

# **Transnationalism from Below: the Case study of Asian Migrants Coordinating Body**

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## **Abstract**

International labor migration has regained its significance in academic writings as capitalist globalization intensifies in recent years. Studies have shown how globalization has increased the extent of labor migration and the lives of migrant workers have been greatly affected by globalization. However, little studies have documented how migrant workers have made collective efforts in resisting capitalist globalization. By collaborating with migrants from different countries, migrant workers have created transnationalism from below and have successfully challenged capitalist globalization.

By studying the Asian Migrants Coordinating Body based in Hong Kong, this paper analyzes how migrant workers from different Asian countries, including the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Nepal and Sri Lanka, have been working together across nation-state, racial and gender boundaries; what they have achieved; what challenges they have been facing and what strategies they have used to overcome difficulties.

## **The Problematic**

International labor migration has regained its significance in academic writings as capitalist globalization intensifies in recent years. Studies have shown how globalization has increased the extent of labor migration and the lives of migrant workers have been greatly affected by globalization. However, little studies have documented how migrant workers have made collective efforts in resisting capitalist globalization.

Among the few scholars who have paid attention to the growing activism about migrant workers issues, the focus is primarily on the efforts of NGOs. Ford (2004) examines the emergence and operation of both migrant labor NGOs and migrant labor associations from a labor movement perspective. She argues that despite the

international union movement's ongoing reluctance to recognize either migrant workers or workers employed in the "private" sphere, migrant labor NGOs continue to play an important role in the advocacy of migrant worker rights. Ford recognizes that NGO-sponsored foreign domestic worker organizations are an important new form of labor movement organizations both in host and home countries, and stresses that migrant labor NGOs' organizing function is the most incontrovertible indicator that migrant labor NGOs are part of the labor movement. Similarly, Sim (2003) celebrates the significance of NGOs in advocating migrant issues and argues that NGO activism has made visible arenas of potentiality and yielded insights into the contested political spaces in transnational migration.

While it is important to recognize the contribution of NGOs in advocating migrants' rights, we should not neglect criticism of NGOs, such as being elitist and non-representative, and consciously or unconsciously serving as the support mechanism of imperialism (Petras, 1999). "GONGOs" (government-organized NGOs) and "MONGOs" (mafia operated NGOs) are not at all uncommon, therefore we should not assume that all NGOs will lead to genuine protection of migrants rights and welfare.

While many migrant NGOs claim their goals are to "empower" migrants and protect migrants' rights, it is not uncommon to see the tendency of NGOs to "speak on behalf of" migrants and the so-called "empowerment" is more of rhetoric than actual practices. Many studies do not distinguish NGOs from grassroots migrant organizations and often mis-conceptualize efforts and achievements of grassroots organizations as that of NGOs (e.g. Constable, 1997; Sim 2003; Law 2002). What is downplayed or neglected in these studies is how migrants have organized themselves and developed grassroots migrant movement. Though NGOs may play a catalytic role in developing grassroots migrant movement, we should not assume that all NGOs share the same values of grassroots-movement-building. What is crucial is to analyze how migrant NGOs position themselves in handling migrant issues. Does the NGO act as the "agent" to speak on behalf of migrants? Or does the NGO clearly define itself as the "supporter" of migrants and gears its efforts to develop grassroots migrant organizations?

Activism on migrant issues always has elements of "transnationalism." As Parrenas (2001) points out, despite of the differences in "context of reception", migrant Filipina domestic workers share experiences of dislocations, which leads them to draw cross-national alliances on the basis of this shared experiences and consequently perceive themselves as part of a global community of workers dislocated into low-wage labor by the economic turmoil caused by global restructuring in the Philippines. Most studies on migrants' transnationalism focus on transnational network of migrants of the same nationality (e.g. Portes 2000; Parrenas 2001; Law 2002; Sim 2003a), rather than transnationalism of migrants from different nationalities.

Studies have shown that as the results of competition among different nation-states and manipulation of brokers, migrants of different nationalities are often divided rather than united (e.g. Cheng 2003; Lan 2003), and in order to protect the rights of migrant workers, some scholars call for transnational solidarity among migrants (e.g. Cheng 2004; Tierney 2002). However, none of these studies have

address to the crucial issue: how can migrants of different nationalities overcome the “divide and rule” tactics and form transnational solidarity?

As Evans (2000) argues, analysis and theory have not caught up to practice when it comes to progressive action at the global level. According to Evans, the global rules and networks currently being constructed around the interests of transnational corporations are “hegemonic” because (1) they are dominant in their ability to provide material rewards and impose sanctions and coercion; (2) they are ideologically dominant for being successful in portraying specific definition of “free trade” and “competitiveness” as representing the general interest of all citizens, not just particular interest. Therefore, Evans maintains that “globalization from below” serves as “counter-hegemonic” allowing ordinary citizens, especially those from poor countries, to build lives that would not be possible in a more traditional world of bounded nation-states.

“Globalization from below” has indeed begun to catch much attention, especially since late 1999, when tens of thousands of protesters brought the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to a halt (e.g. Brecher et al 2000). However, most studies aiming at “globalization from below” focus on “big event,” such as the protests against WTO, G8 Summit and APEC. While these events are important, what have been neglected in these studies are the efforts of grassroots organizations trying to organize themselves across nation-state boundaries. Unlike resourceful NGOs and advocacy groups, most grassroots organizations do not have much resource to make themselves visible globally.

In regard to transnational social movement, Porta and Tarrow (2005) identify three important process of transnationalization of social movements: diffusion, domestication and externalization. Diffusion means the spread of movement ideas, practices, and frames from one country to another; domestication means the playing out of domestic territory of conflicts that have their origin externally; and externalization means the challenge to supranational institutions to intervene in domestic problems or conflicts. In their framework of analysis, Porta and Tarrow (2005) still separate nation-bound domestic activism from global activism, though they recognize the interaction between the two levels of activism. Similarly, Evans (2000: 240) separates local from transnational struggles: “It is precisely the potential catalytic effects of transnational networks on local struggles that make them worthwhile. Building transnational networks give local organizing new prospects of success, and local mobilization is an essential element of counter-hegemonic globalization.”

However, as Smith (1994: 25) suggested, “the types of ‘grassroots’ political practice that has emerged among transnational migrants and refugees does not fit well into the restrictive boundaries of local politics conventionally used in connecting the local to the global.” Grassroots migrants’ struggles have to simultaneously encounter the states of their origins, the states of their workplace and settlement, and supranational institutions, which is termed by Smith (1994:31) calls a “politics of simultaneity” or a politics that brings together multiple actors from multiple places. Therefore, in her study of migrant workers’ activism in Hong Kong, Law (2002) argues that it is not enough to localize the transnational advocacy of NGOs in Hong Kong, contextualizing it as a contemporary form of local politics. Rather, Law

suggests considering Hong Kong as one “site” of transnational activism within a broader “social space” where new alliances between migrant, feminist and workers’ organizations are taking place.

Hong Kong as a “site of transnational activism” for migrant issues has been well studied (e.g. Constable 1997; Law 2002; Sim 2003; Ford 2004). However, as mentioned, these studies neglect the importance of grassroots migrant organizations or confuse them with migrant NGOs. The Asian Migrants Coordinating Body (AMCB) is particularly interesting and important not only because it is the first coalition of migrants from different Asian countries, but also because it is a coalition of grassroots migrant organizations from different nationalities.

Some studies have documented the importance of AMCB (Law 2002; Sim 2003) because it has demonstrated its strength in protecting migrants’ rights. However, none of these studies have investigated how AMCB is established and progressed. Law (2002) argues that the formation of AMCB was motivated by the Asian financial crisis and its aftermath. However, as will be discussed in the following, the idea of forming a coalition of migrants from different nationalities existed even before the financial crisis and much effort had been made, especially from the advanced Filipino organizations, to make AMCB possible. Without these continuous efforts to establish mutual understanding among migrants from different national organizations and further help them see the needs of transnational solidarity, the financial crisis itself will not automatically trigger the successful formation of AMCB.

By studying in details the Asian Migrants Coordinating Body based in Hong Kong, this paper will analyze how migrant workers from different Asian countries have been working together across nation-state, racial and gender boundaries; what has made this transnationalism of grassroots migrants possible; what have they achieved; what challenges they have been facing and what strategies they have used to overcome difficulties.

## **Conditions of Migrant Workers in Hong Kong**

### **General Situations of Migrant Domestic Workers**

Migrant domestic workers (MDW)<sup>1</sup> comprise the majority of migrant workers in Hong Kong, and almost 98% of MDW are women. Though migrant domestic workers have been employed in Hong Kong since the mid-1970s, their number has increased significantly, from 1% of labor force in 1982 to 7% in 2001 (Hong Kong Government, 2003a). The number of migrant domestic workers has been steadily increasing. In 2005, with an increase of 2.2% from 2004, there were 223,200 migrant domestics officially employed in Hong Kong, a significant and visible number among the total population of 6.9 millions (Hong Kong Government, 2005).

Migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong used to be predominantly Filipino women, and starting in the 1990’s an influx of Indonesian domestics has been brought in. In 1997, Filipinas accounted for more than 80% of the 170,971 migrant domestic

<sup>1</sup> Hong Kong Government uses the term “Foreign Domestic Helpers (FDH),” but in this paper I use “Migrant Domestic Workers (MDW),” the term widely used in international human rights discourse.

workers officially employed in Hong Kong. The proportion of Indonesians has increased gradually from 29% of all migrant domestic workers in 2001 to 43.4% in 2005. The proportion of Filipinas decreased accordingly, from 66.7% in 2001 to 52.9% in 2005 (Hong Kong Government, 1997, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005). Aside from the Philippines and Indonesia, major countries that supply migrant domestic workers to Hong Kong are Thailand, Nepal, Sri Lanka and India (APMM, 2003).

Migrant domestic workers generally stay with their employers, with only a few exceptions wherein an agreement is made between an MDW and her employer for the MDW to be allowed to stay in her own flat. Employer of a stay-in MDW is supposed to provide for her board, food and travel allowance. However, such agreement is based solely on the discretion of the employer. As stay-in employees, the working hours of MDWs vary. More commonly, they work from 12 to 16 hours per day and they are on-call for 24 hours. Migrant-serving institutions have encountered cases wherein MDWs are made to work non-stop for almost 20 hours per day (APMM, 2003). The stay-in working conditions make migrant domestics in a very vulnerable position. In addition to long working hours, more than 22% of migrant domestics surveyed get fewer than 4 days off per month. Abuses are often encountered by migrant domestics. A survey reports that 23 % of migrant domestics are verbally abused, more than 25% have been physically abused at least once, and more than 4% have been sexually abused (AMC, 2001).

Workers in Hong Kong, including locals and migrants, are supposed to be governed by the Employment Ordinance purportedly to protect their rights. However, while MDWs are also covered by the said ordinance, some benefits stated in the ordinance do not include them. Special provisions have been instituted in the policy to govern migrant domestic workers. For example, The New Conditions of Stay (NCS) or “Two Week Rule” was implemented in 1987. Prior to the NCS, migrant domestic workers were given the chance to change employer within the first year of their employment. With the advent of the NCS, new conditions were imposed: (1) A change of employment will not be allowed in the first two years of the employment contract; (2) Those who break their contract will not be allowed to submit a new and valid contract before they leave Hong Kong; (3) When an MDW contract is terminated, she will be allowed to stay in Hong Kong for at most two weeks (with very limited exceptions though it still largely remains on the discretion of the Immigration Department) (APMM, 2003).

This NCS placed the migrant workers in a very vulnerable position. Under the NCS, circumstances surrounding the termination of employment and how a MDW was treated by the employer prior to termination are completely disregarded and deemed unimportant. Even though the MDW has the option to file a complaint in case of breach of contract, she has to leave Hong Kong after two-weeks from the resolution of the case. Besides, if the MDW opt to pursue the case, the burden of proof rests on her shoulders. Because of its stringent provision on length of stay after termination, MDWs are forced to contend with abusive employers for the fear of greater loss to their livelihoods. In the case of premature termination of contract, the two weeks that she is allowed to stay is not enough for her to find a new employer. Even if she finds an employer, she still has to return to her country of origin before her new contract gets processed. Therefore, the freedom to terminate a contract in seek of better employment conditions is curtailed. More discriminatorily, the two-week rule only

applies to MDWs. While the employers can look anytime for a replacement, MDWs have to undergo a rigorous and expensive process simply to be able to remain in Hong Kong if a labor or criminal case is pending. MDWs with labor cases are not allowed to work and are forced to borrow money from friends to pay for visa extension fees and other necessary expenses to survive. Yet, employers who have pending labor cases are free to continue with their lives and normal routine (APMM, 2003; AMCB et al, 2006).

The Minimum Allowable Wage (MAW) was made in 1973. Governing only MDWs, the MAW was started to supposedly protect the wage of foreign maids from underpayment and other forms of abuse. However, the existence of the MAW has instead, become a thorn to MDWs, because it was used to pin down their wage. As a policy, only the government has the sole decision on the salary of MDWs. Despite the steady rise of the cost of living in Hong Kong and in their home countries, the MAW has never been proportionately increased. Annually, Hong Kong government offices including the Economic Development and Labour Bureau review the MAW and make recommendations regarding its implementation. In 1996, the Hong Kong government declared a three-year freeze on the MAW. Nevertheless, the declaration did not stop the government from cutting the wage of MDWs by 5% in 1998. Using the Asian financial crisis as the basis, the government decided to slash MDW salary. It was only through the intense campaign of Asian migrant workers that the cut was reduced to 5% instead of the originally proposed 20%. After the first pay cut, proposals have again been made to further depress MDW wages. In 2000, a political party proposed the imposition of a 20% tax on MDWs. According to them, MDWs should be taxed for their use of public facilities like the local workers, which failed to push through after facing the indignation of migrant groups. In 2001, another proposal to cut the wage of MDWs from 15 to 25% was made. The campaign waged by the Asian Migrants Coordinating Body against the proposal gathered the support of thousands of Asian migrants, and again the Hong Kong government was forced to back down (APMM, 2003).

Late in 2002, political parties led by the Liberal party proposed the imposition of a 20% levy on MDW. Using, once again, the economic slide of Hong Kong, these groups maintained that MDW must also “make sacrifices” and “carry the burden” of the Hong Kong economic slide. Despite the fact that even under Hong Kong policy, only workers earning HK\$9,000 and above are charged with Salary Tax, sectors within the Hong Kong government have been adamant in pushing for a tax policy on foreign maids to resolve the Hong Kong budget deficit. In April 1, 2003, wage cut of HK\$400 took effect and effective on October 1, 2003, a levy of HK\$9,600 is charged to employers of MDWs before they can hire a foreign maid for a two-year contract period. This levy of HK\$9,600 is equivalent to monthly HK\$400 wage cut of MDWs (APMM, 2003), which practically means that the levy charged to the employers is derived from the wage cut of the WDW.

Aside from the wage cut, many anti-migrant policies have been proposed. Some have already been defeated through the organized protests of migrant workers and some still remain a threat. According to the evaluation report of AMCB (APMM, 2003), these policies include the proposed abolition of maternity protection, ban on driving duties and ban on live-out employment arrangement.

Moreover, more than 27% of migrant domestics earn less than the minimum wage (AMC, 2001). The issue of underpayment is especially widespread among Indonesian migrant workers. Many cases of underpayment happen with the collusion of the employers and private recruiters. Several schemes are used by recruitment agencies to force Indonesian migrant workers to accept salary much lower than the MAW. Meanwhile, the Indonesian government remains silent on this issue and, more often than not, let the recruitment agencies get away with their illegal practices (APMM, 2003).

All anti-migrant policies previously mentioned can be classified as discriminatory for it exploits the vulnerable conditions of migrant workers. With minimal protection from their own national governments, migrant workers are singled out by the Hong Kong government in terms of “special conditions” on their wage and employment conditions. However, aside from institutionalized discrimination, MDWs also suffer from racism on their everyday lives. From their homes to public places, MDWs are treated as second-class and even third-class citizens. There are many cases wherein MDWs have been treated harshly by local citizens in beaches, restaurants and parks (APMM, 2003).

*Some migrant domestics are not allowed to eat with employers. Some experience being shouted at restaurants, markets, and being cut in cues waiting to buy things. Some are made fun of. The locals thought they don't understand Cantonese, but many know some Cantonese words and they know the locals are making fun of them (President, UNIFIL).*

*Migrant domestics sometimes are shouted in public places, like when they are cueing for something, they will be cut by the locals. Sometimes they are even sold at higher prices at stores and markets. Even among white color migrants, migrants from Thailand are paid less compared to locals (President, TRA).*

### **Prejudices among Migrants of Different Nationalities in Capitalist Globalization**

Although migrant workers in Hong Kong face same working conditions set forth by Hong Kong government, migrants from different nationalities do not automatically share a sense of “community” or solidarity. On the contrary, many migrants have some stereotypes and prejudices against migrants from other nationalities, which is part of the crucial conditions that organizers need to face and change when trying to build transnational solidarity among migrants.

*Ordinary Filipino migrants consider Filipinos are good and educated, whereas migrants from other nationalities are not educated so they can be exploited. Especially the images of Indonesian migrants are from poor families and countryside. They are thought of not ready to work, just here for playing, because of their young age and low educational levels..... If we hear it, we would explain that the problems are Indonesian governments and agencies, and Hong Kong government as well. (President, UNIFIL).*

*For Thai migrants, they don't like Indonesians because they feel Thai migrants have been replaced for lower wages. Thai used to be the second largest and now*

*the third, and Indonesians are the second. They feel Indonesians are not educated and they are willing to take very low wage. They thought Filipino migrants are sexually abused because they are too open and forward. (President, TRA).*

*Indonesian migrants are afraid of Filipinos, ... because Filipinos can speak English, and they know how to fight, so they deserve higher wages. (President, ATKI)*

These negative impressions of migrants from other nationalities are constructed in the capitalist globalization context where developing countries are competing with each other to expand their markets for exporting labor. To become more competitive in the global labor markets, governments of labor sending countries often need to demonstrate to receiving countries their “competitive advantages,” that is, how workers from their countries are “better” than others. For the Philippines, whose labor export policy has a long history and is much more systematic, the niche of the competition is the “skills,” including the capacity of speaking English. For governments which are late-comers in formalizing labor exporting policy, the marketing niche for “selling commodities” (migrant workers) is to ensure their labor as cheaper and more docile. To ensure systematic exportation of labor, the governments of sending countries are often unwilling to protect the welfare and rights of migrants, and some are even actively engaged in creating conditions detrimental to migrants. It is documented that an Indonesian labor department official during a pre-departure group briefing told migrants that it is “normal” for Indonesian migrants to have lower wages than migrants from different nationalities (Sim, 2003a).

As the number of Indonesian migrants significantly increases, Indonesian migrants have already replaced Thai migrants as the second largest group among migrants in Hong Kong, and their number is still on the rise and expected to be soon replacing Filipinos as the largest. The threat of being replaced by Indonesian migrants, whose wages are often lower, has contributed to the stereotypes of Filipinos and Thais against Indonesians.

One of the reasons why employers in Hong Kong prefer to hire Indonesian migrants is because of their lower wage. A study shows that 48% of Indonesian domestic workers are underpaid, some at rates of less than half the minimum wage, whereas more than 99.6% of Filipino domestics receive minimum wage and above (Wee and Sim, 2002; cited in Sim, 2003a). Wee and Sim (2002) argue that Indonesians are not just worse off compared to Filipina domestic workers but compared to all other groups of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. Indonesian domestic workers in HK are not only young, single, Muslim women from rural, farming families in Java, but they are less likely to have friends and family in HK and even less likely to know of their rights as workers in HK. In cases where they learn of their rights during the course of their employment, such as wage underpayments compared to the legal minimum, they tend to put off seeking legal redress. The ignorance that fuels the vulnerability of Indonesian domestic workers is not alleviated by the presence of the Indonesian Consulate in Hong Kong, which often discourages Indonesian migrants from taking legal actions against employers. (Sim, 2003a)

Aside from governments, recruiting agencies in Indonesia play crucial roles not only in making Indonesian migrants more “docile” but also the images of migrants from other nationalities, especially Filipinos. Recruiting agencies often inform of potential migrant workers in Indonesia that they are “not as good” as other groups, creating a sense of inferiority that justified a lower salary (Sim, 2003a).

*Before, I was afraid of Filipinos, because agents kept telling that. I was told before by agent that only Filipinos have these rights. One time I went to park for gathering of Indonesian friends who went to the same agent. I told them about my situation (underpayment) and they just told me to be patient.....All Indonesians are told many times by agency: don't befriend with Filipinos. Ordinary Indonesian migrants may be influenced by this, feeling that it's ok to have lower wages, because Filipinos speak English, they know how to fight, so they deserve higher wages (President, ATKI)*

As the results of the manipulation of governments and recruiting agencies, migrant workers often have stereotypes and prejudices against migrants from other nationalities. This antagonism among migrants from different nationalities is the barriers that need to be overcome when trying to build solidarity across nation-states boundaries. The efforts of AMCB have successfully changed the prejudice and stereotypes among migrants, which will be discussed in details later in this paper.

### **Formation and Development of AMCB**

Asian Migrant Coordinating Body (AMCB) was established in 1996 as a coalition of grassroots migrant organizations of different nationalities in Hong Kong. As of June 2007, AMCB is not a formal alliance yet, but according to its 2003 evaluation report, AMCB is in the process of formalizing the alliance with registration as a “society” in Hong Kong. Currently, member organizations of AMCB include Far East Overseas Nepalese Association (FEONA), the Association of Sri Lankans in Hong Kong (ASL), Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Hong Kong (ATKI), Thai Regional Alliance (TRA), Friends of Thai (FOT), and United Filipinos in Hong Kong (UNIFIL-HK).

As documented at the evaluation report (APMM, 2003), AMCB's formation was the result of Cultural Festival in Hong Kong held in 1994 and 1995. This Festival served as a venue for migrants of different nationalities to work together and share respective traditional cultural dances and songs in the spirit of international solidarity.

The first Asian Cultural Festival was held in October 23, 1994 and attended by 1,500 migrants. Migrant groups participating in the festival were migrants from India, Indonesia, Thailand (Thai Women Association, TWA), Nepal (Far East Overseas Nepali Association, FEONA) and Philippines (United Filipinos in Hong Kong, UNIFIL). There were no formal groups yet established representing migrants from India and Indonesia.

In December 1994, the International Human Rights Day celebration with the theme of “Migrant Rights are Human Rights” was organized and initiated by previously-mentioned groups, plus the Association of Sri Lanka. Around 200 migrants

of different nationalities participated. Another celebration of the International Human Rights Day was held in December 1995, as an Asian Migrant Festival and migrants of different organizations from different nationalities presented their respective traditional cultural dances and songs. Local individuals and around 2,000 migrants attended this event at the Piazza of the Hong Kong Cultural Center.

In 1996, a committee composed of representatives from the UNIFIL, FEONA and the Mission for Filipino Migrant Workers (MFMW) was formed to draft the declaration of unity. This draft declaration was later presented and discussed among other representatives of migrants of different nationalities. After series of meetings, the declaration was approved and the formation of AMCB was launched in December 10, 1996 during the 3<sup>rd</sup> Asian Migrants Festival in observance of the International Human Rights Day.

Migrant organizations participating in the initial formation of AMCB include Association of Sri Lankan, Far East Overseas Nepalese Association (FEONA), Friends of Thais (FOT), Indonesian Group, Thai Women's Association (TWA), and United Filipinos in Hong Kong (UNIFIL-HK).

AMCB's declaration of unity states,

*“We share the belief that only through step by step organizing and educating our ranks, engaging ourselves in worthwhile mass actions, shall we address our homesickness and ensure the protection of our rights, welfare and dignity. We share the belief that a migrant right is human rights too, hence must be respected.*

*We share the dream of every migrant worker to return home for good to join our families in our homeland. We share the following aspirations:*

- 1. To have stable decent jobs.*
- 2. To be able to clothe and educate our children and kin.*
- 3. To live with no fear of where to stay and where to get food for our families.*
- 4. To live with no fear of huge cost of hospitalization and medication in times of sickness.*
- 5. To live with no fear of political persecution because of our beliefs.*
- 6. To live in a society where we can participate to achieve real economic progress, serve justice, attain long lasting peace and genuine national democracy.*

*We share these beliefs, common experiences and our commitment to assert and uphold the interests of migrant workers and our people and uniting ourselves beyond cultural boundaries.*

AMCB's work includes advocacy and organizing, networking and cooperation, and education activities. Every member organization functions independently and the coordinating committee of AMCB composed of executive committee members of each member organization meet regularly, plan and assess particular actions and activities. Initiating programs during International Labor Day, Women's Day and International Human Rights Day are among the important dates where AMCB mobilizes its members as part of its educational awareness activities and form of

cultural exchanges.

Despite being a loose coalition with only a coordinating committee functioning as a secretariat, the AMCB is able to mobilize both their member organizations and various other nationalities to oppose anti-migrant policies and proposals. It also mobilizes its members and networks against particular issues opposed by their respective member organizations and nationalities. Struggling against issues and problems affecting migrants are the common basis of unity in the AMCB.

AMCB networks with different migrant groups who are not yet part of the AMCB. Consultations on different issues and problems of migrants are being held. Other migrant groups are also encouraged to participate in the protest actions and other activities initiated by AMCB. AMCB is also working in partnership with regional and local institutions advocating for the rights and welfare of migrants. It also establishes close working relationship with major trade unions, women and community based local organizations.

To enhance the understanding and leveling off on the capacity and awareness of its members and in their respective countries, education activities are held for the sharing of experiences and struggle of respective organizations and countries within the AMCB. Other education activities include leadership training and crucial issues, such as the effects of globalization and WTO on the lives of migrants.

## **The Achievements of AMCB**

### **Creation of Migrant Movement in Hong Kong**

Before AMCB was established, many migrant organizations were already active. However, though these migrant organizations were active and even vocal on certain issues, their voices were mostly seen as representing migrants for specific nationality. For example, UNIFIL could only speak of situations of Filipino migrants, or even Filipino women domestic workers only. Since AMCB was formed, the issues are no longer confined to specific nation-state, racial and gender boundaries, because AMCB is composed of migrants from different nationalities, and of both women and men.

*One of the results of AMCB is the creating of a migrant movement of different nationalities, so now they can speak on behalf of the whole sector, represented by migrants from different nationalities. This result shows to Hong Kong government that migrants are more organized! (Managing Director, APMM)*

Despite being a loose coalition, the AMCB has been able to lead migrants in Hong Kong, mobilizing both their member organizations and various other nationalities to oppose anti-migrant policies and proposals. It also mobilizes its members and networks against particular issues opposed by their respective member organizations and nationalities such as the case of Nepali migrants in Hong Kong working in construction. They experience discrimination by not receiving safety equipment compared to their local counterparts. There are also issues where incoming Nepali are forced to undergo urine tests at the HK airport for being suspected of using illegal drugs (APMM, 2003). The case of Nepali construction workers epitomized that

AMCB has successfully cross boundaries of nation-state, race and gender. While Filipino and Indonesian migrants are mostly women domestic workers, many Nepali migrants are male construction workers. AMCB does not only take up issues related to women domestic workers but also issues specific for male migrant workers.

A common basis of unity is the reason how AMCB can be successfully crossing nation-state, racial and gender boundaries. The basis of unity is struggling against issues and problems affecting migrants. Because of this clear basis of unity, member organizations identify themselves as part of migrant movement, rather than simply organizations for the welfare of their fellow country folks. As ATKI president clearly stated, “*We are part of the migrant movement!*”

This unity was translated into growing numbers of migrants participating in the street protest and marches, which range from 5000 up to the peak of 12,000 in February 2003 for wage-cut issues (APMM, 2003). The ability of mass mobilization at very significant number has forced many changes of Hong Kong government’s migrant-related policies, which is indicative of the formation of migrant movement in Hong Kong.

More importantly, the common basis of unity is made possible by understanding the root causes of forced migration.

*Since AMCB was formed, the basic understanding within AMCB is that all migrant workers from different nationalities are victims of poverty back home. It’s forced migration. From this basic understanding, we link to the locals, national movements, and global movement. Because of AMCB, we erase the ideas of blaming individuals. We develop the basic understanding through various workshops. We held migrants orientations, where we identified the root causes of migration. We ask the migrants if they believe the analysis. They said yes. From this understanding of root causes, migrants easily understand why we address issues to Hong Kong government and governments of our home countries. (President, UNIFIL)*

## **Protection of Migrants in Hong Kong**

AMCB as an organization became more prominent and recognized by the Hong Kong government as the representative of migrants in Hong Kong as a result of the massive campaigns and mobilizations against the wage cut and other anti-migrant proposals. As leaders of AMCB member organizations point out, “*Because AMCB always fight back HK government’s anti-migrant policy, so they have to be very careful. They know we will counter them.*”

Wage-cut is probably the most burning issue for migrants in Hong Kong. The annual MAW proposal has become AMCB’s primary target of action over the past few years. AMCB has successfully launched strong campaigns against wage-cut proposals since its establishment (APMM, 2003). In August 1998, Provisional Councilor Jennifer Chow Kit-bing proposed a 20% cut on the minimum allowable wage (MAW) of migrant domestic workers while the Employers Association of Foreign Domestic Helpers called for a 35% cut. The AMCB immediately launched the

campaign against the wage cut. Series of protests were held as well as a dialogue with Councilor Chow Kit-bing. This campaign led to a big march participated by 2,000 migrant workers during the celebration of the International Human Rights Day, with a theme: “Local and Migrant Workers Unite for the protection of both local and migrant workers in Hong Kong”. As a result of the massive opposition of migrant workers on the proposed wage cut, in January 1999, the Hong Kong government was forced to lower the wage cut from 20-35% to a token 5%. The decision was considered a victory.

Another proposal was announced in 1999 after the wage cut decision was made. The new proposal contained the ban on driving duties, abolishment of the maternity protection and live-out arrangement. These three proposals were opposed and employers affected by the ban on driving duties also participated in the campaign. Series of meetings were held among the AMCB members and a joint meeting of MDWs and employers were held. A petition signing to oppose the ban on driving duties was held and the petition gathered thousands of signatures. In 2000, as a result of the massive campaign and series of protest actions, the three proposals were shelved.

In 2001, AMCB held a dialogue with the Immigration and Labor Department. Issues and concerns among different AMCB member organizations were raised such as the issue of illegal recruitment, underpayment, overstay and other contract related violations and abuses. The issue on the two-week rule was also raised and the campaign for the abolishment of the two-week rule was again put in the agenda.

In July 2001, the Labour Department proposed a HK\$400 levy on employers hiring MDW's to be utilized in retraining programs for the local labor force wanting to work as domestic helpers. AMCB immediately opposed this and the Labor Department withdrew its levy proposal. Later in November, the Hong Kong government proposed “measures to raise revenues”, including a 15-20% wage cut for MDWs. Immediately, AMCB organized a press conference to register its opposition and position with regards to the planned proposed measure. On December 2, a rally from Victoria Park to the Central Government Office (CGO) was held, with participation of more than 3,000 migrants. AMCB called for “*No Wage Cut for FDHs! No to Wage Levels of 1989! No to Abolition of Live out arrangements for FDHs! Protect our rights and livelihood! No to Racism and Discrimination! No to all anti-worker and anti migrant policies of HK government.*” This rally was published in major news dailies in Hong Kong and in other countries. On the 7 of December, The Education Manpower Bureau was forced to call for a dialogue with the AMCB about the issue.

On January 13, 2002, a 5000-strong mobilization ensued against the wage cut. After the massive protest and efforts of AMCB members, the review of the MAW resulted in a freeze instead of a wage cut, which was released on February 3. On November 17, AMCB launched its campaign against the wage cut and the levy in a press conference followed by a protest march supported by 500 migrants. December 15, around 5,000 migrants marched from Victoria Park to CGO shouting the slogans, “*No to Wage Cut! No to Levy!*” On Dec 21, 47,000 signatures gathered against the wage cut. All these efforts culminated in a historic march of 12,000 migrant workers on February 23, 2002.

Since the MAW is being reviewed every year, continued vigilance, organized protest actions are staged and written submissions to the HK Labor Department are made by the AMCB. In 2004, the MAW was maintained. However, in 2005 and 2006, the MAW was increased by HK\$50 and HK\$80, respectively and recently, a HKD80 increase was announced. The current MAW is HK\$3,480.00 or US\$445 effective on June 6, 2007. Despite the series of increases, it is still felt short of the March 2003 wage level of HK\$3,670.00. Thus, the campaign for a wage increase to return back the MAW to the March 2003 level continues.

On the other hand, the levy of HK\$400 per month for hiring migrant domestic workers was maintained. The levy was implemented in October 2003 while the HK\$400 wage cut was implemented in April of the same year.

As part of the campaign, a judicial review to challenge the legitimacy of the employers levy in hiring migrant domestic workers was filed in court. However, the court decided that the implementation of the levy is legitimate.

The campaign against the levy will encourage the employers to support the wage increase campaigns because the domestic workers will benefit directly from the HK400 instead of giving it to the government in the form of levy. Thus, AMCB vows to continue the wage campaign in order to bring back the remaining HK\$190 (March 2003 wage level) and demand to abolish the levy.

### **Solidarity with Local Organizations**

AMCB has made efforts to establish close working relationship with major trade unions, women and community based local organizations in Hong Kong. To ensure solidarity with the locals, AMCB organizes solidarity actions in support of the issues and problems faced by the local people, in addition to attending and participating local activities. Solidarity work with locals was even present as AMCB was newly formed. In 1997, the first May Day activity organized and initiated by AMCB was held, highlighting cultural presentations, speeches and photo exhibits of the international labor situation as well as labor actions in different countries. Some local workers representatives presented during the May Day celebration and delivered their solidarity messages (APMM, 2003).

Some migrant organizations used to focus only on issues with their own nationality, but since their involvement with AMCB, they have been keener to local issues.

*At first we only dealt with Filipino issues, and now we are open to local issues, such as trade unions and women's issues. These local organizations then also help the Mission (MFMW) and Bethune House. Now our relation with locals is good. We support each other's issues. We give inputs if we can, and present our concerns to them. (President, UNIFIL)*

As migrants of different nationalities are pit against each other, locals also have prejudices and even discrimination against migrants. Migrants are often seen as

stealing jobs from the locals and causing social problems. Migrant workers in Hong Kong are also aware of the negative attitudes and reactions from the locals. As the results of working within AMCB, migrants have come to realization that they need to overcome the barriers to be united with the local organizations. As ATKI's president eloquently stated, *"the only solution is to be active in local activities.... To show we are here to support."*

*Because of propaganda by governments, people are being pit one against the other. I was sensitive to prejudices from the locals before. But then I learnt that the only solution is to be active in local activities. We are trying to break gaps by being active. To show we are here to support. (President, ATKI)*

On various issues, AMCB made efforts to find common ground to be united with the locals. For example, the campaign against government's proposal of abolition of maternity protection gained support of local women's groups because this proposal is an infringement of the rights of migrants not only as workers but as women as well. The campaign against another anti-migrant proposal of ban on driving duties was also supported by middle-income employers who would be affected by the ban for it would mean additional expenses for them to hire another employee to do the driving task. Joint meetings of MDW represented by AMCB and employers were held to establish the ground of united action against these proposals (APMM, 2003).

Migrant workers' most burning issue of wage cut has also been supported by the locals. In support of the campaign against wage cut, a petition signing was initiated by HKCCLA in 1998. The issue of wage cut was the main issue on the International Human Rights Day celebration on December 16, 2001, where not only discussed impacts of the proposed wage cut on migrants, but also the condition of the local people, delivered by a representative of local community organization called GDC (APMM, 2003).

By supporting issues of the locals, AMCB has helped strengthened solidarity between locals and migrant domestics.

*AMCB also launches campaign to remove levy on employers, because this levy makes families of employers much difficult... We also support local domestic workers campaign for minimum wages, by joining their activities and initiating statements or activities to support them. The connection between AMCB and the locals is good. The locals also recognize the strength of migrant workers"*  
(President, UNIFIL)

Though AMCB had been consciously developing close working relations with the local organizations, the 2005 people's struggles against WTO was a "turning point" to make this solidarity work much more strengthened and organizationally established. Leaders from the Filipino and Indonesian organizations express that *"after WTO in 2005, we are for sure considered part of the local organizations and movement."*

The Sixth Ministerial Meeting of World Trade Organization was held in Hong Kong and met by "People's Action Week" organized Hong Kong Peoples Alliance on WTO (HKPA). AMCB was part of HKPA and on the anti-WTO march, more than a

hundred migrants mobilized by AMCB served as marshals along with some local activists. The anti-WTO action in 2005 thus became the “turning point,” because,

*Before WTO, the collaboration with the locals was issue-based, with joint activities and supporting each other’s campaigns. Since WTO, the collaboration has become more formal, and AMCB became member organization and now considered part of the local movement.”* (President, UNIFIL)

## **Link to Global Movement**

The 2005 people’s struggles against WTO are not only significant for AMCB to be fully recognized by the local organizations, but also indicative of AMCB’s close link to global movement. The capacity to mobilize more than 5000 migrants at the centralized march on the first day of people’s action week against WTO demonstrated globally the strength of migrant movement led by AMCB.

This close link to global movement is the result of the conscious efforts provided by local and regional institutions of migrants. By linking AMCB with their networks and partners in Hong Kong and outside the country, these institutions help AMCB to develop its own network and enrich its solidarity links among other people’s organizations and movements internationally.

For instance, the World Conference Against Racism and Discrimination held from August 30 to September 5, 2001, in Durban, South Africa, helped AMCB establish many international contacts. The AMCB was represented in this event through the participation of APMM and UNIFIL and the issues of discriminations and racism faced by migrants in Hong Kong were projected in the event. The representatives of the AMCB attended the International Migrant Conference held in November 2001, which passed a resolution for the establishment of an International Migrant Alliance (IMA). Most of the AMCB representatives were part of the International Initiative Committee that was given the responsibility for the formation of the IMA. A tripartite conference on Trade Union, Migrants Organization and Women’s Organizations organized by the Asia Pacific Women Law and Development and Migrant International followed the IMC event. AMCB representatives also attended the tripartite and new links among women’s groups and institutions in the region were established (APMM, 2003).

For the anti-WTO action in 2005, AMCB took more than a year, with the help of APMM and other institutions, to prepare migrants with the understanding of the WTO and its impacts on migrant workers. A forum on the WTO and Migration was conducted in conjunction with the People’s Caravan for Food Sovereignty of the Pesticide Action Network—Asia Pacific (PANAP). The forum was co-organized by Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants, AMCB and PANAP. As part of HKPA, organizations from AMCB were actively rallying migrant workers against the WTO through various activities. The migrants’ anti-WTO activities intensified in the weeks leading to People’s Action Week with the “Migrants’ 10-Week Countdown,” consisting mainly of education and propaganda activities aimed at making the WTO a talk of the migrants against the WTO. The Mardi Gras was participated by various organizations carrying particular themes that depict the people’s alternatives to

globalization and their demands. In addition to its own activities, the AMCB also actively participate in the activities organized by HKPA (APMM, 2005).

AMCB's efforts of participating in anti-WTO campaigns were highlighted in many news reports. For example, on November 4, 2005, the Standard published an article titled "Migrant workers launch month of WTO protests" reports:

*The SAR's migrant domestic workers predict the city is in for a quirky five weeks as it prepares for next month's World Trade Organization talks.*

*The Asian Migrants Coordinating Body and the United Filipinos in Hong Kong - local organizations that assist migrants - announced Thursday the beginning of month-long protests that they hope will "junk the WTO."*

### **Inspiration to Migrant Movements outside of Hong Kong**

The development of the AMCB can be summarized as the transformation from cultural sharing network, to an alliance for migrant sectoral movement, and then to an active actor in anti-capitalist globalization movement. This transformation has been inspirational to migrant organizations in other countries.

In November of 2001, AMCB representatives attended the International Migrant Conference held in Manila. They spoke of the issues and concerns in Hong Kong and shared their experiences in advocacy and campaigns at workshops and plenary presentations. Participants were inspired by the experiences and struggles shown by the AMCB and encouraged to replicate AMCB formations in other countries with large concentration of migrants of different nationalities. According to the Managing Director of APMM, in South Korea, efforts have been made to establish a similar formation as AMCB, and in Japan an annual cultural festival of migrants from different nationalities have been organized. As pointed by APMM's director, "AMCB has shown that it's possible and important to work with other nationalities." The recognition by migrant organizations in different countries, in turn, further encourages AMCB and consequently it is stated in its evaluation report (APMM, 2003),

*"The lessons in terms of organizing, solidarity and coordinated actions derived through arduous and committed struggle... are very important. This (sic.) lessons and experiences of AMCB must be emulated in order to create a movement of migrants both inside the country and in the international level."*

### **Transformation of Migrant Workers within AMCB**

#### **"Victims Become Heroes for Themselves"**

Working in AMCB is transformational process for many migrants. The united strength of migrants from different nationalities has proven to migrant themselves that they can make changes happen. Leaders of the Association of Sri Lanka said, "I have helped people. I feel I am more empowered. I can see my strength."

President of ATKI very poetically expressed her feelings of being empowered, “*I see victims become heroes for themselves!*” She talked about her personal change after being involved in migrant movement.

*I am a migrant! .... Before, I could not imagine a movement. But now I know we are part of the migrant movement.... When I was working underpaid, I thought that I could only be like that, even I didn't like it. I only could try to learn how to be a “good,” meaning obedient, DH. But deep in heart, I could not accept it, because it's inhumane. I felt I deserve fair treatment. It's only because my family needs that I had to endure it. Until I could not take it any more, I ran away and triggered everything that has happened. I felt relieved when I ran away but I also needed to face the fact that I had no money.... From this experience, I learn lessons of organizing migrant workers, and how to do political and collective fight. I am empowering myself because I want to empower others. I have learnt that change should come from the migrant workers themselves. ... The major impact of AMCB on me is politicizing, realizing that the only to protect ourselves is to fight. I have learnt the importance of solidarity as workers and learn about organizing.*

For Filipino migrants who were already experienced in organizing, working in AMCB is also empowering.

*I used to be a student activist. But organizing migrants is much more complex. Especially, when I became leader of migrant organizations, I need to think more about what I say, especially when talking to the press. I have learnt a lot and felt that I have become a more comprehensive organizer. I need to learn leadership, assert rights, and deal with different leaders. I need to study how to work with different persons, especially people from different nationalities. (President, UNIFIL)*

### **Transformed Perceptions of Migrants of Other Nationalities**

As previously mentioned, migrants have stereotypes and prejudices against other nationalities, often manipulated by the governments and agencies. By being involved in AMCB, these perceptions have been transformed.

*Most Indonesians are underpaid. Before, many Thai migrants felt negative about Indonesian migrants because Thai workers were replaced by Indonesian workers for lower wages. But because of AMCB, now Thai migrants know why and know the situations of Indonesian workers. Thai migrants now even went to help Indonesians. (President, TRA)*

*Before I became involved, I only knew that Filipinos are brave and skilled. Even working at the same house, Filipinos are fully paid and Indonesian underpaid. I was afraid of Filipinos. We were taught by agencies again and again that we should not be friends with Filipinos. I only found out at Bethune House that the reason why Filipinos are more advanced and brave is because they have a strong movement, which is led by migrant workers themselves. So employers and agency can't do anything.*

*Now many ordinary Indonesian migrants still think what I used to think about Filipinos. But we try to organize them, give them confidence, for them to realize that the issues are not between Filipinos and Indonesians. The issue is that we are commodities. They think that we Indonesians are obedient. But why we are obedient? It's because we are afraid of losing jobs. But why we are afraid? It's because of the agents and we don't want to go back to agents. But why can the agents do this to us? It's because the problems in our country and the problems with our government. (President, ATKI)*

*Because of the decrease of Filipino and the increase of Indonesians, ordinary Filipino migrant workers think it's problems of Indonesian migrants accepting lower wages..... But now since AMCB, Filipinos are even inspired by Indonesians because they are young and energetic, unlike Filipinos sometimes get tired easily because we feel old. Ha! Ha! Indonesians are always active in rallies, marches, and are very creative! So Filipinos also learn from Indonesians, such as their creativity. Now the Filipino migrants even say, "We should be more like Indonesians!" So in AMCB, everyone can benefit! (President, UNIFIL)*

### **Appreciation of Transnationalism**

In AMCB, migrants from different nationalities learn from each other's culture, history, situation, and collectively they have protected their rights as migrant workers and their lives have changed for the better. The sense of transnationalism is highly appreciated by members of AMCB.

*In AMCB, we are determined to learn from each other. We don't pretend to know things that we don't. We learn different cultures and develop a culture of giving in AMCB. (President, UNIFIL)*

*With AMCB, we can get more chances and more powerful to protect rights of migrants. If small group, we can't do much. The most important thing is our rights. If working together, we can get it more easily. For example, when we are against Hong Kong government, if only one nationality we can't do it. Just fight for our rights. Always be together. (Leaders, ASL)*

*We are part of the migrant workers movement..... We can't do movement individually or nationally, though we also recognize national dynamics. In AMCB, we always support each other's call.... All ATKI members feel strong solidarity with AMCB. We become more encouraged when seeing other nationalities support. (President, ATKI)*

Even for already advanced Filipino organizations, the sense of transnationalism is also appreciated.

*Members of UNIL are very proud of AMCB, because now migrant workers are more organized. They are happy to see other nationalities are also organizing themselves. Some non-UNIFL Filipino organizations also want to join AMCB. So it shows very positive results of AMCB. (President, UNIFIL)*

## **Linked to Movement in Home Countries**

In AMCB, trainings and workshops are provided for migrants to increase their understanding of the root causes for their forced migration. Though Hong Kong government is often targeted by protest actions, AMCB also helps migrants from different nationalities to realize that problems in their home countries are one of the root causes of forced migration and therefore efforts aiming at developing and strengthening people's struggles in their home countries are necessary.

Filipino migrant organizations have a long history of working with social movement organizations in the Philippines (will be discussed in next section), and this has also inspired migrant organizations from other nationalities. Being linked to the movement in home country not only helps migrant organizations broaden their perspectives of their struggles, but also helps organizations in their home countries better understand the issues of migrants. This link to movement in home country helps migrants see their importance and values. President of Thai Regional Alliance was very proud to say, "*Our organization is the first overseas labor organization in Thailand!*"

The link between migrant organizations and movement in home countries is developed by various exchanges. For example, Thai unions and labor institutions (NGOs) come to Hong Kong for trainings and as speakers to Thai migrant organizations. Thai Regional Alliance uses newsletters and radio programs for migrants and people in Thailand to better understand issues of each other. The newsletters regularly provide information and issues in Thailand for the migrants to be aware of situations in Thailand, whereas the radio programs inform people in Thailand of situations with migrants overseas.

Similarly, the Indonesian organization, ATKI, has gradually developed collaboration with organizations in Indonesia, including labor groups, student organizations, NGOs on human rights, peasants and workers. These organizations in Indonesia help organizing and training with ATKI by sending organizers to Hong Kong and offering training to ATKI officers who return home for visits. On the other hand, when ATKI officers return to Indonesia, they share with these organizations about the issues of migrants in Hong Kong and other countries. This experience is especially unique for Indonesian migrants, most of whom are young and with no experiences of organizing. As ATKI president, "*I could not imagine movement before!*" Because of ATKI and ACMB, these ATKI officers are not only involved in migrant movement in Hong Kong, but also involved in movement back home. As their perspectives are broadened, their concerns are no longer limited to their own immediate needs. They can see the importance of building a stronger movement in Hong Kong, Indonesia and even other countries. Because of this broaden perspectives, ATKI officers have helped organize Indonesian migrants in Macau, and currently in the process of reaching to Indonesian migrants in Taiwan.

## **Crucial Roles of the Advanced Filipino Migrant Movement**

When asked why their organizations joined AMCB, all interviewed leaders of the migrant organizations from different nationalities point out that they have been

inspired and helped by Filipino organizations. Sri Lankan leaders found the forum and educational activities provided by Filipino organizations very helpful. President of Thai Regional Alliance stated, *“I felt crazy about UNIFIL and always think how we Thai people can do the same!”* The growing Indonesian group, ATKI, was helped established by several Filipino organizations, and according to the president of ATKI, *“all the active members of ATKI are thinking how we can be like the Filipinos!”*

The significance of Filipino migrant movement has been well documented (e.g. Sim 2003; Law 2002; Bultron, 2006). This section analyzes how the advanced Filipino migrant movement has helped develop AMCB, the landmark in organizing of migrants in Hong Kong and inspiration among migrant organizations in Asia Pacific and other global regions.

The crucial roles Filipino organizers include appreciation and creative ways of realizing international solidarity, criticism of NGOism and stress on grassroots organizing, supporting migrants of other nationalities, and linking migrant sectoral movement to struggles in home countries.

### **Appreciation and Creative Ways of Realizing International Solidarity**

All the leaders and organizers of Filipino organizations I interviewed highlight the values of international solidarity. As the president of UNIFIL said,

*We know Filipino organizations are far advanced than other nationalities, but we do not take it as advantage. We don't see other nationalities as competition. We formed AMCB to show to our community that we should not fight against each other, but we should help each other.*

From the analysis of the Filipino migrant movement, it is clear to them that “divide and conquer” is the best strategy of the rulers. As the Managing Director of Asia Pacific Mission for Migrant clearly explain why they made efforts to help establish AMCB.

*Not only Filipinos are exploited. Other states also exporting people, so we need to share experiences of organizing migrant workers in HK, where there are migrants from many different nationalities. To protect migrants' rights and welfare, we need to deal with both sending and receiving countries. That is, we need to deal with Hong Kong government and other states. It is much better to come together with different nationalities, so we can be more powerful.*

As previously mentioned, migrants from different nationalities are often pit against each other by the manipulation of the states and brokers. Filipino organizers are very aware of it and make efforts to show Filipino migrant workers the importance of international solidarity.

*We don't want Filipinos to be divided from other nationalities as the governments intended. Instead of competition, we need to show Filipino migrants that we need solidarity with other nationalities. We explain to the Filipino migrants, at the same time reach out to other nationalities (Managing Director, APMM)*

It is not without difficulties to convince Filipino migrants to appreciate the importance of international solidarity. As the president of UNIFIL mentioned,

*Because of the decrease of Filipino and the increase of Indonesians, ordinary Filipino migrant workers think the problem is due to Indonesian migrants accepting lower wages. If we hear it, we would explain that the problems are Indonesian governments and agencies, and Hong Kong government as well.*

Filipino organizers take all means to help Filipino migrant workers realize the necessity to collaborate with migrants of other nationalities.

*When we explained to them, some accepted our views, but some were suspicious. So we tried to educate them about solidarity through informal and formal discussion. For example, when we were invited to attend other's activity, we explained to them why it's necessary to attend this activity and what should be our attitudes. Now, some Filipino migrants even realized that other nationalities are even more exploited than Filipinos and they have more empathy with them and even try to help them. They appreciate it when Filipinos have issues, other nationalities help us, so they want to help others as well. (Managing Director, APMM)*

It is easier to understand international solidarity conceptually than to put it in practice. Even experienced Filipino organizers find it difficult, but they have found creative ways of gradually realizing international solidarity among migrants in Hong Kong. They started with cultural sharing, and gradually transformed it to transnational network for migrant issues.

*It's not easy. We tried to find ways to gather migrants from different nationalities, hoping to find common issue for campaigns. We started with cultural exchanges..... Why did we start with cultural exchanges? It is because many migrants were interested in showing their own cultures and learning from others. When Filipino organizations had their cultural presentations, they incorporated issues in their presentations. Other nationalities found this type of presentation interesting, so they also learned how to do it. Then we began to have discussion about issues, before and after cultural events, aside from preparing for the cultural event. During discussion, we tried to raise some issues to other nationalities and see how they react to those issues. They got interested and later on, ask more questions about issues. When discussing these issues, such as wage cut, we asked them how we could stop it. Then they decide that it is better to organize ourselves and fight together. The first joint activity of AMCB aside from cultural activities was the protest against wage cut in 1998. We first held forum discussing about the issues, then lobbying at labor officials and parliament. Then we began to have protests. Eventually, Hong Kong government was forced to lower the wage cut from 20-35\$ to 5%. Migrant workers saw it as a victory. Few years later, Hong Kong government proposed another wage cut, AMCB conducted various mass protest actions and it was stopped completely! (Managing Director, APMM)*

## Criticism of NGOism and Stress on Grassroots Organizing

AMCB is significant not only because of its transnational networking, but because of it is an alliance of grassroots organizations. From the historical development of AMCB, it is obvious that its power comes from its capacity of mass mobilization, which not only catches the media's attention but also forces the governments to take AMCB very seriously. As highlighted in AMCB's declaration of unity, they believe that solid mass movement is the only solution to migrants' plights.

*“We share the belief that only through **step by step organizing** and educating our ranks, engaging ourselves in worthwhile **mass actions**, shall we address our homesickness and ensure the protection of our rights, welfare and dignity.”*

“Step-by-step organizing” is the key in the success of AMCB's mass mobilization. Member organizations of AMCB are all influenced by the principles and methods of “step-by-step organizing” developed by Filipino organizations.

An education manual for organizing migrants was produced by Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants Filipinos (APMMF, which later became APMM), which summed up experiences of Filipino organizers and migrant leaders who have worked in Asia and the Middle East. This manual originally served as a guide for general references in organizing migrant Filipinos is also provided to non-Filipino migrant organizations in AMCB and considered helpful for organizing migrants of other nationalities. For example, influenced by this step-by-step organizing, ATKI has developed more than 100 active members. They integrate themselves with other Indonesian migrants by joining them in the parks on weekends. Since many Indonesians do not enjoy their rights of regular days-off, ATKI develops its own creative way of organizing, “mobile counseling.”

*We used mass counseling, or mobile counseling. We have trained twenty to twenty-five counselors and we divide our tasks to make sure that we call our members regularly to know their needs, and counsel them what to do if they have problems.... Since we have more active members now, we also want to train them to be more experienced organizers. So we decided to divide ourselves to four groups and each group goes to different areas of the parks on weekends, to integrate with Indonesian workers and discuss issues with them. By giving them chances to integrate and lead discussion, they can be better trained as good organizers. (President, ATKI)*

Step-by-step organizing “begins with initial social investigation to building contacts, organizing groups, a committee of organizing groups and the formation of a formal mass organization that will genuinely uphold the interest of migrant Filipinos and the Filipino people.” (APMMF, 2000: 4) The purpose of step-by-step organizing is to ensure yielding “a solid and active participation of members in an organization,” which is considered crucial “because it binds the membership into one voice that will pave changes in Philippine society and will affect the truest sense of sovereignty, democracy and justice.” (ibid, p. 6)

This time-consuming and even pains-taking process of organizing reflects the principles and beliefs of these Filipino organizations that the prime mover for social

change should be the exploited masses. As clearly stated in the Preface of the organizing manual, “*the marginalized sector of a society like the migrant workers cannot protect themselves and act as one unless they are aware of their conditions and role and they are united and organized.*” Guided by these principles, the organizing manual defines an organization as,

*[C]ollective strength, skills and experiences of individuals coming from various sectors and classes, with common aspirations to promote and defend their legitimate interest and for social change in a society. Within the organization, a declaration of principles clearly unites the members. It reflects an active and effective collation of knowledge, skills and potentials of every member to uphold their interest. Likewise, an organization brings forth the consolidated people’s power that represents and asserts their sectoral or class interest, welfare and rights, while specifically struggling against the exploitation and slavery of migrant Filipinos by the few.” (APMMF, 2000)*

This emphasis on solid grassroots organizing is a result of the long years of experience in the Philippines in terms of organizing the people. However, the Filipino mass movement had encountered efforts to undermine the development of grassroots organizing, which was highlighted in a critique of NGOism that the Philippine progressive movement organizations have concluded from their experiences of struggles. A historical review and critique of NGOs in the Philippines by KMP, the Peasant Movement of the Philippines, highlighted the historical lessons the Philippine people’s movement have learnt about the danger of NGOism (KMP, 1994).

The development of Philippine NGOs can be traced back to the 1950s when poverty and underdevelopment in the third world countries became a major concern to global power, especially the U.S., and used NGOs to conduct some poverty-relief projects to meet the growing challenge of liberation movement. Consequently, these NGOs were considered “*an effective instrument to facilitate ‘colonization without an occupational force.*” A different breed of NGOs sprouted in the 70s and 80s, at the height of the peoples’ anti-dictatorship struggle, and they took a more radical approach to social change, viewing underdevelopment as a result of structural inequality, and closely linked with the people’s movement. However, the intensity of the people’s movement led the other mainstream NGOs to blend in with the people’s movement and assumed the progressive postures to evade being identified with the ruling system. After Marco’s downfall as a result of people’s uprising, NGOs proliferated further due to the unprecedented increase in financial support from industrialized nations for development activities and the opening of “democratic space” during the early years of Aquino administration. Both governments and funding agencies manipulated NGOs for the interests of the powerful. NGO projects and programs had to assume a non-political character to win the approval from funding agencies and thus had to reorient their mission and vision to conform the demand of funding agencies. Moreover, based on the concept of “civil society,” the mediating sector between private citizens on the one hand and state and corporate interests on the other, some NGOs began to perceive themselves as playing the major role in social transformation. These beliefs diverged from the basic principles governing the people’s movement, particularly on the primary role of the exploited masses in effecting genuine change, which is criticized as “NGOism” (KMP, 1994: 6).

*The embellishment of the NGO role undermined the people's struggles against the structures that kept them in poverty and rendered some NGOs disoriented on their accountability to the oppressed and exploited masses as they began to preoccupy themselves with this new perception. Action undertaken by some NGOs along this line eventually led to some conflicts with the grassroots, giving birth to a problem derisively described by some as NGOism.*

According to KMP's analysis, the problems of NGOism include loyalty to the funding agency rather than the people's movement; socio-economic work without the need for class struggle and change in the social structure; bureaucratism; corruption of the NGO service orientation; professionalism; adoption of corporate practices and standards and turfing (ibid., pp.6-7). In essence, by reflecting on the development and problems of NGOism, these Filipino progressive movement organizations reaffirm that the exploited masses should be the prime mover of genuine social transformation. Though NGOs are important to the people's movement, NGOs concerned about the welfare of the oppressed mass should define themselves as the "supporting" force for the mass organizations, rather than impose themselves as "representing" the mass.

*The mission of poverty alleviation and development must be recognized as a political mission and NGOs can only succeed at achieving this only by supporting and taking part in the people's struggles. .. The role of the so-called third sector is to take part in this process of liberation by working to articulate, support and participate in the people's efforts to forward the people's development vision. (KMP, 1994: 15)*

Guided by these principles, the MFMW, Bethune House and APMM, the three NGOs instrumental in developing grassroots migrant organizations of other nationalities, have been clear in their commitment to support migrants and help them organize themselves, rather than impose themselves as the saviors or spokespersons on behalf of the migrants. Without this fundamental principle of perceiving the migrants themselves as the prime movers to change their lives, these Filipino NGOs could not have made great efforts in empowering migrants of Filipinos and other nationalities, and AMCB would not have been possible.

### **Supporting Migrants of Other Nationalities**

In addition to developing AMCB, Filipino organizations have contributed a lot to strengthen grassroots migrant organizations of other nationalities. From various forum, leadership and organizers' training workshops and consultation, leaders from Sri Lanka, Thailand and Indonesia all expressed their appreciation of what the Filipino organizations have provided them.

Despite of limited resources, Filipino organizations provide much resources to help Indonesian migrants organize themselves.

*We would like to help other nationalities as much as possible. But due to limited resources, we can't help much with other nationalities. We identify Indonesians as the priority. Practically, before AMCB was established, Indonesian migrants*

*had no resources. Thai group can set up their own shelters, offices, and other nationalities can already organize themselves. Indonesians need more support, because they don't get much help from their own countries. So they can't handle cases. We help ATKI officers to stay in Hong Kong, when they have problems with employers, so they can continue their organizing work. We also provide office space for them to have meetings, and continuous trainings to develop more organizers. (Managing Director, APMM)*

The story of Eni, the president of ATKI, best illustrates how Filipino organizations have not only helped her, but also developed ATKI.

*Because I was underpaid, so I talked to some Filipinas at park on holidays. I knew Filipinos know more about these things. They advised me to complain to Immigration and I did not know how to do that. I was too afraid as well at that time and I was not sure how Immigration will help me. I did not trust them as they are part of government department in which, so far that I knew, never stand in favor of the poor like in Indonesia. Therefore I did not follow their advice. But then I was not afraid of Filipinos any more.*

*Before, a Filipina migrant working next door told me that I should not be underpaid. I didn't know how to answer her. These Filipinos were not even organized domestic workers, and they already knew so much about their rights. They did not know how to refer me to organization.*

*I was told before by agent that only Filipinos have these rights. One time I went to park for gathering of Indonesian friends who went to the same agent. I told them about my situation and they just told me to be patient. I endured the work for about 6.5 months, so I could pay back the agency fees. Then I felt I could not take it any more. My friend told me to talk to Christian Action and learn about Bethune House. After working for 6 and half months, I ran away. I went to Christian Action but they did not have a shelter. I went to Christian Action and I was referred to a shelter under Catholic Center. However after a month staying there with some Filipinas, Indonesians and Sri Lankans, we (Indonesian and Sri Lankans) were discriminated by the patron who was Filipina. Because of this, all the Indonesian residents decided to leave the shelter. After staying outside for a night, finally we were referred and accommodated in Bethune House. In this new shelter, we learn a lot of things and they taught us how to handle my own case.....*

*The way they handle cases in Bethune House were very empowering. Bethune House helped me by education, exposure to ways of handling different cases. Mission (the Mission for Migrant Workers, Hong Kong) provided education, helped me see the importance of organizing migrant workers. APMM also helped with various trainings.*

*Bethune House is the second home for many Indonesians. It's also for empowerment. Bethune House was started for Filipinos only, and later opened up for other nationalities....*

*I was sheltered at Bethune House, for 4 to 5 months. From the shelter, I learnt from the Philippine movement. I attended their forum, activities, and I was so impressed by Filipino migrant organizations. They are also migrant workers, but it did not prevent them from fighting and organizing themselves. I see **how the victims become heroes for themselves!!!** So we Indonesians also felt the need to form organization for fellow Indonesians.*

Eni's poetic expression of "*I see how the victims become heroes for themselves,*" vividly illustrates how advanced Filipino migrant organizations empower Indonesian migrants, who have been taught by the states and agencies to be docile and submissive.

#### 1. Collaborative network of Filipino NGOs and grassroots organizations

The collaborative network of four Filipino organizations is the mechanism for the developing of Indonesian organizers. The four organizations are: The Mission for Migrants in Hong Kong (MFMW), the Bethune House Migrant Women's Refugee (BHMWR), Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM), and the United Filipinos in Hong Kong (UNIFIL).

MFMW is an ecumenical non-governmental institution established in 1981. It started out mainly to assist Filipina domestics in Hong Kong and later began assisting other nationalities such as Indonesians, Thais, Sri Lankans and Nepalese. Among the MFMW's vital achievements was the setting up of a shelter, the Bethune House, which today is a full-fledged charitable institution that provides accommodation, counseling, legal and mediation services to distressed foreign women workers.

According to the Executive Director of MFMW, since the MFMW's establishment in 1981, they have handled over 23000 cases, among which 8-10% became active in organizations. In addition to providing individual counseling for clients with their cases, the Mission also sees it as educational opportunity for the migrants to understand the causes of the problems they are facing and how to solve the problems by collective efforts of migrants themselves.

Unlike the conventional counseling that solves the problems for the clients, the MFMW presents possibilities to the migrants and the migrants have to make their own decision, and thus take consequences as well. As the Executive Director of MFMW pointed out, "*Giving opportunities to decide for themselves is already an empowerment.*" While waiting for cases to be solved, MFMW encourages migrants to volunteer at organizations, and many become members of these organizations. MFMW encourages migrants to participate in campaigns for migrants' rights. In addition to encouraging migrants to join organizations, MFMW helps strengthen these migrant organizations by offering various trainings, including how to handle cases with their own members.

At MFMW, most clients leave after their cases are settled. In Bethune House, the shelter for migrant women, much more can be done for the purpose of empowerment, because migrants live in the shelter for an extensive period of time. As the president of ATKI, pointed out, "*Bethune House is the second home for many Indonesians. It's also for empowerment.... When ATKI was formally established on Oct. 1, 2000, there*

*were 24 members, and half of them were former clients from Bethune House.”*

In Bethune House, various workshops and trainings are organized. APMM provides many trainings for the migrants in the shelter, with topics including leadership, organizing, writings (for newsletters, statements, etc.), advocacy and alliance work. When ATKI founders were in the shelter, APMM provided weekly trainings for three to four months. As ATKI was newly established, APMM continued to provide regular trainings and since ATKI is now more experienced and they can do trainings themselves, so APMM only offers trainings upon request. When ATKI needs help, APMM would consult with them about issues, planning or if they encounter problems.

Before ATKI was formally established, the Bethune House already organized an Indonesian cultural group, Voice of Indonesia, participating in AMCB. Therefore, when the founders of ATKI were clients in Bethune House, they already knew about AMCB. When there were activities organized by AMCB, UNIFIL or other migrant organizations, the migrants in the Bethune House are invited and encouraged to attend, so they can be more exposed to the issues and how Filipino migrants organize themselves.

Filipino grassroots migrant organizations thus serve as important inspiration for migrants of other nationalities. As president of ATKI said, *“we were thinking how we could be like Filipinos!”* UNIFIL is an alliance of grassroots Filipino migrant organizations, with membership of more than five thousands, all of whom are domestic workers and more than 95% are women. UNIFIL was formed in May 1985 by organizations which used to campaign against forced remittance. This former alliance was called United Filipinos Against Forced Remittance formed in 1984 by ten Filipino organizations to protest the Filipino government’s Executive Order 857 which forced overseas contract workers to remit 50% of their earnings through Philippine banks. At present, UNIFIL is composed of 25 organizations, including religious, cultural and socio-civic organizations. UNIFIL focus on campaigns and solidarity with other organizations, including the locals and AMCB. UNIFIL’s activities include annual celebrations of Labor May, Women’s Day and Migrants Day, rallies and pickets for various issues, and workshops aiming at how to handle problems through organizing. UNIFIL’s organizing structures reflects its bottoms-up democratic principals. General Assembly is the highest policy making body, approving the general plans and other major documents and electing the Executive Committee officers. A Council of representatives of every member organization has monthly meetings to ensure active and equal participation of each member organization. Aside from these regular meetings, UNIFIL officers and organizers go to places where Filipino migrants gather to discuss issues to encourage active participation of migrants.

Though Filipino organizations are much experienced, they did not impose themselves on other nationalities. As the Executive Director of MFMW humbly stated, *“We did not know how to organize other nationality, so we encourage them to have their own organization.”*

When migrants of other nationalities seek help from MFMW and Bethune House, the Filipino organizers often invite them to attend activities organized by UNIFIL and

other Filipino organizations. After attending these activities, Filipino organizers would ask migrants of other nationalities if they have similar problems, and what are these problems. As the migrants gradually realize the causes of their problems, Filipino organizers ask them what they think can be done to solve these problems. This “problem-posing method” (Freire, 1970) is crucial when Filipino organizers help raise consciousness for migrants of other nationalities.

*We do not know much of their situations, especially in their countries, so encourage them to find out the problems for themselves and later on find out what they can do to solve these problems. It is empowering for them to find out the causes of the problems. Later on, they are more empowered by making the decision to do something to stop the problems. (Executive Director, MFMW)*

## 2. Companionship and consultation

Filipino organizers do not only help migrants of other nationalities to establish their own organizations, they also accompany them and consult with them when they encounter difficulties. For example, APMM offers many training workshops for respective countries when these organizations request. Many leaders of other nationalities value the training and consultation.

*“Whenever we have internal problems, I asked the officers, ‘Do you forget what we learnt from APMM’s trainings?’ (President, TRA)*

Companionship and consultation are especially important for migrants without experience of organizing and campaigning. President of ATKI vividly remembered how they were accompanied by Filipino organizer to gradually solve problems when ATKI was newly established.

*Before, I did not believe that Suharto could have so much impact on Indonesian migrants’ participation in ATKI. But when we started to organize, I realized how many Indonesian migrants were afraid. For them, being leaders meant death!*

*When we just began in 2000 and 2001, it’s not safe to even go to Victoria Park, because agents and Indonesia Consulate staff monitored, checked on migrants. So we decided to move to Star Ferry at Kowloon side, but it did not work. Because how could we organize Indonesian migrants when we could not even enter the park where most Indonesian migrants congregate?! We had to confront the fear. In 2001, after consulting with Filipino organizers, we launched a survey about conditions of Indonesian migrants. The survey last for less than one month. It’s an entry point for organizing. The first protest action was at Consulate to expose issues and break fear, we even had to wear black mask, so migrants would not be identified by agents or the government. This protest was on a weekday, and there was less than 100 attended. But it was already significant and hit the news. So we gained confidence. We continued to stay at Victoria Park. Edwina from Bethune House accompanied us every week for a month, because we did not know how to deal with harassment and intimidation. She helped us and we learnt how to deal with it. Later on, we could handle things by ourselves, so she did not have to accompany us any more.*

### 3. Humbleness of Filipino organizers

The humbleness of Filipino organizers is crucial in helping other nationalities organize themselves. As MFMW director emphasizes, “*the key to organize other nationalities is to learn from them about their cultures and histories.*” The president of UNIFIL also points out that “*while working with different nationalities, we need to know their situations, and should not impose things on them and expect more than their reality. The emphasis should be always on equality.*”

When having joint activities, Filipino organizers very consciously play low keys to encourage more active participation of other nationalities.

*Filipinos are often treated as “experts”, but we always try to explain thoroughly so other nationalities can fully understand the issues and we can have more involved discussion..... In rallies and marches, Thai and Indonesian organizations are usually in the front. Their cultures are more impressive and they are very creative. Nepali and Sri Lankan organizations are in the middle, because their number is not very big. Filipinos are often at the back. (President, UNIFIL)*

This humbleness of Filipino organizers is highly appreciated by migrants of other nationalities.

*In AMCB, we always promote equality. Filipinos don't take advantage even though they are much advanced. Indonesians appreciate Filipinos very much. For example, at marches, Filipino are walking in the back, so Indonesians and other nationalities can walk in the front. Simple things like that make Indonesians appreciate Filipinos. (President, AKTI)*

### **Linking Migrant Sectoral Movement to Struggles in Home Countries**

The strength of Filipino migrant organizations can only be fully understood if situated in the broader context of Filipino mass movement. The four Filipino organizations that help establish AMCB are all part of the progressive mass movement in the Philippines. MFMW was the first NGO established for the welfare of migrant Filipinos, which later set up the Bethune House Migrant Women's Refuge and helped established Asia Pacifica Mission for Migrant Filipinos. These three NGOs have served as a triangle network helping migrant Filipinos organize themselves, including many member organizations of UNIFIL. Moreover, UNIFIL is part of many Filipino grassroots migrant organizations that form Migrante International (International alliance of Filipino migrant organizations), which is a member organization of a multi-sectoral national alliance of mass organizations, BAYAN.

BAYAN, (the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan , or New Patriotic Alliance) was formed in May 1985, bringing together more than a thousand mass organizations composed of more than a million members, representing different classes and sectors committed to the people's struggle for national freedom and democracy in the Philippines. Along with other progressive forces, BAYAN carries forward the Filipino

people's struggles against US imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism to attain national and social liberation. BAYAN's member organizations include alliances of grassroots organizations from different sectors<sup>2</sup>, including workers, peasant, women, students, teachers, ethnic minorities, government employees, church institutes, and migrants.

Representing the migrant sector within BAYAN, Migrante International was officially founded in 1996. Before its founding congress, Filipino migrant organizations had been working together to advance welfare and rights of migrant Filipinos. These Filipino migrant organizations not only formed national network or alliance within specific receiving country, such as Japan and Australia, but also gradually formed regional and global network.

In January 1992, a conference of Filipino migrant organizations from different countries took place and established the Committee for the Unity of Overseas Filipinos (CUOF), composed of progressive organizations and institutions that promote and protect the rights and welfare of overseas compatriots and the Filipino people. The CUOF was mandated to prepare for the formation of an alliance of progressive organizations in the Asia-Pacific region. Two months later, CUOF was renamed Migrante-APME. However, its implementation was suspended because it was decided that it needed to strengthen and expand the progressive Filipino organizations in the region.

Another consultation took place in 1994 with representatives of progressive Filipino organizations and institutions in the Asia-Pacific, North America and Western Europe. Part of the results of this consultation meeting was to transform Migrante-APME into Migrante-International. An Executive Committee was formed to prepare for the convening of the Founding Congress of Migrante-International.

When the Flor Contemplacion's issue<sup>3</sup> erupted in 1995, Migrante-International spearheaded the campaign in the Philippines, in close coordination with progressive Filipino organizations in different countries and with different sectors in the country. This campaign was widespread and had a strong impact within and outside the Philippines, and brought the situation of overseas Filipino migrant workers to the national and international level. It consolidated the need for an international alliance of progressive Filipino organizations that promote the rights and welfare of overseas compatriots and of the Filipino people. Consequently, the Founding Congress of

<sup>2</sup> The member organizations are: Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU, May First Movement Labor Center) ; Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP, Peasant Movement of the Philippines) ;Anakbayan; League of Filipino Students (LFS); Student Christian Movement of the Philippines (SCMP) ; Gabriela (National Alliance of Women's Organizations) ; Kilusan ng Manggagawang Kababaihan (KMK, Women Workers' Movement) ; Amihan (peasant women's association) ; Samahan ng Malayang Kababaihang Nagkakaisa (Samakana, urban poor women association) ; Health Alliance for Democracy (Head) ; Ecumenical Movement for Justice and Peace (EMJP) ; Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT) ; Pambansang Lakas ng Kilusang Mamamalakaya ng Pilipinas (Pamalakaya, fisherfolk association); Confederation for Unity, Recognition and Advancement of Govt. Employees (Courage) ; Promotion for Church People's Response (PCPR) ; Kalipunan ng Katutubong Mamamayan sa Pilipinas (Kamp, National Minorities' Association) ; Migrante International ; First Quarter Storm Movement. See: [http://www.bayan.ph/about\\_bayan\\_the\\_alliance.htm](http://www.bayan.ph/about_bayan_the_alliance.htm) (accessed on June 11, 2007)

<sup>3</sup> Flor was a Filipina who was hanged in Singapore for allegedly killing another Filipina domestic and the child of this Filipina's employer. It was widely believed that Flor had been wrongly accused.

Migrante-International took place in 1996.

Migrante-International aims to arouse, organize and mobilize overseas compatriots to fight for their rights and welfare and to support and participate in the movement for social change in the Philippines. It is firmly convinced that the solution to the continuing migration of Filipinos abroad lies in resolving the basic problems of the Filipino people in achieving national freedom and democracy, and therefore Migrante-International is united with other sectoral alliances of BAYAN (Bultron, 2006).

To ensure the link of the migrant sectoral movement to the movement in the Philippines, efforts were made to “*make sure that Migrante International is based in the Philippines.*” (Executive Director, MFMW) Moreover, migrant Filipinos’ campaigns are supported by organizations in the Philippines. For example, in the campaign against wage cut, in January 2002, with the help of Migrante-International and Bayan Muna<sup>4</sup> in the Philippines, UNIFIL successfully brought some members of the Committee on Labor of the Philippine Congress in Hong Kong to lobby the government against the wage cut (APMM, 2003).

As the results of strong and comprehensive mass movement in the Philippines, many Filipino migrants have some experiences in organizing before they become migrants. This experience back home contributes a lot to the formation of Filipino migrant movement overseas. To take Delores, the president of UNIFIL as an example, she was a student activist in the Philippines. When she had to work in Hong Kong as a domestic to help her family, she took only nine months after arriving in Hong Kong to actively participate in Filipino migrant organizations. She later became an officer of one Filipino organization, and a few years later, in 2004, elected as the president of UNIFIL. When asked if her experience in the movement back home helps her organizing in Hong Kong, she explained,

*My experience with the student movement helps me a lot in organizing work in Hong Kong. I already understood the basic problems in the Philippines, such as the root cause of the poverty, and knew what the Philippine government has been doing to the people. I also know how to share my understanding with other Filipinos. (President, UNIFIL)*

In contrast to Delores, Eni, the president of ATKI, had no experience of organizing before she became a migrant in Hong Kong.

*ATKI is my first experience of organizing. Some ATKI members were active in religion organizations or student organizations. I was also member of student organization, but it’s just following work that you were told to do. It’s nothing like organizing work here. So I don’t think of it as experience of organizing. I really learnt it from scratch here. (President, ATKI)*

<sup>4</sup> A progressive national political party in the Philippines, composed mainly of workers, farmers, professionals and other progressive sectors that champions the cause of “New Politics, the Politics of Change” in the Philippines.

By knowing the importance of linking migrants' struggles to the people's struggles in the home countries, Filipino organizations also encourage migrants of other nationalities to seek the root causes of their forced migration and link themselves to the organizations and movement back home. This explains why AMCB members from different countries have established increasingly stronger network and collaboration with organizations in their home countries, as discussed previously.

In her paper on transnational activism, Law (2002) maintains that the transnational activism of AMCB successfully constitutes a new domestic worker subject, which loses the specificity of national debates. According to Law, by conceiving domestic workers as "workers"—rather than as Filipino women, AMCB shifts the debate for Filipino activists, because the Filipino feminist-nationalist movement can no longer constructs the female migrant worker subject as dependent upon neocolonial government policies and negative images of Filipino women abroad. Law (2002: 219) further argues that *"for Filipino organizations, global social movements can help bolster their national agendas, but the stability of the AMCB might be jeopardized because of the importance of national politics in labor migration."*

From the previous discussion, it is clear that Law has made some mistakes in her analysis and prediction. First, the formation of AMCB does not lose the specificity of national debates, because migrant organizations of Filipino as well as other nationalities continue to link their migrant sectoral issues to the national issues. Second, the AMCB has not been jeopardized by bolstering Filipinos national agendas as Law predicted. On the contrary, the AMCB has been expanding as Filipino organizations encourage other nationalities to link to their home country struggles.

The mistakes by Law in her analysis of transnational activism in Hong Kong are probably due to her neglect of understanding the Filipino migrant activism in the broader context of Filipino movement. Without this comprehensive understanding, one cannot see how the Filipino migrant organizations are developed and strengthened by conscious efforts of Philippine mass movement, and how the comprehensive Filipino mass movement has contributed to the development of migrant organizations of other nationalities.

### **Challenges and Strategies of AMCB**

As discussed previously, the AMCB has made significant achievements, including the creation of migrant movement and protection of migrants in Hong Kong, solidarity with local organizations, link to global movements and inspiration to migrant movements in other countries. Moreover, for the migrants involved, the AMCB has empowered them, transformed their negative perceptions of migrants of other nationalities, make them appreciative of transnationalism and linked to movement in their home countries.

Along with these achievements, many challenges are facing the AMCB. Challenges identified by leaders and organizers of the AMCB include: language, limited time availability, limited resources, different levels of politicization and organizing among different nationalities, and the need for expanding and

consolidating organizing work.

English is the language of communication among migrants from different nationalities. However, except for Filipinos, not all migrants can command English. Though leaders of different nationalities can communicate in English, it often needs translation for members and some officers to understand the issues being discussed in AMCB meetings. Education materials also need to be translated to different national languages.

Since most migrants only have free time on holidays, almost all AMCB activities need to be scheduled on those holidays, when all member organizations also have their own activities. The need to maximize Sundays is always the concern for AMCB organizers. Leaders from different organizations often need to work around schedules to avoid time conflicts. For example, since Sri Lanka group can only have meetings on Sundays, the AMCB sometimes holds meetings on Sundays. However, even when the AMCB holds meetings on Sundays, members of ASL do not attend sometimes because of other priorities.

Financially, AMCB does not maintain and raise money for the operation of the organizations except during campaigns and for specific activities. It conducts solicitations among friends and advocates and relies mainly on the contribution of member organizations. Financial resources are necessary for various purposes. For example, when holding seminars, forums and trainings, rents for venues are needed, especially for big venue to accommodate larger participation. A common gathering place is needed, because different nationalities congregate at different places.

The differences in levels of politicization and organizing among different nationalities are probably the most important challenges for the AMCB to overcome. The level of politicization and experiences in organizing ranges from very advanced and experienced Filipino organizers to young Indonesians without any experience and easily intimidated by the governments and agencies. Organizers within AMCB have made conscious efforts to encounter these differences, by respecting dynamics within each organization, encouraging less experienced organizations to participate, and ensure equal participation in decision-making and representations.

*In AMCB, we always promote equality. Filipino don't take advantage even though they are much advanced. Indonesians appreciate Filipinos very much. For example, at marches, Filipino are walking in the back, so Indonesians and other nationalities can walk in the front....*

*We respect the dynamics in each other's organization. As leaders, we keep contacts with leaders of different organizations and don't reach their members directly, except in forum, workshops, etc. We should not intervene other organizations. We respect each other's organization. There is no prejudice within AMCB. Though Indonesians were the least experienced, ATKI is well respected within AMCB, because we are growing. (President, ATKI)*

To ensure equal participation, AMCB has a coordinating committee with representative from each organization. The decision making practice is based on the principles of consensus among its representatives and any organization can call for a

meeting. At press conferences or other public activities, three spokespersons from Filipino, Thai and Indonesian organizations are appointed to represent AMCB.

According to the Managing Director of APMM, to resolve the differences in levels of politicization and experiences, systematic trainings, not only for officers but also members of different nationalities, are necessary. That is, AMCB needs to expand and consolidate its organizing work. Since Filipino organizers do not speak other languages, it is difficult for them to conduct systematic trainings for members of other nationalities. To ensure more systematic trainings, more full-time organizers for all nationalities are needed, but unfortunately the lack of resources has prevented it from realizing.

Despite of these challenges, with its clear basis of unity and arduous efforts, the AMCB continues to thrive and it is a living proof of transnationalism from below keeps inspiring migrants all over the world!

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