

Business Challenges to Build Sustainable Futures

by

Chonchanok Viravan

International President. BPW International

It is a pleasure for me to give a talk on international migration and business challenge to build a sustainable future.

Some of you may wonder why international migration, since it has been happening since the beginning of time. But international migration has recently gained new life due in part to the attention it receives from the United Nations (UN). In fact, last year the UN held a high-level dialogue on migration, and next month (July 2007) we will have a global forum on migration in Brussels.

The Council of Europe has recognised that, when it comes to female migration, women face discrimination on two levels —as women and as immigrants. If you look at international migration statistics, you see that women constitute half of international migrants worldwide —94.5 million out of 191 million. Of all migrants, Europe hosts 34% North America 23% Asia 28% Africa 9% Latin America and the Caribbean 3%, and Oceania 3%.

Fifty-nine per cent of women migrants reside in countries designated as high income, and 70% of migrants are refugees. One third of migrants would be from developing countries to developed countries, with the other one third from one developing country to another.

What about the APEC region? If you look at the top 20 countries that received migrants in 2005, you see that six are in the APEC region with about 65.7 million migrants —about 35% worldwide. Australia is 12th and the United States number one.

What are the leading causes of migration?

Typically it is due to war, conflict, trafficking, poverty, unemployment and discrimination. So what else is new? But they give the impression that migrants are under-educated and poor. However, recently because of globalisation and transnational companies and organisations, migrants are no longer poor. In fact, they are some of the best educated and they have quite a bit of money. There are skilled labourers who are highly valued in their receiving country.

Of course, we also have another kind of migrant that is not so well off - mail-order brides. Many countries have the problem of infanticide of baby girls, so when the boys get old enough to marry, there are not enough women so they import a bride.

During 1992–2005, 75% of increased immigrants occurred in only 17 countries. One of every four migrants lives in North America and one of every three in Europe.

On the bright side, one of the best things that skilled migrants bring is remittance income. In fact, this is regarded as the second-largest source of external funding for developing countries, after foreign direct investment. It is for consumption in the country of origin and can be used to invest in business. Migrant remittances globally increased substantially from US\$102 billion to US\$232 billion. If you take a percentage of this for developing countries, US\$58 billion or about 57% of remittances are going to developing countries in 1995. By 2005, this had increased to US\$167 billion or 75%

There are other bright sides to international migration: brain gain of skilled migrants. In fact, it is estimated that between one third and one half of science and technology personnel living in developed countries are from developing countries.

Migration can also become a win-win employment solution for developing countries that have low fertility and negative population growth. They actually need skilled labour. You have developing countries with a high unemployment rate for APEC countries. After the economic crisis, this was a big problem.

At that time, the government promoted unemployed skilled workers to migrate. The receiving countries were happy to receive these migrants, especially when they are tax paying.

Trade and investment also increase with migration. A good example is in Canada, which has a high percentage of Asian migrants. The import of Asian goods to Canada increased by 74%. Of course, migration brings about diversity in business management. It also opens doors for women who are discriminated against in her own country. She has a better chance of gender equality if she migrates.

But international migration has its dark side, too, starting with brain drain. Because women and men migrants have to be subject to the labour laws of the country, some are limited to short-term contracts. They cannot change the boss and may be subject to an abusive situation. Some are stuck in a job for which they are overqualified because they cannot get a job that suits their qualifications and profession —for legal and/or other reasons. Many migrants, as a result, end up with '3-D' jobs —difficult, demeaning and dangerous.

A new challenge for international migration is caused by climate change. According to a United Nations report, by the year 2080, water shortage could threaten 1.1 billion to 2.3 billion people. You can expect huge migration between now and 2080.

One problem, if you have seen Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, is too much water in one place and too little in another. Many natural disasters can bring about sudden, huge migration and the country or city nearby must be ready to handle the social, economic and political impact. It is not necessarily going from developing to developed countries anymore. Handling the challenges is not trivial.

Many of you know there was a controversial bill in the United States that, in the end, did not pass. However, it put the spotlight on international migration. The United

States used to love migration —they would say ‘we are the American melting pot — come.’ However, they are not as open to accepting migrants now as they used to be.

We have to take this as a lesson and think about how we are going to handle the challenges. At the country level, how can we manage brain drain? An international organisation on migration indicates that to block migration does not work. It is not effective. You have to manage the migrants to determine what measures are required to reverse brain drain —how do you attract people to come back. You also need to prepare the infrastructure for the inevitable.

The business, if they are aware migration is going on, can choose to prepare their strategy to benefit from immigrants, especially skilled immigrants. If they do not, they stand to lose their competitive edge.

Lastly, how do we begin?

You may be surprised to know that since 1990 there has been a United Nations convention to determine how to address the migration problem. This convention is called the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. The problem is that only 34 countries, or 17 per cent of all countries in the world, have ratified it. We need to promote the ratification of this to protect the women who migrate.

Next month I will be attending the Civil Society Global Forum on Migration in Belgium, and I will then have the opportunity to make recommendations to the United Nations on international migration. If you have good practices from your countries on how you handle international migration, I would be happy to hear about them.