



Forced Migration: Pain and Tragedy, Challenges and Responsibilities
The Istanbul Agreements
of Churches Witnessing With Migrants (CWWM)

Istanbul, Turkey, 10-11 October 2015

The picture of three-year old Syrian child, Aylan Kurdi, face down and lifeless on the shore after trying to cross to Greece, has been making the rounds of alternative and mainstream media. It moved people, as it must. It called for change, as it should...Let the tragic pictures of the death of children not only break our hearts, but also the walls of exclusion and inhumane migration and refugee policies that do not respect the fundamental rights of people already forcibly displaced by economic want and wars.

{Eni Lestari, Chairperson, International Migrants Alliance}

Pain and tragedy

1. We are gripped by the horror of suffering and deaths of thousands of human beings brought about by forced migration and massive displacements occurring in many places around the world. Such forced migration of peoples stare us in the face. We see this in the ongoing massive dispersal, displacement and dislocation of peoples across the Mediterranean, from and within Africa and the Middle East and into Europe, with many of them braving the elements along great distances, dangerous seas and fortified borders. The thousands of unaccompanied minors crossing into the US from the Mexican border is another appalling situation too vivid and horrific to ignore. Equally appalling is the fate of the Rohingyas of Myanmar and out of Bangladesh whose massive migration by sea have met largely unwelcoming gestures in the Southeast Asian region. There is also the abuse and violence against migrants and human beings in various situations of trafficking—a modern-day slavery so abominable that we must eradicate. The pain and tragedy arising out of these conditions pose challenges and obligations we must fully consider and take to heart.

2. The great loss of human lives and the massive dislocation of populations from their homes, livelihoods and circles of familiarity are truly painful and tragic. But pain and tragedy are not going to immobilize and paralyze us. We bear a common responsibility to stop forced migration as peoples of one planet acting beyond our national allegiances, and without fear and prejudices. And respond we will, as we already have and are doing. The urgency of the situation demands

the continuation of our acts of mercy, relief and compassion, even as the tragedy of forced migration compels us to work intentionally on acts of justice that take into account the historic roots, systemic causes and contemporary challenges of forced migration.

3. Acts of mercy for migrants and refugees involve the provision of humanitarian services and necessities like food, shelter, clothing, medical care, psychosocial support and the like. Acts of justice involve, among others, the advocacy for structural change and systemic transformation. At the nexus of acts of mercy and justice are acts of solidarity and accompaniment that make available platforms for migrants and refugees to raise their own critical voices and decide for themselves how to protect their human dignity and assert their human rights, and in this context, how to break the walls and prison bars that restrict freedom of movement.

From New York and Stockholm, to Istanbul

4. We issue this statement, henceforth called the “Istanbul Agreements”, from our sixth CWWM international consultation assembled in Istanbul, Turkey, on 10-11 October 2015. CWWM is an international platform for advocacy and forthright action focused on global migration, particularly forced migration in all its forms. We are organized as a tripartite body of equals that includes migrants and representatives of migrant-serving and faith-based organizations from various faith traditions. In our practice of a tripartite arrangement, we have come to value working together and inclusively on acts of mercy, accompaniment and justice.

5. The [“Istanbul Agreements”](#) (Istanbul, 2015) supplements two CWWM framework documents that include [“The Intersections of Migration, Human Rights and Development Justice: CWWM Advocacy Paper”](#) (New York, 2013) and [“The Stockholm Affirmations: Deepening and Broadening Advocacy”](#) (Stockholm, 2014). These three documents represent CWWM’s understanding and critical analyses of forced migration, the forms of advocacy and action required to address the wanton disregard for human dignity and rampant violations of human rights that ensue from forced migration, and the crucial work involved in addressing the historic and systemic roots of today’s forced migration. Together, the CWWM documents address outrages to the well-being of peoples and the planet by greed, exploitation and resource extraction. Collectively, they propound a discourse and practice of development justice whose pillars include redistributive, economic, social, and environmental justice, and accountability to people.

6. In New York (2013), we asserted that the magnitude of neoliberal globalization, and the deepening structural inequalities within countries and between countries and regions, have unduly privileged profit, greed and unsustainable development practices, including the commodification of human beings and the commoditization of their labor and services. In Stockholm (2014), we affirmed that it is not possible to understand the realities of forced migration without understanding the intersectionalities of racialized, gendered, sexualized, and securitized migration. New York underscored the crucial role of human rights and the centrality of the personhood of migrants (notion of *being*). Stockholm affirmed that migrants, their being and

their labor, cannot be commodified and commoditized; they must decide for themselves their lives and labors, and freely determine their destinies (notion of *becoming*). In Istanbul (2015), we gave time to understand the nexus, but also wide swath, between public policy formulation, legislation and implementation on one hand, and the engagement of migrants themselves as deciders of their lives, labors, and destinies on the other hand. Even as migrants, refugees and asylum seekers negotiate the ambiguities and formalities of public policy formulation and legal and judicial systems, they also forge identities so as to claim their dignity, they struggle so as to protect their human rights, and they organize so as to forge associations and circles of familiarity that are meaningful and sustain them in their struggles (notion of *belonging*).

7. In Istanbul, we agreed that the just, durable and sustainable solution to forced migration involves sustainable development that prioritizes the rights of peoples, protects their environment, and promotes democratic space at all levels of participation and governance, which in turn prospers sustainable peace. This form of sustainable development focuses on freeing peoples from poverty and hunger and protecting the planet from development aggression, global and structural inequalities, and neocolonial plunder and exploitation, including extractive practices and policies. This is development that truly eliminates the reason for forced migration and massive displacements.

8. At CWWM, our public policy involvements, our advocacies, and our solidarities need to be intentional about focusing on the actual, material, concrete, sensuous human bodies of human beings and how such bodies respond to the violations of their dignity and the exploitation of their labor and services as they negotiate the workings of market and capital. Hence, the Istanbul consultation examined the metaphors of the body and the “body politic” to understand more fully the dynamics of “global capitalism” and its consequences. This difficult but needed discourse provided the opening for how to ground and orient our understanding of migration, immigration, and emigration, but also, and perhaps more important, to strengthen our resistance to the objectification, reification, and commodification of human beings and nature arising out of the estrangement intrinsic to the dynamics of capitalism’s relations of production, reproduction, and representation.

Realities and challenges

9. And yet, we were made painfully aware that migrants and their advocacies for their immediate welfare and struggles for social justice are being challenged, even ignored. Increasingly, nation-states are using the phantoms of jobs scarcity and dwindling resources to justify clamping down on refugee and migration flows, and the reduction, if not abolition all together, of various forms of social safety nets and public services. As economic and other crises rage with so-called sluggish economic recovery, refugees and migrants are being used as convenient scapegoats, blurring, if not totally skipping over, the reality that skewed economic policies and the lack of political will and the courage to forge human solidarity beyond national allegiances are at the root of the problems related to forced migration.

10. The same neoliberal-driven economics that uphold labor export is forcibly driving millions of people from their homelands who are seeking a safer and more secure life, if not for them, also for their families. Extreme poverty and unemployment, global economic exploitation, militarization, environmental degradation, resource grabs, longstanding wars and conflicts in many countries and regions, and political and religious persecution, severally or collectively have resulted in a combination of internal displacements and forced migration of hundreds of thousands of peoples from their countries and across lands, borders and dangerous seas. In their wake are migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and a variety of human trafficking conditions (sex, child, labor, drugs, and human organs) and various forms of sexual and gender violence. Climate change that has resulted into environmental degradation is reshaping our planet that is home to diverse species and humanity itself, and producing what we call today as climate refugees.

11. As CWWM, we reiterate again that all human rights are migrant rights; that human dignity is inalienable and indivisible. It bears repeating in this moment of urgency that this current massive dispersal, displacement, and dislocation of peoples has clear, although complex, historical roots of injustices brought about by slavery, colonialism and racism even as neoliberal globalization exhibits contemporary forms of economic exploitation, political oppression, cultural subjugation, and intervention and occupation by enriched and powerful countries that we must confront.

12. Among several issues we discussed included, among others, the following: 1) the massive migration across the Mediterranean, from Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa (Syrians, Somalis, Afghans, Eritreans) of peoples fleeing brutal dictatorships, political and sectarian repression, extremist violence and ethnic and/or religious cleansing, arriving on the shores of Europe, if they survived drowning at sea; 2) the decades of migration of some seven million Palestinians living as refugees within the Occupied Palestinian Territories and into neighboring host countries [Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria] resulting from Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories, demonstrates how forced migration also happens within the same region and has long term impacts on host countries; 3) two cases of various forms of violence and physical abuse against domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines, illustrating the success of organized global solidarity and action; 4) two cases of human trafficking, one from Cameroon into the United States and another from the Philippines to Canada, both cases demonstrating the importance of perseverance in running after human traffickers and the necessity of community support in fighting against human trafficking especially in the courts; 5) the gender dimensions and concerns of the invisible African women hidden away in crammed housing in Italy's Lampedusa, especially cases involving women and girls who are brutalized, raped, trafficked for sex, and enslaved as domestic labor and how national policies are reinforcing such practices; and 6) the Lumads, indigenous peoples of Mindanao, southern Philippines, who have been internally displaced in different parts of the Philippines after fleeing from escalating militarization and violence, rape and harassment by mining and other business interests in their ancestral

domains, and from attacks on their schools and communities, that have also led to extrajudicial killings of their peoples and leaders.

13. We realized that in situations of forced movement and displacement of peoples, human security and human rights are also compromised. The situation in Europe is a case in point. Even more so than previously, forced migration is challenging the migration policies of migrant-origin and migrant-destination countries. The closure of borders and heightened restrictions in the entry of foreign nationals—be they migrants displaced by economic hardships, or refugees and asylum seekers fleeing from wars and political strife and religious persecution—are slowly creeping not only into Europe but also in other destination countries of many who are forcibly displaced from countries of birth or transit. The United Nations has proclaimed the European migration crisis a global threat. For the European Union (EU), it is primarily a regional unity and security issue. But this unity and security are now fractured by national policies that are fueled by statist, populist, xenophobic and discriminatory ideologies and practices that threaten national and regional, if not, global peace and security. In turn, some European countries are devolving into fortress states, threatening if not deploying police and military action against those who seek to cross their borders and those who aid them, emphasizing that border crossings are potential security threats.

14. While the migration crisis has led to considerable challenges in countries affected by it, we underline that in cases like Europe, it is a crisis which is manageable for a regional community which has the size and wealth of EU. At the same time we call on public authorities and all stakeholders to acknowledge and put into practice the rights which migrants, refugees and asylum seekers already have under domestic, regional (EU and African Union) and international laws. We believe that in order to solve the crisis, we must not do any more harm and avoid the unnecessary loss of lives. A new system of safe and legal passage must be put in place, including provisions about resettlement, family unification, humanitarian visas, and suspension of visa obligations.

Responsibilities and tasks ahead

15. Our understanding of forced migration, and the responsibilities and obligations to address it, were informed by the stories, narratives and expertise shared by our participants representing themselves and organizations from and based in regions and countries, including Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, Cameroon, Canada, Denmark, Ecuador, El Salvador, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong SAR, Indonesia, Italy, Lebanon, Nepal, Netherlands, Norway, Philippines, Senegal, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Turkey, Uganda, United Kingdom, United States of America, and Zimbabwe.

16. The Istanbul consultation directed us to develop strategies, mechanisms and protocols on how to respond to urgent life and death situations facing migrants, their families and communities, while continuing public policy advocacy and organizing at all levels to achieve the longer term struggle for social justice. We will be sure to undergird the intersections of migration,

human rights, and development justice, moving beyond protection towards recovery, restoration and transformation of migrant's lives and well-being. This includes commitment to truly eliminate hunger and eradicate poverty for all, by achieving food and jobs security, among others. It is in this light that we will engage critically with local, national, regional, international, governmental, nongovernmental, intergovernmental, and multilateral groups and mechanisms, including the United Nations and its related bodies, to work for the welfare and human rights of migrants and their families and communities. The same manner of engagement will include the processes and mechanisms to implement and realize all internationally agreed development goals, including the newly agreed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its 17 goals and 169 targets, acknowledging how fragile and threatened are the political will and promises, and the economic and political infrastructures, which undergird them. It is in this context that our engagement with the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) and its voluntary, inter-governmental, non-binding and informal consultative process may be assessed. The CWWM met in Istanbul prior to the 8th annual meeting of GFMD and a few of our participants attended its Civil Society Days. While we welcome the GFMD giving increased attention to forced migration, we reiterate our opposition to any policy that consigns migrants to tools for development, where their bodies and services are treated as pure commodities to be managed and traded in the marketplace.

17. In Istanbul, we also celebrated the many forms of solidarious acts of accompaniment, empowerment and capacity building rendered by our faith bodies, together with grassroots and nongovernmental organizations. Christians and their churches, and other faith traditions across Europe, have played essential parts in rendering an inclusive welcome and radical hospitality to newly arrived migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Remarkable work is being done especially in frontline countries like Italy and Greece, where there is advocacy within Europe for the adoption of models of action, including the declaration of “humanitarian corridors” and “channels” for safe passage or issuing “humanitarian visa” based, for example, on EU Visa code, for those who need and deserve immediate humanitarian protection. Faith bodies and civic organizations in countries like Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, and Turkey, have acted with compassion to the migration crisis, opening doors to those in need and planning for sustainable and just resettlement. We celebrated and expressed solidarity with the churches and ecumenical bodies in focal points such as Lampedusa, Lesbos, Ceuta, and in the Hungarian borders that have granted assistance to and solidarity with migrants. Their work and ministries on all sides of the Mediterranean—Africa, Europe and the Middle East—is longstanding and therefore not new. What is new that led to the recent dimension of emergency in Europe is the heightened and offensive rejection of migrants and the hermetic closure of its borders. The demonstration of shared responsibility and obligation by many peoples and communities is testament to the actual living out of radical hospitality and inclusive community in our world. We resolved in Istanbul to share as many of our stories and narratives, singly and collectively, utilizing many forms of communication tools, to tell of the great, albeit daunting, tasks being done and are lying yet ahead.

18. For the worldwide ecumenical and faith traditions, we are challenged even more to speak prophetically. For the global grassroots movement of migrants and refugees, including survivors of human trafficking, gender-based violence, and religious and political persecution, we are challenged to vigilantly reclaim our human rights and speak with forthright determination of our struggles and hopes in our places of work, countries of transit and destination, and communities of belonging. We will no longer allow ourselves to be defined by our stations and status in life as migrants and refugees except by our common and inalienable dignity and indivisible human rights as human beings.

19. For the faith-based institutions in the CWWM, this moment is about God's order of justice and peace, and a summons to our faith and resources in the service of God's people, not the least the migrants. For all of us at CWWM, this moment is about the cry, call, and struggle of the people called migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, survivors of human trafficking, and their movements for justice, peace and sustainability. We claim our responsibility to respond with duty and obligation, even as we realize that religious institutions and social movements—including their structures, efforts, mechanisms and processes—remain largely inadequate in responding to such a moment and struggle. We pray we will seize the moment, grasp the tasks ahead, and all rise to the occasion.

20. What we already do to address forced migration and massive displacements must be heightened and sustained. Together, we reaffirmed the collective work we do through CWWM and resolved to improve upon the structure, network and resources that make this joint work possible. For the church and the ecumenical communities, we must make visible God's justice and accompaniment in the struggles and hopes of the displaced, dislocated and dispersed. For the migrants and refugees, we must persevere in organizing our ranks and reclaiming our dignity and asserting our human rights. For everyone, celebrating strength in our unity and solidarity to establish just, peaceable, durable and sustainable communities for all gives us the fortitude and courage to forge ahead.

The time to act decisively is long overdue and cannot be delayed.

For more information about Churches Witnessing With Migrants, visit:

<http://nccphilippines.org/our-programs/faith-witness-and-service/churches-witnessing-with-migrants/>

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