International migration governance ready to make a new start

The negotiations on the Global Compact on Migration, co-facilitated by Switzerland and Mexico, have just been completed. If adopted in December, this pact should constitute a radically new framework to promote safe and regular migration. The Swiss Civil Society Platform on Migration and Development is confident that this will benefit both parties.

As borders close, new walls rise and xenophobic parties are democratically elected in a growing number of countries, a multilateral initiative, facilitated by Switzerland and Mexico at the United Nations, reverses this trend by providing a framework for safe, orderly and regular migration. Unknown to the general public, the Global Pact on Migration is a UN process, that was launched in September 2016 - in the midst of a migration crisis - which resulted in a text formulated around 23 objectives and finalized in July 2018 in New York. It is scheduled to be launched in Marrakech next December.

"This text is very important because it proposes a vision for a more coherent and comprehensive migration governance. The Pact proposes a global approach integrating the various dimensions and issues related to migration and bases this vision on human rights," explains Peter Aeberhard, coordinator of the Swiss Civil Society Platform on Migration and Development, a coalition of 80 Swiss NGOs that has accompanied the process from the outset. "In Europe, the United States and Australia, the discourse on migration consists in saying that we must protect ourselves from it. However, the Global Compact covers the various facets of migration and also aims to provide a framework for and better protect migrants. Agenda 2030 for sustainable development recalls that human mobility and migration both contribute to development. People working outside their country of origin must therefore be protected and their access to universal rights respected and guaranteed. Equally important, the Pact also reiterates that migration must never be a consequence of despair, governments must give people the opportunity to stay at home with the possibility of real prospects.

Migration, an economic necessity for destination countries as well

The text contains 23 objectives formulated around concrete commitments, aimed at increasing information on migration, cooperation on border management and combating
human trafficking, but also ensuring the existence and availability of regular migration routes; facilitating fair recruitment and conditions for decent work; minimizing the structural factors that force people to leave their countries; saving lives; minimizing detention of migrants as a last resort; creating conditions for migrants and diaspora to contribute to the sustainable development of all countries; eliminating all forms of discrimination; investing in skills, development and facilitating mutual recognition of diplomas; collaborating on the thorny issue of return, etc.

"Migration is an economic necessity, as stated in the report by Peter Sutherland, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on International Migration (and former Director of the WTO)," adds Peter Aeberhard. “The Swiss economy needs migrants. Some are accepted, some are not. Yet irregular migrants also have rights, and they should not be criminalized. It is time for a new narrative, a constructive discourse that overcomes the polemical and discriminatory discourse towards migrants.”

Does that mean we have to welcome everyone? "This is not the philosophical question the Pact is trying to answer," says Pascal Fendrich, the platform’s deputy coordinator. “The current text in no way affects the sovereignty of States; it proposes a pragmatic approach and a framework for international cooperation on the main dimensions of migration. Facilitating and managing regular migration is one way to meet the needs of the economy, by introducing active and responsible migration governance, but also by combating the black market that benefits from irregular migration. By reducing the costs associated with remittances between migrants and their families also enables migration to contribute to the development of countries of origin.”

80 heterogeneous organizations in one platform

So what is the Swiss Civil Society Platform doing, which brings together somewhat heterogeneous actors such as development organisations, human rights organisations, the diaspora, academics, trade unions, in short organisations that are not used to discussing this issue? "We participated in consultations with international civil society. We had a fruitful dialogue with representatives of Switzerland, preparing Switzerland’s official position. From December, our ambition is to support the implementation of commitments," explains Pascal Fendrich. “The text should be signed as it stands, but the question is whether certain major players will withdraw. The United States has already done so, Hungary has said it is not going to sign. Switzerland played a mobilising and appreciated role in the discussions and the construction of a balanced agreement. Thereafter, it will be necessary to ensure that States implement their commitments, as it is not a binding international treaty.”

But is this text realistic, given the current political situation in the immigration countries? "This ambient discourse is quite toxic," admits Peter Aeberhard, "but it doesn't really give any answers. We know it’s not going to lead to anything.“

"Is continuing with the discourse of the fortress realistic and desirable?“ adds Pascal Fendrich. “We can reverse the weight of evidence. The current discourse is incomplete. Human tragedies could be avoided. In the background, the historical and current contribution of mobility to economic, cultural and social development is forgotten. This Pact is an important and significant step. Despite the international context and the American
defection, we have a reference framework that gives a lever. We do not fully agree with certain provisions, however they are the fruit of a compromise. This is not a total reversal, but a definite move forward, a positive dynamic undertaking of collaboration.

But in any case, this Pact already has the merit of existing.

The Swiss Civil Society Platform on Migration and Development is a project launched in 2015 by Caritas Switzerland and HELVETAS. Terre des Hommes and the World Trade Institute (University of Bern) are strategic partners.