

Who owns and drives capacity building?

by Colleen Thouez and Sarah Rosengaertner

Capacity building is context specific and often subject to North-South political games. This is often apparent in Regional Consultative Processes (RCP), fora for states, international organisations and NGOs to informally exchange information on migration-related issues of common interest.

First introduced in Europe in 1984, RCPs assist governments within a particular region to strengthen their understanding and application of migration and refugee policies and laws. They focus on strengthening national capacities and forging regional cooperation. RCPs often centre on aspects relating to border control.

They meet a need. In regions such as Central Asia and the Caucasus, where the regulation of migration across neighbouring countries is a fairly recent phenomenon, strengthening national capacities is essential. Many of these countries established migration departments in the 1990s and have worked to strengthen their capacities to address refugee and migration issues. In Africa, where regulating human mobility across most of the continent is a new concept, the need for strengthening national capacities and regional cooperation is uncontested.

The RCP model does not obligate states to make firm commitments to the issues discussed. Countries are able to come together to benefit from training, exchange information, forge links with counterparts in neighbouring countries and strengthen common understandings without constraining their respective sovereignty.

Nevertheless, the input played by third – Northern – parties in shaping the training agenda is quite revealing. For instance, within the African RCPs, Europe and the US have had a steady presence as ‘observers’. Similarly, Australia and

Canada also have disproportionate influence in RCPs in their spheres of interest. There have been cases where regional powers shape the agenda of RCPs. In the Caribbean in 2001-02, the US government objected to addressing the issue of return of deportees. In the CIS and neighbouring region dialogues from 1999 to 2004, the Russian government was often on the defensive for its handling of migration issues and was reticent to share information.

Northern influence is also behind the fact that the RCPs tend to focus on ‘migration management’ and border control issues. The Inter-

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Governmental Consultations on Asylum, Refugee and Migration Policies in Europe, North America and Australia (IGC) – a North-based RCP which first emerged out of concern for more effective refugee protection – has concentrated its efforts on effective border control. In the South, discussions tend also to concentrate on border control, arising not only out of the concerns of Southern countries but also undoubtedly because of the expensive border control programmes and technologies that Southern countries are able to implement with the support of countries in the North.

International organisations are often involved in facilitating RCP meetings and maintaining the exchange of information within

RCPs, offering technical expertise and administrative support. Most RCP secretariats are administered by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The IOM’s role is not a disinterested one as a clear link exists between promoting and sustaining such regional efforts and concurrently securing IOM’s participation and follow-up through the implementation of IOM programmes in the countries and regions concerned.

In the case of RCPs, the North clearly has an influence over capacity building in the South. It may facilitate the establishment of the RCP as a medium for delivering training and have an influence over content based on its own interests such as border control. However, the South is clearly not the ‘loser’ in this equation. The South needs the capacities that the North brings by way of RCPs. Further, while Southern countries may toe the line with respect to the rhetoric shared by observers and international organisations involved in RCPs, ultimately they are not formally bound to what is endorsed by the RCP. Due to the non-binding nature of RCPs, countries can select certain elements – such as training and technical assistance – without necessarily incorporating other elements into respective national strategies.

Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that the North is often influencing the South’s priorities in the latter’s own backyard. The extent to which priority setting means that issues of critical relevance to the South are being overlooked – in exchange for the North’s priorities – should be a subject for concern.

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