



ALLIANCE OF ALLIANCES:
BUILDING CIVIL SOCIETY CONVERGENCES
AMONG GLOBAL MOVEMENTS FOR MIGRANT RIGHTS

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Recent Historical Trend pre-1990

In 1990, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly approved the International Convention for the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, commonly referred to as the Migrant Workers Convention (MWC). This landmark treaty set international standards to address the treatment, welfare and human rights of all migrants, and the obligations and responsibilities of sending and receiving countries. It also extended the concept “equality of treatment” between nationals and non-nationals, between men and women migrants, and between documented and undocumented workers.

The MWC’s purpose is to prevent and eliminate the exploitation of all migrants throughout the migration process, specifically seeking to end clandestine recruitment and trafficking of migrant workers and prevent the unscrupulous exploitation of migrant workers in undocumented status. It also establishes mechanisms for implementation that provide opportunities for increased participation from the global community, particularly that of civil society.

The passing of the MWC however, was the culmination of decades of incremental standard-setting related to migrants’ rights directly, or indirectly. As early as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the notion of universality and equality were set, especially in relation to free human mobility (Article 13), asylum from persecution (Article 14), nationality and changing nationality (Article 15), as well as work and trade union association (Article 23).

The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, as well as its 1967 Protocol, further extended definitions and protections for those being persecuted and residing outside their countries of nationality. These also established protections for employment and welfare, especially with regard to identity papers and documents.

For global civil society, these treaties were an indication of the ongoing progressive and cumulative inter-governmental dialogue on migration, which was predominantly centered around states' protection and advancement of the human rights of migrants, leading to a series of international policies related to such. With the MWC, it also signaled new opportunities for civil society to play key roles as stake-holders and actors in promoting and implementing these human rights policies and standards for migrants.

1994 Cairo Conference and Beyond

The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (the "Cairo Conference") however, signaled a dramatic shift in that trend. Chapter X of its Programme of Action, outlines one of the most comprehensive texts related to migration adopted by the international community which was undertaken primarily within a development framework. Indeed, in retrospect, the 1974 and 1984 World Population Conferences had already begun addressing various aspects of migration and its relation to development. But at the Cairo Conference, the marrying of the migration and development nexus was thoroughly and permanently cemented.

Since then, the twin issues of migration and development have become intertwined into a singular topic in almost all major international forums and discussions. The UN itself considers it as a sub-item with biennial periodicity on the agenda of the 2nd Committee of the General Assembly. This famously led to the decision in 2003 to convene a High Level Dialogue (HLD) on International Migration and Development, which took place in 2006.

Leading up to 2006 HLD, then Secretary-General (SG) Kofi Annan appointed Mr. Peter Sutherland as his special representative (SRSG) on migration and development. During the 2006 HLD, the SG and SRSG then proposed the creation of a forum to continue the dialogue on migration and development. This was widely endorsed by member states, resulting in the creation of the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD), now entering its 6th year.

The GFMD has as one of its stated objectives, "to maximize the development benefits of migration and migration flows". In spite of certain exceptional inclinations and anecdotal statements by particular states or key individuals, nowhere do the GFMD's stated objectives refer to protections and rights of migrant workers. It is understood

then, as the GFMD has become THE primary inter-governmental place of discussion of migration policy and framework-setting, that this now only happens within a development context. Further, it is an indicator of how the momentum of policies to advance migrants' rights has systematically regressed, and has nearly disappeared from inter-governmental discourse at the highest levels.

This period since 1994 also coincides with other dramatic shifts in international policy. The landmark North-American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) came into force on 1 January 1994, creating the world's largest trade bloc in the world, based on GDP of its signatories. 1994 also witnessed the U.S. government's adoption of its multi-pronged migration control strategy of "Prevention through Deterrence", which included the launch of the now-infamous Operation Gatekeeper – the construction of a 3000-mile long border wall between the U.S. and Mexico.

The September 11, 2001 attacks resulted in increased hostility towards migrants around the world. This was primarily driven by harsh migration enforcement measures adopted by the U.S. and E.U. under the guise of protecting "national security". Since then, the national security framework in these countries are responsible for the immense growth of increasing human rights abuses of migrants with complete impunity, and total disregard of international norms and standards, resulting indirectly to thousands of deaths in border-crossing attempts to the U.S. and E.U., a humanitarian crisis of great magnitude. The U.S.' case has also led to the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), by far the largest government employer in the world, not including the U.S. military forces.

In 2004, the Berlusconi-Gaddafi Agreement not only gave Italy access to gas and oil from Libya (the gas pipeline from Libya to Sicily accounts for 20% of Italy's gas energy needs, and Libya supplies one-third of Italian oil consumption), it created the notion of the "externalization of European borders" into the African continent, with Italy providing technical assistance for Libya to control its interior borders and engage in wide-scale mass deportations of migrants. This particular border security pact has recently been reinforced with a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between both countries, that was widely condemned by human rights bodies including the United Nations High Commission on Refugees who underlined the MOU's lack of proper protections of asylum-seekers and other migrants.

Many more similar trends during this period have all led to three primary real-world outcomes:

- (1) The intensified criminalization and exploitation of migrants around the world;
- (2) The erosion of protective mechanisms and legal channels for migrant workers to live sustainably; and
- (3) The corresponding rise in market economy-oriented policy frameworks to treat migration.

Consequently, migrants are either deemed as economic commodities that may feed global economic needs – through increasing production in receiving countries and critically supplementing income in sending countries through vast remittances – or dangerous threats or social problems that need to be dealt with firmly.

New Formations

In response to this surge, civil society has had to catalyze new formations to directly respond to the urgent need to protect migrants or provide some form of relief:

- Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and networks have emerged to advocate against abusive policies and to promote better protections, such as *La Cimade* in France;
- Many other NGOs have responded to providing services and immediate relief, and offering protections to migrants in receiving countries, such as the *Border Angels* along the U.S.-Mexico border-crossing corridors;
- Others have responded proactively by launching projects to enable migrants to contribute directly towards the community development of their home communities, such as *Migrant Forum Asia's* (MFA's) *Migrant Savings for Alternative Investments* (MSAI) in the Philippines and other parts of Asia, or *Casa Michoacan's* (based in Chicago, U.S.A.) hometown associations in its *Federacion de Clubes Michoacanos* (FEDECMI) in the Michoacan State of Mexico;
- Some bi-national NGOs have sought to seek redress for injustices against migrant workers from their countries of employment even after deportation or have returned to their home countries, such as the *Global Workers Justice Alliance* in U.S. and Mexico;
- Deported migrants themselves have organized into support units to help their community reintegrate back into their home countries and, more importantly, seek justice for abuses, unpaid wages and other crimes, such as *Association Malien des Expulses* (AME) in Mali.

The emergence of these and many more like these, can be traced to the need to respond to the increased pressures on communities to migrate due to international policies, and the corresponding erosion of human rights protections of migrants by states in the last 20 years. As a result, civil society has had to assume governments' responsibility of responding to the needs of its population even.

At the same time, this has also necessitated more effective advocacy at the international level principally, to continue to push for better governmental protections, to deter more abusive policies from emerging, and to find avenues for other policies to be adjusted accordingly. Since international policies haven't been as responsive to urgent needs of migrants, rather much more responsive to employers' desires for a malleable pool of labor, advocacy efforts have had to ramp up and become more effectual.

Emergence of New Alliances and Convergences

With that, it was only a matter of time when new alliances began to be forged. Firstly, as any smart organization recognizes, cross-sharing of information and increasing knowledge-base is always critical in order to adapt and thrive. Organizations working with similar goals in their respective regions or sectors quickly gravitated towards each other to share what is now commonly referred to as “best practices” which is somewhat a misnomer.

Nonetheless, the critical point is that by understanding how a particular organization or movement achieved success or victories in their respective region or sector, enabled the propagation of that across other regions/sectors. For instance, the *International Detention Coalition* (IDC) has promoted the use to “Alternative Detention” policies primarily through publicizing and uplifting such policies by various states, none more so than that of Australia.

Secondly, organizations and associations working towards similar goals, especially on the international level who share common principles, can maximize their effectiveness and impact by building strong alliances to accomplish that collectively. *Migrants Rights International's* (MRI's) own history and beginnings were subject to that – experts and organizations working towards ratification of the MWC as well as promoting greater human rights for migrants through other UN mechanisms, formed the *Migrant Watch Committee* (later evolving into MRI) at the Cairo Conference.

As these alliances began to emerge around the world, they in turn began converging within two distinct key spaces – the *World Social Forum on Migration* (WSFM) and the *People's Global Action on Migration, Development and Human Rights* (PGA).

World Social Forum on Migration (WSFM)

The WSFM emerged as a thematic forum from the wider *World Social Forum* (WSF) structure and process. The WSF itself was created in 2002 as a space to challenge the growing power of the world's economic powers, namely the *World Economic Forum* (WEF) and enshrined in the *World Trade Organization* (WTO). Acknowledging that the WSF did not contain enough time and space within its centralized annual gatherings to adequately treat specific issues, it began to spin-off thematic as well as regional forums. The WSFM was then initiated in 2005 and held every two years since then.

The primary characteristics of the WSFM include its unmatched democratic nature – almost all of its content is self-organized i.e. workshops are proposed and organized by the participating organizations themselves. Also, the WSFM distinctly has a strong critique of the neoliberal economic model as the current dominant global economic

paradigm, and directly holds it responsible for most, if not all, of the abuses suffered by migrant communities around the world.

Nonetheless, that is also related to the WSFM's other characteristic – it is not aligned to any governmental mechanism nor has any specific policy advocacy goal. This can be both a benefit (it is completely independent and can organize its own trajectory) and a disadvantage (it can be disregarded as ultimately ineffective or politically inconsequential.)

Organized by a voluntary International Committee (IC), the WSFM has begun to “globalize” beyond Latin America and Spain, being organized by MFA in Asia for the first time this year, and possibly in the African continent in 2014. More importantly however, is the role played by the IC in converging social movements broadly within its organizing meetings and decision-making process. While it is a non-aligned process, the IC informally engages movements that share similar political angles and have been able to engage key policy figures such as the previous Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, as well as the out-going Chair of the UN Committee on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of All Migrant Workers.

The challenge remains however for the WSFM and its IC, whether it can be effective at affecting policy or remain primarily a networking venue and an incubator. That begs the question of whether in fact alliances should have policy-advocacy as its ultimate goal or is the alliance itself its main target?

People's Global Action on Migration, Development and Human Rights (PGA)

The other convergence has coalesced movements focused on UN and its States' mechanisms, as well as the GFMD, thereby having a specific international and inter-governmental policy advocacy goal and focus.

The PGA was conceived out of MRI members' collective response to the 2006 HLD. Unprecedented severe limitations on civil society access and participation in the HLD (a civil society “hearing” was held 3 months prior to the HLD) meant that the voices of migrants – the very people affected by policies being deliberated – were marginalized. In response, MRI organized the “Global Community Dialogue on Migration, Development, and Human Rights.”

This initiative provided an alternative space for the sharing of perspectives, challenges, and proposed solutions from communities around the world. Participating organizations came together to jointly lobby their country governments, organize a series of workshops and panels, partake in a cultural evening hosted by migrant communities in New York, hold press conferences, mobilize a public rally in front of the UN headquarters, and issue a joint statement. This so-called parallel event, as modest

as it began, ignited the imaginations and inspired its participating organizations with a new sense of solidarity and hope for the possibility of exerting real political pressure.

As the GFMD process sprouted from the HLD, MRI re-convened a similar parallel event in conjunction with the inaugural GFMD the following year in Brussels. But it was in Manila in 2008, that these early initiatives really made a quantum-leap into its next critical phase. Hosted by MFA in Manila, the 2008 event adopted its permanent name, the *People's Global Action on Migration, Development and Human Rights* or simply, PGA.

The PGA in Manila also gave birth to its 2 key organizing bodies – an International Work Group (IWG) and a Local Organizing Committee (LOC). These 2 bodies had a similar profound effect – it converged and aligned civil society organizations at both the international and local levels respectively. Most importantly, it gave the opportunity for these groups to collaborate in an intense manner to achieve same goals.

Out of such an experience, a number of the PGA's LOCs formed permanent bodies where none existed earlier. For instance, after the 2009 PGA in Athens, the local migrant associations which had formed the LOC emerged as a new Greco-Athenian Migrants Alliance.

Other, albeit unplanned, convergences also began to happen among groups from particular regions or sectors within the PGA itself. The *Pan-African Network in Defense of Migrants Rights* (PANiDMR), *European Working Group* (EWG) and *Women and Global Migration Working Group* (WGMWG) were all initiated as caucuses within the PGA, and transformed into new alliances of their own.

Global Coalition on Migration: A New Alliance of Alliances

Most importantly for the purposes of this paper however, was the process being forged by the IWG. While the international unions and networks that made up the IWG focused on all the aspects of technical organizing of the PGA, side conversations often would veer towards strategic discussions on policy advocacy. Very soon it was realized by MRI and other key IWG members, that while the PGA was a necessary and critical parallel civil society event that was needed to maintain a critique and external pressure on each year's GFMD, it was not designed and therefore insufficient as a space to adequately address the larger issues of dramatically shifting migration policy internationally.

After the PGA in Mexico City in 2010, MRI took the responsibility to then reconvene the IWG into a new entity of its own. The Global Coalition on Migration (GCM) emerged as a new "alliance of alliances" the following year, with the intention to collectively re-envision new directions in international migration policy and to take action collaboratively towards it. It follows a principle of "bubble-up and trickle-down",

where comprehensions and analyses emerge from each organization's base of members (bubble-up) and decisions and actions taken by the GCM are spread out around the globe through the same network of members (trickle down).

The following international organizations and unions have initially signed on to the GCM as members (or in one case, as an active observer) while a few more will be incrementally incorporated in the coming years:

- Building and Woodworkers International (BWI), Chair of the Council of Global Union's Working Group on Migration (*tentatively as an observer*)
- Espacio Sin Fronteras (*South American regional network*)
- Women and Global Migration Working Group (WGMWG)
- International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC)
- International Network for Migration and Development (INMD/RIMD)
- International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)
- Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA) (*Asian regional network*)
- Migrants Rights International (MRI)
- National Alliance of Latin and Caribbean Communities (NALACC) (*U.S. and Central American network*)
- National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (NNIRR) (*U.S. network*)
- Pan African Network in Defense of Migrants Rights (PANiDMR) (*African regional network*)
- Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM)

This year (2012), the GCM embarks on an ambitious plan to develop a long-term (10-20 years) plan to dramatically shift international migration policy. Meeting in Accra alongside the Pan-African Network's 2012 GFMD preparatory consultation (September) and then in Manila alongside the 2012 World Social Forum on Migration (December), the GCM will undertake an extensive strategic planning exercise. This will include a deep critical assessment of the international migration policy environment and its effects on communities around the world, a re-envisioning of a new policy framework, and a comprehensive action plan and roadmap to get there.

Undoubtedly in coming years, there will be even more attempts to streamline global governance on migration, not just within the GFMD or Global Migration Group (GMG), but a close review of the option for a possible new UN agency or some other international body. Consolidation of civil society will also be correspondingly necessary to face these challenges and play a critical role as powerful stakeholders in such processes. The GCM will be tested these coming years to see if it can indeed create new critical perspectives with a strong unified civil society voice, to reset international migration policy and re-center it within a new human rights framework. This is ultimately necessary to halt the current trajectory of international policy, begin a new one that will better reflect our needs and rights, and change conditions for grassroots migrant communities around the world.