

International Migration: Global Perspectives and Implications for Britain The Report of the Global Commission on International Migration UK Launch Event

The Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM) was launched by the United Nations Secretary-General in December 2003 in Geneva. Comprised of 19 Commissioners, it is independent and has the mandate to provide a framework for the formulation of a coherent, comprehensive and global response to the issue of international migration. The resulting document "*Migration in an interconnected world: New directions for action*" was presented to the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, UN Members States and other stakeholders on the 5th of October 2005.

In its report, the Global Commission on International Migration says the international community has failed to realize the full potential of migration and has not risen to the many opportunities and challenges it presents. The Commission stresses the need for greater coherence, cooperation and capacity to achieve more effective governance of international migration. The 90-page report provides a comprehensive yet concise analysis of key global policy issues in the field of international migration, and presents six 'Principles for Action' and thirty-three related recommendations that can serve as a guide to the formulation of migration policies at the national, regional and global levels.

On the 9th of December 2005, an event was held to mark the UK launch of the report. Organised by the Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty (University of Sussex) and the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS at Oxford University) the conference "*International Migration: Global Perspectives and Implications for Britain*" was designed to stimulate public debate in the UK regarding the issue of international migration, bringing together both academic and policy perspectives.

The report was presented by two representatives of the Commission - Mr. Jan O. Karlsson, former Swedish Minister for Development Cooperation, Migration and Asylum Policy, and former President of the European Court of Auditors of the European Union and Commissioner Mary Robinson, Director of the Ethical Globalisation Initiative and former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. A round table of senior government figures from the Home Office, Foreign Office and Department for International Development commented on the report and then academics in the field were joined by policy advisors for a discussion and questions from the audience.

The following notes are not full transcriptions of proceedings but summaries of the discussions held at the UK launch event. Readers should note that speakers have not had the opportunity to check or comment on this record of proceedings.

Welcome

Richard Black,

Director, Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty

Richard Black opened the conference and gave the welcome address. He highlighted the importance of the GCIM report to the UK. There are 4 million foreign-born people living in the UK. This means the UK interests also go beyond its national borders with 3.5-4 million British-born living overseas, and the UK has to recognise the impact of global migration on foreign policy and international development policy. Black highlighted the report's key theme which calls for greater coherence in policy making.

Jan Karlsson,

Co-Chair, Global Commission on International Migration

Key Discussion Points:

- **report of the GCIM: process and policy**
- **driving forces behind migration**
- **migrants as actors**

Jan Karlsson introduced the report and explained that the Commission was an independent group that was formally launched in Geneva in December 2003. Many observers believed that it would not be possible to produce a review in 18 months on such a large and conflict-laden area; therefore, the Commission was very pleased to produce a unanimous document with only one or two compromises.

Karlsson informed the delegates that the Commission was conscious of the dangers of producing a report resulting in no action; therefore, the Commission explicitly decided to produce a concise, clearly written report and had a policy of openness and 'no surprises'. The document does not contain new theory or innovation but simply aims to coherently bring together existing evidence regarding migration processes and policies. The Commission wanted to put forward ideas that would gain momentum over time.

Karlsson informed the delegates that the timing of the report is important as rates of international migration are increasing and it is becoming an ever wider issue, yet the understanding of the consequences of migration are developing at a slower rate. There are 200 million migrants in the world, the highest number in history, and equal to the fifth most populated nation in the world, Brazil. Migrants work and produce income and often send it home. They remit between \$150 billion (World Bank estimate) and \$300 billion (IOM estimate) a year, compared with the \$60 billion given in international development aid each year. While this is private money and therefore spent differently to official aid, it can potentially have a large impact on development. Karlsson emphasised the report's belief that more could be made of this resource and the key message was that migration and development have close and interesting links.

The following driving forces for migration were outlined:

- demography;
- development; and
- democracy.

In demographic terms rich countries are people-poor, and will find this situation becomes more acute in the next couple of decades. However, these countries are surrounded by countries where people are unemployed or underemployed, therefore although migration will not suffice to solve the demographic problem, it can at least be part of the solution. Karlsson discussed the potential to increase productivity by managing migration better, and stressed the urgency of this matter for poverty reduction. In absolute numbers, there are as many people living in poverty now as there were 25 years ago. He underlined that governments have the main responsibility in this as they 'own' migration yet, to date, they have not been very successful; policies conflict and are incoherent, governments have been acting in isolation and debate has concentrated on enforcement and, in Europe at least, on asylum. The Commission does not call for an international body overseeing migration as it feels that governments are not ready for such a framework. He added that coherence begins at home; integration and other migration policy actually happen at the local level and not the national level.

Karlsson explained that the Commission advocates a rights-based approach that should be applied to all policy, and not selectively for 'legal/ illegal' migrants. This has consequences for how migrants are perceived. The Commission felt that migrants should be seen as actors rather than as victims; even if at one point a migrant is a victim, they will later become an actor. Migration has the potential to be an effective tool in development and can have benefits for receiving and sending countries as well as for the migrants themselves. In order to maximise these benefits, policy needs to have greater coherence with migrants treated as actors. In public debate, this would change how migrants are seen and lead to them being recognised as collaborators. This relates in particular to debates about integration where migrants themselves play an important role.

Karlsson concluded by talking about the hypocrisy in attitudes towards migration and the lack of acknowledgement of the enormous mobility that people now have. Governments feel there is a need to control migration, but in order to do this, migration policy needs to be linked up with other social goals. Better migration management and policy could maximise three layers of benefits; to the receiving country, to the sending country and to migrants themselves.

Mary Robinson,

Commissioner, Global Commission on International Migration

Key Discussion Points:

- **GCIM support for a rights-based approach to migration**
- **Conceptualising migration: the importance of language**

- **GCIM support for innovative migration policies**

Mary Robinson began her session by noting that the eve of human rights day is an appropriate time to be launching the GCIM report in the UK with its recommendation for a rights-based approach to migration policy. It is her hope that the report will spark a dialogue, getting away from the myths and contradictions that surround migration.

Adding to Jan Karlsson's comments on the compromises of the report she highlighted one key area where there had been much discussion. The report had to stop short of advocating ratification of the 1990 Convention on the Protection of the Rights of Migrants and the Family Members, but Robinson stressed that this was an important way forward, but one where the commission had ended up with a compromise.

In highlighting the importance of language, she pointed to chapter 3 of the report which discusses the challenge of "irregular" migration and went on to explain that from a human rights perspective individuals cannot be irregular or illegal. She also pointed to the increasing harshness of language regarding migrants and emphasised the report's warning against this.

Robinson felt that the criticism that the report is Euro-centric was perhaps warranted, however she emphasised that this is meant to be the beginning of a debate which is to be continued.

Robinson talked of the importance of diasporas, as discussed by the Shadow Commission on Africa, and the potential for involvement of these groups in more innovative policies, for example in addressing brain drain and increasing co-development.

In her concluding remarks, Robinson stated that there needs to be greater understanding that human mobility will increase drastically and that migration is the human face of globalisation. A positive approach is needed in order to maximise the potential benefits of this increased mobility.

Questions from the audience

A question was asked about the approach to reducing brain drain of medical staff, and why there was not more concentration on keeping British staff so as to reduce demand for foreign staff. Mary Robinson replied that she felt that there was an opportunity to think about this in a more focussed way, from the point of view of co-development. She felt that there could be more imaginative policies that would allow medical professionals greater opportunities to migrate and use their skills (such as permitting short term but regular migration) but that she would not advocate a strategy that would place restrictions on the movement of individuals.

In response to a question about the protection of the rights of domestic workers, Mary Robinson said that there was an opportunity for the sending countries to work together to put pressure on receiving countries to establish greater access to rights and better working conditions for migrant workers, rather than undercutting one another.

There then followed a discussion on the terms “high-skilled” and “low-skilled”, and the problems associated with making distinctions between migrants.