Migration: An overlooked tool for local development

By Cécile Riallant, Programme Manager, UN Joint Migration and Development Initiative (http://www.migration4development.org/en) (JMDI)

The global approach to migration and development is typically framed at the national level, whereby policies are conceived by national governments and mostly implemented with national fiscal resources and by national actors. This is in line with the common perception that migration is subject to national sovereignty, involving country to country agreements and adherence to international conventions. Yet, this national level approach fails to acknowledge the diversity of development and migratory contexts that exist within countries. Indeed, persisting inequalities, one of the identified drivers of migration, exist not only among different countries, but also within countries. Migrants tend to move between specific territories, creating varied local migratory contexts within countries themselves. This is why the links between migration and development need an integral and bottom-up approach from the often overlooked local level. Increasing evidence supports migration as a local development tool that can enhance the dynamism of territories receiving and sending migrants.

Indeed, migrants are important contributors to local development as they can and do contribute to the social and economic fabric of their host and home territories. Through their transnational presence, migrants and diasporas are building development links between territories of origin and destination through international remittances, investment, skills, expertise and labour. Such factors can accelerate urban growth by transforming towns in migrant-sending regions through investments in real estate, for example. In territories of destination, the diversity brought by migration has a positive impact on productivity and innovation.1
Harnessing the benefits of migration for local development also need to uphold migrants’ political, economic, social and cultural rights. This means ensuring equal access to health, education and justice. Given the profound local dimension of migration, local and regional agents/authorities (LRAs) are fast becoming crucial actors in migration governance.

How can this impact be optimised? Evidence shows that migrants’ contributions to local development depends, to a large extent, on the relationship they establish with local actors and overall on the governance system existing at the local level. Migrants’ activities tend to be limited to the margins and rely on autonomous and direct personal relationships, with few interactions with local institutional stakeholders. Potential shortcomings of their local institutional environment can severely hamper their development potential. It is therefore essential that LRAs create a conducive and inclusive environment by providing migrants with a space for their opinions to be heard, establishing transparent frameworks that enhance trust between local stakeholders and migrant associations.

Several factors impact the ability of LRAs to effectively mainstream migration.

First, the level of decentralisation matters as it directly influences the competencies held by LRAs and, equally important, whether the decision on implementation is made locally or not. While not a prerequisite for setting-up mainstreaming mechanisms, decentralisation does add value as it allows for more enhanced participation of all local actors, which means that policy design and implementation efforts respond more accurately to local needs.

Second, regardless of the level of decentralisation, the dialogue mechanisms that exist between national and regional/local authorities are key to establishing pertinent policies that are in line with both national priorities and local realities. These mechanisms aim to share, diffuse and manage information, as well as facilitate negotiations and allow coherence between national and local policies. Consider the well-managed coordination mechanism between the national, regional and local levels in the Bicol region of the Philippines. At the local level, centres and councils on migration and development were established with corresponding budgets and personnel to lead the main activities in each municipality. Technical working groups also were established at the local level to bring in the expertise and support of various key actors. The regional capital of Naga City plays a coordinating role through a Migration and Development Council that provides capacity building and technical support at the local level. At the same time, Naga City partnered with the state through the Commission for Filipinos Overseas and fosters coordination, dialogue and mutual knowledge sharing and support between the local and national levels. All of this has been instrumental in mainstreaming migration into local, regional and national development planning.

Third, the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in which migration clearly features through specific targets presents a unique opportunity to increase the role of LRAs in managing migration as it relates to development. Clear lines of action for LRAs also have been outlined in the Quito Local Agenda, which came out of the second Mayoral Forum on Mobility, Migration and Development[^2] a process supported by the UN Joint Migration and Development Initiative (JMDI), the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), the World Bank’s KNOMAD Programme and IOM. Moreover, the New Urban Agenda recognises migration and displacement management as key components for ensuring sustainable urban development.

Working in migration and development at the local level presents a clear entry point to implement the universal outlook of the SDGs. It breaks from the Global North-GLOBAL SOUTH dynamic by tackling the impact of multi-directional migration movements locally and within a global development framework that strives to leave no-one behind. This approach can address the challenges associated with increasing

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inequalities within countries. The local migration and development dimension is a powerful way to engage with migrants themselves and effectively respond to their needs while empowering them as transnational development actors.

Three key considerations to successfully achieve such engagement should guide the way forward as follows:

First, local authorities should integrate migration into development dynamics and planning. Migration is a cross-cutting issue that affects and is affected by policies across the wide panorama of governance, including, among other factors, health, education and access to justice. Thus, mainstreaming migration into development planning and local governance generally has proven to be the most effective manner to ensure policies across the board for strengthened migration management and, consequently, enhanced development impact.

Second, local authorities should foster links between migrants’ territories of origin and destination, using migrants as bridges between territories connected by migration flows. Migration management for local development and diaspora-led development initiatives can be enhanced within decentralised co-operation dynamics where local authorities across migratory channels jointly manage the entire migratory cycle from start to finish. Moreover, this can provide legitimacy and empower diaspora- and migrant-led initiatives by ensuring that these are in line with the development priorities of the territory of origin and supported and up-scaled at both ends. Take, for example, the decentralised co-operation agreement between the regional governments of Tuscany in Italy and Kasserine in Tunisia. Through it, the Tunisian diaspora, many of whom are health professionals in Italy, support efforts to enhance health services and awareness in the region of Kasserine through study tours and knowledge transfer. This has enhanced the capacities of health professionals in Kasserine and led to refurbishing health centres and upgrading equipment.

And third, local and national authorities should work together to develop policies that can be replicated elsewhere, with an impact on national policies. Innovative and successful locally led initiatives can and do influence the national level. In some cases, this has led to endorsing good practices that are then considered in national policy making on migration and development to be applied across all territories. Ecuador’s Human Mobility Unit of the Provincial Government of Pichincha successfully promoted the social and economic inclusion of migrants and displaced persons in the region. Thanks to strategic multi-level coordination and information sharing about this at the national level, the Unit was officially recognised as an exemplary practice. The experiences and lessons learned fed into the creation of a new national law on migration that considers the local dimension of migration management. Moreover, this model was replicated in the province of Imbabura and plans are underway to replicate it in other areas. This highlights the importance of ensuring vertical coordination between local and national levels for policy coherence and effectiveness. Achieving this calls for both a bottom-up approach that responds to real needs at the local level and a top-down approach that feeds into replicating good practices in other territories.

Development Matters is kicking off the New Year with a series of blogs during the month of January that focus on international migration and development. This is the first blog in the series.

1) Kemeny, T., “Immigrant diversity and economic performance in cities”, University of Southampton, 2014
