

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT

Migration good, says Mahbubani

**Govt policies
can ensure best
outcomes for
migrants, citizens**

SINGAPORE — Even as Singapore fares well once again in the latest human development index, more can be done to improve its migration policies, several experts said as the United Nations Human Development Report (HDR) 2009 was launched here.

Among the ideas: Granting all foreign workers rights equal to those of the local workforce and promoting direct recruitment of workers, instead of going through agents.

For instance, foreign domestic workers are currently not covered under Singapore's Employment Act, and are hence not entitled to days off via legislation, said Dr Noorashikin Abdul Rahman, an executive committee member of advocacy group Transient Workers Count Too.

But in a reflection of the cross-border issues of migration, other ideas proposed would involve international effort: The establishment of an independent South-east Asian think-tank to do policy-relevant research, and making employment contracts legally binding in both the migrants' home and destination countries.

The latter, for example, is a "simple mechanism" that would have a "huge effect" in helping troubled workers seek redress, said Dr Francisco Rodriguez, the lead researcher of the HDR. The HDR was released last week with Singapore ranking 23rd in the human development index, and Norway coming out tops.

More importantly, said

Dr Rodriguez, the report challenges common misconceptions about migration, .

For instance, it argues that development and migration go together — countries with high human development have a median emigration rate of 8 per cent, twice that of those with low human development.

In Singapore, HDR figures from 2000 to 2002 put the emigration rate at 6.3 per cent, about twice the world average.

As for immigration, the report said destination countries generally attract new investments and do not suffer job losses. This is seen particularly in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries and also in Singapore, where migrant workers' skills tend to complement the locals' skill sets, said Dr Rodriguez.

Simply put, "migration is good", said Professor Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, which hosted the report's launch.

It is important that the world come to this consensus, as there is increasing political backlash against migration, argued Prof Mahbubani in his keynote speech.

A new global social contract on migration is also needed — one that stresses the responsibilities of migrants and their home countries, he said.

Migrants should add value to the countries that receive them and not exploit their welfare systems, while ill practices like corruption and exploitation in migrant-sending countries should also be brought to light.

Statistics released last month showed that one in four people living in Singapore are foreigners.