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Europe must embrace human mobility

On this International Migrants Day, Caritas Europa highlights the indispensable contribution that migrants make to Europe's society and economy. In a new briefing paper, we call on European policymakers to facilitate human mobility and labour migration, while respecting migrant workers' rights and dignity.

“It is high time European policymakers adopt labour migration policies that respect migrants' rights and stop erecting walls and fences. Migrants have always been part of Europe's DNA and the positive contribution of migration to our society – economically as well as socially and culturally – should finally be acknowledged, not least in a context of demographic challenges and severe labour force shortage.”

Maria Nyman, Secretary General of Caritas Europa

Regretfully, policymakers, the media and society at large too often perceive migration negatively, overestimating migrants' presence in Europe, when citizens of non-EU countries represent only 5.3% of the EU's population. Similarly, many migrants too often face mistreatment, privation and violence in their daily lives. Therefore, we call for an alternative approach, which acknowledges the positive contribution of migrants to Europe and promotes mobility and rights.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed us how several sectors, such as agriculture, education, health, care and cleaning, would not be able to function without migrant workers, including those who are undocumented. Research shows they make up 13% of key workers in the EU, and in many countries migrants contribute more in taxes and social contributions than governments spend on their social protection, health and education.

Europe's demographic challenges combined with acute labour forces' shortages puts the welfare and social protection system under pressure and makes the need to facilitate the admission of foreign workers with all types of skills -including low and medium ones- more evident.

While it is important to stress that most entries into the EU occur regularly - with approximately 2.25 to 3 million non-EU nationals coming to the EU annually for work, family reasons or education - nevertheless, regular migration channels to Europe are limited, especially for those who are not highly skilled. In addition, such channels are often marred with bureaucratic obstacles, strict criteria and restricted visa policies, while the right to family life is restricted due to administrative and financial obstacles.

The lack of more regular migration channels coupled with multiple entrance obstacles and a high demand for labour in Europe is a main factor fueling irregular migration. In addition, the precarity of work and residence permits risks pushing people into irregularity and easily leads to exploitation in specific sectors of the workforce.

As demonstrated by our new briefing paper, humane labour migration policies are essential for tackling current labour market challenges. This is why we call on European and national policymakers to expand regular labour migration pathways for all skill levels, adopting policies that put workers' rights and the fight against exploitation at the centre. It is important that migration policies provide efficient administrative procedures and a secure residence permit with solid rights that facilitate social inclusion and family reunification to ensure the full participation of migrants in the country of destination. The interests and needs of the countries of origin should also be at the core of all migration policies to ensure that mobility is beneficial for all countries involved and does not lead to brain drain. Ultimately, we insist that migrants are not economic tools and their rights and dignity should be at the core of all policies.

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About Caritas Europa

Caritas Europa is a network of 49 member organisations in 46 European countries and one of the 7 regions of Caritas Internationalis. Our members assist and provide services to millions of people in need.

Caritas Europa aims at lifting people out of poverty by empowering them and by influencing unjust structures and unfair policies that keep people trapped in positions of disempowerment.