



IOM International Organization for Migration
OIM Organisation Internationale pour les Migrations
OIM Organización Internacional para las Migraciones

MEETING BRIEF

MIGRANTS IN TIMES OF CRISIS: AN EMERGING PROTECTION CHALLENGE

On Tuesday, October 9th, the International Peace Institute (IPI) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) convened a roundtable seminar entitled “Migrants in Times of Crisis: An Emerging Protection Challenge.” The event focused on the situation of international migrants caught in crises in their destination countries and the consequences of their subsequent return to their countries of origin. It was part of the International Dialogue on Migration (IDM)—the IOM’s principal forum for informal multistakeholder dialogue on migration policy since 2001.

For 2012, IOM member states designated “Managing Migration in Crisis Situations” as the overarching theme for the IDM. Two previous IDM seminars took place in Geneva in April and September 2012 and served to introduce the main concepts and examine principal policy and operational challenges and solutions. This latest meeting built upon previous discussions, with the aim of raising awareness of the issue of migrants caught in crisis among the diplomatic and broader international community in New York. This is especially timely and important to help inform next year’s High Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development that will take place at the UN General Assembly.

The event brought together a diverse group of participants and resulted in a rich and substantive discussion of some of the complex institutional challenges that surround this issue at the national, regional, and international levels. Participants also examined the tension between short-term humanitarian crisis management and longer-term development, as seen through the lens of the large-scale returns of migrants to their home countries in the wake of the 2011 crisis in Libya.

Five main themes emerged from the discussion:

- While events in Libya brought the topic of international migrants in times of crisis back to the forefront, the issue is not new. Migrants were affected in crisis situations like the first Gulf War in 1990–1991, Lebanon in 2006, and others. Although the current situation in Syria is most prominently a refugee crisis, there is an important migrant component. There is also the murky issue of potentially displaced Palestinian and Iraqi refugees. The lessons learned in managing these crises should be used as reference points when developing crisis preparedness and response plans.
- The events in Libya showed that effective coordination among all actors is crucial to a timely and successful response. The cooperation shown between organizations like IOM and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) was a good example of this. Interagency coordination with respect to humanitarian assistance for this often “invisible” group should be seen as contributing to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Transformative Agenda. Likewise, cooperation and communication between receiving, transit, origin,

and neighboring countries was vital for stemming a humanitarian disaster, especially at the borders. The role of regional cooperation, including regional consultative processes on migration, in promoting better preparedness for such situations was underlined, as was the critical contribution of neighboring countries that kept their borders open to fleeing migrants during the Libyan crisis.

- Likewise, policies put in place prior to crisis play a critical role in crisis management. Policies regarding rights of migrants in destination countries directly affect how migrants are treated during crises, or whether they are even considered in national crisis-management strategies. In Libya, for example, migrants were accused of supporting the Qaddafi regime and became targets of xenophobic violence. Likewise, issues such as employers abandoning migrant workers and/or withholding migrants' travel documentation were a major hurdle. Countries of origin also have a responsibility to put in place policies to assist their nationals in other countries during crises. The measures taken by the government of the Philippines, both generally and specifically during the crisis in Libya, present useful models in this respect. Additionally, knowledge of where and how many migrants are present in a country is important both for destination countries in providing protection and assistance during crises and for countries of origin in reaching out to their citizens abroad and, if necessary, planning for the logistics and effects of return.
- In many cases, repatriation of migrants in times of crisis puts a significant toll on countries of origin. This can be especially problematic in already fragile states. Migrants often return to the same situations that prompted them to migrate in the first place. Lack of opportunity, poverty, and insecurity all pose significant problems for returnees and are often not included in crisis-management strategies. Examples from Bangladesh and Chad highlighted the diverse challenges resulting from large-scale returns from Libya. For example, many Sahelian migrants returned at the peak of the "hungry season," exacerbating pre-existing food insecurity. In countries of origin, capacity needs to be developed in a wide variety of areas and support is needed from states and international organizations.
- Finally, the tension between short-term emergency management and longer-term development challenges remains unresolved and linkages between the two must be improved. Migration in times of crisis tends to be handled in the context of short-term humanitarian efforts. Some participants acknowledged that this dichotomy between humanitarian action and development is perpetuated in institutional divisions of labor and in the way in which funding is allocated. Participants suggested that the current emphasis on strengthening resilience of communities might provide a good framework for improving linkages between humanitarian and development approaches. It was also stressed that migration-management approaches have a role to play, in particular using the positive effects of migration on development for postcrisis recovery and reconstruction or offering new labor-migration opportunities for returned migrants.

International migration is a key piece of the interlocking puzzle that affects development, stability, and sustainability. As preparations begin for a post-2015 agenda on development, the international community needs to make an effort to better articulate the connections between international migration and humanitarian and development challenges.