

The Impact of Financial Crisis on Labour Migration and HIV

By Gita Lingga, Communications Officer, ILO Jakarta

BALI (ILO News) - During economic crises migrant workers are often the most vulnerable group of workers as they have the most insecure terms of employment. As it turns out, the current global economic crisis is no different, as migrant workers of various nationalities find themselves on the receiving end of the downturn.

Thousands of migrant workers have already been laid off, particularly in construction, manufacturing, plantation, agriculture, hotel and catering, as well as the health and care sectors. For their families, almost exclusively dependent on their remittances, this is a severe blow, particularly as migrant workers in the present economic climate have trouble finding new, decent jobs. As opportunities in the formal sector are being cut back, they are more likely to seek unsafe, informal work that increases their vulnerability to HIV.

To further discuss the issue, the ILO, the Joint United Nations Initiative on Mobility and HIV/AIDS in South East Asia (JUNIMA), UNDP and UNAIDS hosted a symposium titled "The Impact of Financial Crisis on Labour Migration and HIV" at the 9th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific, in Bali, on 12 August 2009. The main aim was to stress that migrants should have adequate access to health centre and HIV services, despite the economic downturn. The symposium presented the findings of a report carried out by UNDP and ILO that reviewed the impact of the current economic crisis on migration and HIV, and drew comparisons to the previous economic crisis in 1997.

The symposium was chaired by Ms. Nafsiah Mboi, the Secretary of National AIDS Commission in Indonesia, and co-chaired by Ms. Roosetiawati, Deputy Director on International Cooperation, Directorate of Manpower Placement Development of Indonesian Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration. The panelists presenting during the symposium included Ms. Loretta Hieber-Girardet, Manager of Technical Cooperation of ILO Programme on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work; Ms. Marites Cardines, a former migrant worker from the Philippines; Mr. Dhannan Sunoto, Director of Cross-Sectoral Department, ASEAN Secretariat; Ms. Caitlin Wiesen-Antin, Regional HIV/AIDS Practice Leader and Programme Coordinator of UNDP, and Mr. Christopher Ng, UNI Pro Regional Secretary.

Ms. Hieber-Girardet told participants that the ILO's tripartite constituents — governments, employers' and workers' organizations — had adopted the Global Jobs Pact at the International Labour Conference in June. "The Pact was created to guide policies aimed at stimulating economic recovery and generating jobs as well as providing protection to working people and their families," she said. "At the same International Labour Conference the international community took a giant step in protecting the rights of workers, by furthering the development of a new labour standard on HIV and the world of work. If adopted next year, as planned, this new labour standard will deepen the commitment of governments, employers' and workers' organizations worldwide to ensuring that workers can seek and retain employment, regardless of their HIV status," she added.

Ms. Cardines shared her plight as a migrant worker. She had to endure not only indecent working conditions and a poor salary, but also sexual and physical abuse from her male employers. When diagnosed with HIV, her right to work abroad was denied. However, she refused to give up and is now actively educating potential migrant workers about their HIV risks and vulnerability as a facilitator for pre-departure training in Cebu City Philippines.

"The financial crisis will have a great impact to many migrants around the region as they lose their jobs and become either undocumented or engage in unsafe migration. I hope that we all continue to advocate for the protection of migrant workers, especially their right to health care and service," she said, adding that she hoped that changes will come soon so that migrant workers are not discriminated against and marginalized.

Ms. Wiesen-Antin presented a comparison between the impact of the 1997 financial crisis and the current crisis on labour migration. She revealed that five patterns of the 1997 crisis are re-emerging in the current crisis: reduction of visa allocations, massive lay-off of foreign workers, declining migration flows, worsened working conditions, and a decreased AIDS budget. She concluded her presentation with recommendations to mitigate the impact of the crisis on migration. These included establishing protective mechanisms to help migrant workers returning home or relocating on site; translating regional and national strategies for HIV that include migrants and mobile populations into budget and services that are designed to reach people on the move and their families; ensuring that migrant workers are not barred from working abroad and deported due to their positive status; and engaging with and supporting civil society organizations in monitoring the health seeking behaviour of migrants.

In relation to the ASEAN initiatives for addressing HIV/AIDS and migration, Mr. Sunoto explained that the Secretariat has established several mechanisms, ranging from ASEAN health ministries meeting and an

ASEAN Taskforce on AIDS, to labour ministries meeting and an ASEAN Committee on Migrant Workers. In addition, he emphasized the importance of the ASEAN Commitments on HIV/AIDS and the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers, endorsed by all ASEAN leaders in 2007.

The most recent action taken by ASEAN Mr. Sunoto said, was the high level multi-stakeholder dialogue on HIV prevention, treatment, care and support for migrants held last February in Bangkok, Thailand. The dialogue concluded with key recommendations, that, among other things, support government reviews of policies, laws and practices related to HIV specific restrictions on entry, stay and residence, ensure that people living with HIV are no longer excluded, detained or deported on the basis of HIV status, and strengthen migrant workers pre-departure and post-arrival orientation on HIV risks and vulnerability, as well as ways to access services.

Meanwhile Mr. Ng called upon the governments to utilize various types of overseas workers funds to assist migrant workers and their families, include them as recipients of financial and technical assistance under the governments' stimulus packages and ensure that all migrant workers, documented or not, are not deprived of health services, including access to HIV services by receiving and sending countries. "The Global Union Movement is fully committed to ensure the protection and promotion of migrant workers' rights," he said.

Questions from the audience focused on HIV mandatory testing for potential migrant workers. Many receiving countries still enforce such mandatory testing, which determines whether a potential migrant worker is allowed to work overseas. Worse still, workers' recruitment agencies or medical centers rarely inform migrant workers that the series of tests they will have to undergo includes an HIV test. Ms. Mboi concluded the symposium saying that all migrant workers have the right to know their HIV status and they should be able to work overseas regardless of their status.