



Some brief thoughts on the UN Network on Migration's Listening Session with Civil Society Thursday

7 May, Mohamed Osman

This was the latest in a series of sessions convened by the UN Network on Migration (whose Secretariat, I should disclose, I am employed by) around the theme of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on migrants and mobility. Below are a few small thoughts (rough and ready) that the session left me with.

1) Resilience.

Firstly, I was struck by the sheer number of participants from organizations all over the world, representing so many people, that made time to join, even amid the myriad of responsibilities, and worries, we are all juggling during this time. It's a comforting thought to think that so many important actors in the care of others have remained resolute. We will surely all be better for it.

However, I would have liked perhaps to have heard more of the ways in which migrants have demonstrated their own resilience in the face of this pandemic, so that we can all enjoy an additional source of inspiration.

2) Fatigue.

Maybe it's a stoic impulse to make the most of the limited time available, but I recall that early on in the pandemic almost every call and email was prefaced with a well-wish by all, to all; hoping the best for colleagues and their families during these difficult times, and sharing some sense of solidarity.

I think it's important not to lose that element even as this thing stretches on. Not that it should become a box to be ticked, or in any way tokenistic- and the worry is that of course it might- but there is something to be said for continuing to acknowledge that we are all very much going through it. It seems to me that we can make time for that (*if* temporal discipline is maintained elsewhere!)

3) Horror/Hope.

Probably the most troubling thing I heard on this call and the one that has stayed with me the most, was the statistic shared by a colleague at the start that, over the course of this pandemic, gender-based violence has seen a 20% increase across the globe.

It's deeply saddening to think that one of the most prevalent responses to these troubling times is to enact violence against women, and that the only thing stopping this from being worse during 'normal' times is the fact that men do not ordinarily spend as much time with women as they do now, in the age of stay-at-home quarantines and social distancing.

Migrant, and particularly undocumented, women suffer unique vulnerabilities within this issue, unable to enjoy the same levels of risk-free access to shelters, hospitals, and law enforcement, as others. Urgent measures of course need to be put in place now to address this, but long past the pandemic we need a seismic, global, cultural shift. These dynamics are unacceptable. They are also unsustainable.

There was good news too, though; particularly the courageous and sensible measures taken by states such as Portugal, France, Italy, Poland, Ireland, Argentina, Brazil, and a number of cities, to extend residency permits, provide full access to services such as healthcare to all, and provide shelter. These are heartening glimmers of hope, and the greater hope for me still is that these measures stick around long after this virus is gone.



4) Business (Politics) as Usual.

Unfortunately, so many of the largest issues raised by the pandemic (and rightly highlighted on this call) are tied to problems we have long known about. Much was shared on the impacts of the structural inequalities that cut across race, class, gender, ethnicity, disability and all of the other categories that determine so much of our lived experiences. If you're dealt a bad hand, that experience can be fairly grim, and it is clear that COVID-19 has raised the stakes.

We heard on this call that migrants and people of colour, often from lower socio-economic backgrounds, are more likely to get COVID; less likely to get timely care for it; more likely to die from it once in care; more likely to get it and die from it whilst providing care to others that have it; more likely to be scapegoated for it; more likely to work in frontline services whose employees cannot work from home because of it; less likely to qualify for benefits and stimulus packages when their places of work have been shut down because of it; more likely to live in places where social distancing is simply not possible; more likely to be punished by law enforcement for not socially distancing; less likely to be able to access online educational services in the face of shut down schools and universities; more likely, therefore, to have to repeat a year, if indeed they can eventually return, and so on.

Inequality is not a buzzword; it is a real problem. This is true during the best of times. Why shouldn't it be so for the worst of recent times?¹ It reminds me of a line from Isabelle Allende's book *The House of the Spirits*, in which a child clairvoyant named Clara predicts numerous tragedies, including, "the one and only time snow fell in the capital, freezing to death the poor people in their shantytowns and the rose bush gardens of the rich."²

COVID-19 is much more to even the very richest of us than a mere herbicide, but of course those who can quarantine in rose gardens are better equipped to face it than those crammed into shantytowns. That's the tragedy of inequality, and we know that too many migrants suffer its deleterious effects more than most. But we cannot treat it as inevitable. It may be a tragedy, but it need not be a Greek tragedy. Which takes me back to 1). Listening to this call I was heartened by how many committed people have not allowed complacency to sink in. We will get through COVID-19 I'm sure. The real task is to leave no one behind in making the world beyond it a place truly worth being in.

Please note that the views and opinions shared do not necessarily reflect those of the UN Network on Migration, its Secretariat, or its constituent parts. It is our intention that this platform will facilitate the much-needed respectful exchange of factual, constructive, information during these troubling times, and that through dialogue and information sharing we may all work towards enjoying better days ahead. We look forward to hearing your thoughts and contributions and will endeavor to share them here. We hope sincerely, and expect, that these best intentions will be shared and honoured, and that in this way we may continue to work better together.

¹ For some. The COVID crisis is actually probably less of an existential threat if you've experienced crises of Malaria, Cholera, Typhoid, Ebola, Zika, Dengue, West Nile, Yellow Fever, earthquakes, tsunamis, flooding, famine, hyperinflation, war, occupation etc.

² *The House of the Spirits*, Isabelle Allende, p.86.