

Looking at Root Causes: Why do Immigrants Come to the U.S.?

“We must never forget that many immigrants come to this country in desperate circumstances. Some have fled political persecution, war, and economic devastation . . . Others have wagered on finding a better life in this country in the face of economic desperation at home. As Pope John Paul II has noted, ‘In many regions of the world today people live in tragic situations of instability and uncertainty. It does not come as a surprise that in such contexts the poor and the destitute make plans to escape, to seek a new land that can offer them bread, dignity and peace. This is the migration of the desperate. . .’”

U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity*, Nov. 15, 2000

There are 60 countries in today’s world that are poorer than they were thirty years ago. A fifth of the world’s population (1.2 billion people) lives on less than \$1 per day and almost half the world’s population, or 2.8 billion people, live on less than \$2 a day. Every second, a child dies of malnutrition. Economic injustice still plagues most of the world, providing a strong impetus for immigration. Given this situation, any true “solution” to illegal immigration to the U.S. must take into account the root causes of the poverty from which many immigrants are trying to escape.

An Unjust Trading System

The poorest countries of the world account for only 0.4 percent of international trade, yet they lose an estimated \$700 billion a year due to unfair trade rules. The U.S. and other developed countries are currently pursuing “free trade” agreements with many developing countries. Developing countries, which often utilize higher levels of tariffs and taxes on incoming goods in order to gather revenue for their governments, are often forced to eliminate these tariffs and taxes as part of free trade agreements. Yet, many people concerned with poverty are pointing to statistics that show that unregulated, “free” trade primarily benefits wealthy corporations and wealthy countries; poverty is increasing around the world despite increased free trade. They point to the fact that the gap between the rich and the poor has increased under free trade: the median income of the richest 10 percent is 122 times higher than the poorest 10 percent. From the perspective of Catholic Social Teaching, this is not authentic human development for all groups of people.

One of the most unjust aspects of the trade system is the use of agricultural subsidies by the U.S. and the EU. The U.S. provides hundreds of billions of dollars of agricultural subsidies, most of which goes to a few large agribusinesses who control most of the agricultural production in the U.S. This allows agricultural production to occur en masse and to knock smaller competitors - in the U.S. and in developing countries - out of business.

The Failure of the “Washington Consensus”

In the 1980s and 1990s, the international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, promoted a set of policies called the “Washington Consensus.” Many developing countries were pressured to liberalize trade and the financial sector, cut back on social spending, and privatize services that were run by the state.

Most countries, for example, those in Latin America, followed the recommended policies. Unfortunately, economic growth rates were generally better before the changes than after, and the region remains very poor. Many experts agree that this was a major setback for Latin America. Unfortunately, some of the same policies are still being recommended by the financial institutions.

“It is evident that the principle of free trade, by itself, is no longer adequate for regulating international agreements. It certainly can work when both parties are about equal economically; in such cases it stimulates progress and rewards effort. That is why industrially developed nations see an element of justice in this principle. But the case is quite different when the nations involved are far from equal . . . (T)rade relations can no longer be based solely on the principle of free, unchecked competition.”

Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, #58-59



The Continuing Debt Crisis

Despite recent initiatives to reduce the debt of poor countries, such as the Heavily-Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) Initiative and the Multi-lateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI), dozens of countries have still not received relief and are still enslaved to debt. High levels of debt hurt the poor because the money that governments must spend on paying interest on debts takes valuable resources away from much-needed social services in poor countries.

According to Jubilee USA, debt slavery is foreign aid in reverse--for every dollar sent to the poorest countries in aid, \$1.30 flows back to lenders in debt interest. Additional debt forgiveness is needed to help alleviate poverty in these countries.

Insufficient Development Aid

In 1970, at the UN General Assembly, developed country governments pledged to devote 0.7% of their Gross National Income (GNI) on Official Development Assistance (ODA) by the mid-1970s.

However, none of the developed country donors reached this goal. Instead of 0.7%, the amount of aid has been around 0.2 to 0.4%, some \$100 billion short. The U.S. has fallen short even worse than other developed countries, allocating just 0.22% of its GNI to ODA. (Compare this to: Norway-0.93%, Denmark-0.81%, Sweden-0.92%, Austria-0.52%, UK-0.48%, France-0.47%, and Canada-0.34%.)

In 2005, the European Union pledged to spend 0.56% of GNI on poverty reduction by 2010, and 0.7% by 2015. People concerned about global poverty are calling the U.S. to take similar action.

Case Study: At the Root of Immigration

“As a volunteer in Duran, Ecuador, I worked with a ‘scavenger’ community which subsisted off a garbage dump. Alongside diving vultures, emaciated cows, and a thick wall of flies and insects, adults and children dug through rotting trash with their bare hands. They were trying to find tin, metal, wood, plastic, glass-anything-they could sell for money to buy food. Many of these people had no other choice: in a country with high unemployment and very few opportunities, this became the way of life for many people. Many children in the school where I taught had skin covered with diseases like scabies and impetigo. They were often hungry and had trouble concentrating. Although they were forced to live like animals, they were beautiful, loving, and so generous.

One day, when my volunteer term was nearing an end, Monica, a wonderful, dynamic, loving, woman who had been voted ‘Mother of the Year’ by the community, pulled me aside. She grasped me by the arms and looked desparately into my eyes. She said to me, ‘Please, if you can, if there’s any way you can, take my son with you when you go back to the U.S. I love him so much. But there is nothing for him here. If he stays, he will only live like me, in this dump.’ My heart almost broke: she loved her son so much and conditions here were so terrible, that she was willing to sacrifice her motherhood. It was in that moment that I truly understand the ‘push’ factors of immigration. In Monica’s desparation, I saw why people come.”

- A former volunteer with Rostro de Cristo (Face of Christ)

Prayer to Change Our Hearts, Our Policies

Undocumented persons among us are often accused of breaking the law. Instead, it is our poverty-producing policies which have broken the law of human dignity. *Change our hearts and our policies, O God.*

Our leaders sometimes see these persons as a burden. Yet, if we came from a life without opportunities, wouldn't we do the same? *Change our hearts and our policies, O God.*

We long for a more just world, where families need not be separated for lack of opportunity. Inspire us to challenge the systems and structures that perpetuate poverty. *Change our hearts and our policies, O God.*

Amen.

- prayer by Jill Rauh

