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**TRANSNATIONAL POLITICS AND THE ORGANISING OF MIGRANT LABOUR IN
SOUTHEAST ASIA – NGO AND TRADE UNION PERSPECTIVES**

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Transnational Politics and the Organising of Migrant Labour in Southeast Asia – NGO and Trade Union Perspectives

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Summary

Southeast Asia is part of a dynamic region in terms of labour migration comprised of source and destination countries highly significant within the broader patterns of human movement globally. The ‘import’ and ‘export’ of steadily increasing numbers of foreign workers in general, and the feminization of migration in specific, has created a myriad of problems and challenges that require attention by governments, trade unions and NGOs in origin and destination countries. In this context, the issue of workers’ solidarity and civil society involvement gains significance as the need for protection and political representation becomes more prominent. New strategies are beginning to emerge in form of intra-organizational reform processes or inter-organizational alliances within the region.

This paper focuses on migrants’ collective activism and national as well as transnational networking by NGOs and trade unions in view of identifying areas of collaboration on issues concerning foreign workers across Southeast Asia. The objective is to highlight the importance of social action and activism in the effort to promote and implement a migrant rights’ agenda. It is argued that by adopting a transnational perspective, today’s prevailing forms of migration that are characterized by their short-term nature and high levels of fluidity can political activism for migrant workers reach positive results.

Introduction

Southeast is part of a dynamic region in terms of labour migration comprised of source and destination countries highly significant within the broader patterns of human movement globally. The ‘import’ and ‘export’ of steadily increasing numbers of foreign workers in general, and the feminization of migration in specific, has created a myriad of problems and challenges that require attention by governments, trade unions and NGOs in origin and destination countries. In this context, the issue of workers’ solidarity and

civil society involvement gains significance as the need for protection and political representation becomes more prominent. New strategies are beginning to emerge in form of intra-organizational reform processes or inter-organizational alliances within the region¹.

Many non-governmental organizations (including trade unions) are advocating or lobbying with the aim to improve migrant workers' rights – their human as well as labour rights. Migrants' rights are among, if not *the*, least clear and enforced group of human rights targeting marginalized groups such as refugees, women, and children. This lack of recognition of migrants' rights in practice means migrants have little real access to rights which is related to political and cultural bias against foreign workers as pointed out by Gosh (2003). But another crucial issue is the absence of a social movement capable of supporting the rights of all migrants, legal and illegal. This has partly to do with the traditionally ambiguous stance of the trade union movement which would otherwise be an important ally in the struggle for migrant *workers'* rights. There are signs, however, of growing civil society activism and the forming of intra-regional networks to address and promote a migrants' rights agenda (Piper 2003; 2004; 2005). At the forefront of these are Asia-based NGOs, rather than trade unions.

Trade unions in the developing countries have not shown much active interest in migrant workers mainly because of their preoccupation with local issues: in countries of origin, the dominant perception is that migrants are better off than local workers because they have found employment abroad; from the viewpoint of local workers in the destination countries, migrant workers are perceived as job-takers and as responsible for depressing wages. The void left by trade unions has to some extent been filled by NGOs.

Despite some new developments, the trade union movement globally is still very much nation-state oriented. This leaves NGOs at the forefront of engaging in transnational activism. Moreover, few national trade union movements in Asia regularly conduct activities that focus on the needs of migrant workers in the formal sector, let alone in the informal such as domestic work (Wickramasekara, 2002). As a result, it is non-union labour organizing that has engaged in issues concerning foreign domestic labour, and in fact, there is increasing empirical evidence on the rise of such organising in Southeast Asia (Sim, 2002; Law, 2002; Piper and Yamanaka 2003).

We are now in a phase in which unions have been relegated to a less decisive role in labour relations and civil society globally, as reflected in decreasing membership numbers. In the name of flexibility, there has been an erosion of acquired rights and at the same time, labour movements in the world are beginning to deepen their analysis of globalisation. Migrant workers have traditionally been ignored or opposed to by unions and have thus remained largely outside the interest of unions which were/are often preoccupied with more pressing domestic issues. Based on their little bargaining power, migrants have largely been ignored. They have also been opposed to, based on the belief that they diminish the standards and contractual strength of national workers. As a result, in the context of foreign labour, the role of unions has for long been replaced, and not complemented, by NGOs (the reverse has been argued by Gallin 2000).

¹ Also across the region, as with Europe for example, as I have discussed elsewhere (Piper 2005).

This article focuses on migrants' collective activism and national as well as transnational campaigns by NGOs and trade unions in view of identifying areas of collaboration on issues concerning foreign workers across Southeast Asia (with occasional reference to Asia at large). It elaborates an argument made elsewhere (Ford and Piper, forthcoming), namely that migrant labour issues have become an important node at which non-traditional ways of organizing have developed, which interact with traditional forms.

My objective is to highlight the importance of social action and activism in the effort to promote and implement a migrant rights' agenda. In adopting a transnational perspective, I also seek to reflect today's prevailing forms of migration that are characterized by their short-term nature and high levels of fluidity. I shall thus emphasize transnational political activism as a crucial element to push for a new rights' agenda that takes on board the context in which many, if not most, migrants operate today.

This paper is based on data collected for a baseline study funded by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation on labour organising in Southeast Asia (carried out in 2005). But the paper also draws on fieldwork carried out between 2002 and 2004².

I shall begin by outlining the major patterns of contemporary migration streams and resultant policy concerns, to then turn to briefly discuss the most recent developments with regard to the legal and normative framework of international migration. The following section on transnational politics summarizes existing research (and gaps) on non-governmental organisations engaging in transnational networking and advocacy outlining in more detail the analytical framework of this paper. The paper then addresses traditional and non-traditional forms of labour organising in general, to then elaborate more on NGOs' networking/alliance building efforts and the role of trade unions. The final section discusses the issue of collaboration between the two types of non-governmental organisations indicating future directions.

New patterns of migration and policy concerns

Both the volume and patterns of migration have undergone important changes during the last few decades. Since the 1960s, the overall volume of international migrants has doubled. In 2000, the Population Division of the United Nations (conservatively) estimated their total number to be approximately 175 million.³ Thus, about 2.9 per cent of the world's population or one in every 35 persons are moving across borders.⁴ Taken

² This was partly done in connection with a UNESCO funded project as well as a Discovery Grant by the Australian Research Council (grant no. DP0343303).

³ This number includes refugees and displaced persons, but it does not capture irregular migrants who often escape official accounting. For this and other reasons, UN figures on migration undoubtedly understate the migration actually occurring and must be seen as the lower bound of probable levels.

⁴ *World Migration Report*, International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Geneva, 2003.

together, migrants would make up the fifth most populous “country”.⁵ According to the ILO, the volume of cross border movements of workers in search for employment is likely to grow, especially in view of globalization having thus far failed to generate jobs and economic opportunities where people live.⁶

Although world-wide figures of migrant labour’s percentage of the labour force is relatively small (1.2 to 1.5%), in the regional context of the Asia-Pacific, their importance has grown considerably. A shift of direction of destinations has occurred from the Middle East to East and Southeast Asia, with migration to e.g. Malaysia and Singapore being indispensable (ILO 1999).

Major policy concerns relating to international migration that have been highlighted in the existing literature include:

- rising numbers of irregular/undocumented migration;
- increasing shift toward temporary and circular migration (as opposed to permanent settlement);
- related increasing ‘bifurcation’ between skilled and unskilled migration in the ease of migration between countries;
- feminisation of migration;
- impact of migration on economic and social development.

All of these issue areas implicate migrants with different skill levels, nationalities or ethnicities, gender, age and so forth. Irregular migration is now much higher than in the 1980s. Undocumented migrants’ numbers are especially high in certain countries. In the case of Malaysia they amount to about 50%, with the highest percentage being in Japan with about 68%. Partly as a result of irregular migration, wage discrimination is rampant (ICFTU-APRO 2003). The rate of employment in the informal sectors where many migrants can be found is also increasing. The latter partly explains the rising numbers of independent female migrants also.

The feminization of labour migration is most prominent in Asia. In Southeast and East Asian countries that admit migrants exclusively for temporary labour purposes, the share of independent women in the labour migration flows has been increasing sharply since the late 1970s (ILO, 2003: 9), and in some cases women clearly dominate over their male counterparts. The Philippines have now surpassed Mexico as the world’s largest labour exporting country, and the majority of its newly departing (land-based) migrants are women. Unlike Southeast Asian sending countries, South Asia is mainly a labour

⁵ *Towards a Fair Deal for Migrant Workers in the Global Economy*, International Labour Office (ILO), Report VI, prepared for the International Labour Conference, 92nd Session, Geneva, 2004.

⁶ *A Fair Globalization: Creating Opportunities for All*, World Commission on the Social Dimension of Globalization, International Labour Organization, 2004; and ILO 2004:9 (supra note).

exporting sub-region where women's (official) mobility is subject to serious restrictions (with the exception of Sri Lanka). Hence, countries such as Bangladesh predominantly send male migrants.

The vast majority of migrants in Asia are low- or semi-skilled workers who are participating in migratory systems with specific characteristics: labour migration is mediated by employment agencies with the effect of increasing the overall costs of migration; cross-border flows are of strictly temporary nature and highly regulated; migrants are subject to widespread incidences of abuse and rights violations; upon return, they are faced with uncertain reintegration (ILO 1999).

In Asia, migrant workers find occupation particularly in the construction sector, in the manufacturing sectors for small firms or for sub-contracting companies, in services, in plantation, rice mills and fisheries. They are typically provided low salaries with little or no benefits. Migrant women are confined to traditional roles in the economies, mostly in the health, entertainment and domestic service sectors. They are also labouring in factories. In many of these occupations, they are inadequately covered by labour legislation.

The legal and normative framework of international migration – recent developments

Certain groups in society, such as children, women, refugees, and also migrant workers, have been targeted by international treaty law, to protect them as a category of people identified as particularly weak. In recent years, considerable progress has been made in establishing an international legal and normative framework for managing the movement of people across borders and for protecting the rights of international migrants. This is related to three international agreements that came into force during the past few years: the 1990 UN Convention on the Rights of All Migrants Workers and their Families (hereafter: ICRM) which had finally reached the minimum number of ratifications in 2003 and Protocols on Human Smuggling and Human Trafficking. But in comparison to other UN conventions/covenants, the overall rate of ratification of migrant rights specific conventions has been disappointing. This is the same for the two migrant worker specific ILO conventions (nos. 143 and 97).

The core principles of relevance to migrant workers are non-discrimination, equality and equal protection of the law. Migrants' specific vulnerability stems from the fact that they are not citizens of the country in which they work and reside. In addition, a distinction is usually made between 'legal' and 'illegal' migrants, with the latter being granted basic human rights in international conventions, but not the full breadth of rights that legal migrants enjoy. This makes irregular migrants⁷ even more vulnerable.

⁷ A note on terminology is required here. Migrants without documentation or work permits are often referred to as 'illegal' in which is misleading as it conveys the idea of criminality. Many studies have shown that migrants shift between the status of legality and illegality for various reasons, often beyond their control or knowledge. The term "undocumented" is preferable, but does not cover migrants who enter the destination country legally but later violate their original entry visa. At the 1999 International

Taken together, existing UN and ILO conventions provide fairly comprehensive – albeit incomplete⁸ - protection but they exist in a fragmented and scattered manner, and it is sometimes not obvious that they could relate to migrant workers when the focus is on the single variable of ‘migration status’ rather than on multiple variables relevant to women and men who migrate for work – including race or ethnicity, occupation, and gender (Satterthwaite forthcoming). It is common that destination countries single out the migration status, and by treating workers as non-citizens, especially when they are irregular migrants, the rights of states clearly prevail over the rights of migrants with states retaining the ultimate right to set the conditions under which foreigners may enter and reside in their territory⁹.

Yet, once in the territory and working, there has been a gradual push in recent years (coming mainly from trade unions and NGOs) toward treating migrants first and foremost as workers, regardless of their legal status. This development has become evident on the international level also, in the revival of a rights-based approach to migration which includes irregular migrants as manifested by the ILO’s latest Plan for Action (result of the International Labour Congress, June 2004). The most recent and ground breaking development in this regard, however, is the ruling by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights that clarifies that all migrants – documented and undocumented – are covered by the principles of non-discrimination, equality and equal protection in the host states where they live and work and must not be excluded from the protection of labour laws on the basis of their migration status.

Despite all this, there has been little systematic and critical analysis of the emerging global policy and impact on advancing migrants’ rights – especially in light of parallel trends toward a global ‘management of migration’ (largely predicated upon the agenda of countries in the North, as it seems). Although this shift in the migration policy debate to international cooperation is primarily concerned with control over entry and exit as well as prevention of irregular migration,¹⁰ broader human rights issues have entered into the discussion and thus, a concern for the basic units of analysis of migration: the migrants themselves. But it is yet to be seen whether this is a matter of paying mere lip service or whether there is in fact a serious concern with migrants’ human rights.

The analysis of these global shifts is also crucial with regard to another development that runs parallel to the above mentioned, and that is the negotiations at the World Trade Organization (WTO) revolving around GATS/ Mode 4 which indicate a trend to subsume migration under a broader trade agenda. GATS is the first multilateral and legally

Symposium on Migration in Bangkok, 21 participating countries agreed to use the term “irregular migrants” which has since become common practice.

⁸ See Bimal Gosh’ discussion on the inadequate recognition of migrants’ rights in international and national law (2003).

⁹ See Pecoud and de Gutcheneire (2005) for a summary of the literature on the “no border” debate as well as Martin (2003) on states’ rights.

¹⁰ See e.g. Global Consultation on International Protection, *Refugee Protection and Migration Control: Perspectives from UNCHR and IOM*, 31 May 2001; www.unhcr.ch/prexcom/globalcon.htm.

enforceable agreement on international trade in services and Mode 4 concerns the movement of natural persons. Developing countries have a surplus in skills in the service sector and GATS provides opportunity to earn higher wages. But the strictly temporary movement of Mode 4 of GATS targeting the highly skilled (which also means it is more beneficial to male migrants than female¹¹) with limited commitments by developed countries imposes serious immigration barriers. Although it has been suggested that the GATS negotiations could provide an opportunity to address human rights risks linked to migration (Dommen 2005), the WTO is not a forum that allows for the input from social partners, and thus non-governmental voices which are usually at the forefront of pushing for rights are not given a voice.

Transnational Politics and Non-governmental Organisations

In view of contemporary migration patterns being largely of short-term nature, often irregular, it is crucial to link country of origin to country of destination in analysing international migration issues and formulating responses. Given the contract labour policies or the tacit approval of illegal migration involving high incidences of return migration, destination and origin countries both take advantage of migrant workers and are thus responsible for their treatment. Government policies rarely reflect such mutual responsibility¹², and it is up to non-governmental forces to work on highlighting this. The emerging subject of transnational politics offers an analytical tool allowing us to combine domestic and external political factors involved that are of great importance when discussing the politicisation of labour migrants' situation in the context of contemporary patterns of migration.

The emerging research area of transnational political activism has generated important studies within several different scholarly disciplines, including International Relations (IR). As I have provided a detailed literature review elsewhere (Piper 2003; Piper and Uhlin 2004), I will not elaborate this any further here but confine my discussion to two points: 1) issues pertaining to labour in general and women workers in specific have been an important ingredient in the development of transnational perspectives on political activism (see whole volume 2, no. 2, of the International Feminist Journal of Politics 2002; Fonow 2003; Herold 1995). In such works, male and female workers emerge as social agents and not merely as passive bearers of the power of global capital; 2) as demonstrated by social movement literature, the effectiveness of political activism is related to networking and alliance building, nationally and transnationally, to accumulate enough force to achieve change (Piper and Uhlin 2004; Courville and Piper 2004).

Much of the literature on transnational advocacy networks has focused on (international as well as national) NGOs or community-based organisations. In the context of protecting migrant workers, the meaning of *transnational* networking and organizing, which reflects

¹¹ For a full discussion of gendered migration streams, see Piper (2005).

¹² Memoranda of Understanding or Bilateral Agreements are no exception to this as they rarely contain any clauses on rights issues.

the nature of cross-border migration involving at least two countries, refers to (1) local citizens campaigning on behalf of non-citizens; (2) activists following their compatriot migrant workers to the destination and campaigning on their behalf from there; (3) migrants setting up an organization for migrants of their own nationality and directing their campaigns at both, the government of the origin as well as destination; (4) migrant workers or their compatriot activists campaigning on behalf of all migrant nationalities, not only their own nationality group.

Unlike NGOs, trade unions' involvement has not been analysed from a transnational perspective in the specific context of international migration and protection of foreign workers. This is not necessarily to mean that transnational action is not happening in the realm of trade unions, but rather that this perspective has been ignored in works on migrant worker organising. Instead, in the small but gradually expanding literature on migrant worker supporting organisations, it is the rise of NGOs and other voluntary associations committed to addressing dire needs and alleviating serious problems of migrants in general and migrant women in particular that have been subject to research from a transnational perspective (see e.g. Piper 2003). In the specific context of migrant worker activism, the phenomenon of rising NGO/civil society activism has, thus, not only been approached from a 'globalization from below' perspective, but also as forms of 'transnationalism from below', wherein coalitions of citizens of various nationalities and classes challenge state policies by transcending national boundaries (Guarnizo and Smith 1998). The extent to which migrant worker NGOs are able to form alliances, especially within destination countries, and assert sufficient pressure on governments to achieve change has, however, been questioned¹³. Hong Kong is the ideal example: despite its vibrant NGO (and trade union) activist scene, the government has nevertheless lowered the monthly income for domestic workers (Ford and Piper, forthcoming).

Recent transnational perspectives that introduce an understanding of migration as involving social processes that bridge countries of origin and destination (Nyberg-Soerensen et al., 2001) also include the realm of politics. Five major groupings have been suggested: (1) immigrant politics (political activities by migrants to improve their situation in the country of destination); (2) homeland politics (political activities directed towards the domestic or foreign policy of the country of origin); (3) home town politics (initiatives from abroad aimed at participation in the development of local communities of origin); (4) diaspora politics (political practices confined to group barred from direct participation in the homelands' political system) and; (5) transnational politics (political activities directed at both country of origin and destination). In this classification, however, the focus is on the aspect of migration or migrant status and not on those migrants' role as *workers*. Hence, trade unionism as the classic political representation of workers' interests – is left out.

Based on the argument that unions and NGOs must strengthen their alliance in order to meet the challenges resulting from the emergence of a global labour market (Gallin 2000), it is also necessary - in addition to transnational networking among NGOs - to investigate the responses to the situation of significant numbers of contracted foreign

¹³ I owe this comment to Professor Vivienne Wee. City University of Hong Kong.

workers in certain sectors by traditional worker organisations, i.e. trade unions. Is there room for collaboration between NGOs and trade unions and are trade unions engaging in transnational activism?

Traditional and non-traditional labour organizing

Employment in growth sectors used to be a source of workers' empowerment through trade unionism but much of today's labour migration undermines this traditional pattern, producing a class of workers who are isolated and largely invisible (Sassen 2003). In a globalizing economy and society, trade unions are facing new challenges, such as organising the informal sector and connecting with other civil society actors to advance a broader socio-political agenda. In this process, both unions and NGOs are presumed to be changing (Gallin 2000).

More recently, in fact, evidence has begun to emerge of trade unions broadening their constituency by becoming more inclusive of migrant worker issues (partly related to contemporary challenges with recruitment for membership of 'traditional' workers etc.), but such observations largely derive from the context of western countries (for the UK, see Avci and McDonald 2000; for the US, Watts 2003). Developing countries' unions have usually had lower levels of members to start with¹⁴; in addition, they have not shown much pro-active interest in migrant workers mainly because of their pre-occupation with local issues. In countries of origin, the dominant perception is that migrants are better off than local workers because of the mere fact that they have found employment abroad; from the viewpoint of local workers in the destination countries, migrant workers are perceived as job-takers and as responsible for depressing wages.

Moreover, in the Asian context it has been observed that few national trade union movements regularly conduct activities that focus on the needs of migrant workers in the formal sector, let alone in the informal such as domestic work (Wickramasekara 2002). Partly as a result, there is increasing empirical evidence about the rise in non-union labour organizing that is occurring around issues concerning foreign domestic labour demands in Southeast Asia (Sim 2002; Law 2002; Piper and Yamanaka 2003).

Non-union organizing as such is not a phenomenon triggered by labour migration only. Scholars writing on labour relations have observed that the Southeast Asian experience demonstrates a myriad of non-union organizations engaged in labour activism within national borders and more recently, across nations as well. Thus, the empirical evidence from the developing South suggest more acknowledgement of the importance and influence of non-traditional, non-union labour organizing (Ford, 2004; Hutchison and Brown, 2001). Not all of these NGOs concern themselves primarily with labour issues but all contribute to a complex web (Ford, 2004).

Unlike unions, NGOs have the ability and willingness to challenge established structures of organized labour. On the negative side, they are limited-member organizations and

¹⁴ In Malaysia, for instance, only 10% of all workers are unionized (Piper 2005).

depend on external funding which sometimes ties them to the agendas of donor agencies. In addition, their activists are rarely of the working class.

Alliance Formation or Networks among NGOs

Existing NGOs can be divided into two broad categories, ‘migrant labour organizations’ (understood as those run by migrant workers themselves) and NGOs involved in migrant labour (i.e. organizations which do not focus on foreign workers *per se*). In the two major receiving countries in Southeast Asia, Malaysia and Singapore, there are no NGOs of the first type, apart from one informal network recently started up by Indonesian domestic workers and a few training centres run mostly by Filipinos in Singapore. They do, however, not replicate the kind of NGOs one can find in Hong Kong that are run by non-citizens.

The second type can be further classified into the following types of NGOs: 1. faith-based organizations, 2. worker/labour NGOs, 3. women’s rights organizations; and 4. human rights organizations. Both Singapore and Malaysia have a group or groups in each category.

In Singapore, most programs and services of existing NGOs or community groups are directed at FDWs – especially the training centres but also the advocacy group TWC2 (The Working Committee 2) which is not surprising as the latter is rooted in the women’s movement and thus concerns itself with women issues. The training centres also all focus on domestic workers. The only general human rights NGO in Singapore, the Think Centre, engages in lobbying work for all types of migrant workers. Most existing NGO/community groups focus on foreign domestic workers, and many groups are set up to cater for one specific nationality group – i.e. Filipino or Indonesian.

In Malaysia, existing NGOs offer a range of services and programs covering important issues in connection with migrant workers. There is clear engagement with regional networks/alliances and lobbying efforts for the ratification of ICRM nationally, regionally and at UN Level (unlike in Singapore). Apart from services offered by embassies, there is no organization that caters for a specific nationality group only. Apart from WAO (Women Action Organisation) which concentrates on offering services and advocacy to FDWs only (and victims of trafficking), thus to women only, the other groups cover migrant workers of all nationalities and sexes. Tenaganita is the one NGO that balances advocacy and service provision most equally. Suaram is a pure advocacy NGO (human rights). The National Organization of Human Development (NOHD), a church-based organization, has the smallest advocacy component among all NGOs that work on migrant labour.

Inter-group alliances

Neither in Singapore, nor in Malaysia have NGOs created a formalized national network. As a result, cooperation among them is often on an ad hoc basis. In Malaysia, the degree of cooperation seems deeper and takes place in form of the publishing of joint statements or the organizing/attending of joint conferences/workshops.

Much NGO activism focuses on FDWs in this region which is understandable since this group of migrants is not covered by national employment legislation, nor by trade union organizing. Being a woman's issue, it is naturally of interest to women's organizations also and it is presumed that women's organizations are the partners for migrant worker organizations.

However, collective activism around FDW issues in the region manifests itself in the often contradictory processes of alliance formation between local women's organisations and FDW groups. This tension is clear in countries of origin such as Indonesia, where middle-class women engaged in activism on behalf of FDWs do not generally raise issues faced by domestic workers employed locally by women like themselves with the same vigour as they promote the interests of Indonesian nationals employed as domestic workers overseas. In destination countries such as Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore, where middle-class women almost always employ foreign maids, class intersects with national identity. In Hong Kong, for example, middle-class women have largely failed to support FDWs' successful campaigns (Wee 2003), perhaps because opposition to the government's proposal to lower the minimum wage is seen as an economic threat to working families who seek to minimise the costs of hiring a live-in maid.

Yet despite these contradictions the middle-class women active in these organisations have played an important role in both sending and receiving countries. A 2001 study of migrant education programs in six countries (Philippines, Indonesia, India, Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan) identified 248 groups which are directly involved or supporting migrants' issues (AMC 2001). Many of these migrant labour NGOs spend much of their time and efforts on service provision and immediate problem solving rather than political advocacy or organising (Piper 2003), but their efforts to advocate for migrant women's rights have been influential at local, national and transnational levels in East and Southeast Asia.

'Good practices' of National and Regional Alliances

With regard to networks among migrant worker organizations (i.e. those run by migrants themselves), the best example is provided by the Philippines which have the most extensive breadth of NGOs involved in migrant worker issues nationally, regionally and globally. The Philippines has a long tradition of grassroots civil activism and citizens' political engagement fighting for human rights, specifically the rights of the poor and indigenous people and other issue areas (Silliman and Noble 1998). The country has an equally long history of feminist movements. These together have constituted a strong social and political force in the Philippines' civil society.

Migrant worker activism in the Philippines grew out of this grassroots democracy movement. From the onset of the government's efforts to promote labour export in 1974, Filipino NGOs have been heavily involved in public policy debates and campaigns. The Catholic Church has also played an instrumental role at home and abroad by providing migrants with spiritual guidance and physical space for social interaction (Asis 2002). Unlike NGOs in other Asian countries (e.g., Indonesia), following its 1986 revolution, Filipino NGOs have been able to work in a comparatively open political system and even to have access to elite allies within the governmental political machine. Although such close relationships with the government have created many frictions and conflicts in government–NGO relations, they indicate the centrality of labour migration issues in Philippine politics and the ability of NGOs to influence governmental policy making there (Villalba 1997).

By the mid-1990s the Philippines had emerged as the second largest source of the world's global labour force. In response to the strong grassroots' push for protection of worker rights both at home and abroad, the Philippine government has become, among all labour sending countries, the most active protector of its migrant nationals. It did so by legislating the most comprehensive laws aimed at enhancing their rights¹⁵. Its first great legislative achievement was ratification of the ICRM in 1995. This happened largely in response to the controversial case of Flor Contemplacion — a Filipina domestic worker executed in Singapore in the same year for allegedly killing another Filipina domestic worker and the child of the latter's employer (Hildson et al. 2000; Law 2002: 210). This widely publicised incident generated a spontaneous public outcry and massive demonstrations by Filipino NGOs and citizens at home and abroad. The sharp response to the incident reflected the hardships and harassment experienced by many, if not most, Filipino migrants. In order to appease the public outcry, President Ramos ratified the ICRM and legislated a domestic law, the *Overseas Migration Act* (RA 8042), to implement the ICRM. The Philippines thereby became the first country to pass such a law, as required by the ICRM, among all signatories to it.

In addition, the most recent such legal accomplishments include the 2003 enactment of the *Absentee Voting Rights' Bill* (RA 9189) and the *Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act* (RA9208). The latter was achievable because committed NGOs and organised groups of migrants and women worked diligently, lobbying for its legislation and educating the public on the issue of trafficking in women. It is important to acknowledge that ratification of the ICRM and the following passage of migration-related bills did not occur in a social vacuum. It was in fact preceded by a number of small 'success stories' achieved by migrant women worker NGOs, mainly those operating from Hong Kong.

As the above indicates, the launching of migrant NGOs abroad is deeply rooted in developments domestically, as expressed by one Filipino activist: "the key to successful campaigning abroad is a strong movement 'at home' ".¹⁶ The vibrant activism staged by Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong and elsewhere is, thus, an outcome of many

¹⁵ The problems with implementation are discussed in Iredale, Piper and Ancoq (2005).

¹⁶ Nicola Piper, interview, Manila, November 2003.

factors embedded in their country of origin, their destinations and in the growing transnational networks that connect them.

Arguable, the most successful of these, in terms of its widespread grassroots support as well as overseas networking is MIGRANTE International which is a global alliance of overseas Filipino organizations. Membership based, staffed by activists who were formerly migrants themselves, and supported from the grassroots level, MIGRANTE has been vital in organizing Filipino migrants on a large scale. Among its objectives are to strengthen unity and organizations of overseas Filipinos and their families in the Philippines and to defend the rights and welfare of overseas Filipinos. It has 95 member organizations in 22 countries in all global regions. By trying to address the root causes of migration in the Philippines, the NGO and its networks are addressing migrant workers rights 'at home'.

Another Philippine-based, but clearly more regionally oriented, network is MFA (Migrant Forum in Asia). It is a 260+ membership organization covering the whole of Asia (West, South, Southeast, Northeast, and East), including NGOs from sending and receiving countries (for more detail, see www.mfasia.org). Its member-NGOs support any migrant workers, female and male, of any nationality in Asia. They hold regular regional meetings, exchange information (and also engage in lobbying) via email.

Although Indonesia has a less-developed system of migrant labour NGOs than the Philippines, it is nevertheless home to many tens of migrant labour NGOs (Ford, interview, June 2003, Jakarta), many of which are organised under the most prominent migrant labour umbrella organization, the Consortium for the Defence of Indonesian Migrant Workers (KOPBUMI, *Konsorsium Pembela Buruh Migran Indonesia*). KOPBUMI has been extremely active in promoting migrant labour issues through the local media, and in advocating for changes in Indonesia's labour law, for example, for a bill on the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers and their Families, which was introduced to parliament in 2002. In the same year, migrant labour NGOs filed a citizen's lawsuit against nine government officials, including President Megawati Soekarnoputri, in relation to the humanitarian disaster at Nunukan (Ford 2003b). It has also sponsored the formation of the Jakarta-based Federation of Indonesian Migrant Worker Organisations (FOBMI), whose local affiliates plan to provide counselling and other assistance to prospective and former migrant workers in their provinces of origin (Ford 2004).

Another important regional network whose secretariat is located in Kuala Lumpur is CARAM Asia (a sub-network part of MFA), which stands for Coordination of Action Research on AIDS and Mobility. It is not only concerned with domestic worker issues, but with larger health and other migration issues. But its work has been particularly influential with regard to FDWs. As a follow up to a regional summit on domestic workers in 2002, CARAM Asia launched a campaign to make FDW issues visible and expose the violations of their rights. It also seeks to bring about legal and extra legal protection of FDWs and lobbies for the recognition of domestic work as 'proper' work. To do so, it organized two consultative meetings with the UN Special Rapporteur for the Human Rights of Migrants. In addition, the network also a declaration called the

Colombo Declaration in 2002 at the conclusion of a regional summit on FDWs which was attended not only by NGOs but also by trade unions.¹⁷ This network has thus included trade unions in their activist endeavours. Whether trade unions attended these meetings purely to get informed or in view of addressing FDW-related issues as part of their programmes and services remains to be seen.

The Role of Trade Unions

Within the world of trade unionism and its policy making structure, we have to distinguish between international unions, national centres and also sector-specific issues.

International Unions and Policy

At the global confederation level, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) has advocated for migrant rights in many venues. It was a very crucial participant in the 2004 International Labour Conference in Geneva. It has also made numerous solidarity actions for migrant issues around the world and its affiliates in many countries have started covering the problems of migrant labour - not only employment issues but also in terms of the social fall-outs like racism and xenophobia. In a recent policy paper ICFTU (2003) argues that a discussion among affiliated organizations is needed to deliberate on “mainstreaming” migrant workers. In 2000, a workshop was organized on this topic of mainstreaming migrant workers.

The ICFTU’s Regional Organization for Asia and Pacific (APRO) has also organized a few regional consultations on the role of trade unions in protection migrant workers (ICFTU-APRO 2003). ICFTU-APRO’s Action Plan from 2003 includes two major recommendations: 1. establishing migrant workers’ desk or committee; 2. recruiting migrant workers as union members. The first has been realized by some national centres, such as Singapore’s NTUC¹⁸. Malaysia’s TUC has a sub-committee/section on foreign workers but they do not have the funding for more full time staff to work on migrant labour related issues, let alone on legal assistance (interview, July 2005, Kuala

¹⁷ For wording and more details, see caramasia.gn.apc.org/page.php?page=regional_summit/.

¹⁸ According to a recent questionnaire by the ILO sent out to trade unions around the world (to which 42 trade unions responded, among them NTUC Singapore), 16 unions replied affirmatively to the question whether they have a designated migration officer, two of which in Southeast Asia: Hong Kong and NTUC Singapore. The main responsibilities of such migration officers were mostly (1) training and information, followed by (2) policy advocacy, (3) individual assistance and lastly (4) recruiting members. NTUC Singapore’s designated migration officer is part of the ‘Migrant Workers Forum’ (MWF) which was set up in 2002, chaired by Mr. Yeo Guat Kwang.

Lumpur). The second recommendation constitutes still an underdeveloped aspect of trade union work in Southeast Asia.

Being a member of another global confederation, the Global Union Federation, the IFBWW (International Federation of Building and Wood Workers)¹⁹ concerns itself with “the promotion and enforcement of workers’ rights in the context of sustainable development”. It is reported as having stressed the need to find ways to make contact with illegal migrant workers (Johnsson 2005). According to the education officer at IFBWW in Kuala Lumpur (interview, June 2005), they are currently running a programme on migration involving as origin countries the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Mongolia; and as destination countries Malaysia, Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong and Japan. They are conducting an experiment of a trade union-to-trade union-agreement in the construction sector with Taiwan as the receiving country and the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Mongolia as the source countries. This project is financially supported by the Dutch FNV (Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging), the largest union confederation in the Netherlands. A trade union counterpart from each country takes part in this project. To operationalize this project, an agreement was signed between the National Federation of Chinese Construction Workers Unions and its employer counterpart stipulating that the union is given access to worksites where there are migrants workers so that migrants can be encouraged to join the union. The initial idea came from the Taiwanese Construction Union (they now see value in terms of foreign membership).

Vietnam is also an interesting case: Vietnamese contract workers to Taiwan are now accompanied by a representative of a Vietnamese union to make sure that their contract is respected and the terms are fulfilled. The catch is: these workers are not allowed to join a union in Taiwan. It would be interesting to study these kind of initiatives with more in-depth to see if they should be replicated elsewhere and how.

National level

In a recent paper prepared for the ICFTU, Johnsson (2005:2) observes that the Union movement considers “reaching out to the unorganized and vulnerable” a key part to ensuring the future relevance of the trade unions movement. He goes on describing trade unions as “one of the most progressive actors in the migration debate” and as “active in organizing them and defending the rights of migrant workers”. But this is not the case everywhere – or at every level (i.e. international unions’ policies might not trickle down to local unions). Also, it is yet to be seen to what extent rhetorics have actually been translated into action (projects and programmes). In receiving countries, one major problem seems to be finance and the justification of spending parts of the union budget on foreign worker issues when foreigners are not fee paying members. In sending

¹⁹ The IFBWW, headquartered in Geneva, has more than 10 million members in 287 trade unions in 124 countries around the world in the building, building materials, wood, forestry and allied industries.

countries, the major hinderance to more engagement with migrant workers seems to be preoccupation with local labour issues.

Gallin (2000) presents a more negative view to Johnsson's assessment, arguing that with trade unions' core actions revolving around wages and conditions of employment, the issue of migrant labour tends to be covered only in the realm of advocacies and statements by trade unions. Direct organizing and provision of services as well as institutional representation of migrants seem beyond the scope of normal trade union work, i.e., collective bargaining.

Yet, changing attitudes of unions towards migrant workers are reflected in two questionnaires (sent to national centres) conducted by the ILO, the first in 1994 and the second in 2003. The most common two issues that trade unions were engaged in with regard to migrant labour concerned discrimination and wages (Johnsson 2005).

In North America and Europe, trade unions have begun to change their traditional opposition to migrant workers, especially irregular migrants. While trade unions used to be very protective of the national workforce and considered the presence of irregular migrants in the workplace to be a threat to the interests of the former, today they recognize that the exploitation of irregular migrants undercuts the position of all workers, both nationals and lawfully resident migrants (Cholewinski, 2004: 46). This, of course, has to some extent to do with changing labour relations in the present era of globalizing labour markets where the traditional "core" labour force has shrunk in industrialized countries and with this, the membership of trade unions (Gallin, 2000).

In some European countries, it is not uncommon for trade unions to support the organization of irregular migrant workers²⁰. Initiatives in Asian countries are also under way. In Malaysia, with irregular migration being rampant, trade unions cannot ignore this. The recent change in leadership of the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) might result in a more inclusive policy direction placing migrant labour (legal and undocumented) firmly on their agenda. In Singapore, although the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) has set-up the Migrant Workers Forum in 2002, it is strictly against reaching out to undocumented migrants. There is also evidence of union work in Asian sending countries. The national seafarers unions (e.g., Associated Marine Officers' and Seamen's Union of the Philippines or AMOSUP) have their traditional focus on monitoring contract standards as well as providing services like health and additional training. The Alliance of Progressive Labour (APL) for its part has deployed a union organizer in Hong Kong to help the Filipino Domestic Helpers General Union (FDHGU). The union is in the process of affiliating to the Hong Kong Congress of Trade Unions and the APL and is also assisted by an NGO, the Asian Migrants Center (AMC). This is an interesting model to observe as it establishes union- to-union and unions-to-NGO partnerships.

There are difficulties inherent in encouraging participation of migrants in trade unions. Sending countries have usually difficulties offering services to migrant while they are abroad. Migrants often work for many different employers and in a variety of sectors. Migrants are often not accessible and there are also problems with language and culture.

²⁰ For some examples, see Piper 2005 (APMJ).

Often the migrants are not well educated and do not have any informed knowledge on trade unions. Particularly when they are undocumented, they do not feel encouraged to become members. Restrictive policies and practices in receiving countries and widespread pressure from employers not to join trade unions (threat of losing job) force migrants to keep a low profile. Furthermore, unions suffer from lack of resources (ILO 1999) as well as lack of knowledge and expertise (especially in countries of origin) (Johnsson 2005).

On the whole, the prevalent view of migrant workers is still as competitors for local workers, despite evidence to the contrary: a recent study in the Malaysian context has shown that this is not the case in many sectors. It seems so in agriculture but definitely not in construction²¹. Interesting to note is that domestic workers are not usually considered competitors on the employment market as local women have moved out of this sectors because of its social stigma, low pay and bad conditions. Yet, trade unions have not shown any interest in organising them.

Much of trade union's engagement with foreign migrant workers is still at level of rhetoric. It is, therefore, important to identify areas and modes of cooperation between trade unions in the labour sending and receiving countries to reach the next level of concrete projects/programmes. A workshop in 2000 organized by the ICFTU-APRO called among others for an integrated approach by unions in sending and receiving countries in the context of skill development, training, information exchange, better networking, and re-absorption of returning migrants. But no concrete plans or ideas have emerged on how to do this (ICFTU-APRO 2003).

Migrant Labour Unionising – sector specific example

The organizing of migrant labour experiences different problems or obstacles according to sector. The construction sector seems particularly difficult in this regard, with its complex sub-contracting structure and the high mobility of project-tied workers (between sites).

In Singapore, one area where the NTUC seems actively involved is in providing the opportunity to migrant workers to upgrade their skills and to acquire formal certification of competency in a trade. Employers are encouraged to offer skill improvement to their foreign workers as the levy imposed by the government on each foreign worker is lower the higher the skill level of the individual foreign worker is. According to the NTUC, in 2002-03, about 9,000 migrant workers (on work permits) had benefited from the Basic Education for Skills Training (BEST) and Work Improvement through Secondary Education (WISE) programmed administered by the union (NTUC Background Paper, 2005). Rahman and Fee (2005) report in their study on Bangladeshi workers that “a

²¹ Presentation by Dr. Suresh Narayanan ('Migrant Labour and the Malaysian Economy') at the UNHCR Roundtable on Migration and Refugee Issues, Kuala Lumpur, 13-14 June 2005.

significant number of migrants had upgraded their skills over time” (p. 73), leaving 52% of migrants unskilled at the time of the interview. These opportunities, however, are only available to workers in certain sectors, such as construction.

The Timber Employees Union in Malaysia has engaged in a different type of ‘action’ attempting to organize foreign workers since about three years ago (interview, June 2005). 30-40% of all timber workers are foreign (Nepalese, Indonesian, Bangladeshi, Vietnamese). In Sabah, 80-90% of the timber workers are foreign and 50% are undocumented (Indonesians and Filipinos). This union tries to organize workers at specific companies in Sabah and Sarawak where they have union branches. Constraints they have been facing when trying to organize migrants include: 1) language barrier (especially with Vietnamese); 2) intermediated by companies (which dismiss foreign worker who becomes member of trade union which goes against their contract but not actually the Employment Law); 3) policy of immigration (immediate deportation upon dismissal). Stage One, according to this union, is therefore to organize migrant workers secretly – to achieve membership of all foreign workers from a specific company – to then pressurize the company to recognize and accept union representation. This is not an easy task because the migrant workers tend to be intimidated based on the contractual requirement to not engage in political organising.

One sector this union is now actively targeting is the furniture industry which is the biggest employer of foreign workers in Malaysia. Some companies have a 90%, and occasionally even 100%, foreign workforce. The advantage of this sector for trade unions is that workers are immobile; they stay in dormitories close to the factories and do not move around (unlike in construction). The Timber Union has hired an education officer whose task it is to recruit the entire foreign workforce at specific companies for membership timber. In the case of one company which has a 100% foreign workforce, this goal (of 100% recruitment) has recently been achieved and the first ever case for recognition of unionization of foreign workers has been filed with this company. The outcome at the time of writing was unknown, and the union assumes that this company will most likely refuse recognition so that this case will have to go to the next higher instance. In any case, this is an important experiment.

NGOs and Trade Union Collaboration

Commonalities/differences

Both trade unions and NGOs are civil society actors. Trade unions and NGOs have in common that they have specific agendas for the improvement of society and that they can legitimately claim to be serving the interests of society in general. As a result, cooperation on a variety of issues between them does exist (Gallin 2000).

At the same time, they constitute very different sets of socio-political institutions. These differences are largely based upon:

- 1) membership mandate but bureaucratic procedures of the unions as against the speed and flexibility of the NGOs; trade unions have a clearly defined constituency; unions are usually seen as more democratic with high levels of transparency and accountability; NGOs are not subject to the same rules; they are membership organizations and have a self-appointed and co-opted leadership; there is no clear monitoring and evaluation procedures but this also gives them greater flexibility and mobility (Gallin 2000);
- 2) ideological positions and ways of organising; unions castigating NGOs for concentrating on certain measures that may ignore or undermine worker power; NGOs criticizing union organization and strategies as inadequate to the needs of migrant workers, especially the undocumented and domestic workers (and their non-recruitment) (cf. Waterman 2005);
- 3) class-based cultural differences; being largely middle-class NGOs are seen as having a culture of charity which differs from trade unions' culture of solidarity; many NGOs have a welfare and basic needs agenda rather than a social change agenda; yet in parts of the developing world, the radicalization of parts of the middle class has led many NGOs to adopt a radical agenda of fundamental social change (Gallin 2000).

At the same time, there are also misconceptions about both organisations' advantages and disadvantages. As Waterman points out, the union movement is not always the most democratic institution in every society, and he describes the image of NGOs "marked by polemical overkill". In terms of funding, both trade unions and NGOs are dependent on similar, if not the same sources. This leads Waterman (2005) to argue that with NGOs and trade unions constituting two very considerable world-scale socio-political-cultural actors, both types of organizations have in fact as much in common with each other as differences. The real question is how to use these commonalities and differences to complement each other. Unions have to realize that they will not be able to turn around their continuing decline unless they engage in a profound, open dialogue with labour NGOs (Waterman 2005).

Strength/weaknesses

The main weakness of NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) is that they tend to be small with little if any regular budgets. Few have full time staff. Singapore-based NGOs, e.g. do not engage in transnational networking across the region or with NGOs based in the sending countries This is partly related to the problem of very limited resources. Some NGO/CBO initiatives for migrants focus on specific nationality groups. Considering their limited resources, this is understandable. But this partly results in unequal service provision among the various nationality groups if not even to outright hierarchisation. For some nationality groups there are no services at all. Foreign-worker led-NGOs (such as a Filipino NGO led by Filipino activist) are also rare and Hong Kong is an exception in this regard. They do not exist in Singapore and Malaysia.

NGOs' advantages, on the other hand, include that they organize public fora/events and bring issues to the attention of the public and policy makers. Through such activities,

governments, such as in Singapore, have been pushed into taking action. In addition, the service oriented/para-legal NGOs that focus on FDWs fill an important gap because otherwise there would be no non-governmental channels for this group of migrants at all. Grass-root based groups have a crucial role in channeling cases to government ministries (such as the Ministry of Manpower in Singapore) or to the national union centres (as in Malaysia). In Singapore, there are also a number of training centres targeting FDWs. They fill an important gap as male migrant workers can obtain training through NTUC to upgrade their skills. Although it is to be tested how effective the actual training is and how useful it really is to returning FDWs, the courses offered by these centres at least serve a social welfare role as a forum for FDWs to meet peers.

As for trade unions, their strength is their sheer size and availability of resources. Promoting non-discrimination and equal treatment, they do not prioritize certain nationality groups. However, they focus on traditional sectors so that no trade union in Southeast Asia to date (with Hong Kong being an exception) offering any concrete projects or programmes for FDWs. The NTUC in Singapore is involved with the Ministry of Manpower' training for employers. NGOs feel that unions should lobby for changes in the employment law and working conditions and should be more active to lobby for standard contracts. NGOs argue that maids are not in the position to negotiate a fair contract for themselves. Trade unions are said to have the resources and connections to do more. They could set up a database on violations and abuses, injuries and breach of contracts to really find out what the scale of the problems are. As it stands, the nature of household work is not understood by the trade unions and misconceptions are abound (e.g. about resting periods during the day etc.).

Being general worker organizations, unions cannot focus exclusively on migrant workers, as NGOs can, and neither can they easily justify the spending of membership fees on foreign worker related issues.

According to ILO recommendations from 1999, trade unions in receiving countries are encouraged to:

- negotiate for internationally accepted standard employment contracts;
- make representation for the reduction of fees charged to migrants in view of the complete abolition of recruitment fees.

These two issue areas are tackled neither by MTUC nor NTUC.

NGOs argue that unions should offer free legal services to migrant workers suffering violation of their contracts. Unions should have a general welfare fund and legal services for all migrant workers. If they were to offer proper services to migrant workers, they could justify charging a fee (membership fee) with which to pay for such services. Likewise, it should be explored whether the levy payments could be used to fund such services.

Cooperation

Cooperation between unions and NGOs depends on whether they share common objectives and on issues relating to their methods of operation. At the international level, there seems to be extensive cooperation between unions and human rights organizations on defending workers' rights against state or para-state repression (Gallin 2000) NGO-trade union alliances also play a role in organizing workers in regions or employment sectors with traditionally low levels (or complete absence of) union organization, such as agricultural workers and domestic workers. Union-NGO cooperation depends in specific cases on shared objectives and also on their respective situations.

On the whole, there is very little contact and concrete cooperation between trade unions and NGOs on the issue of foreign workers. Whatever cooperated there might have been, this usually occurred in form of an ad hoc, one-off initiative to respond to a specific 'crisis'. This is partly attributed to trade unions' leadership (taking a pro-government stance) with unions taking the conventional approach of migrants taking away jobs from locals and for creating too many social problems.

Also, there is often little or no trust between NGOs and trade unions which is a mutual problem. In Singapore, NTUC is seen by NGOs as too close to the government and likewise, NTUC cannot engage with politically too 'noisy' NGOs. In Malaysia, the problem was similar with the previous leadership (with Zainel having held a government position), but since the change in presidency, trust seems to be building up. Since the change of leadership, some NGOs (notably Tenaganita) work now more closely with MTUC on exchanging information on individual cases and publicizing joint statements. MTUC now represents migrant workers in mediation cases (lawyers are not allowed, only unions). How this collaboration evolves and whether it will lead to more concrete projects/programmes is yet to be seen.

To sum up, NGOs are often micro managed and more grass-roots oriented and thus ideal to deal with concrete cases, whereas trade unions are part of the overall labour movement and thus, mass organizations. Trade unions argue that they cannot easily justify putting more resources into foreign worker issues as their membership is largely comprised of local workers. NGOs, on the other hand, feel that trade unions have a clear role to play and should take over some of the tasks that NGOs used to fulfill until now. This points to the importance of trade unions in the sending countries getting involved more actively.

Conclusion

In this paper I discussed the concept of transnationalism in the context of migrant worker organizing by non-governmental organizations. Political activism aimed at promoting migrant workers' rights has been taking place by way of transnational networking and alliance building to reflect the nature of much of today's cross border migration. This has however not occurred equally in all countries and across all types of organizations.

In a transnational context in the contemporary era where temporary contract labour constitutes the majority of foreign workers, the methods of political organizing must change to adequately respond to the needs and issues relevant to such workers. Trade unions must wake up to this and catch up with NGOs. Profound dialogue between the two sets of actors needs to take place nationally on the exact terms of engagement and areas of cooperation based upon their respective strengths and weaknesses. Transnational partner unions need to be identified and brought into this process to build a complex web of transnational interaction that would improve the complex situation of the various categories of migrant workers.

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