

July 6, 2020

Civil society speech at the opening of the Abu Dhabi consultations of the Global Forum on Migration and Development

Presenting by Mrs. Maryam Al-Ruwaie

Ladies and gentlemen,

Your Excellencies,

In the beginning, we would like to thank the UAE and the Abu Dhabi dialogue for opening discussion spaces that bring together representatives of governments, civil society, employers and local authorities on a regional scale. The change in the equation of the Global Forum on Migration and Development, and a major focus on migration from a regional perspective, would enrich our discussions and facilitate effective initiatives and solutions to some of the challenges we all face. We hope that this new equation will be preserved in the post-Abu Dhabi forums in 2021.

Starting in January 2020, in preparation for this meeting, the Arab civil society and the Asian civil society were held 9 Meetings aimed at consulting the six topics covered in the regional consultations. The consultations included more than 250 representative of civil society.

Concerning the three topics that our consultations deal with today, namely building partnerships, immigration governance and the use of technology, civil society in the region raises the following points, which may be the beginning of a joint brainstorming that we do during the coming days:

(Regarding) Building Partnerships:

The trend of the Global Forum on Migration and Development to focus on building partnerships reflects a collective intention and political will to move from the stage of diagnosing the problem to finding effective and creative solutions. **Let us dare today to make this step a quantum leap for establishing real partnerships in which all parties are equal. Let us dare to tackle difficult issues with the spirit of partnership and based on human rights standards.**

As an example of some of the core issues that our partnership should be covered, is the issue of wages for workers returning to their country as a result of the "Covid-19" crisis. The region has witnessed the return of vast numbers of migrant workers who have lost their jobs, and wage theft has been one of the most prominent problems. We see an active role for partnerships between governments, countries of origin, diplomatic missions, civil society, migrant organizations, United Nations organizations, and the private sector, to find effective solutions to wage theft and facilitate migrant workers' access to compensation and benefits. The partnership here lies in developing appropriate regulatory frameworks, documenting cases, providing necessary assistance, and ensuring access to justice. We hope this partnership will be one of the results of this year's Abu Dhabi Summit.

We must also work together to develop partnerships to facilitate the reintegration of returning migrant workers, including through documentation of returnees and their needs, ensuring psychological and social support, recognizing their skills and creating decent work opportunities commensurate with your qualifications, ensuring access to justice and equity, and facilitating their return to their jobs in Countries of destination if these jobs become available again. Also, the success of

these partnerships requires the concerted efforts of the countries of origin, destination, local authorities, civil society and the private sector.

(Regarding) immigration governance:

First, although the Corona pandemic has not brought anything new in terms of dramatic changes in immigration governance, the crisis has come to reveal some flaws in the existing employment policies. The migrant workers were working in the informal sectors were the most affected by loss of employment and deduction of wages. Perhaps this is also an opportunity to reconsider these policies, to work to regulate the informal sector, to provide social protection for all workers, and to focus on sectors that do not have long been outside the protection system, such as domestic work. This also necessitates working on clear plans to correct conditions for undocumented workers.

Second, and with regard to undocumented workers in particular, this experience has shown that many of them are doing the necessary work or what is called Essential Workers Any workers necessary for the economic process and daily life. This crisis also demonstrated the willingness of countries to provide health care and services in general, regardless of legal status. This is in recognition of their role in building the societies of destination countries. Hence, we must start to work to ensure equal rights and access to services in the post-crisis phase. This can be done through partnerships between the civil society, local authorities, and central authorities aiming to facilitate access to this segment of migrant workers, build confidence, spread information, and secure the necessary services.

As for international politics, this may be the right moment to reconsider the distinction that exists due to the practice between formal and informal workers.

These consultations may be an opportunity to launch such an initiative and to activate international cooperation on this topic.

Third, we must also focus on reforming the recruitment process for migrant workers, as this has a major impact on the workers themselves, their family members, and employers as well. Under the light of the Coronavirus crisis, and a large number of skilled workers are affected and returning to their countries, joint initiatives can be launched between governments and stakeholders to register the returnees, recognize their skills, and facilitate their re-recruitment to the destination countries. Such an initiative would reduce the fraud and exploitation that will increase due to the economic crisis and increase competition for job opportunities.

Use of technology:

The current crisis has changed the nature of the debate about the role of technology in labor migration. Technology has become an essential component of business continuity while the world is still grappling with the epidemic. Technology has become an essential component to ensure work safety. Those who can complete their work using technology are less at risk of an epidemic. However, the largest number of migrant workers in the region work in sectors that have not been affected by this digital shift, as the performance of these actions depends to a large extent on the performance of the physical effort. Therefore, we must consider the possibility of using technology to ensure decent, safe and healthy working conditions, with a focus on sectors that have not been affected by this digital shift.

Likewise, research must be done on how to invest technology to solve the basic problems facing migrant workers. Here are some examples:

First, technology must be used to facilitate access to justice, enable complaints to be submitted via applications and the Internet, accredit digital courts and the ability to testify remotely. We have seen again some successful examples in a number of countries in the region that are heading towards adopting some models of digital and remote trials due to the Corona epidemic.

Second, technology must be used to monitor working conditions: Here, technology can also be used to make sure that wages are paid and wage protection systems are put in place, to monitor work contracts and to ensure no deception in the recruitment process. Technology can also be used to monitor housing conditions and employers' compliance with their obligations, and to allow workers to report any breaches.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is no doubt today that our Gulf society is beset with great challenges. On one hand, the Corona pandemic and the resulting economic crisis have come to reveal the depth of our societies' dependence on migrant workers, who are the main engine of our country's economy. On the other hand, the crisis also revealed the extent to which some inappropriate practices are taking root, such as the conditional housing of workers and insecure working conditions, which made everyone, and not only migrant workers, at risk of the epidemic and its consequences.

Today, we are facing a real opportunity to achieve what we aspired to in previous forums to provide constructive and effective solutions. And civil society due to its presence on the ground and its proximity to immigrants is a key partner in providing solutions and working to implement them. We hope that this discussion will be a gesture to enable the civil society

and migrant organizations in the region to play their essential role, as a partner keen on the rights of migrant workers.