

COVID-19 AND MOBILITY

OVERVIEW

- The COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a health crisis. The threat remains the virus: Not people; not migrants, stranded, or displaced persons. The pandemic is borderless; people are affected regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, religion or status.
- And yet, the pandemic is having an unprecedented and devastating impact on migration, human mobility, and displacement, both in terms of regimes for border and migration management, and the situation of all people on the move.
- Migrants are not inherently more vulnerable to, or at heightened risk of, contracting infectious diseases. Rather, it is the conditions in which they migrate, live or work that influence or compound health risks, including access to health services.
- As an immediate impact, travel restrictions and border closures have left thousands of migrants stranded around the world, from labourers to international students, in need of assistance and in often precarious situations.
- The pandemic has further brought to the fore existing inequalities and made rights violations more visible. Migrants, including displaced persons, often fall outside of social safety nets, lack access to basic services to ensure their health and well-being, and experience situations of increased vulnerability. Migrants are also increasingly being rendered as scapegoats and subjected to xenophobia, discrimination and hate crimes.
- Mobile and displaced populations are more likely to reside in overcrowded households, informal dwellings, or even camps. In humanitarian and crisis-impacted contexts specifically, including groups impacted by the adverse effects of climate change and environmental degradation, people in camps or camp-like settings – where capacity, resources and access to services are limited yet humanitarian needs remain – are highly vulnerable to contracting infectious disease, in conditions where viruses can more easily spread. Others may be some of the hardest populations to reach and monitor, yet most ill-equipped to protect themselves against infection.
- Migrants are furthermore likely to be employed in daily-wage, short-term, or precarious work in the informal economy often with limited provision for, or fear of seeking access to, social protection, adequate food, housing, health and social services. Many face increasing situations of loss of employment and wages, health vulnerability and protection risks, exclusion and discrimination. Risks of tensions and conflict between migrants and the communities in which they reside could be further exacerbated due to livelihood collapse or decline as well as increased pressure on basic services.

- Migrants are overrepresented and essential in sectors that have been hardest hit by lockdown and economic uncertainty, including health, construction, agriculture and food production, services, tourism, transport, retail, and many other sectors. At the same time, migrants are a fundamental part of the COVID-19 crisis response as doctors, nurses and other essential caregivers. Sectors traditionally dependent upon a migrant labour force as essential workers are facing critical supply gaps. Crops, for example, are spoiling before they can be picked, running the risk of significantly impacting food supply and value chains, increasing global food insecurity.
- The ILO estimates that 50 per cent of the global labour force could face unemployment and the World Bank forecasts a global 20 per cent reduction in remittances this year due to the pandemic. This economic shortfall will likely translate into fundamental social safety gaps for communities in both countries of origin and destination, often heavily reliant on remittances to cover household essentials, as well as national development.
- Some States have relaxed regulations to take account of the situation, including offering visa extensions, temporary stay, moratoriums on return and extending access to basic services for migrants irrespective of immigration status. Nonetheless, it has become harder for many migrants to remain in compliance with immigration requirements, creating increased risk and vulnerability.
- Facing disruption to travel plans, loss of income, reduced access to support services, illness as a result of the crisis, or visa challenges, many migrants have been pushed into vulnerable or exploitative situations. Families have been separated, others have been detained. Women and girls are at a disproportionate risk to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), abuse and exploitation.
- In the possible long term, this could result in diminished avenues for safe, regular and orderly migration, further exacerbating health vulnerabilities and human security risks, including opportunities for human traffickers and smugglers.
- Migrants provide an immense contribution to societies, and will be essential for the recovery process. Linking migration policy with response, recovery and long-term development planning – in recognition of the important role that migrants play – can mitigate the economic and social impact of COVID-19. If migrants are left behind, however, the health impact of COVID-19, as well as its social and economic consequences for both countries of origin and destination may be more severe and protracted.
- It is crucial that the challenges and opportunities of international migration unite, rather than divide, us. States can turn to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration as a supportive road map to speed up response and recovery efforts and keep the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in sight.
- This pandemic has revealed how none will be safe until all are safe. And this requires a shared and collective interest in the safety and well-being of all.

IOM'S SUPPORT TO THE IMMEDIATE EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND THE SOCIOECONOMIC RECOVERY PROCESS

IOM will support countries of origin, transit and destination as well as migrants, including displaced persons, and the communities in which they live through the provision of ongoing assistance and capacity-building to ensure that the immediate response needs are met and socioeconomic recovery is promoted.

In so doing, IOM will support States and other stakeholders to ensure that responses are legal, proportionate, necessary, non-discriminatory while being based on public health considerations, human rights, and humanitarian and development principles. COVID-19 should not be an excuse to unduly tighten migration policies, restrict access or deliberately worsen conditions faced by migrants. Instead, there is an opportunity to ensure better – and safer – managed migration, while more effectively meeting needs.

1. Priority on saving lives: Upholding the rights of migrants and ensuring access to basic services

Human rights must form the backbone of the response and recovery. Across all of IOM's activities, priority is given to **mainstreaming protection** concerns within the COVID-19 response to **ensure that efforts are rights-based, people-centred, inclusive, do no harm and prioritize the safety, dignity and well-being of assisted populations**. Everyone, everywhere, irrespective of nationality, migration status, ethnicity, faith, age, disabilities, gender identities and more must have access to social services and social protection.

Efforts to support internally displaced persons, vulnerable migrants and community members are needed to respect the rights to humanitarian assistance, health and human rights for all, avoid harmful consequences and hardship, reduce public health risk, as well as enable these groups to contribute to the recovery process.

1.1 IOM areas of support:

- **Inclusion of all migrants and displaced persons in national pandemic preparedness and response plans** and promoting their equitable access to essential services, in the spirit of pursuing Universal Health Coverage and upholding the right to health for all.
- **Provision of immediate assistance and protection to migrants in need**, irrespective of migration status, recognizing that migrants are currently stranded or living in destitute situations because of the pandemic.
- Recognizing the **compounded risks in humanitarian contexts**, including fragile and conflict-affected settings as well as environmental crises, **ensure that migrants in vulnerable situations continue to have access to essential services**, including continuity of ongoing treatments, maternal and child health services, social protection measures and mental health and psychosocial support. This extends to specific measures to avoid the spread of disease in camp-like settings (e.g. provision of critical health, water and sanitation services).

- **Mitigating the risks of exploitation and abuse** in a gender and age-sensitive manner, including sexual and gender-based violence, trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants, and ensuring the protection of children. Where exploitation and abuse has occurred, referral must be ensured to appropriate protection services of competent authorities.
- Supporting **the release of migrants from immigration detention** and identifying suitable alternative, community-based measures, while planning for longer-term rights-based and sustainable solutions.

2. *Facilitating safe mobility in the pandemic response and recovery:*

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken to the core international trade and travel. This is not limited to migrant workers but also affects tourists, businesspersons, students, cross-border trade, as well as free movement and regional integration regimes. The closure of borders has widespread implications, including for future migration dynamics. Where and when travel and mobility resume, additional health requirements will be required from origin, transit and destination countries, applying to a larger and more diverse group of migrants than before the COVID-19 pandemic.

IOM will support governments to adopt innovative, post-COVID-19 measures to facilitate mobility, while ensuring rights-based and protection-centred migration management that is integrated, secure (in line with data privacy), and coordinated, and meets overarching health concerns. Cumulative fragilities stemming from other challenges, such as conflicts and disasters, need to be factored in when designing appropriate responses.

2.1 *IOM areas of support:*

- Increasing preparedness through the provision of **data and analysis on the impact of COVID-19 on population mobility dynamics** at the global, regional and country levels in order to contribute to a more targeted and evidence-based response. IOM will continue monitoring, analysing and reporting on international travel restrictions, including at points of entry, being enacted worldwide, by engaging in population mobility mapping exercises to identify high risk mobility corridors and areas of transmission.
- Support to States to **manage borders in a manner that integrates health and protection considerations**, with human security and other rights-based priorities, to further minimize the risk of disease transmission between countries and within border communities.
- Policy advice, capacity-building assistance and innovative operational support implementing **health assistance, including at points of entry** – pre-departure, during travel/transit, arrival and returns/exit – including direct medical service provision, laboratory and radiology diagnostics, health information management systems for secure and timely data sharing, and coordinated support for referrals to appropriate services.
- Technical assistance to States on **alternatives to return**, including moratoriums, amnesties and temporary visa regimes.
- Supporting **safe and voluntary returns**, including repatriations of stranded migrants and refugee resettlement, when conditions are safe and favourable. Further, to mitigate the negative socioeconomic impact, provide reintegration assistance including, among other, tailored assistance for migrants in vulnerable situations.

- Supporting States on the provision of **regularization policies**, including new pathways for safe and legal migration opportunities.
- Expanding **remote consular and/or processing support**, to ensure the continuation of seasonal or temporary work and enhanced access to available mobility pathways through facilitated immigration and visa procedures.
- Assisting States in **rethinking immigration processes** and programmes to fully integrate holistic migration governance imperatives, including incorporation of safe and accountable technological innovations to facilitate procedures such as e-solutions through mobile apps, online platforms and digitization of the visa process.

3. Preventing xenophobia and fostering inclusion of migrants

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented level of expressions of solidarity and support across different groups within society, regardless of socioeconomic status and background. At the same time, however, it has laid bare instances of discrimination towards migrants, including displaced populations and returning migrants. Stigma, discrimination and xenophobia not only damage social cohesion in the long term, they also jeopardize the safety of migrants and displaced populations and their communities, infringe on their rights, undermine their physical and mental well-being, and the overall safety of the country and community.

In a time of uncertainty and fear linked to the spread of COVID-19, it is critical to maintain international solidarity and community cohesion, and prevent stigmatization, discrimination, xenophobia and hate speech or hate crimes against particular groups, including migrants, during this crisis based on nationality or ethnic origin. States have the responsibility to ensure that these acts are punished and that the victims have access to remedy.

3.1 IOM support:

- **Full inclusion and social cohesion** of migrants and societies through evidence-based public discourse, communication and information campaigns to dispel fears and misconceptions.
- **Expanding risk communication and community engagement activities** to leverage community networks to ensure public health information is communicated in accessible, culturally and linguistically appropriate ways to the most vulnerable, including migrants and displaced populations, regardless of status.
- **Deploying mental health and psychosocial support** services, as well as delivery of psychological first aid and training to front-line health-care staff and other service providers.

4. Ensuring that migrants are a foundational and fundamental part of socioeconomic efforts towards sustainable recovery and development

The COVID-19 crisis is a “wake-up call”, an opportunity to re-think how we do business, and develop strategies for building a better way of working which meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations. Well-governed migration is a transformative pathway for achieving this. Good migration governance is essential for mitigating some of the immediate negative impacts of COVID-19, supporting societies’ socioeconomic recovery and for accelerating progress on sustainable development.

It is critical to ensure that long-term response strategies are rights-based, inclusive and forward-looking, to enable and leverage migrants' contributions to socioeconomic response and recovery. Further, recovery efforts need to support the shift to a green economy and promote the creation of green jobs and sustainable growth; whilst investments for recovery need to target sustainable projects that help the environment.

The response provides an opportunity to ensure that no one is left behind; we must build back better. We must work towards safer, healthier, more sustainable and inclusive mobile societies. IOM will support governments to mainstream migration into response and recovery efforts to mitigate the socioeconomic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and leverage the potential of migration for sustainable development.

4.1 IOM support:

- Identifying and **responding to the barriers** that prevent or make it difficult for migrants to contribute to COVID-19 response and recovery, such as promoting skills recognition (for example, as part of the essential services workforce), engaging with the diaspora, and supporting mechanisms for remittance transfer.
- Support to States, in cooperation with other key stakeholders, in **reviving and setting labour mobility mechanisms** to aid both origin and destination States, communities and migrants themselves in the recovery process.
- Promote **decent work and the protection of migrant workers** in business operations and supply chains. This includes support to governments, the private sector and civil society, to address exploitation and abuse, including human trafficking.
- Ensure that necessary assistance and protection are provided to vulnerable migrants, including displaced persons, and take **measures to promote social cohesion and reduce risk of conflict**.

5. Coordination and partnerships

This pandemic underscores the vital need for whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to migration management. IOM will work with governments, private sector, diaspora and UN partners in monitoring the impact of the pandemic on mobility and displacement so as to raise awareness and develop appropriate solutions. The UN Migration Network, coordinated by IOM, is core to this response. The UN Network is producing policy briefs, issuing statements, and holding “listening sessions” with civil society to ensure that the concerns of all actors are incorporated. IOM will foster coordination among States and UN partners for cross-border and regional policy development on “health-proofing” migration management.

In light of the anticipated long-term impact of the pandemic, IOM will step up its efforts **to explore new partnerships and business practices** that can help – now and in the future – to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and support recovery.

As a member of the UN Sustainable Development Group (**UNSDG**), supporting the COVID-19 socioeconomic recovery plan around its five critical pillars, IOM is further working closely with the UN Development Programme to ensure that migrants' needs are addressed, and their contributions are leveraged for the recovery process and sustainable development efforts around the globe.

As a member of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), IOM participates in the stepped up and coordinated humanitarian response to the direct public health and indirect immediate humanitarian consequences of the pandemic in the world's most fragile settings, prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable including older people, people with disabilities, and women and girls.

LOOKING FORWARD

The ability to develop successful responses to COVID-19 that both protect people on the move and their host and origin communities and harness the power of migration for “recovering better” depends on a solid understanding of the effects of the pandemic on human mobility. Concerted and coordinated actions and responses are needed in a spirit of shared responsibility among States and other national and international stakeholders.

This shock has highlighted – once more – the dangers of persistent inequality in our societies. There are many opportunities and challenges ahead. Collective efforts will be required to mitigate the impact at a micro and macro level; all the while addressing the critical protection gaps that have been exposed through this crisis, from social protection safety nets to public health access. In trying to establish a new status quo of human mobility and migration management, inclusion and respect for rights is not just good for migrants, but a public good which will benefit all. This should be embraced with openness and solidarity.

This is a time to re-evaluate and stress the value of multilateralism as a central part of sustainable recovery. Only with an inclusive and coherent approach, truly leaving no one behind, in the spirit of the Sustainable Development Goals, including for Universal Health Coverage, and adopting a rights-based approach can society overcome this global crisis of unprecedented magnitude.

IOM CAPACITY

IOM's 14,000+ staff, implementing – amongst other thematic areas – more than 200 direct health projects in more than 110 countries with over 1,300 staff working specifically on health – is working to respond to this public health emergency from the perspective of mobility. In doing so, the Organization is drawing on its experiences from previous emergencies – notably the most recent Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo -- and is **working closely with the World Health Organization and other UN Migration Network member agencies and partners** to ensure the integration of migration health and socioeconomic concerns across the UN system.

For more information on operational and thematic updates, please consult: www.iom.int/covid19.

For more information on IOM's funding appeal, please refer to: [IOM's Global Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan](#).