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Why We Need a Global Approach to Migration

Abstract (DE): Migrationspolitik gleicht heutzutage eher einem Lottospiel als einem gesetzlich standardisierten Prozess – ein Problem, welches die gesamte globale Zivilgesellschaft tangiert. Ulrich Hemel schlägt zur Lösung dieses Problems die Gründung einer Migrationsbehörde innerhalb der UNO vor. Diese Institution würde nicht nur regionalen und nationalen Migrationsbedarf erfassen sondern auch über Menschenrechtsverletzungen berichten. Eine solche Behörde kann ein Anfang sein, um das Gesicht der Welt in Bezug auf Migrationsangelegenheiten zu zivilisieren.

Abstract (EN): Today, Migration seems to be closer to a lottery than to a legal standard process which is an issue concerning the global civil society. Forming a UN Migration Authority is a possible institutional solution to this problem. Such an institution is to register regional and national migration related needs and to report human rights violations. It will be a start to civilize the face of this world with regard to migration.

We can fight issues surrounding migration by establishing a UN Migration Authority

In a world with 7bn people, migration is the answer to war, persecution, and poverty, but also a solution for matching economic needs from both sides. Palestinian engineers work in Dubai; Pakistani taxi drivers in New York; Filipino housemaids in Rome; Algerian waiters in Paris; Polish nurses in the United Kingdom. There are more examples: Iranian medical doctors practise in Germany, Swiss bankers work in the US, and let's not forget a famous Swedish writer working for a theatre in Angola.

So we have everything: brain drain from poor to rich countries and, rarely enough, vice versa; refugees finding good or miserable work; and of course, poverty immigrants who are starting from virtually nothing. And we are speaking of around 150mn people worldwide; 5% of the global work force.

In a civilised world, global civil society should work on the issue. Until now, migration has been a fairly opportunistic process driven by adverse events or entrepreneurial individuals. It may be fostered by excellent labour chances on accessible markets or become a way to pursue legal opportunities as well as illegal exploitation.

Overall, migration today seems to be closer to a lottery than to a legally structured process. Many OECD countries are struggling with illegal immigration, and many illegal immigrants are trying to make a living in spite of their legal status.

All of that is unfair, especially in view of the most underprivileged persons. It is also unfair for the regions that have to absorb huge streams of refugees. Look at the Somalian refugees who enter due to drought and hunger, Congo's civil war refugees, Colombia's small peasants driven out of their fields by local guerrilla groups like the FARC, the situation of minority groups such as Christians in Iraq or in Pakistan, and Muslims in some parts of former Yugoslavia and the Philippines.

What can we do if we want to civilise the face of this world in view of migration? What can we do to improve the fate of migrant families who very often need two or three generations to adapt and overcome life challenges such as the lack of language skills, cultural barriers, lack of access to formal education, or the even more basic lack of access to healthcare?

Not every situation of distress can be avoided, and nobody will reasonably argue for an uncontrolled stream of immigration from "poor" to "rich" countries. But we all can do more, and we can do better. In some parts of the world, labour is urgently needed: the Gulf States, an aging Europe where Germany is starting to suffer from qualified labour, and the lack of doctors and engineers in many poorer countries. In other regions, mass unemployment is a huge challenge, and not just in emerging markets as it used to be with Brazil but also in countries such as Spain, which has a youth unemployment rate of 45%.

Let us look for an institutional solution and propose that global civil society exert pressure on forming a UN Migration Authority. Such a new institution should have two main tasks: First, there should be a registry of migration-related needs. Regional or national authorities would deposit their migration needs for both immigration and emigration.

This will lead to a new level of international cooperation. Modern databases can match immigration and emigration needs. And the empirical matching will not be just another exercise in data mining: As time goes by, migration criteria will develop. They might refer to professional or vocational standards but also to cultural "soft facts" such as language, culture, and religious preferences.

In a couple of years, such an international registry would prepare a World Migration Report which would give us a much clearer picture on the reality of our social world.

This, however, is not enough. The challenge beyond data matching will be the definition of migration standards. Until this day, there has been no such thing as a recognised standard of behaviour, a minimum migrant rights chart for all those millions of people who—by their own will or driven by circumstances—live and work outside their home country.

These standards should answer the typical questions that arise from the everyday needs of human life. What are legitimate expectations to be directed at migrants? What should be their level of "adaptation" to their new countries, in terms of language, religion, and family behaviour? What is the legitimate extent for bringing along practices of their own cultural home? Where should legitimate borders of tolerance be respected? What is the impact of education and value training when controversial cultures meet?

There is another side, too: What should be the minimum requirement for language, social behaviour, education, healthcare, and justice? If a minority exceeds a certain number of persons, should they have the right to have their own schools, eventually in a bilingual setting? Should they have the right to use their language before court? What is the right level of adaptation to be requested, the right level for justified diversity?

There will not be the one and only answer. It is fair to accept a variety of regulations in different countries. The pre-condition, however, should be a basic respect for human rights. In such a way, a UN Migration Authority should have a reporting department where cases of dispute, abuse, intolerance and general human rights violations should be documented.

As a matter of fact, migration issues are far from being simple or self-evident. There have been different approaches to this around the world. On the island of Bali, the Hindu minority in Indonesia has maintained their cultural lifestyle hundreds of years after their original immigration. In the US, however, you would hardly find second or third generation US citizens of German origin who know the German language. In the Berlin quarter of Kreuzberg, on the other hand, you will have difficulties if you do not speak Turkish—an effect of massive immigration since the 1960's.

In South Tyrolia, the German minority has the right to use their language in schools and courts. In the Basque region of Spain, two official languages are recognised: Basque and Spanish (or rather the "Castellano"). In Switzerland, every linguistic group has the right to their complete infrastructure; so you have French, German, and Italian broadcasting, television, court audiences, schools, cultural events, and so on. Even if the example of Switzerland is not just due to migration, it is obvious that the issue of building up an inclusive society in a migrant and minority social context, shows some similar challenges.

Migration, in the end, is not a one-way issue. It is a reality and it needs standards. Those standards may be different according to each case: War refugees, hunger refugees, and white-collar migrants do not have the same needs. They are all human persons however and they are all confronted with the task of adapting to a new social environment.

So the idea of a UN Migration Authority may be a good start in order to go all the way to a respectful definition of human dignity in places where you were not born, where you probably were not eagerly expected. Places that are simply your new home.