

Globalization catches up with migrants

This century's migrations are likely to be greater than those of the early nineteenth century. The only difference – and it is a big one – is that we now have international organizations dedicated to assisting migrant workers.

Olivier Annequin
Journalist

It was long believed that mass migrations were peculiar to the early nineteenth century and would remain so. The industrialization of the West did indeed give rise to the biggest migratory movements ever recorded up to that time. The availability of more and faster transport changed people's time-honoured conceptions of the Earth. It seemed to have shrunk!

There are striking parallels with the late twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. New information technologies and the advent of the Internet seem to have abolished distances altogether.

In the nineteenth century, the rural poverty caused by the mechanization of production forced millions of Europeans to leave the countryside for the towns, with their overcrowding and their factories. Working conditions were extremely difficult and pay was miserable. Within a pitiless economic context, where the weakest had little chance of survival, the prospect of starting a new life across the ocean was a seductive one. For example, 500,000 immigrants are estimated to have settled in Brazil between 1819 and 1883.¹ Over the following years, the pace quickened. There were 883,668 immigrants between 1884 and 1893; 862,100 between 1894 and 1903; and 1,006,617 between 1904 and 1913. Things slowed down in the decade after that, which saw "only" 503,961 immigrants. Most were Germans, Austrians, Hungarians, Slavs, Spaniards, Italians or

German-speaking Swiss, but there were also Japanese, Syrians and Lebanese.

In the past ten years or so, thousands of South Americans have been trying to travel in the opposite direction in order to escape the economic crisis in their countries, which is more often than not accompanied by an unbearable climate of violence. They all dream of building a new life for themselves in the countries that their forebears fled. Today, young Brazilians, Argentinians and Peruvians are feverishly searching the family archives for the birth certificate of a grandparent who was lucky enough to be born Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, British or French. For them, finding this precious document is tantamount to having a European passport.

Migrant workers now have rights

The fundamental difference between twenty-first century migrant workers and their predecessors is the existence today of international organizations that protect their rights. The most important of these is the International Labour Organization (ILO). Created in 1919 by the Treaty of Versailles, the ILO is dedicated to promoting social justice and more particularly to ensuring that human rights are respected within the world of work. It draws up the international labour Conventions and Recommendations that set the minimum

standards to be applied in its spheres of competence: trade union freedom; freedom of association and collective bargaining; the abolition of forced labour; equality of opportunity and treatment, etc. A number of these Conventions specifically deal with the protection of migrant workers. (See also the interview with Manolo Abella on page 1.) It also provides technical assistance in various fields: vocational training and retraining; employment policy; labour administration; labour law and industrial relations; working conditions; management training; cooperatives; social security; labour statistics; and occupational safety and health.

Furthermore, it encourages the formation of independent organizations of employers and workers, and promotes their growth through its training and advisory activities. A specificity within the United Nations system is the ILO's tripartite structure – employers and workers take part in the work of its decision-making bodies on an equal footing with governments.

Other organizations are active on the fringes of the ILO's own endeavours. The main ones are the UNHCR (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) and two organizations that are not part of the UN system – the international Red Cross and Red Crescent movement and more particularly the IOM (International Organization for Migration).

When a refugee becomes a migrant worker

The HCR's mandate is to lead and coordinate international action to protect refugees worldwide. Its main mission is to try to guarantee their rights and well-being. It attempts to ensure both that everyone can benefit from the right of asylum in another country and that everyone can return, of their own volition, to their country of origin. The Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme and the UN General Assembly have also authorized it to intervene of behalf of other groups. Thus, stateless persons, people of disputed

nationality but also, in some cases, people displaced within their own countries may come within its remit.

Upstream from its urgent actions in the field, the UNHCR tries to prevent forced population movements by encouraging States and other institutions to create conditions favourable to the protection of human rights and the peaceful resolution of disputes. In this same spirit, it seeks to promote the reintegration of repatriated people in their country of origin, so as to prevent situations of instability that would provoke further flows of refugees.

However, the UNHCR's action ends when a refugee has obtained the right of asylum in a country, as its spokesman in Geneva, Mr. Janowski, explains: "Our action is over once a right of asylum has been granted. When the refugee enters the labour market, he or she will be subject to international labour law as well as to the particular regulations of the receiving country."

Helping the vulnerable

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies was founded in 1919. It has 178 national societies in membership, a secretariat in Geneva and more than 60 delegations across the globe. Its mission is to improve the lives of vulnerable people by mobilizing the power of humanity. Vulnerable people are those who are at greatest risk from situations that threaten their survival, or their capacity to live with an acceptable level of social and economic security and human dignity. Often, these are victims of natural disasters, of poverty brought about by socio-economic crises or of health emergencies, or else they are refugees. The federation's work focuses on four core areas: promoting humanitarian values, disaster response, disaster preparedness, and health and community care.

The federation, the national societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross together form the international Red Cross and Red Crescent movement. The national societies act as auxiliaries to the public authorities of their own coun-

tries in the humanitarian field. They provide a range of services including disaster relief, health and social programmes and assistance to people affected by war.

Regulating migration flows

“Migration will be one of the major policy concerns of the twenty-first century,” declared IOM Director General Brunson McKinley in May 2000.² “In our shrinking world, more and more people will look to migration – temporary or permanent – as a path to employment, education, freedom or other opportunities. Governments will need to develop sound migration policies and practices. Properly managed, migration can contribute to prosperity, development and mutual understanding among people... The human rights of migrants deserve greater attention. Trafficked migrants are routinely exploited, mistreated or even killed. Migrant workers often find themselves without protection or recourse, either from their own governments or in the country where they are working.”

The IOM’s labour migration activities focus on regulation of the movement of labour and on programmes to assist governments and migrants in the selection, recruitment, cultural orientation, training, travel, reception, integration and return of labour migrants.

The Western countries are not the only ones that face the arrival of migrants looking for work. Thailand, for instance, has to deal with an inflow of migrant workers from Cambodia and Myanmar (formerly Burma). In this context, the IOM has launched an assistance project in partnership with the various ministries concerned, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), employers’ and workers’ organizations and, of course, the ILO. The aim is to understand the nature of the demand for unskilled foreign workers and to recognize the differences between the types of foreign worker entering the country. Is this demand structural, rather than temporary or seasonal? In some border areas, seasonal migrations have long been part of regional

history. Moreover, some small traders cross the border on a daily basis. Some of these workers may also be fleeing persecution in Myanmar. It is therefore important to identify from the outset the motives for this migration, as well as the different categories of migrant and their motivations.

The IOM is also developing specific projects in countries of the former Soviet Union, notably the Russian Federation, Georgia and Lithuania, in South America (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay), in North America (Canada), in Asia (Bangladesh), in Europe (Albania, France, Germany, Italy, Romania and Spain) and in Africa (Tunisia).

CD-ROM and web tools for integration

A project concerning France, Romania, Italy and Spain aims to promote the integration of migrant workers by developing innovative measures and interactive multimedia products. The objective is to provide migrants, but also their trainers, with the tools that are indispensable to their integration. Within the framework of this project, the IOM in Rome has been given the task of planning and producing a CD-ROM on “basic skills” and to plan and coordinate the search for training opportunities for migrants in the countries concerned, whilst the search for jobs will be undertaken by a partner in each country.

In the longer term, the project should lead into transnational research on the integration of migrant workers in France, Italy, Romania and Spain; to the development and production of software and CD-ROMs for vocational training, language courses and cultural orientation; to an online virtual classroom; and to reference manuals for trainers and migrants.

In conclusion

When people who no longer have any work in their own country cross a border in an attempt to carry on feeding their family, they often, despite themselves, become

“unauthorized workers”. When a firm dismisses thousands of people and crosses the same frontier in order to cut its wage bill, it never becomes an “unauthorized enterprise”. Considerable progress could be made on the issue of migrations by working women and men if the factors determining the authorization or otherwise of human actions were clearly identified.

Notes

¹ *Almanaque Abril*, São Paulo, Editora Abril.

² Quotation from IOM web site <<http://www.iom.int>>.