

Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants, Hong Kong

Promoting the Rights of Migrant Workers

By Frank Jomo

What would you do if you couldn't provide for your family's needs? Tens of millions of people faced with this situation have left their homes to work as migrants in other countries, only to find they are working for low wages under poor conditions, isolated and denied their basic rights.

Migrant workers in Asia, the Pacific and the Middle East have an ally. Through innovative projects such as radio broadcasts, the Hong Kong-based Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM) is helping migrants of different nationalities claim their rights through advocacy, organizing and building links to advance migrants' rights.

Since it was established in 1984, Hong Kong-based APMM has been advocating for good working conditions for migrant workers and promoting their rights. The organization is involved in education, providing welfare assistance and encouraging networking for the rights and well-being of undocumented workers and families.

APMM Managing Director Ramon Bultron says the majority of migrants are forced to work in harsh conditions and are not allowed to form groups to voice their concerns. Often governments, organizations and individuals crack down on workers who demand their rights to bully them into continuing to work in harsh conditions.

Ironically, most of these workers are lured into foreign jobs by their own governments. Bultron cites the example of the Philippine government, which has institutionalized the exportation of labour to Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Australia, the Middle East and many other countries.

With the support of WACC funding, APMM is currently engaged in two important projects aimed at advocating for the need to end forced migration and educating migrant workers on their rights.

One is a radio programme that teaches migrant workers their rights and urges them to unite and speak with one voice in demanding their rights. The programme is becoming more popular because it enables the organization to get in touch with many people whom it could not otherwise reach.

“It is difficult to meet migrant workers in person because of the long hours that they spend at their work places,” says Bultron. “The radio programme therefore ensures that we reach out to them through broadcasting. This has enabled the workers to learn from what other migrant workers are doing in claiming their rights.”

The program, which is also Internet based, has become a powerful tool that is also communicating with undocumented workers who fear to come forward because they will be sent into detention for wrongful entry into the countries they are working in. Bultron says undocumented migrant workers are treated as criminals and fear to speak out.

This radio broadcast has been of great importance because it has allowed APMM to reach out to a wider audience of migrant workers, including the domestic workers who are difficult to meet.

“The program creates a forum of interaction between organizations working on similar programmes,” note Bultron. “We learn from each other as organizations but also the migrant workers themselves. This acts as a medium through which they come to know what other migrants are doing in claiming and promoting their rights.”

The second project WACC is supporting is a programme to explain the historical background of the forced migration of Filipinos.

“Migrants, especially Filipinos, need to understand the historic development of migration from the Philippines to other countries because the Philippine government is promoting the exportation of human labour,” says Bultron. “We want the people to know that their government is institutionalizing the exportation of labour. This awareness wouldn’t have been possible without WACC funding.”

APMM is working with the local people in all these initiatives. According to Bultron, involving the people who themselves are victims of forced labour helps them to own the project. As such, they look at the project as their own and contribute to its success.

“From conceptualization to implementation and to evaluation, people are involved. What we try to address is what the people themselves say are the challenges migrant workers face and so we address the core of the problem,” he says.