Migrant Worker

Commodity or Human?

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Abstract

This paper uses peace and conflict theory to analyse the migrant worker issue in the Gulf States, focusing on Indian construction workers in the emirate of Dubai. Peace and conflict theory is found to provide a missing perspective on the question, which is best understood in an interdisciplinary frame-work combined with for example migration and development theory. Migrant workers’ vulnerability in the global free market is described and the modern economic history of the Gulf region is discussed to explain today’s unique labour situation. Different regional and local parties to the conflict are identified to distinguish guiding interests and their impact on the conflict. Put in an international perspective, the same conflict mechanisms found in the Gulf are detected globally. They reveal widespread practises of structural and cultural violence that can only be contested by a vibrant global civil society guided by truly cosmopolitan values.

[Keywords: Gulf States, migrant workers, globalisation, civil society, violence]
# Table of Contents

List of Figures and Tables ............................................................................................................ 3  
Abbreviations ............................................................................................................................... 4  
1. Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 5  
  1.1 Problem Formulation ............................................................................................................... 5  
  1.2 Research Questions and Delimitations .................................................................................. 6  
  1.3 Sources and Material ............................................................................................................. 7  
  1.4 Outline .................................................................................................................................. 8  
2. Method and Theory .................................................................................................................... 10  
  2.1 Method .................................................................................................................................. 10  
  2.2 Peace and Conflict Theory ..................................................................................................... 10  
  2.3 Key Concepts ......................................................................................................................... 12  
  2.3.1 Capitalism ......................................................................................................................... 12  
  2.3.2 Globalisation and Cosmopolitans ..................................................................................... 13  
  2.3.3 Civil Society ...................................................................................................................... 14  
  2.3.4 The Gulf States .................................................................................................................. 14  
  2.3.5 Migrant Workers ................................................................................................................ 15  
3. Background Analysis ................................................................................................................ 16  
  3.1 The Unique Gulf Society ...................................................................................................... 16  
  3.2 The Situation for Migrant Workers ....................................................................................... 17  
    3.2.1 Reasons for Leaving Home .............................................................................................. 17  
    3.2.2 Patriarchal Obstacles ....................................................................................................... 18  
    3.2.3 Common Working and Living Conditions ...................................................................... 19  
    3.2.4 Social Consequences ....................................................................................................... 20  
  3.3 Why Asians? ......................................................................................................................... 21
3.3.1 The Descent of the Non-Gulf Arab Workers ........................................... 21
3.3.2 The Preference for “Pliable Workers” ...................................................... 21
3.3.3 Enemy Images and Othering ................................................................. 22
3.4 Is there no Agency for Change? .................................................................. 22
3.4.1 Laws in the Host Countries .................................................................. 23
3.4.2 Sending Countries’ Attitude .................................................................. 23
3.4.3 Workers = Victims? ............................................................................... 25
4. Conflict Analysis ......................................................................................... 27
  4.1 Actors .................................................................................................. 27
    4.1.1 Gulf Actors .................................................................................. 27
    4.1.2 Sending Countries ........................................................................ 28
    4.1.3 Migrant Workers .......................................................................... 28
    4.1.4 Combining the Actors .................................................................. 29
  4.2 Violence ................................................................................................. 30
  4.3 The Power of International Attention ...................................................... 31
  4.4 Cultivating Grassroots ........................................................................... 32
5. Conclusion .................................................................................................. 34
Appendix ......................................................................................................... 35
References ...................................................................................................... 37

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Gramsci’s State ........................................................................ 12
Figure 2: Lederach’s Actors ................................................................ 12
Figure 3: Galtung’s ABC ........................................................................ 12
Table 1: Population of the GCC Countries, 2004 and Latest Estimates .......... 35
Table 2: Major Expatriate Communities in the GCC Countries ................. 35
Map 1: South West Asia ........................................................................... 36
Map 2: The United Arab Emirates ........................................................... 36
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AMC</td>
<td>Asian Migrant Centre</td>
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<td>AMY</td>
<td>Asian Migrant Yearbook</td>
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<td>ASPBAE</td>
<td>Asian South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education</td>
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<td>GCC</td>
<td>Gulf Cooperation Council</td>
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<td>HRW</td>
<td>Human Rights Watch</td>
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<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labour Organisation</td>
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<td>IOM</td>
<td>International Organization for Migration</td>
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<td>MECC</td>
<td>Middle East Council of Churches</td>
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<td>MFA</td>
<td>Migrant Forum in Asia</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non Governmental Organisation</td>
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<td>UAE</td>
<td>United Arab Emirates</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>US</td>
<td>United States</td>
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<td>UNTC</td>
<td>United Nations Treaty Collection</td>
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<td>WCC</td>
<td>World Council of Churches</td>
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<td>WTO</td>
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1. Introduction

Globalisation is affecting people at every level all over the world. But it is not happening by itself and it is not happening evenly. One effect of globalisation is the increasing movement of goods and people. I intend to explore the question of migrant workers as an aspect of globalisation. My interest lies in the situation of the countless men and women who leave their families and communities to go abroad for work because they lack opportunities to support their families and themselves at home.

Today, especially within the European Union, there are strong advocates for a free market policy that includes free movement of labour globally. The idea is that a free market promotes mutual benefit across the world. But in reality, this has unpredictable effects on individual peoples’ lives. The different political conditions in the world make it difficult to implement readymade market policies without instigating conflict.

This problem first struck me roughly ten years ago when my family and I moved to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In an unbelievably artificial society we cruised in air-conditioned jeeps to school on the highway, passing cattle-trucks crowded with blue-collared Asian workers on their way to work.

There is now a law against transporting people in unsafe vehicles in the UAE. But it is not thanks to lobbying from the workers themselves; labour law in the UAE prohibits strikes and unions. Conditions for migrant workers can improve, albeit slowly, in the UAE despite strict labour laws. But what are the consequences of these laws? And why are they not challenged?

1.1 Problem Formulation

There is a unique labour situation in the oil-rich Gulf States. Most of these countries have seen an extreme development over the past forty years, from rural nomadic or agricultural small scale businesses to the petrol-dollar economy and large scale luxury tourism of today.
At present there is nothing small scale about the Gulf except the small native populations who – thanks to oil – live comfortable lives almost entirely paid for by their governments. An army of labour is needed for the maintenance of this comfort and the continued development of the region. As a result we have non-democratic welfare states whose citizens are multiply outnumbered by migrant workers who come from abroad to keep the wheels turning.

What is interesting is that although the Gulf so desperately relies on migrant workers to function, these migrants’ human rights are barely protected by national laws in the host countries, not to mention the difficulties in enforcing international law. And while labour-exporting countries like India are dependent on the remittances that are sent back home, few governments provide substantial support to their Gulf-stationed citizens.

A significant amount of research attends to this exceptional situation, ranging from development studies to migration theory and free market economics. But these disciplines strangely lack a discussion on the use of agency at the different levels of participation. Considering the key position that migrant workers hold and the important role they play in the international economy of both South Asia and the Gulf: why are their rights and interests not protected? And how can peace and conflict theory be useful in analysing the situation?

1.2 Research Questions and Delimitations

1. What is the background of the labour issue in the Gulf?
2. Who are the migrant workers in the Gulf?
3. What are the reactions to their grievances?
4. How can peace and conflict theory explain the situation?

It is necessary to limit the scope of this paper which is why I choose to concentrate on legal migrant workers in mainly labour intensive sectors like construction. The most prominent geographical centres of my study are India (primarily the state of Kerala) and Dubai because material available tends to focus on Indian migrants working in Dubai (one of seven emirates in the UAE). Lack of space obliges me to keep my conclusions quite general, meaning that although my basis of information largely relates to India and the UAE, my analysis is not a case study of these places exclusively but draws on information from other parts of the Gulf and South Asia as well.
Frustratingly enough, I will throughout this paper come across issues that deserve their own investigations but that I have no possibility to more than comment on, given the many subjects of possible relevance to migration and human rights. Some interesting fields of study that I have had to leave out include: recruitment agencies’ roles as facilitators and profiteers; families’ experiences of being split apart but also improving their living standards; female migrant workers’ uniquely vulnerable situation (because the available material is lacking their voice); migrant workers’ reactions upon returning home; the implementation of UN conventions relating to the issue and a thorough analysis of civil society traditions in the Gulf countries.

I also avoid bringing up a discussion on the nationalisation programmes emerging in most Gulf countries that aim at replacing migrant workers with nationals to reduce the dependency on foreign labour. These programmes, however, seem to be more concerned with administrative “proper” jobs than exposed low-skilled jobs such as construction and household work.

Furthermore, it is appropriate to point out that the recent financial crisis has indeed affected labourers all over the world, including the migrant workers in the Gulf. This might just be a temporary downturn for the labour market – which could have very interesting consequences in itself – but it can also have long term effects that are still too early to analyse.

1.3 Sources and Material

I am relying on secondary sources because primary sources such as interviews and local investigations require a larger time-frame and budget than I have access to. Primary sources would have enhanced my study but the scope of this essay is satisfied by the available secondary literature.

Most of the research material I have consulted revolves around studies made in the 1980-1990’s. Although this might seem like outdated material, the articles of later date that I use also depend on material from around this time. It therefore has to be concluded that little new research is available and that the observations made twenty and thirty years ago are still relevant. It should also be noted that the more recent material I have found belongs to civil society publications, i.e. non-governmental organisations’ (NGO) research, whereas the older material is of a more scholarly or academic character. I will where necessary take recent
developments into account through the use of news reports to make sure my analysis holds up to date relevance despite the lack of new publications.

As already mentioned, a great deal of my material stems from different NGO-initiatives concerned with migrant workers and their rights, for example Asian Migrant Centre (AMC 2001) and Human Rights Watch (HRW 2006, 2007, 2009), which also provides the most recent reliable information on this issue. To secure local sensitivity I have made use of a Dubai-based NGO called Mafiwasta¹ (2009). It is a voluntary group of admittedly Western academic expats – for example David Keane and Nicholas McGeehan (2008) – who advocate for migrant workers’ rights and as residents are able to follow the developments continually.

Myron Weiner (1982, 1995) is a veteran in the field of migration. I employ his research to establish the larger framework around my own investigation. His observations are complemented with reflections from other scholars of migration such as Peter Stalker (1994, 2000) and Douglas Massey et al. (1998), and some research on development including publications from the United Nations University edited by Godfrey Gunatilleke (1986, 1991).

My particular field of interest being migrant workers as a group in conflict is greatly lacking published material. Most research in the area revolves around migration and market theory or human rights issues. I have taken care in comparing the facts on the ground with peace and conflict theory and largely rely on established theorists like Johan Galtung (1969, 1990, 2000), Edward Azar (1990) and the Berghof Research Centre’s publications (2004, 2006, 2007). Their work is supplemented with a range of other academics and activists with insights on social movements and global processes to create an inter-disciplinary framework for my study.

1.4 Outline

I begin by laying out the theoretical foundation for my research and introducing definitions of some key concepts. I then move on to give a brief background of the developments in the Gulf and how this corresponds to the situation of migrant workers. Next I account for the history of migrant workers in the Gulf, discussing the shift from reliance on non-Gulf Arab

¹ Roughly meaning “with no connections”, “wasta” being Arabic for the important contacts you might have
migrant workers to Asians. I connect this to a discussion on the political potential of migrant workers in the Gulf. This will establish the nature of the conflict and result in an analysis that explains the most important components of the conflict in accordance with peace and conflict theory. Lastly, I argue that social movements and civil society are imperative for the empowerment of individuals in conflict locally, regionally and globally.
2. Method and Theory

2.1 Method

As has already been established, this is a paper that explores peace and conflict theory and as such the methodological discussion is limited. The method I use is of a qualitative character, meaning that I analyse the information available on migrant worker related issues in the Gulf and South Asian region and compare the findings to theoretical discussions on migration, development and conflict. I recognise that a more comprehensive methodological framework could have been useful and invite future research to develop a suitable approach to conduct interdisciplinary studies, particularly comprising peace and conflict models.

When studying any conflict it is important to understand the framework surrounding it. This includes the geographical and historical facts, but also requires a familiarity with the different parties or actors and an appreciation of the debated issues related to the conflict (Ramsbotham et al. 2005:74f). Once these are established a deeper analysis that draws on relevant peace and conflict observations can be attempted.

I am mindful of the methodological discussion among “circlers” and “framers” (Clements 2004; Neufeldt 2007) in the field of development and conflict transformation. It is agreed that circlers’ hold relevant arguments in that no situation can be understood through general criteria but must be appreciated as a unique context. However, research in the social sciences is left no choice but to use accumulated “frame-work” knowledge with a “circling” sensitivity in order to be productive. This is also what I will try to do in this paper.

2.2 Peace and Conflict Theory

I now present a summary of the basics of peace and conflict theory which forms the backdrop to my analysis in Chapters 3 and 4.
Peace and conflict theory takes a very different perspective on the issue of migrant workers compared to theories of migration and market economics. This provides a new way of looking at the problem which could lead to a better understanding of the situation and the potential for change.

Peace and conflict theory and development theory are interrelated in the field of social sciences and complement each other greatly (Galtung 1969:183). Azar’s claim that “peace is development in the broadest sense of the term” (quoted in Ramsbotham et al. 2005:86) is relevant here. This is founded on the idea of a democracy where empowered grassroots have real influence over their lives (Ropers 2004:6). Development is a constant process, much like democracy, which requires a bottom-up engagement. For peace to rule, it must be actively promoted from the grassroots all the way up to the executive power holders. At this point we encounter some complications. Galtung brings up the difficulties inherent in talking about “peace” because there is disagreement as to what “peace” really is (1969:183ff). Is it simply the absence of violence? And if so, what kind(s) of violence? We come back to these questions in Chapter 4.2.

The different parts of the bottom-up structure are on the other hand quite easy to identify in a given context. For example, interpretations of socialist philosopher Antonio Gramsci describe the state as being comprised of three overlapping but quite hierarchically distinguished spheres: government, market and civil society (Kössler and Melber 2007:30, see also Fig. 1). This model can be useful in a number of ways. John Paul Lederach identifies actors at different levels of influence ranging from top (state-representatives) and middle (influential NGOs and the media) to grass-root (civil society and the people) levels (1997:39, see Fig. 2). It is significant to look at the role of power in the spheres of the state and in the hierarchy of actors. When power is unevenly distributed we encounter power asymmetry which is a common component in protracted conflicts (Ramsbotham et al. 2005:20f) as it restrains the access to power for the “lower” sectors of society.

Galtung’s understanding of conflict, most simply explained by the ABC-triangle combines attitudes and behaviour of parties to a conflict to discern the resulting contradictions (2000, see also Fig. 3). This means that by looking at parties’ motives and interests we can better understand their actions and how they relate to other parties in the conflict. On this foundation there are endless possible layers that add to each conflict’s special character. There are aspects of violence, power, enemy images and international interference that can be relevant. Work-
ing from this basic model, more complex modes of analysis can be employed to fit the specific area of research.

For example, Azar is concerned with the concrete and explicit parts of conflict and he establishes that at the heart of a conflict is the communal content:

the origin of many conflicts is to be found at the communal level, and although communities across societies will share ideological needs, the dynamics of how these needs are or are not met will vary widely from one society to another. (1990:128)

This paper now investigates how this variety of factors can be relevant in understanding the situation for migrant workers, specifically in the Gulf but also generally in a global context.

\[\text{Fig. 1: Gramsci’s State} \quad \text{Fig. 2: Lederach’s Actors} \quad \text{Fig. 3: Galtung’s ABC}\]

\[\text{Government} \quad \text{Market} \quad \text{Civil Society}\]

\[\text{Top: heads of state} \quad \text{Middle: community leaders, media, NGOs} \quad \text{Grassroots: civil society movements, individuals}\]

\[A \quad \text{Attitude} \quad B \quad \text{Behaviour} \quad C \quad \text{Contradictions}\]

\[\text{CONFLICT}\]

\[\text{2.3 Key Concepts}\]

\[\text{2.3.1 Capitalism}\]

The traditional Marxist idea of capitalism, as understood by political theorist Andrew Linklater, comprises a powerful bourgeoisie controlling and profiting from the labour of the proletariat (2005:113). Karl Marx criticised these massive inequalities with a “notion of a higher morality” (ibid.:115). This is still relevant today as “the subordination of many states to the dictates of global capitalism is so evident” (ibid.:128). Scott Burchill portrays the progress of this subordination as follows:

the disappearance of many traditional industries in Western economies, the effects of technological change, increased competition for investment and production and the mobility of capital, undermined the bargaining power of labour. The sovereignty of capital began to reign over both the interventional behaviour of the state and the collective power of organized working people. (2005:72)
Abbas Mehdi observes that “[a]ll the features of capitalism are present – and extended – in globalization” (2004:12). Especially labour is seen as a commodity in the global economy, being “the industrialized countries’ secret weapons for [...] competitiveness” (AMC et al. 2001:13). Labour is traded like any other goods or services and “[c]apitalist expansion facilitates [this] by developing communication and transport links” (Stalker 2000:132).

2.3.2 Globalisation and Cosmopolitans

Globalisation is not a process that homogeneously affects the world. One problem is that it is often thought of in the context of “Western” discourse which fails to emphasise the very different implications globalisation has elsewhere in the world (Paolini 1997:67). “In the most popular usage, ‘globalization’ refers to the spread of global capitalism” (Kaldor 2003:111) but also to a “growing interconnectedness in all fields – political, military, economic, cultural” (ibid.). There is a general consensus as to the fact that there exists a global process although the parts of it may be very different and not always related (Paolini 1997:64).

Strictly speaking there is nothing new about globalisation, especially not when it comes to top-down processes like the global economy. What makes it so visible these days is the increasing bottom-up involvement as communication technology and ability to travel spreads to the grassroots of societies (Tilly 2004:101f). Admittedly these are still exclusive commodities that shut out many of the “unconnected” citizens of the world (ibid.:105) and rather indicate a “globalisation from the middle” (Sen 2007:62). Despite this, the process of globalisation is “the outcome of deliberate human agency” (Kaldor 2003:113) increasingly through the use of these commodities. Where agency is motivated by a sense of universal human equality we can identify cosmopolitan ideals that require “active belonging” (Spyra 2006:6), not achieved through consumption of “exotic” foods or holidays. Some define “cosmopolitans as people who familiarize themselves with other cultures and know how to move easily between cultures” (Leonard 2006:92f), indicating that for globalisation to constructively develop there is a need for people to become more attentive to their global footprints and misguided assumptions.

Mary Kaldor points to a clear difference between the actors on the global political arena where “individuals as well as collectivities have an increasing possibility to participate. For the neoliberals, the emphasis [...] is linked to private property, consumption and the pursuit of profit. For the new social movements, it [is] linked to life chances, human rights and political
participation” (2003:114). These discussions reveal the importance that Immanuel Kant has had in shaping modern European politics.

2.3.3 Civil Society

As we saw from Gramsci’s model (Fig. 1), civil society is the space between the government and the market in a state. This is where ordinary people trade ideas and initiate movements in their own interest, often with the aim of influencing the market and/or government. Charles Tilly sees civil society as the arena for the most important democratic component; “[t]he rise and fall of social movements marks the expansion and contraction of democratic opportunities” (2004:3).

What parts of the public that actually comprise civil society is highly debated. Jai Sen claims that “‘civil society’ is not what the textbooks say it is, that neutral (and neutered) ‘space between the individual (or the family) and the state’, but rather just what the term says it is: civil society – a society or community that is ruled by norms of ‘civility’” (2007:54). However, just the word “civil” is immensely problematic because it is self-appointed (ibid.:56) in a way that excludes those who do not belong to, or at least challenge, the norm. The norm generally being:

middle or upper class, middle or upper caste, white [...] and male, actively or passively practicing the dominant religion in the region and speaking its dominant language; and people of colour and of other differentiations and preferences who are allowed by such sections to join them. (ibid.:58)

Civil society actors need to be sensitive about this tendency as the concept runs a risk of limiting itself to euro-centric origins when it instead should be enhanced by diverse experiences and traditions from other parts of the world.

2.3.4 The Gulf States

The Arab countries focused on in this essay will be termed the Gulf States or the Gulf revealing their geographical character. I omit the prefix of Persian, Arab or Islamic in order to avoid the discussion on political ideology in the region. The Gulf States are the equivalent of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Bahrein, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which excludes Yemen. As already mentioned, my main focus of these is the UAE and I wish to point out that although I discuss the Gulf States generally, specific information will

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2 Emphasis always in original if not otherwise stated
3 See Map 1 in the Appendix
4 See Map 2 in the Appendix
usually concern the UAE and its emirate Dubai. This is an essay about the global issue of migrant workers placed in the context of Dubai because Dubai provides some of the most well documented difficulties at hand.

2.3.5 Migrant Workers

Now, what are these migrant workers? Their economic motivation for moving places them in the voluntary section of migration effectively cancelling them from the label of forced migration. Voluntary migration can be categorized into *legal permanent settler migration, legal temporary migration or illegal temporary or permanent migration* (Bali 2008:471). The second two are by far most common nowadays and in my study I will deal with *legal temporary migration*. Another term frequently used by other scholars for this group is *contract migrant workers* (Zachariah et al. 2003) as well as *guest workers* (Massey et al. 1998:5; Weiner 1995) to emphasise their temporary character.

It should be noted that the Gulf States as a rule do not grant citizenship to foreigners and expect all migrant workers to stay temporarily, even those who work until retirement in these countries (UN 2006:17). This inhospitality is reflected by the harsh laws aimed at migrants’ deportation if offences are made or ability to work ceases (HRW 2006:19, 34). Zachariah et al. sum up the prospect for migrant workers:

> contract migrant workers are persons working in a country other than their own under contractual arrangements that set limits on the period of employment and on the specific job held by the migrant. Once admitted, contract migrant workers are not allowed to change jobs and are expected to leave the country of employment upon completion of their contract, irrespective of whether the work they do continues. (2003:162)

I limit the discussion to legal migrant workers, keeping in mind that the numerous illegal migrants are intertwined with the legal (though usually not represented in the statistics) and on top of their shared problems face an even harsher reality (HRW 2006:44f).

A fraction of the migrant workers in the Gulf are more commonly known as expatriates or expats with American or European origin. They are subject to the same laws as the less privileged Asian migrant workers but lead comfortable family lives with better pay (Massey et al. 1998:141). They will not be included in this paper.
3. Background Analysis

3.1 The Unique Gulf Society

The beginning of the 1970’s saw great changes in the Gulf region. Budget restrictions caused the British government to leave its Gulf protectorate just as the native rulers intensified the exploitation of local oil resources (Graz 1992:10f). This resulted in a flood of petrol-dollars “directly into the hands of the state” which was promptly invested in social welfare institutions (Gause 1994:75f). Because the Gulf transformed from a rural society into modern welfare states over just a few years, all technology had to be taken from abroad, including the labour (AMC et al. 2001:11).

With the oil reserves, taxes have never been necessary in the Gulf; quite the contrary as “a vast array of services and benefits are now available to citizens, at little or no cost. The only requirement [...] is keeping your political and social behaviour within the limits set by the government” (Gause 1994:58). The new generation thus has every funded opportunity to pursue higher education as long as it conforms to the established norm. In terms of political involvement, this has resulted in a small society without the history or tradition of civil rights movements that we see over the rest of the world (ibid.:76). Materially speaking, the citizens of the Gulf States have no reason not to support their governments who provide access to everything they need: modern welfare and comfortable, mainly administrative, jobs (Stalker 1994:241) but not to political involvement. Compared to other state systems this has proved to be a stable success. By satisfying all citizens’ communal needs, potential political opposition is effectively prevented in the UAE and most of its neighbouring countries. Weiner describes this as a policy of redistributing wealth instead of political power (1982:9) which has “stimulated the emergence of an economy and culture of consumerism” (ibid.:11). This does not apply to the immense work force that mans the service and construction sectors, among others. Their purchasing power is weak and their political agency is curtailed by harsh laws, as we shall see.
This division between “white and blue-collar” jobs fits the segmented labour market theory which is applied to developed capitalist economies (Massey et al. 1998:141). Weiner explains: “foreign workers enable industrial societies to fill labor needs in dead-end, low status, low-wage sectors of the economy [...] without perpetuating sharp class cleavages within the native population” (1995:79). Instead this creates a racial hierarchy with Gulf Arabs at the top, Westerners next, non-Gulf Arabs in the middle and Asians at the lowest stratum (Shah 2004:105; Kapiszewski 2004:128f). As we shall see, this leads to a segregation of all the segments.

3.2 The Situation for Migrant Workers

As of 2005, the UAE hosted at least 2 700 000 (legal) adult migrant workers comprising unbelievable 93% of the total work force and at least 80% of the total resident population, estimated at approximately 4 100 000 people (HRW 2006:21). It should be noted that the recent financial crisis in the world has affected these figures (Rahman 2009) but it is difficult at this point to make an estimate of the long term changes. For the migrant worker issue in general, this crisis probably has no fundamental influence. Considering the continued developments after the 1990’s Gulf war and the following recession (UN 2006:7), the figures are likely to recover at least as long as there are oil revenues in the region (Massey et al. 1998:1425).

3.2.1 Reasons for Leaving Home

At the foundation of what I am investigating there are general root causes of migration that of course are vital to address if long term global changes are to be made. These are however of a different character than the subject of this limited analysis. Some examples can, nonetheless, be useful to list. Such as:

underlying forces of nationalism, ethnic conflict, foreign intervention, arms sales, incompetent government, and widespread human rights violations [...] population growth and the rapid increase of young people entering the labor force in developing countries, starvation resulting from crop failures, and “the overall economic imbalance between developed and developing countries.” (Weiner 1995:208)

5 For a more detailed comparison of population figures in the GCC see Table 1 in the Appendix
Apart from these, there are a number of applicable migration theories\(^6\). We have already mentioned the segmented labour market theory (chapter 3.1). Massey et al. identify the bottom line of new economics labour migration theory: “[i]n most developing countries [...] investment capital and consumer credit are unavailable or are procurable only at high cost. Thus, the absence of well-functioning capital and credit markets creates strong pressures for international movement as a strategy of capital accumulation” (1998:22). This coupled with unemployment and low wages at home, makes supporting families and managing businesses very difficult (Shah 2004:110).

In the course of seeking employment abroad, migrant workers accumulate large debts to recruitment agencies and other brokers which sometimes results in a “debt-bondage” situation which can take years to overcome (AMC et al. 2001:153; HRW 2006:8ff). Usually their governments still encourage them to seek work overseas to ease national unemployment rates and because the remittances they send home constitute one of the most important economic assets of the national economy (Weiner 1995:115). The curbing of unemployment statistics is important from a social point of view as well; Kevin Clements observes that “most recent civil wars are fought by young men who are either unemployed or under-employed” (2004:12). Abroad these men are kept busy, frustrated or not; they are no physical threat to the political climate at home.

### 3.2.2 Patriarchal Obstacles

Another dimension of this problem is that of gender. The global labour market is largely reproducing and strengthening traditional gender assumptions about work (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill 2003:29f, 93). It is still mainly men who migrate to support their families (UN 2006:18) and in the Gulf they are overwhelmingly employed in physically strenuous “masculine” jobs like construction (Keane and MacGeehan 2008:108).

In some interpretations, women who become single heads of household when their men leave to work abroad, acquire a higher status which can empower them and help change patriarchal patterns in their communities (Goldstein 2001; Cockburn 2007). Often, however, this task is much too heavy to carry alone and without preparation, especially as there may be tensions with the extended family (Nair 1986:101f).

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\(^6\) For a thorough analysis of the most relevant migration theories relating to the UAE, see Suter’s IMER Master thesis: “Labour Migration in the United Arab Emirates: Field Study on Regular and Irregular Migration in Dubai” (2005)
The Gulf States hold the lowest percentages of female migrant workers in the world at 29% of the total number of migrant workers (UN 2006:7) and it should not be forgotten that these 29% are almost exclusively placed in traditionally “feminine” domestic positions as nannies, housekeepers, cleaners and nurses (ibid.:8; HRW 2007:15). Because their working conditions are within families, they lack social networks and are extremely vulnerable to physical, mental and sexual abuse (ibid.:2). In the UAE, domestic workers are exempted from the labour laws without apparent reason (ibid.:113; Stalker 1994:244).

3.2.3 Common Working and Living Conditions

Human Rights Watch is the most up-to-date source available with information on the lives of migrant workers in the Gulf. Their report “Building Towers – Cheating Workers” from 2006 systematically lists common grievances among construction workers employed in Dubai. These include employers confiscating passports and withholding wages to prevent workers from absconding (HRW 2006:39; Zachariah et al. 2003:163, 167); non-payment of wages (HRW 2006:33f) and hazardous working conditions like heat-related illnesses when April-September seldom sees temperatures below 32°C (ibid.:41). Construction work entails many dangerous aspects and the Indian consulate reported in 2005 that at least 61 Indian nationals had died in “site accidents” of the total 971 Indian deaths reported in Dubai that year (ibid.). The reluctance of the UAE government to impose a minimum wage (ibid.:37) means that some workers do not earn more than 100 US dollars a month, although widespread figures range up to 250 US dollars (ibid.:56). There were an estimated 585 000 Indian migrant workers in Dubai in 1995 (a figure that has most probably dramatically increased by now) but only 25% of these earned more than the 850 US dollars required to be able to bring your family with you to live as expats in the GCC countries (Zachariah et al. 2003:167f).

With such low salaries, most workers are confined to spend their free time in the labour camps provided for their housing. In Dubai the largest camp is called Sonapur\(^8\) and is located 15 km from the city (ibid.:168), seriously affecting the workers’ free mobility. This camp was in 2006 modestly estimated to house 150 000 migrant workers from mainly India and Pakistan (Dagher 2006). Labour camps are notoriously overcrowded with at least five men in every room, lacking most furniture except bunk beds (Zachariah et al. 2003:168; HRW 2006:23f). 25% of the camps in the UAE do not have adequate cooking and toilet facilities

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\(^{7}\) 3000 Dirhams (currency in the UAE), dependent on exchange rates

\(^{8}\) Hindi for “the Golden Place”
which are otherwise communally accessed within the camps (Zachariah et al. 2003:168).

Elsewhere in the UAE, camps are reported to have been cut off from electricity as a result of companies mismanaging their bills (HRW 2006:34).

Other grievances reported are unreasonably long working hours and no compensation for overtime (ibid.:32); unilateral changes of working contracts (ibid.:36) and harassment from superiors (ibid.:37). Some of these offences are illegal by UAE labour laws, such as the confiscation of passports (ibid.:62) but HRW concludes that “there is little evidence for [their] enforcement” (ibid.:50). Massey et al. observe that “nations of the Gulf thus sponsor strict labour migration regimes designed to maximize the economic potential of migrants as workers but to minimize their social participation as human beings” (1998:136).

3.2.4 Social Consequences

The fact that most migrant workers come alone and leave their families behind has tremendous psychological effects especially considering that many are young parents (Zachariah et al. 2003:168) and have small chances of going home for visits during their contract period (Keane and McGeehan 2008:89f).

As an outsider it is important to understand that for migrant workers to become migrant workers they need capital to invest, and if they do not have capital they require securities to take loans (Nair 1991:35). Therefore the people we see working abroad for a couple of hundred dollars a month are not the worst off. The poorest in India and elsewhere usually do not have the means to leave. The general attitude in the sending countries is that “overseas migration is a privilege to rise out of poverty which very few are able to avail of” (AMC et al. 2001:27) and as such, ”migrants should not expect too much attention from civil society” (ibid.).

These ideas along with a number of different human qualities like high expectations and pride makes it very difficult for migrant workers who are ill-treated, cheated and exploited to stand up to demand help and solidarity (ibid.:153). The Indian consulate in Dubai reports that 84 Indian nationals committed suicide in 2005, with financial failure being the major motive (HRW 2006:46f). The focus on personal standing undermines the possibility to wield sympathy and pressure for these dangerous offences to stop.
3.3 Why Asians?

3.3.1 The Descent of the Non-Gulf Arab Workers

In the 1970’s construction boom in the Gulf, the first migrant workers were taken from other Arab countries like Egypt, Yemen and Jordan, many being Palestinian refugees (Kapiszewski 2004:119). But from 1975 to 2002, their share of the foreign populations in the GCC went from 72% to 25-29% with even lower figures in the UAE (ibid.:123).

Initially they were favoured over other foreign workers in the Gulf because they shared similar linguistic and cultural customs (ibid.:119). But these same characteristics soon started to work to their disadvantage as “[l]eftist, pan-Arab ideas promoted by Arab expatriates” began to challenge the local monarchies and inspired labour strikes (ibid.). Another difficulty was that the “Arab immigrants usually brought their families to the Gulf in the hope of settling there permanently” (ibid.:120). Presumably, close cultural ties and assumed kinship obligations between local Arabs and foreign Arabs began to infringe on the political stability of the Gulf States (Weiner 1982:12). As a result, covert regulations were adopted to oust the non-Gulf Arabs and stop the political disorder they brought with them (Kapiszewski 2004:120).

The GCC realised that they needed workers “who came without their families, made little use of public services, and did not put economic or political demands on employers or the state” (Weiner 1995:80).

3.3.2 The Preference for “Pliable Workers”

The market for Asian migrant workers now grew (UN 2006:6). Their presence has steadily increased and in 2002 constituted nearly 90% of the foreign population in the UAE (Kapiszewski 2004:123). Massey et al. connects this to the experience of the Arab migrant workers:

The growing involvement of Asian countries in the Gulf system reflects an explicit desire on the part of GCC nations to deter the permanent settlement and social integration of labour migrants. The ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds of Asians set them apart from the local population more than workers from neighbouring Arab nations, thereby minimizing the propensity to settle. (1998:141)

This trend is evident in other parts of the world as well. Weiner points out that “[e]ven when employers can find workers on the local market, they often prefer foreign workers, who are pliable, unlikely to join unions, willing to work long hours, tolerant of conditions that local labor finds unacceptable and readily dismissible when no longer needed” (1995:197).
People who are disconnected from a familiar context are vulnerable and often run the risk of being exploited or ignored (Kössler and Melber 2004:37; Chandhoke 2004:38). Things like unfamiliarity with the local customs, language and national laws severely infringes on their ability to protest and seek redress when ill-treated (HRW 2006:17).

3.3.3 Enemy Images and Othering

The discourse on “enemies” does not hold the acute relevance here as it does in armed conflicts. But research on this phenomenon shows that it involves a process of “othering” (Harle 2000:12) that is highly visible in the experience of migrant workers. Holding low-status jobs, living on the outskirts of society and wearing anonymous blue overalls hides their personalities and individuality. Perceiving “them” as a collective excludes “them” from the identity of “us”, thereby numbing the ability to recognise our shared humanity (ibid.:11, 15). This in turn makes the situation seem normal – somebody has to build the skyscrapers and sweep the streets.

Othering is evident in other strata of the Gulf society as well. Neha Vora describes how even Indian middle-class migrant workers in Dubai – who can bring their families with them – experience racial discrimination in terms of work benefits and salaries, but also live segregated from other nationalities and classes (2008:385).

The fact that most of the migrant workers make more money in the Gulf than they can hope to make at home is a common argument used to defend the current system (Hari 2009). It has to be assumed that most migrants know what they are doing and see it as the best opportunity at hand. But external acceptance and resignation to the current situation reveals a process of othering gone much too far.

3.4 Is there no Agency for Change?

There are of course forces working for change, as can be seen from the international work by HRW, Mafiwasta and other small-scale charities both in the home and host countries. The question is rather, why is there no agency for change among the core parties, i.e. host and home governments and the workers themselves?
3.4.1 Laws in the Host Countries

The Gulf States “have not ratified core International Labour Organization conventions protecting freedom of association and the right to organize, which includes the right to strike and the right to collective bargaining” (HRW 2009:526). Labour law in the UAE and its neighbouring countries explicitly prohibits these actions (Stalker 1994:244; Keane and McGeehan 2008:86). In 2005 the UAE labour panel including the labour minister stated that workers who “protest on flimsy grounds will be taken to court” leading to the repatriation of a currently unknown number of workers (Gulf News in Keane and McGeehan 2008:100). Authorities are provided with immunity to declare protests unfounded which is an easy way to replace inconvenient labourers (Keane and McGeehan 2008:100). In 2006 the Ministry of Labour announced that it would shortly implement laws allowing the formation of trade unions (HRW 2006:7) but this was refuted in late 2008 (Mafiwasta 2009).

Another aspect of these laws is that human rights organisations have no possibility to individually and freely monitor the developments in the region as their applications for accreditation are ignored by the government (HRW 2009:522). Instead they report with the help of dedicated individuals (HRW 2006:45) and reserved consular staff (ibid.:41, 46); but also with information from the few overwhelmed Church communities in the region – comprised almost exclusively of migrants themselves (WCC 2000). However, this is a low key activity as Christians are a small minority in the region.

3.4.2 Sending Countries’ Attitude

The Philippines is the only labour-exporting country in the region that has promoted regulations to be followed in foreign countries that employ Filipino citizens (UN 2006:23f; AMC et al. 2001:25). This has subsequently led to few Filipinos working in the Gulf countries; of the Filipino outflow of migrant workers only 8% work in the UAE with even lower percentages in the other GCC countries9 (UN 2006:5). Of the remittances sent back to the Philippines in 2006 only 13% came from Arab countries (GCC included), where Saudi Arabia constituted 9% (ibid.:23). Compare this to the Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian outflow of migrant workers where 25-29% are destined for the UAE (ibid.:5). Of the remittances sent home from the Gulf, only Bangladesh provides recent figures, amounting to 70% of the total sum of remittances in 2004/05 originating from the GCC states only (ibid.:23). However,

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9 Saudi Arabia being the exception at 26%, given that this is by far the largest GCC country with the largest number of migrant workers (UN 2006:2), see also Table 2 in the Appendix
figures for Pakistan and India most probably surpass Bangladesh since they have much larger migrant worker populations in the GCC countries (Kapiszewski 2004:125).  

Obviously these remittances hold major relevance for the sending countries in Asia and elsewhere in the world. The UN affirms that “[r]emittances are a significant contributor to the GDP of many countries” (2006:22). Although figures from 2007 point to remittances constituting “only” 3% of India’s GDP; the individual numbers for Kerala (the state in India from where most migrant workers originate) lie at 22% (Chishti 2007). In 2007, India topped the world statistics of remittances sent home from abroad at 27 billion US dollars, followed by China and Mexico (Dadush et al. 2008:19). As mentioned above, there is no reliable data on where exactly the remittances come from as they go by such diverse channels, however in the 1990’s, the remittances from the Middle East (GCC included) amounted to about 50% of the total money sent home to India from its migrant workers around the world (AMC et al. 2001:16).  

Aside from encouraging contract migration, the Indian government is lacking regulations that protect migrant workers from exploitation abroad (AMC et al. 2001:27ff). Indeed former prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, considered the country’s migrant workers as “a bank on which the country could draw from time to time” (Hindustan Times in Weiner 1995:110), underpinning the idea that the country is aided by the migrant workers and not vice versa. It also shows that the overall assumption in India is that migrant workers are strong and independent, which connects to the social problems discussed in Chapter 3.2.4.  

Weiner notes that “[w]hen workers have been expelled for strikes and other agitational activities, home governments often remain silent even when workers’ contracts have been violated” (1995:145). This has to do with the high competitiveness in the world market; if Filipinos or Egyptians are expensive and demanding, they can easily be replaced by more submissive workers. The Indian government thus allows “Indian companies to pay a lower wage to Indian workers so they can successfully compete for contracts in the Gulf” (Weiner 1982:5). Another influential factor is the Indian dependency on Gulf oil and other exports (ibid.:12f). “States are […] deliberately choosing to reduce their own significance. This has profound implications for global governance and regulation, since at present the global institutions that might take over some of the functions ceded by national governments remain relatively weak” (Stalker 2000:9). This leaves migrant workers literally in limbo and at the

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10 See also Table 2 in the Appendix
mercy of charitable organisations or individuals when the need for professional help or pro-
tection arises (HRW 2006:45).

Migration rules and international relations are closely entwined in the Middle East, where
population flows have, in the main, been approved by both sending and receiving countries. In
these cases, negotiations on migration matters are generally at a low level, involving government
bureaucrats. (Weiner 1995:122)

The reluctance from most sending countries to make demands on host countries is a clear
signal that migrant workers’ grievances are not a prioritised question and thus receive no
high-level attention in international affairs. It is obvious that most Asian governments have
their hands full with domestic issues such as poverty, health care, crime and ethnic conflict.
Many of these matters hold more urgency than the migrant worker question, but must be
understood holistically as interconnected structurally and should be addressed in unity. At the
same time, Weiner claims that “[t]he political system of the host country, rather than the
political system of the home country, is the more important variable in predicting whether
migrants will receive political support from their country of origin” (ibid.:125). Where the
host countries’ resistance to discussion on the matter is strong, the sending countries put little
effort into enforcing changes.

3.4.3 Workers = Victims?

It is tempting to conclude that these exploited workers are victims of unfavourable political
and economic forces. But there is a danger in such a conclusion. By victimising their situation
they are incapacitated to speak for themselves (Becker 2004:10). The facts are that a great
number of these workers actually try to enforce change themselves. For example, several
strikes have been conducted to demand higher pay and better living conditions in the UAE
over the past few years (HRW 2006:31ff). Some have been mildly successful although in
most cases minimal improvements were accomplished (ibid.:37f). In some cases workers on
strike even received encouragement from the UAE ministry of labour (ibid.:31) but were later
promptly deported with the help of the UAE police forces because the continued protests were
in breach with national law (ibid.:38).

The greater the political rights of migrants, the more readily they can make claims on the political
system. As noted earlier, migrant workers in the Middle East, knowing that they can be summarily
repatriated by their authoritarian host governments, are in a weak position to make claims. (Weiner
1995:125)

Nonetheless, HRW finds that migrant workers persistently do make use of the few judicial
channels open to them in the UAE (2006:34f) which include arbitration committees at the
ministry of labour (ibid.:50ff). The ministry of labour in the UAE is however criticised for not being transparent or effective in its work (ibid.). The workers involved in these procedures – usually concerning payment of withheld wages – claim that they have no choice but to wait for justice; “[t]hey can’t just quit their jobs and return home, because they remain indebted to recruiting agents, and their only hope to repay the debts is to remain in their jobs and hope for eventual payment” (ibid.:35). Among the protesting workers the disillusion is graver; risking deportation is the last resort available to attempt change (ibid.:38). Obviously, these strikes have had the effect of making migrant workers visible in the UAE society by providing some media attention to their plight, not least in the local news (Keane and McGeehan 200811). A great deficit in this context is the absence of a local civil society movement that can provide “wasta” (connections) for a larger impact on the centres of authority (HRW 2006:17).

11 See also the various news reports in References
4. Conflict Analysis

Can we define this as a conflict? Migrant workers in the Gulf are not part of a manifest or overt conflict with violent outbreaks – which is usually the association made to “conflict” (Ramsbotham et al. 2005:85). They are however, party to what in the field of peace and conflict studies is called a latent conflict. Azar claims that this is the major type of conflict present in our world today and that we need to pay much more attention to it (1990, Ramsbotham et al. 2005:85f). I take a look at this aspect in this last section.

4.1 Actors

First of all I briefly summarise the actors that we have come across so far, establishing how they are organised in the society and identifying their attitudes and behaviour according to Galtung’s ABC-model.

4.1.1 Gulf Actors

As we have seen, the typical Gulf State does not follow Gramsci’s scheme of government, market and civil society. The market and the government are virtually united and the sphere for civil society is, as we usually know it, missing; although this should be understood in its own context and not from euro-centric models. For example, the role of Islam in these countries can historically be seen to substitute some of the functions attributed to civil society (Kaldor 2003:42f) by occupying the space between government, market and in some ways the family (ibid.:10f).

The key Gulf actors to the conflict can be found in the GCC labour ministries, to some extent among local businesses (although many businesses are run by expats (HRW 2006:52f)) and in the media. If we connect this to Lederach’s model of actors, we see that they all belong to the middle and top of the society’s hierarchy (see Fig. 3). These actors cannot fill the function of a civil society that “monitors” sources of power (Kaldor 2003:19f). HRW points out that:
There are no independent organizations to monitor the construction sector—or any other labor sector—to report and document abuses systematically, and to advocate for migrant workers’ rights. This has produced a situation where the government and the business sector are the sole entities deciding on labor-related issues. (2006:24)

Considering the prevalence of news reports on this issue it could be expected that the news media is a potentially important actor to instigate change. They seem to work quite freely in Dubai although most probably exercise self-censorship to avoid trouble with the authorities – as can be seen from their hasty praise of the labour minister when hollow promises of support to migrant workers were made in 2005 (HRW 2006:31).

Both the private and public business sectors want profit and accomplish this by keeping labour costs minimal. The GCC governments want investment and as a result sympathise with the businesses, especially within the public sector. Attitudes and behaviour correspond well between these two parties without leading to contradictions.

4.1.2 Sending Countries
The sending countries, being very diverse, hold a more complicated state make-up. Civil society organisations abound, but generally focus on other issues than migrant workers. Especially in India migrant workers are overlooked as a privileged sector helping itself. The government benefits from the huge amounts of money being remitted by the migrant workers and is relieved from providing them with employment at home. The major worry is competition from other labour-exporting countries which averts governments and their embassies from offering adequate protection for their citizens abroad. Obviously these mixed attitudes of enthusiasm, cautiousness and competitiveness lead to a dubious behaviour, bordering on passivity.

4.1.3 Migrant Workers
The migrant workers themselves sport high hopes of earning enough money to support their families, improve their standard of living and repaying debts as well as enhancing their skills and experience. This makes some of them take risks such as signing up with unregistered agencies and taking loans that are difficult to pay back. Once abroad they find little else to do but work and hope their wages are paid on time. Disappointment with work and living conditions can lead to a range of emotions such as depression, home sickness and fear. They might attempt to negotiate the situation with relevant parties such as superiors or labour ministry officials but are inhibited by the enormous power asymmetry between them.
4.1.4 Combining the Actors

The conflict is indefinitely prolonged by the state parties’ behaviour. By denying the migrant workers their human rights and trapping them in an expensive bureaucratic system, the Gulf governments refuse their attempts at empowerment while simultaneously discouraging others to realise their own agency. The sending governments’ failure to extend support to its citizens abroad reveals an implicit consent to the situation. The migrant workers themselves are trapped in the middle, breeding frustration which is characteristic for asymmetric conflicts:

[T]he structure deprives them of chances to organize and bring their power to bear against the topdogs, as voting power, bargaining power, striking power, violent power – partly because they are atomized and disintegrated, partly because they are overawed by all the authority the topdogs present. (Galtung 1969:177)

Azar writes: “access to social institutions (that is, effective participation in society) is a crucial determinant for satisfying physical needs. Effective participation may thus also be considered a developmental need” (1990:9). And so the “[f]ailure to redress these grievances by the authority cultivates a niche for protracted social conflict” (ibid.).

Therefore, by looking at the actors in the migrant worker question, it is easy to detect the incompatibility between the attitudes and behaviour of the migrant workers and their home governments on the one hand and between migrant workers and their host countries on the other hand. Galtung writes: “Actors seek goals, and are organized in systems in the sense that they interact with each other” (1969:175) and it is in these systems that the power asymmetry is established; “where there is interaction, value is somehow exchanged” (ibid.:176). Internationally we see a conflict between all three parties (or even more parties considering the different policies from different sending countries) that marks a visible hierarchy between them; rich Gulf States first, then sending countries and last the commodity; migrant workers. Weiner points out that “[t]he asymmetrical dimension of policymaking is well understood by all” (1982:9). The tensions that emerge are symptoms of a complicated conflict that includes the denial of basic needs for both human and state actors.

I now take a look at how this conflict manifests itself through different forms of violence.
4.2 Violence

Galtung early started to problematise the concept “violence” (1969). Drawing on his findings we will now do the same in order to describe some major structural obstacles in this conflict that have implications globally.

If peace is the absence of direct violence, then “[h]ighly unacceptable social orders would still be compatible with peace” (Galtung 1969:168). We must conclude that the findings presented in this paper reveal an “unacceptable social order” (at least) for migrant workers in the Gulf.

As already mentioned, this conflict is not primarily apparent through direct violence. We have seen some examples of abuse in the incidents of strikes, attributed to triggers like withheld payments. But what is more relevant here is what Galtung calls structural and cultural violence; “when the potential is higher than the actual is by definition avoidable and when it is avoidable, then violence is present” (1969:169). This means that when a situation occurs where people are prevented from realising their full potential – anything from good health to economic independence – even though there are means available to do this, violence is present in a structural form. Galtung clarifies that structural violence exists “regardless of whether there is a clear subject-action-object relation, as during a siege yesterday or no such clear relation [exists], as in the way world economic relations are organized today” (ibid.:171). Meaning that in an increasingly globalised world where economic reforms spread indiscriminately, it is more difficult to identify the explicit sources of conflict as they themselves have become structural. This has to do with structural violence usually being combined with what Galtung calls cultural violence.

“If we accept that the general formula behind structural violence is inequality, above all in the distribution of power” (ibid.:175), then cultural violence is what says that this distribution is reasonable. Cultural violence is discreet, it “makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right – or at least not wrong” (Galtung 1990:291). This traces back to the process of othering discussed in Chapter 3.3.3. Cultural violence – expressed by a global acceptance that poorer and darker people can do more demeaning and less paid work – makes the situation for migrant workers in the Gulf seem almost normal. This perpetuates the cycle of structural violence that strikes migrant workers by cutting them off from means of empowerment that can give them better lives.
4.3 The Power of International Attention

In this section I briefly estimate the international involvement in the conflict. What involvement there is and what influence it has had.

The absence of direct violence reduces the visibility of the migrant worker conflict also internationally. The UN’s special rapporteur on the human rights of migrant workers has, although aware of the alarming situation in the region, not yet requested an invitation from any of the GCC countries to investigate the question further (Keane and McGeehan 2008:104). This would put much needed pressure on the governments to comply at least with the conventions they have signed, such as the The International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination and The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (ibid.:96).

Another very relevant convention is The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. Adopted by the general assembly in 1990, it has not been signed or ratified by any large migrant importing countries including the Gulf States, India and the EU States as well as North America and Australia (UNTC 2009). Obviously, international agreements do not take away the power of states to regulate the flow of migrant workers. States are free to decide who should enter and in what numbers, but international agreements govern the rights and benefits that states should provide to all who are admitted – rules [...] pertaining not to the right of migration but to the rights of migrants. (Weiner 1995:155, my emphasis)

This is one of the top-level channels open for improving the situation for migrant workers globally. Further research should investigate exactly what mechanisms are preventing the exercise of this method.

International attention has, however, recently focused on the use of children as camel jockeys in the UAE. This led to a US class action lawsuit under the Alien Tort Claims Act of 1789 against the ruler of Dubai for being responsible for slavery among countless young Asian and African boys (Keane and McGeehan 2008:105). As a result, immediate measures were taken by the ruling elite of the UAE to stamp down on the malpractice with international help from the UN among others (ibid.). Obviously the UAE’s international reputation is extremely important to its rulers, which gives a hint as to how influential international advocacy can be when it highlights human rights issues over capitalist wonders of the world.
In a bid to keep the status quo the UAE ignores applications to establish human rights organisations in the country (HRW 2009:522). The media’s role, both international and local, can increase the pressure on both international engagement and local authorities. This seems, however, not to be the case at the moment although more research would be welcome.

4.4 Cultivating Grassroots

In this final section we identify some possible ways to change the structures in this conflict, but also in the regional and global arena.

It is crucial to understand that external intervention can easily complicate transformations of any conflict, if cosmopolitan values – beyond outrage over abused human rights – do not guide the process. As is emphasized over and over again in development aid and peace research, bottom-up structures are vital for successful social change (Neufeldt 2007:14; Paffenholz 2004:4; Galtung 2000).

I, and many others, have established that migrant workers in the UAE have few opportunities to organise themselves and demand their rights. It is therefore important to make sure that their concerns are taken into consideration by the people who might seek to protect their rights on their behalf. The international community needs to hear the voice of migrant workers across the world. This can be attempted by, for example, strengthening the ties between already existent organizations working with the issue (like HRW, AMC, Mafiwasta and the church community) and connecting these efforts to UN instruments such as international conventions. A discussion on the worldwide importance of these conventions should involve the EU and other powerful actors. Moreover, granting this question larger visibility in the media would create awareness and challenge the comfort of snug cosmopolitan identities – also locally.

Cosmopolitanism is not just about embracing globalisation and travelling around the world; it is about genuinely recognizing our shared humanity, regardless of class, gender, ethnicity or background. This is a task especially suitable for the less vulnerable migrant workers in the Gulf region, like EU-nationals and Americans with supportive home governments.
There is an increasing notion of a global civil society (illustrated for example by the World Social Forum) that responds to global processes like the free market and interstate agreements, much like a border-less model of Gramsci’s state (see Fig.1; Kaldor 2003, among others). In the best of worlds a global civil society would connect grassroots all over the globe to reduce inequalities and power asymmetries. The first step in the Gulf is to encourage political participation among its populations – not only its citizens – so that a civil society sector can come into existence and start to think about how to meet all residents’ needs. A truly democratic distribution of power would make it easier to uphold social justice not only in the region, but also globally.
5. Conclusion

This paper has investigated the situation for underpaid migrant workers in the Gulf. We have found that the rapid economic growth in the region has resulted in great social conflicts. This can partly be explained by a lack of democratic processes in most Gulf States. The absence of a broad civil society means that power is confined to the government and market. For migrant workers this has serious consequences. Especially as political and economical circumstances cause the sending governments to minimise their over-seas protection. Migrant workers are used as export commodities in a free market where their competitiveness is more important than their human rights. This reality will continue as long as power is kept in the top-levels of society and state actors fail to take a holistic approach to development.

My study has suggested that peace and conflict theory provides a new perspective on the migrant workers’ situation. This is in accordance with the inter-disciplinary idea that more than one aspect of a problem is needed to fully understand its essence. Further research should take a more systematic approach to this question and combine different fields of science to find the most viable methods for change.

As a first step, this paper has shown that peace and conflict theory provides a suitable framework for revealing clear conflict components in the global reliance on labour migration. These include power asymmetries, conflicting interests, destructive behaviours and structural obstacles. A central concept in any conflict situation is violence. In the Gulf it is clear that structural and cultural violence is prevalent in keeping the status quo. By understanding how these factors work to make the situation in the Gulf seem normal, new approaches at change can be made.

In a wider perspective, these very same components can be distinguished in our globalised world. A challenge for any world citizen is to pursue a cosmopolitan identity which safeguards basic moral values like human rights and international justice.
Appendix

Table 1: Population of the GCC states, 2004 and Estimates (2005-06)

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<td>19.0</td>
<td>3 278 000</td>
<td>81.0</td>
<td>4 000 000</td>
<td>4 700 000</td>
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<tr>
<td>GCC Total</td>
<td>21 184 323</td>
<td>62.9</td>
<td>12 486 349</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>33 677 832</td>
<td>39 376 160</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source: Kapiszewski 2006:4 (estimates in italics)

Table 2: Major Expatriate Communities in the GCC Countries

<table>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>120 000</td>
<td>320 000</td>
<td>330 000</td>
<td>100 000</td>
<td>1 300 000</td>
<td>1 200 000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pakistani</td>
<td>50 000</td>
<td>100 000</td>
<td>70 000</td>
<td>100 000</td>
<td>900 000</td>
<td>450 000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Egyptian</td>
<td>30 000</td>
<td>260 000</td>
<td>30 000</td>
<td>35 000</td>
<td>900 000</td>
<td>140 000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bangladeshi</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>170 000</td>
<td>110 000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>400 000</td>
<td>100 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>25 000</td>
<td>70 000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>50 000</td>
<td>500 000</td>
<td>120 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lankan</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>170 000</td>
<td>30 000</td>
<td>35 000</td>
<td>350 000</td>
<td>160 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordanians/ Palestinians</td>
<td>20 000</td>
<td>50 000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>50 000</td>
<td>260 000</td>
<td>110 000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kapiszewski 2006:10 (selected data and estimates for various years)
Map 1: South West Asia

Source: My Travel Guide 2005

Map 2: United Arab Emirates

Source: CIA World Factbook 2009
References

Books and Articles


AMC; ASPBAE and MFA (2001) Clearing a Hurried Path: Study on Education Programs for Migrant Workers in Six Asian Countries, Hong Kong: AMC


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