

13th GFMD Opening – 18 January, 2020

Civil Society intervention

Stella Opoku-Owusu

Your excellencies, chair of 2020 GFMD United Arab Emirates Mr Nasser bin Thani Juma Al Hamli, colleagues from civil society, ladies and gentlemen. On behalf of the civil society mechanism, I would like to say thank you for this invitation to address the opening plenary at this 13th Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD). 2020 GFMD will go down in history for two things – both significant. One, for being the first ever virtual GFMD summit, necessary within this unprecedented global pandemic that we find ourselves in - for this, Civil Society would like to express its sincere gratitude to the UAE chair and the GFMD task force led by Mr Alex Zalami, and also for its commitment to the GFMD even at these very trying times. Secondly, that for the first time all sessions of the GFMD summit are entirely open for participation by all civil society delegates – this has been recognised and warmly received by civil society as a significant milestone in the history of the GFMD. As political spaces for civil society continue to shrink, the GFMD has become a standout example of how self-organized engagement by all stakeholders should look like, and how this enables us to reach our shared goals together.

With that, we also thank the constant support provided by the GFMD Support Unit over the years, and which has enabled us this year to navigate all the technical challenges and be fully engaged in the entire summit.

I also extend our further gratitude to the governments who have financially contributed to ensure fair and diverse civil society representation and a virtual one at that – Germany, Switzerland, UAE and Canada.

This year, given the openness of the summit, we, as civil society have also approached our programme much more as a preparatory meeting to brief delegates about the 2020 GFMD summit, to consider the GFMD themes, to share learning and experience of these, all with a view to sharing civil society expertise and knowledge and improving dialogue and interaction with member states and other stakeholders during the summit.

While the summit will be focusing on 6 themes, civil society chose to focus on 4 of the 6 plus an additional one mainly for reasons of relevance and priorities at this time. These were

Theme 1: The Governance of Labour migration and Skilling of Migrants

Theme 2: Addressing Gaps in Migrant Protection

Theme 3: Irregular Migration

Theme 4: COVID-19 – Building Back Better for Migrants

As we begin the summit, we would like to share with you some opening thoughts and reflections on where we believe the focus must be during the upcoming deliberations.

From the start, civil society reemphasized some recurring fundamental principles at the heart of our discussions: that

- Movement / mobility is a human right – this is how humanity works, lives and loves.
- A reminder that protection is ensuring that the human rights of people are respected, fulfilled and implemented

Theme 1: The Governance of Labour migration and Skilling of Migrants

Whereas the summit considers these themes separately, Civil Society considered both themes of governance of labour migration and skilling as one as we felt strongly that in addressing them as one, solutions for one would complement the other as well as enhance it even more. It was felt that there are linkages between the two that need to be unpacked further. For example when dealt with as one theme, one could see how upskilling could help to reduce the flows of irregular labour migration as higher-skilled (potential) migrants would have access to more economic opportunities at home or via regular routes. The labour migration component is also silent on protection for migrants while the skilling component is silent on decent jobs. CS also felt that both themes needed to address partnerships and agency much more concretely, create the linkages between the two to ensure a more holistic discussion and approach to solutions.

Regional priorities change and so it was also suggested that discussions try to tackle the regional dimension also. We would also caution about an increasing focus on return which overshadows labour migration deliberations and in that approach fails to address the root cause.

Theme 2: Addressing Gaps in Migrant Protection

The theme of addressing gaps in migrant protection underlined once again that the core human rights of people need to be respected, fulfilled and implemented. CS stressed the vulnerability of those who need it the most – the need for access to health services, to education, to justice systems, to livelihoods, to privacy and security. Many migrants have been left out of social protection efforts offered to populations due to the pandemic – and it was felt that there is now also a protection crisis for migrants and refugees, not just a health pandemic. Of particular concern was the additional impact of measures to mitigate the impact of the pandemic – such as restrictions on movement - which in itself have inadvertently put migrants and refugees in precarious situations. To quote one of the CS co-facilitators – ‘the option to work is not an option for many migrants – it’s a necessity, particularly if they are left out of the social safety net’. Additionally, it seems wage theft which is common place throughout the world, has received more attention during the pandemic for varying reasons which need to be explored further - but perhaps also due to the fact that during the pandemic recruiters, employers and migrants have all been at the mercy of adverse economic shocks that the pandemic has unleashed, and are all also reliant on support – or the lack thereof – from member states. Protection of labour rights is essential for migrants. Emphasis was put on the need for access to public health, testing, treatment, vaccination and so forth to be done without discrimination or lack of safeguards or firewalls, and to build a safety net that leaves no one behind.

Theme 3: Irregular Migration

On irregular migration, CS made two critical points made – 1 - that while the focus of the GFMD background paper is on irregular migration, many migrants migrate regularly and then lose their status and become undocumented. For example during the pandemic migrant women domestic workers have been unable to return to their countries of origin due to border closures, and due to the pandemic their employers are unable to keep them in work. They may find themselves ‘undocumented’ and ‘irregular’ due to the fact that their employers keep hold of their passports (yet they might have originally migrated in a regular manner). It is important that the summit delves deeper into understanding the systemic structures that often result in migrants becoming undocumented. 2. Here again, as with the discussions on labour migration, it was felt that there is too much emphasis on return policies which are not effective in addressing the root causes.

Theme 4: COVID-19 – Building Back Better for Migrants

New challenges reared their head – it has been devastating and at worst fatal for migrant and diaspora communities. It has amplified and multiplied pre-existing challenges. Also provided opportunities where member states for example have released those detained, prolonged temporary working permits, communicated information in different languages, remittances made essential service and so on – the importance of these good practices have given us all some hope and a glimpse into a future of possibilities of building back better, stronger and collectively. Civil Society also raised concerns about contradictions of mitigation measures that inadvertently exclude migrants or go against the principles of mobility and the need to address these. In relation to returning migrants, there was an agreement that sustainable reintegration in this context and the preparedness of states will need more thought and discussions as some returnees are facing a great deal of hardship.

Intersectionality

In all our discussions, it was felt very strongly that across the themes, there was an unavoidable intersectionality that needs addressing and unpacking further to provide a more holistic approach, highlight specific challenges and situations faced and offer solutions. For example one participant indicated that irregular status makes a migrant vulnerable, and this vulnerability is also compounded by other situations which might make a person vulnerable, due to their age, gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, and so on. By looking at migration from an intersectional approach, we could go much further in our understanding of the various levels of discrimination faced by migrants and develop policies to remedy this.

Leveraging new technologies to empower migrants & fostering partnerships for the SDGs

Technology has always been viewed as a driver of migrant and diaspora contributions to development and discussions should look at aiding more development in this area to build more migrant and diaspora capacity in their roles as key stakeholders in development. In developing partnerships, Civil Society are clear on a collective approach that is relevant to the objective as well as the importance of developing effective civil society agency.

Civil Society looks forward to further deliberations and dialogue with member states, the mayoral and business mechanisms, international organizations and other stakeholders over the next few days of the Summit. We remain optimistic that while we continue to manage a global pandemic, that the commitment shown by the UAE within this challenging context is one that will be exemplified ensuring that the years of co-creating this space together will lead to progress, and overall building back better for migrants.

On behalf of CS, I wish you a Happy & Healthy New Year and fruitful deliberations at this 13th GFMD.