



A Civil Society Line Against Regression: Recommitting to Rights-Based Multilateralism

On this closing day of the second International Migration Review Forum (IMRF), civil society continues to strongly reaffirm the critical importance of multilateralism and the cooperative framework enshrined in the Global Compact for Migration (GCM). The commitments made within the GCM objectives and guiding principles – and during the first IMRF in 2022 – provided a vital, rights-based blueprint for global mobility, and we recognise the continued efforts of stakeholders working to uphold these values.

However, we are compelled to highlight a stark and deeply concerning lack of tangible progress as we assess the realities on the ground today. Rather than advancing toward our shared goals, we are witnessing a severe global regression in the human and labour rights of migrants. This underlines the need to implement existing commitments in ways that are human rights-based, people-centered, age- and gender-responsive, child-sensitive and grounded in non-discrimination. The widening chasm between diplomatic rhetoric at the multilateral level and the harsh, punitive realities of state practice is profoundly alarming, particularly as governments themselves fuel narratives of division, spreading racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance within communities. This regression is further exacerbated by the structural incoherence of immigration laws and policies that fail to align with the lived realities of migrants and the communities that support migrant rights and integration, and actual labour market conditions, and do not recognise the precious contribution of migrants to the socio-economic and cultural development of the host societies.

This backsliding is characterized by a disturbing shift away from foundational human rights principles like non-refoulement and access to essential asylum and refugee protection systems. Glimmers of hope remain, through practices and programmes such as the recent regularisation programme announced in Spain; the provision of universal healthcare including to migrants in Brazil; and significant strides to end child immigration detention and promote alternatives in Thailand, Malawi and Zimbabwe. The success of these initiatives illustrates that, with sufficient political will, positive outcomes are achievable within the framework of GCM objectives. However, these remain exceptions in a global increase in the normalisation of anti-migration rhetoric and criminalisation policies.

States are increasingly resorting to the externalisation of migration management, to pushbacks, forced violent returns, escalated deportations (including to third countries), enforced disappearances, and the normalization of arbitrary detention. We are also particularly alarmed by the growing reliance on exploitative temporary labor migration schemes that commodify migrant workers and systematically strip them of fundamental labour standards protections. These schemes move away from rights-based pathways, family unity, and pathways to permanency, with implications for young migrants entering the labour market and for families affected by temporary or restrictive migration pathways.

We are deeply concerned by the severe and disproportionate impact on migrants by ongoing wars and conflicts, with countless loss of life, displacement, exposure to increasingly hazardous occupational safety and health (OSH) risks, loss of livelihoods including wage theft, tremendous and persistent mental and psychological stress, protracted family separation, no access to humanitarian service and support and basic services. The wars and conflicts have exacerbated existing situations of vulnerability for migrants, **including children and young people on the move**. Amongst these difficult contexts, we commend the positive role and contributions of millions of migrants and stakeholders in responding to and coping with wars and conflicts, especially how migrants have provided emergency mutual aid, including shelter, food, psychological and mental support.

Concurrently, migrants and their families are routinely subjected to toxic scapegoating, bearing the brunt of xenophobic political narratives that distract from broader systemic failures. Compounding these deeply entrenched rights violations are the acute, life-threatening dangers faced by migrants trapped in war/conflict zones, as seen most urgently in the current situation in the Middle East / Southwest Asia. Migrants are deported to third countries where they have no ties, resources, security, or solution; the lives of those on the move are increasingly threatened as they are forced to take more dangerous routes, all in the context of the rapidly accelerating crises of climate change and environmental displacement.

These assessments are supported by a growing body of evidence from surveys, monitoring systems and mixed migration research conducted directly along migration routes. Data collected from people on the move consistently shows that restrictive and deterrence-based policies are not reducing movement: they are redirecting it to more dangerous routes, extending journeys, deepening financial precarity and increasing dependence on smugglers. People are temporarily stopped or diverted, but they do not return. The conditions that drove departure remain unaddressed. What changes is not the decision to move but the danger of doing so - a cost borne entirely by the people moving.

Across the world, civil society actors are witnessing the direct impacts of these regressions, working in increasingly difficult contexts to provide essential, often life-saving, services, including rescue of migrants at sea and on the migration routes, provision of health care, quality education and training, psycho-social support and aid. **Urgent, course-correcting action is imperative to ensure the adherence to international human rights law and to bridge the gap between important multilateral promises and the local, lived realities of migrants worldwide.**

We recognize that multilateralism itself is under unprecedented attack, making the current geopolitical climate an exceptionally sensitive. However, political complexities and polarization cannot serve as a pretext for abandoning the foundational commitments of Member States to the GCM. Civil society has continued to strongly advocate to align international, regional, national, and local migration policies and governance with the needs of migrants and local communities.

We are now witnessing the degradation of decades of work done by migrants themselves, civil society and building diplomatic collaboration and dialogue, we must at the absolute minimum draw a firm line against any further regression of migrants rights.

It is imperative that Member States and stakeholders unequivocally reaffirm a rights-based approach to migration and multilateral cooperation—one that remains strictly anchored in the normative United Nations framework of human rights and the international labour standards of the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Upholding this established baseline is a non-negotiable prerequisite for safeguarding human dignity, saving lives and ensuring any meaningful path forward.

Civil society in all our diversity remains at the forefront of defending migrant rights through diverse, frontline action. NGOs provide critical legal aid and policy advocacy despite shrinking budgets, while local community, civic and faith-based organisations deliver life-sustaining food and shelter to the most vulnerable. Trade unions are essential in organising workers across both the formal and informal economy, securing collective bargaining power, promoting labour rights throughout the migration journey, from recruitment onwards, and ensuring access to justice. Migrant and diaspora-led organisations provide peer-to-peer community support and translate lived experience into technical expertise for decision-makers. Meanwhile, young migrants and youth-led organisations bring lived experience and community-based perspectives to advocacy and policy discussions, and mobilise for systemic justice, while academics produce the evidence-based research necessary to expose and address ground-level realities.

However, we must underscore that this critical work is taking place against a deeply troubling backdrop of rising authoritarianism, the systematic closing of civic space, and the criminalisation and escalating attacks on human rights defenders worldwide. In the face of these threats, Member States have a profound duty to protect democratic participation and safeguard those on the frontlines of human rights advocacy.

To successfully further the objectives of the Global Compact for Migration, states must commit to meaningful, transparent, and continuous engagement with migrant-led organisations, civil society, and trade unions including through safe and enabling spaces for meaningful participation. Genuine, sustainable progress can only be achieved when those most directly impacted by migration policies are guaranteed a seat at the table and an active role in shaping their own futures.

Urgent Call to Action to Course Correct

1. All Member States and intergovernmental institutions must recommit to the universal declaration of human rights and the ILO fundamental principles and rights at work applying to all people regardless of migration status, **without discrimination**.
2. Recognise and promote the understanding that respect for human rights and human dignity is fundamental to global integral and sustainable development.
3. Concrete action must be undertaken by Member States and agenda-setting institutions to internally analyse and move away from fundamental concepts, terminology and language used in policies and public discourse that either directly or indirectly results in the promotion of xenophobic narratives, and the dehumanisation and/or instrumentalisation of migrants.
4. Concrete action must be taken by Member States to ensure the right to life and to prevent migrant deaths at sea, land border, in transit, and in camp settings. Borders must be managed in conformity with international law, international human rights law, international refugee law and international humanitarian law, including the principle of non-refoulement, the absolute prohibition of torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, the prohibition of collective expulsion, the right to individual assessment, and the prohibition of arbitrary detention, including immigration detention of children. Member States must also prevent the implementation of policies and laws that criminalise migrants and their rights defenders, as well as protect all migrants from gender-based violence, abuse, labour and financial exploitation, and violations of physical and mental integrity, with particular attention to children and young people on the move.

5. Member States and intergovernmental institutions must commit to basing migration policies on robust, disaggregated and independent evidence. This includes data collected directly with people on the move, which too often remains absent from official statistics, as well as existing evidence produced by civil society actors. Where evidence shows that a policy is not achieving its stated goals and is producing documented harms, states have an obligation to revise it, not simply to intensify it.
6. Urgent concrete action and international cooperation must be undertaken to centralise the sustainable address of negative drivers of migration, such as conflict, violence, lack of decent work opportunities and poverty driven by global and national inequality, and climate change, **taking into account their differentiated impacts across age, gender and other factors.**
7. Stakeholders across the world, at all levels of operations, must come together to support dialogue, exchange and cooperation mechanisms to streamline mutual support, learn collaboratively more efficiently than ever, and ensure all efforts are complementary in maximising impact.
8. Member States and intergovernmental institutions should ensure meaningful, transparent, safe and sustained participation throughout all related migration processes. This includes timely access to information, inclusive preparatory processes, clear participation modalities, and feedback mechanisms that enable civil society, migrant-led organisations, trade unions, local authorities, youth-led organisations and other relevant stakeholders to contribute effectively to implementation, follow-up and accountability.
9. Member States must actively protect, enable and resource civil society actors, migrants human rights defenders, trade unions and migrant-led organisations, including youth-led and women organisations, and decisively oppose the shrinking of civic space in all its forms. This includes guaranteeing their safety, freedom of association and expression, and meaningful access to decision-making processes.

10. Concrete action must be taken by Member States to dismantle exploitative temporary labor migration schemes that commodify migrant workers and systematically strip them of fundamental labor standards and protections. We call for a transition toward rights-based humanitarian pathways to permanency that address socioeconomic needs while upholding the dignity and agency of all workers, provide for family unity, and allow for migrant workers to exercise their freedom of association and other labor rights.

11. Member States must commit to developing ambitious national plans for the implementation of the Global Compact for Migration, complemented by multilateral collaboration to ensure prompt humanitarian service, support and sufficient coordination within and between governments, and with relevant stakeholders.