the exclusion of migrants from access to formal land, housing and job markets as well as health and education services.

Migration policies of both origin and destination countries can affect cities in positive and negative ways. Restrictive, inadequate or unclear policies on labour mobility may give rise to irregular migratory flows and the growth of informal urban settlements. Strict border control policies can lead to urban ‘transit hubs’ where migrants become stranded on their way to intended destinations. Newcomers often have no choice except to settle in hazard-prone and poorly planned areas, where they have limited access to resources and opportunities that are essential for resilience. Furthermore, when disasters strike, they are among the worst affected.

IOM’s October 2015 High Level Conference on Migrants & Cities highlighted a number of these issues and affirmed the key role of local authorities. Some of the key conclusions of this Conference included: the need for policy responses in cities to be adapted to accommodate, not to control increasing human mobility; that adequate infrastructure will need to be significantly developed if it is to meet the increased demand for services and to realise the full benefits of human mobility, especially in developing countries where the majority of urban population growth is expected to take place; that the integration of migrants – planned in collaboration by central and local authorities – needs to feature in all aspects of public policy; and that good governance of human mobility in urban contexts requires partnerships between local and central authorities’ and all relevant actors including the private sector.

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