PROMOTING MIGRANT INTEGRATION AND COMBATING XENOPHOBIA
SUMMARY DOCUMENT

On 2 June 2016, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) held a briefing on the theme of “Promoting Migration Integration and Combating Xenophobia” as part of its New York Migration Series. The Series aims at disseminating knowledge on contemporary migration issues and exchanging experiences, lessons learned and policy solutions amongst Permanent Missions, representatives of United Nations (UN) agencies, civil society and other stakeholders at UN Headquarters.

OPENING REMARKS

Mr. Ashraf El Nour, Permanent Observer of the IOM to the UN, began by highlighting the session’s aims: to enhance approaches to multiculturalism, and to more effectively manage diversity and to promote tolerance and objectivity. The benefits of drawing from best practices globally and having fruitful exchanges are intended to drive a positive discourse around migration. Mr. El Nour noted that in absence of an acceptable universal definition of xenophobia, prejudicial behaviours and attitudes require closer examination to distinguish the realities from the myths relating to migration globally. In this regard, he spoke of increased politicisation, stigmatisation and misrepresentation in the media as exacerbating the negative narrative. He noted, in three key considerations, migration is inevitable and must involve a flexible, contextualised process of communication between migrants and host communities; mind-sets must shift to facilitate policies to better handle integration at local and national levels; the international community should recognise the critical role cities play in integration processes. Mr. El Nour also alluded to the ‘push and pull’ factors of migration before stressing the importance of partnerships between all stakeholders.

H.E. Mr. Michael Grant, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Deputy Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations, spoke of the strengths and positive effects of migration reflected in the Canadian experience. In addition to highlighting some statistics demonstrating reliance on migration for population growth and labour force participation, Ambassador Grant focused on Canada’s historical policy and legislative approaches to migration that build upon peaceful pluralism and diversity, and provide a foundation to assist overcoming xenophobia. He also spoke of the country’s strong focus on human rights as an integral part of its global engagement, noting the Government’s priorities of effective resettlement and integration of newcomers. Ambassador Grant concluded by iterating Canada’s intention to share experiences, best practices and lessons learned to promote the strengths of inclusive diversity.

Mr. Ephraim Leshala Mminele, Minister Plenipotentiary, Deputy Permanent Representative of South Africa to the United Nations, began by noting the potential of migration to be divisive, given its sensitive nature. His initial comments focused on the challenges faced by the South African Government in fulfilling its human rights obligations for those who remain in the country following visa expiration. Despite these challenges, Mr. Mminele noted the strength of South African commitment to uphold human rights under its international obligations that have been transposed into South African law. In addition, he noted that while smuggling and trafficking deter the Government’s ability to provide migrants their
rights, as a ‘human rights cherishing’ country South Africa is committed to promote inclusion, integration and self-reliance. Finally, Mr. Mminele spoke to his country’s initiatives in combatting xenophobia and supporting refugees and asylum seekers in line with its international obligations.

Mr. El Nour closed by noting that the forthcoming panels must put the spotlight on, and demystify major issues in order to reach conclusions on the way forward.

SESSION I: COMBATING XENOPHOBIA

The first panel focused on the factors driving xenophobia and potential solutions to prevent its further exacerbation. The panel was moderated by Ms. Agnès Hurwitz, Senior Policy Advisor, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and featured the remarks by Mr. Eóin Young, Programme Director, International Centre for Policy Advocacy (ICPA); Mr. Thibault Chareton, Media and Migration Project Specialist, United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC); and Ms. Wies Maas, Civil Society Liaison at the United Nations for the High-Level Meeting on Addressing Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants, International Catholic Migration Committee.

Ms. Hurwitz began by sharing the UNHCR’s observation that xenophobic speech will have a direct impact on protection space for migrants and will lead to the adoption of further restrictive measures. She stressed the urgency of the preventive element in addressing xenophobia, noting that often the presence of xenophobic rhetoric will be the first warning sign of further serious human rights violations, persecution and in some cases, genocide. She noted UNHCR has developed specific strategies to address xenophobia, working with a number of partners, including IOM, OHCHR and relevant civil society partners, to develop early warning analysis, and highlighted how UNHCR monitors media and political discourse reflecting xenophobic reactions in part to identify or anticipate how it may impact asylum issues.

Mr. Young’s intervention focused on the ICPA’s Reframing Migration Narratives Project, which sets out to understand the origins of public attachment to a negative narrative and how to address it, and seeks to create a toolkit in order to empower individuals to effect positive change on migration dialogue. He noted that current discourse focusing on benefits and commitments to international obligations creates a disconnect with the public and suggested that rather than a discussion on facts and rights, in an attempt to “myth bust” public discourse, leaders should drive a conversation approaching the public from an inclusive standpoint that addresses the legitimate concerns communities may have – concerns which populist politicians often wrongly leverage and tie to nativist thinking. In political discourse, legitimate concerns are often tied to anti-migration narratives and ‘frames’ or socialised stories which drive public opinion and public policy become owned over time by communities. Anti-migration frames, by way of example, can be triggered by metaphors of natural disasters used to describe human mobility. Mr. Young stressed that public anger often arises where legitimate concerns are not directly addressed and the discussion must be moved to a rational point to restructure the debate and put another frame in the public sphere.
Mr. Chareton focused on the critical role of the media in combating xenophobic sentiment, noting that at present, anti-migrant sentiment is exacerbated by negative portrayals of migrants by the media. He noted the driving factors of such portrayals, which can lead to fact-mixing and hate speech and which are found not only in the mass media but also on social media platforms. He stressed the difficulties of regulating such content. To address this issue, Mr. Chareton presented the UNAOC initiative #spreadnohate, which combines an active media education campaign with policy recommendations around, inter alia, the definition of hate speech and an examination of various measures used in combating hate speech, as well as the reasons for its pervasiveness in contributing to violent extremism and the treatment of migrants. In addition to highlighting the campaign’s next steps, Mr. Chareton highlighted three of its recommendations including, more generally, the need for media organizations to ensure workforce diversity and to directly address issues of concern.

Ms. Maas’ remarks reflected the views of the Migration and Development Civil Society Network and addressed five points. Initially, she spoke of the critical need for public support to overhaul migration policies. While xenophobia is a cross-cutting issue, she noted that a global response remains challenging given the critical need for local and national contexts. To this end, work at the national level is particularly important. Secondly, Ms. Maas focused on the exacerbating effects of language used by politicians and media, and proposed the upscaling of a global tool to address this issue similar to the European-based “Words Matter” Campaign. Thirdly, she emphasised the need to challenge perceptions as well the ‘perceptions of perceptions’ to recognise existing support for refugees and migrants. Addressing the issue of xenophobia requires a comprehensive action plan, which Ms. Maas recommended including as an integral part of the 19 September Summit. Finally, she added further civic engagement is imperative.

The ensuing discussion focused on three questions. Firstly, regarding balancing hate speech and freedom of expression, Mr. Young noted a current ‘draw’ between the two would constitute progress, and, if the balance is redressed, the media reports would be different in that it would have a more neutral, rather than negative tone. Secondly, regarding adaptation of a global model to the local context, Mr. Chareton noted the need to identify areas in the world which would most benefit from programmes on the ground. Ms. Maas added the need to work with local governments to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. Finally, regarding rebuilding connection with the public, Mr. Chareton stressed people should be provided with tools to flag hate speech. Mr. Young added the advantages of including creativity as part of advocacy.

In closing, Ms. Hurwitz stressed that a key responsibility incumbent on public leaders is to highlight the factions of society which are in fact supportive of migration and migration-related processes.

SESSION II: PROMOTING POSITIVE, SUSTAINABLE MIGRANT INTEGRATION

The second panel focused on tools and initiatives to promote migrant integration and remedy exclusion of migrants in host communities. Moderated by Mrs. Marie Paule Roudil, Director, United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) New York
Office, the panel included of Ms. Sarnata Reynolds, Director, Strategy for Humanity and Consultant to Amnesty International; Mr. Walter Vásquez, Director, Comunidades Transnacionales Salvadoreñas (COTSA); and Ms. Pindie Stephen, Senior Migrant Training Specialist/Integration Focal Point, Labour Mobility and Human Development Division, IOM.

Mrs. Roudil’s opening comments focused on the need to build a ‘spirit of dialogue’ through an inclusionary approach with all Member States. She shared UNESCO initiatives aimed at promoting migrant inclusion, including on the need to foster global citizen education, the importance of inclusion at the city level, the empowerment of media organizations and the promotion of equitable participation.

Ms. Reynolds began her intervention by noting that the results of Amnesty International’s Refugee Welcome Survey appear somewhat to counter the prevailing negative narrative surrounding refugees. Her remarks asserted migrants do best in socially and politically inclusive environments. The use of food vouchers, by way of example, is an approach which adds value to the lives of migrants and host communities that in turn promotes positive integration and cultivates good will. In addition, Ms. Reynolds stressed the avoidance of xenophobic rhetoric, particular for migrant children in schools, helps them to absorb social norms and acquire language capacities. Inclusion of children provides the parents with a link between the family and a core state function. Ms. Reynolds shared a survey indicating more than one-third of 2,000 U.S. teachers surveyed during this election year observed an increase in anti-Muslim and anti-migrant sentiment toward irregular migrant children in their schools – illustrating that while education for irregular migrant children can serve as a gateway to integration and social cohesion, it can also be seriously undermined by vitriolic political language. She concluded by noting the protection and fulfilment of the human rights of migrants and refugees is the best way to promote integration and nations must take up ‘bold’ positions in order to do so.

Mr. Vasquez’s remarks focused on his experiences both as a Salvadorian migrant as President of COTSA, the aim of which is to better protect human rights for Salvadorian migrants in Washington, DC. He noted partnerships at the local level with various stakeholders have been imperative to promoting integration and have better served the migrant community. COTSA has been successful in opening dialogue with local-level government and community leaders to represent and voice the concerns and contributions of the Salvadoran community in DC, creating better representation and opportunities for the Salvadoran migrant population within the greater DC-Virginia communities. In sharing his personal experience, Mr. Vasquez demonstrated the clear and often difficult decision which is made for one to migrate, many times as a last resort and in hopes of better opportunities for family and future generations.

Mrs. Roudil echoed the importance of paying due attention to the enormity of the decision to leave a country.

Ms. Stephen noted the acceleration of migration to new communities demonstrates the need for comprehensive integration policies. In addition to noting the absence of an agreed-upon definition of integration, Ms. Stephen referenced an integration continuum encompassing a need for actors to facilitate integration from pre-departure to post-arrival stages. She stressed that for successful integration, local-level involvement of grassroots
community organizations and businesses is key, noting IOM’s World Migration Report on Migrants and Cities and the theme of the International Dialogue on Migration 2015. A whole-of-community approach makes integration policies more effective, as does visible leadership of local officials. Regarding the need to better inform and better prepare migrants and host communities, Ms. Stephen highlighted the positive effects of promoting interaction between migrants and host communities and cited IOM’s pre-departure orientation programs and capacity building initiatives for local authorities. Ms. Stephen stressed the importance of labour market integration as a significant factor in long-term integration prospects, and the role of volunteer organizations in developing soft skills. An awareness of what failed integration might look like is also important.

The ensuing discussion focused on the issue economic integration, particularly of widows and children. Ms. Reynolds noted the prominence of economic integration as one of the biggest challenges for migrants where there are few best practices. She emphasised that while widows are more likely to receive extended livelihood support from humanitarian programming due to their specific vulnerabilities, many countries restrict the ability to take up quality work. Ms. Stephen stressed the importance of investment in training, language learning and life skills. Mrs. Roudil noted the limits of restrictive legislation of intercultural dialogue, stressing the importance of education in this regard.

In closing, Ms. Roudil reiterated UNESCO’s commitment to cooperate with IOM, particularly in preparation for the 19 September Summit.

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