

Report on the GFMD Regional Consultative Process on the theme of 'Leveraging Technology to Empower Migrants'

Bali Process and Abu Dhabi Dialogue

Thematic Lead: Gibril Faal (August 2020)

1. Introduction

The theme of 'Leveraging Technology to Empower Migrants' was discussed in breakout sessions at two of the GFMD Regional Consultative Processes (RCP), namely the Bali Process RCP on 29 June 2020 and the Abu Dhabi Dialogue RCP on 9 July 2020. There were 92 participants representing 60 entities, of which 22 were governments and the remaining 38 were international organisations, municipalities, business networks and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) comprising migrant organisations, worker representatives and research institutions. Of the 92 participants, 27 made verbal interventions, of which, 13 were government officials¹. The thematic discussions in the breakout sessions focussed on the five key questions that were circulated weeks prior to the sessions, namely:

- Examples of Migration-Related Technology Platforms
- How to Optimise Data Sharing and Processing
- How to Improve Trust, Accessibility and Usage
- How to Reduce Recruitment and Remittance Costs
- How to Improve Access to Welfare Services.

Participants deemed technology to be a crosscutting subject relevant to different aspects of migration and migrant empowerment. This report is a mix of summary and synthesis of the key points, examples, analysis and observations that arose from the discussions.

2. Examples of Migration-Related Technology Platforms

The RCP discussions generated about 15 specific examples of migration-related tech-platforms operating with varying degrees of effectiveness². The main points and observations arising from the RCP discussions regarding 'examples of migration-related technology platforms' were as follows:

- I. **E-Government and Digital-Nations:** Most governments are committed to the use of technology for migration-related services. This commitment is rooted in national strategies and policies within the wider context of setting up e-government and digital-nation capabilities. Many governments already run migration-related tech-platforms, although the levels of operational success vary immensely.

¹ Bali Process: 51 participants, 33 entities, of which 9 were governments; 15 verbal interventions, 5 were government officials

Abu Dhabi Dialogue: 41 participants, 27 entities, of which 13 were governments; 12 verbal interventions, 8 were government officials.

² The tech-platform examples are listed in the appendix.

- II. **Doubled-Edged Technology:** In practice, technology is neither neutral nor is it necessarily always a good thing. It can be a double-edged sword, and it is amenable to being used for good or bad, relating to migrants. As such, it should be seen as a tool rather than a panacea, and be used with alertness, positive purposefulness, and with necessary checks and balances from diverse stakeholders.
- III. **Purposeful Empowering of Migrants:** The existing migration-related platforms are generally set up to expand and enhance services to migrants. This by itself can empower migrants - however empowering migrants is not necessarily their fundamental and foundational goal. Given the doubled-edged nature of technology, governments should purposefully commit to the principle of empowering migrants as a virtue in itself, beneficial to all stakeholders, in line with agreed global and regional frameworks.
- IV. **Typology of Migration Tech-Platforms:** Migration-related tech-platforms assist and support prospective and actual migrants through the processes of emigration, employment, sending remittances, managing social and earned benefits, and accessing welfare services. These platforms vary in interactivity and can be classified into the following main types:
 - Non-interactive information and awareness-raising platforms
 - Exchange, dialogue and consultative platforms
 - Applications and document processing platforms
 - Matching and specialist service provision platforms
 - One-to-one welfare service platforms.

The least interactive platforms are the most common; the one-to-one welfare platforms are rare.

3. How to Optimise Data Sharing and Processing

The main points and observations arising from the RCP discussions regarding 'how to optimise data sharing and processing' were as follows:

- I. **Diverse Platforms and Interoperability:** In addition to government technology platforms, there are many other digital and online platforms run by civil society, international and other types of organisations. This diversity can be a good thing, but it needs to be matched with stronger partnerships through multi-stakeholder functionalities and platform integration. In practice, this would mean ensuring intra-operability amongst the different government platforms, and interoperability with platforms run by non-government and foreign government partners.
- II. **Privacy, Regulations and Compliance:** Bearing in mind the double-edged nature of technology, fair and ethical regulations are needed. These regulations and the monitoring and encouragement of compliance need to be seen as part of a process to empower migrants, as opposed to disadvantaging them, through spying, censorship, undue control and other acts that undermine migrant rights and privacy. Platforms should not be used by governments and other operators as subterfuge for collecting personal and group information for purposes beyond the empowerment of the migrants. This fundamental principle of migrant and user privacy and empowerment does not prevent operators undertaking data analyses aimed at improving the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of services.

- III. **Linkages and Portals:** Irrespective of which entity runs a migration-related platform or its primary operational purpose, data sharing can be optimised by adding functionalities and links so that they serve as portals to other relevant and useful information. Such enhanced platforms can also serve as one-stop-shops that deliver a portfolio of core services, and provide easy access to a wide range of migration-related services delivered by other governments, institutions, businesses, CSOs and other providers.
- IV. **Core Migration Processes:** The migration loop of pre-departure, travelling, living and working abroad, diaspora engagement, circular and actual return, involves a wide range of bureaucratic and operational processes. These standardised and repetitive tasks are amenable to machine processing. Machine learning, artificial intelligence and other technological advances have facilitated automated identity and document checking and validation. Case studies around the world indicate that core migration processes can undergo transformational change and improvement through the use of technology. These processes include amongst other things: visa and permit applications, issuances and extensions; worker recruitment, interviews, selection, induction and ongoing training; ticketing, check-in, security clearance and boarding for air and international travel; remittances and trans-boundary financial services. Migrant databases can also help improve migration management systems in a manner that satisfy national regulatory requirements without putting onerous, intrusive and unfair constraints on migrants. Employers can share and update migrant worker details with national authorities, without the need to take possession of the documents of migrants, a practice that infringes on migrant and labour rights.
- V. **Transparency and Technological Bias:** All tech-platforms are prone to algorithmic bias, negative profiling and other discriminatory tendencies. These can be hidden and embedded in machine systems through either the original and updated coding or through routine machine learning. As such, machine based processing and operations need to be accompanied by ongoing and rigorous checks and corrections, as well as facility and functionality for human intervention and discretionary reviews. One of the most effective ways of ensuring fairness and ongoing improvements is openness and transparency about principles, facts, figures, outputs and challenges of the tech-platform. This enables all stakeholders to provide their experiences and perspectives, providing relevant 'open-source' input to complement other analytical and technical tasks linked to the ongoing improvement of the platforms.
- VI. **Social Media and Specialist Platforms:** Governments and other operators use existing global social media platforms such as facebook and WhatsApp to reach vast numbers of their migrants and diaspora. This is likely to continue simply because of the convenience, relative low cost and extensive reach. These platforms are effective for information sharing, meetings, seminars and one-to-many advisory sessions. However, it is recognised that specialist and tailor-made platforms are needed to address the specific requirements of different categories of migrants, bearing in mind language and socio-economic backgrounds.

4. How to Improve Trust, Accessibility and Usage

The main points and observations arising from the RCP discussions regarding 'how to improve trust, accessibility and usage' were as follows:

- I. **Effective and Equitable Service Delivery:** As part of e-government and digital-nation programmes, many governments see migration-related tech-platforms as means of improving general migration management and extending public services to their citizens abroad. There seem to be two foundational elements needed to build trust for these tech-platforms. Firstly, they should deliver services in an effective and efficiency operational manner which actual and potential users find useful and beneficial. Secondly, services need to be provided in a fair and equitable manner, from the perspective of the diverse users coming from different socioeconomic backgrounds. With such a premise, the platforms address needs and wants, whilst anticipating and responding to migrant expectations.
- II. **International Principles and Standards:** Given the trans-boundary nature of migration and the global dimensions of new technology, international standards, guidelines and frameworks for migration tech-platforms can be an important basis for building trust and enhancing access and usage. In order to promote interoperability of platforms run by different governments and diverse entities, an international and multi-stakeholder approach is needed. There are reputable institutions with experience and competency in setting up and supporting the implementation of global principles and best practices relating to the effective and fair use of technology³. However, it appears that migration-related tech-platforms are not formally and substantively connected to these institutions. In the context of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), it is important for frameworks like GFMD to engage with bodies such as the International Standards Organization (ISO), as well as global technology governance and citizen privacy organisations, to set up and oversee guiding principles and international standards for migration-related tech-platforms.
- III. **Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships:** In addition to using global social media platforms for migration-related information sharing, multi-stakeholder collaboration can deliver multiple benefits and dividends to diverse partners, not just migrants. Partnerships can include the global tech companies, new and innovative specialists, civil society, regional and international organisations, and groups of countries. Services, functionalities and platform design can be expanded, replicated and upgraded through partnerships. Open standard packages can be used to construct the tech-platforms, where applicable. It is important to use software and functionalities which facilitate open and easy accessibility for migrants using different types of devices and mobile phones. International organisations such as UNESCO can work with educational institutions globally to serve as a repository for formal certificates, thereby providing easy third party verification of migrant qualifications.
- IV. **Multi-Purpose Platform Usage:** In addition to information sharing and service delivery, the platforms can serve multiple and complementary purposes including: being online interactive communities of migrants for mutual learning and support; hub for user surveys, research and rating of migration-related services; forum for research and consultations on policy and practice; repository of relevant information, presented in different languages and in multiple formats including text, audios and visuals.

³ One example is 'Principles for Digital Development' - <https://digitalprinciples.org/>

- V. Fact-Checking and Fake-Checking:** As is common practice, it is important for tech-platforms to undertake structured and ongoing fact-checking to verify the accuracy and relevance of the information and content on platforms. Structured and ongoing fake-checking has now become a necessity for tech-platform operators. This is due to the fact that new technology is versatile, making it relatively easy and cheap for online fraudsters, scammers and chancers to set up fake platforms for fraudulent and nefarious purposes. Fake platforms can be used to steal financial and identity details, and for extortion, blackmail, harassment and trolling. Platform operators need to fake-check to ensure that their platforms are not cloned or infected with malware that steal data and information. In line with multi-stakeholder partnerships, search engines and global social media platforms can cooperate with governments to ban, track, find and take down fake and exploitative platforms that charge extortionate sums for government services such as online visa waivers (which the government websites provide at a nominal fee).
- VI. Brokerage, Partnership and Intermediation:** Due to reasons such as literacy challenges, lack of awareness, distrust of government and formal institutions, many migrants are refraining from using tech-platforms despite the fact that they can benefit from services on offer. Migrant and civil society organisations that work with different categories of migrants can serve as brokers and intermediaries, helping build trust and improve access to services.
- VII. Options, Alternatives and the Digital Divide:** Even though the tech-platforms are capable of providing a wide range of services effectively and efficiently, it is important that face-to-face services remain as options and alternatives for those who cannot use tech-platforms. The reality is that a digital divide exist, with certain groups of citizens having limited capacity and capability to access and use new technology. Although migrants may be more likely to be tech users than the average citizen, nonetheless the population of actual and potential migrants are affected by the digital divide.

5. How to Reduce Recruitment and Remittance Costs

The main points and observations arising from the RCP discussions regarding 'how to reduce recruitment and remittance costs' were as follows:

- I. Other Migration Costs:** Given that there are specific SDG targets relating to remittance and recruitment costs, it is not surprising that attention is focussed on these. However, tech-platforms provide the opportunity for other forms of migration costs to be monitored with the view to reducing them. Foremost amongst these are direct fees and indirect costs charged by governments and public institutions for visas, residence permits, identity cards and other required documentations. These should be included in action plans to reduce the general and overall cost of migration.
- II. Cost Bearing and Fair Fees:** To reduce costs incurred by migrants, tech-platform operators need to adopt the principle that expenditure on the construction and development of the platforms and other infrastructure are treated as social and developmental investments to be borne by the operator. These costs should not be passed on migrants. The cost bearing principle does not prevent operators charging reasonable fees for their services. Furthermore, where fees are to be levied, they should be open, fair and proportionate, devoid of any element of profiteering and exploitation, so as to genuinely empower migrants – the majority of whom are low and mid income earners. These principles apply to commercial, social enterprise and government platforms, including charges for visas, permits and other official documentation.

- III. **Monitoring and Promotion of Agreements:** There are SDG targets, GCM commitments, ILO standards, IOM programmes, World Bank and IFAD schemes and other agreements, protocols and frameworks relating to the reduction of the cost of migrant recruitment and remittances. Tech-platforms can provide ongoing monitoring, performance and compliance data and intelligence specific to individual countries and migration corridors. Up to date empirical data from the platforms can inform ever evolving bespoke responses to stimulate, promote and incentivise performance to achieve existing agreements.
- IV. **Cost and Service Comparison and Rating:** Remittance cost comparison websites have been around for about 20 years. New technology provides the opportunity for comparisons to be corridor specific, more precise, covering both transfer fees and hidden foreign exchange charges, using real-time data. Such enhanced cost comparison can also be applied to recruitment costs. Furthermore, cost comparisons can be complemented by service delivery rating and comparison. This can expose and weed out unethical companies, promote fair business competition, leading to improved services, reduced costs and higher value for money. The tech-platforms can provide the information and functionalities in easy formats for different devices and mobile phones. Key facts, figures and observations can also be provided in text, audio and visual illustrations in different languages.
- V. **Linked and Complementary Services:** There are many complementary financial and professional development services that migrants need which, through the use of technology can be provided at minimal marginal cost by the remittance and recruitment companies. Remittances can be linked to related services such as: payments for services and goods; health insurance; education payment plans; bank accounts; savings and investments; voluntary contribution to pensions and social security schemes. Migrant recruitment can be linked to related services such as: recognition and validation of skills and experiences; skills development and career guidance; training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD); visa, permit and document renewals. Using technology and multi-stakeholder partnerships to develop and offer related services can enable companies to capitalise on operational synergies, whilst expanding commercial relationships with their existing client-base.

6. How to Improve Access to Welfare Services

The main points and observations arising from the RCP discussions regarding 'how to improve access to welfare services' were as follows:

- I. **Technology as Welfare Right:** Access to technology should be treated as a human and migrant right. This is important not only for people to benefit from the options and opportunities available, but to end current practices whereby migrants are prevented from accessing technology and communication devices. This deprives them access to their families and to information and knowledge relevant to their welfare. In the current cyber-age, access to online information and resources, and the ability to communicate through mobile devices has become a new utility service, comparable to access to electricity and energy. People deprived of it suffer degradation of their welfare. As such, access should be based on affordable costs and minimal bureaucracy. In order to reduce existing digital-divide, governments have a regulatory role to ensure continued affordability, fair pricing and access for all.

- II. Friendship and Integration Networks:** Migrants generally suffer from unfair negative perceptions and xenophobia. These arise from deliberate onslaughts of negative propaganda and falsehoods, and institutionalised misperceptions and bias, to the detriment of migrant safety and welfare. Rebuttal through hard and dry rational acts such as provision of facts and figures is not enough to counter ingrained perception. Credible facts need to be complemented with soft, emotional, cultural and interpersonal responses. Tech-platforms can play key roles in promoting fair, positive and empathetic perceptions of migrants. These migration-related platforms include: host-migrant befriending and exchange schemes; cultural exchange and solidarity hubs; community, volunteering and integration networks; national and multimedia campaigns.
- III. Human Trafficking and Modern Day Slavery:** Tech-platforms can be used to monitor, document and warn against entities and outfits involved in human trafficking, modern day slavery and other illegal and unethical practices against migrants. A multi-stakeholder approach can ensure that verified data can come from national law enforcement and judicial sources, specialist international and non-governmental organisations, and other reputable sources. Similar to other monitoring platforms, these can be country and corridor specific, with functionalities and information available in different formats and languages.
- IV. Access to Tele-Justice:** The COVID 19 pandemic has highlighted the need and opportunities for online access to justice platforms for migrants. Migrant tele-justice platforms can incorporate the elements, structure and protocols of employment tribunal, arbitration and Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) frameworks, addressing claims and grievances relating to migrant wages, fees, benefits and other contractual issues. A multi-stakeholder approach can be based on existing ILO and other frameworks, bringing together government agencies, employer federations, employee representatives, international and civil society organisations.
- V. Access to Tele-Medicine:** Tele-medicine platforms can be used to provide medical services to migrants, especially those who without regular status or those otherwise denied access to general services. Furthermore, migrant medical practitioners based in different countries can use these tech-platforms to provide medical support as part of voluntary and social enterprise programmes. A multi-stakeholder approach can bring together tech and medical companies, local hospitals, humanitarian charities, migrant and diaspora organisations to support vulnerable migrants. Partnerships can help ensure that services and practices meet the highest global standards in medicine, patient care and confidentiality, and access to state of the art tele-medicine equipment.

Appendix: Migration-Related Tech-Platform Examples

Migration-Related Tech-Platform Examples	
visadb.io (Poland)	https://visadb.io/about
<i>Internet visa database indexing 300,000 visa, residency and citizenship routes for 200 countries</i>	
e-migrate (UAE/India)	www.emigrate.gov.in
<i>Digital platform used by UAE and Indian governments to manage the deployment of migrant workers, including: job offer reviews; passport checks; employment contract reviews; and visa issuance</i>	
SLBFE Portal (Sri Lanka)	http://www.slbfe.lk/
<i>Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment one-stop portal for services to migrants and recruitment agencies – pre, during and after migration</i>	
Public Authority of Manpower (Kuwait)	www.manpower.gov.kw/Labor-services.html
<i>Portal for recruitment and deployment of migrant workers, including dispute resolution service</i>	
Integreat (Germany)	https://integreat-app.de/en/
<i>Information app for newcomers in Germany, with over 50 governmental partners</i>	
CMSC (Singapore)	www.sgmigrant.com
<i>Covid Migrant Support Coalition platform provides language and other courses, recreation, mental health and wellness services to migrants</i>	
Remitscope (IFAD)	www.remittancesgateway.org/remitscope/
<i>Multi-corridor remittance data and market analysis</i>	
Saver Asia (South East Asia)	https://saverasia.com/
<i>Comparison of fees and foreign exchange rates for remittances within South East Asian countries</i>	
Rise (UAE)	https://www.gorise.co/
<i>Linked services including migrant remittances, bank account, investment, insurance and shopping</i>	
SWADES (India)	http://www.nsdcindia.org/swades/
<i>Skilled Workers Arrival Database for Employment Support – skills platform for migrant workers</i>	
MADAD (India)	www.madad.gov.in/AppConsular/welcomeLink
<i>Grievance resolution mechanism for Indian migrant workers</i>	
Migport (Turkey)	http://migport.com/
<i>Enables refugees to connect anonymously with volunteers who are willing to help them with their daily challenges such as education, finance and bureaucratic processes</i>	
INMI (Chile)	https://inmi.cl/home/
<i>Support for migrant integration and employment; digital matching of migrant workers to employers</i>	
Techfugees (France)	www.techfugees.com
<i>Empower displaced people whilst supporting tech innovations designed by, with and for them</i>	