



Labour Migration – Relevant trends for public employment services

By Miguel Peromingo October 2012

The World Association of Public Employment Services (WAPES) gathers their members and international experts to discuss the way ahead in labour migration and employment. Best practices and recommendations will be broadcasted live from the WAPES event 18 and 19 October in the Dominican Republic and later provided as video-on-demand on this website.

Migratory flows

215 million first-generation migrants are proving their mobility across the globe. If they were a country, it would be the fifth biggest in the world, smaller than Brazil and bigger than Indonesia.

Migrants are impacted by career considerations, natural disasters, popular uprisings like the Arab spring, or economic challenges that make them take the decision, more or less voluntary, to move to another country. This step also drives the migrant to find a job in the new country.

Although it slightly slowed down during the global economic crisis, labour migration has been rising again after 2011. It is now at a 40% higher rate than in 1990. The magnitude of labour migration is more relevant than ever, especially in Asia and Africa, but also still in the Americas and to a lesser extent in Europe.

Over 10% of the global labour migration flow originates in China. Asia in general, seems to be the key source for high-skilled migration.

175 million Africans have moved to another country in the last years. That is more than twofold the number of the former generation. According to ILO, by 2025 every tenth African will be working outside of his or her home country.

As an example, in 2010 a fifth of the tertiary-educated Moroccans resided abroad. Tunisia, already before the Arab spring, had over 12% of their skills elite moving abroad developing the Maghreb region into the most mobile region in the world.

In Europe migration does not seem to be a valuable alternative to escaping economic problems, as the emigration from economically challenged countries like Greece or Spain is staying at relatively low levels. A number of countries in Europe, however, remain important receiving countries of migration, both regular and irregular.



Migration and employment

All the stony paths that job-seekers have to walk are all the more trying for migrants in search of employment. The information about labour markets and the migrant's recognition on the job market can be particularly difficult to get and add to a vulnerable condition like being young, aged or low-skilled.

Public employment services are in a critical position to support the migrant entering or remaining on the labour market.

For this, it seems crucial that discussions around migration do emphasize the aspect of labour and do not reduce migration to an issue of border controls.

As the ILO puts it in a recent review, restrictive labour migration policies, as they have been adopted during the crisis by a number of governments in immigration countries are likely to be "sticky and stay even when recovery is achieved." This might bring about labour market situations, in which high skilled migrants will not come to work to a country with high administrative burden although rapid technological development and the constant high demand in sectors like health care and engineering call for a foreign gain of skills. Even in lower-skilled jobs like in agriculture or domestic services the need for workers might not be fully met by native workers.

Public employment services cannot decide on the migration laws of a country, but they can be part of a discussion, in which the mobility of international skills is highlighted.

New migration patterns

Equally important, labour migration has changed. The duration of staying abroad is generally shorter and undergoes more changes. The mobile worker of the past used to emigrate and stay in employment abroad for a working life. Today, labour migrants are going for shorter periods followed by a return to the country of origin or to a move into a different country. The concept of circular migration changing back and forth across one or more borders is no longer constraint to seasonal work. Again, harder border controls hamper the effective course of those new migration patterns. Some world regions lack a system for social protection of cross-border workers altogether, that way opening doors to irregular residence and employment.

In this respect, another meaningful change in patterns of migration is the shift to South-South flows. So far, the policy focus of international migration has been put rather on South-North flows, the traditional direction for



emigrants from less developed to more developed countries. Current data suggests that about 73 million migrants in 2010 from developing regions resided in developing regions. South flows consequently represent a third of all international migration.

In Latin America and the Caribbean for instance borders between the region's countries are becoming more relevant for labour migrants than the US-Mexican border. Annual immigration flows from Mexico to the U.S. dropped from 1 million in 2006 to approximately 600,000 in 2009 based on U.S. surveys. Countries in the Southern Cone have transformed from sending countries to receiving countries like Brazil or Chile.

In spite of yet missing reliable data on the actual impact of those flows, it is very likely that South-South migrants are facing very similar, and in many cases aggravated circumstances of irregular labour market access as well as issues of integration and returning. Public employment entities need to consider this a determining factor when dealing with job-seekers or employers in the South-South environment.

The added value of migration

Globalization has made migration more visible but does not necessarily explain its added value better. The fact that migrants and returners are a stimulus to economies is often hidden behind alleged negative impacts of immigration. Statistical evidence is hard to find. A study by the Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration calculates that the welfare impact of observed levels of migration is substantial, at about 5 to 10% for the main receiving countries and about 10% for the main sending countries. In fact, this study claims, the GDP of both countries involved in migration is better off than without it, especially if the migration lasts longer than just for a couple of months.

A larger variety of the workforce increases productivity and the readiness for innovation and entrepreneurship, something that can also contribute in reducing youth unemployment.

In Europe and the USA over 20% of people filling new job entries in growing economies like green jobs are migrants. Returning migrants are often at the top of technological development in their countries of origin. Regions with high emigration rates get richer, unless more than 20% of their university graduates leave, an effect known as brain drain.

Migration paves the way for international trade. There are more Chinese people living outside China than there are French people in France. In almost every country of the world one can meet a member of the 22 million strong Indian diaspora. They are running an excellent field test for later foreign direct investment.



All this happens through employment relations. Public services would be well advised to help this come to the light.

Conclusion

Public employment services should be agents of skills mobility. Migration in today's world of work asks for a set of conditions in order to do so:

- Labour migration is a global phenomenon and should be treated as such, also on government level. Mobility partnerships among public organizations can help.
- The discussion around labour migration needs to be de-politicized. Where media-snapshots are the sole source of information, research on migration impact and success stories need to come in. PES can provide those.
- The classical "bilateral-issue-mentality" of migration flows from developing to developed countries should undergo a diversification. PES can be part of designing human capital development across borders.
- Migrant workers themselves have to be given a voice in the discussion about labour migration rather than just being the object of it. The outreach of PES can be a decisive pathway to do that.

A comprehensive partnership approach to the international mobility of skills can support in turning the debate around economic gloom and migration into a proactive employment management including integration, skills development and decent work.