

Keynote Address to the Future of the Forum Session at GFMD 2017, Berlin

By Kathleen Newland, Migration Policy Institute.

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, colleagues, friends. I am honored to address you this morning during this important debate on the future of the Global Forum on Migration and Development, and very grateful to the co-chairs for inviting me. Congratulations to them for organizing a forum where the quality of informality and free-flowing exchange of ideas has finally been achieved.

In the last 35 years I have worked, as staff or consultant, for seven different entities within the UN system, including IOM, ILO, UNHCR, the World Bank, two Secretaries-General, and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) for Migration. So I feel that I know the UN fairly well. I have also attended all 10 GFMD summits and have been involved in organizing some of them, both from the civil society and the government sides. And I was privileged to work with the small team that supported Peter Sutherland in his work on and surrounding the Sutherland Report. So when I talk about the Role of the GFMD, it is from this perspective.

I have seen the GFMD evolve since its creation at the High-Level Dialogue in 2006 from fairly shaky beginnings, based around a single annual event, to an ongoing process in which states together with other actors can discuss even the most controversial issues without confrontation. Each chair of the Forum has brought new issues, actors or processes into the Forum, making it a dynamic body.

I think it is important to look back at how and why the GFMD has developed, and in what ways it has succeeded, as we think about its future. In a way, the GFMD has succeeded because of what it has not become. As intended, the GFMD is not a formal, staff-driven institution. It is not politicized or factionalized. It is not a negotiating body, creating new obligations for participating states. To appreciate these negative qualities, it is worth recalling that the migration debate in the UN in the 1980s and 1990s was frozen. Discussions were rancorous and unconstructive, pitting countries of origin against countries of destination. Countries of origin said “migrants’ rights” and countries of destination heard “right to migrate.”

Partly as a result of this rancor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) omitted any reference to migration as a factor in development. The MDGs focused on the reduction of poverty and its most debilitating consequences, such as ignorance and ill health, but did not take into account that, at the level of the individual, international migration is the most powerful and immediate means of poverty reduction known. People who leave a poor country for a rich one and find work in their normal occupations are likely to multiply their incomes many-fold. At country level, migrant remittances amount to more than three times official

development assistance and, for most developing countries, bring in more foreign exchange than earnings from trade in goods or services. Yet MDG 8, which called for a global partnership for development, included targets on trade and on development assistance—but not on migration. It was in part because of this void that a process began in Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s office that resulted in the creation of the GFMD.

Much progress has been made since the MDG’s were formulated to recognize the connection between migration and development. Migration is mentioned in several places in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015, although it is hardly central to them. But while migration may still play a relatively minor role in international development thinking, development has played a major role in international discussion of migration. Development was the gateway into migration policy for the United Nations: the first high level policy discussion dedicated to migration at the United Nations was the High-Level Dialogue on Migration *and Development* in 2006. Migration was considered too highly politicized and divisive for a general debate, but member states could agree to talk about it in the context of development—a common goal. Putting this boundary around the topic was intended to foreclose discussion of more controversial topics, particular concerning migrants’ rights.

As you know, the agenda of the GFMD has expanded, and in so doing it has helped to expand the agenda of the United Nations to include migration. The GFMD, gradually, also brought new voices into the state-led debate about migration and development—civil society and, more recently, business. This is a hugely important development. Governments have the illusion that they control migration, but in reality migration decisions are made by individual migrants, families, communities, and employers. Smugglers also play an important role, and in some cases criminals who traffic in human beings.) So it is vital that states work with civil society (including migrants and diaspora members), with the private sector and, increasingly, with local governments—especially governments of the large global cities that are the intended destinations of so many migrants.

With the expansion of the agenda and the participants, is the “D” in GFMD still central to its purpose and the international migration agenda? Certainly, economic development has had to share the stage in recent years with other impacts and drivers of migration, including human rights and the vulnerabilities of migrants, the particular needs of women and children as they move, environmental degradation associated with climate change, and efforts to control unauthorized migration. Since the turn of this century, the migration-and- development debate has been an iterative one: first, development was the cover for getting migration on the international agenda; then economic development truly dominated policy discussions; then other issues were allowed to enter the mainstream of migration considerations in international forums—often, after the GFMD had demonstrated that they could be discussed without

confrontation among actors with opposing views. What has emerged, however, is not a downgrading of development concerns, but a broader conception of development which is cognizant of the critical role that factors such as human rights and the quality of the environment have in advancing *human* development. A more sophisticated understanding has also emerged of the relationship that legality and orderliness have with safety; this can be seen in the insistent call for opening more legal pathways for migrants so that those migrants who can access them avoid dangerous—and, too often, lethal—journeys.

The New York Declaration that emerged from the UN Summit on Addressing Large Movement of Refugees and Migrants is forceful in asserting its adopters' appreciation for the "positive contribution made by migrants for inclusive growth and sustainable development." But it is clear that this appreciation was not the primary motive for the September 19th plenary and the call for a global compact on migration. The plenary took place as the world had experienced more than a year of what was perceived and characterized as a migration crisis, most visible in the Mediterranean but affecting, at a minimum, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, West Asia, South East Asia and Central America. The impetus and focus of the September 2016 Summit and the Declaration were on migration as a problem rather than an asset.

The positive side of the preoccupation with forced and irregular migration is that certain policy narratives emerged or regained prominence in the struggle to cope with the large movements of 2014-16 (which have continued, although at a slower pace, in 2017). Four of these are:

- A new appreciation of the importance of addressing the root causes of large movements
- The development potential of migrants and refugees if they are empowered to do so
- The possibility of reaching practical solutions through more collaboration among states
- New global partnerships, with the involvement of the private sector, civil society and other social partners alongside states.

These and other narratives define the challenges and opportunities for the Global Compact on Migration.

What does a global compact have to offer?

Compacts have been used as a vehicle for international development and humanitarian assistance. In constructing a compact, "diverse actors make mutually reinforcing commitments to resources, policy changes and projects designed to achieve a shared vision."¹ This concept is well suited to migration negotiations; it implies a balanced approach to the needs of origin, transit and destination countries and accommodates the reality that many countries are all three. It also has room for non-state actors, as envisioned in the New York Declaration. What

¹ <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/refugee-compact-brief.pdf>

the migration compact lacks that development compacts include is a financing mechanism, and it is hard to see it functioning well without one—not only to provide incentives for cooperation but to build the capacity of resource-poor states to deliver on the commitments they want to make.

Most importantly, perhaps, a compact approach provides a framework for a portfolio approach to international cooperation on migration. In discussions of the global compact on migration, at IOM’s International Dialogue on Migration in 2016 and in subsequent thematic meetings, states have emphasized that one size will not fit all; that different regions and states have diverse priorities and capabilities, even if all are committed to the principles of the New York declaration. These principles are explicitly based on prior agreements such as Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, the Paris Agreement on climate change, the Sendai Framework for Disaster risk Reduction, the UN human rights treaties (which the treaty bodies have made clear apply fully to international migrants) and of course the bedrock principles of the United Nations Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This is a broad framework, and no country will be able to pursue all the migration-related measures within it evenly at the same time.

The most realistic way forward for the global compact would seem to be what SRSRG Peter Sutherland referred to in his report to the Secretary-General as “mini-multilateralism,” a process of building coalitions of interested parties around specific, practical, actionable issues such as strengthening consular protection for migrants, creating new legal pathways for labor migrants, ensuring access to education for migrant students, or achieving the long-standing objective of lowering remittance costs and facilitating the use of formal channels for them. Each of these coalitions should adopt metrics for tracking progress on its issue, and invest seriously in monitoring and evaluation to make sure that efforts stay on course.

The Future of the GFMD

As states think about the Future of the GFMD, three basic positions seem to have emerged.

- Some states have never been enthusiastic supporters of the GFMD. They feel that migration belongs in the United Nations and should be debated in the formal structures of the UN—forgetting, perhaps, the paralysis of the past or believing that it has been overcome as migration has entered the mainstream of debate at the UN.
- A second position can be summed up as “ten years is enough.” The GFMD has been useful, even very useful, but it is time to move on and institutionalize migration in the existing structures of the UN, especially now that IOM has become a related agency. The entrenched rivalries among UN bodies and the rigidity of their mandates is not seen as an insurmountable obstacle.

- The third position is “if the GFMD did not exist, we would have to invent it, and if it ceases to exist, we will have to create something like it.” Those who hold this view value the function of the GFMD as a safe space for debate, and a valuable forum for sharing of ideas and—especially—the best practices that have proven successful in other countries.

The Sutherland report envisaged several possible functions for the GFMD in the near future. The one that seems most irreplaceable by other bodies is for the GFMD to serve as the terrain for coalition-building for concrete actions to bring the Global Compact on Migration to life. The GFMD has never been and, in this vision, will not be a place for accountability but rather for creativity and the construction of partnerships. The GFMD has done a lot to achieve constructive dialogue and advance common understandings, but it is time to get beyond that. What is needed is a mechanism that is not about what countries can be held to, but is about what they want to do, and how partnerships and coalitions can help them achieve what they want to do to improve the lives of migrants better and the governance of international migration.