

## **Adolescents and Youth Migration: Harnessing the Development Potential while Mitigating Risk**

### **Adolescents and youth migration: A reality to be taken into account**

Migration is not a new phenomenon; however, there are new demographic revelations with the estimated 214 million international migrants (World Migration Report 2010). For instance, women now comprise approximately 49 % of the world's migrants – the so-called “feminization” of migration. More important is the startling numbers of young migrants. According to the Youth Supplement of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) *State of the World Population Report 2007*, young people make up about a quarter of migrants worldwide. If the definition of youth includes young people up to the age of 29<sup>1</sup>, young people represent half of global migrant flows (UNFPA, 2006).<sup>2</sup> Beyond migrating themselves, youth are affected by migration in other ways. As the total number of international migrant's increases, so does the number of children and youth who accompany their parents in the migration process or feel the impacts of migration – negative or positive – if they are left behind. The recent revolution in North Africa has already led to refugees seeking asylum and work in Europe, and is likely to further increase the number of young people in forced migration.

For demographic reasons and forecasting with various economic theories of migration, it is important to note that, Europe with its aging population will need young migrants more than ever to sustain and promote its economic growth.

Youth in the age of globalization have access to relatively cheap and easy means of transport, and are more likely than ever to migrate for reasons ranging from family reunification to the desire for better education and employment opportunities to the need to escape war or conflicts. As mobile phone networks and internet spread rapidly around the developing world, youth are increasingly aware of opportunities beyond their borders, even as immigration laws become stricter worldwide. A recent study in Ghana by an affiliate of [Young People We Care](#), for example, found that over 88% of Ghanaian youth internet users had plans to leave the country within five years for education or employment.

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<sup>1</sup> As is the case of the UNFPA report, the African Union also considers young a person to be young up to 35 years of age.

<sup>2</sup> See: UNFPA (2006). *Moving young : State of the world population 2006 – youth supplement*: New York: United Nations Populations Fund.

## **A call for attention for the largely “invisible” people**

Despite the growing number of young people affected by international migration, youth migration is rarely a key issue at international debates as compared to other issues like female migration. It is exciting, however, to see that the international community was no longer turning a blind eye to Child and Youth Migration at a time when youth unemployment – a key reason why many young people wish to migrate – has sparked revolutions in countries like Tunisia, spreading through Egypt to other North African countries. The entire African continent is at the brink of a revolution if we use youth unemployment as a yardstick for unseating failed governments or regimes. Still within the confines of the UN-proclaimed International Year of Youth, and for the second time the World Bank has advised African governments to urgently tackle youth unemployment to avoid losing economic gains in its 2011 World Development Report.<sup>3</sup>

These developments also reminds me of a recent speaking engagement I had with UNICEF following the launch of its flagship State of the World Children’s report, which tried to make a case for investing in adolescents.

Traditionally, many politicians see young people as a “problem group.” Economists and demographers have put forth a number of reasons why Africa’s current youth bulge should be seen as a catalyst for development, however; if offered the right investment of resources, they will yield great economic, social and political dividends. All other things being equal, when a greater proportion of a country’s total population is in the middle-age phase of the demographic transition the country enjoys increased income growth, higher savings rates and increasing economic power, as experienced by as many as a third of East Asian countries with their so called “miracle” growth rates over the past few decades. This middle age or youth bulge presents a demographic dividend or potential which can help increase productivity, savings and investments – all of which are crucial for economic growth. However, sound economic policies are needed at this stage to help propel economic growth.

There are many logical reasons to invest in young people by promoting entrepreneurship and smooth school-to work-transition opportunities, amongst other programs. For instance, young people who would otherwise have been engaged in socially destructive activities such as armed robbery, irregular migration and prostitution, instead find worthwhile opportunities that promote their personal and community’s development in their country of origin. When opportunities are abundant for young people, they are able to make rational choices. Conversely, when youth lack opportunities such as education and employment, migration for instance becomes a necessity rather than a choice.

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<sup>3</sup> The case for investing in young people was first made in the 2007 World Development Report, which postulated that “developing countries which invest in better education, healthcare, and job training for their record numbers of young people between 12 and 24 years of age could produce surging economic growth and sharply reduced poverty.”

Appropriately, the Global Migration Group shall host a two day Informal Thematic Debate on International Migration and Development at United Nations Headquarters in New York on 19<sup>th</sup> of May, 2011 on “Migration, Adolescents and Youth: Harnessing Opportunities for Development”.

### **The way forward: Realizing needs of young migrants and involving them in shaping their own future**

To add to the debate on adolescents and youth migration, below are some recommendations that we would like the President of the General Assembly and the Global Migration Group to consider:

1. Create formal spaces for key affected populations of young people in migration policy debates: According to a recent UNICEF report, “young people are one of the important stakeholders in international migration. However, they are largely invisible in research, public debates and policy about international migration.” The first step to minimizing the costs and maximizing the gains of migration is to ensure the formal participation children and youth in the migration discourse at local, national and international levels, such as this UN-hosted event and the Global Forum on Migration and Development. Lessons could be learnt from the formalized participation of youth in other issues like HIV/AIDS. For instance, there is the youth-for-youth organized program at the annual International AIDS Conference that promotes exchange of both experiences and resources to promote active youth leadership in the addressing a key development issue like HIV/AIDS for which young people remain one of the hugely affected constituents. Participation should also move beyond tokenism to ensure that the views and concerns of young people are respected and the necessary projects and policies undertaken by policy planners, elected officials and decision-makers.
2. Capacity building for co-management of migration: There is a need for institutional capacity-building of youth-led organizations working on adolescents and youth migration issues, such as through trainings and funding of youth-led migration initiatives. By supporting grassroots, youth-focused organizations, development organizations and policy makers can learn firsthand about the real needs of young people to minimize the negative aspects of child and youth migration while leveraging the benefits and opportunities. Youth-led initiatives often lack the expertise, staff experience and long-term relationships to make a sustainable impact on issues like migration. Financial support and technical capacity-building are necessary for youth-led organizations to function effectively.
3. Support co-development: Host countries and countries of origin are increasingly initiating programs that recognize youth migrants as agents of development for

their sending countries, but these programs should be greatly expanded. International organizations could support such initiatives with funding and capacity building. At this stage, the [EC/UN Joint Initiative on Migration and Development](#) is worth mentioning as one of the paramount examples of the ways in which international organizations can work with host countries, diaspora communities and sending countries to maximize the gains of migration. However, it is important for such initiatives to recognize *youth*-led migration initiatives as key to harnessing the development potential of youth migration.

Youth in the diaspora should also be targeted to help mobilize financial resources for development in sending countries with “diaspora bonds.” African youth such as Chelsea’s ace midfield player Michael Essien and Ghanaian singer and songwriter [Rhian Benson](#) are just two such African youth in the diaspora who could be targeted for diaspora bonds. A diaspora bond is a debt instrument issued by a country — or potentially, a subsovereign entity or even a private corporation — to raise financing from its overseas diaspora. Israel annually since 1951 and India on three occasions since 1991 have raised over US\$35 billion using these bonds.<sup>4</sup> [Diaspora bonds](#) could provide a lifeline to countries struggling for access to capital and funds for infrastructure development, according to Dilip Ratha, the World Bank’s Lead Economist on Migration and Remittances.

4. Address the root causes of migration: Despite the number of information campaigns conducted to dissuade youth from migrating irregularly, there are still media reports and empirical evidence of young people who undertake perilous journeys in attempts to reach the so-called greener pastures of Western countries. Meanwhile academicians exploring the relationship between economic development and emigration tend to agree that improving the economic opportunities for people in source countries is the best long-term solution to unauthorized migration.<sup>5</sup> It is imperative for sending countries, especially African governments, to create the necessary opportunities for youth to be gainfully employed and educated, while also ensuring the meaningful participation of youth in the governance process of their countries of origin. Governments should note that migration can never be a substitute for the long-term gains of sound economic policies.
5. Ensure the social protection and promote human rights of young migrants: UNICEF country studies suggest that children and youth who are left behind by

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<sup>4</sup> See: Diaspora Bonds: Tapping The Diaspora During Difficult Times, <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/TOPICS/Resources/214970-1288877981391/Ketkar-Ratha.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> See: World Migration Report, 2000. International Organization for Migration

migrating relatives have a greater incidence of drug abuse and teen pregnancy<sup>6</sup>, and are more prone to bouts of violent behaviour than children who live with their parents. Additionally, some studies find that children left behind face discrimination in their communities as a result of their parents' migration. Young migrants remain vulnerable to human rights abuses, such as labour exploitation, trafficking and physical abuse. It is important that governments initiate social protection mechanisms to help provide for and develop young people in sending countries, while their parents are away. Moreover, children whose parents are [arrested or detained for legal issues](#) during the migration process should be offered protection; detention in deportation centers in developed countries increasingly lasts months or even years, during which period children are often left to fend for themselves or join their parents in degrading and humiliating detention conditions. Civil society organizations and the media should stimulate and play active role in ensuring government accountability in enhancing protection and integration of young migrants and alternative ways of participation for individual development.

6. Lastly, it is important for host countries to note that restrictive migration policies can never be the solution to reducing the rate of youth migration. Despite the huge benefits that guest worker programs have provided to countries like New Zealand and Canada, it is disappointing to note that such temporary or guest worker programs no longer exist for young people from many sending countries. Temporary migration programs could be one of the meaningful ways to satisfy the curiosity of young migrants while reducing the rate of irregular and non-circular migration among young people.

## Conclusion

Following the above discussion, it is apparent that there are various ways for the UN, sending countries and destination countries to work together to harness the development potential of children, adolescents and youth who are affected by migration, whether as migrants themselves or as family “left behind.” Properly managed which also requires the active participation of youth in migration debates, policies and actions , migration can serve as a “triple win” for sending countries, destination countries and young migrants themselves, all while minimizing the social and economic cost of migration.

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<sup>6</sup> See: Remarks By Ms. Kirsi Madi Deputy Regional Director For CEE/CIS, UNICEF On Behalf Of The Chair Of The Global Migration Group at [http://www.unctad.org/sections/wcmu/docs/ciem4\\_OP\\_Madi\\_en.pdf](http://www.unctad.org/sections/wcmu/docs/ciem4_OP_Madi_en.pdf)

*\*\*An open access article by Michael Boampong, with inputs from Ausrine Pasakarnyte and Céline Lemmel submitted to the Global Migration Group and the President of the General Assembly ahead of the informal debate to be held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York on 19<sup>th</sup> of May, 2011 on “Migration, Adolescents and Youth: Harnessing Opportunities for Development”. Michael, Ausrine and Céline are youth development activist who have coordinated three Youth Consultations on Migration and Development since 2008 to enhance youth perspectives on migration and development for NGO – Young People We Care. For further enquiries contact Michael via [mboampong@gmail.com](mailto:mboampong@gmail.com)*