



ELSEVIER

Habitat International 30 (2006) 706–715

**HABITAT**  
**INTERNATIONAL**

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## International migration, diversity and urban governance in cities of the South

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### Abstract

One of the new challenges globalization raises to urban management is the increasing number of international migrants moving to cities of developing countries and their impact on urban governance.

Although there is growing perception that urban cultural diversity is a desirable outcome of globalization, most international migrants add to the low-income population and are particularly affected by urban exclusion. Furthermore, local governments in developing countries are seldom prepared to cope with the ad hoc policies needed to integrate people with different cultural, social and religious traditions into the urban society.

Such policies should aim to encourage mobility and temporary vs. permanent migration, strengthen civic identity, deal with the cultural differences and the resulting discriminatory reactions from local residents, promote participation and representation, and fight the social and economic exclusion that often expose migrants to illegal activities contributing to raising urban violence.

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*Keywords:* International migration; Multiculturalism; Urban governance; Inclusive city

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Urban growth in the developing world is taking place in a context which has changed significantly over the last decade. On the one hand, globalization has proved to be a major driving force in shaping urban development. While many effects have been positive, they have been distributed unevenly, thus exacerbating inequalities within and among cities. On the other hand, urban management responsibilities have generally been shifted from central to local governments, which have become main actors in urban decision making. Though globalization and decentralization potentially offer new opportunities, they also present further challenges to urban management.

One of these challenges is the growing international migration towards an increasing number of cities in the South. A long-time phenomenon in advanced economies, the number of international migrants<sup>2</sup> moving to urban areas is also becoming an important issue in many developing countries. The growth of transnational migration is clearly linked to globalization, with the related declining costs of transportation and the rising awareness of differences in living conditions due to the universal reach of the media. Meanwhile, local governments with limited financial resources and even more restricted management capacity find themselves having to deal with a phenomenon which is by definition extremely complex, largely new and potentially a source of high social tension.

According to the most recent estimates ([United Nations Population Division, 2002](#)), from a world total of approximately 175 million, international migrants amount to 33 million in Eastern Asia, 21 million in the Middle East and North Africa and 14 million in sub-Saharan Africa. Though they include refugees, these figures do not account for illegal or irregular migrants, estimated to be in the realm of 15–30 million worldwide, and rapidly increasing. Although few data are available, in recent years the number of migrants is likely to have increased significantly as a result of economic and social crises that have affected many developing countries.

The benefits of globalization fall mainly to certain groups of population, adversely affecting women, unskilled workers, the poor and producers undermined by cheap imports. Most trade expansion benefits industrialized countries and a small group of developing countries, while the majority of the latter have not profited from it. As a consequence, the informal sector grew in most developing countries: it now represents 48% of total non-agricultural employment in Africa, 44% in Latin America and 32% for the whole of the Asian continent ([ILO, 2004](#)).

Thus, despite a tightening of immigration controls in most countries,<sup>3</sup> including those of the South, labour shortages have fostered the movement of workers. In some countries, whole sectors of the economy, particularly but not only the poorly paid or those with poor working conditions, are being filled by migrants. In the oil-exporting countries of the Gulf, construction and domestic

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<sup>1</sup>The paper draws largely from the UN-Habitat research project on “Urban policies and practices addressing international migration” presently carried out by Università Iuav di Venezia, and the results of the project Introductory workshop that took place in Venice earlier this year. M. Balbo is the project director and G. Marconi project assistant. The research includes six cities from developing countries: Bangkok (Thailand), Dakar (Senegal), Johannesburg (South Africa), Karachi (Pakistan), Sao Paulo (Brazil), Tijuana (Mexico).

<sup>2</sup>International migrants are defined as persons born in a country different from that in which they live.

<sup>3</sup>“While goods, firms and money are largely free to criss-cross borders, people are not” ([ILO, 2004](#)). In fact, crossing borders is now more complicated than it was some years ago.

workers come mainly from the Arab world and some Asian countries. Domestic work is provided for by international migrants in many cities of Latin America, particularly those of *Cono Sur*, while the informal activities of Johannesburg and Dakar as well as Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, San José de Costa Rica and Santiago de Chile are nurtured by people coming from poorer neighbouring as well as distant countries (UN-Habitat, 2004).

Though an increasing number of governments, both local and national, officially oppose the inflow of foreign (poor) people into their territories,<sup>4</sup> it is all too clear that international migration is not only an inevitable consequence of globalization, but also an opportunity for the sending as well as the receiving countries. In fact, despite seemingly rigorous immigration controls, a “migration industry” has appeared in both sending and host countries, including recruiters, specialized travel agencies and lawyers. International migration can and should be managed, but it cannot be controlled, let alone halted.

### **The urban character of international migration**

Transnational migration to developing countries is significantly different from past migration flows.

One of the main changes that occurred in the last 10–15 years is that what was once a predominantly rural flow is now increasingly urban. In the second half of the twentieth century the agricultural sector of most traditionally labour importing countries such as Thailand and Malaysia, as well as Western African countries where migration dates back to colonial times, was hit by economic difficulties, rapidly reducing the demand for agricultural migrant workers. Yet, in Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok, large communities from Laos and Cambodia can be found, while thousands of migrants from Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea-Bissau and Niger have settled in Abidjan. Similarly, South Africa no longer requires the unskilled workers from the neighbouring countries who used to work in its mines,<sup>5</sup> but with the end of the apartheid regime, the number of workers arriving in Johannesburg and the Gauteng area from Mozambique and Angola has rapidly increased. In Buenos Aires, Santiago and Sao Paulo a growing percentage of the urban population is made up of migrants from Bolivia, Paraguay and Uruguay and the number of people from Central America and the Caribbean going to Mexico City or the urban centres of *maquilladora* on the border with the US is becoming an issue for the local governments in the north of Mexico (UN-Habitat, 2004).

In the city, international migrants can not only access the large and expanding urban informal sector, they can also benefit from the new demand for low-paid service jobs, resulting from the enhanced role many cities have acquired in the context of globalization; jobs such as maids and personal attendants all the way down to sex workers. Moreover, the networks that support

<sup>4</sup>The number of governments adopting measures to restrict international migration has increased significantly in recent decades: by 2003 one-third of all countries had policies to lower immigration, compared with only 7% of all countries in 1976. Moreover there is now a similarity between developed and developing countries with respect to their propensity to pursue lower levels of immigration: in both groups, about one-third of the countries aims to lower migration (UNDESA, 2004).

<sup>5</sup>In the early 1970s there were more than 300,000 foreign workers employed in the mining sector, at present down to less 150,000 (Oucho & Peberdy, 2001).

international migration are largely located in cities, where relatives and fellow countrymen have already settled and represent an essential reference point for the newcomers. The street vendors from Dakar rely on local Senegalese communities to access jobs in French-speaking African cities; most Nicaraguan migrants live in the *asentamientos nuevos* of San José de Costa Rica; communities from Southern African countries and Nigeria are well established in specific areas of Johannesburg; in Bangkok, migrants from different countries have established ethnically distinct neighbourhoods (Brettell & Kemper, 2002).

A second important change relates to the urban migration type, which is no longer composed of just labourers, but also qualified professionals, students and, increasingly, women (OECD, 2003). The “feminisation of migration” is linked to the increasing number of single women needing to provide for their children back home, or trying to escape from harsh family “dependency” conditions. In fact, women represent more than half of all transnational migrants (in the 1990s 84% of all Sri Lanka migrants to the Middle East were women, as were two-thirds of Filipino migrant workers) in what has been called “the female underside of globalisation” (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2002).

One more change in migration trends is the shift, observed in many cities of the South, from a prevalent European flow to an increasing flow from the poorer neighbouring countries. What was once largely a migration of skilled white-collar workers for the needs of the colonial power administration has been substituted by mostly unskilled workers. Typical of the ongoing change is Johannesburg, where the origin of pre- and post-apartheid migrants is, on inspection, totally different. However, a similar phenomenon can be found in Tijuana or Sao Paolo, as well as in Bangkok where the historical flow of immigrants coming from China has been replaced by increasing cross-border migration from Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos.<sup>6</sup>

International migrants represent an essential economic resource for the urban economies that employ them, but also for their countries of origin, which benefit from the remittance of money. Although the scale of remittances is notoriously difficult to establish and is largely underestimated, remittances to developing countries are currently believed to amount to between US\$75 and 100 billion annually, significantly more than the value of ODA and second only to oil (ILO, 2004). Moreover, annual remittances are a stable source of income for those who have remained at home and have more than doubled between 1988 and 1999 (Gammeltoft, 2002): the 20 million Indian migrants spread over 135 countries in 2003 sent to India almost US\$15 billion, an amount of foreign currency exceeding the revenues generated by the country’s software industry; between one-third and half the Filipino population is sustained by remittances (Salazar Parreñas, 2002); for Lesotho and Jordan remittances represent approximately one-fourth of total GDP, between 15% and 20% in Bosnia, Albania, Nicaragua, Yemen and Moldova (IMF, 2003).

## What we know

Current understanding of this phenomenon is insufficient. Official surveys, censuses and registration instruments largely underestimate the dimension of international migration. In most

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<sup>6</sup>The mentioned cities are part of the six case studies analysed by the UN-Habitat-Università IUAV di Venezia research project on “Urban policies and practices addressing international migration”.

cities experiencing international migration the number of illegal/unregistered migrants is assumed to be very conspicuous and increasing. Illegal Chinese migration in Vladivostok (Russia) is estimated to be more than double the legal level; in Sao Paulo (Brazil), according to the 2000 Census figures, the total number of immigrants amounted to nearly 200,000 people, but about the same number of undocumented Hispanic-Americans as well as thousands of illegal Koreans are assumed to live in the city. And although, due to the reduction of work permits issued in Johannesburg since 1990, the number of legal immigrants entering the country has constantly decreased, the number of undocumented migrants is believed to have grown significantly.

If illegal migration appears to be a common phenomenon, the reasons behind it can be quite different, as well as the ways to enter the country of destination (or transit). In countries with restrictive access policies, the main method used by unregistered migrants is legal entry and overstay (South Africa, Thailand). In other countries access can be easier but the weakness, complexity or absence of migration policies can make registration a very difficult or even impossible task (Brazil, Senegal, Mexico, Russia). For example the Brazilian “statute of the foreigner”, which should regulate migration into the country, is often considered to encourage illegal migration due to the severity of sanitary restrictions and the difficulties in complying with documentation rules. In Karachi it is the government’s geo-political strategy that sometimes directly promotes or discourages the presence, and thus regularization possibilities, of specific ethnic groups.

Illegal or irregular status is not attractive for anyone. However, due to lack of or inadequate migration policies and practices, people determined to seek better economic and living opportunities often have no alternative than unregistered stay, and they obviously avoid revealing their presence. On the other hand, illegal migrants are among those who most need access to health and education services, adequate housing and labour rights. Lack of data renders difficult both their identification and the provision of the support they need in order to access citizenship rights.

The majority of migrants find employment in low-paid sectors and job positions eschewed by locals, or end up entering a limited range of activities in the expanding informal sector. In Johannesburg migrants are mainly present in the construction sector, services and domestic work while the urban landscape has been deeply transformed by informal transnational trading. In Sao Paulo migrants from other Latin American countries work mainly in activities requiring little training, such as street trade and arts and crafts production, while many Koreans end up in small textile industries where they receive very low wages, have no labour rights and cannot obtain the documents needed to regularize their stay in the country. The Thai ministry of labour allows immigrants to work only in a limited range of sectors, reserving the higher skilled jobs for Thai citizens.

Migration policies are generally set nationally, since migration is looked at as a security issue. However, the consequences of migration fall onto local governments who need to cope with the demands arising from the new population settling within their city limits. The attitude of most local governments is essentially of a *laissez-faire* type: city authorities absolve themselves from the responsibility of any proactive supply of infrastructure and services, obliging migrant communities to heavily rely upon the private sector or self-provision. Lack of coordination among and within the many levels of governments operating within city or metropolitan boundaries is the norm, adding to the limited capacity to manage an issue often regarded as temporary and marginal.

### **Many, often conflicting issues**

The features of present international urban migration raise several issues that add to the already numerous challenges faced by the cities of developing countries.

#### *Permanent vs. temporary migration*

Since a wide range of factors affects the migrants' decision to stay or return, strategies promoting or discouraging long-term migration must be based on a clear understanding of these factors. The common perception is that migration is permanent, resulting in highly restrictive migration laws. However, recent research shows the temporary and circulatory nature of most migration to cities (UNDESA, 2004). New communication technologies help migrants to maintain strong links with their country of origin, while the total volume of remittances shows that very often migrants look forward to going back home. Some go as far as to organise a turn-over system in the workplace so as to stay away from home for just a limited period of time. In Johannesburg, large numbers of informal traders regularly cross South Africa's borders on a short-term basis to trade, shop and buy-and-sell but, due to highly restrictive migration laws quite inappropriate for this type of movement, they face numerous legal and financial obstacles crossing borders and growing their transnational enterprises. As a matter of facts, growing number of migrants consider the city where they settle simply as a transit point in view of returning home or, in some cases, to move to other destinations of greater economic opportunity. Moreover, in recent years international urban migration in developing countries has been made up of increasingly different types of migrants with different types of motivations: people looking for better paid jobs, in the formal as well as the informal sector, domestic servants, single women migrating to support the family they have left back home, as well as women joining their husbands, asylum seekers, students and trainees.

Many if not most recent migration features temporary migrants whose aspiration is indeed to return, sooner or later, to their country of origin. Thus, promoting temporary work programmes and facilitating re-entry should be clear objectives of any national and local migration policy. For receiving countries and cities, a more extensive and planned use of temporary movements of workers can fill demand–supply gaps that are observed in a particular period or location and, at the same time, it can help reducing undocumented migration attracted by jobs opportunities available mainly in low-skilled sectors of the labour market. To encourage the return home of international urban migrants, with the aim of reducing the problems arising from permanent migration as well as contributing to the social and economic development in the countries of origin, local governments should have the capacity to promote labour agreements with guidelines on how migrants are recruited. They should also be aware that urban polices have a strong impact on the type of migration: encouraging renting vs. ownership is one such policy, as well as establishing (micro)credit schemes facilitating remittances and investment in the places of origin. In addition, migrants can play a central role in strengthening cooperation between the home and host society.

International migration has traditionally been conceived as a permanent movement of individuals on one side, and the endeavour to limit it by the government of the hosting country or city on the other, with the idea that migration falls into two clear-cut categories: legal and illegal.

In fact, international migration is a manifestly more complex and, above all, dynamic phenomenon for which a dualistic perception is clearly inadequate: there is much research to be done on the reasons driving the decision to remain in the host city, for how long, to move to more attractive destinations or to return to the country of origin, and after how long.

### *Civic identity*

Migrating to a new country and city is a multi-stage process and it is difficult to establish the point to which it requires *adaption* and when *integration* begins. The degree of integration of migrants in the host society depends on many factors, including their command of the local language, the availability of job generating a sufficient income, their legal status, their participation in civil and political life, their access to social services (UNDESA, 2004) as well as their own expectations and objectives. Most newcomers prefer settling within their ethnic communities, where mutual aid social networks assure them the support that local institutions are often unable or unwilling to provide. In Karachi, Dakar or Abidjan the reliance on social networks lead to strong ethnic communities, vis-à-vis weak governments unable to cater for even some basic needs of the local population, and in particular international migrants. In this case migration strengthens non-civic identities and reinforces both a condition and a sense of marginalization up to the point of exclusion. Anyway, some migrant communities are definitely more open to integration than others depending mainly on cultural, religious and educational background, from which the very notion of inclusion and citizenship varies. For example in Tijuana, despite the absence of spatial concentration in ethnic enclaves, Chinese community tends to self-exclude from local society.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, ICT facilitate migrants in maintaining strong networks with households and friends left behind, while reduced transportation costs permit more frequent journeys home. Migrants' desires to affiliate with the values, language and way of life of the host country and city is thus weaker than in the past, and they thus end up belonging simultaneously to two societies. For second generations, i.e. children born in the receiving country from foreign parents, the situation is even more complicated since they often do not feel themselves locals nor do they have clear links with the countries of origin. This emerging phenomenon of a dual civic identity, makes citizenship a major issue when widely available, cheap and rapid communications allow "the creation of 'deterritorialised' groups which owe allegiance to no single space but operate in transnational space with identities of their own" (Skeldon, 2001).

### *Cultural diversity*

When migrants have a cultural level, language and ethnic features comparable to those of the local population, their integration is relatively easy. Not only are Tijuana residents accustomed to their own country *mestizo* diversity, but international migration comes mainly from Latin American countries with a similar racial mix and sharing the same language. Migrants are thus

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<sup>7</sup>With an estimated 9000 persons residing in Tijuana, Chinese represent the most numerous group of immigrants. Despite Chinese migration being as old as the foundation of the city, most Chinese hardly speak Spanish. Moreover, while most foreign migrants usually get married to a Mexican, Chinese immigrants get their partner from inside their own community.

facilitated in opting for the integration strategy, instead of strengthening their own identity. Similarly, in Johannesburg recent debates have discussed whether new African migrants are transnational in their behaviour and cultural practices, despite public and official xenophobia being major problems for transnational migration. However, the increasing ethnic diversity in the cities of developing countries experiencing international migration, some of them with little or no multicultural tradition, tends to produce anxiety and fear among local residents. Nowadays migration takes place at a very fast pace making the assimilation process more difficult than in the past. Though only quite a small percentage of the urban population, the presence of migrants is frequently overestimated in the perception of local residents. International migrants are easily not only recognizable, they are often spatially concentrated, while also tending to agglomerate in specific economic sectors.

In Bangkok, despite many nationals recognizing the migrants' contribution to the country's economic health in light of the labour shortages they fill in labour-intensive, poorly paid, uninviting industrial sectors, unskilled workers from neighbouring countries have often been unwelcome by local workers as they were considered posing obstacles to the improvement of working conditions and wages for the locals. Furthermore the attention of the media often focuses on uncontrolled flows of people looking for job, on undocumented migration, on foreigners' implication in criminal activities, thus contributing to a negative public perception of the phenomena.

Local governments increasingly need policies and practices to manage diversity and promote integration among residents. Similarly fundamental are public information campaigns on the roots of international migrations, the costs and advantages for the urban society to receive foreign migrants, as well as the rights and duties of both migrants and hosting communities.

### *Participation and representation*

Of utmost importance in managing urban international migration are the forms of representation migrants adopt and how their inclusion in the decision-making process can be promoted. Identifying effective ways of working and communicating with diverse communities and groups is an increasingly crucial issue for good urban governance in multicultural cities. Great attention has to be paid to identifying appropriate ways for promoting community participation and to understanding multicultural/diversity issues as well as community experiences in accessing city services. However, the international communities are far from being represented or simply consulted. The majority of migrants add to the multitude of local people who are themselves destitute of basic social rights and live in conditions where the "right to the city" is generally weak. In Bangkok, migrants have no civic rights, while in Dakar the phenomenon is so understudied that the issue is totally ignored by local as well as national decision makers. In Sao Paulo, where innovative democratic mechanisms—such as the participatory budgets and popular councils for the monitoring and management of policies—have been introduced in order to make decision making more inclusive for the urban population, international immigrants are essentially excluded from the forums and advocacy instruments, principally because "participation" was never conceived with the goal of responding to immigrant's demands.

Clearly different groups of migrants have different reasons for being in the city, engage in different activities, place different demands on city services, have variable requirements of city government, and so on. As the city begins to articulate a policy on the presence of international migrants, it is imperative that it takes account of migrants' perspective. The recognition of diversity as a source of urban strength and enrichment rather than a problem is the first step toward equity and participation. A stronger collaboration between local governments and NGOs/CBOs is essential in order to identify the main issues emerging from culturally diverse communities and to adopt appropriate inclusive policies and strategies.

### *Urban violence*

Many criminal actions can be linked to the increasing migration to urban areas: trafficking of persons (especially children and women), labour exploitation, production and trading of fake personal documents, irregular housing and illegal service providers such as the “water-mafia” in Karachi, unregulated recruitment agency, and corrupt police. Social and economic exclusion leads migrants to be even more exposed to and attracted by illegal activities such as drug dealing, poaching, prostitution and organized crime, deepening the local population's negative perception of the phenomenon. Again, good management of migration is crucial to increasing security and control and minimizing the negative aspects of international migration to cities.

### **The governance side of international migration**

As many researchers have pointed out, international migration is inevitable (Skeldon, 1997; Salt, 2001): in particular, in an urbanizing world, international urban migration is inevitable. Like urbanization, migration flows cannot be controlled; at best they may be governed, most likely they have to be managed. If managed effectively, international migration can take full advantage of the potential benefits it brings to both migrants and the host city. Governments need to understand the essential features of the phenomenon for the economic dynamism of cities.

In this perspective, most cities of the South experiencing international migration need to foster the coordination of national and local policies and practices. The necessity to improve the capacity of decision makers, managers and service providers to make informed choices on how to deal with international migration is all but evident.

Though highly skilled workers also move across national boundaries, for the most part international migration adds to the low-income population of the city. International migrants also have cultural, social and sometimes religious traditions that are different from the country and the cities they migrate to. As a result, their integration into urban society needs to be supported by ad hoc policies and measures that governments are seldom prepared to adopt, let alone implement. Even more so in the context of globalization, where the role of the state has significantly weakened, and the response to the needs of low-income groups has been largely shifted to local governments.

International urban migration involves essentially all dimensions of urban policy, from local economic development, particularly the informal sector, to education, health, housing and urban safety. Moreover, it has important urban governance dimensions on two counts: firstly, as it

relates to the access of international migrants to local decision-making processes. Secondly, and more importantly, because international urban migration must be considered as a domain where the interests of different actors are at play—institutions and individuals, public and private, legal and illegal (Salt, 2001). Dealing effectively with the phenomenon means providing adequate responses to international urban migrants when they settle in a city or want to become returnees as early as possible. However, it also means understanding the interests the different actors have in encouraging and “selling” migration and setting up a system of governance focusing on these actors, as well as on the urban migrants.

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