



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

Background on Root Causes of Migration to U.S. September 2015

There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they left behind, without enjoying any legal protections whatsoever. Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world.

*–Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, May 24, 2015*

BACKGROUND

Since 2011, the United States has seen an unprecedented increase in the number of 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 (USCCB) visited Central America in November 2013 and June 2014, and a third delegation travelled to Mexico in June 2015. They found a series of interrelated factors, a “perfect storm” of root causes, has coalesced to create this dramatic increase in migration. Push factors include violence exacerbated by gangs and the drug trade; unemployment; lack of access to quality education, and the resulting inability for individuals to support their families in their home countries/local communities. The desire to reunify with family in the United States also has contributed to this increase in migration. Many of these migrants face violence and danger as they travel from Central America through Mexico to the United States. In all these countries, free trade agreements with the United States have harmed local farmers and led to worsening labor conditions, as well as in Mexico.

USCCB POSITION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Root Causes and their Policy Consequences: As the U.S. bishops 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 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 dignified lives 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, USCCB promotes the following policy recommendations for adoption by the U.S. government:

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 poorer countries in their ability 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 and by ensuring there is a safety-net in sectors that would be adversely affected by the agreements. Trade agreements 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 expand its partnerships with local governments, private sector, and civil society to identify and develop public policy innovations in the region that can substantively impact poverty reduction, social inclusion and disaster risk reduction. Assistance should focus more on economic development, including investments in health, education and job creation, and less on security and weapons.

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 Americans without advanced skills. Investments in health, housing and education must be improved to provide enhanced employment opportunities.

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 foster 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. As Pope Francis has noted in *Laudato Si'*, economic development and opportunity must be fostered in a context that preserves and protects the environment. U.S. government trade and assistance policies must foster the protection of environmental justice and human health.

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, of curbing corruption at every level, and of curtailing the arms trade and human trafficking, as well as the resultant violence. In addition, the U.S. government, local authorities and religious and private institutions in our country must recognize the insatiable demand for drugs in our nation, and develop policies and programs to combat such use.

USCCB has advanced principles of equitable trade related to the Trans Pacific Partnership and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership agreements, presently being considered by U.S. Trade Representative. The bishops have supported the ratification of the Arms Trade Treaty to regulate international arms trafficking, and have urged that peaceful development, rather than military spending, be the focus of U.S. aid under the Mérida Initiative and other assistance programs.

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