Shaping International Migration Policy: The Role of Regional Consultative Processes

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This article analyses the evolution of regional cooperation in the field of migration, specifically by detailing the rapid spread of Regional Consultative Processes for Migration (RCPs) to most parts of the world. The article examines RCPs’ characteristics and functions, and seeks to account for the replication of European-based RCPs founded on ‘policy transfer theories’. It also explores the actors taking part in transfers and the modalities of such transfers. The central argument presented is that regional trends contribute to global convergence in perceptions and expectations, which in turn results in the harmonisation of policies and practice. Thus, while at first glance it may appear to be undermining a common direction with a multiplicity of RCPs, in fact transferring models of cooperation from one region of the world to another contributes to strengthening policy convergence.

Since the genesis of cooperation in the field of international migration in the 1950s, significant developments have occurred. The number of international migrants has doubled in the last 40 years. In addition, whereas only a few countries were affected by migration in the 1960s (Massey 1998: 7; United Nations Population Division 2002), the contemporary geographic impact is far more widespread.1 There is also greater diversity in the categories of mobility: people (both men and women, representing respectively 51% and 49% of migrants) move for various reasons ranging from family reunification to employment.

These increases in scope, impact and complexity of migration are developing in a context in which countries often share common objectives given their status as countries of destination, transit and origin of migrants. Furthermore, international human mobility is more frequently associated with other international issue-areas such as development, security, demography, health, etc. These factors combined create greater incentive to strengthen international cooperation in this area.

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Indeed, international migration policy’s growing prominence is unlikely to abate in the future, as the establishment in 2004–2005 of the Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM) with the support from over 20 states and the UN Secretary-General showed. While by no means undercutting the central role of the state in developing migration policy, the growing tendency to seek out international approaches represents a shift in both perceptions and approaches. It also points to the deficiencies in the approaches used to address international movement of people, as many of them were developed in a context in which the scope and challenges were considerably different (Overbeek 2001: 48).

At present, we find ourselves with a variety of efforts geared towards strengthening inter-state cooperation at regional, cross-regional and international levels, each process in one way or another shaping the development of migration policy. The focus of the discussion here is dedicated to regional initiatives, such as Regional Consultative Processes on migration (RCPs). This account examines how these processes contribute to the evolving pattern of cooperation between states in this field, as well as how they constitute one of many ‘building blocks’ of an international migration regime.


This essay will analyse the historical elements underlying the evolution of RCPs, and will seek to explain the rapid spread of RCPs across most regions of the world. The analysis is divided into five parts. The first section introduces the context of regional intergovernmental cooperation in the field of migration. It does so with two case studies illustrating the emergence of the first RCPs in the European context in the mid-1980s and early 1990s. The second section describes how key characteristics of the first RCPs are replicated in RCPs that have since developed in other parts of the world, and examines their characteristics and functions. The third section uses policy transfer theories to seek to account for the diffusion of European-based RCPs to other parts of the world. The fourth section investigates the actors taking part in policy transfers and the modalities of these transfers. The conclusion gives the authors’ view of how regional trends are contributing to the global phenomenon of convergence in perceptions and expectations. This convergence, taking place through the informal socialisation networks known as RCPs, is leading towards the harmonisation of policies
and practice in the field of migration. Thus, rather than undermining the
direction of migration policy and approaches by the multiplication of RCPs,
we contend that transferring models of migration cooperation from one
region of the world to another in fact strengthens policy convergence.

Cooperation between States: Emerging Trends

The emphasis on coordination and cooperation in migration policy
originates in the 1980s, and progressed rapidly through the 1990s with the
emergence of a multitude of regional and international initiatives, activities
and structures dedicated to international migration policy and practice
(Widgren 1989: 59–60; Channac 2002). These initiatives encourage consulta-
tion, information sharing, and coordination between various levels of
political decision-making both within and between countries, which reflects
in part the multi-level governance required in this field.

Until recently, answers to migration issues had been considered essentially
on a national or bilateral basis. Governments are now slowly becoming aware
of the fact that solutions can be found at the global and/or regional level in
spite of persisting differences in perceptions and interests among countries.
Indeed, the factors that have contributed to this new awareness over the years
are: recognition of the limits of strictly national or unilateral policies
(especially measures against irregular migration); and the inter-relatedness
between migration and other trans-national issues, which, as mentioned
above, reinforces the need for more multilateral cooperation in this field.

A number of important developments shape the modalities of multilateral
cooperation on migration issues. One is that the regionalisation of inter-
governmental cooperation is now observable in most parts of the world.
A second is that new fora have emerged based on cooperation between
countries and coordination between various decision-making levels. In the
process, a comprehensive approach to migration is emphasised, i.e. a plu-
ralist rather than a sector-based approach in which various dimensions of
migration are aggregated. A third is the simultaneous trends towards glo-
balisation and regionalisation apparent in the current context which
emphasise integration and coordination. This convergence of efforts at the
global and regional levels underlies a convergence in actors’ perceptions,
expectations and behaviour that is facilitated by the transfer of models of
cooperation between different regions of the world.

This general trend towards convergence feeds into efforts to construct an
international regime for migration. As is the case with all regime emergence
and change, the appearance of the new regime is driven by the evolution and
confrontation of actors’ interests and perceptions at regional and interna-
tional levels. Convergence in the region should then be analysed as a part of
a wider picture with regional and international developments being closely
intertwined. Questions of interests and motivations must also be addressed.
Surely, RCPs do not develop randomly, but follow simple imitation effects
from one region to another. Their development is a reflection of actors’ calculations and strategies. Furthermore, they are a product of contextual factors in international relations, and their diffusion can be explained, at least partly, by different policy transfer theories.

The History of the First RCPs

Just as international organisations’ mandates and competencies in the migration field have evolved to meet the needs and challenges presented by human mobility over the last fifty years, on a much smaller scale, a similar scheme of institutional development of regional initiatives over the last twenty years has come to complete this global system of intergovernmental cooperation. Here, we present the political and institutional background of the Intergovernmental Consultations on Asylum, Refugee and Migration Policies in Europe, North America and Australia (IGC); and the Budapest Process, two of the first RCPs.

Intergovernmental Consultations on Asylum, Refugee and Migration Policies in Europe, North America and Australia (IGC)

The first informal consultative process appeared in Europe in 1984 against the backdrop of: rising numbers of asylum applications lodged in Western European states (its pinnacle occurred in 1992); the adoption of restrictive immigration policies; and the emergence of what has come to be known as the ‘migration/asylum nexus’. This last phenomenon, which is also termed ‘mixed migration flows’, refers to the relationship between what are considered ‘legitimate’ asylum-seekers and a growing number of people who resort to asylum channels although their purposes for migrating are not based on the criteria stipulated in the UN Refugee Convention (1951). These pressures on the asylum system began to test its efficiency and indeed its raison d’être. This situation was exacerbated by xenophobic backlashes against foreigners throughout Europe which led to migration becoming a major political factor in national policy-making. This, combined with the lack of harmonisation and coordination on asylum policy amongst European states, contributed to an increase in the number of asylum applications.

As asylum pressures increased for migrant-receiving countries, so too were these felt by the major UN body mandated to protect refugees, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Indeed, intensive negotiations were taking place concerning UNHCR itself, which was faced with growing economic and political constraints. Tensions between developing and developed countries on how to ensure protection to refugees underscored efforts to achieve more equitable burden sharing through proportional distribution of funding for programmes. UNHCR was also facing pressures to reform its administrative structures and decision-making procedures including clarification of its mandate and competencies, and more
appropriate representation within the organisation’s political and decision-making bodies.

Following the conclusion of the ‘Consultations on the Arrivals of Asylum-Seekers and Refugees in Europe’ organised by UNHCR in May 1985, the Swedish Government invited six countries (Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland and the UK) and UNHCR to Stockholm to consider various models of intergovernmental cooperation that could be further developed.

This informal forum came to be known as the Informal Consultations – or more precisely the Intergovernmental Consultations on Asylum, Refugee and Migration Policies in Europe, North America and Australia (IGC). In October 1986, the first discussions at the level of Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Ministers of the European Communities, concerning the implementation of an intensified cooperation in the field of asylum and border controls, strengthened these Governments’ conviction regarding the necessity of enhancing coordination policies in this domain, on a more comprehensive, formal and operational basis. The IGC’s structure was thus established and its mission clarified from 1987 onwards (Widgren 1993).

The Budapest Process

After 1989, mobility became a factor of consideration for the Newly Independent States (NIS), as well as countries in Central and Eastern Europe. European countries bordering these regions, including Austria and Germany in particular, were positioning themselves to address these changing dynamics. In January 1991, the Austrian Minister of Foreign Affairs along with the Council of Europe (CoE) hosted intergovernmental meetings between Western European countries and Central and Eastern European countries to strengthen cooperation processes in the field of asylum and immigration control. The Ministerial Conference that took place in Vienna, entitled ‘The Conference of Ministers on the Movement of Persons from Central and Eastern European Countries’ brought together representatives of 35 countries and several intergovernmental organisations (IGOs). This conference proceeded within the CoE, by the Group of Senior Officials entrusted with the follow-up to the Conference of Ministers on the Movements of Persons from Central and Eastern European countries – better known as the Vienna Group – which gradually lost its influence and faded out in 1994.

Also in 1991, a series of meetings which came to be known as the Berlin Process were organised by Germany with the objective of harmonising visa policies and seeking ways to reduce migration pressures. In October of that same year, the German Home Secretary organised a conference in Berlin to discuss measures to control illegal immigration from Central and Eastern Europe. A working group chaired by Austria, which also included Italy and Hungary was responsible for organising the follow-up within the context of
the Berlin Process. This led to the Hungarian Home Secretary organising a conference in Budapest (Conference to Prevent Uncontrolled Migration) in February 1993. A new follow-up group was then created to replace the Berlin Process and to extend its activities: the Budapest Process (ICMPD 1998).

Following these developments, the Austrian and Swiss Governments launched the creation of a new organisation: the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) in the autumn of 1992. Agreements finalising its creation were signed between the Swiss Minister of Justice and the Austrian Federal Minister of Home Affairs in May 1993, and the new organisation was operational as of November 1993.

The ICMPD had two innovative characteristics. First, it was conceived as a centre for the study and analysis of migration flows and policies, with a view to developing a knowledge base to better advise its member states and to look for long-term solutions. Second, as the Secretariat of the Budapest Process, it clearly positioned itself as a framework for political and strategic reflection at the international level, formulating exchanges between already existing intergovernmental, governmental and non-governmental structures.

**Comparison and Contrast between the IGC and the Budapest Process**

**Similarities: Exogenous and Endogenous Variables**

In these two case studies, the creation of RCPs is a result firstly of the evolution of exogenous variables related to developments in the general context of international relations and changes in migration patterns around the world. Secondly, these RCPs also resulted from endogenous variables related to internal events occurring in multilateral institutions that support RCPs’ creation and their activities afterwards. As described above, this is true for: UNHCR, for the IGC; the ICMPD for the Budapest Process; and for a short time, the Council of Europe for the Vienna Group.

The IGC was built as a reaction to exogenous developments in the political landscape of the time. These included an increase in the number of de facto refugees, and the development of mixed flows in a context of global economic recession, increasing unemployment rates and xenophobia in Western industrialised immigration countries. It became increasingly obvious that national unilateral restrictive policies aimed at closing and controlling borders were not the solution.

In parallel, this first informal regional process appears within UNHCR as a reaction to conflicts concerning the organisation itself at a time when it was experiencing a stream of reforms. For UNHCR, this meant pressures from its main contributors who pushed incessantly for administrative and programmatic reforms.

The Budapest Process was established, in a similar manner, to respond to exogenous developments. Its constituents faced both the impact of the collapse
of the Eastern bloc and the mounting pressures of irregular migration. In the process, Budapest went some way in meeting EU third states’ expectations, with the gradual establishment of a free-movement area. Eastern and Central European states were also progressively associated or integrated in the discussions aimed at controlling and securing the boundaries of this European free-movement area (Lavenex and Uçarer 2002).

Here again, institutional variables played a role. While the ‘hosting’ institution, ICMPD, did not exist prior to the establishment of the Budapest Process, it was partially created to allow the process to detach itself from organisational constraints while transferring these functional constraints to the host institution.

Differences: Geographical Space and Membership

While significant parallels can be drawn between the IGC and Budapest models, important differences remain between these two processes, which are also to be found in the more recently created RCPs in other regions of the world. First, differences related to the definition of the RCPs’ territorial or geographical bases are apparent. In the case of the IGC, membership is limited. The region is not so much defined by a territorial continuance between adjoining or neighbouring states as based on the idea of a community of similar concerns, interests and perspectives.

The definition of regional space in the context of the Budapest Process is more in line with the principle of territorial continuity. This process aims at gradually defining the boundaries of a regional space in which the movement of people could be better managed and controlled. It rests upon the logic of geographic proximity; and as it is more open, governmental participation in the process has continued to increase. Another difference is to be found in the fact that the Budapest Process integrates immigration countries as well as transit and origin countries, unlike the IGC which limits its governmental representation to industrialised immigration countries. These distinctions have fundamentally shaped perspectives on the origin of these processes. They have also influenced their general functioning and the activities that each has undertaken.

These similarities and differences notwithstanding, it is worth noting that a number of the characteristics of these first RCPs apply to RCPs throughout the world. Furthermore, as we see below, just as the issues underpinning mobility within Europe have affected RCPs’ development, so too have the factors associated with mobility in given regions affected how RCPs emerge and develop elsewhere.

Commonalities of RCPs around the World

Since the end of the 1990s, several RCPs have emerged around the world, following roughly the same functioning modalities. Nonetheless, not all
RCPs have yet reached the same stage of development. RCPs develop at different rates, mainly depending on the regional context; and, while the first is already almost 20 years old, some new processes have just begun to emerge. Regardless of their different stages of development, their regional characteristics and the different conditions determining their creation, they all share essential common characteristics that are strikingly similar to those of the first two European RCPs.

Few studies have been undertaken regarding the mechanics of RCPs, and the few that have borrow a broad consensus-based definition of such processes. According to this definition, three main characteristics distinguish the RCPs from classic regional or international institutions:

1. informality – they are a process, not an institution, meaning that working toward an eventual goal is an important aspect of the process;
2. openness – since agreement on all issues is not required all options can be explored openly, thus increasing the number of possible solutions to issues;
3. efficiency – since there is a minimum administration, direct communication is easily possible between high level officials and experts in regional consultative processes. (Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2001: 9)

Informality

These multilateral and essentially intergovernmental arenas are informal. They are processes and not institutions, even if it is true that some processes tend to become institutionalised as their objectives become clearer and their activities diversify. It is also true that participation in meetings of classic international institutions, particularly at the global level, gives them a kind of institutional recognition or legitimacy. However, this informality is not limited to the processes’ structures – in our opinion, it also applies to the confidential character of the negotiations and discussions taking place within such regional processes. For instance, the restricted, almost-exclusively intergovernmental participation is a way of safeguarding this confidentiality, which, as described below, is an essential element of the RCPs’ functioning.

Openness and Non-binding Decisions

These regional processes for migration are consultative, with governments participating in the process on a voluntary basis, and endorsing, by consensus, recommendations that are non-binding. This is what A. Klekowski von Koppenfels (2001) refers to as ‘openness’. Since no formal commitment is sought (or imposed), participating governments approach subjects relatively freely, knowing that they will not be forced to accept common political lines or binding instruments. The ‘openness’ is thus
derived largely from their confidential nature. The RCPs are not institutions intended to design standards, binding legal rules or agreements, nor do they have the responsibility to assess whether participating governments respect their international commitments. These elements draw a clear distinction between RCPs and classic multilateral organisations. Furthermore, the level of financial constraint is weaker because, in the case of most RCPs, funding the process is not provided through fixed contribution quotas, but based exclusively on voluntary contributions, by one or several of the participating governments (IOM 2003: 134).

**Efficiency**

Finally, RCPs function with a relatively small administrative structure, their secretariat often hosted by an international organisation (IO). According to Klekowski von Koppenfels (2001), this is an important asset for the RCPs. It ensures their efficiency by reducing administrative red tape and malfunctioning. Information exchange among participants is also made efficient and timely as no filter or intermediate administrative levels stands in the way. Whether having IOs as secretariats for such processes in practice ensures an efficient and unbiased exchange of information is questionable; we explore this issue further on.

This three-pronged definition is the longest standing definition and has the advantage of being broad enough to encompass most if not all regional consultations in the field of migration to date. However, in applying it across the board, RCPs are treated as a homogenous mass based on a minimum set of commonalities rather than on their particularities. We are thus at risk of overlooking many differences, complexities and subtleties of today’s RCPs. It is only through a concerted focus on the points of commonality and divergence of RCPs that we can delve into a more significant analysis of their evolution.

**Explaining the Global Diffusion of European Experiences**

With the rapid development of RCPs in several regions of the world, an important consideration arises regarding the motivation behind their emergence. Do they borrow from European experiences? Are they initiated and/or imposed by the outside? Does most of the transfer take place within the confines of individual RCPs once they take shape in a given region?

From the outset, we can say that it is likely to be a combination of both internal and external influences. Spontaneous imitation effects undoubtedly play a part. Other potential influences that should be considered are the externalisation effects of European immigration policies and their consequences on third countries; and the fact that many European governments have participated, as members or as observers, in the newly emerging RCPs in other regions.
Analysis cannot be limited to the idea that a ‘successful’ experiment in one region – that is the outcomes of which suit the political expectations that preceded it – necessarily incites governments in other regions to adopt a similar outlet. This rationale is insufficient as it evades essential questions, such as: how does this transfer of experiences take place? Does the model undergo adaptations according to regional contexts? Who are the actors who decide on this transfer (inside and outside the region)? What are their motivations?

Imitation effects do account for some developments. For instance, the fact that the process of integration did not fundamentally question member states’ sovereignty may certainly motivate other states to adopt such models of cooperation that are ‘without risks’ and at the same time advantageous. Migration flows are a sensitive issue in inter-state relations, which partially explains governments’ hesitation to engage in cooperative processes in this domain. Intergovernmental cooperation without risking a loss of sovereignty remains on the whole a valid contributing factor for RCPs’ development. Indeed, RCPs’ functioning rules, as seen earlier, seem to be designed to preserve participating states’ sovereignty: decisions are non-binding, they are taken by consensus; meetings are informal; finally, most of the topics discussed in RCPs relate to migration management which implies at least a minimum of cooperation between states.

However, it is unlikely that good ideas or initiatives spread with equivalent ease and haste. Further, ideas do not circulate by themselves: actors, motivated by vested and evolving interests, uphold them. It would be misleading to presuppose that processes develop under the same scheme and for the same reasons as all RCPs are not identical. As Richard Rose notes with regard to lesson-drawing experiments, some questions should not be overlooked (Rose 1993: 20–26). These include the circumstances under which lessons are drawn from other regions’ experiments; and the adaptations required to ease the transfer and to ensure success. In addition to variations in modalities of application and development, the strategies and interests of the states presiding over the creation of such processes differ. This is clearly the case with respect to the first regional consultative processes in Europe. Analysis should thus concentrate on the strategies and policies of the governmental actors involved in this process of diffusion.

Thus, the analysis in terms of ‘policy diffusion’ or ‘imitation effects’ is insufficient to explain RCPs’ development and actors’ motivations underlying their creation and perseverance.

**Policy Transfer**

By contrast, the concept of policy transfer offers a more adequate tool of analysis for understanding RCPs’ development in various regions of the world. Following David Dolowitz and David Marsh’s definition, a process of policy transfer is ‘the process by which knowledge of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system
(past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political system’ (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000: 3).

In their study of policy transfers, Dolowitz and Marsh start from two essential questions: what was transferred?; and what degree of transfer has occurred? (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000:12). To answer these questions, they suggest (Figure 1) using a ‘policy transfer continuum’, which consists of a spectrum of situations ranging from learning or lesson-drawing experiences, for which the transfer takes place voluntarily according to a rational calculation, to cases of coercive transfer, directly imposed on the actors.

When applied to the development of RCPs, the policy transfer continuum suggests that what is really transferred from one region to another are ideas about how multilateral cooperation should develop in a given domain, rather than specific policy actions. Herein lies the connection between Krasner’s (1983) definition of international regimes, and the issue of regime-building. The transfer of knowledge, information and approach takes place progressively, by forging regional intergovernmental structures of cooperation and conveying these as a prerequisite for future transfers. This represents a first institutional step towards the organisation of convergence between governmental expectations and policies. By extension, as evidence would seem to suggest, this constitutes at least part of the ‘building blocks’ of an international migration regime (Figure 2).

At the various stages of any RCP’s development, actors’ expectations and perceptions are likely to evolve. As a result, various levels of the continuum proposed by Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) are combined. Situations of ‘lesson-drawing’ and potential situations of ‘coercive transfer’ are tightly intertwined and it is usually difficult to determine which of the two is more likely in a given context.

*FIGURE 1*
A POLICY TRANSFER CONTINUUM

*FIGURE 2*
The ‘Building Blocks’ of an International Migration Regime
This is certainly due to the fact that there are a plurality of actors with differing motivations and perceptions involved in this transfer. Indeed, RCPs are multilateral arenas gathering states that do not necessarily share identical interests on migration issues. Within the same region, there are, for example, immigration and emigration countries. It is also necessary to take into account the plurality of actors from outside the region and their interests in facilitating or promoting this transfer (such as IGOs that take part in the transfer).

Thus, in the case of RCPs, there is never a situation of pure ‘lesson-drawing’ or ‘coercive transfer’: the subtlety of the transfer lies in the balance between these two elements. At first, the RCP is conceived of as an institution of socialisation of governmental actors. This process of socialisation influences actors’ perceptions – perceptions that shape their understanding of international migration issues, but also their perceived interests in cooperating (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000: 14). This strategy is apparent in the RCPs’ main aim to build networks for information exchange between participating governments. By doing so, they implicitly foster trust and confidence amongst actors who are said to share common ideas and cultures and to nurture ‘common understandings’ or ‘common positions’ on key migration issues. In addition, by their very nature, RCPs explicitly lead to convergence and harmonisation of migration practices and policies between various levels of decision-making, at national, regional and international levels.

**Actors Taking Part in Transfers and Modalities of Transfers**

As discussed above, the original transfer is really the idea of how multilateral cooperation should work rather than a particular policy or set of actions. The transfer thus entails the conditions to organise a future convergence in policies. Concretely, how do these transfers of models of cooperation get organised from one region to another? Two inter-related questions, based on the scheme proposed by Dolowitz and Marsh (2000), should allow us to refine our understanding of the RCPs’ functioning and purpose: (1) Who transfers?; (2) How does the transfer take place and what elements facilitate the transfer?

**Who Transfers?**

Clearly, the principal agent in the transfer of cooperation is the state. Direct beneficiary states often encourage the RCP’s establishment as they profit from its output (information sharing, coordination, capacity-building, etc.). They tend to lobby fellow participating states, donors and other states for the perpetuation of the RCP through financing and other forms of support. As discussed above, there are states outside the geographic scope of a particular RCP which have economic, political and often historic ties with countries in the region in question, and that by extension influence the given RCP. This is true, for example, for the US regarding the RCP development in the Caribbean.
Beyond states, several intermediary actors intervene throughout the transfer process, including IGOs; as well as governmental experts and observers. IGOs play a crucial role in the development of RCPs. As we have seen, IGOs such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), UNHCR or the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), help to initiate processes by convening conferences and seminars aimed at launching a discussion about international migration at the regional level. Once established, RCPs’ secretariats are often hosted by an IGO that ensures not only administrative and technical tasks, but that can also play a mediating role between participating governments.

The IOM facilitates the largest number of RCP secretariats. In some cases, it is directly responsible for the secretariat and follow-up. In other cases, it has worked with the International Migration Policy Programme (IMP), as an intermediary on a programme co-sponsored by other IGOs as well: the UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR); the UN Population Fund (UNFPA); and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Hence, IGOs ensure an intermediary role in the transfer of models of regional cooperation. Through their offer of technical expertise and administrative support, they often facilitate meetings and maintain the exchange of information during the interim periods between meetings.

The institutional interests and strategies of IGOs in facilitating the development of RCPs are important. For IGOs and for IOM in particular, there seems to be a clear link 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. It is also interesting to note that IOM’s own mandate and scope of activities, independently of the multiplication of RCPs, has evolved quite remarkably in the last decade and a half. Its membership went from 43 member states in 1991 to 105 in 2004 (and 27 states with observer status). In addition, by November 1989, IOM implemented its revised constitution, which granted it a permanent status it had not before, and which expanded the geographical and programmatic scope of its activities. Furthermore, an important point was integrated into the IOM’s constitution: the necessity to promote the cooperation and coordination of states’ activities with those of international, governmental and non-governmental organisations in the field of migration (Ducasse-Rogier 2001: 95–108).

The second category of intermediaries that assist with the transfers is governmental observers and experts who participate in RCPs. In most if not all RCPs, observer states from other regions as well as representatives of other processes are invited to attend. For example, Canada, the Netherlands, and the US attended the International Migration Policy Seminar for the Caribbean Region in Kingston Jamaica in May 2001 as observers. Belgium, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands and Switzerland were also represented at the Issyk-Kul Dialogue follow-up conference in Istanbul, Turkey in June 2001. For the African processes (MIDSA, MIDWA, International Migration
Policy Conference for East Africa, the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region), observers included: Australia; Austria; Belgium; France; Ireland; Italy; the Netherlands; the US; Sweden; and Switzerland. We can thus conclude that industrial countries also follow attentively the development of RCPs in other regions, noting here the attention drawn to regions with a high concentration of migrant-origin countries.

It is interesting to observe that Australia, Canada and the US are directly involved and participate in the development of most processes in nearby regions. In fact, many of the processes associated with these countries were the first to develop after the European-based RCPs. Keeping in mind that these three countries are also active participants in the IGC and observers in the Budapest Process, this evidence would lend itself to the idea of transfer and adaptation of models and learning processes. Furthermore, as noted, RCPs are also developing in non-neighbouring regions, in Africa for instance, that are nonetheless tied to these countries and to European ones for that matter through development aid and other forms of assistance.

Moreover, RCPs are not created ex nihilo; they most often lean on existing regional or sub-regional processes of economic integration, which frequently include agreements concerning the movement of people between neighbouring states. Thus, the outline of cooperation in the field of migration is often already partially fixed by previous and on-going cooperative experiences.

In Africa, while incorporating some southern EU states, the Dialogue on Migration in the Western Mediterranean (5 + 5) also gathers all the member states of the Union of Arabic Maghreb (UMA). The Migration Dialogue for Southern Africa (MIDSA) also follows the borders of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and so does the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) are closely associated with the development of the Migration Dialogue for West Africa (MIDWA). In Latin America, RCPs are bound to regional economic groupings, such as the South American Common Market (MERCOSUR), North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA), the Organization of American States (OAS), and Caribbean Community (CARICOM) as well. For Asia and the Pacific, the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Pacific Island Forum (PIF) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) support the majority of the RCPs in the region.

The linkage between these regional arenas having an economic vocation and the RCPs is not a matter of pure coincidence. In a context of globalisation and growing interdependence, the multiplication of economic agreements aimed at liberalising trade, finance and investment flows often lead to intensified pressures on governments towards the liberalisation of movement at least for certain categories of people. However, to date, increased liberalisation of
capital and goods flows has not been matched with a concomitant liberalisation in the flow of human beings.

Another important consideration is the motivation of extra-regional actors in RCPs. An obvious explanation is that their models of cooperation are more advanced and that they share this knowledge because they have it and possess the capacities to do so. Less developed regions are often only too pleased to take advantage of the offer. This is due to the financial support they invariably receive; the fact that the model has been ‘tested’ elsewhere; and the implicit responsibility that extra-regional actors incur by taking part. For many regions, there is also a neo-colonial relationship that persists as an incentive for extra-regional actors to join in because of their desire to maintain influence. This factor clearly plays a part: it is evidenced by the number of old colonial powers attending RCPs as observers, and supported by the continued relevance of colonial links in shaping migration patterns. However, to overstate the intent of old colonial powers in shaping the policies of such countries would be misleading. Their motivation to assist other regions both in terms of capacities and policy is first and foremost conditioned by their domestic priorities, for which relations with old colonies is certainly an important but by no means the only consideration.

**How Transfers Take Place**

When examined closely, the stated common interests for the creation of RCPs are far from self-evident. Rather, they are gradually built and incorporated into actors’ real and perceived interests. To a certain extent, this community of interests and perceptions is organised – it derives from the RCP model, and does not necessarily precede the RCP. Actors’ preferences are largely built on interaction amongst themselves and their environment. In the case of the regional consultative processes, the intergovernmental cooperation structures and modalities influence the construction of the actors’ reality, that is their perceptions and their understanding of migration issues and of their interest in cooperating. These include: information exchange; the promotion of a common language; increasing the frequency of the meetings and gatherings. The processes gradually build confidence among the actors, along with a notion of shared understandings and a sense of common purpose.

Moreover, because of the practically non-existent administrative structures, the processes are often compared to clearing-houses, that is, to structures maintaining a permanent and increasing stream of information among their participants in order to facilitate their contacts. They do so by allowing them to know each other better and to quickly and clearly identify respective interlocutors. Convergence is thus organised gradually through these networks of socialisation. These relations, as they are socially and structurally built, are developed with relative ease largely because they are perceived as rationally and strategically determined by the actors themselves, in accordance with their own interests.
Indeed, this convergence is partially facilitated by the evolution of migration issues which makes intergovernmental cooperation increasingly difficult to avoid, and by the fact that cooperation is no longer perceived as a zero-sum game once common interests are identified. However, it remains to be seen on what basis this community of interests is defined, and who benefits most from this cooperation through convergence. As international regime theories suggest at global level, it seems to us that the role of regional hegemons should be investigated more closely in this context, as well as considerations relating to coercion, influence and persuasion between states within a given region.

This convergence of perceptions largely ensues from the RCP structure and model. It also gets organised and stabilised, within every process, through two different but complementary tracks – the processes weave links among participants and thus organise a convergence in their perceptions by offering capacity-building programmes, and by promoting the use of a common vocabulary and quasi-permanent information exchange among participants. These two activities are related to the process of shaping actors’ perceptions – even ‘conforming’ or ‘standardising’ views and eventually actions taken in this field.

To do so, RCPs, generally with the assistance of one or a group of IOs, develop: (1) capacity-building activities, and (2) exercises aimed at developing the use of a common language in the field of international migration and information exchange between governments.

These programmes aim at upgrading and harmonising the level of knowledge of national civil servants with regard to international laws and migration policy development. Incrementally, they gather civil servants from all the ministries concerned with migration along with ministries of foreign affairs. These attempts at de-compartmentalising national approaches to migration at the inter-ministerial level constitute one such effort to promote a common approach to international migration from a multi-level governance perspective. It reflects a will to articulate and to more clearly and effectively integrate various decision-making levels, from the global to ministerial level. And, while the subject discussed is adapted to regional concerns and contexts, the content is often closely related to the experiences with European processes, such as the IGC. African, Asian or Caribbean civil servants thus generally receive similar messages concerning priorities and means of implementation of migration policy and practice as their counterparts do in Europe or North America.

Conclusion

As evidenced by the transfer of RCP model, institutional fragmentation does not necessarily prevent deeper processes of political convergence.

In the first place, RCPs’ objectives are to build networks between participating states so as to promote trust between actors sharing common ideas and cultures, and a common understanding of migration priorities.
Thereafter, this commonality of perceptions gradually translates into a process of convergence and harmonisation in practices and policies. Pre-existing regional economic linkages and common migration problems set the stage for cooperative processes to emerge in this field as they have in others, notably trade.

However, it seems equally apparent that RCPs play a role in socialisation. Common perspectives and interests are not necessarily self-evident for the actors participating in the processes, but rather are gradually integrated into states’ calculations and their perception of interests. Common understandings do not always precede these processes: they are jointly organised as a function of the RCP. With the gradual convergence in perceptions and expectations through these informal socialisation networks, an eventual harmonisation of practices and policies ensues.

Notes

Views expressed herein are the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of their employer.
1. Nevertheless, it is important to note that three-quarters of all migrants are located in just 28 countries – with 20% residing in the United States (UN Population Division 2004).
2. Today, a number of international organisations’ mandates cover different categories of migrants and/or certain aspects of international migration:
   - the International Organization for Migration (IOM): most migrants in general
   - the International Labour Organization (ILO): migrant workers
   - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): refugees and to some extent internally displaced persons (IDPs)
   - United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR): the human rights of migrants
   - World Trade Organization: migrants who are service providers (as defined under Mode IV of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS)).
3. The IGC numbers 15 member states, while about 40 governments are represented at Budapest Process meetings today.
4. For a detailed view on RCPs and their membership, see the annexes to the UNFPA Report (Thouez and Channac 2005).

References


