

POLICYBRIEF

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From Promises to Practice: Towards the Effective Implementation of the Global Compact for Migration

A synthesis of ideas and solutions presented at a UNU-CPR migration policy roundtable

Key recommendations:

- Member States must ensure effective respect, protection, and fulfilment of migrants' human rights. Supportive measures include integrating actors in the migration space with the United Nations human rights system and ensuring migrants understand their rights.
- Efforts to eliminate all forms of discrimination should be reflected in national plans; and national mechanisms should be initiated to undertake intersectional racial justice analyses of migration policies.
- A whole-of-government approach is needed to move migration policymaking beyond the security space to include other State actors – through knowledge sharing, capacity strengthening, and more dialogue across all levels of government.
- Effective implementation of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) requires a 'bottom-up' approach that facilitates the active engagement and participation of all actors in society, including migrants and civil society organizations (CSOs).

Introduction

The GCM is an important tool that can help to facilitate cooperation between Member States in their responses to migration. It offers concrete commitments that, if fully adhered to, would ensure that policies towards migration centre human rights and respond appropriately to the needs of people. In adopting the Progress Declaration¹ at the International Migration Review Forum (IMRF) in 2022, Member States reaffirmed their commitment to the principles underpinning the GCM, but also acknowledged that the implementation process had been slower than hoped, and uneven in many areas. Challenges and gaps in the implementation of the GCM are due, in part, to limited resources and national capacities, as well as insufficient coordination within and between governments, and with relevant stakeholders. The COVID-19 pandemic also negatively impacted progress, exacerbating existing situations of vulnerability for migrants, and creating new ones.

¹ United Nations Network on Migration, "Progress Declaration of the International Migration Review Forum," 25 August 2022, <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/resources/progress-declaration-international-migration-review-forum>.

This policy brief summarizes the key themes and recommendations that emerged from a migration policy roundtable held in Geneva in November 2022, six months after the IMRF.² The event provided an opportunity to reflect on progress related to the implementation of the GCM and discuss challenges that lay ahead to turn the Compact’s promises into practice. Discussions focused on four cross-cutting and interdependent guiding principles underpinning the GCM: 1) Respecting, protecting, and fulfilling the human rights of all migrants (regardless of their migrant status, across all stages of the migration cycle); 2) Eliminating all forms of discrimination (including racism, xenophobia, and intolerance) against migrants and their families; 3) Implementing a ‘whole-of-government’ approach – to ensure horizontal and vertical policy coherence (across all sectors and levels of government); and 4) Implementing a ‘whole-of-society’ approach to address migration in all its dimensions. These principles and relevant policy recommendations are discussed in more detail in proceeding sections.

Respecting, Protecting and Fulfilling Migrants’ Human Rights

Both the GCM and the Progress Declaration underscore the obligation and the necessity of States to ensure effective respect, protection, and fulfilment of the human rights of all migrants. However, while the Compact and the Declaration embed several human rights obligations and principles, the speakers identified a gap between policy and practice. They noted that there is a need to shift the narrative around migration, from one that is premised on security to one that is premised on human rights. As noted by Louis HERN Marcelin, of INURED Haiti and the University of Miami: “[G]overnments continue to frame migration as a security imperative,” with security ministries typically responsible for developing and delivering migration policy. Security-led migration narratives and policies are predicated on seeing “others,” often non-white migrants, as a threat to the cultural, economic, and security aspects of society. These biases do not take into account the benefits that migrants can bring to the development of host societies and sending countries, including through remittances. This has implications not only for how the State conceptualizes migration, but also how it operationalizes its national policies.

All of the speakers emphasized the importance of taking a human rights-based approach across all stages of the migration cycle: normatively based on the human rights of all people and operationally directed toward implementing those human rights. Ben Lewis of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) commented: “There is a need for a fundamental shift in the way that we think about migration, the way that we speak about migration, and the way we respond to it.” Reflecting this, the OHCHR has developed guidance on building human rights-based narratives on migrants and migration.³

Recommendations for Member States:

- Strengthen OHCHR’s work on migration, including through increased staffing.
- Increase integration between actors in the migration space and the United Nations human rights system, including the Human Rights Council.
- Ensure that people are equipped with the knowledge to understand their human rights, including those that they hold as migrants.
- Draw on existing support and guidance, including that produced by OHCHR, to challenge negative migration narratives.

Eliminating Discrimination Against Migrants

The history of colonialism is often embedded in the dialogue surrounding migration: the choices about who is granted access to a country and the treatment that migrants receive are connected to ideas of belonging and ‘othering’ based on group identities, particularly race. As Laurel Townhead of the Quaker UN Office noted, the “GCM alone is not enough to address the complex and nuanced issue of racism within migration governance.” Nevertheless, the Compact does help draw the international community’s attention to the issue and encourage action.

The GCM Progress Declaration acknowledges that systematic instances of intolerance, xenophobia, racism and all other multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, including misleading narratives that generate negative perceptions of migrants and falsely associate migrants and diasporas with

² The first event in a series of migration policy roundtables, ‘From Promises to Practices: Towards the Effective Implementation of the Global Compact for Migration’ was organized by UNU-CPR in partnership with the MIDEQ Hub and Geneva Science-Policy Interface, and with financial support provided by the Think Tank Hub. Speakers included Heaven Crawley (UNU-CPR and MIDEQ Hub), Ambassador Francisca Méndez Escobar (Permanent Representative of Mexico to the UN Office at Geneva), Louis HERN Marcelin (INURED Haiti and University of Miami), Ben Lewis (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights), Laurel Townhead (Quaker United Nations Office), and Azrah Karim Rajput (UN Network on Migration Secretariat).

³ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR), *Seven Key Elements: On Building Human Rights-based Narratives on Migrants and Migration* (Geneva: OHCHR, n.d.). Accessible at: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Migration/SevenKeyElements.pdf>.

disease or criminal activities, heighten anti-immigrant sentiments and promote violence against migrants. In signing the Progress Declaration, Member States committed to eliminating all forms of discrimination, including racism, systemic racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, stigmatization, hate speech, hate crimes targeting migrants and diasporas, as well as negative stereotyping and misleading narratives that generate negative perceptions about migration and migrants.

Recommendations for Member States:

- Review, develop and implement relevant legislation, policies and practices to ensure that these do not discriminate against migrants.
- Develop national action plans to eliminate racial discrimination in all its dimensions.
- Create national mechanisms to undertake intersectional racial justice analyses of migration governance policy and practice and monitor progress.
- Engage the United Nations system, civil society, and people with lived experiences as migrants in supporting the development of the above measures to address discrimination.

The United Nations Network on Migration provides examples of good practice on how to eliminate discrimination in its repository of practice.⁴

Adopting a Whole-of-Government Approach

The GCM and the Progress Declaration both note that a whole-of-government approach is needed to address migration challenges, moving migration beyond the security space to include other State actors such as ministries of health, education, child welfare, and housing. For example, Ambassador Escobar described the steps taken by Mexico to try and implement a whole-of-government approach, citing the National Mechanism to Monitor the Objectives of the Global Compact, launched in 2019. One of the first outcomes of this mechanism was an assessment and compilation of all existing government policies, programmes, and best practices in the area of migration. Some 35 federal agencies provided relevant information, resulting in the identification of 177 related actions, programmes, and policies. More recently, academia and civil society joined the follow-up mechanism to ensure a whole-of-society approach.

Another critical aspect of the whole-of-government approach is that it requires continuous dialogue between sending countries, transit countries, and receiving countries. It also entails examining migration ‘corridors’ which link migrants’ countries of origin and destination, thus enabling greater examination of the relationship between countries. The speakers noted that this is critical to ensuring that the human rights of migrants are upheld at each stage of their migration journey.

Recommendations for Member States:

- Promote policymaking through dialogue and engagement across all levels of government from the international to the national and local.
- Report and monitor on how States operationalize the whole-of-government approach so that others can learn best practices.
- Provide capacity-building and technical support to States to ensure they have the resources and knowledge to adopt a whole-of-government approach.

Achieving a Whole-of-Society Approach

Related to the whole-of-government approach, the GCM and the Progress Declaration also indicate the importance of adopting a whole-of-society approach to migration. This means that action on migration entails the involvement of actors beyond governments, across different layers of society, especially migrants themselves and CSOs.

The expertise and experience of migrants, especially those who are undocumented, is often limited, undermining their involvement in national and international policymaking and decision-making processes. CSOs can play an important role advocating for the human rights of migrants and working to hold governments accountable to their commitments and obligations under the GCM and international law.

Recommendations for Member States:

- Ensure that migrants, regardless of status, are included in policymaking and decision-making processes, including at the multilateral level.
- Adopt a bottom-up approach to migration by providing resources to civil society actors working at the local level and enable greater engagement between the United Nations and CSOs.
- Assist States in adopting national plans on how to engage with CSOs and support their work with migrants.

⁴ United Nations Network on Migration, “Repository of Practices,” last accessed 28 April 2023, <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/hub/repository-of-practices>.

Closing the Gap between Commitments and Reality

A key theme emerging from the roundtable was the existence of a gap between States' commitments in the GCM and reality. Several suggestions were put forward so States could close that gap and better meet their commitments under the GCM and enable its effective implementation.

Recommendations for Member States:

- **Ensure that a human rights-based approach is at the core of implementing the GCM:** This could include engaging an array of State actors beyond those focused on security in migration policymaking and decision-making

and implementing national action plans to eliminate all forms of discrimination.

- **Involve and centre the expertise and experiences of migrants and local civil society organizations in implementing the GCM:** This could include consulting migrants, particularly those who are undocumented in policymaking and decision-making spaces and providing resources and support to local CSOs working with migrants.
- **Monitor and report on best practices that emerge from implementing the GCM:** This could include developing a set of indicators for monitoring and measuring the impact of the GCM and sharing best practices on how to adopt whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to migration policies and responses.

About the UNU-CPR Migration Policy Roundtable Series: The UNU-CPR Migration Policy Roundtable Series brings together UN agencies, Member States, international and civil society organizations and academics to explore the evidence in relation to key policy issues relating to equitable development and migration. The events are held in a hybrid format, alternating between New York and Geneva. For more information: <https://cpr.unu.edu/research/researchareas/equitable-development#overview>.

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