

Development through systematic commodification of migrants *NOT for the Benefit of the Grassroots*

A critique of the Third Global Forum on Migration and Development

November 4-5, 2009

Athens, Greece

In its first meeting in Brussels, Belgium, the Global Forum on Migration and Development's (GFMD) main agenda was on the impacts of migration on social and economic development. The following year in Manila, Philippines, GFMD's goal was to emphasize the human aspect of migration and the protection of migrant rights, and to examine the impact of such protection in reinforcing development.¹

Now on its third year, the GFMD promised to build on the discussions of the past two meetings and further the discussion on focal points of migration and development.

Mr. Athanassios Nakos, Deputy Minister of Interior of the government of Greece and Chair-in-Office of the GFMD Athens 2009, compared the 3rd GFMD to the previous ones as attempting "to do something different: to bring out ways of accommodating migration through developmental actions and thinking, because migration is a consequence – not the cause – of the lack of development"²

While the third GFMD may differ on its overarching theme with the first two forums, it will not really depart from the essential agenda of the GFMD right from the start: intensify commodification of migrant labor cloaked under a development design that is not for the people.

Last year on the occasion of the Manila GFMD 2008, the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM) and the International League of Peoples Struggle (ILPS) Study Commission No. 16 released a critique on the GFMD that looked into the process under the framework of neoliberal globalization.

This paper takes off from the basic analyses forwarded in the said critique and expounds on the design of the third GFMD under the current context of the global crisis.

GFMD and the Global Economic Crisis

The 3rd GFMD is convened while the crisis that stemmed from the monopolization of finance capital has reached almost every part of the globe. The lives and livelihood of many people have been shaken to the core by the economic crunch that is believed to even get worse than the Great Depression in the 1930s.

Migrants are not exempted from the severe impacts of the crisis. The rights of migrants have been under fire more than ever.

While the Manila GFMD was projected to focus on the rights and empowerment of migrants, its actual recommendations on the protection of migrants fell too far short from solving the actual situation of migrants and the grave violations of their rights.

The recommendations only included: 1. Set up a Working Group on Protecting and Empowering Migrants for Development, which could conduct a study on the actual links between protection for migrants and their capacity to contribute to development; 2. Develop a compendium of best practices at national, regional and international levels on protecting migrants, which may be replicated and monitored on a continuing basis.; 3. Continue forging bilateral and other agreements where no binding protocols exist to ensure protection in practice; 4. Undertake capacity building in both origin and host countries for ensuring welfare and protection

¹ <http://www.gfmdathens2009.org/index.php?id=9&L=0>

² *ibid*

of migrants through relevant institutions, structures and mechanisms; 5. Monitor and evaluate GFMD outcomes/proposals and recommendations; 6. Explore closer linkages with the UN Human Rights system.³

In the face of the global crisis, these recommendations have been proven insufficient, if not entirely inutile. While the report of the Ad Hoc Working Group on Protecting and Empowering Migrants for Development is still supposed to be launched in the Athens GFMD, no substantial impact has been made in changing policies that infringe on the rights of migrants. A year after the Manila GFMD, what it can only so far show is the strengthening of structures and processes that will further define the destructive thrusts the GFMD has adopted from its inception.

The economic setback in many countries has displaced numerous migrant workers. With businesses closing down, cutbacks in the workforce have been made and some of the first casualties were the migrant workers. Across the Asia-Pacific region, many countries have also implemented various restrictive policies against migrants or policies that worsen the condition of migrant workers.

From October to December last year, 9,644 migrant workers in the manufacturing sector in Taiwan were retrenched.⁴ Meanwhile South Korea issued a directive that takes away free board and lodging for workers under the Employment Permit System (EPS) while in Malaysia, like in Saudi Arabia, the government directed businesses to lay off foreign workers first if cuts have to be made.⁵ In Macau, 14,078 were laid off from September 2008 to January 2009.⁶

Again in South Korea, a crackdown against undocumented migrant workers is underway that is expected to last until December of this year. For the first half of the year, more than 17,000 people have been already deported.⁷ In Europe, the European Union is gearing to implement the EU Return Directive by next year that is expected to affect hundreds of thousands of undocumented migrants in the whole region.

The situation in the world is expected to get even worse. According to the International Labor Office's (ILO) annual Global Employment Trends report (GET), "... based on new developments in the labor market and depending on the timeliness and effectiveness of recovery efforts, the report says global unemployment in 2009 could increase over 2007 by a range of 18 million to 30 million workers, and more than 50 million if the situation continues to deteriorate".⁸

Even the current OECD economic outlook in its summary and introduction mentioned that "the economic crisis will cast a long shadow. The projections described in Chapters 1 and 2 imply that by the end of 2010, even though a recovery is under way, most OECD countries will still face severe macroeconomic imbalances including large output gaps, high unemployment, very low inflation or even deflation and wide fiscal deficits."⁹

The Athens GFMD 2009 is convened under the theme "Integrating migration policies into development policies for the benefit of all." While even before the GFMD, migration has been increasingly integrated in national programs especially of labor-exporting countries, whether such integration will lead to the benefit of migrant workers is highly-doubtful in a development design that is under the imperialist framework of neoliberal globalization.

The rallying call of policy integration is also being packaged by the GFMD as a positive response to the global economic crisis. Even the United Nations, in its report entitled "Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and

³ Report of the Proceedings, Second Meeting of the GFMD (Manila)

⁴ News Digest, Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM), January 2009.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ News Digest, Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM), February 2009

⁷ E-mail message from the Committee to Free Minod Monkan, 16 October 2009.

⁸ http://www.ilo.org/global/About_the_ILO/Media_and_public_information/Press_releases/lang--en/WCMS_101462/index.htm#1

⁹ <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/36/35/43117806.pdf>

Development" has called for governments worldwide to look at changes to their immigration policies with a view to offering a "new deal" to migrant workers whose skills can help spur economic recovery.¹⁰

Integration of Commodification and Modern-Day Slavery of Migrants to Globalization-Designed Development

In labour-sending countries, integration of migration to national development policies means the systematization of labour exportation that furthers the commodification of human labour – of migrants. Meanwhile in receiving countries, such integration in policies means the systematic importation of cheaper labourers.

The Philippines is a prime example of a labour-exporting country that has developed migration as a national program more sophisticated than most countries. It uses migration as a tool to address the growing number of unemployment in the country.

One recent example of how the Philippines is trying to integrate migration in its development strategy can be seen in the recently passed House Bill 387 in the Philippine Congress, otherwise known as "An Act Liberalizing and Accelerating the Processing and Deployment of Overseas Filipino Workers." This bill aims to fast track the processing and deployment of overseas Filipino workers (OFW) and has made no qualms in the "active promotion" of overseas employment to boost the national income. In fact, the author of said bill, Rep. Roilo S. Golez (Paranaque City), said this measure corrects the Ramos-era policy that "downplays" the export of Filipino labor abroad.¹¹

The biggest recruitment agency in the Philippines, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) was established by Executive Order 797 and signed into law by the former Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos in 1st of May 1982. As early as during that time, the labour-export program has been made concrete in the Philippines.

No wonder in Asia, the Philippines consistently topped the list of major exporter of human labour in Asia alone from period 1996 to 2000. It is then followed by Thailand (763,258), Indonesia (723,139), Sri Lanka (651,635) and Nepal (227,742).¹²

Indonesia – that has been learning from the Philippine experience of migration – in recent years has also been systematically developing its migration program. In Hong Kong, for example, the number of Indonesian domestic workers has already surpassed the number of Filipinos with its exponential increase for the past 10 years.

Meanwhile, the integration of migration to national policies of labour-importing countries follows the Mode 4 agenda of now stalled negotiations on the GATS.

In Australia, for example, the government has expanded and relaxed the rules on the 457 visas or the Temporary Business (Long Stay) visa (Subclass 457) that opened up the importation of more skilled foreign workers that are paid lower than the local workers and removed safeguards on the rights of migrants working under the said visa.

Since 2001, the removal of the requirement for labour market testing or to demonstrate an activity is key to the business, requirement for employers to demonstrate a training benefit to Australian workers and

¹⁰ <http://uk.biz.yahoo.com/05102009/323/un-report-calls-new-deal-migrant-workers.html>

¹¹ A Closer Look at Forced Migration and Development Aid: The Cases of Philippines and Indonesia, Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM), 24 June 2009.

¹² *ibid*

requirement to have the sponsored person's credentials first vetted by Australian accrediting authorities, has resulted to the rise of 457 visa holders from 24,000 in 1996-97 to 70,000 in 2005-06.¹³

Integration of policies in labour-importing countries is only to the extent where they can benefit from the cheapened labour of skilled migrant workers. In Hong Kong, the policy of importing foreign domestic workers has been in place since after the economic boom in the 1970s to liberate men and women from household chores so they can take part in the booming service sector. However, FDW labour has been maintained as cheap and even the recent process of instituting a Statutory Minimum Wage for Hong Kong workers has excluded FDWs.

Conclusion

The GFMD is already on its third run and with it, the future of migrants remains as bleak as ever.

The agenda and direction set forth by the Athens GFMD 2009 still do not address the flawed framework of development and labour migration that labour sending and receiving countries are working on. Neo-liberal globalization's design on migration and development pervades the GFMD process and under such framework, migrants will always be on the losing end.

Already shadowed by the impacts of the global economic crisis, migrants can only expect but a worsening of their condition as labour-exporting countries bask on the remittances, government income from fees and easing of chronic unemployment as benefits of migration to them. Labour-importing countries and their monopoly businesses, on the other hand, are expecting to reap more profit and capital from migrant labour either through the cheap labour of migrants or by reducing the general wage level in various sectors of work where importation of labour is allowed.

Mr. Nakos said, "our thinking about incorporating migration into development is based on our strong belief that future labor migration should be mostly propelled by choice rather than necessity or need. When more people migrate out of choice than desperation, they contribute more to the benefit of their countries of origin and destination and they lead more secure lives".¹⁴

It may be a welcoming note. But the reality of migrant workers and the shape that migration is taking is far from reassuring for the grassroots migrants. ###

Released by:

**Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM)
International League of People's Struggle (ILPS) Study Commission No. 16**

¹³ "The Flexibility of Labour in Australia and the temporary guest contract workers under the Australian Visa Sub-class 457", Peter Geoffrey Brock and Jane Corpuz-Brock, (undated).

¹⁴ *ibid*