



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on Root Causes of Migration January 2015

At this time we think of the many migrants, the many refugees, of their sufferings, of their life, often without work, without documents, with such grief. And we can together say a prayer for the migrants and the refugees who live in the worst and most difficult situations. --Pope Francis, January 20, 2014

BACKGROUND

Since 2011, the United States has seen an unprecedented increase in unaccompanied children and families migrating into the country, predominately at the border with Mexico. There are no simple answers for the significant growth in this migration. Two delegations of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops visited Central America in November 2013 and June 2014. They found that a series of interrelated factors have contributed to this dramatic increase in migration and that a “perfect storm” of these root causes has coalesced to create this phenomenon. Push factors include: violence exacerbated by gangs, the drug trade and economic desperation; unemployment; the lack of quality education and access to education; and the resulting inability for individuals to support themselves and their families in their home countries/local communities. The desire to reunify with family in the United States, in part driven by these forces, also has contributed to this increase in migration.

In all these countries, free trade agreements with the United States has harmed local farmers and led to worsening labor conditions throughout many nations of Central America.

USCCB POSITION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Root Causes and their Policy Consequences: As the bishops of the United States have stated, all persons have the right to remain in their homeland and to find there the means to support themselves and their families in dignity. Migration flows should be driven by choice, not necessity. To achieve this goal there is a need to develop the economies of sending nations, including particularly Mexico and the countries of Central America. Congress should also address the root causes as part of comprehensive immigration reform, so that migrants have the right and opportunity to remain in their homelands and support their families in dignity.

Only a long-term effort that adjusts economic inequalities between the United States and the nations south of our border will provide indigenous workers with employment opportunities that will allow them to remain at home and to build a dignified life for themselves and their families. The Church, most recently in the statements of Pope Francis, has consistently singled out economic inequality between nations as a global disorder that must be addressed. To address this inequitable situation, the following policy recommendations for adoption by the U.S. government have been proposed in this area:

Trade policy must reflect principles of just development. The United States, as a wealthy country, should reduce the subsidies, tariffs, and quotas that severely constrict the ability of poorer countries to market their own products and sustain their own agriculture. Trade documents should be made available by the U.S. government during the process of negotiation for review and public comment. Trade agreements should lead to economic and social improvements at home and abroad, particularly for poor and vulnerable workers and their families; this can be accomplished by adopting internationally agreed upon

labor standards in negotiations involving the U.S. government and by ensuring there is a safety-net in sectors that would be adversely affected by the agreements. Trade agreements entered into by the United States should foster the right to organize and bargain collectively.

Foreign assistance efforts must support the identification and promotion of key public policy innovations for poverty reduction and inclusive development in the region. The U. S. government should focus its foreign assistance programs so as to expand its partnerships with local governments, private sector, and civil society to identify and develop public policy innovations in the region that demonstrate substantive impacts on poverty reduction, social inclusion and disaster risk reduction.

The creation of employment opportunities in Mexico, the nations of Central America and throughout Latin America would help to reduce poverty and would mitigate the incentive for many migrants to look for employment in the United States. The implementation of economic policies in these countries that create living-wage jobs is vital, especially for Latin American citizens without advanced skills. Investments in health, housing and educational systems in these nations must be improved to provide the basis for enhanced employment opportunities for workers.

Civil society and governments must support democratic political systems throughout the continent. The Church looks sympathetically upon the evolution of democratic governance insofar as it favors an ever more marked respect for the rights of each individual. More emphasis on the institutions of sound governance needs to be encouraged by international and local national policies. Civil society can help hold governments accountable to their people.

Governments must act to protect human rights, including the right to religious freedom. The U. S. government can support civil society in the nations of Latin America and elsewhere by supporting the work of the Church and other religious organizations that are major participants and willing partners in efforts to promote human development.

Governments should recognize the importance of preserving the environment and the rights of indigenous populations. Economic development and opportunity must be fostered by the U.S. government in a context that preserves and protects the environment.

External economic factors, including excessive levels of foreign debt, must be addressed. U.S. government policies at both the national and international level must address the role of excessive debt as a destabilizing element in the economy of a nation.

Efforts must also continue to address the underlying causes of violence in the border regions. U.S. policies must reflect the importance of controlling the illicit drug trade, the centrality of curbing corruption at every level of national life, and the need to curtail the arms trade, weapons and human trafficking, as well as the resultant violence that accompanies these illicit activities.

The USCCB's Committee on International Justice and Peace has proposed a number of policy recommendations that address the "root causes" of migration, protect the right of persons not to migrate, and allow them to remain in their home countries under conditions of peace and economic opportunity. The bishops have written to advance principles of equitable trade in the context of pending trade agreements. The bishops have also supported the ratification of the Arms Trade Treaty, which will regulate international arms trafficking, and have urged that peaceful development, rather than military assistance, be the focus of U.S. aid under the Mérida Initiative and other assistance programs.

For information: Contact Kevin Appleby, Director of Migration Policy, at 202-541-3074, kappleby@usccb.org, or Richard Coll, Foreign Policy Advisor, Office of International Justice and Peace, (202) 541-3153, rcoll@usccb.org.