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Bonn Juego: Migration in Asia-Europe Relations

Last Updated (Wednesday, 10 November 2010 09:19) Written by Bonn Juego



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Migration is an issue of common interest to both Asia and Europe. Asia has very large intra-regional flows of migrant workers, currently the largest source of temporary contractual migrant workers in the world, and home of the top three sending countries — China, India, and the Philippines. Europe has the largest migrant population of over 60 million and is confronted with the difficulty of creating a common migratory space and jointly managed borders within the framework of the European Union. Against this background, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) has provided a dialogue platform to address this phenomenon by organising the Ministerial Conference on Cooperation for the Migration of Migratory Flows and consequently forming the ASEM Migration Experts Group in 2002 so as to mitigate the difficulties the ASEM member countries face at the domestic, regional, and inter-regional levels.

A momentum has thus been introduced. The challenge now for ASEM and its member countries is to sustain this momentum so as to effectively manage migration for the benefit of all (the migrants and their families, the receiving countries, and the sending countries) and the realisation of genuinely harmonious multicultural societies.

This essay hopes to contribute to sustaining this momentum by proposing a serious rethinking of the ASEM agenda on migration. It argues that the current emphasis, in both policy and discourse, on the issue of migration as primarily 'political' is extremely weak and hence deemed problematic. It then puts forward an alternative view that regards migration as a 'social relation'.

The ASEM activities operate in three main pillars: political, economic, and cultural. It is in the 'political pillar' where the issue of migration is addressed. Within this framework lies the major crux because it mainly sees migration as a political problem that involves questions of control and border security. In fact, the initial attempts to address migration are limited to 'exchange of information on flows of migrants and migration management, cooperation in improving the quality and security of travel documents, fighting forgery of documents, setting up networks of immigration and consular liaison officers and meetings at expert and director-general level.' The political response to migration through these limited initiatives would founder on its inability to grapple with the complex phenomenon of migration and hence the need for comprehensive responses. Under this current agenda and strategy, 'the political' is exalted, 'the economic' downplayed, and 'the cultural' neglected.

Several scholars on the ASEM institution and civil society like the Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF) have long argued for the inclusion of a 'social pillar' in the ASEM process. This suggestion that highlights 'the social' or 'the people' in Asia-Europe relations is sensible especially in light of contemporary migration issues.

Migration is a 'social relation' in which 'the political', 'the economic', and 'the cultural' are organically connected to—not separated from—one another. When migrants come in to a receiving country, they come in not merely as 'commodities' devoid of relational character, they come in as a domestic social force and hence contribute to the political, economic, and cultural evolution of the receiving and sending countries.

In reality, while ASEM basically places migration issue in the political pillar, most—if not all—migration agenda of its rich individual member countries especially in Europe are essentially intended for ‘economic’ development. In other words, these policies perpetuate a development strategy in which a poor country’s brain drain is the rich countries’ brain gain. In this sense, migrants are reduced to being players in the game of buying and selling of goods and services in a space called the ‘labour market’. They are treated merely as ‘factor of production’ devoid of any character as human beings who are embedded in social relations, socialised in various ways, and also living beings with hopes, dreams, and fears.

Apparently, globalisation has not yet brought about its promise of the free movement of both goods and people. There are much more restrictions to the mobility of people than of goods. Irregular migrants abound because immigration is restricted. This barrier to the free movement of people can only be evaded by illegal immigration (which creates ‘disposable workers’ that are easily vulnerable to exploitation, appalling labour conditions, and despotic situations) or through casualisation and short-term contracting without job security.

In a palliative attempt to harmonise the political, economic, and cultural aspects of migration, receiving countries have been incorporating the idea of ‘social integration’ into migration policy. However, this policy is not sufficient because the assumption upon which the idea ultimately depends is hollow. Integration implies a one-way process—that is to say, immigrants are obliged to adjust to the lifestyle of the receiving society. This idea assumes that the receiving country is static and migrants are passive robots.

In sum, there is a remarkable difference between viewing migration as a social integration issue, on the one hand, and migration as a social relation. The idea of ‘social integration’ has unrealistic assumptions that see migration as a one-way process, that societies and human relations are static, and that migrants are mechanical. Policies that are founded on unrealistic assumptions are most likely to generate tensions, conflicts, and contradictions. For a migration process to succeed in forging social harmony and development, it is therefore of decisive and crucial importance to regard migration as a ‘social relation’. This is simply because successful migration has to be a harmonious synergy between the migrants (and also the sending countries where they come from) and the receiving society (and its people). As indicated, migrants enter into the receiving society not merely as a passive commodity but as a social force who are proactively involved in the political, economic, and cultural evolution of the receiving country (as well as the sending countries). Societies evolve; they are not static. A society is like an organism capable of change and constantly engaged in the process of change.

However, the management of migration and the promotion of multicultural societies would only address the symptoms rather than the causes of a deeply structural problem. Migration is a palpable manifestation of the combined and uneven character of development in today’s world where the rich enjoys hegemony over the poor. The fundamental development challenge remains: a qualitative improvement to the lives of all. Addressing this challenge requires much bolder visions and coordinated strategies for ASEM and its member countries toward a just, peaceful, caring, and developed world. It is only when we have resolved the problems of uneven development and tremendous privation in each and every country in the world that we can have genuinely harmonious multicultural societies, a world with many worlds in it, and free human beings who are free to move in any place they wish to lead a ‘good life’.