

“The Global Compact on Migration Should Endorse Social Security Benefit Coverage and Portability for Irregular Migrants and Deportees”

Statement at Fourth Informal Thematic Session of Facilitating Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration: Remittances and Portability of Earned Benefits

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I wanted to speak on the portability of retirement, disability, health and other social security benefits. Increased economic integration and international migration should be accompanied by a substantial increase in benefit coverage and portability. Unfortunately, only [23 percent](#) of the world’s international migrants – mostly those moving between developed states -- benefit from bi-lateral social security agreements. As the issue brief for this session indicates, there need to be more bi-lateral *and* multilateral agreements that provide for portable benefits, including for temporary migrants.

Social security benefits should also be available and portable for irregular migrants and deportees. Portability is a matter of equity: it speaks to allowing a worker – whose work has benefitted a state -- to keep what he or she has earned. A central lesson of the migration and development dialogue is that development is not just a way to obviate the need to migrate, but that migration can be a source and (indeed) a form of development. Circular migration, in turn, has emerged from this dialogue as one of the policies that can help to maximize migration’s development potential by promoting the transfer of skills, monies, training, education, and (often positive) social norms. Yet the literature also suggests that the lack of portability of benefits can be a disincentive to circular migration, particularly to the return of migrants to their communities of origin.

If economic integration is on the rise, so too are mass deportation and involuntary return policies, which begs the question: What happens to the social security benefits earned in developed states by irregular migrants and deportees? By 2012, the US Social Security Administration’s Earning Suspense File counted [\\$1.2 trillion](#) in uncredited wages. In 95 percent of these cases between 2008 and 2012, the names and social security numbers on the federal W-2 (wage and salary) forms did not match official Social Security records. This is because a high percentage – between one-half and three-quarters -- of uncredited earnings comes from out-of-status workers, who will not receive these benefits unless they can obtain legal status. Moreover, legal immigrants who are deported lose status and, as a result, lose eligibility for old-age and disability benefits. They cannot receive the earned fruits of their labor unless and until they are lawfully readmitted, which is a very unlikely prospect in most cases.

Combined, these practices deny persons the social security benefits that they have earned, diminish development in migrant sending communities, and risk impoverishing hard-working persons and their dependents. The global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration should support the eligibility of workers (regardless of status) for these benefits and should support their portability, even in the case of deportation. Another idea would be to channel social security earnings that cannot be credited to individual workers to development initiatives in migrant-sending states, in rough proportion to the uncredited contributions of their nationals.

Finally, I would like to make a point that is not on all fours with the theme of this session, but that should be emphasized in the compact. Even more important than the ability of social security benefits to move with migrants is the ability of families to move together. Families contribute immensely to

[immigrant integration](#) and well-being, and to the [protection](#) of members who are at risk. Immigrants admitted based on family ties also make essential contributions to the labor markets of receiving states. In fact, it is impossible to think of a humane, effective immigration system or development in the sense of enlarging people's freedoms and capacities, without recognizing the central importance of family unity. For these reasons, the global compact should underscore the need for intact families.

Thank you.