

## **GOING WITH THE FLOW: MANAGING THE CHALLENGE OF MIGRATION**

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**by Mamphela Ramphele**

I would like to begin by thanking the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at Oxford University for inviting me to present this Annual Lecture. The United Nations Global Commission on International Migration for which I work was established soon after the inauguration of COMPAS, and we have already established a close working relationship. As someone who has worked in both academia and in the world of public policy, I find this kind of collaboration particularly rewarding.

It is no coincidence that COMPAS and the Global Commission came into being at around the same time. Both organizations are indicative of the extent to which international migration has risen to the top of the global policy agenda. Nowhere is this more evident than here in the United Kingdom, or back at home in South Africa. In both countries, the issue of migration hits the headlines on an almost daily basis. In both countries, the issue of migration has become extremely emotive. And in both countries, a lively debate continues to take place about the consequences of international migration and its implications for the resident population.

### **The Extent of Migration**

South Africa and the United Kingdom are not, of course, alone in this respect. In the past decade, international migration has become an increasingly large, widespread and complex phenomenon.

First, recent years have witnessed a substantial increase in the total number of international migrants throughout the world. Up to 200 million people are now living outside their country of birth. The global labour force is becoming increasingly mobile and increasingly segmented, and it seems certain that the scale of international migration — or at least the desire of people to move to another country or continent — will increase in the years to come.

Second, international migration has become a genuinely global phenomenon. Not too long ago, experts in international migration used to joke that they would be out of a job if every country was like Albania, which refused to let anyone out, or like Japan, which refused to let anyone in. The last thing threatening any migration expert these days is the risk of unemployment! For in recent years, countries like Albania and Japan - states that were previously unaffected or only marginally affected by international migration - have experienced very significant movements of people out of, into and across their territory.

Third, migratory movements have become increasingly complex: complex in terms of the routes that migrants take and the way in which their travel is organized; complex in terms of the legal status pertaining to migrants at different stages of their journey; and complex in the sense that traditional categorizations can no longer be rigidly sustained. The distinction between countries of origin, transit and destination, for example, has become an increasingly redundant one. Many countries around the world now fall into all three categories. The traditional distinction made between permanent and temporary migration has been undermined by the phenomenon of circular migration. Even the basic distinction between a citizen and a foreigner has been called into question by the spread of dual nationality and the growth of transnationalism. Indeed, it was the predecessor to COMPAS, Oxford University's Transnational Communities Research Programme, which played such an important role in bringing these phenomena to our attention.

Fourth, I would also like to suggest that the motivations for migration have become more difficult to identify and to categorize. As signified by the well-known notion of the 'migration-asylum nexus', a single person or household may decide to leave their own country and to seek residence in another state for a complex mixture of economic, social, political and personal reasons which can be extremely difficult to disentangle. Again, both here in the United Kingdom and at home in South Africa, the public and political discourse on migration has to a considerable extent been driven by this issue of motivation. Are the people arriving on our territory looking for a better standard of living, or are they seeking protection from persecution and armed conflict? And if they are *bona fide* refugees, why did they choose to make their way through a number of other countries before reaching and claiming asylum in their country of destination?

## **The Complexity of Migration**

International migration, then, is an increasingly complex phenomenon. But let me sound a note of caution, as I feel that we should not get too carried away with the notion of complexity. One rather simple conclusion can be drawn from all of the evidence available to us. It is that the vast majority of international migrants, whether they move on a temporary or permanent basis, whether their status is legal or irregular, whether they remain in their own region or move from one continent to another, migrate from poorer to more prosperous states. Poverty, in other words, is central to the dynamics of international migration. But migration is not just a matter of poverty; it is also about the quest for better opportunities. Seen in this light migration is a positive expression of an individual desire for self-improvement.

Allow me to qualify and expand on that statement. I am not referring to absolute or abject poverty. We know from long experience that the most destitute members of society often lack the resources, the information and the social capital needed to move from one country or continent to another. In fact, those people who can be regarded as the poorest of the poor are most likely to migrate from a rural to an urban area of their own country. Alternatively, they are likely to resort to coping mechanisms and survival strategies that lack any migratory dimension. Rather, it is the issue of relative poverty and socioeconomic disparity that plays such an important role in prompting people to migrate from one country to another.

Let us explore this relationship a little further. I would like to suggest that the linkage between relative poverty, socio-economic disparity and international migration is in two respects a manifestation of the globalization process.

First, there is now a good deal of evidence to suggest that while the globalization process has had some beneficial consequences, it has also led to the growth of socio-economic disparities: disparities within societies, disparities amongst states, and disparities between different regions of the world. Such disparities, I would like to suggest, provide those people who have lost out in the process of globalization with a very powerful incentive to leave their own country and to move to other countries: countries that offer them new chances in life, countries that enable them to enjoy a higher standard of living, and countries which provide them with the opportunity to send remittances home, thereby alleviating the poverty of family members that the migrant has left behind.

Second, as well as providing relatively poor people with a powerful incentive to migrate, the process of globalization has provided those same people with the means which they need to move from one country and continent to another. In fact, the very success of globalization in establishing cheap and accessible information, communications and transportation networks has not only made millions of people acutely aware of the relative poverty in which they live. It has also provided them with the infrastructure and the resources which they need to move, even if their presence is officially unwanted by the states to which and through which they move. We see this taking place in the movement of people from West Africa, the Sahel states and North Africa to the European Union. We see it happening in the migration of people from many different parts of sub-Saharan Africa to my own country of South Africa. And we see the same pattern of events in the movement of people from the relatively poor countries of South Asia to the more prosperous states of South-East Asia and the Pacific.

On the basis of this evidence, we might conclude that international migration, and more specifically irregular international migration, is an integral part of the globalization process. Indeed, there now seems to be a strong demand for cheap and flexible migrant labour in the world's more prosperous countries. Because in practice, governments which speak in very strong terms about the need to exclude undocumented foreigners from their territory, often seem prepared to tolerate the existence and even the growth of informal labour markets which provide employment to significant numbers of irregular migrants. To support this observation, you might have seen the recent investigation by 'The Guardian' newspaper into the United Kingdom's growing population of casual migrant workers, many of whom are employed by a somewhat shady network of gang masters, recruitment agencies and sub-contractors, but who are nevertheless providing goods and services to some of the country's largest and most respectable companies. According to 'The Guardian' investigation, the growth of this migrant labour force is directly attributable to the process of globalization, which obliges the private sector in the UK to compete against suppliers in low-wage economies by minimizing labour costs and by compromising labour standards.

At the same time, we must recognize that the world's poorer countries — those countries from which most migrants originate — have little real incentive to obstruct the departure of their citizens, even if they are leaving in an illegal or irregular manner. From the perspective of the developing

countries, migration reduces the need to create jobs for large numbers of unemployed and underemployed people, especially those younger people who are entering the labour market for the first time. In this respect, migration acts as a social and political safety-valve, providing opportunities to people who might otherwise become frustrated and angry. For the world's poorer states, international migration, whether it is of a regular or irregular nature, also brings with it the promise of remittance transfers, diaspora investment and the establishment of social networks that will lead to new trading opportunities. Such resources are of evident value for countries that are struggling to maintain their balance of payments, to enhance their economic competitiveness and to prevent the issues of poverty and economic disparity from becoming a threat to social and political stability.

### **Hypocrisy and Human Rights**

Allow me to draw some conclusions from the preceding analysis — conclusions which I hope may help to frame the contents of this presentation.

First, if I can introduce a somewhat controversial phrase to our discussion, there would appear to be a degree of 'common hypocrisy' in the current discourse on migration, particularly irregular migration. As I have tried to suggest, the world's more prosperous states — those states which have been in the vanguard of the globalization process - bear a significant degree of responsibility for the forces which have prompted and sustained the movement of irregular migrants from one country and continent to another. And yet it is equally clear that the world's poorer countries have an interest in the continuation of such movements, as do migrants themselves. While they may be prompted to move by relative poverty and economic disparity, it would be wrong to regard them simply as victims. Indeed, in my own experience, migrants are usually purposeful actors, people who have a particularly entrepreneurial spirit and a strong determination to make life better for themselves and their families.

Second, there is also a darker side to the role that international and irregular migration currently plays in the global economy. Despite the fact that they are purposeful actors, many migrants, both regular and irregular, are also victims, in the sense that they have limited access to their human rights. They do not enjoy what the International Labour Organisation refers to as 'decent work', and they are often marginalized in society, especially when they come from countries or cultures which are associated in the public

mind with violence, extremism and terrorism. As you will know from recent experience in this country, there is a particular propensity for migrants to be marginalized and even demonized when such fears are deliberately exploited by the media.

One must not be totally negative when it comes to the situation of migrants in the world's more prosperous countries. There are certainly many examples of good practice in relation to the recruitment, employment, protection and integration of migrant workers. We must evidently identify, learn from and replicate such good practices wherever possible. But we must also acknowledge that in many parts of the industrialized and industrializing world, international migration has become associated with a variety of negative phenomena: xenophobia and racism; migrant alienation; social disharmony; and the growth of an unregulated informal sector which threaten the ability of both migrants and nationals to enjoy decent work and wages. We hope that the work of the Global Commission will be able to play a useful role in drawing attention to these problems and suggesting some ways in which they might be addressed.

### **Remittances**

I now turn our attention to the implications of international migration for countries of origin in the developing world. In this respect I would like to touch on two issues which are currently attracting a great deal of attention. The first is the question of migrant remittances. And the second is the issue of 'brain drain'.

First Remittances. Academic researchers and policymakers alike have in recent years placed considerable emphasis on the economic potential of international migration for countries of origin. Migrant remittances, it has been argued, as well as diaspora investment and other forms of economic engagement represent an important developmental resource which could be used more effectively to promote sustainable growth at home. I would not discount this argument entirely. Recent research demonstrates quite clearly that the global volume of migrant remittances has expanded very rapidly in recent years, and that it is now considerably larger than the amount of Official Development Assistance provided to the world's less prosperous states. Indeed, current estimates suggest that the annual value of remittances is in the region of 100 to 120 billion US Dollars — around double the value of Official Development Assistance.

Research in countries such as Afghanistan, Mexico and the Philippines indicates that migrant remittances play an important role in supporting national and local economies, and that they provide very direct and tangible benefits to the household that receive them: the ability to send a child to school, for example; the ability to construct a better house; the ability to start a small business; and the ability to survive an economic crisis or natural disaster. We must seek to maximize the positive outcomes of remittance flows, and recent analysis of this issue has provided us with a very rich menu of policy options. The transfer costs of remittances, which can be as high as 10 or 20 per cent of the money transferred, can and must be brought down. Migrants and their families can be given better access to banking facilities and given training in 'financial literacy'. Countries of origin and destination can work more closely together in the effort to meet these objectives. Home-town associations established by migrants can be encouraged to transfer collective remittances, which can be used to sponsor infrastructural and other projects which bring benefits to whole communities rather than single households. And in situations where such collective remittances are transferred, both governments and international agencies could be encouraged to provide matching funding, so as to increase the scale and impact of the investment made. All of these options must be explored. At the same time, I feel obliged to sound a note of caution with respect to this issue. For it may well be the case that specialists in international migration have placed unrealistic expectations on remittance flows as a means of promoting sustainable growth and development in the world's poorer countries. Indeed, it was particularly striking that the Millennium Project's recent report, 'Investing in Development', makes very little reference to the issue of remittances. Are we perhaps at risk of over-estimating their importance?

First, I would like to suggest that international migration and remittance flows can never be a substitute for an effective macroeconomic development strategy or a coherent population policy. In too many of the countries that have sizeable numbers of their citizens working abroad, remittances may actually be obstructing the introduction of reforms that would provide a more effective basis for long-term economic growth.

Second, while remittances may bring many immediate benefits to those families and communities that receive them, their developmental (as opposed to poverty-reduction) impact would appear to be limited. Indeed, the very

advantage of remittances — the fact that they consist of private money, transferred directly to the intended recipients — is also the reason why they cannot be used for broader and longer-term development purposes. It is for this reason that we should be very wary indeed of any argument which suggests that the growing volume of migrant remittances might allow a reduction in levels of Official Development Assistance.

Third, while seeking to maximize the positive outcomes of international migration and remittances, we should also take account of their negative implications. The benefits of remittances, both common sense and the research indicates, are not shared equally, and such financial transfers may exacerbate the socio-economic disparities that exist between different households, communities and regions in the country of origin. In seeking to maximize the number of migrants they send abroad and hence the level of remittances which they receive, countries of origin may also be at risk of 'killing the golden goose'. In Asia, for example, countries such as Cambodia and Viet Nam are beginning to see the export of migrant labour as an increasingly important part of their economic policy. Countries with established overseas labour programmes, such as the Philippines, have already indicated that their migrant workers may in future have to accept lower wages and poorer working conditions in order to compete with these newcomers to the global labour market. In terms of migrant rights and welfare, there are some evident dangers in this situation.

Fourth, when calculating the economic benefits of migration, we must not forget to factor in the high social costs that are incurred when migrants - husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters - decide to leave their own household and community in order to work in another place. In Southern Africa, for example, the social and human costs of the migrant labour system established under the apartheid regime are still painfully apparent. As I have seen from personal experience, the family life and social fabric of many communities in Southern Africa has been disrupted by international migration. Indeed, one of the cruellest consequences of international migration in my own part of the world is the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which has been fuelled by the separation of men from their families and by the social dynamics of migrant labour compounds. I therefore feel obliged to ask if there is a risk that the current quest to export migrant workers and to maximize the remittances which they send back home will inflict the same kind of suffering on other societies.

## Brain Drain

Secondly, the ‘brain drain’. Again South Africa is a case in point, international migration may indeed promote financial flows that are of significant value to the people, the communities and the countries which receive them. But international migration can also lead to the long-term or permanent departure of a society’s brightest and besteducated young people: people who have an essential role to play in providing essential services, in promoting development and fostering democratic forms of governance in the world’s less prosperous societies. While the term may not be a fully satisfactory one, the issue of ‘brain drain’ must form an important part of any discussion about the link between disparities, development and international migration. First of all, we must ask whether the migration of skilled personnel from countries such as my own has a detrimental impact on the society and economy which they leave behind. Addressing this issue, I have heard researchers say that the evidence remains sketchy, and that there is no proven correlation, for example, between the emigration of doctors and nurses and the health status of the population in areas where they previously worked. I have also heard commentators suggest that while such personnel may take their talents with them when they migrate, they are likely to remit significant amounts of money, and that they will eventually return home, bringing new skills and resources which will be of great benefit to their country of origin.

Finally, I have heard people suggest that in a globalizing labour market, where the supply of certain skills cannot keep pace with the demand, people will inevitably move to those locations where wages and working conditions are best. To impede such movements, it is suggested, defies economic logic and is a denial of the right to leave one’s own country.

While there may be some truth in all of these arguments, I do not think that we can afford to be quite so sanguine on the issue of skilled migration and ‘brain drain’, especially in the health sector — a sector in which I have a particular and professional interest.

First, I have no doubt that when a country such as South Africa loses a significant proportion of its trained health personnel as a result of emigration, the health services available to its citizens - especially poorer citizens living in the more remote rural areas - are at serious risk of deterioration. We should not exaggerate that risk. On one hand, we know that many trained

personnel have withdrawn from the public health sector in South Africa not to emigrate, but to find employment in other sectors, including private hospitals, where the pay, working hours and conditions are more attractive. On the other hand, the emigration of South Africans is to some extent compensated by the immigration of health personnel from neighbouring and nearby countries which are even poorer. But this does not alter my basic point; namely that the departure of skilled personnel, especially those offering essential health services to the population at large, represents a net loss to countries of origin, especially in the shorter term. According to the 2004 World Health Assembly, and I quote, 'many countries face an urgent need to deliver more and better services to their poorest and sickest people. The absolute shortage of health personnel, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, is recognized as the principal constraint to achieving the health objectives of the Millennium Development Goals.' (End quote).

Second, while it would be foolish to ignore the laws of economics and unacceptable to disregard individual human rights, the 'brain drain' issue must also be regarded from the perspective of ethics, equity and global public goods. From that perspective, I do not feel that we can nonchalantly accept a situation in which poorer states devote scarce resources to the education and training of their citizens, only to see those people being recruited by states which already enjoy a far higher standard of living. Nor can we ignore the contradiction that exists when countries which are committed to poverty reduction, multilateral development initiatives and the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals are simultaneously involved in the recruitment of scarce skilled personnel from countries such as my own.

What can be done to address this problem?

Let me say from the outset that I reject any proposal that would seek to prevent individuals from leaving their country of origin in order to take up employment elsewhere. I do not feel that such an approach would be workable in practice. And in principle, it is inconsistent with my belief that migration is motivated by the very noble desire to gain a better quality of life for one's self and one's family. I am equally unconvinced by the suggestion that the world's poorer countries should be provided with financial compensation for the skilled personnel which they provide to the world's more prosperous states. We know that such proposals will get short shrift from countries that are currently recruiting skilled personnel from

Africa, Asia and other developing regions. We know that if such financial compensation were to be provided, it would not necessarily be used for productive, developmental or socially useful purposes. And we know that any demand for compensation will reinforce the unfortunate - if inaccurate - image of developing countries as 'suppliant states', perpetually seeking hand-outs from donors and international organizations.

We must therefore look for an alternative approach - an approach which treats the 'brain drain' issue as a common interest and common responsibility of both sending and receiving countries, and an approach which appeals to what might be called the 'enlightened selfinterest' of the developed world. Such an approach, I want to underline, is very much in line with the Millennium Development Goals and the Monterey Consensus, which commit the industrialized states, developing countries and international development institutions to work in partnership with each other. I am confident that this principle of partnership will also be endorsed by the findings of the Africa Commission, whose report we await with great interest. Unless these different actors are able to pursue common and coherent policies at the national, regional and global levels, we know that the MDGs will not be attained. And if the MDGs are not attained, we know that developing countries will be at greater risk of social tension, political violence, armed conflict and humanitarian disaster. Hence my reference to the notion of enlightened self-interest.

What, then, can be done to address the problems created by the movement of skilled personnel from poorer to more prosperous states?

First, while recognizing that the notion of centralized economic planning has fallen out of fashion, I would argue that all states, both developed and developing, have an obligation to engage in effective and long-term workforce planning. It is irresponsible for states, especially prosperous states, to ignore this duty and then to find a quick-fix solution to their workforce problems through the active and sometimes aggressive recruitment of personnel from developing regions. In this respect, I particularly welcome the steps taken by the United Kingdom to ensure that the National Health Service engages in ethical recruitment practices. We must ensure that such practices become the norm in the OECD states, and that they are applied to recruitment agencies and private sector health facilities, as well as to public health services.

Second, we must appeal to the enlightened self-interest of the North. The demographic reality is that countries in the South have growing pools of young people who could acquire the kind of skills required by their own and other countries. But they will only be able to acquire such skills if adequate levels of investment are available to provide them with education and training. I believe that there is scope for the creative use of Official Development Assistance in reinforcing the health services and training capacity of countries which have been affected by the migration of doctors, nurses and other personnel. In this context, the recently released report on Human Resources for Health by the Joint Learning Initiative, supported by World Health Organisation, the Rockefeller Foundation and the World Bank makes an interesting point. It points out that if just 400 million US dollars of the 10 billion US dollars of Overseas Development Authority currently devoted to the health sector were dedicated to communitybased human resource capacity-building, it would be possible to develop a sustainable human resource base for health in developing countries. In this respect, the United Kingdom's agreement to invest in the development of nursing skills in India is an arrangement which promises to help meet the needs of all the parties concerned.

Third, we must take full account of recent research which demonstrates that health personnel in developing countries often seek work abroad or move to other sectors of the economy because their pay and working conditions are so poor. In many cases, the research shows, they are confronted with harassment and violence in the workplace. Their employment prospects are poor, and they are often subject to gender-based discrimination. Needless to say, these problems are especially common for nurses and for teachers, a large proportion of whom are women. In accordance with the principle of common responsibility, I believe that developing countries must address these issues in an urgent manner. Common hypocrisy must give way to straight talk. Developing countries have an obligation to position themselves as good employers and to create a better environment for home-grown talent to flourish than many have done so far. Unfortunately, valuing skill and expertise is not yet a sufficiently prominent part of the political culture in many developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, the inability of African states to compete with the countries of South-East Asia centres to a significant extent on the respective value attached to education, training and talent in these different parts of the world. This situation must change if the African continent is to escape from the vicious circle of underdevelopment, underinvestment and emigration.

## Conclusion

I bring this presentation to a conclusion. International migration, I believe, is an inherent and integral part of the globalization process. It is a phenomenon which seems far more likely to expand than to contract in the years to come. There are some significant disparities between the North and the South - disparities in terms of development, in terms of demography and in terms of democracy — and international migration seems certain to be one consequence of such disparities and differentials. We urgently need a more open, honest and informed discourse on this issue and it is my hope that the work of both COMPAS and the Global Commission on International Migration will contribute to the attainment of that objective. We can no longer afford to pretend that international migration is unnecessary and unwanted, and that it can be obstructed by the erection of increasingly restrictive barriers. Indeed, there is now a growing recognition that such barriers have fuelled the human smuggling industry, encouraged economic migrants to abuse the asylum system and led to increased levels of irregular migration. At the same time, we should be equally wary of pretending that international migration represents any kind of long-term or comprehensive solution to the major challenges currently confronting the world's less prosperous states. I believe that our vision should be one of a world in which people migrate out of choice rather than necessity, in a safe and legal manner, and in a way that contributes to - rather than detracts from - the sustainable economic and social development of their country of origin. If this objective is to be achieved, the world's more prosperous states will have to introduce more coherent policies towards the developing world, taking full account of the close linkages that exist between the issues of trade, aid, debt, development and international migration.

At the same time, the world's poorer states have an equal responsibility to create the conditions which are required for entrepreneurship to flourish, for poverty to be alleviated, for socioeconomic disparities to be reduced, for human rights to be respected and for good governance to be exercised. We have the means to ensure that international migration brings benefits to countries of origin, to countries of destination and, most importantly, to migrants themselves. Are we ready to do so?

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