

International Labour Organization (ILO)

A. MAIN FINDINGS AND POLICY SUGGESTIONS OF AN ILO RESEARCH PAPER

In the first months following the onset of the global financial and economic crisis in the third quarter of 2008, some observers assumed a pessimistic scenario of massive returns of migrant workers to their countries of origin. They also feared worsening work and living conditions for migrant workers and their families, and rising xenophobia directed at them. At the same time, a number of researchers pointed out that there would not be massive returns of migrants unless conditions would worsen.

Fourteen months have passed since the onset of the crisis and a more balanced assessment of the impact of the crisis is possible. A research paper published by the International Labour Organization (ILO) has reviewed the experiences regarding the impacts of the crisis on labour migration for a number of countries. The selection of countries was guided by the level of impact of the crisis on migration, the extent of related policy interventions and the availability of information. The paper assumes that the consequences of the crisis on migrant workers depend on its impact on economies of destination in general as well as on specific sectors of activity.

The picture that emerges from the paper is one of differentiated impact of the crisis on migrant workers. As expected, consequences of the crisis on migrant workers have been harshest in the countries most severely affected by the crisis. In countries where construction had been the engine of growth in recent years, such as Spain and the United States of America, migrant workers employed in this sector were the first to lose their jobs. Workers in other sectors followed. But in other countries, in East and South-East Asia, the engine of growth had been manufacturing, with migrant workers contributing to its expansion. With the contraction of trade

tion, manufactu
restaurants— have been seriously affected by the crisis with mig
shocks. But some other sectors with an equally high concentr
maintained, or even expanded, their levels of employment. F
benefit from this, although some crisis-affected native work
employment in these stable or growing sectors.

Faced with reduced overall demand for labour and risin
workers, at consistently higher rates than natives, countries of
encouraging voluntary return, tightening conditions for new adm
address irregular migration. The crisis can also be seen as an o
policy. Voluntary return policies have not been very successfu
explain the reserved reaction by migrant workers. First, regul
security systems might lose their benefit entitlements if they left.
market opportunities in countries of origin compared to dest
deterrent against return. This may partly explain why plans which
benefits due to them on return have not met with large success. I

agreements represent frameworks for the elaboration of measures to counter the effects of economic downturns and other crises on migrant workers.

B. PROPOSED POLICY MEASURES

Despite the overall mitigated effects of the global crisis on migrant workers, the adoption

should be an important pillar among these procedures. The involvement of social partners would increase the effectiveness of these policies.

In formulating improved labour migration policies that can respond to the crisis or capitalize on the opportunities ushered by it, countries of origin and destination might benefit from the guidance of relevant international labour standards. The ILO Convention on Migration for Employment (Revised), 1949 (No. 97) and the ILO Convention on Migrant Workers (Supplementary provisions), 1975 (No. 143) are of particular importance for both those States that have ratified them and those that have not done so yet. The ILO Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration sets forth principles and provides guidelines that can be of value in the formulation of policies.

Financial resources should be transferred to countries whose economies and standards of living have been especially hit by the decline in workers' remittances. Stimulus packages put in place by industrialized destination countries and programmes to be drawn up by international financial institutions should allocate resources to this end.

Countries of origin wishing to promote labour migration should monitor the evolution of external demand for labour in years to come. This is to formulate and implement appropriate human resources development policies. It is highly unlikely that some patterns of demand for migrant labour will persist. Demand for labour in a non-tradable sector such as construction cannot return to the pre-crisis levels. In contrast, demand for labour in manufacturing can go back to its levels before the crisis. Demand may grow at unprecedented rates in other sectors, industries and occupations. Demand to fill green jobs may be a case in point. In other words, countries of origin should take account of the changed structure of demand for migrant labour, which should depend on new growth patterns in countries of destination. Therefore, countries of origin should follow closely policies put in place by countries of destination to overcome the crisis situation.

In formulating education and training policies adapted to the new pattern of demand for migrant labour, countries of origin should ensure that sufficient skills are also available for their own development. Otherwise, the migration of highly skilled labour may be a drain on development efforts.

Migrant workers have participated in promoting economic growth and prosperity and the creation of wealth in countries of destination. They have contributed to poverty reduction and development in countries of origin. With the crisis, however, some countries have expressed reservations on the roles of migrants in the national and global economies. But the majority of stakeholders recognize the valuable role of migrants. It is therefore important to adopt appropriate policy measures to reinforce the protection and recognition of the crucial role of migrant workers so that their contributions to both countries of origin and destination could be maximized.