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The activities of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2008-2009

Committee Opinion[1]
Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population
Rapporteur: Mr Pedro AGRAMUNT, Spain, Group of the European People's Party

A. Conclusions of the committee

1. The Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population welcomes the report by Ms Lilliehöök (Sweden, Group of the European People's Party), which concentrates in a timely manner on the challenges posed by the global economic downturn and outlines the OECD's policy proposals for tackling the current crisis. It appreciates the new comprehensive approach introduced by the Committee on Economic Affairs and Development whereby other relevant committees have been invited to contribute to the compilation of the draft resolution already at a preliminary stage.

2. The committee hails the leading international role that the OECD has assumed in helping governments soften the impact of the global economic crisis and lay the foundations of a stronger global economy for the generations to come. The committee particularly commends the work undertaken by the OECD in seeking responsive, fair and effective migration and integration policies that could adjust to the current crisis and beyond. It welcomes the recently published International Migration Outlook 2009, which proposes a road map for managing labour migration through an improved identification of labour market needs and the adjustment of migratory flows, for reducing irregular migration and illegal employment practices (or redirecting them into legal channels) and for ensuring better integration strategies for migrants and their children.

3. The committee shares the OECD's concerns as regards the negative effects of the rapid deterioration of the labour market on migrant workers and their families worldwide. Many OECD and Council of Europe member states which used to experience record-high migration inflows in the years prior to the crisis are now among the hardest hit. In the United Kingdom and Ireland, for example, migration from the new European Union member countries has declined by more than half this year.

4. Although the extent, depth and impact of the current economic crunch are still being debated, there is enough evidence to show that migrants and those relying on remittances are among those who suffer most from the crisis. With unemployment rates rising everywhere, employers are increasingly more reluctant to hire immigrants and more prone to fire them. As a result, unemployment rates among immigrants have risen more than among native-born workers. The latest OECD projections (June 2009) suggest that the OECD-area unemployment rate could reach 10% by the end of 2010, equivalent to over 57 million unemployed, many of those being migrant workers. Already today, more than one out of four labour migrants in Spain is unemployed (27.1% in the first quarter of 2009), compared to 15.2% for natives. Whereas the economic crisis may have seen its lowest point in terms of stock exchange and economic growth, the OECD predicts that joblessness will still be on a rise for at least a year.

1. See Doc. 11985 prov. tabled by the Committee on Economic Affairs and Development.

5. Migrant workers are particularly vulnerable due to their high over-representation in many of the most badly suffering sectors, such as service industries, construction, low value-added manufacturing, food processing, leisure and hospitality. Recent arrivals are also more often employed in less secure and low-skilled jobs, which are the first to disappear during a downturn. Also, labour contract protection is a problem in almost all countries, with migrant workers often being employed under temporary contracts that allow employers to call them in only when they are needed.

6. With migration becoming increasingly feminised, migrant women are particularly affected by the economic crisis. They shoulder a disproportionate burden, marginalised on both levels of gender and economic status. As a result, migrant women are much more vulnerable to exploitation than their male counterparts – losing their jobs first or, where they remain employed, suffering cuts or delays in wages, hazardous conditions and denial of benefits. The negative repercussions can be several. Most notably, the economic downturn can force a greater number of women to seek opportunities abroad or, in the alternative, force women to remain in foreign countries, unable to return or remit much-needed support to their families back home. It is therefore more than ever essential that migrant women must be granted access to opportunities to participate in national economic recovery.

7. The committee is concerned that the decreasing incomes in European countries may generate various shadow economic activities, which open more opportunities for irregular migrants. Also, migrants whose permits are not renewed subsequent to job loss but who decide to stay abroad will be in an increasingly precarious position, with fewer opportunities for legal employment and the possibility of greater stigmatisation – potentially resulting in abuse, discrimination and xenophobia.

8. These recent trends have led many OECD and Council of Europe countries to adjust their migration policies towards more restrictive measures. Several countries are reducing their labour migration programmes or putting in place policies to encourage return migration among unemployed immigrants, by offering them money to return home. The committee observes that past experience has proved such schemes to have limited – if not negative – impact. Keeping markets open to migrants and migration is important to stimulating a quicker economic recovery.

9. The committee endorses the conclusions of the recent First OECD High-Level Policy Forum on Migration, held on 29-30 June 2009, and outlines the following three aspects: the need for long-term policies for labour migration management, the importance of promoting development in source countries, and the improvement of the effectiveness of integration policies.

10. In particular, the committee shares the conviction that the on-going economic crisis will not alter the fundamental push and pull factors driving international migration, and that migration will remain an essential ingredient in the economy of the 21st century. In most OECD and Council of Europe countries, labour needs are long-term as they are related to the ageing of the population, technological changes and the integration of the world's economy. The challenges that were present before the economic downturn will still need to be tackled. While of major significance, the current economic crisis will at some point pass. It is therefore important that member states develop migration policies that should seek a balanced long-term approach rather than overreacting to current conditions.

11. Secondly, the committee remains concerned about the negative impact that the significant job losses by labour migrants will have on remittance flows to countries of origin. The World Bank estimates a 5-8% decrease in remittances worldwide in 2009. The decrease in the worldwide trade flows, foreign direct investments and a possible decrease of the official development aid will likewise affect the traditionally remittance-dependent countries. This poses a serious threat to the fight against poverty and exacerbates hardship in communities dependent on such transfers. Many of these countries have neither the policies to facilitate the reintegration of migrants, nor resources to improve education, transport systems or social security for returning migrants. It is therefore essential for the world community to ensure that the benefits of migration are shared between sending and receiving countries. The latter should also include responsible policies to avoid the risk of brain drain and greater portability of social rights to reduce obstacles to returns. Efforts should also be made to decrease the costs of remitting the money.

12. Finally, the committee shares the OECD's concern about the continuing negative portrayal of migrants and migration in public media in the receiving states. Leaders – in government and civil society – should be clear about the benefits of migration and support anti-discrimination and integration policies. It remains convinced that a realistic and responsible discussion of the benefits and costs of migration are in the long-run interest of both states and migrants. It is thus essential to work to prevent attitudes of hostility to migration and immigrants and take positive measures to combat marginalisation of migrants.

B. Proposed amendment to the draft resolution

Whilst emphasising its support for the draft resolution tabled by the Committee on Economic Affairs and Development, the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population proposes to include the following paragraphs to the draft resolution:

"1. The enlarged Assembly commends the work undertaken by the OECD in seeking responsive, fair and effective migration and integration policies that could adjust to the current crisis and beyond. It encourages the OECD to invite its members to step up efforts towards working out functional, coherent and long-term migration management policies with a view to maximising the benefits of migration. Channels of regular migration should remain open with a view to meeting continued demand for migrant workers, thus helping to prevent irregular migration and trafficking in human beings.

2. The enlarged Assembly remains particularly concerned about the protection of the rights of migrants and equality of treatment during the economic downturn and, to this end, calls upon the OECD to seek guarantees from its member countries that the rights of migrants are adequately and effectively protected in terms of human rights, working and living conditions and in the event of loss of employment, and that migrants are offered adequate protection from any form of discrimination and xenophobia.

3. The enlarged Assembly urges the governments of OECD countries to strengthen their co-operation with developing countries, including by promoting measures to facilitate remittance flows through initiatives of tax deductibility of both remittances and money placed in special savings accounts to support development projects, by reducing obstacles to returns through improved assistance, greater protection of social rights and transformation of the potential of these returned migrants into "brain gain", and by addressing the risks of "brain drain" through responsible recruitment policies.

4. The enlarged Assembly notes with concern the increasing hostility to migration and immigrants in public opinion. It therefore encourages the OECD to join efforts and support projects of awareness-raising, in particular through public media, about the valuable economic and social contributions made by migrants. Additionally, it encourages the OECD to work with civil society groups, and notably with diaspora associations, with a view to challenging the stigmatisation of migrant workers."

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Reporting committee: Committee on Economic Affairs and Development

Committee for opinion: Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population

Reference to committee: Reporting committee's terms of reference

Opinion approved by the committee on 28 September 2009

Secretariat of the committee: Mr Neville, Mrs Odrats, Mr Ekström