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## **Paving the road for international discussions on migration – Global Forum on Migration and Development. An interview with Stefan Rother.**

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### **Abstract:**

Stefan Rother, a political scientist working at the Arnold-Bergstraesser Institute for socio-cultural research, Freiburg, Germany, discusses the institution of the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD), a recently established platform for annual meetings of government officials, NGOs and migrant organizations. He focuses on its structure, procedures and international significance as well as the criticisms leveled at it. The fourth and till today last GFMD took place in November 2010 in Mexico, Stefan Rother commented upon in his blog. More general information on GFMD can be found here.

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### **What was the original impetus for starting an event such as the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD)?**

Migration had been almost completely absent from the international agenda - if it was discussed at all, then predominantly under the aspect of security. This *securitization* of the issue further increased as a result of the attack on September 11. But in the last years, a more positive *framing* of migration gained prominence: A potential nexus between migration and development. Especially the rise in remittances sent home by migrants was propagated as a contribution to development by institutions like the World Bank. While I have many reservations regarding this “new development mantra”<sup>1</sup>, it certainly paved the road for international discussions on migration.

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<sup>1</sup> Kapur, Devesh (2003): Remittances: The New Development Mantra? The World Bank. Washington, DC. (G-24 Discussion Paper Series, 29).

But when in 2006 the first UN High-Level Dialogue on Migration on Development was held in New York, there were major disagreements on how to proceed. The tendency was: The developing countries wanted to deal with the topic within the UN framework, the receiving countries wanted to keep it outside and some like the USA under Bush jr. were opposed to any global discussions at all.

So the GFMD must be seen as a compromise: It is state-led, informal and non-binding. This means that it is hosted and organized by a state, with the idea of a more and a less developed state taking turns every year. As a consequence, although there is a limited supporting structure, it always comes down to the commitment of the host country. Furthermore, only recommendations and declarations can be issued. While thus one could label the GFMD as a mere talk-shop, the more optimistic view would be that it might be seen as a confidence-building measure that may lead to a more formal process at some point.

### **Why did some states want the discussions to take place outside the UN framework?**

There are usually significant discrepancies in economic and political power between sending and receiving states of migrants resulting in very unequal bargaining power. And the more developed states, which consider setting the *entry and exit-rules* for their territory as one of the last strongholds of sovereignty, do not want to lose this power by entering into multilateral and binding deliberations. This may seem a little black-and-white, but if you look at the UN Convention for the rights of migrant workers and their families, you will see that there is not one single developed receiving country among its 44 signatories.

### **How would you comment on the development of the GFMD meetings? How are they changing in structure, topics, rhetoric?**

If you just look at the GFMD in its present state, then there is certainly a lot to criticize. But if you take into consideration how little has happened in the field of global migration governance for decades, then it has certainly come a long way in the four years since the idea was conceived. The first meeting in Brussels in summer 2007 was mostly organized “on the fly” – by this I mean that the format was for a good part developed during the preparation process for the actual meeting and not beforehand. If I compare the Brussels meeting with the one in Mexico in November 2010, I see three positive developments, at least from a rights-based approach to migration to which I personally subscribe: There is more space for civil society. There is also more interaction between civil society and government representatives. And sensitive topics like irregular migration, refugees and border controls are no longer taboo. In addition, the USA has come on board after all – although the Obama administration was criticized in Mexico for having even increased the number of deportations.

This is a telling example for the asymmetry between the undeniable progress that has certainly been made at the GFMD stage and the huge issues at stake that would call for a much more robust instrument.

**Who organizes the Civil Society Days which form one of the official parts of the GFMD?  
And who decides about who participates?**

The Civil Society Days which are held before the government meeting are organized by a foundation that is based in the host country. In Athens in 2009 this was the Onassis Foundation - in Mexico it was organized by the Fundación BBVA Bancomer. This is a philanthropic foundation of the biggest private bank in Mexico which is quite active in migration issues. The selection of participants is done in cooperation with the International Advisory Committee (IAC), a body with changing membership, consisting mostly of civil society representatives and experts. Selection of participants in the GFMD Civil Society Days is apparently based on geographic region, sector representation, experience focused on best practices and gender. There are many more applications than spaces available, so naturally, there is some dissatisfaction with the selection process.

Apart from the delegates there are academic observers and representatives from international institutions. The private sector is mostly absent. Some migrant representatives claim that this is a good thing, but I would argue that the “migration industry” is one of the main actors in the process, so it would be important to get them onboard.

**Why are there street protests during the GFMDs? Does it not mean that the GFMD does not include an important category of actors?**

Some may consider the “official” GFMD process to be fairly complicated, but it gets much more complicated when you also take into consideration the numerous events held parallel or in opposition to the forum. For once, there is the People’s Global Action on Migration, Development and Human Rights (PGA), organized by a global alliance of migrant organizations. They already held a parallel event during the UN High-Level Dialogue in New York in 2006 and have continued to do so during the previous GFMDs. But while they are critical of the GFMD process they also see it as an opportunity for agenda-setting and thus follow an “inside-outside” strategy: Some of their representatives take also part in the Civil Society Days as delegates or are even actively involved in the IAC, as chairs, rapporteurs etc. This strategy led to the recognition of the PGA as an important and “official” part of the GFMD process for the first time in Mexico this year. So, the organizers consider this to be a success and an opportunity to “mainstream human rights in the agenda”.

But there are also accusations of the PGA being co-opted into the GFMD and thus involuntarily supporting its neoliberal agenda. These are made by the International Assembly of Migrants and Refugees (IAMR), a more radical event in complete opposition to the GFMD which they see as a “forum on modern slavery”. They tried to get “inside” as well, but in a very different manner – a two-day caravan travelled from Mexico City to Puerto Vallarta, where the GFMD was held. There, they tried to hold a demonstration in front of the convention, but were blocked off by the police and military before getting even close. Another event, closely associated with the IAMR, was the International Tribunal of Conscience (ITC), a two-day meeting in Mexico City, where human rights abuses of migrants

from all over the world were presented. It was a symbolic Tribunal, of course, but raised a lot of attention.

In its own words, the IAMR want to "expose the GFMD as a tool of imperialism to sell neoliberal and financing strategies and to expose and oppose US-led NAFTA and the militarization of borders in the region".

### **What is your overall assessment of the GFMD in Mexico?**

Before the meeting, I have described Mexico as a "make-it-or-break-it"-stage of the process. If the GFMD had proceeded as half-hearted as in Athens, that may have been the beginning of the end. While there is an uncertainty about the immediate future (see below), I think the process is here to stay, although not necessarily in the form as we know it. From a civil society perspective, it can definitely be seen as a step forward; but for the future of the forum it is probably more important to provide incentives for the governments to participate in and support the process. I am not sure yet what to make of the newly introduced "platform for partnerships" – an internet-based exchange of "best practices" - , but if that could initiate some meaningful cooperation it may also stabilize the GFMD process. While it was definitely not broken in Mexico, it still rests on shaky ground – from my perspective, the most important step to move on would be the establishment of more regular and probably more regional meetings. Already existing Regional Consultative Processes (RCPs) could be used as a basis.

### **How do you see the future of the GFMD?**

While as a researcher I am quite happy that the GFMD takes place every year, there are also voices stating that every two years could be sufficient. It is an expensive meeting and maybe it would be more productive to have regular regional meetings instead and exchange more specific results every two years in a global forum. Switzerland, which has stepped in for next year, might push the process in that direction. The country was quite involved in the GFMD in Athens in 2009 already with a heavy emphasis on "best practices", so from a government point of view they may bring the forum forward. In terms of civil society involvement one can only speculate at this point.

But there is another important event upcoming in Switzerland next year that promises a much more specific outcome: In Geneva, the International Labour Conference (ILC) will hold its second round of negotiations on the "Decent Work for Domestic Workers Convention". This could be a breakthrough that would also benefit migrant domestic workers - documented and undocumented alike. The tripartite structure of the ILC – representatives of governments, trade unions and employers negotiate and can come up with binding agreements – might also be a model for the global governance of migration.<sup>2</sup> There are many other fora beside the GFMD and migrant organizations are very aware of that fact. They will certainly be active in Geneva as well.

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<sup>2</sup> Stefan Rother discusses this in depth here: <http://www.inwent.org/ez/articles/176246/index.en.shtml>

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