

## Reflections of Civil Society

Presenter: William Gois, Regional Coordinator, Migrant Forum in Asia

Over the last two days, civil society organizations from South, Southeast, and West Asia have engaged in a parallel consultation on migrants in crisis. In this process, we have reviewed the analysis of global civil society on stranded migrants, migrants caught in crisis situations, and the perpetual crises that migrants face daily. Our analysis has evolved and taken shape over many years of work with migrant communities and engaging in national, regional, and international government processes.

So far, the MICIC Initiative has taken the approach of migrants as vulnerable recipients of assistance. This framing does a disservice to migrants, who are strong, resilient, and resourceful. The MICIC Initiative framing needs to be rethought and revised — we must look at migrants as actors who can help to mitigate the impact that crisis situations can have on their lives and those of fellow migrants.

We need only look at the migrants who risk their lives every day crossing the Mediterranean Sea because of crisis, determined not to return home. The huge risks these migrants take demonstrate considerable resoluteness and high tolerance for risk.

**The MICIC Initiative’s delinking of “personal crisis” from “countries in crisis” must be revisited.**

The crises experienced by migrants every day create and increase vulnerabilities experienced in crisis situations. The strength of individuals will impact the extent to which they can act on their own behalf and on behalf of others when external crises occur.

Migrants can be a force; their potential to act in crisis situations goes untapped because of laws, practices, and attitudes during ordinary times that debilitate them from becoming empowered actors in times of crisis.

**The human rights of migrants must be guaranteed at *all* times, not just in times of crisis.** While the protection of human and labour rights in ordinary times does not necessarily impact crisis levels when conflict or natural disaster occurs, it does, however, impact the degree of vulnerability of affected populations, including migrants. When human rights are protected, people are better able to freely assert their needs and determine their own solutions. In the case of migrants, when their rights are protected they are better equipped to assist themselves and one another.

**Migrants must be empowered to act collectively.** In countries of destination, we continually witness the closing down of migrant organizations, associations, and trade unions out of fear that organized migrants will engage in discourses that might threaten national security. This is happening on a very big scale in the GCC countries. Hundreds of community organizations have stopped meeting for fear of being held suspect.

Recent restrictive monetary and financial regulations in countries of destination (GCC) stifle the ability of migrant communities to raise money to support their counterparts when they are in need. Migrants are prevented from pooling their resources to provide assistance to migrants who become injured or for the repatriation of workers who are injured or the remains of those who die while in countries of destination. Being prohibited from such activities in ordinary times means that migrants have no experience of such collaboration to apply in emergencies. For example, Filipinos in one GCC country resolved to continue their fundraising efforts to support those affected by Typhoon Haiyan, despite their host state’s

prohibition on such activities. In solidarity, the Ambassador of the Philippines attended each fundraising event to provide immediate assistance in case there was any intervention on the part of the host state authorities. Such measures should not be necessary.

These examples show how the inability to form and strengthen migrant community networks in ordinary times breaks down communication and solidarity within migrant communities that could otherwise be activated in times of crisis. Experience informs learning. If the practice of responding in ordinary times is not tolerated, this will be difficult to initiate in crisis mode.

On the other hand, allowing migrants to organize themselves can ultimately create an environment in which migrant communities can regularly come together to support one another, share experiences, and can even result in these communities moving beyond a national approach to a collective experience approach that goes beyond the borders of national identity. For example, during the war in Lebanon in 2006, Ethiopian diaspora communities in the United States raised money to support affected migrant communities. They entrusted these funds to a Lebanese CSO to assist both Ethiopian nationals and migrants from other countries who were affected by the conflict.

For migrant community organizations to effectively organize, they must be able to register with the competent host country authorities and with their embassy. When such organizations are able to formalize and be recognized in ordinary times, they will be better able to locate their fellow migrants, organize responses for their communities, and collaborate with government response teams in times of crisis.

**Governments and emergency response teams must consult migrant communities.** The best system to locate migrants in time of crisis is to consult migrants themselves. Migrants know where their fellow migrants are. Migrant community networks can be kicked into high gear at any time much more quickly and efficiently than any state-led apparatus, as these networks continue to function even when state facilities are inadequate or fail, and operate on a basis irrespective of legal status.

Many migrants from South Asia are ambivalent about the role of embassies and state officials in providing support and protection in times of crisis. Undocumented migrants are particularly reluctant to approach their embassies or state authorities. As such, the potential for states to collaborate with migrant communities remains weak.

The measures I have described are pre-emptive, empowering, and enable migrants to become actors rather than passive recipients of state assistance. Persistent human rights violations and ongoing systemic barriers to full integration and participation in the community life of countries of destination create a stifling environment for migrants, as they are unable to realize the strength and potential of act and agency within their communities. If these barriers were removed and migrants were able to claim their power, they would be a significant force that is able to act with far greater effectiveness in collaboration with state-led initiatives, because for governments it is an operation, while for migrants it is survival. The practice established in ordinary times induces learning and courage to act in extraordinary times.