Round table report

Advancing regional social integration, social protection, and the free movement of people in Southern Africa

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Introduction

The round table on "Advancing regional social integration, social protection, and free movement of people in Southern Africa" was organized as part of the conference "Regional governance of migration and social policy: Comparing European and African regional integration policies and practices" held at the University of Pretoria (South Africa) on 18–20 April 2012, at which the articles in this special issue were first presented.[1] The discussion was moderated by Prince Mashele of the South African Centre for Politics and Research and the participants included: Yitna Getachew, IOM Regional Representative for Southern Africa, Migration Dialogue for Southern Africa (MIDSA); Jonathan Crush, University of Cape Town and Balsillie School of International Affairs, Canada, representing the Southern Africa Migration Program (SAMP); Vic van Vuuren, Director of Southern African ILO; Vivienne Taylor, South Africa Planning Commission; Sergio Calle Norena, Deputy Regional Representative of UNHCR; Laurent De Boeck, Director, ACP Observatory on Migration, Brussels; Wiseman Magasela, Deputy Director General Social Policy, South African Department of Social Development; and Sanusha Naidu, Open Society Foundation for South Africa.

It became clear in the discussion that the issue of regional social integration and free movement in Southern Africa is highly contested as there were varying opinions on how the regions in this part of the world could become more integrated. This report is a short breakdown of the arguments presented by the group of government officials, international experts, and civil society represented at the table, who discussed the im-

portance of regionalism, why we are failing to adequately deal with the issue of migration, and what can be done going forward to promote free movement and social protection in the region. The main objective of this discussion was to identify the problems that Southern African countries are facing regarding immigration and develop concrete ideas that could be used to develop a form of cross-border migrant management scheme that recognizes the social rights of migrants.

Problems in trying to address migration

The Southern African region is failing dismally to address the issue of migration due to a wide variety of problems. A large portion of blame lies with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and its inability to function effectively. Institutionally SADC is weak, not only in implementing a common framework for migration but also in developing concrete policies. In most SADC member states, pressing domestic needs privilege the national level at the expense of any meaningful supranational form of regulation. Unless a strong regional framework (including a common development strategy) is agreed upon, it will be hard to develop a joint policy on migration and social rights. The diversification of the regional structure, with a number of overlapping memberships and geographical inconsistencies (e.g., Tanzania and Mauritius are part of SADC but they are not located in the Southern African region), makes this job even harder.

On a more technical level, a speaker from the African Caribbean Pacific Observatory noted that a "lack of data" is a major issue hampering the development of migration policy. Currently there is a vast knowledge gap with respect to the different types of migrants that move within the Southern African region. Linked to this is the way in which labor mobility affects migration. The majority of migration occurs within the informal labor market, which makes it very difficult to gather accurate data as this market is constantly changing and subject to significant volumes of irregular migration.

The need for better data and a different attitude towards social protection

In order to address the issue of migration and social rights, certain key mechanisms must be in place. SADC would need to develop its infrastructure with a view to building capacities in migration management. It

would also need to take the lead by developing a unified policy suitable for national implementation. According to Sanusha Naidu from the Open Society Foundation for South Africa, this will involve going down to "the grassroots level and engaging with migrants, the border community and even private enterprise" to develop a sustainable solution for promoting integration and free movement in the region. The support of organizations such as MIDSA will prove invaluable in establishing the groundwork for this kind of policy framework.

Addressing the data gap is paramount, as well as ensuring that this information is readily available for policy making. More research will need to be carried out concerning the different categories of migrants. What are the volumes and typologies of economic migrants, for instance, vis-à-vis political refugees? How many of them relocate permanently and how many move back and forth to the country of origin? With systematized data collection, regional authorities and member states would be able to better gauge which of those groups are in need and what different types of assistance can be made available to them. This is a fundamental precondition to any national and regional legislation in the field of social protection.

There must also be an attitude shift in the way that countries are approaching economic policy. The current economic growth-centered paradigm in which Southern African states operate is proving harmful to the social protection of migrants. The political and economic discourse is largely based on a narrow definition of macro-economic growth, which results in a conservative understanding of social protection mechanisms. In most of these countries, social welfare policies are generally viewed as a waste of public money with no direct economic returns. By contrast, a coordinated policy of free movement or managed migration would allow certain states to address critical skills shortages and support economic integration in the region.

The South African context

According to Vivienne Taylor of the South Africa Planning Commission "out of the population of 50 million people it is estimated that there are 5 million immigrants living within the borders of South Africa." There is little doubt that South Africa plays the role of "leader" in the region and its role is critical as the most important economic hub. Nevertheless, South Africa still faces chronic poverty, officially estimated at 24% but possibly much higher (about 40%). As pointed out by Wiseman Magasela of the South African Department of Social Development, South Africa presents

an evident paradox: a citizen can qualify for a house and own the land upon which it is built, have access to health care, and even receive up to six different types of social welfare grants. Yet, some of these people are still poor. These measures are not sufficient and, most importantly, they do not seem able to break the vicious circle of poverty. This is an important lesson for whatever mechanism of social protection for migrants is developed. In such a context education becomes critical, as it is an essential driving force in ensuring that people become economically active. The focus must shift so that social development and economic development are considered equally important.

The role of trade unions must also shift. In some cases, for instance, South African trade union organizations (e.g., COSATU) have indirectly made it difficult for migrants to seek decent social protection and living conditions as the unions' central focus is on the South African labor force. As long as migrant workers continue to be exploited in a "race to the bottom" scenario hampering wages and working conditions, then it will be hard to promote any form of consistent social protection as labor migration triggers dangerous "wars of the poor." This is especially true if one examines the large amount of migrants working in the construction sector and the (informal) domestic industry. In addition to trade unions, business organizations must be brought into the picture in order to promote a deep-rooted cultural and political shift, involving as many stakeholders as possible, as a precondition to establish a common (ideally regional) framework of social protection for migrants.

Lessons from the rest of the world

Experiences in other parts of the world may help eradicate deep-seated fears and stigmas with regard to migration. In particular, the widespread bias against the idea of supporting an area of free movement of people might then be overcome. The paradigm of regional integration prevailing in Southern Africa, indeed, privileges the movement of capital and goods (to varying degrees), but still restricts the movement of people. There is a prevalent perception that a free movement policy would lead to floods of migrants to South Africa. However if one looks at the European Union (EU), where an area of free movement was established in the 1990s, this need not be the case. Official estimates indicate that only 2.5% of the total population of EU member states has actually taken advantage of a free movement area to resettle in another country. Most people travel regularly, but do not seek jobs or permanent relocation. Interestingly, the EU experience shows that mobility has allowed most countries to diversify

their labor markets and strengthen competitive advantages. Migration policies in the Caribbean Community have also followed a similar approach, enabling skilled workers to move across the region and support development policies. In both cases the regional "leaders" (e.g., Germany and Jamaica) have benefited from a free movement area.

The way forward

In order to ensure the social protection of migrants in the Southern African region, both regional institutions and member states will need to strengthen their infrastructural capacity and promote dialogue across sectors, especially with labor and business organizations. More data is needed to fully grasp the extent and typology of the phenomenon. Most probably, this will require a bottom-up approach where information is gathered directly at the grassroots level. There is also a strong need for political commitment: governments will need to rethink their view of social development and economic growth, whereby social protection systems are integrated into a coherent framework of sustainable and equitable development.

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