

**GFMD Mauritius 2012**

**Roundtable 3.1 – Improving Public Perceptions of Migrants and Migration:  
Challenging preconceptions and shaping perceptions**

*Report of the Rapporteur*

In their introduction to the roundtable entitled “Improving Public Perceptions of Migrants and Migration: Challenging Preconceptions and Shaping Perceptions”, the co-chairs started by remarking on the significance of public perception for the realization of the full potential of the contribution that migrants can make to their country of origin as well as the country of destination, with a specific emphasis on the necessity for this need to be recognized by all players, including policy makers, the political leadership, civil society organizations, migrants themselves and the public at large. Recognizing that the issue of “perception” is inherently a subjective issue, co-chairs underlined the importance of an interactive discussion in as many platforms as possible, thereby pointing to the usefulness of not only traditional media outlets, but also social-media and “ethnic media”, i.e. the mediums used by migrant communities, thereby doing all that is possible to empower migrants by giving them a voice in the public sphere.

The first theme of the discussions, namely on the relationship between perceptions of migrants and government policy making, proved to be a salient starting point, as delegates pointed to a scenario in which well-meaning politicians and policy makers who face an engrained negative perception of migrants in the public opinion of host-societies find it difficult to reverse this discourse during their time of appointment to office. Accepting the validity of the argument, it was noted that perceptions of the public and the policies of the government tended to fall into virtuous or vicious circles depending on the starting point, or rather, the existing historical and contextual relationship of countries to migration. Canada was cited as an example to a virtuous cycle, where high support for migration among the public enabled the implementation of effective migration-friendly policies that reinforced and promoted the positive outlook on migrants. An example to a vicious cycle, on the other hand, was given in the sense that “securitization” and “secretization” of the issue of migration are both the cause and effect of the negative perception of migration in society. The question of how to disrupt a vicious circle, in which public opinion that is already set against migration and migrants, informed the rest of the discussion, starting with the way in which the issue of migration “management” should be conceptualized, to a normative evaluation of the roles which different stakeholders can play and the relationship between these actors, and then finally to best practices from different experiences of countries.

Inquiring as to different methods of approaching the issue of public perception and looking at migration management in a different light, the importance of “thinking outside the box” was emphasized, thereby pulling migration out of a “zero-sum” discussion whereby one area of migration such as security is opposed to another, such as the economic gains of migration. The suggestion with which to accomplish this task was to replace the discourse of “managing migration” with “migration governance”, whereby the latter implied a broader and more holistic understanding of migration, which necessarily incorporated not only data management but also sensitivity towards the “human experience” and the realization that we are dealing with real human beings. Nevertheless, the necessity for a clearly defined migration management plan was underscored, based on the understanding that integration is a long-term process that can be envisaged as a continuum involving settlement, citizenship and multiculturalism programs, policies and services, and that countries who have proved to be successful in migration are those who have put in place managed migration systems consisting in a suite of immigration, integration and multiculturalism policies and programs. Such a migration management plan, it was argued, would enable a country to enter into a virtuous circle, which would be self-reproducing in its effectiveness.

The discussion at the roundtable focused heavily on the stakeholders' role and areas of action, starting with the role of governments in the collection and utilization of empirical facts and data, the use and promotion of correct terminology concerning the field of migration, empowering migrants, informing the media and investing in the education of the public.

Underlining the fact that regularization experiences do not bring about a noticeable change in figures relating to criminality and unemployment, the importance of conveying such evidence to the general public to ensure that their perceptions are informed by healthy and correct information was stressed. The necessity to obtain and present hard empirical data to break down stereotypes against migrants in general, and women migrants in particular was noted. Another point to take into consideration is the fact that women migrants invest heavily in human capital and are therefore of great importance to explaining the interlinkages between migration and development.

A recurring theme in the discussion was the necessity to promote the usage of correct terminology in the field of migration, as negative perceptions are frequently (mis)informed by deliberate or unintentional errors in this field. Tendencies include the labeling of persons who had already obtained citizenship as "migrants" for short-term political gain, while it was noted that host societies are not knowledgeable with regard to the different types of migration, leading to the view that migrants are impoverished and uneducated, and not noticing the fact that mixed migration flows include migration for the purposes of family reunification and asylum. Delegates emphasized the importance of discourse, and specifically noted the debilitating effects on society's perception of migrants of the term "illegal", as opposed to "irregular" migration.

Another topic that was heavily emphasized in the discussion was the necessity to empower migrants and enable them to voice their stories and complaints in the public and legal spheres. Best practices in this area include encouraging migrants to speak of their experiences on air, and therefore contributing to a better understanding among the host society. It was agreed that allowing outlets for migrants to voice their stories and concerns would be a practical way of dissolving negative perceptions. Moreover, migrants' access to the justice system and the resulting ability of migrants to claim their rights against discriminatory practices was deemed to be paramount.

The relationship of the government with the media, in all its forms, was stressed numerous times in the discussion, not least because it was noted that the media has a large role in influencing the public's perception of migrants and the potential it has of carrying migrants' voices to the public sphere. Acknowledging the fact that a new and more "pragmatic" approach to the media was necessary, especially taking into consideration and accepting that the media cannot be manipulated and has a tendency to, and interest in, publishing human interest stories rather than divulging in empirical accounts, a general agreement was reached in trying to find ways to correctly inform the media and form a constructive relationship with it regarding the reporting of issues related to migrants and migration.

The education of the public, especially the youth, was also deemed to be of high importance, with special endeavors to target children of host societies and their values regarding diversity and inclusiveness, and creating platforms on which the youth of host societies and migrants can interact and understand one another.

An important point stressed in the discussions was the role of the migrants themselves in integrating to societies. Migrants who fence themselves away from the host society inadvertently cause an alienation with the locals, which leads to the creation or perpetuation of a negative image of migrants in the receiving country. Solutions to prevent such isolation, therefore, are needed, either before entry to the country or during the migrants' stay. The characteristic of "integration" was portrayed as a "two-way

street”, whereby both the host societies and the migrants are responsible for a harmonized way of living. An emphasis was made, however, on the necessity to tailor such integration methods and apply them locally, thereby ensuring that local communities engage and learn how to best apply such policies for maximum effectiveness. Language training was put forward as necessary to prepare migrants for jobs, schooling and community life in general.

The important contribution of civil society to the perception of migrants in host societies was also discussed in the roundtable, underlining that civil society’s rightful advocacy for migrants’ human rights should be coupled with an endeavor to understand the government’s position vis-à-vis public opinion and other pragmatic issues (such as finance, infrastructural capacity, etc.) and thus take on a constructive approach based on the promotion of fresh ideas.

Last but not least, the role of the private sector was also considered in the framework of “pragmatic” thinking to influence both public opinion and, relatedly, policy change. Noting the “underwhelming involvement of the private sector for immigration reform” the necessity to pull in the private sector and encourage them to voice their views on the matter was underscored. Best practices included the Canadian banking sector which specifically catered for the needs of new citizens or permanent residents and marketed themselves in a very positive way.

Best practices by governments were used to exemplify and reinforce the arguments stated above. The Swedish delegation called to attention the regular empirical evidence published on the internet in answer to false propaganda, as well as the practice by Swedish Universities of publishing a “diversity barometer” measuring the public perception towards migrants since 2005. Mention was also made of the proposals to widen the scope of the issues with which the Equality Ombudsman was dealing in order to encompass the rights of migrants, as well as efforts to train teachers to combat xenophobia and racism in schools. The IFRC also noted several projects which endeavored to inform the youth regarding the life experiences of asylum seekers and migrants, providing the example of a computer game that is to be launched in Australia on the issue. On a separate note, the UN Alliance for Civilizations mentioned two projects regarding media perceptions and prejudices towards migration in 5 European countries and a dialogue with media professionals in the framework of which 30 chief editors have been invited to a seminar in which they were provided information and knowledge on the issue. The Philippines also shared their best practices by pointing to their three tier training program for emigrants, starting from a general seminar informing potential emigrants of the pluses and minuses of working overseas, to pre-departure training following the signing of a contract, whereby migrants are informed of the specifics of the country they are to travel to, and finally post-arrival seminars conducted by labor attaches in foreign missions or other embassy personnel. The importance of working with intergovernmental institutions in the process, such as the IOM, was emphasized. Underlining the necessity of coordination and open dialogue among major stakeholders, the Russian co-chair gave the example Russia’s newly drafted migration policy plan covering the period up to the year 2025, which demarcates concrete directions of policy making in the sphere of migration, socio-economical development, integration, international cooperation, integration, etc. The migration policy plan is also accompanied with a practical instrument, namely an “Action Plan” up to 2015, in which practical measures and stakeholders’ roles and actions are clarified.

## **In sum**

The backdrop to consideration of perception of migrants and migration must recognize the human rights and human development dimension of the individuals involved.

Tackling the issue of perceptions of migration will often benefit from being informed by a vision of integration as a long-term process that can be envisaged as a continuum involving settlement, citizenship and multiculturalism programs, policies and services.

Some of the countries that have proved to be successful in migration are those that have put in place managed migration systems consisting of a suite of immigration, integration, and multiculturalism policies and programs. Notwithstanding the value of an effective approach to managed migration, it was observed that this may usefully be set in a broader context of the governance of migration.

Such an approach can help countries avoid falling into a vicious cycle of negative public perceptions constraining public policy which further feed negative perceptions. Shifting negative perceptions under these conditions is extremely difficult. The alternative is to aim for a virtuous cycle in which public understanding paves the way for more enlightened policymaking.

As a concrete action, it was considered that information, research and data are important to assist the public to understand better migrants and migration. The importance of gender-disaggregated data was emphasized to help counter discrimination and prejudice against women. The research agenda would include understanding the nature of migrant flows - which are often more varied and complex than the public appreciate - and how they contribute to the societies of destination and origin.

Effective engagement with and through the media was identified as key to building and sustaining the essential public support for effective migration policies. Strategies include working with editors, rapid rebuttals using new social media tools, such as Twitter (as was piloted through this roundtable in this year's GFMD).

In the areas where public perceptions need to be changed, the urgent need to look at root causes of some perceptions, combat racism and xenophobia was emphasized. Teachers and educators play a major role in this regard, especially in shaping young people's outlook.

The roundtable noted that the need for a more amplified voice of the private sector, which to date has been muted, in public debates that could shape perceptions of migration.

While information and data play a relevant role, the human experience needs to be known and shared. It is important to give migrants a voice, including access to the justice system. Media could provide an additional channel, including ethnic media.