



Interview

Entrevista

René Plaetevoet*

For this number, the REMHU presents an interview conceded by René Plaetevoet, who runs December 18 – a NGO in Special Consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Among the many emerging themes about migration networks, the interview highlights on the work of this organization and its achievements concerning the promotion and protection of the rights of migrants worldwide.

Neste número, a REMHU apresenta a entrevista realizada com René Plaetevoet, diretor da December 18 – uma ONG em status Consultativo Especial no Conselho Econômico e Social da Organização das Nações Unidas. Dentre muitos subtemas alçados concernentes a redes migratórias, a entrevista aclara sobre o trabalho e as realizações desta organização, relativos à promoção e à proteção dos direitos dos migrantes mundo afora.

1. How was the December 18 created? What's its mission?

Back in 1999, a couple of people decided to set up December 18 as a volunteer organization. Our aim was to build a multilingual website that would bring information on international labor migration issues, with a focus on content produced by civil society organizations. At that time we were one of the

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first such websites. From the very beginning we also decided to work on the international human rights framework, especially the UN protection regime. Today, December 18 is a Belgian non-governmental organization working at the international level. Our name refers to the 18th December 1990 when the U.N. adopted the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. This date was later proclaimed by the U.N. as International Migrant's Day. The mission of December 18 is to promote and protect the rights of migrants worldwide with dignity and respect as basic values. Our goal is to support the work of migrant organizations in the different regions by using the Internet as a tool for advocacy, networking and the dissemination of information. We promote a rights-based approach to migration policies that is based on the international and regional human rights instruments and mechanisms.

2. The December 18 articulates a worldwide network of organizations e people that act for the protection of the migrants' human rights. What is the value and what are the advantages of accomplishing the mission in networks on the migration field? The December 18 develops a singular portion of its activities throughout the internet. What are the advantages and limits when using this way of social communication?

What is important to understand is that December 18 is not a formal membership organization. With network we mean that as an independent organization we seek to work together with groups from around the world in order to achieve respect and justice for all migrants and members of their families, regardless of their legal status. The internet and the new tools such as social networks (Facebook), video-platforms, mobile telephones and sms-applications do have a positive effect because these tools make it much easier to build international solidarity and take global/local action. But, as we all know, meeting someone face-to-face is equally important. That's why I think that international events such as the World Social Forum-gatherings are still useful, although small-scale meetings are of course also quite effective.

3. Would you explain the problematic issues of operating on an international network? What are the disadvantages and risks that must be considered and dealt with?

As December 18 we work primarily at the international and regional level. We are, for example, a founding member of the International Platform for the Migrant Workers Convention (IPMWC), which operates from Geneva. It looks at the effective implementation of the UN Migrant Workers Convention. For our organization this work is really important, but it is at times removed from the realities on the ground. We therefore try to get local organizations involved in this kind of work, for example, by encouraging them to write shadow reports and by trying to assist them in this process.

4. The December 18 promotes and manages activities around the

world in occasion of the International Migrant's day (December, 18th). We would like to understand how the celebration events for this date reflect on the migrants' human rights defense.

We see International Migrants Day (IMD) as an opportunity to celebrate the contributions made by migrant workers and members of their families as well as to highlight their plight. Last year, at least 55 events were organized in 30 countries. When we look at these activities, we can see that they range from cultural events to marches and debates. What is in our view important is that we continue to promote the fact that this is an international day and that protecting the rights of migrants is something that is needed worldwide. It is also absolutely necessary that we encourage international solidarity. Obviously, defending the rights of migrants is something that happens on a daily basis throughout the year. More than ever, International Migrants Day (IMD) is an occasion for international solidarity and for making migrants voices heard. December 18 gives a platform to these testimonies via Radio 1812.

5. The December 18 deals with many themes related to migration, but, in a specific way, it prioritizes the "International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant workers and members of their families". What are the main objections regarding its approval by the more economically developed countries and what are the results achieved in the countries it was sanctioned?

First, national, regional and international NGOs, active in the field of the rights of migrants, base their actions and interventions on the legal framework provided by the UN Migrant Workers Convention. Overall, NGOs and other migrant rights supporter, believe that the Convention is the instrument that best protects the rights of migrants, because it is designed to address their specific protection needs; protects migrant workers independently of their status (whether they are in a regular or irregular situation), throughout the migration process; and compiles in a single document all the fundamental rights migrants are entitled to, based on what can be found in the other core treaties as well as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. There are, of course, some shortcomings with this Convention. Some people point out that, for certain provisions, other international instruments might provide better protection. This is, for example, the case with respect to the right to unionize. Also, whilst the Convention is innovative because it specifically states that fundamental rights apply to undocumented migrant workers as well, one could argue that the Convention leaves room for interpretation because it often refers to the national law context. However, these shortcomings should, in my opinion, not be an impediment but rather be seen as an opportunity for vigilance and concerted comprehensive advocacy, both at the international and national level, using the most appropriate instruments available.

Last year marked the 5th year of the entry into force of this particular Convention. It is the task of the Migrant Workers Committee to monitor the implementation of the Convention. What is absolutely necessary, however, is

for migrants' organizations and other civil society groups to actively engage in this process by submitting additional information to what the government has included in its official report. It is equally important, however, to ensure that the recommendations issued by the UN Committee are implemented by the concerned state.

The decades-long gap in the adoption of a treaty and other human rights tools for the protection of migrant workers is about to have particularly dire consequences. For scores of migrants, the world financial and economic crisis exposes their existing vulnerability to stronger hardship and exploitation. It will also result in diminished remittances to those left behind in their home countries. Ironically, while migrants have often been the invisible architects of many striving economies and least benefited from financial investment and related wealth generating products, they are amongst the worst hit.

It is thus essential that civil society renews the call for universal ratification of the Convention. Furthermore, the fact that major countries of destination did not ratify this convention does not mean that they should not/and cannot be held accountable. Other international instruments do apply to migrant workers and it is up to migrants' organizations, civil society and the international community to make use of them.

6. How to cooperate with the December 18 actions?

We remain very interested in getting in touch with organizations that are looking at using the international human rights instruments and we are open to work together on this and develop joint projects.

I would also specifically like to mention the unique initiative Radio1812, a global radio show connecting migrant communities and radio journalists on the occasion of International Migrants Day. It brings together as many radios as possible worldwide over one day to produce, broadcast and share audio programs on migration and integration, targeting a wide and diverse audience. Everyone who wants to take part in this event can get in touch with us. The programs from last year's edition can still be listened to on the special web site: www.radio1812.net. Last year, 174 radio stations from 47 countries took part in the event. We hope to do even better in 2009.

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