

**“The role of communications in promoting widespread recognition of the benefits of migration, improving public perceptions of migrants, combating discrimination, and promoting integration”**

2<sup>nd</sup> Thematic Meeting, Global Forum on Migration and Development 2015

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Ambassadors, distinguished participants, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a great pleasure for me to participate in the 2nd Global Forum on migration and Development 2015 thematic meeting on *“The role of communications in promoting widespread recognition of the benefits of migration, improving public perceptions of migrants, combating discrimination, and promoting integration”*.

I would like to thank the Turkish authorities for their invitation and the opportunity to share my views on these important issues for our societies and economies.

I cannot start this speech today without thinking about the migrants who are at this very moment, with their families, on boats fearing to drown any minute, fearing the extreme violence of their smugglers, hoping for a rescue and a safe shelter. We are facing a terrible humanitarian tragedy; Sir Peter Sutherland, in his address to Ministers in charge of migration at the OECD High-Level Policy Forum on Migration last December, referred to it as *“increasingly presenting as one of the great, indelible stains on our generation of leaders.”*

Images of people landing on the European shores are conveyed on a daily basis by all Media all over the world. These images are as powerful as the tragedy of these persons is real. They help shape a partial and distorted perspective on migration issues. It is as if Europe was a citadel under siege, as if migration was only - or at least mostly - about these unregulated flows. As if migrants -including refugees - come here to take our bread.

A common public perception is that migration is uncontrolled and costly. Uncontrolled because the borders are not secure. Costly because immigrants are supposed to displace native workers or to come for social benefits. You know this is not the case. Top quality analytical economic analyses, including those undertaken by OECD, clearly show this is wrong. Other speakers will provide ample evidence of this during next sessions. But having experts agree among themselves will not by itself be enough to change public opinion.

In these introductory remarks, I would like to address four questions:

- What do we know about the impact of migration?
- Why is there is (an increasing) gap between public perception and reality?
- Why does this matter?
- And what can we do about it?

**So lets start with the hard facts.**

We know that migration has been continuously increasing over the past decades. Between 2001 and 2011 migration to the OECD increased by almost 40%. We now count about 117 million migrants in the OECD, -more than 10 percent of the population.

Population ageing and easier access to information will both drive labour migration upwards in the future. Lower transportation and communication costs, increasing international marriages, internationalisation of higher education and the growing global middle class will further increase international mobility of people more generally. Migration and mobility will, we can confidently expect, continue to grow.

Immigrants will help make our labour markets more dynamic. Recent joint OECD-EU work on *“matching economic migration with labour market needs”*<sup>1</sup> has shown that migrants accounted for 47% of the increase in the workforce in the United States and 70% in Europe over the past ten years. A third of all new immigrants coming in the are tertiary educated, although their skills are not always fully used. Migrants fill important niches, both in fast-growing and declining sectors of the economy. Over the past 10 years in Europe, new immigrants represented 15% of entries into strongly growing occupations, such as science, technology and engineering as well as the health and education professions. In the United States, the equivalent figure is 22%.

At the same time, immigrants are also taking jobs that native workers do not want, either because of the working conditions or because the long term prospects in these

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/matching-economic-migration-with-labour-market-needs\\_9789264216501-en](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/matching-economic-migration-with-labour-market-needs_9789264216501-en)  
<http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=12628&langId=en>

occupations are unfavourable. Migrants also play a key role in social and care sectors. These are the people who are in our homes taking care of our old parents and children.

OECD work on the fiscal impact of migration published in the 2013 edition of our flagship publication on migration, the *International Migration Outlook*,<sup>2</sup> has shown that in almost all OECD countries migrants contribute more in taxes and social contributions than they receive in benefits. What is more, on average, immigrants receive fewer benefits than their native-born peers.

The evidence is clear: Migrants do not come here to steal our jobs or to benefit from the welfare state. The economy is not a cake to be divided up among more people. More shares does not imply smaller shares. Migration is not a zero sum game.

### **But why do people do not see that ?**

When people are asked about the magnitude of migration, they usually get it wrong. People largely overestimate the magnitude of migration and underestimate its positive impact. The 2014 Transatlantic Trends Survey<sup>3</sup> shows, for example, that U.S. respondents guessed the share of immigrants in their country to be around 40%; when in fact, only 13% of the U.S. population is foreign-born. At the same time, 50% or more of people in the UK, France or the United States think that migration is a problem.

This tells us that people are often ignorant about migration issues but it does not mean necessarily that they are opposed to migration. Indeed, when people are told the real percentage of migrants in their country they are usually less likely to say that there are too many immigrants. In Italy, France or Greece, the proportion of people complaining of too many immigrants falls to a half.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/international-migration-outlook-2013/the-fiscal-impact-of-immigration-in-oecd-countries\\_migr\\_outlook-2013-6-en](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/international-migration-outlook-2013/the-fiscal-impact-of-immigration-in-oecd-countries_migr_outlook-2013-6-en)

<sup>3</sup> [http://trends.gmfus.org/files/2014/09/Trends\\_Immigration\\_2014\\_web.pdf](http://trends.gmfus.org/files/2014/09/Trends_Immigration_2014_web.pdf)

People not only get it wrong on migration. A recent study by Ipsos Mori actually highlights how wrong the public across 14 countries are about the basic make-up of their populations and the scale of key social issues<sup>4</sup>. For example,

- people think that the population is much older than it actually is – the average estimate is that 39% of the population are 65+, when only 18% are

- people tend to greatly overestimate the extent of unemployment in their countries. The average guess is 30%, when the actual figure is 9%.

This shows that, even on some major uses such as employment or ageing, public perception may be largely distorted. It is true that migration is a very sensitive area, but this is not the reason why people are misled. More research may be needed here but it seems that the basic facts simply do not come to the general public in a simple and intelligible manner.

Lastly, a recent IOM analysis<sup>5</sup> of Gallup world pool data show that public attitudes to migration across the globe are much more varied than one might think, and are not predominately negative. The study shows that worldwide people are generally slightly more likely to want immigration to stay at present levels or to increase rather than to decrease.

Maybe our perception of the public perception of migration is also distorted.

### **So why bother?**

I can see at least three main reasons why we should be concerned about the gap between the perceptions and the reality regarding migration issues.

Firstly, perceptions shape policies. OECD work published in the 2010 edition of our International Migration Outlook<sup>6</sup> on “Public opinions and immigration: individual attitudes, interest groups and the media” shows that beliefs about the economic and cultural impact of migration, significantly influence attitudes towards opening the borders to

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3466/Perceptions-are-not-reality-Things-the-world-gets-wrong.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> <http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/MPP20.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/international-migration-outlook-2010/public-opinions-and-immigration\\_migr\\_outlook-2010-6-en](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/international-migration-outlook-2010/public-opinions-and-immigration_migr_outlook-2010-6-en)

migrants. More recently, we have shown that there is a strong connection between a person's views on the fiscal impact of migration and the willingness to accept additional immigration flows. In all OECD countries, people who think that immigrants are net contributors are more willing to accept additional immigration flows than those who think the reverse.

A recently published theoretical study <sup>7</sup> shows that pessimistic beliefs regarding the impact of migration that induce a country to impose higher barriers to immigration may deter skilled migrants or incite them to leave and thus confirm initial beliefs that most migrants are unskilled and cost our welfare systems more than they contribute in taxes. The reverse is the case for optimistic views. The authors argue that this self-fulfilling mechanism may sustain the formation of an anti or pro-immigration prejudice.

Second, extremist views on migration are reinforced by preconceived ideas and ignorance. In recent years, there is a widespread perception, backed by election results, that the share of the public holding extreme viewpoints on migration has grown. The public debate on migration is increasingly defined less by the median position than by the extremes. Governments must respond to these vocal and polarised positions, which make it difficult to ensure that policy is evidence-based. There is therefore an urgent need to regain the political space.

Thirdly, where migration has become a polarising issue, extreme views reinforce barriers between residents and contribute to radicalisation of individuals, communities and the electorate. Where perceptions of migration are more negative, the risk of discrimination and radicalisation may be higher.

Recent OECD work<sup>8</sup> shows that immigrants and their offspring have to send more than twice as many applications to get invited to a job interview than people without a migration background who have an otherwise equivalent CV. Discriminatory behaviour stems from negative stereotypes about immigrants and their children. These stereotypes

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<sup>7</sup> [https://www.wto.org/english/res\\_e/reser\\_e/ersd201206\\_e.pdf](https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/reser_e/ersd201206_e.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/international-migration-outlook-2013/discrimination-against-immigrants-measurement-incidence-and-policy-instruments\\_migr\\_outlook-2013-7-en](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/international-migration-outlook-2013/discrimination-against-immigrants-measurement-incidence-and-policy-instruments_migr_outlook-2013-7-en)

may affect the behaviour of immigrants themselves and may lead to disaffection with host countries, rendering anxieties about immigration self-fulfilling prophecies. This is a case where everybody loses.

### **What can we do about it ?**

International migration is a sensitive issue in most countries. One of the reasons is that it touches upon the very notion of the nation state. Changes in the rules regarding who can enter or stay legally, who can settle with his or her family, who can obtain citizenship or can vote have implications for the composition of the host-country society and its institutions.

In the face of growing migration, public opinion surveys consistently find that the public, including migrants, is losing confidence in governments' capacity to control borders, manage migration and ensure successful integration.

It is therefore important to signal that things are under control and to rebuild trust in migration policies and institutions.

This can not be done if migration is seen as an area where the rule of law does not apply. We must tackle the challenges of irregular migration and illegal employment of migrants. Opening up to more labour migration needs to be accompanied by appropriate safeguards.

Another key challenge here is to develop a well-defined and robust migration policy, while maintaining the ability to respond to unexpected events. Recently, countries have been confronted with migration shocks over which there is little discretionary policy control. Geo-political crises can produce a sudden influx of migrants or asylum seekers, as witnessed currently by many countries. Other events such as the enlargements of the European Union over the past decade also had a profound impact on migration flows. To visibly remain in control of the situation, migration policies must be able to adapt to such shocks.

Leadership and effective policy communication are also critical. When political leaders try to avoid the public debate on migration this gives room for extremists views to prosper.

Overly rosy approaches to migration issues are also counterproductive and satisfy only those who are already convinced that more migration will necessarily be a good thing. Let us be clear here: There are winners and losers associated with migration, welcoming refugees is costly, and labour market integration of immigrants and their children is not always straightforward. Recognising these facts and adopting a balanced, facts-based, public discourse on migration is a precondition for any effective communication strategy aiming at closing the gap between perception and reality.

Public opinion are still broadly determined by the way these issues are covered by the media. Some media, often in response to pressure from competitors, may convey a simplistic impression and only concern themselves with the more sensational aspects of migration issues,. Bad migrants outcomes are good for sales.<sup>9</sup>

Scepticism regarding immigrants' willingness to integrate into the host society is another challenge to be tackled. Integration outcomes of migrants who have arrived previously may indeed be taken as a marker for success or failure of current migration policies.

The OECD, together with the DG Migration and Home Affairs of the European Commission, will shortly release a publication entitled "*Settling In*" with detailed indicators of integration comparing native-born with immigrants and the children of the two groups. These put integration outcomes in perspective. A key result of this work is that immigrants have lower outcomes than the native-born, but perhaps surprisingly, it is at the top end of the qualification scale where the differences between immigrants and the native-born are most pronounced. Furthermore, despite noticeable progresses accross generations, the large proportion of children with low-educated immigrant parents in Europe have unfavourable education and labour market outcomes.

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<sup>9</sup> OECD (2010), see footnote 6.



How can we explain to the public that future migration will be beneficial if we do not make a better job at using the skills of migrants who are already here? A successful integration of immigrants and their children is a precondition for ensuring public support for future migration and migration policy reform.

Ambassadors, distinguished participants: countering extremist views on migration and more generally improving the public perception of migration, requires not only transparent and relevant data to inform the public debate but, I am convinced, also requires leadership. Leadership to (i) rebuild trust on migration issues, (ii) to adopt well-defined and flexible migration policy frameworks, (iii) to develop an effective and pragmatic communication, and (iv) to tackle the issue of the labour market integration of immigrants.

The OECD is fully committed to move forward this ambitious and critical agenda.

Let me end by thanking you all for your attention with a special thanks to the organisers for having given me the opportunity to discuss these critical issues. I look forward to a rich dialogue and exchange of ideas with you.