

EDITORIAL

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November 2012 will mark the first occasion when the World Social Forum on Migration (WSFM)¹ is held in Asia. Following previous meetings that took place in Europe and Latin America, the 5th WSFM will be convened in Manila, the Philippines, under the theme of “Mobility, Rights and Global Models: Looking for Alternatives”. More than 3,000 delegates and participants are expected to attend. Manila can certainly be considered an ideal venue for the Asian debut of the Forum since the Philippine capital is a major hub of transnational, regional and global migrant activism.

The World Social Forum process was originally conceived as an alternative to the World Economic Forum held annually in Davos, Switzerland and has usually taken place around the same time each year – in January or February – ever since it started in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The American critical theorist Nancy Fraser has called these gatherings of civil-society representatives and activists of the *alter-globalization* or *global justice movement* a “transnational public sphere”. After a decade of activity, the Forum is now a well-established process and a number of regional and thematic offshoots have even been created. One of these is the World Social Forum on Migration, which first took place in 2005.

The 2012 WSFM was originally planned to be held in South Korea, but has since been shifted to Manila for unspecified reasons – a particularly well-suited place to argue about migration. The Philippines is often seen – and considers itself – as a role model of a labour-sending state in the region. More than four decades of an active labour-export policy have led to the creation of a number of state institutions that promote and organize labour migration. As a result, more than a million OFWs (Overseas Filipino Workers) are deployed annually. The remittances they sent home amounted to US\$ 23 billion in 2011.

But that is only one side of the coin. Migrant organizations have been active in revealing and exposing the personal costs and disadvantages caused by such a massive labour-export programme: countless families have been torn apart and there have been numerous reports of exploitation and abuse at all stages of the migration process, including underpayment and overcharging of fees by the “migration industry”. Since this can happen in the sending, receiving and transit countries, the issue has been increasingly addressed in a transnational manner: migrant

¹ The Forum (www.wsfm2012.org) will be held on 26–30 November 2012 in Metro Manila, the Philippines. The author plans to participate in it and blog about the event on gfmd-blog.com.

organizations in the respective countries have started to cooperate with each other and establish chapters or partner organizations. This has led to the establishment of regional networks, the Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA) with its headquarters in Manila and CARAM Asia (Coordination of Action Research on AIDS and Mobility) with its headquarters in Kuala Lumpur being two of the major ones.

Members of these networks are also found among the leading activists of global migrant movements such as Migrants Rights International (MRI) and the International Migrants' Alliance (IMA). This became evident when the state-led Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) was held in Manila in 2008 and a great number of parallel and counter-events were held at the same time (see ASIEN 111). Thus, the organizers of the WSFM can now build upon the organizational and mobilization experience gained four years ago.

One thing has changed since then, though. While the activists almost uniformly regarded the then ruling (and later imprisoned) Philippine president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo as "an enemy of the migrants" back in 2008, her successor Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III announced that his government would be more conscious of migrants' rights and vowed to "discourage" Filipinos from seeking foreign employment by creating more job opportunities for them at home. Whether or not the situation of OFWs and the national labour market have actually improved under the Noynoy government is a matter of debate. The fact that the Philippines is the second country to have ratified the International Labour Organization's convention on "decent work for domestic workers" (convention no. 189) this August can be considered a step forward, however; the provisions of the convention include the rights of migrant domestic workers, which are among the main "exports" of the Philippines.

While this convention is certainly an important milestone (albeit one that has yet to be ratified and, more importantly, implemented by most countries), there are numerous specific as well as fundamental issues to be addressed during the WSFM which range from the local to the global level. The various activities and workshops that are due to take place during the week will be grouped under four themes: "Crisis, Critique and Consequences of Global Migration", "Migrants Rights Are Human Rights", "Re-imagining Migration: Proposing Alternatives, Exploring Models" and "Resistance, Organization, Action". Several field visits and cultural activities are going to be organized as well.

But even this event with its aims of inclusiveness – according to the statutes, anybody can apply to participate except political-party representations and military organizations – is not without its opponents: migrants' organizations from the militant left will organize their "own" event because they object to (and compete with) the policies and strategies of the members of the Philippine Working Group of the WSFM. Thus, an alternative "Migrants' Tribunal" will take place, which effectively represents a counter-event to a counter-event...