VOICES

MDGs: The solution is in our hands

WE CAN END POVERTY 2015

MILLENIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS
Agents of Development
How migrants contribute to achieving the MDGs

Despite the evident links between migration and development, migration does not feature explicitly in the MDGs. However, in recent years there has been increasing recognition of the multi-dimensional relationship between migration and development. The positive contribution of migrants to the development of their families and communities at home, as well as their countries of origin, is finally being acknowledged. In fact, migrants are increasingly seen as agents of development. Key issues such as remittances, knowledge transfer and entrepreneurship are becoming the focus in discussions of the so-called migration-development nexus.

The significance attributed to the contribution of migrants to development is reflected by the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD). Since its creation in 2007, the GFMD is held on an annual basis at different locations - first in Belgium, then in the Philippines, Greece and most recently in Mexico - to discuss the migration-development nexus. The forum's aim is to advance understanding and cooperation and to foster practical and action-oriented outcomes as well as policies which further enhance the positive contribution of migrants to development. The GFMD has become an important platform for dialogue between governments, international organizations and civil society stakeholders. Although the forum does not form part of the United Nations system, it holds strong links with the UN, e.g. through the participation of the UN Secretary-General, the support of both the UN Secretary General's Special Representative for Migration and Development, and also the inter-UN agency Global Migration Group (GMG).

The different stakeholders participating in the forum base their effort to empower migrants on a common ground, namely the recognition that migrants do make a difference in meeting the MDGs. They furthermore assume that the contribution of migrants to development is closely linked to the protection of their human and labour rights. Thus,

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stakeholders at the GFMD promote the protection of migrants’ rights with the aim of freeing their potential to act as agents for development for their countries of origin, families and communities at home.
The approach of qualifying migrants as agents of development reveals the concept of responsible well-being, introduced by Robert Chambers and influenced by Amartya Sen’s capability approach. This concept regards people – and so migrants – as a major engine of development. It puts the personal and the individual ability at the centre of development processes, because it is their ability to act and change the world which drives development. Development in this context is defined as a person’s well-being and good quality of life. And it is good quality of life which the MDGs stand for. The term ‘responsible’ thereby points to an obligation, the obligation to take responsibility for one’s own well-being as well as for the well-being of others, just as migrants do through their commitment towards their families, communities and countries of origin. How does this commitment translate in practice?

The most prominent contribution of migrants to development is their financial remittances. Remittances are the sum of migrant workers’ earnings sent back to their families and communities in their countries of origin. They are sent either individually or collectively as part of a diaspora organisation. By sending remittances, migrants contribute to the achievement of the MDGs in a variety of ways.

Firstly, remittances provide an additional family income and play therefore a significant role in:

A) eradicating extreme poverty and hunger (MDG 1), when spent on food, shelter and clothing;
B) achieving universal education (MDG 2), when children either don’t need to start working to earn a living for themselves and their families thereby holding them to be in school, or when spent directly on the education of the families’ children;
C) reducing child mortality (MDG 4), improving maternal health (MDG 5) and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases (MDG 6), when spent on medicines and on medical help.

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Secondly, remittances enable migrants to finance economic activities, which in turn increase the families’ income and contribute to the achievement of the MDGs as described above. Thirdly, remittances represent a source of foreign direct investment in real assets including building schools and clinics and thereby contribute to MDGs 2, 4, 5 and 6. Fourthly, remittances finance development projects and philanthropy or charitable activities in the countries of origin. Remittances can thus have a further positive effect on achieving the MDGs, when spent on the right projects.

Stakeholders at the GFMD pointed out a growing number of female migrants who represent almost half of the world’s migrants. Women become senders of remittances, which leads to their empowerment within family structures. As recipients of remittances from a family member abroad, women are empowered because they decide how the money is spent. Migration therefore has the potential to change gender roles and empower women, contributing to the achievement of MDG 3, the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Migrants do not only contribute to the MDGs through financial remittances, but also through ‘social remittances’. These include ideas, practices and identities that migrants remit home. Migrants - for example - who familiarize with empowered gender roles in their receiving countries contribute to the transformation of gender relations at home and thereby to the achievement of MDG 3.

A third way of migrants contributing to the achievement of the MDGs is through the transfer of technical knowledge and professional skills acquired abroad. These can be used for business set up and entrepreneurship or - for example - the improvement of the health sector.

It becomes clear that migrants have the capability to contribute to the achievement of the MDGs, that they do it day-to-day on a small or even bigger scale, and that the international community is able to support them, as the GFMD does when promoting migrants’ ability to contribute to development processes.

Want to learn more?

Robert Chambers, “Ideas for development: reflecting forwards”
Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty, “Making migration work for development”