

Facing Up to the Challenge: *Migrants in the Quagmire of the Crisis*

The financial crisis which started in 2006 with the burst of housing bubble in the US and its open manifestation in 2008 will even be worse and felt in 2009 as predicted by economic experts. In fact the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) predicts a sharp rise of unemployment in its member countries which include most of the countries in Europe and North America, Korea, Australia, Japan and New Zealand. This will be the scenario for the next two years.

Meanwhile in the policy briefing of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) for 2009, the financial impact on migration might result to a very precarious situation for migrant workers, such as losses of jobs, worsening working conditions, reduction of wages and the like.

This is the situation migrants and the service providers face at least for the next two years. The worsening conditions of migrants will definitely bring about new problems as consequence of the financial crisis besetting the entire world.

The new dangerous thrust being peddled in the last Global Forum on Migration and Development held in Manila, Philippines in October of 2008, the centerpiece of the

forum is on how to make use of migration as a tool for development. The Forum launched by governments of both sending and receiving countries and sponsored by OECD and the World Bank added in their discussions the human rights of migrant workers. But all migrants knew very well that it is just mere words and almost no actions at all.

In the coming GFMD 2009 in Greece, it is more direct. They are already discussing on how migration can help in the bailing out from this economic crisis. This is a very dangerous thrust to tread. As what the UN special rapporteur on migration and human rights said in the last GFMD, *"This is very important to point out because this notion that the international migrant workers have some responsibility in the shaping of conditions of economic development of their countries of origin will warrant that it is behind the notion that somehow governments of their countries of origin have certain rights to determine what should be the destinations of the remittances that are the result of works of international migrants.... So the migrants will be to blame in any conditions of underdevelopment."*

The danger lies on the fact that many migrants are being retrenched from their jobs or their salary is being reduced to

the barest minimum. So in order to bail out the economy from the recession, migrant workers left behind to continue working will be squeezed to death in order for the companies to gain profit. The rise of grave exploitation is expected to rise if GFMD will pursue their desire to use migrant workers to surmount the crisis.

In some countries, there is already strong demand to stop employing expatriates so as to avert the increasing unemployment rate.

These indeed are challenges that service providers will face in this new situation. Concretely, the IOM indentified in their 2009 policy brief the following problems migrant workers had to contend with. To quote in the paper:

There is no concrete evidence available yet on the impact of the global financial crisis on migration, but the following largely negative effects have already been observed or are likely to occur:

Job losses, especially in construction, manufacturing, finance, services, retail and tourism, thus affecting migrants in these sectors.

a) Possible reductions in wages and
Crisis, pls. go to p. 2

Crisis, pls. from p. 1

poorer conditions in the workplace as companies and employers seek to make savings, as well as cuts in social services provision, impacting on migrants' quality of life and health.

b) The risk of discrimination and xenophobia as migrants are mistakenly perceived as taking the jobs of local workers particularly in low-skilled sectors of the labour market.

c) The return of unemployed migrants to countries of origin (or regions of origin in the case of internal migration) where they are also likely to face inferior economic conditions (e.g. high unemployment and poverty) and could affect economic and social stability. Such returns, however, are less likely to occur from those countries (e.g. European countries) where migrants (and their families) enjoy secure residence and the safety net of a strong social welfare system.

d) A decline in remittance flows to developing countries as migrants lose their jobs, thus increasing poverty and exacerbating development gaps. However, the World Bank has observed that remittances are expected to remain resilient relative to many other categories of resource flows (e.g. trade, foreign direct investment – FDI) to developing countries and in 2009 are expected to fall by 0.9 per cent and, at worst, by no more than six per cent. Migrants may also be more reluctant to send money through formal channels due to a lack of confidence in the stability of banking systems.

e) Adoption of more restrictive immigration policies to protect the local labour market

and in response to a demand for fewer foreign workers. For example, a reduction in the number of migrants to be admitted for employment has already been announced in some countries (Italy, U.K.) or is under discussion in others (e.g. Australia). In Spain, the Government has introduced financial incentives to encourage unemployed migrants to return home.

f) A reduction in labour migration flows as potential migrants choose to stay home and see out the crisis there.

g) An increase in irregular migration and the strengthening of the informal labour market as unemployed migrants in destination countries seek to work without authorization and as opportunities for regular labour migration decrease resulting in the emigration of more persons from countries of origin more seriously affected by the crisis. An increase in trafficking in human beings is also a possibility.

h) The crisis is expected to impact differently on male and female migrant workers especially in affected sectors of the economy dominated by

one gender (e.g. construction in which male migrant workers predominate).

In Hong Kong, it will be manifested in the following manner:

a) Re-imposition of the levy.

b) Reduction of wages.

c) Increase of contract termination related to practices of unscrupulous recruitment agencies conniving with unscrupulous employers on early termination so as to create a seemingly continues hiring of domestic workers.

d) Actual job losses because employers facing tremendous loss of income.

e) More physical or verbal abuse because of the effect of financial crisis on employers, especially those experiencing big slash in their income but cannot do away with the services of a domestic worker.


f) Increase in revenue generating schemes of both governments of sending and receiving countries.

The current economic crisis we are experiencing is far serious

than the last three decades. It is so because this is also the worst in the last 34 years that hit the US economy. The tendency of the US to reduce the farming out of their production and businesses has direct bearing on migrant workers and as it worsens so with the conditions of migrant workers.

Service providers must prepare themselves so they won't get caught flat-footed in the deluge of migrants seeking assistance.

Both migrants and service providers face challenging times. The services we provide must adapt to new situations. We must clearly explain to migrants what is happening, what is or are the probable cause(s). If we explain to them, we have already done them good service for they must at least be aware and conscious so that they themselves will be prepared.

This is also the time when service providers must come together to unleash and maximize its potentials. The unity that it can foster among them will be very beneficial to its constituents who will be the first one to be hit hard by this grave crisis. 



MFMW Limited conducted a Charity Raffle Draw on 27 December 2008. Various groups like migrant organizations, Churches and individuals in Hong Kong

joined together to help in selling the tickets. The purpose of this activity is to raise funds for the charitable basic services and facilities for the relief of migrant workers in

Hong Kong. The result of the draw was published in local newspapers of Hong Kong.

The winners are the following: 1st prize – 023380, 2nd prize – 020871, 3rd prize – 026715.

For the ten consolation prizes: 030884, 031138, 002151, 001655, 043896, 030444, 003936, 015752, 013716 and 028898. The Raffle Draw was held in Fanny Li Hall of St. John's Cathedral.

The Mission for Migrant Workers would like to thank everyone who helped and made this event possible.



Economy of Life and Justice

Today's economic woes are caused by unregulated market economy. The Bible has something to say about this.

Luke 12:16-21 says, 'He told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years: relax, eat, drink and be merry.'" But God said to him, "You fool. This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared whose will they be?"' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.'

Far from being simply allegorical, the parable is real. There are two conflicting ways of getting food and other goods. The first economy is market economy. In the center of this economy is the logic of accumulation of profit. Its only goal is profit. The Parable of the Rich Grains Merchant illustrates this.

He had such a bumper harvest that he planned to have his old barn torn down to build a much bigger barn to "store his grain and other goods" enough to last him many years. This may be a praiseworthy example of saving for the future. But this can also be an act of hoarding, of creating an artificial shortage, of economic sabotage, of creating scarcity in the midst of plenty.

Prices in a market economy are governed by the law of supply and demand as we all know. The Roman writer Marcus Tullius Cicero (January 3, 106 BC – December 7, 43 BC), writing at the time of Jesus, wrote, "The grain has only a good price in bad harvest; but if the crop is abundant, then the price of grain is bad." Thus by storing his grains during this

tremendously abundant harvest — and I suppose the other land owners did the same — he or their class created (artificial) scarcity in the midst of affluence. The greater the scarcity, the greater the profit. By creating scarcity he profits from the needs of the people. The Book of Proverbs, says, "The people curse those who hold back grain, but a blessing is on the head of those who sell it." (11:26). Hoarding therefore, or creating artificial shortage for profit is, in the eyes of the Bible, a sin against God and one's neighbors.

The same judgment can be said of today. In 2006, the UN reported that more than 800 million people were hungry, and every 5 seconds a child under 10, dies of hunger, when in reality the total food production worldwide was enough to feed 12 billion people. In a world of plenty, millions are dying of hunger. The Parable of the Rich Grains Merchant is a judgment against unregulated market economy, of unbridled capitalism and the current economic catastrophe is the result of this.

Opposed to the market economy is an alternative economy proposed by Jesus (Mt. 6:25-30; Lk 12: 22-27). He speaks of not being anxious about our lives, of what we shall eat or what we shall drink, nor about our bodies, of what we shall put on.

The goal of this economy is not the accumulation of profit but the satisfaction of human needs. In this, Jesus is following the tradition of the social laws of the Torah, of the Law of Moses (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 5.14; Leviticus 25:1-7; Deuteronomy 15:1-18, Leviticus 25:8-55).

The Bible limits market economy in the interest of the poor. The poor are the measure. The starting point of the economy of the Bible is human dignity specially the dignity of the poor. This is the economy of life and justice.

Some two centuries after Jesus, the rabbis codified their interpretations of the Torah. One chapter says, "It is forbidden to hoard grain, vegetables, food like oil, wine and flour" another one says, "It is forbidden for Israel to make money with those things that you need for living like wine, oil and flour."

The implications are staggering. The law of market economy is suspended when it goes against human needs. It means, nobody should earn money from the scarcity of his neighbour, from the needs of his neighbours.

The purpose of life is not the accumulation of wealth — "the things you have prepared whose will they be?" is Jesus' question — but "to do justice" (Micah 6:8) and all human activities must be defined within that framework. There will be enough for everyone, if there is justice. In the heart of this kind of economy is the realization that God is the God of abundance for all. He is the God who sent his Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, that all — not only the taipans and capitalists and bankers and speculators and independent financial advisors — but all — and that includes each one of us — may have life and have it abundantly (Jn. 10:10): not in the hereafter, nor in the there and then, but in the here and now.

In the light of our present predicament, of our anxieties and fears for the future with regards the impending economic doom, we who are in this crossroads of our history and in this threshold of a new tomorrow, have the choice.

Either we continue with the form of economics that has brought us to this abyss, or create a new economy that will allow a life on earth with dignity for all. The choice is ours, whether to continue with the old economy or work together for an economic order that takes care of life.

On 18 December, a joint Christmas celebration organized by St. John's HIV Centre, Mission for Migrant Workers (HK) Society and Bethune House Migrant Women's Refuge was held at the Fanny Li Hall, St. John's Cathedral from 7:00 – 9:00 PM.

Friends, supporters, and volunteers of the three institutions were present. Residents of Bethune House also graced the occasion.

The celebration started with a brief introduction of the services provided by the three institutions. Several guests from the migrants' community took turns in expressing their

Joint Xmas Party 2008



Christmas greetings. There were games and cultural presentations from the different groups. A magician supporter and his son entertained the audience with their tricks.

In the midst of the celebration, food were served and shared by everyone. The celebration ended with everyone exchanging gifts which were one of the highlights of the celebration.

Bethune House is IDT-Asia's Recipient for its Int'l Calling Cards on Valentine's Day

IDT Asia, the regional operating arm of IDT Telecom collaborated with the Mission for Migrant Workers to give a special Valentine treat for the residents-clients at the Bethune House Migrant Women's Refuge (BHMWR). Foreign domestic workers who have temporarily sought shelter at the Bethune House. Each received an international calling card from IDT which allowed them to get in touch with their loved ones back home.

Chip Barton, IDT Asia Pacific Managing Director said, "BHMWR performs a sadly vital role for the migrant worker community, many of whom are IDT Asia's customers. So when hard times come IDT is only too happy to help those who have sought shelter to keep in touch with their loved ones."

"BHMWR provides a refuge, but keeping in touch with family and friends is essential to maintaining people's spirits

in difficult circumstances. IDT is well known to many people here for its trustworthy phonecards, so we appreciate their support, particularly on Valentine's Day when thoughts naturally turn to loved ones" added BHMWR Executive Director Edwina Antonio, .

Tawag Na Plus, Becak and Bintang phonecards cater to the communication needs of Filipino and Indonesian migrant workers and are sold at retail shops in Hong Kong.

Mission For Migrant Workers (MFMW)
St. John's Cathedral, 4 Garden Road,
Central, Hong Kong SAR
CHINA



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Editorial Team

Cynthia Ca. Abdon-Tellez,
 Norman Uy Carnay, Jun
 Tellez, Fr. Dwight dela
 Torre

Contributors

Len Tomas,
 Sol Pillas,
 Patricia Makalinao

Address

St. John's Cathedral,
 4 Garden Road,
 Central, Hong Kong SAR

Tel No. (852) 2522 8264

Fax No. (852) 2526 2894

E-mail

mission@migrants.net

Webpage

<http://www.migrants.net>

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