

Key Note Speech of Federal Councillor Simonetta Sommaruga on the occasion of the opening of the Concluding Debate of the Swiss Chairmanship of the Global Forum on Migration and Development held in Geneva on December 1st 2011

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Honourable Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

No matter what country or continent we represent - there is one question that all representatives of States and Governments ask themselves:

Is migration more beneficial or more costly to the development of our country?

The question alludes to national interest and we have to raise it - especially at a Global Forum like this one. After all we can only say that our migration policy is on track if the answer is yes. Also no policy designed on the drawingboard can succeed if it is not backed by the political stakeholders - especially our Citizens.

The question also indicates something else: Migration is never just good or bad.

Switzerland for example benefits from migration economically, but migration also presents us with problems and challenges. In the end, the starting point of our migration policy is our national interest.

This is absolutely legitimate. After all, we as politicians are mandated to defend national interests - also in migration and development policy.

This may sound provocative or, in the case of development policy, even contradictory to you and you might ask yourself why Switzerland is then so engaged in the Global Forum on Migration and Development - where the focus clearly is on the global perspective.

The answer is clear and simple: it's in our national interest!

For a bit more than a year I am now the Minister responsible for Swiss migration policy. One of the conclusions I have drawn from my first year in office is that

whoever tries to develop national migration policy without looking beyond their own borders will fail!

Therefore we have to find partners from across the globe that can help us address our challenges. This is of course only possible if we also seriously consider the challenges of our partners. These are often not as different from ours as it might seem.

Not long ago I was in Guinea, where I have held talks with the Government and signed a Migration Agreement. This Agreement treats migration in a comprehensive way and covers reintegration, cooperation in combatting human trafficking but also return and readmission.

My counterparts have explained to me that the exodus of their Citizens to Europe is an issue of concern for them. Guinea has no interest in educating its Citizens just to see them emigrate. At the same time Switzerland has no interest in seeing Citizens of Guinea residing in Switzerland irregularly.

As the competent Swiss Minister I especially have to answer to the Swiss people and must make sure that the legislation it has adopted is effectively implemented. Therefore I am in the short run certainly interested in a good cooperation on issues of return and readmission. But at the same time it is also in the explicit interest of Switzerland that migration does not take place due to poverty and hardship. This can only be achieved if there is a real perspective at home.

National interests can therefore much better be put forward through international cooperation than through national stand-alone policies.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in Switzerland as in other countries there is currently a heated debate on the opening of new accommodation facilities for asylum seekers. These are difficult discussions loaded with a lot of emotions. It is our job to make sure everybody keeps in mind that we are talking about human beings.

Migrants must not be treated as a commodity. They are human beings who are aiming for the best possible lives for themselves and their families. Isn't this exactly what we are all aiming for?

The protection and the defense of human dignity has to be at the heart of our policies - otherwise we lose our credibility and eventually also our self-respect.

Many of you know Switzerland as a „Country of Destination“.

By doing so also we Swiss too often forget that for centuries Switzerland has above all been a country of origin - and due to its geographical situation in the heart of Europe naturally always also a country of transit. Even today more than 10% of Swiss Citizens live outside Switzerland - which compared to other countries is still a lot.

Only with the ongoing economic development towards the end of the 19th century has Switzerland for the first time become a net country of destination. Development attracted many innovative people who have been crucial to the rise of Switzerland to one of the most wealthy countries on earth. Today Switzerland still has the privilege of being a very attractive place to live and work - which like in the past is both the cause and the effect of migration.

Migration therefore was and is indispensable for our development. This can however only be sustainable if we also adequately take in to account non economic factors like integration and the interests of the countries of origin like the avoidance of brain drain.

In this we can only succeed through an open and outcome oriented dialogue led by a true spirit of partnership. Here the Global Forum for Migration and Development is an ideal venue.

Let us together think "out of the box" to find new and better ways to work together. Our common goal at this Global Forum is to put our national interests in an international context.

I am therefore very happy to welcome you all to Geneva on the occasion of the Concluding Debate of the Swiss Chairmanship of the Global Forum for Migration and Development and to convey to you the greetings of the Swiss Federal Government.