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Sierra Club International Programs: Addressing the Root Causes of Migration

Migration happens when freedom, disaster, economic opportunity, environmental degradation, and desperation are distributed so unevenly across the globe that people are forced to make difficult choices: stay and barely survive, or move and possibly thrive.

Sierra Club founder John Muir, a migrant born in Scotland, once noted that “when we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.” Today, the Sierra Club mirrors that sentiment with multifaceted programs encompassing population issues, human rights, fair trade, and environmentally sustainable development.

Why People Migrate

We are all migrants, who, throughout human history, have moved toward opportunity and away from poverty and oppression.

Migrants today are not unlike migrants of the past. They seek a better life for themselves and their families and share the common values of working hard, building strong communities and valuing faith traditions. In the past, Americans have recognized this and managed migration effectively, while incorporating migrants into the tapestry of the nation.

The pressures to migrate — inequalities in wages, freedom, and opportunity —dissipate over time as their root causes are addressed. Economic and political stability, justice and equality can also reduce the pressure to migrate.



Addressing Root Causes Is the Solution

Most migrants would not choose to leave their homes given reasonable alternatives for the survival of themselves and their family. But disenfranchised people are forced to make difficult choices. To improve people’s lives and reduce migration pressures we must address the root causes while *respecting individual human rights, dignity, and economic aspirations*. U.S. migration policy is divorced from policies on agricultural subsidies, trade, security, international development lending and family planning, all of which have a tremendous impact on the pressure to migrate into the United States.

Increasing Access to Education, Healthcare and Economic Opportunity

Global population growth has far-reaching environmental and social consequences, including migration. At the 1994 U.N. International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), 179 nations—including the United States—met in Cairo, Egypt to address both the challenges of and solutions to population growth, and to grasp the connections among reproductive health, poverty, economic development, and a sustainable environment. The conference adopted a 20-year *Program of Action*, also referred to as the “Cairo Consensus,” which encouraged each participating country to invest in and strive for goals such as universal access to voluntary family planning, reproductive health services, and education for women and girls. When women and men can choose the size and spacing of their families, they tend to have smaller, healthier families. This has a ripple effect that benefits communities socially, economically, and environmentally.

In line with these international goals, the Sierra Club supports the highest levels of funding without restrictions for voluntary international and domestic family planning programs, including the *United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)* and the *United States*

Agency for International Development's (USAID) Family Planning Programs. These programs include assistance for clinics, reproductive health services and education, and maternal and child healthcare. We also work with development, faith-based and environmental organizations to promote sustainable development policy initiatives that address the root causes of environmental degradation, including global poverty and lack of access to basic healthcare.

Today one third of the world's population lives on less than \$1 a day¹, 1.1 billion people lack access to safe drinking water,² and over 200 million couples worldwide would like family planning and safe motherhood services, but are unable to obtain them.³ Although the wealthiest nation in the world, the United States falls behind other nations in our per capita funding for critical reproductive health programs and global poverty alleviation initiatives.

The High Cost of "Free" Trade

The internal dislocations caused by globalization's "race to the bottom" are worsened by trade agreements that facilitate the unsustainable export of natural resources. Fundamentally, "free trade" agreements are a set of rules that enhance the rights of corporations at the expense of what has long been considered to be the prerogative of government: the establishment and *implementation* of laws and regulations in the public interest.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which the Sierra Club strongly opposed because it lacked adequate environmental, health, and worker-safety regulations, has been blamed for pushing more than one million small-scale Mexican farmers off their land since its 1994 implementation. NAFTA allowed cheap, subsidized U.S. corn to flood Mexico's market resulting in a 68% poverty increase during the first eight years of NAFTA.⁴ The dissolution of the agricultural economy in Mexico has resulted in mass migration and the deaths of migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border.

Applying NAFTA on a global scale, the policies of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have encouraged dozens of countries to abandon sustainable domestic development to create a climate attractive to foreign investors. This means accumulating huge

foreign debt, creating millions of low-wage earners and cutting social services and subsidies for basic necessities. The result has been an increase in poverty and economic instability and a decrease in human rights and environmental protections worldwide, directly increasing the pressure to migrate. The Sierra Club wants a trading system different from the corporate "free trade" model. We support strong environmental and health standards in trade agreements and advocate for an alternative model of development that keeps decision-making power vested in the people and their public officials rather than in corporations. It is a model where someone can earn a decent living at home, rather than having to flee their country to survive economically.

Our Role

Sierra Club's international efforts go to the headwaters of migration, promoting environmentally sustainable livelihoods that keep wild lands and families healthy, while holding multinational corporations accountable and keeping trade agreements fair.



As the country's oldest, largest and most influential grassroots environmental organization, the Sierra Club has a long-standing policy that commits us "to addressing the root causes of migration by encouraging sustainability, economic security, human rights, viable ecosystems, and environmentally responsible consumption." Our policy encourages us to tackle the human and environmental tragedies that force people to migrate. It suggests that global population pressures can best be solved by providing all people a decent standard of living and by giving all women access to reproductive healthcare so that they can choose the size and spacing of their families. Sierra Club policy, most importantly, says that we don't want to make one part of the world better off by making another part worse.

For more information

Visit www.sierraclub.org/international

Footnotes

1. "Poverty, Population and Development: Poverty, high fertility, ill health, gender inequity. Reproductive health information and services help break the cycle." UNFPA Annual Report 2002. United Nations Population Fund. 3 June 2008 www.unfpa.org/about/report/2002/2chapter.htm.
2. "Health, Dignity, and Development: What Will It Take? Achieving the Millennium Development Goals." The UN Millennium Project Task Force on Water and Sanitation, Final Report, Abridged Edition. New York: United Nations Millennium Project, 2005. 13.
3. www.unfpa.org/swp/2007/english/chapter_6/social_development.html
4. "Trade Liberalization and the Self-employed in Mexico," Gurleen K. Popli, UNU-WIDER, World Institute for Development Economics Research, January 2008

