

## YOUTH AND LABOUR MIGRATION

Summary of Week 5 Online Discussions

Moderated by: DSPD/UNDESA and ILO

### Executive summary

The 2013 World Youth Report (WYR) will attempt to offer a multidimensional account or perspective of the life experiences of young migrants and young people affected by migration. The report aims to highlight some of the concerns, challenges and successes experienced by these young people affected by migration, from their own perspectives, based on their own experiences and in their own voices.

Young participants presented diverse and broad perspectives and opinions on what they thought was motivating young people to migrate for employment, the factors or characteristics in young migrants that determined their employment outcomes in countries of destination, and the challenges specific to young migrants that they or their migrant friends, relatives, or acquaintances faced in the labour markets of destination countries. Lastly, some presented good practices on youth employment and recommendations they believe can improve young migrants' working conditions.

Frequently highlighting their own experiences, participants pointed out that most young people migrate in order to financially support their families. However, participants also noted that young people might also migrate to pursue their studies or out of a desire to satisfy a sense of adventure, and then seek to integrate themselves into the labour market of the host country. Motivations for migration are largely determined by the socio-economic status, educational profile and the resources of the young migrant. The educational and skills profile (low or high-skilled) of a young migrant was also seen as playing a big role in his or her employment outcome, with the higher skilled and more educated more likely to get a better job abroad. At the same time, many participants recognized that immigration status, the needs of labour markets at destination and certain immigration regulations impacted the transaction costs of employing foreigners and therefore sometimes resulted in the de-skilling and brain waste of young migrants. The problem of lack of recognition of foreign qualifications and education was

also highlighted. Given the propensity of the youth to migrate, certain participants voiced concerns about brain drain and put forth recommendations to governments and non-governmental organizations including youth-led and youth-targeted organizations on how to promote brain gain for the benefit of origin countries' development their youth who migrate. In general, it was clear that young migrants not only faced the labour market disadvantages that came with being young but also those that come with being a migrant and foreigner.

### Introduction

The youth employment crisis pushes millions of young women and men towards the decision to migrate with the purpose of seeking alternatives to improve their job prospects. Many of them migrate to urban areas and big cities within their country, or seek new opportunities in foreign countries. Roughly 27 million leave their countries of birth to seek employment abroad as international migrants. International/internal migration can bring new opportunities, particularly in terms of employment and training, but young workers, especially young women and those in irregular situations, face certain challenges and vulnerabilities in the migration process. The labour migration experience can end up representing either an opportunity or a risk to young people and can lead them to decent work or its very opposite, depending on policies and measures supporting them, such as provision of a better linkage to the world of work, more and better social protection, education and training for employment, entrepreneurship development, social inclusion and an effective institutional framework.

Participants in this conversation ranged in age from 23 to 32 years and identified themselves as coming from a diverse number of countries, including Bangladesh, Croatia, Canada, Ghana, India, Libya, Lithuania, the

Netherlands, Nigeria, Paraguay, the Philippines, Pakistan, South Africa, Sweden, Tunisia and the United States of America. During the e-consultation, a total of 74 comments were exchanged between the moderators and the young participants, highlighting issues that are crucial to youth migrants who are either considering migrating for work or have already undergone labour migration.

The common themes in the discussions are discussed below.

### **Motivations for labour migration**

*“The motivations of youth labour migration is similar to that of adult migrants. Both groups are mostly in search of greener pastures. Youth labour migrants also generally migrate for work experience.”* B, 29, female, from the Philippines

*“Youth labour migration can be seen in different perspectives. We can relate it with the hierarchies of class system as well. Because if we see, youth especially from lower strata generally migrate in order to sustain their livelihood. Their migration can be referred to the survival migration. The current trend of migration of youth from middle class reflects their passion to achieve more and more. ...While upper class youth generally involve in the International migration, in order to maintain their social status and reputation.”* Megha Shree, 24, female, from India

Participants largely agreed that the vast majority of young people migrate in search of decent employment to be able to financially support themselves as well as their families. However, in many cases, this is not the overriding motivation, as it may be for adult migrants. In addition to the potential economic gains from working abroad, young migrants are attracted to the educational possibilities and opportunities for personal development that they perceive international migration brings to them. As noted during the discussion, the search for decent employment is also associated with difficulties in transitions from school to decent work as well as other drivers of migration such as political instability, extreme poverty, poor economic conditions as well as social and cultural factors in the country of origin. Many participants also opined that young people were more likely than adults to be flexible on the terms of their employment abroad, choosing to accept lower pay and

positions in the expectation that they would advance eventually as they acquired new skills. They are also more flexible to the terms of their migration in that they are more willing to migrate on a temporary basis. One participant, Deeja Sarr, 32 year old who is a second generation immigrant from Gambia but raised in Sweden, identified culture as a factor in young people’s decision to migrate, suggesting that new technologies and social media platforms that facilitate access to images and information about far-flung places raise the desires and expectations among youth to experience these places in real life.

At the same time, many participants acknowledged that socio-economic status and personal resources, including networks and contacts, played a big role in determining the motivation among youth to migrate. Youth from lower economic strata are more likely to migrate solely to earn a livelihood to be able to financially support their families, whereas those from middle-to-upper socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to pursue their studies and/or personal development as well.

### **Factors that may determine employment prospects: Education and skills profiles**

*“[The kinds of jobs young migrants get at destination] totally depends on the background/skills/education level of the migrants and if they immigrated legally or illegally.”* Lonneke, 34-year-old, female, from the Netherlands but living in Hong Kong

Young people are not a homogenous group; they represent a diversity of socio-economic backgrounds and experiences. The same thus holds true for young migrants seeking employment. As potential or actual workers, young migrants embody a wide range of educational and skills profiles, and this was identified by the majority of participants as playing a major role in the migration and employment outcomes of the youth.

Young migrants from poorer economic backgrounds and with fewer skills and educational attainment were seen as more likely to migrate irregularly, under circumstances that put their health or lives at risk, and to end up in indecent working conditions. Mid-to-highly skilled young people with higher educational achievements stand a better chance of accessing decent working conditions after migrating. Young people from this category are also more likely to first migrate to pursue their studies before integrating themselves into the labour market of the destination country. This was

the case for many of the participants of this e-consultation.

Nevertheless, the labour market landscape at the destination country or community could upset this pattern. If the demands of the labour market in destination countries do not match the education and skills profiles of the young migrants in these countries, even highly educated or skilled migrant youth can find themselves forced to take jobs below their skills level, and this appears to be the experience of a number of participants in the online discussion. In one participant's own words:

*“Every type of job is available for young migrants in United States but less skilled jobs are more predominant. I got my 1st student job after 6 months of migration, the limitation is that it must be an on-campus job at least in the 1st year. My employment prospects aren't better than it is in my country because my kind of job is made more available to citizens and residents than foreigners. ... I do know that lots of young male migrants in US irrespective of their educational qualifications rely on menial jobs for survival.”* Laz, 30 years, male, from Nigeria but living in the United States of America.

## Impact of migration status on employment

*“...especially if you're a non-EU citizen looking for work in the EU member state. Basically, every online job application for an organization or firm has an elimination question "Do you have a right to work in XY country?" or "Are you an EU citizen?" which makes it impossible for a non-EU qualified citizen to work where he/she wants especially in a branch he/she wants that may not be very popular or widespread in his/her country.”* Tijana Salaj, 26 years, female, in Croatia

It is important to note that in the labour markets of destination countries, young migrants are not only defined by their age but also by their migration status. The fact that they are foreigners can further complicate their employment prospects. It is clear from the discussions that the status of young migrants as foreigners, the various gradations of status that exist even within that category, and the specific immigration policies as it relates to employment that the country of destination has in place all have significant impact on the labour migration experiences of migrant youth. Participants elicited experiences of not being able gain employment in their field of specialization in destination countries or being turned down due to policies that

require employers to hire national workers, to justify the hiring of foreigners by proving that there are no available national workers for that position, or undergo lengthy and expensive processes to attain the necessary authorization to employ a young foreigner.

Moreover, in destination countries, young migrants often lack the professional networks and contacts that very often facilitate employment for young people. This is especially the case for young migrants who did not spend any extended length of time in the country of destination, as either a student or in some other status. Also, unlike local youth, young migrants face disadvantages in mastering the language of the destination country. As a result, jobs requiring an advanced level of familiarity with the local language are more or less automatically barred to migrant youth, even if they otherwise have all the necessary qualifications for the position. Altogether, these factors often result in a de facto, unintended discrimination against young foreigners in the practices of employers in destination countries. Therefore, young migrants not only face challenges or barriers common to youth in the labour market—such as lack of professional experience and problems related to school-to-work transition—but also must confront another set of complications brought on by their migration status.

## Labour rights of young migrants

*“I had faint knowledge of rights and working conditions for F-1 students before my migration. I got the information about my rights and working conditions from my friends who were already graduate students. It affected me positively because it made me to have realistic expectations and prepared to cope well with the challenge of having no job on arrival. The information I had at that moment was adequate for me to make informed decisions.”* Laz, 30 years, male, from Nigeria but living in the United States of America.

Young labour migrants - especially low skilled migrants, those in irregular status, indigenous migrants, female domestic workers and other low skilled migrants - are most at risk from labour exploitation and various forms of abuse. Ensuring that young labour migrants have access to information about their labour rights could be key to promoting their rights at work. Through the e-consultation, it was established that most young migrants with regular status and formal employment in destination countries were often aware of their labour rights through information provided by their schools, friends, and employers as well as through various

internet sources prior to their migration. This information, in addition to other benefits such as housing, made their professional integration relatively easy in the destination country.

### **Brain drain, brain waste and potential for brain gain**

*“I know of endless list of university graduates...with backgrounds in Engineering, Economics, Mathematics, to mention a few, whose migration situations have pushed them to working in salons, security jobs, as internet café consultants, as cobblers, simply a lot of skilled migrants end up trading in unrelated fields and eventually abandon their profession. Some have voluntarily gone back home as situations have not been favourable.”* George Tweneboah Kodua, 32, male, from Ghana

Young people who face challenges of securing decent work in the destination country may choose to return to their country of origin, especially when they feel that they can no longer cope with job conditions in the destination country and are likely to have better job prospects in their country of origin. However, another problem that migrants in general face, whatever their age, is the lack of recognition in countries of destination of the qualifications and education attained in countries of origin. As a result, young migrants with academic and/or skills qualifications who have recently arrived at a country of destination, and thus do not enjoy an extensive professional network at destination, typically find themselves confined to jobs that do not match their education or skills background and could be harmful for their health and well-being as well as for their professional development. For this reason, many participants brought up experiences, personal or otherwise, of brain drain and brain waste.

### **Recommendations and good practices presented by young people**

The scenario of brain drain and brain waste represents a loss for all parties involved in labour migration, and it is exacerbated where discrimination enter the picture. For this reason, many participants expressed that there needs to be serious formulation and promotion of policies or programmes that encourage brain gain through return migration interventions and the good governance of labour migration for young migrants.

One participant from Paraguay cited the programmes of the German, Japanese and Korean development agencies:

*“...I wanted to highlight the German structures that contribute to place human resources (or young Germans from 18 years old) around the world. The German Development Cooperation is running a placement programme where they basically place people, who were educated in Germany, in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern and South Eastern Europe to support the operations of the GIZ worldwide. Once these placed people finish their contracts, they return to Germany and pursue their professional careers with new skills gained abroad, therefore contributing to a brain gain process for Germany. As far as I know, the Japanese and Korean development cooperation’s agencies have similar programmes...”* Federico Recalde-Ovelar, 27, male, from Paraguay.

Ausrine, 28, from Lithuania, recommended that young people only migrate when they have secured employment at destination and their employer is willing to make the necessary arrangements with the destination country’s immigration and labour authorities:

*“The company took care of all the legal documents, permits and visas, as well as offered temporary housing (before we could find something on our own), car loans and etc. Everything was very well taken care off (contract, salary, etc) and I could not even imagine it being different, I mean if you want to ship me to another country you better take care of everything and guide me, otherwise why would I leave my comfort zone, my family and friends, right.”*

Unfortunately, judging by the responses of the participants, this scenario is rare.

It is crucial that the youth themselves are involved in the processes and policy discussions as well as programme design and implementation to address the challenges of youth labour migration. Young people participating in this e-consultation stressed meaningful participation as a critical approach to addressing their needs. They identified several areas where youth organizations can be engaged in addressing the identified challenges. Such youth-led interventions include providing potential young return migrants with detailed information about existing opportunities and conditions in the country of origin to ensure that they make informed decisions and that their voluntary return is truly voluntary as suggested by one participant:

*“I am preparing myself, in collaboration with Expatriates Paraguayans' associations around the world, to address the members of the new government, that will be elected in April 2013, and ask them to commit and give a particular consideration to the Paraguayan young migrants in their process to go abroad and to return home. In fact, I am also planning to launch an initiative, using the web social media, that would incentivate Paraguayan young migrants to return home and start a process of brain gain.”* Federico, 27 years old, male, Paraguay

## Conclusions

This e-discussion and the plethora of responses that it elicited made it clear that the heterogeneity of the world's youth translates directly to the population of young migrants who partake in labour migration. Beyond their age, young migrants are defined and differentiated by their socio-economic levels, education and skills profiles, nationality, and, of course, immigration status at destination, and all these factors have an impact on the reasons young people migrate as well as on their migration outcomes.

While the motivations to migrate among young people did not differ greatly from those of adult migrants, participants felt that young people are more flexible with regards to the terms of their migration (temporary versus longer term) and their employment abroad. Young people also tend to take greater risks, perhaps migrating before any job opportunity is confirmed, and are often not motivated solely for economic gain but can also be driven by a desire for personal development or to satisfy a desire for adventure.

It was generally thought that young people from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds or with lower educational attainments were more vulnerable to abusive recruitment processes at origin and exploitative working conditions at destination. Youth who had accumulated some human capital or economic resources were thought to stand a better chance at securing decent work abroad. However, the demands of labour markets in destination countries and having access to influential networks or contacts also played a significant role and could upset this pattern: even if a young migrant is highly educated or qualified, if there is no demand for his specialization in the destination country, she or he would very likely be forced to take a position far below her or his skill set.

In addition to the impact of their personal characteristics, young migrants are also often forced to navigate the restrictions on their labour market mobility that results from destination countries' migration policies and regulations. This hardship is further exacerbated when and where young migrants' qualifications are not recognized or there is discrimination.

As a result, the majority of participants in the e-discussion recommended that Governments of both origin and destination countries formulate policies or programmes that prevent brain drain and brain waste while encouraging brain gain. There is also a need for policies and programmes that ease young migrants' ability to either return and reintegrate professionally into their home countries or contribute to their countries development from abroad. The need to ensure mutual recognition of studies and qualifications in both origin and destination countries was also underscored as a way of promoting decent work for young migrants. There was an implicit agreement that destination countries' Governments needed to lower the barriers that made it difficult for young migrants to integrate through decent employment, and unintentionally introduces structural discrimination. Young people participating in the e-discussion highlighted the need to mainstream youth migration and youth development issues in migration and development policies as well as the critical role that meaningful youth participation plays in addressing their specific challenges.

This discussion was moderated by Michael Boampong, DSPD/UNDESA; Gianni Rosas, ILO; and Min Ji Kim, ILO

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