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ABSTRACT

Based on his own experience with migration issues in Mesoamerica, the author reflects on the situation of the region's movement for migrant rights, identifying challenges, criticisms, and recommendations to help strengthen the social struggle necessary to implement the rights of migrants and refugees.

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ESSAY

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FACING NETWORKS AND ORGANISATIONS WORKING ON MIGRATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN MESOAMERICA

Diego Lorente Pérez de Eulate

1 Introduction

Perhaps the title of this article is somewhat pretentious. Describing the human and organisational reality of something as broad as social action for migration in Mesoamerica runs the risk of falling back on generalizations, particularly in an area where there are so many projects and processes underway on different topics related to the human rights of migrants— projects and processes that are not all well known or even in communication amongst themselves.

Nevertheless, I believe that my experience in recent years with organisations and networks that work with migrants in Mexico and the Caribbean allows me to comment on some of these things. I can also comment on challenges that I have observed in the way these entities function, which result from the political and social context in which they carry out their activities and develop their internal dynamics. Therefore, this article aims to describe and analyze those realities—both those that are external to these organisations and those on the inside—and how their interaction characterizes the processes that develop in this complex world of organisations dedicated to human rights and migration.

To this end, I believe it is important to first describe my experience in this field, so that readers can better understand the perspective and background that I have when writing these lines, and where my analyses and proposals come from. I have spent more than 15 years dedicated to social and organisational issues, always focusing on the situation of migration and human rights. I believe that migrants are one of the populations for whom discrimination and exclusion are most relevant, and injustices are particularly severe. This is an area where my training as a lawyer can be useful, after having broken through the individualistic and closed-minded education one receives in pursuing a law degree; it can allow the promotion of a sense of justice in the treatment of migrants, in a context where the exception to the rule of law has become the rule.

My 15 years of experience were divided between the Spanish government, where I worked on issues related to discrimination and racism, and then in Latin America, where I moved in 2008. In places like Mexico and Guatemala, discrimination against migrants and refugees takes very different shapes but have very similar dynamics. This change gives me an interesting comparative perspective in the identification of challenges and recommendations. I have been in this region for nearly seven years, and I have had very close contact with migration networks that operate primarily in central and southern Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.

From a critical perspective, though always with the intent to help strengthen the social struggle necessary to effectuate the rights of migrants and refugees, I have been able to get to know different organisations that work on this topic from a number of various perspectives. Some help migrants that are in transit while others work with migrants who have been settled for years but remain invisible or with migrants who have been forced to leave their communities and are suffering the consequences.

This experience has allowed me to observe how factors both internal and external to these organisations can interact and effect the way in which they develop their activities and projects. External factors are not linked directly to their work, but are related to the context in which they operate. This article attempts to describe the current situation in the region, looking at both internal and external factors, and the way they interact to create challenges. At the end, I share some recommendations that again emphasize the importance of seeing how these factors are interrelated.

I apologize in advance if anyone feels that my reflections are too general and inexact. It is hard to cover all existing projects and processes, given how scattered the pro-migrant organisations are; there are many projects and processes that are only known at a very local scale. I have great respect and admiration for these activities, and those of all of the organisations. No one can doubt their commitment or their energy; at the same time, self-criticism is important to help us advance our work.

2 Characterization of current migration and human rights organisations in Mexico and Central America

2.1 External factors that affect the work of these organisations

One essential factor for human rights organisations—whatever their focus—is the immense problem they are trying to address. It is critical to look at this in contexts like the Mesoamerican one, where the very structure of the State is affected by corruption and impunity.

There, they live and work in situations where complex and difficult problems never cease to appear. These problems are the result of structural configurations that develop differently in each context, but that are always associated in these countries with chronic inequality in the distribution of wealth;

corruption and impunity among the authorities; and discrimination and racism in large parts of society.

This situation is particularly common in the context of migration because of how migratory patterns are evolving in the region and because of how the issue cuts across other social problems that affect migrants—be it in their hometown, along the migration route, at their destination, or when they voluntarily or forcibly return to their community of origin. In my view, the forced migrations observed in Latin America are one of the clearest signs of how the social, economic, and political situation is deteriorating in our countries. This is attributable to a classist, undemocratic, patriarchal, and unequal model of development.

Addressing this broad and complex social reality, where so many elements and problems come together, is often exhausting and overwhelming. It is hard to see an end to the action that is carried out; on the contrary, the more that is done, the more issues there are to address. That frustration becomes a factor to consider, and it explains how many processes of social action begin with great strength and end up falling apart and wearing out their proponents. This psycho-emotional impact is one of the internal factors that affect organisations, though it is also caused by external factors. However, little attention is paid to this issue within organisations, even while it exhausts both individuals and teams.

Even as the organisations multiply in order to deal with this intense social issue—for which they continually face a scarcity of resources—another emerging factor relates to the slow but steady efforts to delegitimize their work. There are news stories in the mass media that criminalize their activities; there are mistakes, scandals, and incidents of corruption committed by individuals in the social movement; there are efforts by some political parties, such as in Mexico, to co-opt the social sector; and there are public institutions that try to discredit those who criticize their policies. Those challenges have not been sufficiently countered by the affected organisations, and that has left the public with a feeling of general distrust towards non-governmental organisations. This bias is particularly visible among youth between the ages of 15 and 25, who express feelings of disdain and distrust of the human rights movement and doubts about its social purpose.

This segment of the population, who could come to take our place in the social movement, often makes reference to the lack of transparency in our actions, and their distrust toward the processes we undertake, among other complaints. The work and commitment that it takes to join a human rights organisation and confront such complex issues often distances us from a large section of society; meanwhile, our efforts go unknown. This means that in today's society, where there is more information than ever but it is confusingly managed, prejudices against the culture of human rights organisations have increased and prevented the consolidation of a social base to support and promote our actions. In addition, the doubt cast upon us reaches the ears of the authorities and economic actors that we must face, and impairs the effectiveness of our advocacy efforts.

Donor policies and priorities are another external element that affects organisations' work. These policies are often decided in places that are very different from the places where the activities are undertaken, which can lead

to duplication of efforts and fuel existing differences such as those between organisations from the centre of the country and those from the periphery/provinces. This creates unequal power relationships between donors and recipients, and between different donors. Ultimately, this affects which projects are launched. It can mean that people and organisations who may not be the most prepared to address the social issue in question still receive support.

This creates excessive competition for donor resources, particularly now, when less and less money is going to social struggles. It can sometimes prevent a well-formed, concerted effort. It particularly impinges on the world of migration organisations in Mesoamerica, as the principal problems develop far from the centres of power. The distance can be fatal to efforts to confront complex issues, and it can contribute to the discrediting of social organisations in the eyes of society.

One last external factor that must be kept in mind, and that continues to complicate the activities of human rights and migration organisations, are the condoned or extra-legal acts of intimidation by a repressive State. Threats against the defenders of migrant rights have increased in recent years as this issue has risen on the political agenda, and groups with power are showing more interest. Additionally, organized crime has emerged in this area, perceiving the extortion and abuse of migrants to be a lucrative business.

The risks are clear, and caused by the presence of organized crime on migration routes, in collusion with a State that is corrupt either by action or omission, and by the fact that groups with humanitarian origins are increasing their social action and turning from welfare to politics. As a result, public officials and politicians that look at the topic of migration from a perspective of control and so-called “national security” have upped their attacks on defenders of migrant rights in order to maintain their status in zones that overlap with northward migration routes.

2.2 Internal factors that wear down organized civil society

All of these factors that are external to the social movement are at the forefront of the minds of those who work on migration issues in Mesoamerica. They have a corresponding effect on the internal dynamics of social organisations. Some effects already been mentioned, like emotional stress. This combines with other factors, which I will list below, that rise from the dynamic interactions of people who try to organize.

First, the aforementioned intensity of the social and political context in which migration occurs in this region not only complicates decisions about actions and their implementation, but also puts a constant and heavy burden of work on the organisations. It is very difficult to distinguish between what is urgent and what is important, and to establish appropriate priorities. This affects social movements like the pro-migrant groups that in many cases grew out of Christian charity efforts. This historical foundation influences the types of activities and analyses that these organisations carry out; they tend to be humanitarian in nature

and provide social responses to the crisis rather than confronting the structural causes of the symptoms they are attending to.

Such a commitment to helping those who most need support, during transit or after arriving at their destination, is admirable. But it does not contribute to more sustainable processes to defend human rights, nor does it facilitate progress towards a more political and more comprehensive view of migration. A humanitarian focus can, in the long term, cause frustration, because it never ends. As a result, there is constant turnover of staff who carry out this work, with the exception of people associated with religious ministries who continue to fulfil the assigned mission but do not look out for their own emotional wellbeing.

There are important exceptions to this lack of structural work, namely in projects associated with the Catholic faith, which come from a more politicized religious background. However, the Church is more likely to work on other human rights issues, and is not often among those who are dedicated to defending migrants. This difference, along with the charitable humanitarian attitude that prevails in many pro-migrant sectors, makes it even harder to bridge the gap between the struggle for migrant rights and the broader human rights movement.

This dynamic is essential to understanding the current social response to the problems faced by migrants and refugees. For instance, we can not forget that the worst violations of migrant rights are committed in relatively unknown parts of Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, which are scarcely populated and hard to access. In such places, the parish or other religious community is often the only group organized with a social purpose.

In these remote areas, we find social groups with a strong sense of humanitarianism. They tend to be linked to some church, but have done little political or strategic analysis. These humanitarian groups are complemented by other groups that work in more formal organisations, often located in the capital city or another large city. These more structured institutions, despite working on the migration issue from afar, sometimes take advantage of their relative power and ability to access information and get in touch with key actors in order to get funding.

Organisations that emphasize project implementation rather than processes tend to have staff with impressive educational credentials; they may even be academics, but with limited social and political awareness. Coming from comfortable backgrounds, and making use of their academic training and working as project managers, they do not question the classist approach to their education. They tend to establish unequal power relationships with “field” organisations and with the migrants whose rights they defend.

Whether these groups lack a strong political vision because of their humanitarian origins or because of the training they received, it often results in a set of pro-migrant activities that don't have a clear end goal or careful political analysis. The work is overly centralized and lacks a long-term strategic approach, which I believe is necessary to confront an issue as complex as migration. These factors often prevent the activities that are implemented from taking into account important things like a gender perspective and respect for the ethno-cultural

diversity of Mesoamerica. This leads to strategies and actions that I believe to be incomplete and counterproductive for achieving the ultimate justice that is being sought.

The unwillingness to criticize or self-criticize those who work this way, and all of us who dedicate ourselves to social issues—despite all the work and commitment we dedicate towards our activities—often prevents a serious analysis of the situation and the identification of lessons learned. It stops us from correcting mistakes that end up discrediting and devaluing us in the eyes of those we want to influence, be they politicians or society in general.

The sum of the personal and emotional elements found in organisations wears on projects, processes, and the people who are trying to drive them. This is especially true because the management approach of organisational leaders is limited; they are more accustomed to managing projects and processes than managing pure human resources. As a result, there can be sharp deterioration within teams, which is almost always addressed too late, when activities are already underway and the teamwork or networking necessary for success has not materialized.

Emotional wear and tear affects those who have often given everything, thinking that their actions would be more effective than they actually were. This frustrates people, and leads them to abandon both the social work they are carrying out at the time, as well as the intention of continuing to work collectively on social processes. It is a kind of exhaustion caused by a lack of understanding between groups of people, due to different experiences and different ways of analysing social problems. This is added to the fear felt as a result of intimidating actions carried out by the State or by organized crime.

This situation becomes more complex given that people who are new to social organisations do not have human rights defenders or related processes that can serve as examples and that can, based on their experience, share a more collective and integrated form of social struggle. We must not forget that we are in a period in history where many political figures no longer exist. Some wore themselves out until they disappeared; some are not relevant to the situation today. This has happened in countries like Mexico, where the PRI system co-opted the social movement for many years, and disappeared those who did not follow its guidelines. The same has occurred in Guatemala and El Salvador, where the armed conflict eliminated many of the most active people. In addition, the signing of the peace agreements led to the disintegration of progressive political alternatives, and heightened tension and distrust. This breakdown or absence of a social fabric has meant a lack of trustworthy references that can help guide people in organisations in thinking about what direction to go in. As a result, people turn to academic processes, or to organisational processes that do not have a social goal, where personal interests supersede collective ones.

Despite the aforementioned factors and obstacles, it is not all bad. In the big picture, as with every social process, pro-migrant organisations and networks are slowly building their policy proposals and social networks, as well as their connections to the broader human rights movement. They are strengthening

their analyses, and, in facing the risks, they choose to raise the political cost for those who attack them. At the same time, they are enlarging their strategic and political vision to better confront these risks. Nevertheless, every week there are new threats that imperil the interesting processes that are afoot in the region. As stated earlier, the fact that migratory issues arise in remote places makes it harder to reduce the risks or strengthen the pro-migrant social movement's policy and strategy formulation process. But, step-by-step, progress is being made.

Finally, another very important factor to cover in terms of the organisational context of migration is the frequent absence of those who are affected. Not only are they not represented in the organisational leadership; they are also completely absent on the inside. The vulnerability that migrants experience, whether in transit, at their destination, or upon returning to their place of origin, often prevents them from being able to participate in organisational processes. Nor are the social organisations in the region very prepared to include those who are far from their home among their members. Cultural, organisational, and language differences do not help.

Their absence affects all of the advocacy efforts, which are unable to include the feelings of those most affected, or their perspective on the problems that they face. The dynamic therefore differs from what occurs in other human rights movements. The leaders of the process are those who defend migrants' rights out of solidarity or charity, not the affected individuals themselves.

Even so, progress has also been made in this area in recent years. Committees have emerged, comprised of family members of migrants who have disappeared in Central America. Latino organisations in the United States have a more comprehensive vision of the political reality of migrants' places of origin. There are organisations comprised of people who have been deported and of migrants who have disabilities acquired as a result of their migratory journey. Organisations and networks of domestic workers in Latin America, many of which are comprised of or led by migrant women, have become more outspoken.

It is important to continue to reinforce the efforts of migrants to demand their rights, because the migratory situation becomes more complex every day, with more intense cases of human rights violations affecting more and more people. It is not impossible; despite their vulnerabilities and the difficulties they face, these groups have been able to organize and gain increasing visibility. These organisational processes are still developing, and they are still weak in terms of leadership and strategic vision. But they are giving greater prominence, with the accompanying successes and failures, to those who are most directly affected by forced migration.

3 Suggestions for addressing issues and challenges in the organisations

The sense of self-criticism and reflection in the preceding sections of this article is not at all intended to end in frustration or a feeling of disappointment. On the contrary, the aforementioned critiques aim to help generate pathways and

recommendations for addressing the situation more effectively, and to help identify actions and strategies that could improve efforts on behalf of migrants and refugees in Mesoamerica. Thus, I can not end this article without turning these criticisms into challenges that can be confronted, and without making some suggestions that I believe, based on my experience, could help to improve the outlook.

My primary proposal, which I feel should always be the first step when facing such a complex situation, is for organisations and networks to put more effort toward reinforcing their political-strategic analysis of the context they are working in. This will create opportunities to investigate the structural causes of the problem in more depth. With a more comprehensive understanding of the issue, including a better comprehension of the structural causes behind migration, they can develop an ideology for their actions and proposals.

Reinforcing the analysis in this way can only bring about benefits. Based on what has happened in other social movements, we know that it can strengthen strategies, giving them a longer-term view, and thereby reducing the exhaustion and frustration that can come from addressing such complex social and political issues. It can build a sense of belonging and collective struggle necessary for true complementary teamwork. It can bring the pro-migrant movement closer to other human rights defenders, by helping them to identify areas of overlap where they can collaborate. Finally, it can improve security and protection for human rights defenders, by giving them more tools and protective networks against the attacks and threats suffered in their work, which may be perpetrated either by the State or by illegal actors.

Based on my experience, I see an advantage to expanding the space for analysis and adopting more political and longer-term strategies for social action. To do so, social organisations must take the time—even in the intense contexts in which they work—to create such spaces for internal analysis and training. This does not often occur. The training need not be formal, but it should, I believe, be complemented by teaching moments that are centred on the exchange of experiences with organisations that have a longer history defending human rights, and with members that have more experience. Doing so would generate more collective and committed points of reference for those who lead organisations' activities.

If there is anywhere where such exchanges—both one-off and long-term—are particularly important, I think it is in the world of migration, because of the similar dynamics of discrimination experienced by migrants in different parts of Mesoamerica, Latin America, and the rest of the world. Moreover, the work is often centred around helping people who are on the move, who could be in one place one day and elsewhere in the region a few weeks or months later. The exchanges would also help overcome what are sometimes very local views of migration, and help to identify common ground where the work could be strengthened through networking. Coordinated work always has greater influence and impact on politicians, who make the decisions that either improve or worsen the human rights situation for migrants.

Expanding networks, views, and perspectives is critical, in my experience, not only to build social organisations' capacity for responsiveness and impact, but also, and in particular, to ensure that the discourse inherent in those actions reflects the causes and effects of forced migration. The social phenomenon of migration is constantly growing due to the impacts of the neoliberal model. Joining this broader perspective to one that focuses on human rights is important in order to avoid resorting to partial or incomplete solutions that ignore the social and political sides of migration.

Having skilled staff and more stable policy proposals would also create more sustainable processes, where leadership is transferred more often. One should keep in mind that addressing social issues from this perspective will be harder for society and even donors to understand. Still, if we can adequately explain the “whys” behind forced migration in the region, we can gain a stronger social base to support and understand our actions. We can also convince donors and politicians of the need for a mental shift and a new development model.