Three Reasons all Countries should Embrace the Global Compact for Migration

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A pragmatic, mutually beneficial vision is under threat. Here’s why it must be saved.
Image: Reuters/James Akena

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The Global Compact for Migration, which is expected to be adopted in December, is the first ever attempt to develop an internationally shared vision of what safe, orderly and regular migration might look like, and how it could be achieved. The Australian government has recently signalled the possibility that it may withdraw from the process – which would make it the third UN member state after the US and Hungary to do so. There is a risk that others may follow, jeopardizing a fragile, hard-won consensus at its most critical stage.

This is the case for the Global Compact that deserves to be heard.

1. The Global Compact will directly benefit all...
The purpose of the Global Compact is to strengthen international cooperation on migration. There is no question that such cooperation is urgently needed and much overdue. While the international community has made extraordinary progress in regulating other areas of common interest and concern – from trade to terrorism, from finance to use of force – migration has long been sidelined as too difficult.

But times have changed, and there is now widespread agreement that no country can “deal” with migration alone – that working together is the only way to make sure migration works for everyone. The Global Compact process has given every member state of the UN the chance to participate in creating a set of broad operating principles within which future cooperation can be structured and implemented. To stand outside that process, or to abandon it just short of the finishing line, is to deny the stark reality of our interdependence when it comes to migration.

It makes little sense that those countries most worried about irregular migration are the ones questioning the Global Compact. This initiative was born directly out of the European migration crisis of 2015 and related worries around security and criminality. That history is reflected in the final text, which focuses squarely on the factors that compel people to move in the first place; on migrant smuggling; and on human trafficking. Failing to cooperate on these urgent issues effectively means giving up: abandoning hope of any long-term, sustainable solution to irregular, exploitative migration. This would be a universal disaster, but with a particularly vicious impact on wealthy countries of destination.
And those questioning the value of the Global Compact must be reminded that it is about much more than irregular migration. It is also about the need to develop a strong evidence base, so that migration policies everywhere are smarter and better attuned to the needs of both sending and receiving countries. It is about promoting regular migration pathways that benefit everyone. It is about making sure that migrant workers – the backbone of many developed economies, including those of Australia and the United States – are able to move, live and work in safety and dignity.

2. The Global Compact is not a threat to any country’s sovereignty

The US, Hungary and Australia have all asserted the Global Compact for Migration represents a threat to their sovereignty; that it will force them to take actions against their interests; that it will create some kind of unelected authority to sit in judgment above their institutions.

This is not the case. When UN member states meet in Morocco in December to sign off on the Global Compact (and its companion, the Compact on Refugees), they will be signalling
two things: first, their assent to its basic principles, and second, an intention to do their best to implement what has been agreed. Development of the Global Compact was only possible because all countries agreed, from the beginning, that it would not impose legal obligations. A core guiding principle of the final text explicitly affirms “the sovereign right of states to determine their national migration policy and their prerogative to govern migration within their jurisdiction in accordance with international law”.

3. The Global Compact is pragmatic and balanced – even on the most difficult issues

The Global Compact addresses some of the thorniest aspects of migration, marking out narrow but important areas of accord.

The issue of return is one example. Subject to certain protections being in place, states are entitled to remove migrants who do not have a legal right to remain in their territory. But without cooperation from the country of origin, repatriation is invariably slow and often hostile. The Global Compact identifies the complementary responsibilities of countries of destination and countries of origin to “facilitate[e] safe and dignified return and readmission, as well as sustainable reintegration”. By doing this, it creates a framework that can be the basis of a genuine partnership. This won’t solve the problem of return and reintegration, but it’s much better than what we have now.
Venezuelans cross the border into Colombia in May this year.
Image: Reuters/Carlos Eduardo Ramirez

Detention of irregular migrants – a highly charged political issue for many countries – provides another example of small but significant progress. One government has singled out the Global Compact’s provisions on detention as a potential dealbreaker, asserting that they would compel changes in policy, thereby encouraging the operations of criminal smuggling gangs. But these claims do not hold up. First, the Compact cannot force any government to do anything it doesn’t want to do. Second, its provisions on detention are balanced and finely nuanced – as would be expected with more than 190 countries involved in crafting them.

The Global Compact does not reject detention of migrants: rather, it carefully and judiciously recognises that detention should be seen as a measure of last resort and encourages states to work towards non-custodial alternatives. It reminds states of their existing legal obligation to ensure that the human rights of detained migrants are respected and that decisions about detention are made in accordance with the law. It further urges that detention not be used as a tool to punish or deter migrants. It highlights the special vulnerabilities and needs of children in detention. None of this is a threat. Rather it is a decent, achievable goal that all fair-minded countries can work towards without feeling that their security and sovereignty is being trampled upon.
However we may feel about it, migration is our common future. Finally, after too long, the chance to influence the shape and direction of that future is within our grasp. No country deserves to be left out. The modest first step that the Global Compact represents is one that should – that must – be taken together.

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The views expressed in this article are those of the author alone and not the World Economic Forum.