Dimensions and dynamics of international migration

1. Migration has been a constant and influential feature of human history. It has supported the process of global economic growth, contributed to the evolution of states and societies and enriched many cultures and civilizations. Migrants have often been amongst the most dynamic and entrepreneurial members of society, people who are prepared to venture beyond the confines of their own community and country in order to create new opportunities for themselves and their children.

2. In the contemporary world, international migration continues to play an important (if often unacknowledged) role in national, regional and global affairs. In many developing countries, the remittances received from migrants constitute a more important source of income than Official Development Assistance (ODA) or Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Throughout much of the world, migrants are not only employed in jobs that nationals are reluctant to do, but are also engaged in high-value activities that local people lack the skills to do. In certain countries, whole sectors of the economy and many public services have become highly dependent on migrant labour, and would collapse overnight if those workers were no longer available.

3. Human mobility has become an integral component of the global economy, with countries and companies looking further afield for the personnel they need to improve their competitiveness. It is no coincidence that some of the largest concentrations of migrants are to be found in 'global cities', dynamic, innovative and highly cosmopolitan urban centres that are enabling people, places and cultures in different parts of the world to become increasingly interconnected.

4. As these examples indicate, international migration has the potential to play a very positive role in the process of human development, bringing benefits to people in poorer and more prosperous countries alike. The Global Commission on International Migration underlines the need for the international community to maximize these benefits and to capitalize on the resourcefulness of people who seek to improve their lives by moving from one country to another. The following sections identify a number of important issues that must be taken into account if those objectives are to be achieved.

Disparities and differentials

5. International migration is a dynamic and expanding phenomenon. As indicated already, the number of international migrants has doubled in the past 25 years, although as a proportion of the world's total population it remains rather modest, at around three per cent. International migration affects countries at every level of economic development and of every ideological and cultural persuasion. Migrants now depart from and arrive in almost every country in the world, making it increasingly difficult to sustain the distinction that has traditionally been made between countries of origin, transit and destination. Many states now fall into all three categories.

6. Over the past 30 years, the proportion of foreign-born residents living in developed

countries has generally increased, while in most developing countries it has either remained stable or diminished to some extent. Around 60 per cent of all recorded migrants are now to be found in the world's more prosperous countries, and the other 40 per cent in developing regions. Despite this trend, large numbers of people continue to engage in 'south-south' migration, moving from one developing country to another. According to the most recent UN statistics, Asia has some 49 million migrants, Africa 16 million and the Latin America and Caribbean region six million.

Development, democracy and human security

7. As suggested earlier, the globalization process has created enormous wealth and has lifted millions of people out of poverty. But it has not yet narrowed the gap between rich and poor, and in some cases economic disparities are widening. Many developing countries are struggling to cope with high levels of demographic growth and are failing to create enough jobs for the millions of young people who are entering the labour market. And although more people than ever before are citizens of states with pluralistic political systems, too many people continue to live in countries characterized by poor governance, low levels of human security, corruption, authoritarianism, human rights violations and armed conflict.

8. Given these conditions, it is not surprising that many people are looking for a future beyond the borders of their own country, both within their own region and, if they have the means to get there, to more distant parts of the world. And for reasons that are self-evident, few people (other than short-term contract workers) seek to migrate from functional states with thriving economies and flourishing democracies to weak or despotic states where human rights are violated and that are unable to meet the basic needs of their own citizens.

Demographic and economic factors

9. While many of the industrialized states are cautious in acknowledging it, their continued prosperity will depend in part on international migration. Many of the world's most affluent societies have low and declining birth rates, and as a result their populations are becoming progressively smaller and older. As a result, they may find it difficult to maintain existing levels of economic productivity, to sustain their pensions and social security systems, and to find the caregivers required to meet the needs of an ageing population.

10. The growing competitiveness within the global economy has led to a process of economic restructuring that has limited the number of public and private sector jobs available in developing countries. This has simultaneously created demand for a flexible labour force in the industrialized states that is prepared to work for low wages and under difficult conditions. Migrants from developing countries are currently helping to fill that gap at the lower end of the labour market, and seem likely to do so for the foreseeable future. At the upper end of the labour market, migrants are also in growing demand to fill positions in high-value and knowledge-based sectors of the economy that are currently confronted with a global shortage of appropriate skills.

Culture, communications, curiosity

11. The expanding scale of international migration can also be attributed to cultural factors. The human race has always been curious, and eager to visit different places, gain new experi-

ences and encounter unfamiliar cultures. As a result of the globalization process, much larger numbers of people can realize those ambitions. Global communications networks provide people with the information they need to move from one place to another. Global transportation networks have made it much faster and cheaper to cross the globe. And the growth of global social networks and diasporas (themselves a product of earlier migratory movements) have made it easier for people to move to another country and to adapt to a new society.

12. An Afghan citizen who decides to migrate, for example, can be guaranteed to find a supportive community of compatriots, whether she or he moves to Dubai, Karachi, London, New Delhi, Sydney or Washington DC. A number of countries, of which Afghanistan is just one, are now characterized by a culture of migration in which moving abroad on a temporary or long-term basis has become the norm rather than the exception.

The complexity of human mobility

13. Human mobility is not only becoming larger in scope and scale, but is also becoming more complex in its nature. International migrants constitute a very diverse group of people. As the number of migrants has increased, so too has the number of legal and administrative categories into which they are placed by governments and international organizations.

14. People who move across international borders are variously described as having regular or irregular status and as being skilled or unskilled workers, permanent settlers or temporary migrants, not to mention additional categories such as student migrant, family reunion migrant, transit migrant, asylum seeker or refugee. In principle, a coherent and comprehensive migra-

tion policy should address the particular circumstances of each of these different groups.

15. In reality, however, an individual migrant may belong to one or more of these categories at the same time. She or he may move successively from one category to another in the course of a migratory movement, or may seek to be reclassified from one category to another, as when an economic migrant submits a claim to asylum in the hope of gaining the privileges associated with refugee status.

16. The traditional distinction between skilled and unskilled workers is in certain respects an unhelpful one, as it fails to do justice to the complexity of international migration. For example, many countries are currently eager to recruit migrants who are specialists in information technology and engineering, but they are equally eager to attract migrants who are able to provide high-quality care to elderly people and children. While they may have different levels of educational achievement, all of them could be legitimately described as essential workers.

Regional differences

17. In the course of its consultations, the Commission has become acutely aware of the many regional and sub-regional differences that exist in relation to international migration, as well the constraints that such differences place on the formulation of international migration policies.

18. The predominant form of migration varies considerably from one part of the world to another. In Asia, for example, many migrants move on the basis of temporary labour contracts, while in parts of the Americas and Africa, irregular migration is far more prevalent. Traditional countries of immigration such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA continue to

accept migrants for permanent settlement and citizenship, while the countries of the Middle East usually admit international migrants for fixed periods and without any expectation of integration. In Europe, the major preoccupation of recent years has been the arrival of asylum seekers from other parts of the world, the majority of whom do not qualify for refugee status.

19. The states of the former Soviet Union have experienced a particularly complex pattern of human mobility during the past 15 years, involving migrations within, to and from the region; movements of a voluntary and involuntary nature, and situations in which people themselves did not move, but in which their nationality changed. Epitomizing this complexity, an intergovernmental initiative to address the issue of migration in the former Soviet Union has been obliged to develop its own vocabulary, establishing new categories of migrant such as 'formerly deported peoples' (communities that were forcibly relocated during the Stalin regime), 'ecological migrants' (people who have been forced to move by environmental disaster) and 'involuntarily relocating persons' (those who have been forced to relocate to the country of their citizenship as a result of circumstances endangering their lives).

20. Important variations are also to be found in the capacity of states to formulate and implement migration policies. Such variations generally reflect the relative prosperity and the historical experience of the countries concerned. One would evidently not expect countries with relatively little relative experience in the field of international migration to have the same capacity as states that have longstanding and large-scale immigration programmes.

21. The Commission's mandate is to provide the framework for the formulation of a "coherent,

comprehensive and global response to the issue of international migration." In accordance with its mandate, the conclusions and recommendations presented in this report are addressed to states and other stakeholders in all parts of the world, and do not focus on regional or sub-regional issues and situations.

Policy linkages: Development, human rights and security

22. A final dimension of the complexity of international migration is to be found in its inextricable linkage to a range of other global concerns, as well as the international community's growing awareness of such linkages. For example, recent years have witnessed a growing appreciation of the need to maximize the contribution that migrants make to poverty reduction and sustainable development in their countries of origin. In addition, the Commission has recognized an increased awareness that the issues of development, human rights and good governance are inseparable, and that an integrated approach to these issues will be required if the international community is to address the pressures that induce people to leave their countries of origin.

23. The linkage between migration and security has become an issue of even greater international concern. Recent incidents involving violence committed by migrants and members of minority groups have led to a perception that there is a close connection between international migration and international terrorism. Irregular migration, which appears to be growing in scale in many parts of the world, is regarded by politicians and the public alike as a threat to the sovereignty and security of the state. In a number of destination countries, host societies have become increasingly fearful about the presence of migrant communities, especially those with

unfamiliar cultures and that come from parts of the world associated with extremism and violence.

24. These are real and legitimate concerns. However, the linkage between migration and security should also be viewed in more positive ways. In many parts of the world, labour migration has contributed towards security and political stability by reducing poverty levels, curbing unemployment and expanding the experiences and opportunities available to the population. Migration can be an empowering experience that enables people to enjoy a greater degree of human security. Returning migrants and exiles have assumed important leadership roles in many nascent democracies that are emerging from years of authoritarian rule.

25. The intricacy of the linkages that exist between international migration and other global issues presents further challenges to policy makers and has also raised some important issues in the preparation of this report. As an entity specifically established to consider the issue of international migration, the Commission has focused its conclusions and recommendations on policies that have a relatively direct bearing on the cross-border movement of people. Even so, the Commission is firmly convinced that migration policies have little chance of producing positive outcomes unless they are complemented by appropriate policies in the many other areas that have an impact on, and which are impacted by, international migration. In short, the issue of human mobility cannot be dealt with in isolation.

Conflicting interests and attitudes

26. Another important challenge confronted by policy makers in the domain of international migration is to be found in the controversial and contradictory nature of the issue. From the beginning of its work in January 2004, the Commission has been struck by the enormous amount of interest and controversy that exists in relation to international migration. States throughout the world are devoting an increasing amount of attention and resources to the movement of people across their borders. Questions related to international migration are being discussed in numerous national, regional and international fora. Migration issues are constantly in the headlines of many major media outlets. And while governments remain the principal actors in this discourse, many other influential stakeholders are striving to have their voice heard, not least the corporate sector.

Markets and states: The global and the local

27. In recent years, an apparent tension has arisen regarding the interests of the state and the interests of markets and the corporate sector in relation to international migration. As indicated earlier, a principal manifestation of the globalization process is the increasing ease with which goods, capital, services, information and ideas flow across international borders. But the same cannot be said for people, who are still confronted with a wide range of official controls when moving from one country to another. While such controls impinge most directly upon unskilled migrant workers, even skilled professionals and the employees of multinational corporations often find that their relocation is obstructed or delayed by restrictive policies and cumbersome procedures.

28. The corporate sector is increasingly anxious to resolve such problems. Private enterprises that wish to boost their competitiveness and expand their markets feel that they must be able to recruit their employees much more freely and on a

global basis. And if they are unable to do so, they may move part or all of their enterprises to countries where they are able to find the people they need.

29. In contrast to the increasingly globalized approach of the corporate sector, the concerns of states are still predominantly embedded in local politics. Governments are often concerned that by facilitating the entry of foreigners to the national labour market they will reduce employment opportunities for citizens, offend public opinion and lose electoral support. While they may acknowledge the economic case for a more liberal approach to international migration, many governments are also worried that admitting additional numbers of foreign nationals, even on a temporary basis, will have negative consequences for the stability of society and ultimately the security of the state.

The public discourse

30. The Commission considers that this tension between markets and the state, between the corporate sector and government, between the global and the local, between national interests and the globalization process, will be an increasingly important element of the discussion on international migration in years to come. While that tension may not be resolved, it must be approached on the basis of a calm, open and objective debate. In the current international context, this represents a serious challenge.

31. In every part of the world that the Commission has visited, international migration has been very high on the public, political and media agenda. While the precise issues at stake may have varied from place to place, the prominence of the discourse has been unmistakeable.

32. In many societies, citizens are expressing concerns, both legitimate and unfounded, about the arrival of people from other countries and cultures. Media outlets across the world report a constant stream of stories related to migrants and migration, many of them focusing on the more sensational and negative aspects of the issue. Migration has proved to be a politically explosive issue in a significant number of countries, to the extent that it seems to have played an important role in determining the outcome of several elections. The discourse on migration has thus become a highly polarized one at national, regional and global levels, with limited common ground between the different constituencies that have an interest in the issue.

33. One should not be surprised or dismayed by this situation. International migration is an emotive issue because it raises complex questions about the identity and values of individuals, households and communities, as well as societies as a whole. International migration is a controversial matter because it highlights important questions about national identity, global equity, social justice and the universality of human rights. International migration policy is difficult to formulate and implement because it involves the movement of human beings, purposeful actors who are prepared to make sacrifices and to take risks in order to fulfil their aspirations. Its challenges are radically different from those that arise in managing the movement of inanimate objects such as capital, goods and information. Those challenges are examined in the chapters that follow.