

## FEATURE: Highlighting ‘positive impact’ of migration key to changing policies, public opinion – UN envoy

28 April 2017 – Recognizing that the issue of [large movements of refugees and migrants](#) is too vast for any one country to handle on its own, the United Nations convened a meeting of world leaders in September 2016 with the aim of finding durable solutions. At the summit, all 193 Member States came together around one plan, the [New York Declaration](#), expressing their political will to save lives, protect rights and share responsibility on a global scale.

Migration is a very big issue. It is very much part of public opinion these days. It is discussed in governments, around kitchen tables. It involves everybody. And it is not new. UN envoy Louise Arbour

As a follow-up to the meeting, [Secretary-General](#) António Guterres last month appointed Canadian lawyer, prosecutor and jurist Louise Arbour as his Special Representative for International Migration.

Ms. Arbour – who has served as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda – is tasked with working with Member States as they develop a first-ever global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration, which is due to be adopted in 2018.

She also leads UN advocacy efforts on international migration, including providing support to the ‘[Together](#)’ campaign, a new dialogue about refugees and migrants to foster social cohesion while countering negative stereotyping and falsehoods about them. In addition, she provides policy advice and coordinates the engagement of UN entities on migration issues.

Ms. Arbour recently spoke to UN News about the need to enrich the narrative on migration which, she believes, focuses overwhelmingly on the negative aspects of migration and obscures the positive impact it has on the prosperity of many countries.

**UN News:** You were appointed as Special Representative of the Secretary-General for International Migration last month. Could you tell us more about the scope of the issue and the challenges ahead?

**Louise Arbour:** Migration is a very big issue. It is very much part of public opinion these days. It is discussed in governments, around kitchen tables. It involves everybody. And it is not new. People have been on the move for as long as there have been people on this Earth. But with modern communication technology, transportation, we have seen an increase in human mobility.

Migration comprises everything from refugees fleeing persecution and conflict

zones to what we sometimes call economic migrants – people who sometimes voluntarily, sometimes not by choice, or are forced, decide to leave their country of birth or their country of origin often in search of employment or to be reunited with their families.

The best estimate is that there are today about 245 million migrants in the world. And I am not sure we are well equipped to facilitate safe, orderly, regular migration, which is the mandate that the General Assembly gave itself last September to bring some order to this.

**VIDEO:** UN envoy for international migration, Louise Arbour, flags the need to highlight the benefits migrants and refugees bring to societies.

**UN News: As Special Representative you will lead the follow-up to the 2016 High-level Summit on addressing large movements of refugees and migrants. How do you see your role in the forthcoming global compact negotiations?**

**Louise Arbour:** The General Assembly last September in the New York Declaration has decided to launch a process with respect to migration that is owned by Member States. And my role is to support that process, to coordinate all the knowledge, expertise, ideas that exist inside the United Nations and with the International Organization for Migration ([IOM](#)), which has come in last September as a related organization. So it is to try to coordinate, to capitalize on all this knowledge to assist Member States in their negotiations.

My role is also to develop a policy, to develop ideas, initiatives; and I have an advocacy role. I will also be the Secretary-General of a big conference at the end of 2018 which has the mandate of delivering a global compact of Member States on migration. There is a parallel process that deals specifically with the question of refugees. Refugees are in essence a subset of migrants but they are governed by the refugee conventions. So there is already a better definition on the refugee side. A lot of work remains to be done to deal with migrants more generally.

**UN News: What are the key milestones over the next 18 months in the lead up to delivering two global compacts – on migration and on refugees – at the conference in 2018?**

**Louise Arbour:** The Member States have agreed on a process. The formal process consists of six thematic sessions on different topics related to migration. The first one will take place in Geneva at the beginning of May, specifically on the question of the human rights of migrants and issues related to racism, xenophobia and intolerance generally.

The second one, towards the end of May, will deal with the drivers of migration – what are sometimes called the pushes and pulls that induce people to move or force them to leave their countries of origin. So it is the spectrum of origin, transit and destination. And we will have sessions on labour issues, migration governance, human trafficking, smuggling, and lots of issues.

This will bring us to the fall at which point there will be, towards the end of this year, a stocktaking meeting so Member States can have a sense of where they are. And then the drafting of the document which will serve the basis of their negotiations is scheduled to take place between January and July of 2018. So this is the formal process.

In parallel to all that... I intend to try to energize the conversation and in particular try to mobilize not just policymakers but general public opinion. I think we have a lot of educating to do, so people could understand better what we are talking about when we talk about the mobility of people, what it is and how we can manage it better.



She pulled refugees to safety across the Mediterranean Sea, and after finding refuge in Germany, Yusra Mardini pursued her love of swimming and eventually swam in the Rio Olympics. For her next challenge, the Syrian teenager says she wants to change people's preconceptions about refugees. The 19-year-old was recently appointed a Goodwill Ambassador for the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) – the youngest in the agency's history. Due to its vast reach, unparalleled popularity and foundation of positive values, sport is ideally positioned to contribute towards the UN's objectives for development and peace. Photo: UN Photo/ Daniel Johnson



Mustafa used to work in Aleppo, Syria's war-torn ancient city, as a pharmacist. Today he lives in Groningen, the Netherlands, and is back in school. He is appreciative of his re-found freedoms and is currently studying to obtain a Dutch equivalent pharmacy degree. Mustafa participates in a weekly support meeting that is set up and run by medical professionals associated with University Medical Center Groningen in order to stay up-to-date on the latest medical trends. With the assistance of the same support group, the Syrian national also managed to transfer his educational degrees and receives guidance for his study. Photo: [www.homeswiethome.nl/Elbert Fliek](http://www.homeswiethome.nl/Elbert_Fliek)



Seventeen-year-old Jackie from Honduras dreams about migrating to the United States, in spite of what happened to her brother. At the age of 16, Alexis, while en route to the US, fell off a freight train and lost his right leg – not an uncommon injury on the notorious route. In spite of the many benefits of migration, migrants themselves remain among the most vulnerable members of society. They are often the first to lose their job in the event of an economic downturn, often working for less pay, for longer hours, and in worse conditions than national workers. While for many migration is an empowering experience for many, others endure human rights violations, abuse and discrimination. Photo: UNICEF/Zehbrauskas



Queen Rania Al Abdullah of Jordan (center left) and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada (center right) co-chair a discussion at the UN high-level

summit on large movements of refugees and migrants. While addressed in various meetings, international migration was never mainstreamed until it was included in the [2030 Agenda](#) and its corresponding Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)), which recognise the positive contributions of migrants for inclusive growth and sustainable development. Photo: UN Photo/Loey Felipe



People wait in line in Port-au-Prince to pick up money sent to them from family living abroad after the earthquake that devastated Haiti in 2010. Remittances play a vital role in the economies of developing countries. In 2015, remittances to developing countries amounted to \$432 billion, more than three times the official development assistance of that year. Photo: UN Photo/Sophia Paris



In 2014, migrants from developing countries sent home an estimated US \$436 billion in remittances; a 4.4 per cent increase over the 2013 level (World Bank 2015), far exceeding official development assistance. Pictured here is a shopkeeper who serves a customer in the Somali capital, Mogadishu. Millions of people in the Horn of Africa nation rely on money sent from their relatives and friends abroad in the form of remittances in order to survive. According to the UN Development Programme ([UNDP](#)), an estimated \$1.6 billion is sent back annually by Somalis living in Europe and North America. Photo: UN Photo/Stuart Price



Louise Arbour, the newly appointed Special Representative for International Migration, is a veteran international civil servant. Pictured here with UN Secretary-General António Guterres, Ms. Arbour served previously as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and as Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda. Photo: UN Photo/Mark Garten

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**UN News: Discrimination and violence against refugees and migrants are rising. The United Nations launched the 'Together' campaign to promote respect, safety and dignity for all. Could you tell us why we need this campaign and how it ties in with the intergovernmental process you have just described?**

**Louise Arbour:** I think the 'Together' campaign is really very much tailored, in large part, to support this Member States' initiative on migration. It is one thing to develop sometimes pretty complex policy arguments for policymakers. We could talk about the remittances that migrants who work in one country send to their home country. It's a huge amount of money, much larger than international aid to development. A lot of people are not aware of this, which is one of the many positive impacts of migration.

I think the focus is overwhelmingly on the negative sides of migration, and completely obscures the immensely positive impact that it has made to date on the prosperity of many, many countries, both of origin and of destinationUN envoy Louise Arbour

It's one thing to talk to policymakers, decision-makers, but for them to have the insight and the courage, sometimes, to make the right decision, they have to feel that they have their public opinion behind them. And as we develop our policies, it's really critical that we engage more and more in conversations – to some extent, we talk about changing the narrative, to enrich the narrative about migration, and to highlight its many very positive aspects, both for the migrants themselves, but also for countries of destination, where they will eventually settle, be productive members of the work force, pay rent, pay sales taxes, live in the country.

So I think that the 'Together' campaign is going to be an extremely important vehicle to attack some of the stereotypes of migrants as either suspicious, as being a burden or a threat, which in reality, we have to concede that, as in any other field of human endeavour, there may be some negative aspects, some who don't behave according to the rules. Currently, I think the focus is overwhelmingly on the negative sides of migration, and completely obscures the immensely positive impact that it has made to date on the prosperity of many, many countries, both of origin and of destination, and to the prospect it has in the future to be extremely transformative of the way we live collectively.

**UN News: UN human rights experts said that accessible social and health services should be made available for persons with disabilities in the new global framework on refugees and migrants. What's your answer to their concerns?**

**Louise Arbour:** One of the things we need to highlight is the need for migrants, like everybody else, to have their fundamental human rights respected and protected without discrimination on the basis of their status. It is the same argument we have been making for years with respect to various groups or persons who may present with certain vulnerabilities. In some cases, it's children. In some cases, it could be persons with disabilities who sometimes need treatment that is appropriate for their needs; not to give them an advantage, just to bring them on par with everybody else. Accessibility in transportation is an obvious example.

In the case of migrants, and it may sound a bit strange, particularly migrants who are in a position of irregularity, who are not properly documented, their irregular situation makes them even more vulnerable. In lots of cases, they cannot have access to the very basic healthcare for instance that they need for themselves or their children. So irregularity sometimes increases vulnerability. So again the argument is not to give preferential or privileged treatment to any segment; it is to ensure that all human beings, regardless of their situation, are protected in their fundamental human dignity, human rights, without discrimination.

But I need to stress here that... we should keep in mind that very often when migrants arrive in a new country, they are received or they find themselves in the most impoverished part of that community. And I think it is going to be critical that, as we pay attention to the needs of these newcomers, the migrants, that we also bring concrete benefits to the host communities that are receiving them.

It is true of countries that receive sometimes unexpected large flows of populations who are moving not only because of war, in which case they are refugees for the most part, but because of famine, bad governance, depravations of all kind; so then we need to assist, have humanitarian gestures vis-à-vis migrants but also very much so vis-à-vis people they have left behind and people who will be hosting them, sharing with them the little they themselves have.

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