

Opening remarks at the EC UN Knowledge Fair on Migration for Development

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends and colleagues,

It is an honor and a pleasure to welcome you today here in Brussels together with the distinguished representatives of the EC –UN Joint Migration and Development Initiative, and the members of Migrant Advisory Board, at the occasion of this Knowledge Fair on Migration for Development.

Many of you have travelled great distances and made big efforts to be here tonight. With participants attending from all over the world, this Fair is a truly global event. Let me thank all of you for attending to this Fair.

Politicians and policy-makers at the highest levels have recognized that the proper management of migration can help reduce levels of poverty in developing countries as well as contribute to the growth and wellbeing of host countries. Nonetheless, recognition alone is not enough. Concrete steps need to be taken, in order to achieve tangible results, and that is why I welcome the EC – UN Joint Migration and Development Initiative.

The Initiative addresses four thematic areas: 1) Migrant remittances; 2) Migrant communities, 3) Migrants' capacities, and 4) Migrants' rights. These thematic windows address precisely four key areas where many migrant organizations and civil society groups have already opened path-breaking initiatives intending to contribute to improving the quality of the lives of the poor and vulnerable in their home countries. However, there is still much to be done in this respect, and many challenges to overcome in various areas, especially, those of migrant remittances and migrant rights.

Working with diaspora communities and bodies representing migrants can have great advantages for policy makers. The Knowledge Fair that we are opening today aims to put a number of outstanding interventions from these groups on the spotlight, with the hope that lessons can be learned from their project coordinators and perhaps encourage and inspire other individuals or organizations to replicate some of these practices elsewhere.

Those who are invited to showcase their projects at this Fair would know that the long road to Brussels was not an easy one. Many, if not all of you, support projects relying mostly on your own financial and social capital. Probably, the effectiveness of your initiatives has been challenged many times and therefore, you must have felt that donors were hesitant to invest on your projects. Many of you may also have felt at times that you were not treated seriously as you were perceived as inexperienced and amateur development workers. Perhaps some of you have heard that you are not objective enough because you work is governed by passion and not by reason. I would say passion alone does not guarantee for a

successful project. On the other hand, tools alone without passion and commitment would not make a good project either.

Policy makers and development agencies still need to understand how migrants and migrant organisations work. What drives them to engage in development?

I have lived in the Netherlands for almost thirty years now. When I arrived to Europe, the Martial Law was still in force in my home country, the Philippines. I joined my compatriots in appealing for the return of democracy in our country. Despite the distance, we were effective in exposing the abuses and violation of human rights under a dictatorial regime. In 1986, the Filipinos gained back their freedom. My compatriots and I started to work to contribute to the economic and development of our country. We lobbied successfully for the endorsement of an enabling law to grant Filipinos living abroad the right to vote and to have dual citizenship. Our advocacy took us nine long years before we achieved what we wanted. In early 1990s, we started campaigning to harness the development potentials of migration by enhancing the productive use of migrant remittances. At that time, we even used our own private money to organise meetings and conferences because no donor organisations would like to contribute to this kind of activity. Each time we asked for funding support to generate awareness on the role of Filipino diasporas in development, we were told that this is not part of the national development strategies. Despite these setbacks, we continued to network and enthusiastically raise funds for our development projects. Some of the pioneers of these initiatives are here today.

Being a migrant myself, it was not easy to find a place in my new homeland. I experienced many ups and downs in the course of my work. However, my stay in the Netherlands has also provided me with many opportunities to improve myself both personally and professionally. In 2001, I have this golden opportunity to work in a large development agency which mission to build a just world without poverty, I wholeheartedly share. In the beginning, I felt I needed to work doubly hard only to prove that I was capable of doing the same thing as my Dutch counterparts. The many challenges did not deter me to continue doing what I was passionate about and that is integrating migration and development in our organization's strategic plan. After 8 years of hard work, and advocacy, our efforts paid back. Oxfam Novib is nowadays truly committed to work on this field, by providing continuous technical and financial assistance to diaspora organizations and migrant groups. In this regards, I am proud to say that several of our partner organisations are here today showcasing their projects.

I am pleased to notice that times are changing now in the international fora. Policy makers, development agencies, and governments are now more willing to listen to the needs and concerns of migrant communities. I also see how migrant organizations are actively working towards the enhancement of their capacities, by taking courses, seminars, attending training etc. to become better and more efficient development agents. I also see many migrants becoming more and more confident in engaging dialogues with policy makers and getting actively in policy and decision-making process in the field of migration and development.

All those are very positive signs. At last, migrants are no longer considered only as mere beneficiaries but as active actors in development. The EC UN Joint Migration and Development Initiative is a good example of the recognition of the work of migrant organizations and civil society groups, active in the field of migration and development.

Millions of migrants working abroad, and sometimes under difficult circumstances, send **money back home** regularly to provide education, food, shelter and other basic needs to their families. Remittances are estimated to be two-thirds of foreign direct investment and

two times more than the official development aid in the developing world and will continue to play an increasing role in the life of people in many poorer countries.

Official development aid and foreign direct investment play a crucial role in poverty alleviation and economic growth. Although bigger in volume, remittances can only complement those two financial flows as they are private money which should not be given the entire burden for achieving global development objectives. Remittances alone could not solve the enormous poverty in poor areas and therefore, should not be considered as replacement to development aid.

Due to the current global financial crisis, a decreasing trend of the remittance flows is already visible in some countries like Mexico. Remittances are considered counter-cyclical but economists including The World Bank are not quite sure how long they can withstand the forces of recession and credit crunch. Although counter-cyclical, the global financial crisis can have negative impact on remittances being the lifeblood of millions of families.

To reiterate the importance of remittances, the World Bank states that “although a relatively large decline in some corridors, remittances are unlikely to fall as much as private flows and official aid to developing countries. This simply means that something structural and systematic should be done to enable migrants to send money back home not only by reducing the cost of transaction, but also to finding appropriate strategies so that a portion of money is saved and invested, promoting financial inclusion of un-bankable sector including the undocumented migrants, and educating families and migrants that they can do more if they manage their financial resources well.

Just like governments and the financial sector are bracing against the current financial crisis, migrant workers have to think of coping mechanisms on how to maintain their support for their families. Some have to take extra work, working 7 days a week, so that they can continue to send money back to their families. 200 million migrants working abroad sustain millions of people. If the amount is reduced significantly, millions of children could not anymore go to school. For families living in the rural areas that are highly dependent on remittances, this would mean hunger **and this is not an exaggeration!**

Something structural and systematic should be done to enable migrants to send money back home not merely by reducing the transaction costs, but also to find appropriate strategies so that a portion of money is saved and invested. It is necessary to promote financial inclusion of the un-bankable sector including the undocumented migrants. It is also necessary to educate migrants and their families, to secure their financial future. It is high time that policy makers take swift and appropriate sustainable interventions to enable migrants to continue providing the basic needs of the families.

In pursuit of greener pastures, people move - sometimes at the risk of their own lives - to another country leaving their families and children behind. A growing number of children in developing countries are brought up motherless while their own mothers have to earn money for their education by taking care of other mothers' children. **Women migrant workers** constitute more than half of migrants globally. Policy makers need to pay special attention to this vulnerable sector.

I would like to call on policy makers, international organizations and development agencies assembled here today, to continue recognizing and supporting migrants' initiatives. To provide enabling environments, formulate coherent migration and development policies, and translate words and commitments into action. Involve them actively as partners, in a sustainable manner.

I would also like to call on migrant leaders and civil society groups to take a constructive attitude as development partners, build long-term strategic alliances with relevant partners to ensure the success of your projects.

I hope this three-day event is not just a moment of glory. Instead it should pave the way for more sustainable partnerships between all stakeholders involved in this thematic area. A challenge to overcome after this gathering is precisely to sustain the active support to these kinds of initiatives.

To conclude, please allow me to say that: In order to maximize the benefits of international migration and address its negative impacts, let us all work together towards a gender-sensitive rights-based approach to migration and development.

I wish you all a warm welcome and hope that this Knowledge Fair will provide a genuine opportunity for dialogue, the exchange of ideas, and cooperation among all those present today.

THANK YOU!