Talking Points

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**International Dialogue on Migration October 15-16, 2020, Geneva**

**COVID 19 Crisis: Reimagining the role of migrants and human mobility for the achievement of the SDGs**

**Panel Session 3**

**Enhancing migrants’ agency and contribution to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals**

**(October 15 15:00-17:00 (GVA time)**

Introductory remarks

* Thank you for the opportunity to be part of the International Dialogue on Migration from Cambodia.
* The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed the world as we know it. In no other time in our generation’s history have we all equally experienced the impact of restrictions on human mobility and subsuming individual freedoms for the sake of the public good.
* And no other group has been adversely affected by restrictions on human mobility as the migrant community.
* It is in this sense that I share three messages on enhancing migrants’ agency and contributions to the achievement of SDGs.

**Message 1: Cambodia is a young and highly mobile population. Migration is an important economic lifeline and a factor driving social mobility for families. The productive capacity and remittances they generate need to be nurtured and protected in an enabling environment that allows them to meet their needs, create savings, assets and opportunities for migrant families, communities and sending and host countries.**

* 60% of Cambodians are under 35 years of age.
* They are **highly mobile in search for economic opportunities and to participate in the prosperity resulting from 2 decades of 7% GDP growth.** Over the last 15 years, **internal and cross-border migration has been one of the most significant drivers for transforming Cambodian society.**
* Cambodian migrants send back on average **USD 200-250/month in remittances**, which constitute a critical lifeline for millions of households, helping families raise their living standards above subsistence levels.
* From a macroeconomic perspective, remittances provide a good source of foreign exchange for the Cambodian economy. **Total remittances tripled from US$ 444 million in 2010 to US$ 1.203 billion in 2019 (or 4.6 percent of GDP, based on data from NBC, 2020).**
* These numbers alone already point to significant contributions migrants make to the economy. **Migrant workers’ remittances can spur economic development in poor migrant-sending communities**. The impact, however, depends on migrant workers’ access to money transfer channels that are affordable and safe. It also depends on recipient households’ capacities and opportunities to use the money for productive investment. And more importantly, remittances need to be channeled to a supportive macro-economic and business environment with good governance systems in place conducive to optimizing these funds for productive investment.
* Some key actions to prioritize: Improving **financial inclusion and literacy**; **bringing the “unbanked” into the formal banking** system; reforming **legal and regulatory frameworks to increase transparency and competition in the remittance market**; deploying digital technologies for more efficient, cost-effective and faster payment systems.

**Message 2: Public perception, being recognized and having a voice matters. When migrants are valued as an integral part of the economy and society, with their rights recognized and upheld, it is the first step in giving them agency. When mobility is part of the fabric of an inter-connected world, we create an enabling environment for migrants to be counted as contributors to host and sending countries societies and economies.**

**How do we make this happen? One, facilitate their ability to access opportunities in a safe, orderly and a regular manner. Two, ensure that they have legal, health and social protection required to lead secure, productive and fulfilling lives.**

* On the first point: one way to ensure safe, orderly and orderly migration is through **bilateral agreements**. The MOU between Cambodia and Thailand, for example, aims **to formalize the status of Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand**. The involvement of private recruitment agencies and employers in this agreement is crucial and contributes to reducing irregular migration as well as strengthening social protection of migrant workers.
* Another way is through **international cooperation via the Global Compact.** The Compact enables governments to promote safe, orderly and regular migration through effective practices in national migration governance. **It also enhances international migration policy by addressing some of the gaps in the way states cooperate with one another**.
* On the second point, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us that the best way to **prevent people from sliding back into poverty is through access to health and social protection services**. However, migrant workers’ access to health and social protection is fraught with many **challenges** because of immigration status, informality, **discrimination in the laws and practices**, as well as absence of portability arrangements in protection of their rights in the country of destination.
* The UN’s efforts in Cambodia support the government to ensure that migrants abroad are **formalized** so that they can obtain benefits from formal labour markets and social protection system in the destination countries.
* We continue working with the Cambodian government **to increase protection of migrants for the whole cycle of migration**. For example, reducing payments of migration services, complex procedures and red tape during recruitment stage.
* We **mainstream migration within certain policy areas to support recognition of its social and economic contributions**. We also bring migration into national and sectoral development plans, as well as help set up more integrated mechanism on social protection.

**Message 3: Even without the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, migrants remain one of the most vulnerable groups and at high risk of being left behind in development, if policies do not target or cover their needs. Tailored measures are required to create economic opportunities for migrants as part of building back better from the pandemic.**

* To illustrate with an example: **Thailand hosts approximately 1.2m Cambodian migrant workers, the largest among the top three destination countries for Cambodians**. When Thailand began to close borders in March in an effort to curb COVID-19 transmission, more than **115,000 Cambodian migrant workers** returned home.
* The mass return of migrants had significant repercussions. Their **return to Cambodia with no jobs meant that their families and host communities can easily slide back to poverty**.
* Without support for alternative sources of income or livelihoods, returning migrants are **unable to re-integrate into the community and are forced to re-migrate, increasing risks from illegal recruiters and human traffickers,** as well as COVID-19 transmission.
* In this case, some of the **priority response actions** were on health and protection, as well as in providing **livelihoods and expand employment** opportunities.
* At policy level, we are ensuring that returning migrants are considered in the government’s policy response and **socio-economic recovery strategy**. At programmatic level, the poor migrant returnees are included in the **IDPoor system so they can obtain emergency cash transfers from the government**.
* Other efforts include:
* providing assistance for **re-skilling or upskilling**
* improving migrants’ **access to employment services**
* Supporting **MSMEs**
* Expanding **support services** for migrant workers at the end of the migration cycle, namely return and reintegration.

Concluding remarks

To conclude, may I emphasize these priority and practical actions necessary in the context of COVID-19 pandemic to enhance migrants’ agency and contributions to the achievement of SDGs:

First, **ramp up efforts to formalize migrant workers in destination countries**

Second, **include migration in the government’s socio-economic recovery plan**

Third, provide **social protection to the returning migrants** & livelihoods support.

And fourth, **support IOM’s global Call to Action on**[**Remittances in Crisis – How to Keep Them Flowing**](https://www.knomad.org/covid-19-remittances-call-to-action/).

Thank you and hope these practical measures help us turn the pandemic crisis into an opportunity in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.