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Perception Change Takes More Than Re-Branding

Mediatenor

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF MIGRATION

Keynote Speech

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Boeing, Steinway, Levi-Strauss and Heinz are all household names in the United States and beyond. Less well known is the fact that these successful companies were founded by German-American migrants. Today 46 million Americans claim German ancestry, making German-Americans, the largest single ethnic group in the USA. This figure reminds us that not so long ago, millions of migrants left Europe in search of a better life. Today, it is Europe’s turn to welcome migrants. Germany, the strongest economy in Europe, now attracts the highest number of migrants in the region.

However, far from celebrating the fact that people want to come to Europe, and other developed countries, we are witnessing a troubling rise in anti-migrant sentiment. Migration is too often viewed as a problem. There is a risk that immigration policies in many countries will be shaped by fears and misconceptions rather than facts. The media have a key role to play in influencing attitudes to migration, given that migration issues receive extensive and increasing media coverage across the world.

Hardly a day goes by without migration hitting the headlines somewhere in the world. However, too often the media tends to focus on the negative aspects of migration. One recent study of 58,000 migration news stories, conducted by researchers at the University of Oxford, found that the most common word used to describe immigrants was “illegal”, even though by far the majority of migrants enter and reside legally. It was also found that the most common modifier of asylum seekers was the word “failed”. It was also typical for journalists to use words such as “terrorist” when reporting on migration stories, stoking fears that migration could be linked to terrorism[[1]](#footnote-2).

In a previous World Migration Report[[2]](#footnote-3), IOM reviewed the evidence regarding the media’s portrayal of migrants. Several studies show that the media tends to focus on illegality, crisis, controversy and government failure, and on more sensational stories. When you read a newspaper or watch TV today you are likely to get the impression that there are too many migrants who steal the jobs of locals, depress wages, and place an unfair burden on the welfare system.

Media coverage has an important impact on public perceptions of migration and the way in which policy debates are framed. The media can select which topics to present and what issues to highlight. Poor public perceptions of migrants restrict the ability of politicians to develop realistic and evidence-based policies to manage migration and integration.

How can we correct this negative portrayal of migration? What can be done to change the way in which we communicate about migration?

First, we need to understand better how the world views migration. For the first time ever, IOM has commissioned Gallup to conduct a global survey of public attitudes towards migration. The full results of our analysis will be released in April, but I would like to present to you some of the initial findings from this new IOM report.

Most polls about what people think about migration have been conducted in Europe and North America, and the results often suggest that the public, especially in Europe, has a fairly negative opinion of migration.

However, when we consider public attitudes to migration across the globe, public opinion is more varied than one might think. IOM’s forthcoming report – How the World Views Migration – provides a rare insight into public attitudes toward migration around the world. Drawing on data from the Gallup World Poll, the report provides figures from surveys conducted in more than 140 countries between 2012 and 2014. The report presents for the first time a global overview of what people worldwide think about migration based on interviews with 183,772 adults.

The study finds that more of the world is in favour of migration than against it. Worldwide, people are generally more likely to want immigration levels in their countries to either stay at their present levels (21.8 per cent) or to be increased (21.3 per cent), rather than to see immigration levels decrease (34.5 per cent).

People in Europe are the most negative toward immigration, although even there barely the majority (52.1%), say immigration levels should be decreased. In North America – another large receiving region – only 39% express this view.

Opinions in Europe vary, however. The majority of adults in nearly all Northern European countries (such as Sweden, Denmark, and Finland) would like to see levels of immigration stay the same or increase. The United Kingdom is the sole exception in this sub-region, with a high proportion of people wishing to see a decrease in immigration. By contrast, residents in much of the Mediterranean region, which is an entry point to Europe for many irregular migrants, would like to see immigration levels decrease. In fact, adults in Greece are the most likely in the world to want immigration levels decreased, with 84% saying this. This sentiment is shared by 56% in Spain, 67% in Italy, and 76% in Malta.

Residents in Latin America and the Caribbean generally want immigration levels to stay the same or increase, with some exceptions such as Costa Rica and Ecuador. Opinions vary widely in Asia. Some countries favour decreasing immigration, such as Malaysia (82%), Israel (76%), and Pakistan (76%). Alternatively, the majority in countries like the Philippines, Japan, and South Korea favour increasing or maintaining immigration levels. People in North African countries tend to be more likely to want immigration levels to decrease (Egypt 72%, Libya 54%). South Africa also shows over 50% wanting decreased levels. Whereas in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, with the highest percentage of temporary migrant workers in their populations, a relatively small percentages of people want to see immigration levels decrease, and a high percentage want to see levels increase or stay the same.

People’s economic perceptions may be the strongest predictor of their attitudes about immigration. Adults who believe economic conditions in their country are “fair” or “poor” are almost twice as likely to say immigration levels should decrease as those who say conditions are “excellent” or “good.” Similarly, those who say conditions are getting worse, are nearly twice as likely to favour decreased immigration as those who say economic conditions are getting better (48.0% vs. 25.3%). In nearly all global regions, people who see economic conditions as “excellent or good” are more likely to have a positive outlook on migration than those who see it as “fair or poor.”

The importance of economic factors may explain why attitudes to migration in the North of Europe, with the exception of the UK, seem to be much more favourable than in the South of Europe. The significant rise in the number of people trying to enter Europe in irregular ways over the last two years through the southern Mediterranean countries may also explain why attitudes in the South are more negative.

Second, we need to better understand the impact that migrants and migration have in the economic, social and labour conditions of the countries of destination and countries of origin in order to communicate better and inform the discussions about migration with real facts and data. Several studies suggest that there are many misperceptions about the impact of migration which fuel fears about migration.

I am not going to pretend that migration does not have its downsides and that States do not need to develop policies and legislations that address them and limit the negative effects of migration. But what I would like to do today is to outline some of the key benefits of migration. Too often the media and public debate about migration focuses only on the negative aspects of migration.

The reality is that migration brings huge benefits, fuelling growth, innovation and entrepreneurship in both the countries people come from, and in those they move to. When governed humanely to promote safety, order and dignity, migration has endless advantages. It provides opportunities, and raises incomes and living standards. These benefits are important to keep in mind because in Europe more, not less, migration will probably be needed in the future.  Europe’s population is ageing and the EU is predicting a massive shortage of workers of 45 million in the next 50 years as the working age population will fall. With no further migration to the EU, the population of the EU27 will be 58 million less than it was in 2010 according to Eurostat data. Contrary to public perceptions that European countries do not need migrants, the reality is that migrants mitigate the effects of an ageing and shrinking population.

A common misperception is that there are too many immigrants. Misconceptions so distort reality that in some European countries ordinary citizens estimate the number of immigrants at three times more than there really are. The 2014 Transatlantic Trends survey conducted by the German Marshall Fund showed that misinformation about basic migration facts is a key factor responsible for anti-immigrant sentiment. In countries like the U.S., the UK, Greece, Italy and others, the proportion of people who agreed that there are too many immigrants in their countries fell sharply when people were told how many foreigners actually reside there.

Another misperception is that the majority of migrants are desperate people who come from the poorest parts of the world. People are generally unaware of the fact that South-South migration, i.e. migration between developing countries, is just as great as migration between the global South and the global North. About a fifth of all migrants move from one developed country to another. The majority of migrants arriving in Germany in recent years, for example, have been coming from other EU countries.

We need to change our mind-set and the way we think about migration. Migration is now a global phenomenon affecting nearly all countries of the world. A growing number of people are moving from the North to the South in search of work. You are all familiar with examples of Portuguese moving to Angola or Spanish moving to Argentina and other South American countries, for instance.

Too often migration is perceived as solely an immigration issue. How many Europeans are aware that the British diaspora, some 5 million people, is the eighth largest in the world?  Nobody seems to question the desire of British people to move abroad and become emigrants. But the arrival of immigrants in the UK is another matter. The migration policy debate in Europe is almost entirely focused on immigration policy questions rather than the implications of emigration.

Another common misperception is that developed countries do not need low-skilled migrants[[3]](#footnote-4). In fact, migrants in low-skilled jobs contribute to the functioning of the European economy by taking up jobs undesirable to natives, which in turns allows natives to take up higher-skilled and more remunerative employment. OECD[[4]](#footnote-5) forecasts show that for some countries like Italy, sectors requiring a low-skilled workforce like home care as well as food preparation and services will continue to grow. In other words, low-skilled workers will be needed just as much as highly skilled workers. And there is little evidence to suggest that migrants depress the wages of low-skilled workers – if anything, wages of earlier immigrants might be negatively affected. One study found that between 1990 and 2000, all European countries “experienced a decrease in their average wages and a worsening of their wage inequality because of emigration,” while immigration led to a positive effect on the “average wages” of native workers and a corresponding reduction in wage-inequality in the countries of destination[[5]](#footnote-6).

Another common stereotype is that migrants take jobs away from local people. The evidence suggests that countries with high unemployment rates usually have lower, not higher immigration rates: this could be partly because migrants move where they are more likely to find jobs. Migrants usually take the “3 D jobs”, dirty, dangerous and difficult work, that natives are unwilling or unable to do. Migrants fill the gaps in the job market. They complement the local labour force rather than competing with it by providing skills at all levels that are needed in most developed countries. An analysis of 30 countries by Hays revealed that many countries, including the US, Mexico, Canada, Chile, Brazil, China, Spain, the UK, France, and Sweden, are facing a “talent mismatch”, which means that the available labour force does not have the skills employers are looking for[[6]](#footnote-7).  Research from the Boston Consulting Group suggests that Germany could experience a labour shortage of up to 2.4 million by 2020, and Australia of 2.3 million[[7]](#footnote-8). But this is not only true for developed countries. A recent report by the McKinsey Global Institute estimated that by 2020, there will be a 38-40 million potential shortage of workers with higher education globally, and a 45 million shortage of workers with secondary education in developing countries[[8]](#footnote-9).

Too often, there is a perception that migrants are a drain on the welfare system of the receiving country. Research shows that migrants are net positive contributors to the welfare systems of almost every European country. Migrants contribute to public finances more than they take out in public benefits and services[[9]](#footnote-10). Migrant households contribute an average €5,000 per year to host countries’ public purses. A study by the Bertelsmann Foundation shows that each migrant in Germany contributed €3,300 in 2012 on average[[10]](#footnote-11). In other words, if anything, immigrants make receiving countries slightly richer, rather than poorer. Migrants often contribute more, on average, to countries of destination than natives, because the country of destination has not had to bear the costs of training and educating migrants who arrive to work. This is particularly true for highly skilled migrants[[11]](#footnote-12).

Another key benefit of migration is that it enhances innovation. Patent applications in Europe are higher in countries with policies to attract highly skilled migrants. The presence of high-skilled migrants and foreign students in higher education contributes to the creation of knowledge as well, and evidence shows that immigrants increase patenting activity of natives too. Networks of diaspora members contribute to the diffusion of knowledge and the presence of a more diverse workforce makes innovation more likely. Migrants file the majority of patents by leading science firms – 65% at Merck, 64% at General Electric and 60% at Cisco, just to give a few examples. First-generation immigrants or their children had founder roles in more than 40% of the [Fortune 500](http://fortune.com/fortune500/). Immigrants are more than twice as likely as native born to found a company: they started 28% of all new U.S. businesses in 2011, despite accounting for just 12.9% of the population” [[12]](#footnote-13).

Companies such as Google, Intel, PayPal, eBay and Yahoo! have all been co-founded by migrants. Migrants have started 25% of US venture-capital-backed public companies and 40% of venture-capital-backed technology firms. In 2 out of 4 of all engineering and technology companies established in the US between 1995 and 2005, there was at least one immigrant key founder. These companies were responsible for generating more than 52 billion dollars’ worth of sales and creating almost half a million jobs as of 2005. Such contributions have only increased in the past decade[[13]](#footnote-14).

Highly skilled migrants and diversity in the workplace positively affect work productivity in recipient countries. Diversity, not only of the highly skilled, but also of the low-skilled, makes countries more productive and richer in the long run. Gains in productivity stemming from ethnic diversity in firms are demonstrated by various studies[[14]](#footnote-15).

Migrants, and especially skilled migrants contribute to increased trade and investment flows between countries of origin and destination, in a way that is beneficial to both; research finds that discrimination might be a constraint to these effects entering into full action, and the fight against discrimination starts, again, with knowledge and understanding of how migrants contribute to societies in destination countries.

Last but not least: emigrants abroad vastly contribute to the development of countries of origin. The money sent by migrants from developing countries back home – 404 billion dollars in 2013 – dwarfs development aid figures, and (excluding China) is greater than financial flows from foreign direct investment and other financial transfers. Households back home benefit greatly from these money flows in terms of greater expenditure on health, housing and education, easier access to formal financial services and information technologies, insurance in the event of environmental or economic shocks”. Furthermore, remittances are incredibly resilient during economic hardship in origin countries and also during times of crisis. For instance, during the intense flooding in Pakistan in 2010, remittances increased by about 20%. Following Typhoon Haiyan, the Philippines saw an 8.5% increase in remittances, helped by money transfer companies agreeing to zero fees for making remittances.

On the other hand, migrants can also decide to return and increasingly do so. People return with a rich baggage of skills and experience to contribute in their home countries. Migrants also facilitate the flow of goods, factors and knowledge between origin and destination countries and establish fruitful networks which are beneficial to their communities of origin.

I have presented to you just a selection of some of the evidence which dispels some of the myths about migration and I hope to have convinced you that it is worth looking further at the positive contributions of migrants and migration, and incorporate this approach into your future communications. The challenge of course is to ensure that this evidence and these messages reach and are understood by the general public via the media.

At the 2013 High-Level Dialogue on Migration and Development, held in New York, senior officials from governments all over the world gathered to discuss how to enhance the benefits of migration for development. One of the key conclusions from this meeting was a recommendation to improve the way in which we communicate about migration to address negative stereotypes and misperceptions. Although there was widespread agreement among governments of the need to do more in this area, no action plan was developed to guide policy makers around the world. Below, I suggest some of the concrete steps that could be taken to develop a global action plan to ensure that we communicate more effectively about migration.

* Monitoring public opinion – create a global migration barometer

In order to develop a campaign to address public attitudes to migration we need to continually monitor public opinion. Although polls are conducted in different countries of the world there is no regular global poll of public attitudes towards migration. IOM would like to see the Gallup survey of public opinion and migration become an annual global survey. This would make it possible, for the first time, to monitor globally what people think about migration each year. It would also be possible to add new questions to the current Gallup World Poll on migration to explore in more detail how the world really views migration. Such information could be used to help better address the public’s fears and concerns about migration.

* Gather and use the evidence

Given the widespread fears and misperceptions surrounding migration it is essential that we invest in gathering the facts and figures about migration. However, it is not enough simply to gather the evidence. We need to react quickly when migration issues arise to ensure that the best available evidence reaches policymakers and the general public. Better awareness of the facts surrounding migration and the positive contributions migrants bring is likely to make migrant integration easier to implement, and reduce the likelihood of extremism and xenophobia.

* Information campaigns – target the destination countries

Public information behaviour-change campaigns have been used successfully all over the world to encourage people to drink less alcohol, stop smoking or wear seat belts. Such campaigns are usually a very cost-effective way of reaching large numbers of people. There is a long history of using information campaigns in the migration field. However, in most cases such campaigns operate in countries of origin and target would-be migrants warning them about the risks of irregular migration. What is needed today is a new type of information campaign which targets the general public in destination countries. Such campaigns should also use new sources of communication such as social media to reach target audiences. IOM is working with Facebook, the world’s largest social media platform to engage in two way communication with potential irregular migrants in the “upstream” countries of origin and to provide guidance on safe migration practices. Data collected from potential migrants on their skills and intentions will also help match needs in countries industrial policies.

* Build a partnership with the media

The media lacks resources for good public service journalism. We need to work with the media in partnership to encourage more thoughtful and more balanced media coverage of migration by supporting the information needs of journalists. But we want to be sure that we have a clear understanding of the type of information media needs and the format in which it is needed to facilitate their work. IOM is developing a one-stop-shop for journalists called the Migration Newsdesk with the aim of providing a steady flow of unbiased information for the media to use.

* Ensure that the migrant’s voice is heard – via Oral History

IOM is engaging in an ambitious oral history project called The Migrant’s Path which aims to capture the authentic voices of global migration for posterity. In partnership with TEDx and Storycorps, IOM will record, preserve and share the stories of migrants with the world in a unique, timeless cultural archive. The recordings will be deposited in the archives of both the United Nations and IOM. An associated illustrated book (with cd) will be published to highlight the most compelling examples of migrant stories.

These are some of the steps that we have identified in IOM to improve the way in which we communicate about migration, but I am sure that you can also bring a lot of new ideas on the basis of your experience.

Concluding Remarks

We live in an era of unprecedented mobility. More people are on the move today in absolute terms than ever before in human history. Roughly one out of every seven people on the planet today is a migrant, including some 232 million international migrants and 740 million internal migrants, and billions more are impacted by the fact that those migrants are on the move. We also know that this trend is expected to continue with an estimated 400 million international migrants by 2040.

That is one billion people whose basic human rights must be respected; one billion people who deserve access to basic public goods like health and education; one billion people who contribute to the economic and social development of their home and host societies. Can we all continue to ignore the contributions of this one billion people when we talk about migration? Can we continue to communicate about migration without including them, their aspirations, their needs and their stories?

An important part of our role today is to dispel the many and all too common myths and misconceptions about migration if we are to maximise its benefits for all actors involved. It is only then, that politicians will be able to develop fact-based policies and legislative frameworks that respond to the real needs while promoting the protection and integration of migrants in host societies.

International Organizations and non-governmental organizations cannot make this perception change alone. The media has a fundamental role in this endeavour. We need you all to be part of this effort. That is why IOM joined the Perception Change Program that Michael Moller initiated a year ago at the UN in Geneva with several International Organizations. This is also why I accepted with great pleasure Roland’s invitation to participate in this conference.

Let us use this opportunity to start finding ways and partnerships to make the perception change of migration a reality. I look forward to discussing with several of you more in detail how we can work together to achieve this goal.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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2. World Migration Report (2011) “Communicating Effectively about Migration”, IOM, Geneva [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Migration Policy Centre (2014), « Is What We Hear About Migration Really True ? Questioning Eight Stereotypes”, European University Institute, Florence. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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5. Docquier, et.al. (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Hays Global Skills Index 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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