

Giving a fair deal to the world's 86 million migrant workers

Across the world, millions of people are on the move – doing jobs ranging from manual labour such as harvesting to high-skilled computer programming. Combined, their numbers with their dependents would equal the fifth most populous country on the planet. And their numbers are likely to increase, according to the ILO. Its Governing Body recently authorized the Director-General to publish its **Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration**, which is part of a Plan of Action for migrant workers agreed by ILO constituents at the International Labour Conference in 2004. Furthermore, an **OSCE-IOM-ILO Handbook** ^{*}, which aims for better management of labour migration flows in countries of origin and destination, was launched today at the 14th OSCE Economic Forum in Prague. ILO Online spoke with Ibrahim Awad, Director of the ILO's International Migration Programme.

ILO Online: How can the new OSCE-IOM-ILO Handbook help countries to deal with labour migration flows?

Ibrahim Awad: The Handbook highlights effective labour migration policies and practices by using experiences from OSCE and ILO member countries. It discusses issues affecting labour migration policy, including the protection of migrant workers, benefits of organized labour migration, effective administration of labour migration, foreign worker admission policies, post-admission policies, irregular labour migration and inter-state cooperation.

The principal objective of the Handbook is to assist member States, particularly those in the OSCE area, in their efforts to develop policy solutions and approaches for better management of labour migration and labour migration flows in countries of both origin and destination. It has been prepared primarily for use by decision-makers and labour migration practitioners in the OSCE area and in countries served by the IOM and ILO.

ILO Online: Why did the ILO recently adopt a Plan of Action on migrant workers?

Ibrahim Awad: Migration is one of the most contentious issues facing the world today. This plan of action protects the rights of workers in one of the most vulnerable sectors. It's a major achievement that serves as a milestone for the future. The action plan represents a historic consensus among our tripartite partners the world over. Never before have so many countries come together to agree on how to address these issues.

Why is this important? Because today there more migrant workers than ever before. Their contributions are more and more vital to stabilizing labour markets, creating jobs and achieving economic progress, North and South. However, as the International Labour Conference found, many migrants face exploitation and abuse in the form of low wages, poor working conditions, lack of social protection, denial of

workers' rights and discrimination. On the other hand, migrants send huge amounts of remittances – estimated last year at US\$160 billion through official mechanisms, including US\$250 billion through informal channels – back to their home countries. The money is used to improve living standards, fight poverty, feed families and provide education and schooling. All this contributes to improving human capital, a vital contribution to development at home. That's why we need to be there to help make sure that these migrants get a fair deal.

ILO Online: What is the Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration?

Ibrahim Awad: The Multilateral Framework was proposed by ILO constituents at the 2004 International Labour Conference. It is a unique compilation of principles, guidelines and best practices to serve as a toolkit to assist constituents in developing and improving labour migration policies. Its fundamental purpose is to help governments and social partners achieve effective migration management and protection of migrant workers, as well as to enhance the contribution of labour migration towards development. It was adopted last November by a Tripartite Meeting of Experts held in Geneva. The Framework contains 15 principles which relate to, among other things, decent work, means for international cooperation, the protection of migrant workers, management of labour migration, social integration and inclusion and labour migration and development.

ILO Online: How will these principles be implemented?

Ibrahim Awad: Under each principle, guidelines have been elaborated to help put them into practice. These guidelines are based on already-existing good practices by governments, employers and trade unions around the world. Many countries are today asking ILO for guidance on how to improve or update their regulation of these increasingly complex issues. The ILO has been asked to expand its advisory services and technical cooperation to help member States and social partners put these principles into practice.

ILO Online: What else can the ILO do to give a fair deal to migrant workers?

Ibrahim Awad: The effective management of labour migration has to include a number of key elements. In the first place, migration policy has to be consistent with labour market conditions and realities. These policies need to be based on common international standards to ensure cooperation and accountability. Wider ratification of the ILO Conventions on migration for employment and the UN convention on migrant workers is essential, including obtaining better cooperation between origin and host countries.

Migration policy has to be based on broad public support, which is most effectively obtained through extensive social dialogue between governments, employers and workers. Measures are needed to regulate recruitment and prevent trafficking, while promoting decent work and ensuring that migrant workers are covered by national labour laws and social security schemes. Policies also need to be adopted to facilitate the integration of immigrant workers and combat discrimination.

The ILO has convened expert meetings and asked member States to contribute best practices for inclusion in the guidelines which will be disseminated through ILO technical cooperation activities, especially those aimed at enhancing capacities of newly emerging migration countries.

ILO Online: What can the countries of origin do to reduce emigration pressure?

Ibrahim Awad: As the ILO Director-General says, if you look at globalization from a people's (migrant's) point of view, its single biggest failure is its inability to create jobs where people live. When it comes to reducing emigration pressure and protecting nationals who seek employment abroad, countries of origin also have an important role to play. On the one hand, they can improve employment prospects in their own countries by giving high priority to employment promotion and decent work in their development strategies. On the other hand, they can supervise recruitment, facilitate remittance transfer, promote the productive investment of migrants' savings and encourage the return and transfer of know-how.

The governments of the countries concerned have sought the cooperative management of migration through bilateral agreements with destination countries. Trade unions have also taken initiatives, defending and organizing this particularly vulnerable category of workers.

ILO Online: What is the main challenge in labour migration policies today?

Ibrahim Awad: The biggest challenge is to ensure access to regular, legal channels for labour migration, and thus prevent abuse, exploitation and trafficking. Furthermore, countries which have policies that prevent discrimination and allow for better integration of migrant workers are much more successful in gaining full and productive participation in the labour market. To protect migrant workers' rights and maximize the positive effects of migration, the answer is not stricter policing but better policies.

^{*/} *Handbook on establishing effective labour migration policies in countries of origin and destination.* Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), International Organization for Migration (IOM), International Labour Office. Vienna/Geneva 2006.