

## **INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT: PAST AND PRESENT ACTIVITIES**

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Four phases can be distinguished in the work programme of Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in the area of international migration:

Phase one, the early nineties: During this phase work was limited to a few, unplanned activities. These activities were implemented in response to needs resulting from the chaos prevailing in the region immediately after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. They consisted in publishing some reports designed to address the emerging issue of returnees, forced to return to their country of origin, particularly the Yemenis who left Saudi Arabia, the Jordanians from Kuwait, and the Egyptians from Iraq. The reports concentrated on the social and economic challenges posed by return migration, which increased as a result of the second Gulf War.

Phase two, the late nineties: In the work programme of 1999-2000, international migration was fully part of the work plan and addressed by a special expert group meeting. The Population Team in the Social Development Division (SDD) was responsible for organizing a three-day Expert Group Meeting (EGM) in October 1999, at the UN-house in Beirut. The meeting focused on "International Migration in the Middle East: Patterns and implications for sending and receiving countries". The purpose of the meeting was to bring population and development experts together to discuss and share their perspectives on: economic change and its impact on migration from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe during the nineties; the dramatic changes in population movements in the region, especially during the aftermath of the second Gulf War; and the subsequent changes in population policies. The EGM was designed to review and to discuss the ways in which the contemporary socio-economic and political forces were influencing the process of international migration in the Arab region, and to propose the most favourable framework for policies that serve both sending and receiving countries. Thus the old migration regime, which treated migrant labour as a form of human capital, and explained international mobility of labour in terms of market forces of supply and demand for labour, was

the soon to appear “demographic bonus” which, in turn, may curb worker migration; and a negative perspective according to which worker migration will increase due to economic policies that are incompatible with changes in the age structure, thus further exacerbating the problems related to labour migration.

### *Lessons learned*

No matter how limited the number of activities that dealt with the subject of international migration, ESCWA has learned some very important lessons, essential for developing future activities. These are:

**The inertia in the work of scholars and the academic community in the Arab countries.** In spite of the dramatic changes that have taken place in the international and regional arena, and in view of the fact that migration has been at the forefront of public concern in the 1990s, very few studies are available on the region and the number of scholars who are engaged in studying international migration is lower than it used to be in the 1970s or 1980s. This situation can be attributed to:

- The absence of a well-developed theoretical framework to adequately interpret the current regime of international migration;
- The lack of reliable and comparable statistical data on international migration in the Arab region;
- The lack of surveys to provide empirical evidence on the migration process;
- The lack of mechanisms to monitoring repatriation;
- The inadequate definition of a migrant;
- The absence of networking mechanisms that could increase collaboration among experts from various Arab countries;
- The limited financial resources allocated to research and development in the region;
- The inadequate financial allocation provided by international and regional donors to initiate inquiries on international migration in the region.

**Changing paradigms.** The conventional neo-classical thinking that treats migrant labour as a form of human capital and explains international mobility of labour in terms of market supply and demand is no longer appropriate to interpret the sudden shifts in the organization of the labour migration system that accompanied and followed the 1991 Gulf War. Due to the wars:

- The structure and character of the Middle East migration system collapsed during the 1990s, and the Gulf War left in its wake immigration policies based chiefly on security concerns;
- The Arab region has experienced all types of migration, return migration, temporary and permanent migration, labour migration, and forced migration.
- The large exodus of returnees has put tremendous pressure on the productive capacities of the countries of origin. This raised many questions on the effectiveness of remittances. In theory, remittances were effective in increasing the productive capacity of a country. In practice, the pressure of returnees on countries of origin has shown that, while the transfer of labour during the 1970s and 1980s did not increase economic efficiency, the inflows of remittances did not stimulate productive investment either;
- Furthermore, many countries have realized that out-migration not only deprived them of their best human resources, but also that the cost to the educational system in mos

