International Organization for Migration (IOM)

IOM International Organization for Migration
OIM Organisation Internationale pour les Migrations
OIM Organización Internacional para las Migraciones

International migration, development and the information society

WSIS Concept Paper

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International migration, development and the information society

With the advent of globalization, not only has the world's population become increasingly mobile but also the patterns of migration flows have changed considerably. In many ways, international migration today is strongly influenced by the emergence of a global information society and by the broad availability of information and communication technologies (ICTs).[1] Moreover, ICTs have become important tools in efforts to manage international migration more effectively. At the same time, the movement of migrants across borders itself shapes the global ICT environment by, among other things, providing a mobile technical workforce for this sector. Migration has a significant potential to further contribute to enhancing the impact of ICTs on economic and social development. This brief paper will explore the ways in which migration, development and the global information society are inter-linked, and will suggest ways in which that linkage can be productively enhanced.

1. ICTs and international migration

Information and the related technologies shape movements of persons in unprecedented ways. Generally, it can be said that information is of crucial importance for migrants before, during and after their journey.

Prior to the migration process, the kind of information available to potential migrants is often one of the main factors shaping their decisions on why, how, when and where to migrate. With the global spread and accessibility of media images has come a heightened awareness of life and work opportunities in other parts of the world, a factor that certainly contributes to aspirations and to greater population mobility. Inaccurate information, however, can lead migrants into difficult migration situations and put their well-being, their health or even their lives in jeopardy, such as in the case of human trafficking and smuggling. Hence, the dissemination of reliable and updated information

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[1] The term 'ICTs' is used here according to a definition laid out by the UNDP: *"ICTs are basically information-handling tools – a varied set of goods, applications and services that are used to produce, store, process, distribute and exchange information. They include the 'old' ICTs of radio, television and telephone, and the 'new' ICTs of computers, satellite and wireless technology and the internet."*, Information and Communication Techologies for Development, UNDP Essentials No. 5, UNDP Evaluation Office, September 2001

regarding possibilities of regular migration, as well as the situation in countries of destination, is essential.

Upon arrival in the country of destination, the availability and accessibility of accurate information assumes an equally important role for migrants, regarding for example immigration procedures, access to education, healthcare or housing. Obtaining such information is crucial with regard to the integration of migrants into the country of residence, but also in enabling them to become aware and take full advantage of their rights and obligations, and the new status quo.

Once settled in the country of residence, for many migrants ICTs are significant tools allowing them to stay in touch with their countries of origin, or even to facilitate the establishment of new ties between the country of residence and that of origin. Thanks to the availability of ICTs, migrants today are often able to lead 'dual lives', i.e. to maintain close relations, material, and emotional affiliations with both their country of origin and their country of destination. In conjunction with the broader availability and general affordability of air travel, this has led to changes in the patterns of international migration: instead of being unidirectional and permanent, migration is more and more temporary, seasonal and circular. Consequently, regular and irregular labour migration plays an increasingly important role in the international economy, especially in linking the economies of developing and developed countries.

2. ICTs and migration management

Besides influencing migration processes as such, the new information and communication technologies are of utmost importance for the effective management of migration, i.e. in helping policy makers to address migration challenges, and to harness opportunities arising from international migration. One such opportunity is utilizing ICTs for strengthening the involvement of diasporas in the development process of countries of origin. With regard to other programme areas, ICTs are equally essential. They facilitate and often enable effective management of labour migration, enhanced monitoring of migration flows across international borders, or help in providing reliable information to potential and actual migrants. Since ICTs have become so vital for the implementation of modern migration policies, the introduction of such policies often involves or necessitates an upgrade of a country's IT capacity. But this can be a double-edged sword for the least developed countries (LDCs). Without adequate resources to maintain such systems, and to support the development of skilled IT cadres, developing countries can be left with increasingly out-dated migration management systems. As such, special support and special attention to this issue is required in initiatives to improve the migration management capacities of least developed countries (LDCs).

Some of the areas where ICTs are crucial for migration management are outlined below.

a) Data and Information

Information dissemination and data management are at the core of what ICTs can do, and both are essential tools of migration management. As mentioned above, for migrants, information and ICTs are relevant during every stage of the migration cycle. Consequently, the gathering, administration and sharing of information are essential components of all effective migration management strategies at the governmental and

inter-governmental levels. Ensuring the protection of privacy rights, as well as the responsible use of sensible data, form an inherent part of such strategies.

Informing migrants prior to their departure about options, opportunities, and potential risks regarding the migration process gives them the opportunity to make their choices on a more informed and conscious basis. Such information could pertain to immigration regulations, job openings, or visa procedures, and extend to cultural orientation, i.e. cultural differences between the country of origin and the country of destination. Information campaigns in countries of origin can also help to raise awareness particularly with regard to human trafficking and smuggling. Information, thus, becomes an important tool to empower migrants, and reduces the ability of traffickers and smugglers to exploit limited knowledge or unrealistic expectations of potential migrants. However, often information may be available, but it is not accessible to migrants. Decentralizing the dissemination of information, and reaching a broader accessibility of ICTs could help to fill that gap.

Closely connected to provision of accurate information is the collection and sharing of data on migration. Data may come from a variety of sources, may be collected by different entities, including Governments, International Organizations, NGOs, employment agencies, research centers and other institutions, and may be used for diverse purposes. The use of data within migration-related activities ranges from policy making and strategic decisions on labour migration, asylum and integration, counter-trafficking and counter-smuggling measures and enhancing security, to a variety of other issues addressing complex social, economic, demographic or political needs within one country or internationally. It must be emphasized that the availability of reliable data is not an end in itself, but rather a key tool to assist policy makers and other stakeholders in developing appropriate strategies with regard to migration. Currently, the range of information and statistics available on migration issues is far from complete and coherent. In addition, different terminologies as well as standards make the sharing and comparison of data difficult. Therefore, the strengthening of dialogue and the reinforcement of the capacity of data management at the national and regional level could be first steps towards a more comprehensive collection and utilization of data for migration management.

b) Facilitating Labour Migration

Labour migration is a core component of present migration processes. An increasing number of countries today is experiencing labour migration, and more and more countries are both, countries of origin and destination. Increasingly, governments of both sending and receiving countries are developing regulatory mechanisms to manage labour migration. These include selective recruitment policies by countries needing labour, and strong marketing and overseas employment strategies by countries supplying labour. In managing labour migration, which requires sound inter-state cooperation, ICTs have become important in a number of ways.

First, ICTs are used for the development and the technical set-up of information systems. The general purpose of these systems is to enable the automatisation of the process of management and storage of data generated under labour migration programmes. The intention is to respond to the information needs of the various users and to achieve maximum efficiency in the administrative and managerial procedures. These information systems can help countries of destination in managing and adapting

their labour migration policy/programmes by generating statistics and information on the demand of labour (the type of job proposed and the duration of contract offered), on the supply (the duration of stay, the level of qualification and the geographical origin of the migrants), the percentage of job matching, and the time needed for a position to be filled. These systems can also provide information on administrative procedures underway and activities already completed as well as facilitate the circulation of information between the different institutions involved in labour migration management.

For countries of origin, these systems can be useful in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the labour market needs of destination countries, informing their nationals on the opportunities available and developing training possibilities in areas of interest. It also allows keeping track of their nationals abroad, which facilitates the eventual elaboration of targeted programmes for a better human and financial contribution of the diaspora to the development of the economy.

To employers and/or private recruitment agencies, these ICT systems permit to display job opportunities to a large audience. When job seekers abroad have the possibility to register their professional and bio data on line, it facilitates the selection procedure. It can also help in the completion of administrative procedures related to the employment of foreign workers, by offering the time saving possibility to provide information on-line to the relevant administrations.

The general public and future migrant workers can be given access though internet to a full range of information including job opportunities, administrative procedures to comply for employment and residence abroad, cultural and legal information on the receiving countries. Future workers might be granted the opportunity to register their personal data or to apply directly on line for one specific job.

The system can include a public database accessible to anyone on the Internet and a restricted database accessible only to authorized users such as for example government institutions and administrative services.

Second, ICTs can be utilized in order to facilitate the entry and exit of specific categories of labour migrants at immigration checkpoints. Such systems have been put in use mainly for highly skilled migrants and business travellers, and allow them to enter and exit certain countries through rapid immigration processing. One example is the APEC Business Travel Card, a document, which permits its holder the pre-cleared short-term entry into the participating economies.

Third, some countries now offer potential labour migrants the possibility to apply online for specific vacancies, or to assess their eligibility for participation in labour migration schemes with the help of online tests. Sometimes, destination countries admit labour migrants on a highly selective basis according to the perceived needs of their national labour markets and economies. Online application mechanisms provide the possibility for destination countries to specifically recruit candidates to sectors and positions where there are shortages of skills.

c) Utilizing ICTs for strengthening the involvement of diasporas in origin country development

Numerous countries of origin are now using ICTs to liaise with their nationals living abroad, and diasporas, vice versa, use the internet and other means of information and communication to actively support development or post-conflict reconstruction in their countries of origin.

Harnessing the potential of the diaspora is especially vital in cases where parts of the skilled workforce have migrated abroad at a rate faster than they can be replaced, leading to a shortage of human resources, as well as in post-conflict situations, where human capital is urgently needed to rebuild the country. ICTs are instrumental in providing opportunities for migrants to become involved in the development process of their countries of origin. They help migrants to develop common agendas and identities, even across large geographical distances, and thereby contribute to the formation of strong and active diasporas. Subsequently, migrants are now in a better position to become involved in the development process of their countries of origin than ever before.

This involvement can take various forms, and it can lead to various policies. Diasporas can play a major role in terms of knowledge and technology transfer between countries of origin and of destination. This transfer can be effectuated through actual returns, whether temporary or permanent in nature, or through a virtual approach, for example through web-based portals that allow for knowledge sharing between the professional diaspora and counterparts at home. 'Digital diasporas' have recently emerged as a topic of discussion among academia and policy makers, and some diasporas have played a pivotal role in promoting the presence and use of ICTs in their home countries, thereby helping to bridge the digital divide. E-learning and online courses are a major opportunity to be further explored in this context, with courses being taught by national experts living abroad to students in the countries of origin.

The availability of ICTs on both ends of the migration spectrum has proven to be of crucial importance also for diasporas who want to support investment in their countries of origin, create trade linkages, or generally explore new business opportunities. Several Governments are directly encouraging their nationals abroad to invest in their country of origin, sometimes with the help of special incentives or specifically tailored investment schemes. Many diasporas have also formed effective business networks and associations, promoting opportunities in their countries of origin, and creating employment through joint ventures with compatriots in the country of origin, wherever possible. In this context, Geographical Information Systems (GIS) already used successfully in other domains, could provide powerful means to facilitate the collection and analysis of migration information with the aim to enhance knowledge of a territory and its potentials and achieve its optimal utilization and development in the broadest sense.

ICTs also facilitate the financial transfers made by migrants to their countries of origin, whose annual volume is estimated to amount to as much as 100 billion worldwide. While a substantial portion of those remittances is transferred through informal channels (through travelling relatives, migrants returning to the country of origin for vacation, etc.), for those which go through formal providers, new methods of transfer that involve the use of ICTs are growing rapidly in importance, since they are often efficient and reliable. Access to ICTs such as cell phones or the internet is therefore an important factor in facilitating the flow of remittances, with e-banking being on the rise.

In this context, the recent discussion about outsourcing and offshoring of IT services is of interest. Cases such as India, where US-based migrant entrepreneurs have been instrumental in promoting India as a destination for IT-related outsourcing, have drawn attention to the potential linkage between diaspora investors and opportunities for IT sector development in the countries of origin. Although motivated by profit expectations of the businesses involved, it is hoped that offshoring will have positive spillover effects for developing countries in terms of creating more jobs, attracting foreign investment, enhancing training and triggering technology transfer. However, it has been argued that outsourcing runs the risk of creating is 'dynamic enclaves'[2] in developing countries, that have few linkages to the domestic economy. Therefore, in order for offshoring to contribute to sustainable development, it needs to be ensured that the IT capacity generated by these processes is used to respond not only to the demands of overseas customers, but also to those of domestic markets, thereby supporting the development of a strong domestic IT sector.

Finally, under certain circumstances, 'digital' diasporas may also become agents of mediation or cooperation between the sending and receiving countries. They can help to 'market' political events or decisions of the sending country in their country of residence, or 'sell' the culture and politics of the receiving country in their countries of origin. In this sense, diasporas can become important agents of change, and can help developing countries of origin to further their integration into the world economy.

d) Migration, ICTs and Security

Security is not just an issue concerning developed countries, but also developing countries and countries in transition. While it is not always justified to link migration and security too closely, it is also the case that security actions must include the migration sector.

Technology plays a key role here. The design, operation and maintenance of electronic border management data systems, for example, is a useful tool both for security and statistical purposes. These data systems are becoming more and more automated, featuring automated data input devices, and increasingly sophisticated user and server systems. Thorough IT expertise and support are needed to install and maintain such systems.

Another application of ICTs within the context of migration and security is in the issuance and utilization of travel documents. Capturing personal data correctly, storing it in useful ways, and enabling their secure retrieval necessitate a strong technical base and well-developed IT skills.

In both areas, border management systems and travel documents, biometrics are emerging into use in increasingly complex technological implications. If developing countries are going to participate equally in the establishment and responsible use of such systems, they may need support in upgrading their IT capacity. This will be necessary in order to enable them to manage and regulate those systems for their own

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[2] Saxenian, AnnaLee, `The Bangalore Boom: From Brain Drain to Brain Circulation?' in *Bridging the Digital Divide: Lessons from India*, eds Kenneth Kenniston and Deepak Kumar, National Institute of Advanced Study, Bangalore, 2000

purposes, and according to their own priorities and needs - on par with the developed countries.

Generally, these technical developments in migration management need to be complemented by the creation of effective legal and political frameworks, which guarantee that the data generated in the context of migration are used responsibly, and that the privacy as well as the individual rights of persons concerned are strictly protected.