Migration has become a defining issue in almost all countries in Europe and Central Asia, and policymakers are looking for possible responses. Their significance for the future of economies and societies in the region may well far outweigh their current numbers. Migration, both regular and irregular, is one of the main issues to be discussed at the Seventh European Regional Meeting of the ILO in Budapest, 14-18 February.

Migrant workers are increasingly in demand, not only for high-skilled information technology and professional jobs, but also for many of the low-paid, less-skilled jobs in agriculture, cleaning and maintenance, construction, domestic service and health care. Migrants are often relegated to the “three D” – dirty, dangerous, and degrading – jobs which national workers reject or are not available for.

Demographic trends are prompting a reconsideration of migration policies almost everywhere. The cross-border movement of workers enables countries with labour shortages to raise their standard of living beyond what would otherwise have been expected.

Wide held fears in receiving countries, that an influx of low-skilled migrant workers will create downward pressures on wages and employment levels, have been shown to have almost no empirical foundation. Indeed, in most cases, migrant workers, as well as the enterprises set up by migrants, have a positive effect on the host country’s economy.

Political changes, and in some cases the redrawing of borders in Europe and Central Asia, have facilitated migration, both regular and irregular, on the Continent. While broad differences in per capita incomes clearly lead to migration, irregular migration is also stimulated by the excess demand in Europe for unskilled labour and the lack of legal channels to meet such demand.

Equal treatment between regular immigrant and national workers is established in law in numerous countries in the region. However, while protection against discrimination and in relation to wages normally covers all workers, irregular migrants are reluctant to denounce violations or to join trade unions for fear of retaliatory dismissal and deportation.

The global challenge today is to forge the policies and the means to regulate and manage migration, and ensure that it contributes positively to development of both home and host societies and to the well being of migrants themselves.

Facts

- The number of economically active migrants in Europe and Central Asia is estimated to be 26.5 million, or about 4 per cent of the total workforce.
- Of this total, between 10 and 15 per cent are in an irregular situation. Of the 22 million foreign nationals resident in Western Europe in 2000, around 3.3 million were in an irregular situation, while a figure of 5 million has been quoted for the Russian Federation.
- In the case of Eastern Europe, most migration flows are to the Russian Federation from Ukraine (36 per cent), Kazakhstan (12.6 per cent), Azerbaijan (3.6 per cent) and other CIS countries, and from China (3.1 per cent).
- In Western Europe, the origins of migration flows are more varied. For example, of the 7.3 million foreign nationals in Germany, most are from Turkey (2 million) followed by the formerly 15 EU countries (1.85 million).
- In Italy, migrants from other EU countries account for only 11 per cent of foreign nationals, compared with 30 per cent from North African countries and Albania, and over 27 per cent from Asia.
- Of the 1.3 million foreigners in the United Kingdom, around one-third are from the EU, 11 per cent from Asia and 6 per cent from the United States.
- In 2003, ten Western European nations already had higher mortality rates than birth rates. Net migration was positive in a great majority of these countries.
The role of the social partners

In Ireland, an Anti-Racist Workplace Week is held annually in collaboration with employers’ and workers’ organizations, to reflect cultural diversity and prevent racism. In 2002, the theme of the week was migrant workers.

In the Czech Republic, workers’ and employers’ groups are involved in a common project to analyse the working conditions of migrant workers, with emphasis on discrimination, and to improve the skills of foreigners through targeted educational programmes.

In the Netherlands, the Dutch Confederation of Trade Unions (FNV) opened membership to undocumented migrant workers in 2000. In Switzerland, unions have worked together with the movement of undocumented workers – “sans papiers” – and have obtained some positive results in terms of legalization of the status of a number of undocumented migrant workers.

The role of the ILO

Since its establishment in 1919, the ILO has worked to develop an international consensus on regulating labour migration and on protecting workers employed outside their home countries. Such consensus is essential because these workers are at the mercy of the host country’s laws and may not be protected by the laws of their home country. The ILO sets standards, assists member States in formulating their policies, and enhances understanding of the impact of migration policies through research and training. The ILO works for safe and constructive migration in three main arenas:

Building the knowledge base, to address migration in the age of globalization. Key research themes concern the costs and consequences of “brain drain”, the impact and productive uses of remittances, conditions of work for migrant workers, measuring discrimination and finding remedies to it, and exploring effective ways of ending human trafficking. The ILO is expanding its online International Labour Migration (ILM) database to provide current data on migrant worker flows and characteristics; currently some 80 countries provide data.

Enhancing good governance of international labour migration, by developing policy with governments, employers and trade unions at conferences and regional seminars, and through direct cooperation. Trade unions – as representatives of the work force – and employers, are key partners in making viable policy and administration on labour migration. Other ILO activities include providing technical advice to governments and training officials of government agencies, and employers’ and workers’ organizations.

Advancing human rights and decent work for migrants, by promoting the adoption and implementation of international norms. The ILO also encourages anti-discrimination activities by governments, and workers’ and employers’ groups. It promotes actions which benefit high-risk groups, such as victims of trafficking and migrant domestic workers, and encourages labour inspection to enforce minimum decent working conditions in sectors where migrants are vulnerable to abuse.

For more information:
www.ilo.org/migrant

Relevant Conventions

ILO Convention on Migration for Employment, 1949 (No. 97)
ILO Convention on Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions), 1975 (No. 143)
1990 International Convention for the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families