

United Nations Development Programme



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Launch of the 2009 Human Development Report (HDR09)

Opening Remarks by

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and Brunei Darussalam

13 October 2009
Singapore

Salutations

- Professor Kishore Mahbubani, Dean, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore
- Ambassador K. Kesavapany, Director, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS)
- Prof. Tham Seong Chee, President, United Nations Association of Singapore

A very good afternoon to you all.

On behalf of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), it gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you to the launch of UNDP's flagship publication, the Human Development Report (HDR) 2009 in Singapore today.

This year, the report's theme is "**Overcoming Barriers: Human mobility and development**". It was launched globally on October 5th in Bangkok by the Thai Prime Minister and UNDP Administrator Helen Clark.

Before I go any further, I would like to express the UNDP's sincere appreciation to the co-organizers of this event: the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (our gracious host for this event), the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), and the United Nations Association Singapore (UNAS), for making this event possible.

We are also honored to have with us today, Dr. Francisco Rodriguez, Head of Research from UNDP's Human Development Report Office. He was also this Report's Lead Researcher. He has flown directly from New York to join us today to present the Report's key messages and findings.

We are also fortunate to have two distinguished speakers in today's programme, who need very little introduction in Singapore and the region, Professor Kishore Mahbubani and Ambassador K. Kesavapany, who will deliver the key note address and closing address, respectively. We look forward to thought provoking addresses from both of them.

In order to bring greater understanding of this issue in both the Singapore and regional contexts, as well as to present additional viewpoints, we have also invited an esteemed group of panelists which include: Ambassador Rodolfo Severino, Head, ASEAN Studies Centre, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS); Dr. Teresita Cruz-del Rosario, Senior Research Fellow, Centre on Asia and Globalisation, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore; and Dr. Noorashikin Abdul Rahman, Executive Committee Member of Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2). I would like to both welcome and thank them and our panel discussion moderator, Professor Gavin Jones from the Department of Sociology and Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore for their presence.

Ladies and Gentlemen

The United Nations is built on the foundations of the UN Charter, as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Preamble to that document talks of the inalienable rights of the human family to “freedom, justice and peace”.

In the context of accelerating globalization in the 21st century, we live in a highly mobile world, where more than *one in seven of the world's population is a migrant*.

For the nearly **1 billion people** who are on the move, migration presents not only the best, but oftentimes, the only option for those escaping war and persecution, or in search of economic betterment.

Without a doubt, mobility is a basic element of freedom. Not only does it bring improved opportunities for work, education, political rights, safety and health care, but it also opens up potentially large gains for source countries, as well as destination places.

Moreover, in the context of current patterns of globalization, which have favored the free flow of capital and global finance over labour (with many of the consequences evident in the current global financial and economic recession), one of the major conceptual reasons for allowing the free flow of people is that, it is the other side of the coin to the free flow of capital. Restrictions on the free flow of unskilled and semi-skilled labor given the largely unregulated flow of capital are clearly part of the global imbalances we have to address, both regionally and globally

The current challenging global context makes this report critical reading for anyone with an interest in migration and development issues, as it takes a decidedly fresh perspective on the issue that is not often heard in the current discourse on migration.

Instead of dwelling on the economic and social impacts in rich destination countries, ***Overcoming Barriers*** instead focuses *first* on developing countries and highlights the inequalities that dictate people's choices when they opt to move in order to improve their lives.

Hence, this report makes a strong and timely call for governments worldwide which are affected by the issue, to put into place policies that not only successfully integrate migrants, but also protect their basic rights, as they move to expand their choices, freedoms and quality of life.

Ladies and gentlemen

Last week, UNDP's new Administrator, ex-Prime Minister Helen Clark of New Zealand and the UN's top management in the Asia-Pacific region had the distinct pleasure of listening to Ambassador Tommy Koh's inspiring Distinguished Lecture.

Ambassador Koh provided insightful comments on the Singaporean model over the past 5 decades and the critical ingredients and building blocks that have made the Singaporean reality today.

However, key elements of the Singaporean economic model have been challenged by today's global financial and economic crisis and governments across the world and the region are re-evaluating key elements of their model for the future including the role of migrants.

The Report, therefore comes at an important time for the world and region. Reliance on highly skilled migrants has been an important part of the Singaporean development story and will continue to be so.

Ladies and gentlemen

It is interesting and relevant to note that intra-Asian migration accounts for nearly 20 percent of all international migration.

It is no surprise that Singapore, with its highly developed economy, and its high levels of prosperity, is a major migration destination because of the Human Development opportunities it offers to developing countries in the region.

The 2009 Population Trends report of the Singapore Department of Statistics, indicated that non-residents comprised almost one-third of Singapore's population of almost 5 million, as of September 2009, whilst the Ministry of Manpower reports 900,000 foreign workers in Singapore as of December 2007, about one third of the total work force.

The services sector alone comprises almost half of the migrant labour population in Singapore, with migrants making up about 500,000 out of the approximately two million person workforce in that sector.

In line with its economic needs, Singapore has well-defined and targeted policies to attract highly skilled migrant professionals, as well as a large number of unskilled workers, predominantly for the domestic care, construction and services sectors.

However, as with any destination country dependent on a migrant population, Singapore faces an array of issues, some of which it has been fairly responsive in addressing.

With approximately one in every seven Singaporean households employing "live-in" domestic help, a vast proportion of migrant workers are female domestic care workers.

While countless domestic workers have positive experiences, many others complain about mistreatment due to long work hours, no off-days, poor treatment and severely restricted movement by employers.

Migrant workers are also amongst the hardest hit by the current Singaporean recession, which began in September of 2008, resulting in widespread cases of migrant worker exploitation in certain industries. The Singaporean government must, in this context, be commended for its swift reaction against errant employers for ill treatment of its workers.

In response to highly publicized cases of foreign maid abuse in recent years, it has also taken a firm stance on domestic abuse and treatment of workers by imposing tough punishments on employers who physically abuse or fail to pay their domestic workers.

Other pro-rights reforms in recent times have been encouraging, such as mandatory orientation programs for new employees and new employers, increased commitment to prosecuting cases of unpaid wages and physical abuse, the introduction of an accreditation program for employment agencies, as well as the publication of a guide for employers which elaborates desirable guidelines on the treatment of domestic workers, along with penalties for mistreatment and abuse.

Ladies and gentlemen

While every country must put the welfare of its citizens first, a more balanced migration policy that takes into consideration the benefits derived from migrant labour, must be considered.

Protectionist policies which serve to reassure citizens particularly at times of economic turbulence are not necessarily the best measure, and the Report discusses at length how most claims about migrants taking jobs from locals are usually unfounded.

Moreover, recent Singaporean media reports indicate that new policies to restrict the number of migrant workers have resulted in labour shortages in the service sectors such as hospitality and transportation, as locals were unwilling to fill vacant positions due to a variety of reasons.

Some employers even commented that they were worried that restrictions on foreign labour will hinder Singapore's economic recovery if labor shortages were not addressed in the long term.

Indeed, UNDP believes that a better approach may be found in policy reform that creates legal channels for people to migrate, temporarily or permanently, based on need and long-term economic strategy.

As the experience of the Singaporean services sector suggests, there is a place for migrants in the local workforce, which doesn't necessarily need to be in conflict with employment opportunities for Singapore's citizens.

Given the vast economic benefits derived from migrant labour, governments should review migration policies to ensure basic rights for migrants, such as fair wages for

employment, as well as access to basic services like healthcare, legal recourse and education for migrant children.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is another implication of restrictive migration policies, one that has serious repercussions beyond the receiving country's borders, which is the issue of remittances.

Apart from the support provided for Singapore's development, the positive impacts migrants here have resonate far beyond Singapore's borders. Their remittances back to their respective countries of origin have been invaluable in terms of raising the quality of life, as well as income, healthcare and education for their families, not to mention their positive impact in terms of reducing the incidence of child labour in their home countries.

Unfortunately, with the global economic downturn, remittances to developing countries are expected to fall from US\$308 billion in 2008 to US\$293 billion in 2009, no doubt with negative developmental impacts in countries that are significantly dependant on these revenues, such as Bangladesh and the Philippines.

As a result of the bleak protracted economic outlook, globally and regionally, Singapore is likely to see more migrants from poorer neighbouring countries making their way here with the aim of improving their livelihood.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Singapore, on the other hand, also has to deal with the brain drain of its population which is popularly termed by many as Singapore's Achilles heel. I recall how in February 2008, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew stated that Singapore is losing about 1,000 of its best and brightest annually and the numbers are growing. These numbers also present other challenges as many such people give up their citizenship and take out their savings and CPF funds.

There is no easy solution to the complex issue of human mobility..

The situation presents a challenge and dilemma for the Singaporean and many other governments in the region since they have to balance their need for migrant labour, which is now an intrinsic part of their development and economic story, while ensuring the welfare and wellbeing of their own citizens.

Moving forward, UNDP strongly believes that in times of economic difficulty, a protectionist policy of restricting migrant labour or revoking permits may not be the best solution for the medium to long term.

Instead, as the 2009 Human Development Report advocates, a better approach may be found in policy reform that creates legal channels for people to migrate,

temporarily or permanently, based on need and the destination country's long-term economic strategy.

This is especially relevant for Singapore considering the recent announcement of its intention to spur economic growth over the next four to five decades by increasing its population by 35% through migration. Judging from media reports, this proposal received strong reactions from Singaporeans, who are already concerned about the dominant role currently played by migrants in the local workforce.

I am pleased to say that this year's Human Development Report presents an informative and instructive reference point on these complex and multi-faceted issues that are relevant for all key stakeholders in both Singapore and this sub-region of the Asia-Pacific.

It also outlines a **core package of six policy proposals** that should serve as guidelines for policy makers faced with very difficult challenges.

These recommendations provide governments with some innovative and bold guidelines for policy makers, in addition to setting the stage for more enlightened migration policy reforms that are not only economically beneficial, but also pro-rights for migrants.

As a highly-developed nation and economic leader in Asia, Singapore is well placed to set standards for other labour-receiving countries in the region and demonstrate how countries are creatively responding to brain drain issues. I hope it will rise to this challenge. UNDP stands ready to assist the Government of Singapore and other stakeholders in the country in these important endeavors.

Thank you.

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