



# The phenomenon of migration

Its significance or meaning in human societies throughout history

# The phenomenon of migration: Its significance or meaning in human societies throughout history

Migration can be defined as “a process of moving, either across an international border, or within a State. Encompassing any kind of movement of people, whatever its length, composition and causes; it includes refugees, displaced persons, uprooted people, and economic migrants.”<sup>1</sup> Migration is certainly not a recent phenomenon; on the contrary, it has been part of the human history since its very beginning. People have migrated from one continent to the other, from country to country or internally, inside the same country. Currently, IOM states that there are about one billion migrants around the world. This number includes 214 million international migrants and 740 million internally displaced persons (IDPs)<sup>2</sup>.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a historical overview on the phenomenon of migration from a RCRC perspective. The importance of migration throughout history will be illustrated by examples, followed by a discussion on the RCRC Movement work in the area of migration, which commenced with the creation of the Movement and has been strongly enhanced through the years. Finally, we briefly discuss current priorities in addressing migration globally.

## The importance of migration throughout history

It is evident that migration has played a pivotal role throughout the years in shaping the world as we know it today.



The phenomenon of migration has been indispensable to human histories, cultures, and civilizations. For example, the connection between religion and migration is a cross-cutting issue throughout the history of major religions such as Christianity (e.g. the spread of Catholicism by Portuguese and Spanish during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries), Islam (e.g. the first and second migration during Prophet Mohamed’s time), and Judaism (e.g. the migration of Jewish from Eastern to Western Europe and overseas, and to the United States of America during the 19<sup>th</sup>). Religion has been playing a fundamental role in both triggering massive population movements but also in influencing the lives and conditions of migrants in their displacement. Today, the intersection between religion and migration or what is called ‘transnational religion’ is at the heart of contemporary migration debates.

- 1 IOM, Glossary on Migration (2004), available online at [http://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/site/myjahiasite/shared/shared/mainsite/published\\_docs/serial\\_publications/Glossary\\_eng.pdf](http://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/site/myjahiasite/shared/shared/mainsite/published_docs/serial_publications/Glossary_eng.pdf) (last accessed 5 March 2012).
- 2 IOM, World Migration Report 2011, available online at [http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/WMR2011\\_English.pdf](http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/WMR2011_English.pdf) (last accessed 5 March 2012).

During the Age of Discovery (15<sup>th</sup>- 17<sup>th</sup> century) many Europeans, with the Portuguese and Spanish leading the way, undertook maritime travels and explored the Americas, Africa, Asia and Oceania. This transoceanic migration led to their discovery of new lands, the expansion of trade relations and the development of the economies of both the countries of origin and destination. Commercial and strategic factors influenced migration in that period as many European countries were competing to colonize strategic regions and territories. At the same time, in order to tackle labour shortages, the slave trade was introduced at various times throughout history<sup>3</sup>, and subsequently abolished in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. A second wave of labour came from Europe, especially England, Spain and Portugal, to what was then called “the new world” (i.e. USA, Canada, Australia, and southern Africa).

A great wave of migration subsequently took place in central Europe after World War I when populations resettled after the creation of many new States, especially following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Another migration period of note was from about 1935 until after World War II when population movements occurred inside Europe. Migration at that time began with the expansion of Hitler’s Germany and later through forced or inevitable evacuations with people attempting to escape from the war and the relocations which followed in its wake

Space does not allow for a full history of Migration on our planet, but it is important to recognise that the phenomenon has been observed everywhere in the world, throughout time. Often for the same reasons as those just mentioned.

Migrants have been essential for the development of many modern states, have shaped labour dynamics around the globe and have been a cornerstone for the global economy.

In recent years, discussions<sup>4</sup> have taken place on the linkage between migration and development in a number of forums and especially since the UN General Assembly High Level Dialogue on Migration and Development (GFMD) in 2006<sup>5</sup>. Migration is a phenomenon, whose benefits can be maximized when countries of origin form dialogues and partnerships with countries of destination. Mexico, for example, as the 2010 Chair of the GFMD focused on improving the collaboration between countries of origin and destination and introduced the concept of shared responsibility, collective benefits and partnerships.

The linkages between migration and development are now recognised as being strong and diverse. However, there is an inherent vulnerability in being a migrant, which can be more problematic in some situations than others. Migrants, by definition, are outside their places of habitual residence’ and often countries of origin (many times also away from their families), in a place where they might not understand the language and/or culture. They usually lack their familiar or community support mechanisms and can be exposed to racism, xenophobia and discrimination.

---

3 IOM, Migration in History, available online at <http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/about-migration/migration-management-foundations/migration-history/migration-in-history> (last accessed 5 March 2012).

4 E.g. the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) and Regional Consultative Processes (RCPs), such as the Colombo Process, the Abu-Dhabi Dialogue, the Puebla Process and the Bali Conference.

5 The IFRC statement to the HLD is at <http://www.ifrc.org/en/news-and-media/opinions-and-positions/speeches/2006/migration--the-un-high-level-dialogue/>

## The role of the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement

The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (The Movement) finds its roots in providing assistance to the most vulnerable people through the vision of Henri Dunant in 1862<sup>6</sup>. The mission of the Movement is to alleviate human suffering, protect life and health, and uphold human dignity especially during armed conflicts and other emergencies, such as epidemics and natural disasters. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC), one of the components of the Movement coordinates humanitarian activities undertaken by National Red Cross Red Crescent Societies. The 188 National Societies in the Movement, as auxiliaries to their public authorities, provide various services, such as disaster relief, health and social services. The seven Fundamental Principles<sup>7</sup> and especially the principles of Humanity and Impartiality require attention to vulnerable people in society. Our commitment to Humanity means that our “purpose is to protect life and health and ensure respect for the human being.”<sup>8</sup> In the spirit of Impartiality, we make “no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions.”<sup>9</sup> The work of the International Committee of the Red Cross on internally displaced persons, and on the restoration of family links is also a vital component of Movement action.



As people throughout the globe are increasingly moving within their countries and across borders, there is a demand for humanitarian assistance to meet the needs of these populations. Historically, the concept of “migrants” has not been widely used, but focus was on specific categories. The Red Cross and Red Crescent statutory meetings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century followed the general trend of these years and used the terminology of “refugees”, “stateless persons”, “war victims”, “returnees”, “displaced persons”, “asylum seekers” and “internally displaced persons”<sup>10</sup>. This can be historically explained by the two World Wars and subsequent conflicts that took place during the Cold War, which brought to the attention of the Movement the plight of persons who were suffering from conflicts, violence and persecution. While little data is available on the migration work of National Societies since 1863<sup>11</sup>, it is clear that there was a lot of work done in the 1920s in support of populations moving within Europe’s new borders<sup>12</sup>. There are also some examples<sup>13</sup> of National Societies providing

6 With his book “A souvenir of Solferino” he called for improved care of the most vulnerable people in wartime.

7 The seven Fundamental Principles guide the work of the Movement: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality. See IFRC, “The Seven Fundamental Principles,” available online at <http://www.ifrc.org/en/who-we-are/vision-and-mission/the-seven-fundamental-principles/> (last accessed 5 March 2012).

8 *Ibid.*

9 Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Geneva, Switzerland 23-24 November 2007, Resolution 5: “International Migration”.

10 10th International Conference, March 1921, Geneva: Resolution 15; 27th International Conference, August 1948, Stockholm: Resolution 31; 24th International Conference, November 1981, Manila: Resolution 21; 25th International Conference, October 1986, Geneva: Resolution 17; 26th International Conference, December 1995, Geneva: Resolution 4; 27th International Conference, November 1999, Plan of Action, Goal 2.3.

11 Taking also into account that the IFRC was not created until 1919.

12 This contributed to the adoption of Resolution XI of the Xth International Conference of the Red Cross in 1921 restricting the possibility that NS could set up branches or conduct operations in the territory of another NS.

13 Linde T., Humanitarian assistance to migrants irrespective of their status- towards a noncategorical approach, 91 *International Review of the Red Cross* 875 (2009), available online at <http://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/irrc-875-linde.pdf> (last accessed 5 March 2012).

medical services to migrants awaiting resettlement, integration assistance to returnees and basic health care for poor rural migrants.

The first example of recognition and awareness of migration activities in the Movement came in 1995 with Decision 12 of the General Assembly of the IFRC. The Decision, entitled “Red Cross and Red Crescent Work with Migrants”<sup>14</sup> underlined “the restrictive measures taken by host countries and the expression of racism, xenophobia and discrimination among some of them” and requested National Societies “to consider action in favour of migrant populations” and invited them to “encourage migrants to take part in their activities”. After 1995, several other decisions at statutory meetings made reference to the migration work of the Movement<sup>15</sup> and it was the Regional Red Cross and Red Crescent Conferences<sup>16</sup> that insisted on a comprehensive humanitarian engagement on migration.



2007 was a landmark year for migration work within the Movement, when the General Assembly<sup>17</sup> mandated the development of a global policy on migration. The same year, the 194 States parties to the Geneva Conventions and

<sup>14</sup> 10th session of the General Assembly of the IFRC, Geneva, 1995, Decision 12: ‘Red Cross and Red Crescent Work with Migrants’.

<sup>15</sup> See for example: 27th International Conference, Geneva, 1999, Reference Document (Goal 1.1: Protection of victims of armed conflict through respect of International Humanitarian Law; Goal: 3.1: Strategic partnership to improve the lives of vulnerable people); Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Geneva, November 2001, Resolution 4: ‘Movement Action in favour of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons’; Council of Delegates, Geneva, August 2003: ‘Tolerance, Non-discrimination, Respect for Diversity’, Document prepared by the ICRC and the IFRC.

<sup>16</sup> 6th European Regional Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, Berlin, April 2002; 6th Asia and Pacific Regional Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, Manila, November 2002; XVII Inter- American Conference of the Red Cross, Santiago de Chile, April 2003; 10th Mediterranean Conference, Athens, March 2007; 7th European Regional Conference of the IFRC, Istanbul, May 2007; XVIII InterAmerican Conference, Guayaquil, Ecuador, June 2007.

<sup>17</sup> 16th Session of the General Assembly, Geneva, Switzerland, 20–22 November 2007, Decision 12: ‘Migration’.

the 186 National Societies adopted at the 30<sup>th</sup> International Conference the declaration “Together for Humanity”, which highlighted migration as one of the great humanitarian challenges facing the world and stated that “We are particularly concerned that migrants, irrespective of their status, may live outside conventional health, social and legal systems and for a variety of reasons may not have access to processes which guarantee respect for their fundamental rights”<sup>18</sup>.

The declaration went on to call for reinforced “international cooperation at all levels to address the humanitarian concerns generated by international migration” while recognising the role of National Societies “in providing humanitarian assistance to vulnerable migrants, irrespective of their legal status”. In 2009, the IFRC Policy on Migration<sup>19</sup> was adopted and it made clear that “the approach of the Movement to migration is strictly humanitarian and based on the recognition of each migrant’s individuality and aspirations. It focuses on the needs, vulnerabilities and potentials of migrants, irrespective of their legal status, type, or category.” The policy was adopted as the Constitution requires by the IFRC Governing Board, but because of the importance of the issue it was placed before the General Assembly, where it was debated and endorsed unanimously.

Two years later, the 31<sup>st</sup> International Conference adopted the Resolution “Migration: Ensuring Access, Dignity, Respect for Diversity and Social Inclusion”<sup>20</sup>, which focused on four practical actions: ensuring access to all migrants, improving border procedures, supporting respect for diversity and social inclusion of migrants and enhancing partnerships. This is a unique resolution for two main reasons. Firstly it was adopted by consensus by the 187 National Societies and the 194 states parties to the Geneva Conventions. Secondly it addresses two issues that are of crucial importance for the work of National Societies and for the protection of migrants: ensuring effective and safe access for National Societies to all migrants, irrespective of their legal status, and establishing national procedures at international borders that include adequate safeguards to protect the dignity and ensure the safety of all migrants.

These resolutions and the IFRC policy were adopted in an atmosphere which recognised that the phenomenon of migration is not a passing phase: it is a fact of life which will present growing humanitarian challenges for organisations like the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The vulnerabilities attaching to migration will remain a matter of concern in all countries, especially as development (or the lack of it) comes to be better understood as part of the migration equation.

## Examples from National Societies

The work of National Societies in the field of migration is diverse and has been notably successful when responding to major natural disasters and crises. Following are examples of good practices that are worth mentioning:

18 30th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, Geneva, November 2007, Resolution 1: ‘Declaration: Together for Humanity’

19 IFRC, Policy on Migration (2009), available online at [http://www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/89395/Migration%20Policy\\_EN.pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/89395/Migration%20Policy_EN.pdf) (last accessed 5 March 2012)

20 31<sup>st</sup> International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, Geneva, Switzerland, November 2011, Resolution 3: Migration: Ensuring Access, Dignity, Respect for Diversity and Social Inclusion, available online at [http://www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/89794/R3\\_Migration\\_EN.pdf](http://www.ifrc.org/PageFiles/89794/R3_Migration_EN.pdf) (last accessed 5 March 2012).

## Dominican Republic Red Cross assistance to Haitian migrants

The response of the Dominican Republic Red Cross (DRRC) to the thousands of Haitians who crossed the border after the devastating earthquake in January 2010 was immediate. Even though the activities of the DRRC are generally centred in disaster risk management<sup>21</sup>, the fact of sharing the Hispaniola Island with Haiti made the Dominican Republic a key actor in the provision of assistance. The DRRC in particular provided assistance to the Haitian migrants and is still dealing with health problems in migrant communities. Now, increasing awareness and advocacy for migrants is one of the priorities of the DRRC, particularly with regards to vulnerable groups in the border area.<sup>22</sup>

## Responding to the crisis in North Africa: The Italian Red Cross (CRI) in Southern Italy

From the beginning of 2011 more than 50,000 migrants have landed in southern Italy. The CRI has been the primary point of contact providing humanitarian assistance during landings and in the CRI Migrants Centres. The CRI assists migrants during their transfer from Sicily and Lampedusa to reception centres run by the authorities in other regions. In Sicily and Lampedusa, the CRI has been engaged in rescue operations during landings of vessels carrying migrants fleeing Libya or coming from Tunisia. The CRI was, during the peak of the crisis, providing 24 hours emergency humanitarian assistance with volunteers, doctors, nurses, logisticians, rescuers and ambulances on the wharf and delivering care at the Advanced Medical Post (PMA) set up the maritime station. The main activities consist of providing information, health care and socio-legal assistance to newcomers.



## Turkish Red Crescent responds to the unrest in Syria

The Turkish Red Crescent Society (TRCS or Kizilay) is providing assistance to persons fleeing Syria since March 2011 and supporting camps close to the Turkish-Syrian borders<sup>23</sup>. The numbers of migrants continue to rise and Kizilay is responding to their immediate needs, providing shelter, meals, health and psychological support. There are six camps near the border that currently host about 10,000 Syrians<sup>24</sup>. The camps are run by the Turkish government and relief supplies are being provided by the TRCS. Petek Akman, a psychosocial support specialist with Kizilay said that “I think we can only understand a little of what they [the Syrian migrants] have been through. What we can do is to provide them with a good atmosphere and environment for living; listen

21 IFRC, Dominican Republic Mid-Year report, Appeal No.MAADO001, 01.01.2011- 30.06.2011, available online at <http://www.ifrc.org/docs/appeals/annual11/MAADO00111myr.pdf> (last accessed 5 March 2012).

22 IFRC, Long Term Planning Framework, Dominican Red Cross, 2012-2015, available online at <http://adore.ifrc.org/Download.aspx?FileId=21670> (last accessed 5 March 2012).

23 Lowry J., Turkish Red Crescent helping those fleeing violence in Syria, IFRC News Stories, 17 June 2011, available online at <http://www.ifrc.org/en/news-and-media/news-stories/europe-central-asia/turkey/turkish-red-crescent-helping-those-fleeing-violence-in-syria/> (last accessed 5 March 2012).

24 Turkey, France attempt to form Syria aid corridor, Hurriyet Daily News, 16 February 2012, available online at <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/turkey-france-attempt-to-form-syria-aid-corridor.aspx?pageID=238&nID=13878&NewsCatID=338> (last accessed 5 March 2012).

to their problems; share their sadness and concerns; and meet their requests, even if it's just bringing them the dried figs and fruit cake they ask for".<sup>25</sup>

These three examples demonstrate the unique capacity of National Societies to respond to migration as part of a humanitarian crisis. However, National Societies also carry out migration activities in non-crisis situations with equally successful outcomes. The following are two initiatives that constitute innovative approaches:



## Comic books in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Belgian Red Cross and the Red Cross of the Democratic Republic of Congo have joined forces with Congolese artists to produce comic books on the realities of migration to Europe. An innovative aspect of the project is the fact that the comics have been produced as educational resources for teachers and young people in both countries, with a unified aim of stimulating debate on migration and raising awareness about the difficulties that migrants can encounter along their journey. With the help of 10,000 volunteers, 125,000 copies have been distributed throughout the country since the project began in 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Akman P., Spreading a little happiness in the Turkish border camps, IFRC News Stories, 12 July 2011, available online at <http://www.ifrc.org/news-and-media/news-stories/europe-central-asia/turkey/spreading-a-little-happiness-in-the-turkish-border-camps/> (last accessed 5 March 2012).

## First Contact Programme in Canada

The Canadian Red Cross runs the “First Contact” Programme and it provides migrants with information on how to find affordable housing, process a refugee claim, secure employment, as well as how to apply for legal aid or social assistance. The “First Contact” Programme started in Toronto in 2002 and its goals are, *inter alia*, to reduce homelessness of refugee claimants and also to reduce the suffering, exploitation, trauma and marginalization experienced by those people.

## Many examples from Spain

It is not necessary in this forum to provide examples from Spain, but it is important to state that the Spanish Red Cross is one of the world’s most valued institutions in the field of care and concern for migrants. The work done to meet the needs of people who make the arduous and dangerous journey across the Atlantic Ocean from Africa has won the admiration of people in National Societies and other organisations all around the world.

Many more National Societies’ migration activities could be mentioned but in summary, the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement has a long history in providing assistance to migrants. The success of migration activities globally show that there is currently growing momentum for relieving the suffering of migrants. Nonetheless, many more activities could be undertaken to ensure assistance and protection of migrants without discrimination and irrespective of their legal status.

## The way forward

The positive aspect of migration has been underlined in recent years and its connection with development, has been discussed formally within the International Organisation for Migration meetings and fora for many years, and at the level of the UN’s principal organs since 2003<sup>26</sup>, although State involvement in a substantial sense came later, with the 2006 resolution which gave rise to GFMD<sup>27</sup>.

GFMD and other discussions, including in top-level economic institutions have identified migrant remittances (including monetary and ‘cultural remittances’ or the transfer of ideas, technologies, cultures) as an important global factor which contributes substantively to local economies and is often greater than Official Development Assistance (ODA) contributions from external donors. Migrant remittances help communities both to prepare and to respond to crises, such as natural or man-made disasters and thereby build resilient communities.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the GFMD Concept Paper developed by Mauritius for 2012 focuses on migrants as agents of socioeconomic change and notes that it is important to support the involvement of migrants and diaspora in



26 The Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM) was launched on 9 December 2003 by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. Details of its work can be found at [www.gcim.org](http://www.gcim.org).

27 On 20 December 2006, the General Assembly adopted by consensus resolution A/RES/61/208 on International Migration and Development, available online at <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/506/85/PDF/N0650685.pdf?OpenElement> (last accessed 5 March 2012).

28 See Mohapatra S., *Can migrant remittances build resilience to natural disasters?* (2009) <http://blogs.worldbank.org/peoplemove/can-migrant-remittances-build-resilience-to-natural-disasters-0> (last accessed 5 March 2012).



to prevent migration<sup>33</sup>. Therefore, it is better to accommodate migration and maximize its benefits rather than attempt to limit it.

Migration is, therefore, a phenomenon in the true sense of the word. It is an observable occurrence, and has been one throughout human history. It will remain with us, and our ability to understand that and work with it has become a significant feature of the work programme of all humanitarian organisations including the International RCRC Movement.

---

33 Foresight, *Migration and Global Environmental Change*, Final Project Report (2011) <http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/bispartners/foresight/docs/migration/11-1116-migration-and-global-environmental-change.pdf>