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MIGRANTS HUMAN RIGHTS, COST OF 'BRAIN DRAIN', PROTECTING REMITTANCES AMONG ISSUES RAISED AS GENERAL ASSEMBLY HOLDS CIVIL SOCIETY HEARINGS ON MIGRATION

Gathered in New York today, representatives of non-governmental organizations called on the United Nations and its Member States to work in a spirit of genuine cooperation with civil society to come up with a comprehensive global people-centred policy on migration and development, and to put the “migration puzzle” together, while keeping the human rights of migrants central in the debate.

Ahead of the General Assembly High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development -- scheduled for 14-15 September 2006 -- representatives of non-governmental organizations, civil society and the private sector lead the four-part, informal and interactive hearings with Member States and United Nations agencies, which focused on the promotion of migrants' human rights, socio-economic policy challenges for sending and receiving countries, and the promotion of partnerships and capacity-building to benefit countries and migrants alike. Acting Assembly President Cheick Sidi Diarra of Mali moderated the hearings.

While stressing the absolute necessity of highlighting “positives”, such as boosts for receiving country labour markets and the importance of remittances -- money earned abroad and sent back to the country of origin -- speakers cautioned against glossing over or discounting the human and social cost of migration. They called for greater overall attention to the root cause of much of today's migration, as well as to the reality that many migrants continued to remain on the margins of societies, both in their home countries and in their host countries, with no effective social, economic or political participation.

Many were concerned that the Secretary-General's report (document A/60/871), which served as the blueprint for the hearings, did not balance the economic dimension of migration with an equivalent emphasis on the people-centred, social dimensions of development. They were not “units of labour” said one speaker, who noted the intersecting race, class and gender vulnerabilities of migrants, as well as the discrimination and social marginalization they faced, and said that an effective

consideration of international migration, therefore, must be squarely focused on, among others, employment, social inclusion and poverty eradication.

One speaker said that no real headway could be made, unless the international community squarely addressed the complex issues surrounding racism and gender equality. She urged migrants and activists working on their behalf to adopt a “nothing about us without us” stance to ensure that the concerns of all migrants were openly discussed and taken on-board in intergovernmental processes of refugees, as well as migrants. Another non-governmental organization representative urged everyone to take advantage of the hearings to press for action on issues that Governments would rather ignore. Others echoed that sentiment, calling for special attention to indigenous migrants, migrant victims of trafficking, migrant youth and internally displaced persons.

Examining challenges for social and economic policies, some participants took that notion a step further, with one non-governmental organization representative saying that the aim of connecting development and migration should be to reinforce the fight against the root causes of poverty. States must also consider how a deeper commitment to human rights would improve progress towards more equitable worldwide development, thereby reducing the pressure to migrate. Indeed, access to education, more and better jobs, decent working conditions and free access to basic health care were elements that contributed to the prevention of forced migration.

Several speakers pointed out, however, that simply providing jobs or access to employment was really only a half measure without ensuring that such employment was safe, dignified, non-exploitive and paid fair wages. One speaker called on the Secretary-General and other top United Nations officials to press Member States to ratify or accede to the International Convention on the Protection of Migrant Workers and Their Families, and to vigorously promote and support relevant International Labour Organization instruments and covenants, which together formed the core of the international normative framework on international migration.

Calling for an integrated and holistic approach, Peter Sutherland, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on International Migration and Development, via video-link from Rabat, where he had just attended a meeting between African and European Union ministers on the impact of migration, said that the complexities of migration today demanded that civil society and private sector actors participated actively in the debate. Indeed, civic actors, particularly those from migrant communities, were real partners in development today, and were critical to generating cooperation and partnerships among all stakeholders to minimize the negative effects of migration and to take advantage of the assets offered by migrants for development.

Mark Malloch Brown, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, said it was up to civil society to warn the international community to ensure the real risks of migration were not overlooked -- particularly in the area of human rights. And while the effective management of international migration could be a win-win situation for both receiving countries and countries of origin, it was no secret that many migrants, particularly

women, were routinely marginalized, denied not only civil and political rights, but also access to education and health care, among others.

He expected that, during the hearings, civil society would press hard on such issues as the real costs to the countries that migrants left, and how “brain drain” could be more effectively addressed. By example he said, a major discussion was under way concerning Africa, and how to protect and compensate Governments for the human capital that was lost, say, in the health-care field in societies that were already under so much stress from HIV/AIDS. Further, remittances must be protected. International and regional banking systems must ensure that such funds were safely transferred back to home countries and not diverted, or co-opted by corrupt or abusive banking networks, otherwise, potential value would be lost.

Among the recommendations on the way forward, one non-governmental organization representative called for tax relief on remittances for development, boosting cooperation between sending and receiving countries on support for migrant business opportunities, and including migration for development strategies in poverty reduction strategies. Another suggested pouring money into training unskilled migrant workers, rather than into building detention centres and holding cells.

One speaker said that it was important for Governments to promote freedom of movement for migrant youth towards the creation of a “true path for development” beyond remittances that would link the diaspora with home countries, while establishing an international framework for an exchange of knowledge and skills. Still, others said that the global debate on migration must include the business community, regional processes, and must consider issues such as the erosion of the middle class in sending countries and voting while in the diaspora.

The participants in the hearings also expressed support for the Secretary-General’s proposal to create a “consultative forum” on migration and development issues, but were concerned that his report noted that such a panel would seek the participation of non-governmental organization representatives and civil society when Governments “deemed it desirable and necessary”. They strongly reiterated their belief that any such forum that did not include civil society, trade unions, migrant and their networks, among others, could not fully articulate policy ideas that would lead to genuine and sustainable development.

Summing up the discussions, Mr. Diarra said the results of the hearings represented an important contribution to the upcoming High-Level Dialogue. Speakers had underlined the importance of ensuring respect and protection of the rights of all migrants and their families, particularly the right to life, work and equitable remuneration, among others. They had also insisted on promoting the ratification of relevant international treaties and covenants, particularly ahead of the September Dialogue. They had also recommended that the dialogue should be transparent and inclusive, so that any plans or initiatives that might flow from the event would be more people-centred, and to ensure that national security concerns or economic arrangements did not eclipse migration policies.