

Addressing Social Cohesion and Effects of Migrants' Integration in Europe and Asia

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The social fabric of countries all over the world has become more complex and diverse with the prevalence of migration. Countries find it challenging to deal with not only an increasing volume of migration, but also an increasingly diverse pool of migrants; some are labour migrants or marriage migrants, while others are refugees from war-plagued countries. While countries lament the social problems associated with migration, they realise that migration is inevitable. There is hence a pressing need to develop effective policies to mitigate the negative effects of migration while ensuring social cohesion to harness the benefits brought about by migration. In a two-day policy conference (3 to 4 November 2014) held jointly by the Institute of Policy Studies and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, policymakers and academics from Europe and Asia spoke about policies instituted in their respective countries to facilitate migrant integration and social cohesion.

Recognition of Migration as an Inevitable Phenomenon that all Countries Face

Speakers generally agreed that migration is inevitable. There are two main reasons for this: (1) ease of cross-border travel and (2) demographic needs.

The formation of the Euro Zone allows for free movement of labour and capital across the borders of Euro member countries. This inevitably leads to the movement of labour from less economically-developed countries from the East and the South to more economically-developed countries in the West and the North. Similarly in Asia, cheap air travel and the formation of specialised agencies to facilitate migration make migration easier than before.

Migration is further fuelled by demographic reasons. There is a demand for labour in the ageing economies due to the ageing and shrinking workforce in these economies. Migration is hence seen as a short-term solution and a necessity to make up for the shortfall of labour. Mr John Ng, Chief Executive Officer of Singapore LNG Corporation Pte Ltd and Vice President of Singapore National Employers' Federation, pointed out that in Singapore, labour-intensive industries such as the energy industry rely on huge numbers of foreign labour to be cost-efficient. The entry of women into the workforce has also increased the demand for foreign domestic helpers to share the burden of household work. Dr Amy Sim, a cultural anthropologist in the Department of Sociology of University of Hong Kong, spoke of the huge inflow of domestic helpers engaged by Hong Kong families to help out with

household chores. As these demographic trends are hardly reversible, policymakers recognise that to avoid compromising on economic growth, migration is inevitable.

Migration and Social Integration as a Challenging Issue to Deal With

The conference exposed several reasons why social integration of migrants and social cohesion is a tall order for countries. One of the reasons is the existing negative perception that people have of migrants. According to Dr Vanessa Steinmayer from the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, a study of four Asian countries (Malaysia, Republic of Korea, Singapore and Thailand) revealed that while citizens acknowledge their economic dependence on migrants, they see migrants as a threat to their local culture. They also associate migrants with higher crimes rates and think that migrants should not be accorded equal rights to citizens. This negative and somewhat discriminatory social perception of migrants is a barrier towards social integration of migrants.

Moreover, not just the volume but also the diversity of migrants makes social integration an uphill task. Dr Mizanur Rahman, senior research fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies in National University of Singapore, informed the audience that Singapore faces a diversity of labour migrants; some are highly skilled and live as expatriates, some are mid-level professionals and have lifestyles similar to the average Singaporean, while others are transient labour migrants who are housed in secluded dormitories and are expected to go back to their hometowns once their labour contracts end. Mr Henry Martenson from the Ministry of Employment of Sweden and Ms Katrin Hirsland from Germany's Federal Office for Migration and Refugees also mentioned that apart from labour migrants, war refugees form part of the migrant community in Sweden and Germany. Dr Hsiao-Chuan Hsia, a professor in Shih Hsin University, Taiwan, and Dr Andrew Eungi Kim from Korea University pointed out that there are also marriage migrants — women from economically less-developed countries who marry local men – in Taiwan and South Korea. Some of these migrants also hold strong links to their motherland and are thus less open to integrating in their host country. The diversity of migrants hence warrants differentiated and complex social policies for each distinct group of migrants, which increases the difficulty in fostering social cohesion.

While host countries are burdened with issues of social integration, countries experiencing migration outflow are also concerned with the re-integration of migrants who come back to their home countries as well as the well-being of their citizens overseas. Ms Ivy Miravalles, an officer in the Commission on Filipinos Overseas, elaborated on the concerted efforts of the Filipino government to promote and uphold the interests, rights and welfare of overseas Filipinos as well as to preserve and strengthen ties with Filipino communities overseas. Social integration is therefore an issue that all governments have to deal with.

Attitudes Towards Migration and Social Cohesion

There is a general consensus that economic indicators are not enough to determine the state of social cohesion in countries. Social indicators would give a more all-rounded assessment of the state of social cohesion. Dr Helen Ting Mu Heng from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Mr Luu Quang Tuan from Ministry of Labour of Vietnam and Dr Germ

Janmaat from the Institute of Education in University of London respectively suggested that (1) indicators of equality such as the Gini coefficient, (2) indicators of social capital such as the rate of involvement in formal groups, as well as (3) indicators of inter- and intra-generational social mobility, should be included in defining the state of social cohesion.

Speakers also revealed that social cohesion and successful integration of migrants should include efforts from various stakeholders. Civil society, businesses and trade unions also have a responsibility in ensuring social cohesion, they said. The speakers also highlighted varying attitudes towards migrants. Germany has a welcoming attitude towards labour migrants. When asked why this is so, Ms Katrin Hirsland answered that the general public understand the need for migration due to its ageing population. Germany also realises that the issue of language makes it less attractive than places like the United Kingdom to skilled labour, hence the government is very proactive in welcoming foreigners to work and live in Germany. On the other hand, Japan remains very resistant against foreigners despite having a rapidly ageing population. Dr Keizo Yamawaki from Keiji University in Japan revealed in his presentation that although anti-foreigner protests and hate speech towards Korean and Chinese migrants are prevalent in Japan, the government has done little to change public opinion of migrants. In terms of labour, Japan is only open to permit short-term guest workers into labour-intensive industries such as construction, caregiving and shipbuilding.

Policy Suggestions

A slew of policy suggestions were brought up by the experts and members of the audience throughout the conference. These suggestions include:

1. *Fiscal adjustments on social spending and wealth distribution.* Dr Kim and Dr Hsia pointed out that weak social safety nets place the poor and irregular workers in vulnerable economic positions, and that has negative implications on social cohesion. Countries also face the issue of tax evasion, which decreases the fiscal ability of governments to conduct social spending. Speakers suggested that tax regimes should be restructured to ensure more fiscal might to countries to strengthen social safety nets for the lower rungs of society.
2. *Enactment of anti-discrimination laws.* Dr Kim, Dr Ting and Mr Martenson voiced the need for strong regulation enforcement by the state regarding anti-discrimination in the workplace and access to social services. This is to prevent the deepening and entrenchment of fault-lines in society while enhancing trust within the national population. Dr Ting added that although these laws do not necessarily foster harmony, they are helpful in setting the norm for inclusiveness.
3. *Ensuring rights and empowerment of migrants.* Many speakers spoke passionately about according migrants equal rights and recognition as fellow citizens of the country. Migrants should be given the same working conditions and pay as locals, as long as they are doing the same work. Societies should include them in collective decision-making to reinforce the notion that they have a stake in the community, thereby fostering social integration. Ms Margarida Geada Seoane, representing União dos Sindicatos

Independentes (USI) in Portugal and European Confederation of Independent Trade Unions (CESI) in Belgium, talked about how labour unions should represent irregular and migrant workers in collective bargaining for better working conditions. Dr Sim and Dr Hsia spoke about how civil societies can empower migrants, helping them to organise themselves and reach out to the community at large. This facilitates social cohesion and integration.

4. *Multi-faceted efforts to socio-cultural integration.* Speakers emphasised that social cohesion is a multi-faceted concept, and therefore warrants multi-faceted policies. Dr Mizanur pointed out that Singapore facilitates social cohesion by implementing suitable housing, education and employment policies. Germany too, implements a comprehensive set of policies, from making it easy for migrants to access information about Germany on portals to providing language and civic classes to facilitate social integration. Dr Paolo Graziano from Bocconi University in Italy and Dr Steinmayer reminded policymakers that it is important to contextualise policies to maximise its effectiveness; what works in some countries may not work in others. Furthermore, it is important to consider the synergy of multi-faceted policies; well-designed policies should not be conflicting and should be robust enough to accommodate for the complexities of the society.

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