# Economic justice: Kenyans trapped by globalization

**The following article, written by Maryknoll Father Frank Breen, first appeared in the March 2005 edition of *Revista Maryknoll* and addresses the fair and sustainable economy theme in the Maryknoll Global Concerns' voter reflection guide. In "Trapped by Globalization," Breen reported on conditions in Export Processing Zones (EPZs) in Kenya, where he served for 29 years. His article highlights the very real effects that U.S. trade policies have on the people with whom missioners live and work. The following is an edited version of the original article.**

On a recent trip to Kenya, where I served as a missioner for 29 years, I met with hundreds of former parishioners. Much to my chagrin, I learned that a dozen women I had known as girls, several of whom I gave school assistance, now work long hours for very low pay in the textile export industry.

Peris Nyagothie was in primary school in Bura-Tana, northeastern Kenya, 20 years ago. She describes her job in Nairobi: "We work from eight to six, six days a week, with a one-hour break for lunch," she says. "Often we work even later, with no overtime pay. Sometimes we are forced to work all night, plus all the next day."

I was not surprised when those exploited workers told me that much of what they produce goes to U.S. markets. Beth Kaloki, a textile worker I first knew as a fourth-grader, says, "We produce for companies such as Jordache and Wal-Mart. Some of the brand names we sew on the clothes are Dockers, Gloria Vanderbilt, JC Penney and Michael Jordan."

Koloki and Nyagothie work in one of Kenya's several Export Processing Zones (EPZ). The zones produce, including electronic goods, solely for the export market.

The Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, passed in the U.S. Congress in 2001, aimed to promote African businesses, provide jobs for African workers and eliminate quotas for U.S. textile imports from those zones. However, Asian investors benefited most from the factories that mushroomed in Kenya. There are now 73 firms, up from 18 in 1998, in the EPZs. Most of them are owned by Asian investors who brought in Asian directors and managers. The factories employ some 35,000 workers, approximately 70 percent of them women, between the ages of 18 and 30, earning from $2 to $2.50 a day.

Nyagothie reports that each row of 40 women in the assembly line has a target of 800 to 1,200 items of clothing per day. Thus, each woman earns about seven to 10 cents for every item, which in turn sells in the United States for $10 to $60. Given Kenya's huge unemployment rate, officially 25 percent, but in fact much higher, one would expect employees to be happy to have jobs. Rather than satisfaction, however, the women express deep bitterness over their plight. "My salary is $52 a month," Nyagothie says. "We have no benefits—no health insurance, no injury compensation, no pension plan. Since we're considered temporary labor, we can be laid off at any time, with no severance pay."

Nyagothie, a single mother, lives with her three-year-old daughter in a 120-square-foot room that she rents for $11 per month. In addition to food, transportation, water and other household expenses, she also has to pay for day care for her daughter. "My job is terrible," she says, "but it's the only work available. If you leave, there are plenty of young women ready to replace you."

There are 90,000 female high school graduates in Kenya every year, and another 100,000 girls who do not go to high school after they finish eighth grade. Companies have no problem finding new workers because labor unions are not allowed in the zones. In 2003, every zone witnessed strikes, often very raucous, but many of the workers were fired and easily replaced.

After a scathing report by the Kenya Human Rights Commission on working conditions in the EPZs, at least one textile firm closed down. A few factories improved conditions, but most did nothing. U.S. multinational companies that buy the retail-ready apparel from these factories are supposed to monitor working conditions, but monitors are often duped by local managers.

Kaloki, like the other women I talked to, says she can't wait until she can quit working in the Athi River EPZ. On average, she explains, women work two to six years in export assembly plants before they quit in frustration.

In March 2008, Breen states that the situation in Kenya with EPZs has changed drastically since 2005. Measured only by pure economic growth (which often ignores the plight of the most disadvantaged citizens), Kenya's economy has improved significantly, with the exception of the period of post-election violence in early 2008. Kenyan women working in factories had started to push for their rights to higher wages, union membership, and freedom from harassment at work. In a "race to the bottom," the majority of EPZ firms simply followed the trend of many transnational corporations and moved their operations to countries where they can cut costs and turn a higher profit. Neighboring countries like Madagascar and Uganda, became new sites for EPZs.

As a result, the transnational corporations benefited, and the workers lost out. The conditions for EPZ workers have only worsened, since in countries like Uganda, wages are lower and restrictions on the formation of labor unions are even more stringent. With the loss of the exploitative but necessary factory jobs, Kenyan women's employment options are even more limited, leaving women like Nyagothie struggling to care for their families. Additionally, male EPZ workers, though more skilled and higher paid, had no guarantee of finding another job when EPZ firms transferred out of the country.

This situation relates very closely to the elections guide policy goal of "chang[ing] restrictive trade policies to allow countries space to meet the needs of local communities, adapt to a future without cheap oil and provide real job opportunities for poor people." Ask your candidates about these issues and keep their responses in mind when you cast your vote in November.

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