

Global Forum on Migration and Development 13th Summit

Closing Ceremony 26 January 2021

Roundtable 4 rapporteur summary

I am pleased to present a summary of our discussion during roundtable 4 held on Tuesday 19 January, which was on ‘Addressing Gaps in Migrant Protection’

From the outset, and on behalf of all roundtable participants, I’d like to acknowledge Mexico and Morocco for their excellent steering of the roundtable, and John Bingham for holding the pen on the background paper and for facilitating much of the discussion. Our thanks also to the UAE as chair and for leading the way on this summit.

We had over 200 participants online, including representatives from states, international organisations and each of the GFMD mechanisms, as well as youth representatives. The broad range of interventions made for a pointed, interesting discussion, so thanks to those who embraced the online format to contribute.

As was no doubt the case for many roundtables, we started by looking primarily at migrant protection through the lens of our COVID-affected reality, and the impacts COVID has had on migrants generally, both temporary and permanent. As we moved through the session though, we recognised that the pandemic had only exacerbated gaps in migrant protection and any efforts to address these gaps needed to be systemic, structural and long-term if they were to be truly successful.

Before breaking down key themes from our discussion, I'd like to start with two general observations:

- The first is something that was either stated explicitly or implied in every intervention made, and every contribution to the background paper – that is that **any discussion of migrant protection must start with an appreciation of the migrant's experience itself**. We heard that migrants can be far from their country of origin, sometimes separated from family, possibly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, or among the first to lose their source of livelihood in times of emergency. Consideration of a migrant's experience must be at the centre of any assessment of protection needs, and gaps, and solutions to fill those gaps.
- The second observation is related – **we need accurate, robust data to inform our consideration of protections and gaps**. Without that, it's hard to imagine how we can have a clear picture of protections that exist in the first place, let alone gaps in protections, and ways we can fill them. Data that is accurate and reliable, and disaggregated in a meaningful way, can help connect citizens working outside their country of origin with support from their government, as was the case with Indonesia's digital platform for Indonesian nationals, or target policy and program responses, one of the key objectives in Switzerland's cross-sectoral partnerships.

With those observations in mind, our discussion fell into three parts:

- Firstly, identifying the gaps in migrant protection against the backdrop of the pandemic;
- Secondly, consideration of the ways those gaps are being addressed, or could be addressed; and

- Finally, a discussion on how these practices and partnerships could have value for recovery from the pandemic, and sustainable development in the longer term

GAPS

While the gaps identified were many and various, underlying all of them was a common concern: that migrants have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and that fundamental inequities in their ability to access basic services, seek meaningful employment and integrate have only been exacerbated throughout 2020 and now into 2021. On the other hand, our speakers widely recognised that despite this inequity, migrant workers contribute significantly to the communities they live in, not least as frontline workers in sectors that have emerged as critical during the pandemic – these sectors include health care, supply chains and so on. They are key to continuity of service and key to recovery.

There were concerns that migrant access to health care is irregular and inadequate, employment opportunities are fewer, and social security is often unavailable or difficult to access. Similarly, access to justice systems and reparation mechanisms are poor. Low skilled and domestic workers and those who are undocumented have often fared the worse because they generally lacked the protections from the outset - labour agreements can be difficult to negotiate for that sector. In New York, we were informed that death and infection rates are higher in immigrant communities and while undocumented workers were more likely to suffer job losses, ironically, they often work in the critical sectors. It was clear that women comprise the majority of the vulnerable, and violence against women had been exacerbated at this time.

We had some interesting examples of the protections some states are putting in place to reduce negative impacts. At the macro level, this included legislative frameworks for negotiating bilateral agreements for the protection of citizens working abroad; the relaxation of visa requirements to ensure those working in critical sectors could continue working; and at the grass roots level, partnerships with civil society, foundations, philanthropic partners etc to provide emergency relief, food assistance, multilingual health messaging, housing and so on.

There was discussion on the risks migrants face when they become isolated. They are more likely to fall prey to people smugglers and human traffickers who raise expectations of regularisation.

ADDRESSING GAPS

In considering how to address gaps, there were a couple of **common themes**:

Firstly, many stressed that approaches **should not only be guided by existing policy and national legislation**, but also by **fundamental principles of international human rights law, international humanitarian law and bilateral cooperation**, and the principles contained in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration;

Secondly, there is **a real need for trust and removing barriers, across all levels of government to find solutions and reduce the vulnerability of migrants through increasing opportunities** for access to education, jobs, justice and services.

We heard of many efforts being taken, or suggestions for what should be done. These included:

- Providing equitable access to healthcare and social services without discrimination, including through some vital partnerships:
 - In **Morocco**, a **partnership was set up with the Doctors Guild specifically to facilitate migrant access to GP consultations;**
 - In **Mexico**, **institutional support was provided to refer asylum seekers to health centres**
 - **Alianza Americas** recommended:
 - **The establishment of firewalls to ensure access to services without fear of being subject to migration control policies; and**
 - **The highlighting of the role of local authorities and allowing migrants access to the services that they offer;**
- On protecting migrant workers:
 - In the **Philippines**, **cooperation with responsible employers committed to ensuring timely and effective protections for migrant workers;**
- On skills development and recognition:
 - In **Portugal**, **entrepreneurship courses were provided to enhance migrants' employability**
 - In **Mexico**, **asylum seekers with healthcare qualifications were referred to health authorities to help with the national COVID effort**

It was clear that there was a lot of excellent work being undertaken in many countries to ease the difficulties migrants faced during this time but that change needed to be structural if we were going to be truly successful at removing the protection gaps.

THE LONGER-TERM APPROACH

The third session took us into recovery which was viewed as being part of a longer-term approach which needs to be sustainable, structured, systemic. It needed to look beyond the pandemic.

Many argued that migrants had to be central to any decision-making process regarding their welfare and that trust and empowerment were key. Often preventing this was xenophobia and discrimination which saw migrants as threats.

Narratives had to be changed and for many social cohesion and the removal of racism and xenophobia were paramount. There had to be a more positive and amplified narrative around the benefits of migration and the contribution of migrants. Referring back to the first of my opening observations, and as one youth delegate aptly put it: one way to change the narrative is to ‘put migrants at the forefront of being agents of their own change’, including by encouraging migrant youth to share their stories on social media, as his organisation had. The Mayors Mechanism, the GFMD Working Group on Public Narratives on Migration, and the It Takes a Community campaign were all seen as excellent opportunities to assist with recovery and sustainability efforts.

Many argued that sustainability rested on enhancing **sources of robust, reliable data because only through this could recovery be targeted. Switzerland, for example is working with IOM on its migration data portal, a central repository of migration-related data collected from across the UN system.** Digital platforms were seen as being able to assist link migrants to government, service sectors and the job market. However, language was often a barrier to full access to services and justice and this had to be addressed to ensure equitable opportunities for access.

CONCLUSION

Efforts to identify gaps in protection are not new but have been given new significance in light of the pandemic and I wonder if we shouldn't be making this discussion available to the Working Group on COVID-19 as something they can use as they undertake their work

In closing, **this is a conversation that must continue**. It is also **broad-reaching**: in the words of our thematic expert, **this is not the only roundtable addressing gaps in migrant protection – all six of them are**. What we discussed only highlighted gaps that were already in place but if we are going to truly address them we need to look at this issue in more detail in the longer term.