



FACTS ON *Migrant Labour*

Millions of people world-wide have left their home countries in search of employment. But many are not looking simply for better work. Propelled by poverty and insecurity, they are looking for *any* work.

Migrant labour is a key feature of globalization, and makes a significant impact on the world economy. Every year, migrant workers send home the equivalent of US\$100 billion in remittances to support families and communities, while making social security contributions in host countries. Today's migrants face many challenges – including mistreatment and discrimination.

Migrant workers are increasingly in demand, not only for high-skilled information technology and professional jobs, but also for many of the low-paid, less skilled jobs in agriculture, cleaning and maintenance, construction, domestic service, health care and the “sex sector”. Migrants are often relegated to the “three D” – dirty, dangerous, and degrading – jobs that national workers reject or are not available for. Many migrants are in precarious and unprotected work in the growing informal economy.

Labour migration can lead to a “brain drain” in home countries. But appropriate labour migration can also contribute to development in these countries through worker remittances and the transfer of skills through returning migrants. The freedom to move geographically, transfer jobs and change employers facilitates economic development and is essential to ensuring the most productive use of labour.

Governments are, however, increasingly erecting barriers between willing migrants and strong demand for foreign labour in host countries – making it highly profitable in many cases to illegally circumvent those barriers. One result has been a dramatic rise in human trafficking.

Migration policies that are not founded on a respect for human rights can exact high costs on individual migrants and their home societies. There is evidence that 10-15% of migration today involves undocumented women and men who enter or work in a host country without authorization. Irregular migration leads to high levels of exploitation, forced labour, and abuse of human rights and dignity.

The global challenge today is to forge the policies and the means to regulate and manage migration and ensure that it contributes positively to development of both home and host societies and to the well being of migrants themselves.

Facts

- An estimated 175 million migrant workers, permanent immigrants, refugees and their dependents were living outside their country of origin or citizenship in the year 2000.
- Of this total, some 86 million are economically active migrant and immigrant workers, including refugees:
 - Africa: 7.1 million
 - Asia, including Middle East: 25 million
 - Europe, including Russia: 28.5 million
 - Latin America and the Caribbean: 2.5 million
 - North America: 20.5 million
 - Oceania: 2.9 million
- Women now constitute 49% of migrants world-wide and more than 50% in Asia, Europe, Latin America, North America and Oceania.
- The US \$100 billion sent home every year by migrant workers is a larger sum than all overseas development assistance, and is second only to the value of global petroleum exports in international commodity trade.
- Developing countries lose 10% to 30% of skilled workers and professionals through “brain drain.”
- ILO studies found that more than one in every three qualified migrant applicants were unfairly excluded in employment selection procedures in several Western industrialized countries: a discrimination rate of 35%.

An “expatriate squad”...

ILO principles and training prompted the Mauritius Ministry of Labour and Industry to set up a “Special Expatriate Squad” to oversee all aspects of employment of foreign workers. Specialized labour inspectors with ILO training, interpreters and legal officers maintain direct contact with migrant workers and employers. The team vets all contracts to ensure that workers have decent working and living conditions and it coordinates between various relevant ministries.

Interventions by this unit have resolved several conflicts through dialogue involving migrant workers, employers and representatives of home countries. For example, misunderstandings regarding conditions of housing and work in Mauritius precipitated a spontaneous walkout from several textile plants by Chinese workers in March 2002. Mediation by Squad members backed by the Mauritius Minister of Labour resolved the dispute, precluding a strike and diplomatic tensions. As Squad officer M. Caremben says, “the office generates solutions between workers and employers, and its success derives from full support by the Minister and ILO inspiration.”

... and special contracts

The Ministry of Labour of Jordan’s Special Working Contract to non-Jordanian Domestic Workers is expected to become a model for other countries in the region. The contract guarantees migrant workers – mainly women – the right to life insurance, medical care, rest days, repatriation upon expiration of contract, and treatment in compliance with human rights norms. The contract resulted from efforts led by UNIFEM in consultation with the ILO and partners such as the host government, the police, embassies of the workers’ countries, and local women’s groups.

The Role of the ILO

Since its establishment in 1919, the ILO has worked to develop international consensus on regulating labour migration and on protecting workers employed outside their home countries. Such consensus is essential because these workers are at the mercy of the host country’s laws and may not be protected by the laws of their home country. The ILO sets standards, assists member States in formulating their policies, and enhances understanding of the impact of migration policies through research and training. The ILO works for safe and constructive migration in three main arenas:

Building the knowledge base to address migration in the age of globalization. Key research themes concern the costs and consequences of “brain drain”, the impact and productive uses of remittances, conditions of work for migrant workers, measuring discrimination and finding remedies to it, and exploring effective ways of ending human trafficking. The ILO is expanding its online International Labour Migration (ILM) database to provide current data on migrant worker flows and characteristics; currently some 80 countries provide data.

Enhancing good governance of international labour migration, by developing policy with governments, employers and trade unions at conferences and regional seminars and through direct cooperation. Trade unions – as representatives of the work force – and employers are key partners in making viable policy and administration on labour migration. Other ILO activities include providing technical advice to governments and training officials of government agencies and employer and worker organizations.

Advancing human rights and decent work for migrants, by promoting the adoption and implementation of international norms. The ILO also encourages anti-discrimination activities by governments and workers’ and employers’ groups. It promotes actions that benefit high-risk groups, such as victims of trafficking and migrant domestic workers, and encourages labour inspection to enforce minimum decent work conditions in sectors where migrants are vulnerable to abuse.

For more information: www.ilo.org/migrant

Relevant Conventions

ILO Convention No. 97 on Migration for Employment, 1949

ILO Convention No. 143 on Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions), 1975

1990 International Convention for the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and members of Their Families



International Labour Office
4 route des Morillons
CH-1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland
Tel. +4122/799-7912
Fax +4122/799-8577
www.ilo.org/communication
June 2004