Reimagining migration

The Commonwealth People's Forum (CPF) is a biennial event held prior to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. CPF 2018 took place on 16-18 April in London and was jointly organised by the Government of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth Foundation. CPF 2018 critically explored policy based actions under the theme of 'Inclusive Governance: The Challenge for a Contemporary Commonwealth'. It provided an innovative opportunity for civil society organisations to share knowledge and learn from each other as well as to interact with governance institutions on key policy issues. The CPF 2018 series elaborates on the issues covered in the London Declaration on Inclusive Governance for a Renewed Commonwealth.

Introduction

Contemporary narratives on migration compound exclusion and hinge on a fear of the migrant as the 'other'. The Commonwealth People's Forum 2018 session reimagining migration examined how inclusive governance can transform this narrative and improve the lived experience of migrants; it also explored ways in which Commonwealth action can accelerate this process.

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To reimagine migration, one needs to understand how perpetuating cycles of exclusion have arisen and to re-humanise migrants and the process of migration. In-group biases as well as histories of colonialism, exclusion, and segregation make it difficult for people to recognise migrants as human beings with legitimate aspirations, who bear acute and often invisible burdens and make significant contributions to the societies to which they migrate.

Issues and strategies

The 'othering' of migrants

Participants discussed how prevalent discourses on migration are linked to a fear of migrant communities and perceived threats to the host community. Inclusive, government-level conversations must address these fears by speaking to and sharing the real lived experiences of migrants, providing some safe spaces for conversation, and hearing migrants' and host communities' stories while creating real opportunities for dialogue. The othering of migrants has not always occurred and understanding the reasons for this can

inform approaches to governing migration.

Language as an excluder

Terms and definitions can perpetuate exclusion. The term 'migrant' is often used to refer negatively to subsets of migrants, in particular economic migrants. As the othering of economic migrants has accelerated, poorer and even more vulnerable migrants such as refugees suffer adverse consequences. This process of 'othering' can be born of narratives that emphasise what migrants take, but fail to recognise their financial, economic, social and cultural contributions.

Social status and stigma

Social systems evolve to exclude segments of society not in positions of power and stigmas cast on the marginalised can remain even when social status changes. Bangladesh, which is beginning to progress to middle-income status, illustrates that progress can be achieved through the prism of migration, because many Bangladeshi migrants are improving their economic circumstances and sending remittances to their country of origin. Yet despite their increasing affluence they remain stigmatised as poor. It was also noted that migrant workers moving from rural to urban areas to seek employment also find themselves in precarious positions not dissimilar from international migrants.

Challenge of restoring rights once denied

Restoring rights, once denied, can also be extraordinarily challenging. In South Africa, the apartheid system removed citizenship and confiscated land from large numbers of South Africans. After two decades of democracy there are still communities that have not been formally recognised, and some citizens still live without birth certificates and access to identification documents. When people move to cities they lose their connection to their families and communities, compounding difficulties in proving citizenship and accessing essential services. Participants noted a similar situation in the UK: citizens who arrived as children from countries that were part of the British Empire subsequently faced deportation on the grounds of having no documentation to prove their status.

Dehumanising conceals migrant sacrifice and the social costs

Labels such as 'migrant' can conceal stories of human sacrifice, rendering people invisible. Migrants frequently leave their children behind in the care of relatives, save for the legal fees so that their children are able to join them, and give up their youth working multiple jobs in order to send remittances to their families.

Parenting at a distance is a widely prevalent challenge associated with migration and can result in parents being separated from their children for decades. This precipitates trauma for parents who must struggle to generate livelihoods for children they may not see for many years. Migrants find their children beginning to refer to them as 'uncles' or 'aunts' as their relationships become increasingly distant; children grow up psychologically scarred, and bereft at the absence of their parents despite the sacrifices being made.

Humanising migrants and migration

A human response is needed to govern migration. The humanising process starts by recognising that wanting to do better is a human aspiration, common to all. Societies and governments, both in countries from which people originate and in countries to which they move, can play a critical role in humanising migrants and the migration process. Different tiers of government, beyond national government alone, have a crucial role to play.

It was acknowledged that there is no simple answer as to how inclusive governance can contribute to reforming the narrative. Truly inclusive governance can only be achieved in a society where every citizen enjoys equality, dignity and freedom. There are a number of

actions that can be taken to ensure these rights are enjoyed by migrants.

Legal reform to include migrants

A legal framework is needed that recognises migrants. Presently, international and domestic laws focus on refugees and migrant workers only and give poor consideration to other types of migrants. Law reform is needed to recognise all migrants and ensure their protection, including victims of other types of forced migration such as trafficking. This could occur at an international level where there are processes in place to develop global compacts.

Even when rights to protection are enshrined in law, inequalities exist in access to these rights. A Southern African study of the extent to which laws apply to asylum seekers and migrants shows that provisions on enforcement, deterrence and exclusion are well implemented, while laws designed to protect and give access to services are not implemented as effectively. Ensuring that courts are increasingly willing to recognise and assist migrants and compel states to make good on their obligations requires a multipronged strategy with a specific legal focus.

Political will is critical

Laws alone do not guarantee protection, political will is necessary to protect migrants, particularly as migrant communities feel vulnerable and excluded; which makes them hesitant to mobilise in order to demand recognition and protection. Governments are critical to shaping perceptions of migrants and should generate rhetoric that is nuanced and embracing. Political will is also important; in the 1960s and 1970s anti-colonial struggles prompted widespread human displacement across Africa, which led to large numbers of refugees. There was solidarity among African independent nations, allowing for refugees to be received and protected through government action. However, while many examples of protective statutes have been agreed across Africa,

political solidarity with migrants has waned.

Recognising the impact of migration on families

An important first step is to recognise the personal impact migration has on family life. Because the process of shifting children around while their parents migrate to work has become increasingly normalised, little consideration has been given to the effects of these experiences on children, parents, and the fabric of communities. Appreciating one another's stories charts a path forward.

The role of civil society

Organisations and civil society need to allow for migrants themselves to advocate for the recognition and protection of their rights, but this is not always possible. Opportunities to speak publically are scarce and fraught with risk, including high risks of violence, particularly sexual violence. Risks are acute for female migrants despite laws designed to protect them. For example, in seeking services and recourse, women are often refused services and run the risk of being arrested and detained where they are undocumented. Creative expression such as use of photography and storytelling can capture these untold stories and provide opportunities for redress.

Building solidarity between migrant groups

Migrant advocacy groups can be nationalistic, looking out for their own diaspora communities. This represents a missed opportunity to better exercise the economic power that migrants have, and to better demonstrate their value to the societies in which they live. Individual governments, consulates or NGOs are often siloed, focusing on fighting for the rights of a specific country's migrants as opposed to representing the common interests of all migrants. There are many reasons for this, including that there are not necessarily any concrete synergies other than the vague designation of 'migrant community'. There is also a general decline in the power of labour

movements and thus diminished solidarity between groups.

Providing security on the right to remain and belonging

Citizenship is not simply a matter of paperwork, but is about a sense of belonging and being accepted in wider society. As the Windrush experience in the UK has shown, the concept of citizenship is tenuous and the markers of citizenship can suddenly change; it is no longer clear whether living in another country for 50 years or more confers citizenship, either through official documentation or through the embrace of mainstream society. Governments have significant power in determining whether society values migrant populations and their descendants by setting the tone of the conversation. As a result, there is a growing need to hold leaders accountable for the rhetoric they use.

Socio-economic choices of home countries

Inclusive governance should be a goal for governments in countries of origin as well as for host governments. The choices countries make regarding economic and social development, the rights enjoyed by citizens and the opportunities they have to better themselves are all important considerations that require inclusive decision-making to address. For many people, migration is a matter of economic imperative and upheaval from their country of origin is undesirable. Where home governments better understand the reasons why people leave, they are better able to create development opportunities that emphasise quality of life as well as material wealth. Home countries also have a responsibility to protect their citizens abroad and need to be far more assertive in ensuring that their rights are respected in host countries. Yet for economic and political expediency, some governments choose to protect some of their citizens and not others.

What can the Commonwealth do?

The Commonwealth has a significant role to play, particularly in bringing greater attention to the reality of exclusion. Commonwealth leaders will attend the global compact meeting on migration in December 2018. In doing so, the Commonwealth can help advance global agreements by shifting away from the current focus on externalising borders, deterring movement and keeping migrants in regions; towards presenting realistic proposals to protect and prioritise the most vulnerable.

Commonwealth governments can also do much more to promote peer review and collective oversight of migration policy. Governments can use a collaborative and consensus-based approach to share lessons and learn from each other by, for example, pointing to deficiencies in migration policy by drawing on existing examples of good practice, including African and United Nations peer review mechanisms. In addition, the Commonwealth can help address hostile attitudes towards immigration in an honest way, providing a platform for conversation and working to counter dishonest narratives about migration. This can be done by focussing on addressing broader challenges of inequality and exclusion, not only in the context of migrants, but as a broader set of challenges faced by each society as a whole.

Mobilising media, education and culture can help shape the political climate across the Commonwealth and can create an environment where politicians are held accountable for discriminatory policies and rhetoric and for extracting political capital at the expense of migrant groups. Pressure can be brought in several ways, including through the Commonwealth, as well as through international campaigns. The 'I Belong' campaign is a good example. While statelessness emerged as an international issue in the 1960s, the UN conventions designed to tackle the issue and adopted at the time were not ratified for many years. It was not until several governments, civil society and the UNHCR flagged the increasing prevalence of the problem that pathways to citizenship began to open up. 'I Belong' led states to pursue a policy review

process, adhere to international frameworks and ensure existing laws began to work in practice.

Presentations at CPF 2018 illustrated that the migrant narrative is complex. Migration needs to be reimagined in order to humanise migrants and migration policy. Doing so can replace the fear migrants and host societies feel with a new approach that recognises migrants as human beings, with legitimate aspirations, making significant contributions to the societies to which they migrate, while bearing acute and often invisible burdens. The stories of migrants must be heard in order to humanise them. Their safety and security and their access to rights and services, irrespective of their status, is a priority. Inclusive governance, both in host countries and in countries of origin can help ensure this. The Commonwealth can also play a significant role by providing platforms for open discussion and promoting migrant rights.

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