COVID-19 AND STRANDED MIGRANTS

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated governments to take various containment measures, designed to limit the spread of the virus. These extraordinary measures, including travel and mobility restrictions, are having an impact on all people, but some are exacerbating the precarious situations and vulnerabilities of migrant populations and in particular, leading to a large number of migrants being stranded. A total of 219 countries, territories and areas have imposed 60,711 restrictions as of 8th May 2020[1]. This is unprecedented historically.

Migrants are stranded for various reasons including, but not only, restrictions on travel and the related drop in international flights. Loss of jobs and income, lack of employment, loss of residence permits and lack of resources to return home have all impacted mobility. As visas and permits expire migrants are also facing deportation. This increases the possibility of more limited (or no) access to health care and social support, stigmatization and xenophobia, and the risk of detention in already overcrowded detention facilities, and homelessness. Those stranded may also be more vulnerable to exploitation, including trafficking in persons and -- out of desperation -- take up employment in conditions with increased exposure to COVID-19.

For example:

- In West and Central Africa, over 25,000 persons including migrants hosted in transit centers and other stranded migrants are left with no option but to wait for borders to reopen.

- Migrant workers, who make up a significant portion of the population of some of the Gulf States, are being disproportionately impacted, particularly in instances where countries have stopped the return of citizens from the region such as Nepal and India.

- Hundreds of migrants are also stranded in the Chilean-Bolivian border, as well as over 2,000 migrants stranded in the southern and northern borders of Panama.

- In South Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, thousands of migrants are stranded, whether in Central Asia, the Western Balkans or the Caucasus to name a few.

This issue brief delves into the main challenges faced by stranded migrants as well as some of the innovative responses that have been implemented. It provides recommendations and guidance to ensure the protection and well-being of stranded migrants in the context of COVID-19.

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[1] www.migration.iom.int

IMPACT ANALYSIS

While the COVID-19 outbreak affects all communities, certain groups including migrants can be disproportionately affected due to pre-existing vulnerabilities, lack of access to services, or legal status. This section provides a brief summary of some of the factors that have led to migrants being stranded and the challenges they face as a result of COVID-19 containment measures across the globe.

Travel Restrictions and Lockdown Measures

Due to lockdown measures in many countries, many migrants have either lost their jobs, have had their wages withheld or are unable to find employment. This leaves them in difficult conditions including homelessness, and also affects remittances needed by families in countries of origin.

 Additionally, global travel restrictions have also imposed further challenges for migrants who already wanted to return home through various voluntary return programmes (as of May 3, , a total of 1,272 IOM movements, 11,240 individuals had to be cancelled including refugee resettlement) or through their own volition including migrant workers, international students, families awaiting reunification, are now unable to do so, leaving them in limbo and exposed to risks and vulnerabilities.

However, despite the growing travel restrictions, trends show that there has been significant return of migrant workers – both internal and cross-border – in a response to the pandemic and national measures.

For example, in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region (GMS), following the announcement of lockdown measures in Thailand, thousands of internal migrants and migrants from neighbouring countries returned to their home provinces or countries, including Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar. Hundreds of thousands of Afghans returned to Afghanistan from neighbouring Iran in recent months, fleeing the corona virus and related economic hardship. Over 8,000 Ethiopian migrants returned from the Gulf States, while some returned independently, others returned through government sponsored schemes.

Such returns, especially in large numbers, may have the unintended effect of driving transmission in areas with less capacity to provide testing, isolation and treatment, as well as increase vulnerability for migrants during their journey and in their home communities.

Immigration and Consular Assistance

The imposition of border closures and travel restrictions have left a significant number of migrants stranded, including laborers, temporary work permit holders, skilled workers, bridging visa holders and international students. Unable to comply with visa requirements or access timely and accurate visa-related support, many stranded migrants face the risk of overstaying or failing to maintain their legal status, which may have long-term consequences including future entry bans, and find themselves in irregular situations, through no fault of their own.

In addition to the health and financial challenges caused by COVID-19, migrants face additional vulnerabilities related to uncertainty about their migratory status, including lack of information, consular support and poor living and working conditions. Various challenges and capacity gaps have prevented some governments from providing effective large-scale immigration and consular assistance amidst the ongoing crisis, and numerous migrants remain in vulnerable situations, with limited access to much needed support.

Detention and Forced Returns

Migrants in detention centres are especially at heightened risk. Detention centres are often overcrowded and have poor hygiene facilities which can exacerbate the spread of the coronavirus disease. They also often lack adequate facilities for quarantine/isolation where necessary as well as the ability to provide appropriate medical care and testing.

Moreover, deportations of stranded and irregular migrants, often unlawful due to border closures; suspension of immigration proceedings and returns, can cause challenges in terms of adherence to public health protocols for self-isolation/quarantine prior to and after return, as properly equipped and staffed facilities either have limited capacity or do not exist. Large scale deportations to countries with limited capacities and overwhelmed health structures for testing and/or care also further risk spreading of the coronavirus disease and crippling the public health system.

Migrant Vulnerabilities

Increased insecurity, poverty and marginalization induced by COVID-19 can exacerbate vulnerabilities of stranded migrants to all types of violence, exploitation and abuse, including trafficking in persons. Criminal groups such as traffickers are likely to take advantage of people's vulnerabilities for exploitative purposes during times of crisis, such as the current pandemic. At the same, many can seize the opportunity to exploit migrants by cutting or withholding wages or threatening to report migrants to authorities due to legal status.

Furthermore, support available for stranded and vulnerable migrants, including victims of domestic violence, victims of trafficking and vulnerable children are also likely to be disrupted as a result of lockdowns and other public health measures, leading to further protection gaps and exacerbated needs and vulnerabilities. Stranded vulnerable migrants may also face higher risks of re-exploitation when they cannot benefit from assistance and care because of the suspension of services.

Migrants, including stranded migrants are also likely to be subjected to discrimination and xenophobia, which can threaten migrants' access to basic social services, including suitable housing and life-saving healthcare. Migrants, particularly those in irregular situations, may be fearful of reporting health conditions and accessing needed treatment. Migrants who have recently returned home may also be subject to stigma and discrimination and face similar challenges, as well as interruptions to planned reintegration support. and discrimination and face similar challenges, as well as interruptions to planned reintegration support.

Returns, whether forced or voluntary can also overwhelm communities of return, particularly where health structures are already weak and fuel discrimination against returnees, leading to increased vulnerabilities. Migrants, including stranded migrants, are also likely to be subjected to discrimination and xenophobia, which can threaten migrants' access to basic social services, including suitable housing and life-saving healthcare. Migrants, particularly those in irregular situations, may be fearful of reporting health conditions and accessing needed treatment. Migrants who have recently returned home may also be subject to stigma and discrimination and face similar challenges, as well as interruptions to planned reintegration support. and discrimination and face similar challenges, as well as interruptions to planned reintegration support.

PROMISING RESPONSES

The challenges have not gone wholly unattended and already many promising initiatives have been taken in response by governments, in the very complex reality of COVID-19.

Several Governments have implemented flexible measures, policies, such as blanket visa extensions and the waiver of penalties, amongst other measures, until lockdown and travel restrictions are lifted to ensure that migrants do not fall into an irregular situation.

Some employers have taken steps to ensure that migrant workers are paid their salaries as usual or partially to cover basic necessities, even while there are quarantine or treatment requirements and/or lockdown measures which prevent them from working. Additionally, some governments have also taken measures to include migrants regardless of their status in wage subsidy/emergency stipend schemes.

Many governments are allowing migrants, regardless of their migratory status or insurance, to have access to medical facilities, particularly those dedicated to COVID-19 and providing food and accommodation to stranded migrants.

There have also been initiatives to create corridors for safe movement of migrants and bilateral agreements between countries with common borders to coordinate migrant flows, including medical screening.

Other promising initiatives include the set-up of hotlines and online mechanisms for information as well as processes such as visa extensions and referral to services including for psychosocial support.

Many donor governments have also supported re-programming to adapt exist projects to respond to the immediate needs of stranded migrants, such as provision of non-food items and shelter, demonstrating adaptability and innovation.

Additionally, many civil society organizations and members of the diaspora have also been instrumental in supporting stranded migrants, not least through support aimed at social protection.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While there have been some commendable measures taken to ensure inclusion of stranded migrants in planning for the containment of COVID-19 and to ensure protection of their rights and well-being, much more remains to be done.

- IOM strongly advocates for the inclusion of all migrants, including stranded migrants regardless of nationality or migratory status, in all national COVID-19 response plans including measures being introduced to mitigate the economic downturns, ensuring that they have access to information, health services, shelter, food and other social support systems. Stranded migrants may also need additional support such as accommodation and socio-economic support in case of lost income/jobs.

Immigration and Consular Assistance

- IOM continues to advocate for the necessary adjustments to be made to national legal frameworks for migrants to remain in compliance with immigration rules. This entails adjusting submission and processing procedures to include enhancing e-solutions, addressing the difficulties in submitting visa and permit applications and renewals, and offering temporary regularization solutions through work permits and visa extensions. This will also serve as an alternative to irregularity as well as minimize detention and deportation which is strongly recommended, especially for the duration of the crisis.

- IOM encourages Governments to expand remote consular support to assist stranded migrants and avoid situations of increased vulnerability, including migrants undertaking costly and sometimes unsafe journeys to access much needed consular support such as assistance with returns, regularization and up-to-date information in languages appropriate to migrants' needs.

Travel Restrictions

- IOM also advocates for all migrants' rights, including stranded migrants' rights to return, including exception to border closure for returning nationals and regular residents and for exit of non-nationals willing to return home, coupled with support to voluntary return and reintegration in compliance with health regulations. While we recognize and support measures in place to contain the spreading of the virus , it is important to stress the right to return and find ways to ensure stranded migrants have the option to return to their countries of origin, all the while taking into consideration necessary protective and health measures and in coordination with the receiving country. It is also important to ensure that extraordinary border closures are lifted as soon as practicable.

- IOM strongly recommends the setup of quarantine facilities and implementation of tracing systems in line with WHO recommendations, both prior to departure as well as post arrival to contain the spread of COVID-19.

- IOM recommends the creation of safe corridors and facilitation of related immigration procedures for movement of migrants wishing to return home voluntarily, in compliance with international and national health measures, including quarantine prior to departure and post arrival.

Detention and Forced Returns

- IOM recommends temporary suspension of deportations of stranded migrants where possible to avoid overwhelming weak public health systems in receiving countries. Where return must take place, there should be constructive dialogue between sending and receiving countries to ensure that proper procedures are put in place, prior to and post return in line with international law, full respect for human rights, effective public health strategies and WHO recommendations. Without recommended quarantine facilities and health screening procedures in place, such deportations could increase the spread of COVID-19, while also fuelling xenophobia and stigma.

- IOM advocates for the release of migrants from detention, including detention for the purposes of deportation, into appropriate non-custodial facilities and other alternatives to detention or at a minimum decongestion of detention facilities, prioritizing vulnerable groups including children, families and the disabled and their respective needs. Detention facilities can become a hotspot for the spread of COVID-19 given that they can often be overcrowded, have limited space to set up quarantine/isolation facilities and limited or no testing and medical screening capabilities. Non-custodial facilities should include access to adequate water and hygiene facilities, offer gender segregation and proper ventilation, as well as ways to apply physical distancing recommendations.

- IOM also advocates for relocation of migrants from camps and camp-like settings into arrangements where public health measures can be adhered to, and migrants are able to access basic services, including medical and psychosocial.

Migrant Vulnerabilities

- IOM urges Governments and all other stakeholders to ensure continuity of care for all migrants, particularly vulnerable migrants, including victims of trafficking. There is a need to identify innovative solutions to continue with identification, referral, psychosocial support, protection and assistance services for migrants who may be exposed to violence, exploitation and abuse and maybe be at increased risk such as children.

- IOM also advocates for governments to confront xenophobia, violence and discrimination against migrants in relation to the spread of COVID-19, particularly for groups of migrants who may be at increased risk such as victims of gender-based violence and LGBTIQ migrants, which can significantly limit migrants' access to life-saving services including health care, especially during a pandemic.

- IOM strongly recommends that migrants, regardless of their migratory status, are included into national health care systems and have access to COVID-19 related services, including testing and treatment as well as inclusion in programmes aimed to alleviate immediate financial impacts of COVID-19, such as emergency stipends, wage subsidies or other economic stimulus plans.

- IOM also recommends the development and use of alternative tools such as hotlines and mobile phone applications or other online solutions for virtual counselling including psychosocial support and provision of information to migrants, to ensure access to accurate information, necessary health precautions and available services and options. It is also recommended that awareness raising is conducted in migrant communities and communities of return on the impact of COVID-19 and the various public health and lockdown measures in place and their implications.

IOM implores governments to address these challenges with urgency and stands ready, in partnership with other UN agencies and stakeholders to continue to support governments to implement the above recommendations and ensure protection and assistance to stranded migrants globally, and efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19.

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