

## **MIGRATION, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND POVERTY**

Professionally my life as a Jesuit has moved back and forth from policy and direct service work in the area of migration refugees and immigration to academic teaching and research work on global migration.

I did this as head of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops Office of Migration and Refugee Services and then as Director of the Jesuit Refugee Service USA as well as the Social and International Ministry Office for the American Jesuits. I also taught and did research at the Refugee Studies Center of Oxford University for 4 years.

I shall draw on both those career areas – academic and operational experience for my talk today. I would like to explore the relationship between poverty, migration and development particularly from a perspective of Catholic Social Teaching.

About 7 years ago I was invited to join the Holy See delegation for the high level dialogue on migration convened by the UN Secretary General. For hours I listened as one foreign minister after another stood at the podium in the General Assembly complaining about the negative impact of migrants and refugees on their individual countries both poor countries and rich countries. Every government seemed to have problems with migrants. When the Nuncio took to the podium he spoke of migrants as human persons with God given dignity and rights. He pointed out that they come bearing many gifts – such as their strong family values, their cultural richness, even their food, and how their children can help to off - set the seriously declining birth rate in most economically developed countries. Migrants of all types, of course, face terrible challenges in rooting themselves up from their homelands and they do often bring difficult challenges to the societies in which they try to resettle. But the catholic perspective is to remember the words of Jesus urging us to welcome the stranger. Our first response to migration should be positive not negative attitudes while always protecting the social conditions that allow human beings to flourish in our societies.

So what is the connection between development migration and poverty?

Let me start with poverty and I will begin with a statement that might surprise you.

We often make the assumption that escaping from extreme poverty is what generates the most migration. But if that were true then we should see the greatest migration from the poorest countries but that is not the case. Research has shown that people living in extreme poverty migrate the least. In order to migrate you need money or at least some form of social capital to facilitate the journey. In some areas of the world smugglers are even called “facilitators” .

I once helped a young girl I found being detained in the Los Angeles juvenile facility. Her Chinese family had to pay the smugglers 25,000 dollars to get her into the United States illegally.

Currently there are over 60 thousand of unaccompanied children in the United States who entered without authorization and unaccompanied by a parent or adult. I am told that to smuggle one child up from central America costs the family at least 5,000 per child and thousands more if they want special protections for their children. That amount might represent a family's life savings but my point is that these families do have life savings unlike the poorest of the poor.

Please note that I am not saying that the poor do not migrate. They do but they are normally not the poorest of the poor around the world. So the connection between poverty and migration is complex. There is no question that many migrants around the world migrate in order to make more money and lead a better life. But I say it is complicated because research shows that their motivations are always mixed: they might feel that they cannot develop their full human potential because of social conditions in their home countries; those social conditions might include violence, persecution, poor education for their children. Uprooting and leaving your culture, your extended family, leaving your home behind can often be traumatic. So the decision to migrate is not simply about making more money.

But money is important and I would like to offer two distinct global phenomena as concrete examples.

The first example is the phenomenon of remittances - this is the money migrants earn in countries and then send back to their families who stayed behind.

I will use the example of migration to the United States because we are truly a nation of immigrants, immigrant labor was key to our economic development. Yes we do have indigenous peoples, the native Americans, but they too migrated here from other places. In general the United States has been very successful at integrating immigrants into American life. But historically there have been periods in U.S. history where there were severely high levels of anti-immigration. We are in one of those periods today. Even though there exists bipartisan understanding in Washington that our immigration system is broken, immigration reform has stalled because anti-immigration groups are particularly upset by the large numbers of illegal immigrants living in the United States and the lack of security on our southern border.

Since the early 1990's we have been taking in approximately 1 million legal immigrants a year plus 50,000 - 70,000 refugees a year. On top of that large number of legal immigrants and refugees, nearly one million undocumented immigrants have been entering every year although currently the numbers seem to be in decline. Some come legally with a Visa and then overstay the Visa. Others sneak into the country without authorization.

Returning to the issue of money and migration, I will concentrate as examples the remittances being sent back to central American nations of El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala from the United States. Remittances around the world have reached an enormous level. The world bank projects that global remittances will soon reach half a trillion dollars a year.

Most of the immigration into the United States right now is coming from Mexico but if you take the 3 poor countries South of Mexico, well over 10 billion dollars a year is being sent back to those three countries by migrants. Remittances are now 17% of the gross domestic product of Honduras, 16% of the GDP of El Salvador and 10 % of the GDP in Guatemala. The total amount of remittances outstrips all foreign aid and all foreign direct investments combined.

Because this money is sent directly to families it avoids governmental corruption and bureaucratic red tape. It enables families to buy food, housing clothing, education and health care. The money mostly goes into consuming things so it is in general good for the very local economy. I know some Salvadoran immigrant workers around Washington DC from the same town in El Salvador who have collaborated with each other to send remittances for the purpose of building a school for the whole village and better water sanitation. Such a project is a good example of working for what the catholic teaching would call the common good.

But there are serious problems with remittances not just in central America but globally. This money sent back to families usually is spent on consumption: buying food, clothes, improving a house, educational fees and health care. While meeting those needs is immediate and important and the money probably does support local businesses, the remittances generally are not being used for projects that would provide long term employment and sustainable economic development. In fact the evidence is weak that the 10 billion a year being sent back to central America by the migrants living in the USA has had any effect on the countries' economic development. Efforts are underway to leverage remittances and diaspora savings for development goals.

The Dodd Frank act which the U.S. Congress passed in 2010 in response to the financial crisis created a financial consumer protection bureau which has made it easier and cheaper for migrants to send money back to their families. It is the first time the remittance process has been regulated in the United States. This is important because after the migrants have sent their monthly checks back to their families and pay for the cost of the money transfer, they must live in the U.S. on even less money. So remittances make them poorer.

Complicating the problem President Obama has dramatically increased the number of deportations of unauthorized migrants mostly from Mexico and central America. 368,000 people were sent home last year. Even more are being deported this year. Ultimately President Obama has deported more migrants than any other U.S. President. This puts huge strains especially on the smaller countries. Jobs are limited and reintegration is often non existent. The youth being

deported because of criminal offenses often end up in violent gangs that are wreaking havoc in all three countries.

Because almost one out of seven people in the world today are either internal migrants or transnational migrants there is I think a growing perception that migration is important for the global common good. I note the recent creation of what is called the knowledge partnership on migration and development (KNOMAD) is producing a guide book on migration data and its connections with development.

There are calls after last year's UN high level dialogue on migration and development for recognizing explicitly that migration be part of the post 2015 development agenda. This is a recommendation that the church could and should strongly support.

I should also like to point out that aside from development, remittances could have a major role to play in emergency humanitarian assistance. Look at the Syrian refugee crisis with more than 2.5 million Syrians living in neighboring countries. International calls for assistance has only brought in 14% of what is needed. Lowering the cost of money transfers to Syrians in Jordan or Turkey by Syrians in the international Syrian diaspora could help these refugees.

For those internally displaced in side Syria the Syrian government has been deliberately blocking remittance inflows saying remittances would be used to support the rebel terror groups.

Now I would like to turn to a connected but quite different migration issue: unaccompanied child migrants.

Around the world there has been a startling rise in the number of children under the age of 18 trying to migrate into other countries travelling without an adult family member parent or adult caregiver more than 25,000 child asylum applications have been filed this year in 77 countries and many children do not file for asylum .

When I was running the US Bishops Office for Migration and Refugee Services we were used to dealing with around 5000 children entering the USA every year. Right now this year 66,000 have entered the country I recently visited a facility in Chicago where I saw children as young as 4 years old. Mostly from those same 3 countries I used as examples for remittances: Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

Why are they coming? The growing numbers may have been triggered by President Obama's announcement a couple years ago that he was giving deferred action status to childhood arrivals (DACA - see post scriptum). That is he deferred deportation to persons brought in to the USA illegally by parents when they were still children. They have been given authorization to work, deferred any deportation proceeding and in most states they can qualify for drivers licenses. This action by the President may have sent a mistaken message to central Americans that if they sent

their children to the USA the children too would be given some kind of status that allowed them to stay.

But I think the larger answer to the question of why this is happening lies in the enormous violence that is ripping through all three countries right now. Much of the violence comes from gangs often linked to the drug cartels. Young people often find themselves attacked by gangs and so their families want them to seek a safer country. In all 3 countries there is a great deal of internal displacement because of the violence. Unless the violence is dealt with the child migration is unlikely to end.

My friend, the highly competent Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Holy See's Nuncio to the United Nations in Geneva told the UN human rights council in June 2014 that "children on the move constitute a humanitarian emergency that calls for immediate remedies".

From a catholic perspective what remedies should we suggest? Our focus and starting point for social problems should always be the human person - in this case the young person. Too often the children primarily are seen through the eyes of immigration law or border enforcement or politics or as an economic problem or even as a trafficking victim when in fact they need to be seen primarily as children. As children they are by virtue of their age, level of mental or physical development, more vulnerable than other migrants. Although it is highly complex this child centric approach makes the most sense. The first question to ask is what is in the best interests of the child? Impossible to answer that question without answering many other questions: such as who are the children? How old are they? Do they speak any English? Why are they here? Who is responsible for protecting them? What role did violence, including domestic violence play in their decision or family decision to migrate? Who should make the decisions around what is in the best interests of the child?

Much of the money being paid to smugglers to bring the child to the USA is probably coming from the remittances being sent by family members already inside the USA. So you see once again how big a role remittances play even in the situation of unaccompanied minors. We estimate that 65%-70% of the children have a relative in the USA. 4.5 million immigrants in the USA are mixed status. That is there is one part of their family who is undocumented and another part with legal citizenship. I would not be surprised to find out that parents here are sending for the children they left behind with grandparents in order to protect the young ones from their violent environment in the home country. And they are using remittances to hire the smugglers. Whether the children will qualify for refugee status is another matter. Processing for asylum status is difficult and there is a huge waiting line of people who have applied for asylum in the USA. It often takes many years, so there is talk of giving most of children some form of humanitarian parole, a way of letting them legally stay in the USA. So many children managing to cross the border has deeply exposed the weaknesses in the US border control system despite all the money and man power that has already been spent on that southern border.

Ultimately the answer to the unaccompanied child migrants is to unite them with their families and keeping families together. If the U.S. Government decides to send them back to their home countries there needs to be a national international and regional effort to control the violent gangs, the criminal drug rings and bring peace and security and jobs to these countries. It should be the first step in any development aid program. The countries on their own are simply unable to cope with the problems they face. They need help. Regional countries like the USA, Canada, Panama and Mexico should show more solidarity with their neighbors. If they do not step up then we will see more migration crises on all our borders.

Post scriptum:

The phenomenon of migration by its very nature is always changing. Several months after the conclusion of the September 2014 FCAPP conference at Fordham university in New York City, President Obama gave a very brief beautifully scripted oration stressing the key role immigration has played in U.S. history and how today's migrants contribute to the life of the country. Without giving specific details he confirmed his intention to take executive action to expand his previous initiative of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) which will give temporary legal status to immigrants brought to the USA when they children, no matter how old they are today. This deffered action could be renewed every 3 years. The number of immigrants eligible could be 4 million. His bold action, without the support of the U.S. congress, could further polarize the American public and it may make fundamental long range changes to the U.S. immigration system even more difficult.