

## ***Report from the Strategic Planning Meeting of the Regional Network of Civil Organizations on Migration***

From February 26 through March 1, 2003, representatives of the Regional Network of Civil Organizations on Migration (RNCOM) gathered in Chalatenango, El Salvador, for a strategic planning meeting. The RNCOM, which was founded in 1996 as a parallel civil society forum to the inter-governmental Regional Conference on Migration (RCM), went through a period of transition in 2002. During the first five years of its existence, the RNCOM's efforts focused on advocacy directed towards the RCM and the promotion of a set of Regional Human Rights Guidelines for the treatment of migrants in particular. After September 11, 2001, the Guidelines campaign stalled and the viability of the RCM as a space in which civil society groups could effectively advance the human rights of migrants at a regional level became uncertain.

The planning process, which was initiated in late 2002 and culminated in this Chalatenango meeting, gave RNCOM members the opportunity to learn from the network's accomplishments and to analyze its internal strengths and weaknesses in the context of current external political and economic conditions. The goal of the meeting was to define a vision and mission statement for the network, and to develop a detailed five-year strategic action plan related to that mission.

At the meeting, RNCOM representatives defined the network and its mission as follows:

### Vision and Mission

*We are a regional network, made up of networks of civil society organizations. With the aim of contributing to the defense and promotion of the full range of human rights of migrant and refugee populations and their families in places of origin, transit, and destination, we conduct advocacy work around the formulation, adoption, and implementation of public policies. We believe in solidarity, equity, and social justice, and we have hope for a better world. We are bound by principles of respect for diversity, democracy, and transparency.*

The RNCOM defined strategic objectives for the upcoming five years that fall into two categories: first, advocacy on public policies relating to migration; second, internal network strengthening and development. A translated detailed list of these objectives, the planned lines of action associated with each of them, and indicators of success is available; please contact us if you are interested in receiving it. Overall, three major themes emerged from the meeting with regard to the future of the RNCOM:

### **1. Strengthening Role of Migrant Organizations in Regional Advocacy Processes**

The need to support the participation of organized migrant communities in regional policy debates that impact them was a key theme in planning process discussions.

Strengthening migrant organizations does not appear as an explicit RNCOM strategic objective because participants acknowledged that this organizational development needed to stem from migrant communities themselves, and could not be carried out by non-migrant led organizations or networks such as the RNCOM. However, participants recognized the key roles these organizations could potentially play as protagonists in regional migration policy debates, and acknowledged that migrant community groups are emerging as important actors in countries of origin and destination throughout the region. The network committed itself to partnering with migrant-led organizations as much as possible, and to ensuring that they participate in national forums as well as in the RNCOM process.

## **2. Broaden the network's agenda: Expand advocacy into arenas beyond the Regional Conference on Migration**

Participants emphasized that the current political climate requires a creative approach to promoting migrants' rights that must reach beyond the Regional Conference on Migration (RCM) process. They emphasized three relevant arenas in which the RNCOM should bring its experience and perspectives to bear in order to advance migrants' rights from an integrated perspective. First, participants agreed that the RNCOM must weigh in on the process of regionalization, which is being rapidly advanced via an array of free trade agreements (ie, NAFTA, the proposed Central American Free Trade Agreement, and the Free Trade Area of the Americas) and integration proposals such as Plan Puebla Panamá. The linkages between regional and global integration processes and migration are becoming evident to civil society leaders, but there are huge gaps between national immigration policy debates and discussions around international trade and development policies. The RNCOM should be pushing policymakers to consider and address the migration implications of regional integration initiatives, and participants agreed that they would give immediate priority to tackling this issue.

Second, participants agreed that they need to utilize regional and international human rights instruments and engage international organizations other than the RCM. RNCOM members plan to make better use of the national visits and recommendations of the OAS and UN Special Rapporteurs for Migrants, and to present at least three cases over the next five years before the Inter-American Human Rights commission. Finally, participants agreed on the need to emphasize public education and media relations efforts – especially now, when short-term policy change is unlikely.

## **3. Internal strengthening: consolidate national-level networks and define organizational structure**

A third important theme that emerged from the planning meeting had to do with strengthening the RNCOM as an inclusive, democratic, effective regional coalition. In order to accomplish this, planning meeting participants emphasized the need to strengthen the national-level organizing processes in all RNCOM participating countries. National forums have the responsibility for carrying out this country-based organizing

process, but the RNCOM should ensure that it develops an agenda that is consistent with some of the key priorities of national groups.

The RNCOM defined a new internal organizational structure for the network. A General Assembly consisting of all the member organizations of national-level immigration forums will govern the network. Representatives of the Assembly will convene annually or semi-annually to make key strategic decisions. An executive committee of five people will be responsible for making decisions and taking actions in the interim, in circumstances when consultation with the entire Assembly would be impractical or impossible. Each country will designate a national contact person who will be responsible for disseminating information about internal network decisions or events to all members of national forums between Assembly conventions. Internal working groups composed of RNCOM members will be established to coordinate the network's efforts to advance its strategic goals. An advisory committee of external experts will also be created to guide the network in carrying out its work.

At the planning meeting, the 2003 Executive Committee was elected. The newly elected members include:

Margarita Hurtado, from Guatemala.  
Gilma Perez, from El Salvador.  
Bridgitte Wooding, from the Dominican Republic.  
Oscar Chacón, from the U.S. And  
To-be-appointed representative from Costa Rica