

Social Conditions and Forced Migration

CONTEXT

The liberalisation of international agricultural trade, the forced opening of national markets, the lowering of customs duties, the introduction of importation quotas imposed by the World Trade Organization (WTO)... all of this has exacerbated the economic crisis affecting the rural zones of our planet. The increased competition between producers has resulted in a general lowering of prices for agricultural produce, sometimes to unsustainable levels below production costs, which in turn has sped up the rural exodus towards the cities, as farmers cannot make a living off the land anymore. The rural infrastructure, social services, health, education, culture are then downgraded, most of the funds being set aside for the needs of the urban population, where services can be sold off to private corporations. Steadily the gap between rural areas and urban areas widens.

At first, the migration process is internal, as people leave the rural areas or the poorer regions to try to make a living in the city. They settle in slums that quickly create a belt of poverty around the cities. Frightened by the hungry masses at their doors, governments apply short-term solutions and try to provide daily food rations at affordable prices. To keep the price of basic commodities low, they subsidise food imports from Northern countries or entrust their fate to multinationals, such as Cargill, which, in some cases, end up controlling up to 50% of the food supply chain in some countries. This, in turn, creates a vicious circle. Rural migration results in high rates of unemployment, which in turn exacerbates wage competition between workers and employees, and opens the door to delocalisation, blackmail and attacks on all forms of collective organisation like labour unions.

Most of the time, rural exodus towards the cities is only the first stage of the migration process. Poor living conditions and hunger push the migrants towards distant horizons. They also result in migratory flows within a continent and between continents.

The well being of economic refugees continues to deteriorate. First, border smugglers subject them to inhuman conditions and/or rob them. Then, they face police and armed forces in the countries to which they cross. The number of migrants who die while trying to reach economic safety is staggering and has reached alarming levels. But that does not stop the ever-growing tide of emigration. Is there a more damning proof of the evils of neo-liberal policies?

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that over 200 million migrants live under very harsh economic, social and cultural conditions in their country of destination, in the hopes of earning enough money to send back to their home country and families they left behind. This migration to the North deprives many countries of a dynamic and young workforce. The growing "brain drain" towards the Northern countries removes an educated workforce and holders of essential skills, thus further weakening the economies of countries in the Global South. Migration also has a major impact on the relationship between men and women, often increasing the precariousness of women's economic conditions.

The consequences of growing rural migration, be it internal or across national borders are not only economic. When women and men leave their families and their communities to try to make a living elsewhere, the entire rural society suffers. It brings changes to food consumption, steadily erasing local knowledge, indigenous expertise and local cultural identities.

The money sent each year by the migrants to their families and to their communities becomes vital to the economic survival of the women, the men and the children left behind, creating a new form of dependency.

THEMATIC WORKING GROUP 6 – DISCUSSION GUIDANCE NOTE

What are we fighting for?

We are fighting for fair market prices for food producers (fishers, pastoralists and farmers) allowing them to earn their livelihoods. We affirm that the poor urban populations have a right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and food-producing resources. If necessary, subsidies must be established in cooperation with urban organisations and movements so that the increase of market prices for food does not have a negative impact on the standard of living of the urban poor. Funding for social services, health, education and culture needs to be balanced between the needs of the urban and rural populations. The rural infrastructure must be developed in order to decrease the economic and overall vulnerability of the people living in rural areas.

- What examples are there of concrete initiatives that have stemmed the tide of forced migration?
- How can we ensure the Right to Food for poor urban populations?
- How can we develop convergent agendas with migrants working in the food and agricultural sectors?

What are we fighting against?

Forced migration is a direct consequence of the neo-liberal policies dictated by the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO. We fight against criminalisation of migrants, as they are the first victims of the "development schemes" of these organisations, which only see the world in terms of economy and commoditisation. We fight against the logic that reduces citizens to a cheap labour force and considers food as a 'cheap' commodity that will feed urban populations, maintained in hunger and poverty by neo-liberal policies, at the expense of rural areas.

- How can we, together with the labour unions and the migrant workers' organisations, strengthen our common struggle and challenge the policies of cheap labour enacted by private companies and by governments?
- How can we be more effective in our struggle against repression of migrants by private companies and by governments?

What can we do about this?

- How can we establish a common political agenda based on joint struggles and solidarity initiatives between migrants/urban populations and people from rural areas? How can we take these common struggles to local, regional and global levels?
- What concrete steps can we undertake to support migrant workers' organisations, especially those working in the food and agricultural sector?