

# Who's Afraid of International Migration in the United Nations?

By  
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## SUMMARY

Although the United Nations has convened a variety of global conferences on a broad range of issues, it has never convened a global conference on the theme of international migration. This avoidance of international migration is in sharp contrast to the fact that international migration has risen to the top of international, regional and national political agendas. What accounts for the lack of an international conference on international migration and who is afraid of international migration at the United Nations are the central concerns of this paper.

The earliest reference to the possibility of convening a United Nations global intergovernmental on international migration dates back to a 1993 resolution of the United Nations General Assembly, adopted nearly a year before the 1994 Cairo population conference. While international migration figured prominently in the groundbreaking Programme of Action from the 1994 Cairo population conference, the contentious question of convening a conference on international migration was deferred to a later date.

The ensuing ten-year period was marked by a number of developments within the United Nations on international migration. These developments included: a) four separate rounds of surveys soliciting the views of Governments on convening of a global conference on international migration and development; b) publication of an influential United Nations report, *Replacement Migration: Is it a Solution to Declining and Ageing Populations?*; c) launching of the annual United Nations Coordination Meeting on International Migration; d) preparation of a confidential internal report on international migration for the United Nations Secretary-General; e) entry into force of the International Convention on the Protections of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and their Families; and f) creation of the Global Commission on International Migration.

After a decade of these various initiatives, combined with intense behind the scenes negotiations, the United Nations General Assembly convened a High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development in 2006, which was basically a compromise between labor-importing and labor-exporting countries. The sole outcome of the Dialogue was a five-page non-negotiated summary of the deliberations, devoid of any binding agreements on any follow-up and thus palatable to labor-importing countries.

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An unanticipated outcome of the High-Level Dialogue, however, was Belgium's invitation to host a Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) the following year. Despite the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the largely labor-importing countries, the Forum was held. The Forum, explicitly designed as a voluntary, non-binding gathering of governments convened outside of the United Nations, set in motion a series of similar annual forums addressing international migration and development from a variety of perspectives. While the Belgium Forum focused on human capital development and labor mobility; remittances and other diaspora resources; and enhancing institutional and policy coherence and promoting partnerships, the second GFMD hosted by the Philippines in 2008 dealt with migration, development and human rights; secure legal migration; and policy and institutional coherence and partnerships. The third meeting of the GFMD, to be hosted by Greece in November 2009, will focus on the need to integrate migration policies in development strategies. Also, Forums are already scheduled for Argentina in 2010, Spain in 2011 and Morocco in 2012.

In a survey conducted by the United Nations in 2008, Member States were asked for their views on possible options for appropriate follow-up to the 2006 High-Level Dialogue. Two-thirds of the 64 responding Member States expressed a need for follow-up to the Dialogue within the United Nations. In contrast, one-third of responding countries, mostly major migrant-receiving countries, felt that a follow-up to the High-Level Dialogue within the United Nations was not necessary. In the end, the General Assembly decided to convene a one-day informal thematic debate on international migration and development in 2011 and also hold a second High-Level Dialogue on international migration and development in 2013.

It is clear that the governments of the wealthier more influential labor-importing industrialized countries and their allies have consistently resisted convening a global conference on international migration. If such a conference were to be held, these governments fear that the more numerous labor-exporting nations might succeed in adopting a global program of action, similar to those adopted at the Cairo population conference, the Beijing women's conference and the Rio environment conference, which would set norms, establish principles and advocate recommendations concerning international migration. Such an outcome, in the view of labor-importing nations, would limit their sovereignty over matters relating to international migration.

Given these political realities, it appears unlikely that the United Nations will convene a global, intergovernmental conference on international migration in the foreseeable future. Considerably more likely, the international community of nations will continue to resort to high-level dialogues within the United Nations and voluntary, non-binding global forums outside the organization as the primary mechanisms to address international migration.

## Conference on International Migration

“**Global Mobility Regimes**” is a recently convened conference held at the Levin Institute in New York City on 27-28 April 2009. The two-day conference, in which the Center for Migration Studies participated, examined international mobility from a global perspective with presentations by an interdisciplinary group of international relations and international migration scholars as well as policymakers, international civil servants and diplomats.

The conference is part of a policy-oriented research project led by Professor Rey Koslowski at the University of Albany (SUNY) and supported by a grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The conference and the project examine a set of interacting global mobility regimes: the established international refugee regime; an emerging international travel regime and a non-existent but potential international labor migration regime. Although the issues of these three regimes overlap somewhat and may lead to misunderstandings and policymaking at cross purposes, potential issue linkages can also be leveraged for widening the scope of international cooperation, perhaps even to form an international labor migration regime.

The project will produce an edited volume based on the contributions presented at the conference. Executive summaries of the contributions and additional information are available at <http://www.globalmobility.info/>. Also for more information about the conference and project, please contact Ms. Laura Gonzalez-Murphy at [gomurph@aol.com](mailto:gomurph@aol.com).