

Migrant Protection and Assistance during COVID-19: Promising Practices



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INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has posed significant challenges for IOM, affecting the provision of much needed support to migrants and governments alike. It has been particularly challenging for the Organization's migrant protection and assistance work, where most of the programming involves direct access to migrants, including those in vulnerable situations. Impacts have been felt across various types of activities including provision of direct assistance to migrants, addressing the protection needs of the most vulnerable and increased vulnerabilities because of the pandemic and the subsequent economic downturn and travel restrictions.

Amidst the travel restrictions, lockdowns and various other containment measures, IOM quickly adapted – both in work modalities and in delivering services and assistance to migrants including virtual counselling and referrals.

This report highlights some of the main challenges that were faced since the beginning of the pandemic and some of the key innovative solutions that have been employed. These measures not only allowed IOM and its partners to continue to work and respond to the pandemic but have also equipped the Organization with initiatives that can be further developed and improved, as IOM, like the rest of the world adjusts to the new 'normal'.

At the onset of the pandemic, the sweeping travel restrictions and various national lockdowns led to (and still continues to) some 2.75 million migrants (as of July 13)¹ being stranded, without any opportunity to return home or continue their journeys onward. IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programmes were impacted, with migrants unable to receive information and assistance regarding their return home. Many migrants also lost their sources of income and risked losing their residency and/or work permits. These implications exacerbated migrant vulnerabilities and left them in limbo.

IOM was requested by governments to support the return of their stranded nationals – which has been challenging given the operational complexity, lack of funding, travel restrictions and the need for quarantine and other COVID-19 containment measures. At the same time, forced returns were stepped up as part of the response to the virus in some countries and resulted in challenges for receiving countries in ensuring minimum public health standards.

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1 Identified through public or official sources, direct requests to IOM, including migrants identified by IOM or referred to IOM for support by governments including diplomatic and consular offices, civil society partners and other UN agencies.

Concern over increased exploitation of migrants grew as the spread of the virus continued, including trafficking in persons, impacting those who are in vulnerable situations as they would be more likely to fall prey to criminals. Delivering direct assistance became challenging as case workers were unable to meet beneficiaries in person. Additionally, with many businesses closing temporarily – in-kind reintegration activities for returnees also slowed down.

In the face of all these challenges, IOM offices worldwide found innovative ways to assist migrants and governments. These included virtual counselling, establishing hotlines, developing mobile applications, cash based initiatives, technical support to governments to set up quarantine measures and procedures, communications and outreach through social media to inform migrants about services and risks of COVID-19, advocacy for decongestion of detention centres and promotion of alternatives to detention and the release of migrants to avoid spreading of the virus, fundraising to support the return of stranded migrants and emergency assistance to those in vulnerable situations.

The report will delve into the specific challenges and solutions on the following areas of work: 1. Assistance to Migrants in Vulnerable Situations; 2. Counter-trafficking; 3. Return; 4. Reintegration; 5. Stranded Migrants and 6. Assessments and Data Collection. An additional topic of cash-based initiatives will be covered in detail, as one of the most effective and innovative solutions.



Assistance to Migrants in Vulnerable Situations

The pandemic led to exacerbated vulnerabilities for migrants due to a multitude of factors including socio-economic, logistical, and medical issues. Some migrants became stranded due to mobility restrictions, while others lost their income because of unemployment and unfavourable market conditions. COVID-19 also increased health risks among many, who often live in situations where compliance with social distancing and maintenance of hygiene standards is a challenge. Additionally, many of the existing social services provided to migrants – such as temporary accommodation, food, medical care, assistance with visa and permit renewals – were, and in some cases still are difficult to access or are operating at limited capacity. These circumstances have led to increasing vulnerabilities to violence, exploitation and abuse, including human trafficking. In response to these challenges and with the aim of protecting migrants’ rights and addressing vulnerabilities, IOM deployed several innovative solutions.

- IOM Ecuador has developed a screening form to assess vulnerabilities and to provide assistance to identified vulnerable migrants. Assistance provided included cash support, psychosocial assistance etc. Additionally, they assisted stranded families by providing them with accommodation. For the most vulnerable, such as those with medical conditions or unaccompanied and separated minors, collaboration with implementing partners with direct access was strengthened or established. Psycho-social assistance to those in need was provided via telephones and web-based platforms. Radio advertisements and video content were produced to provide advice and support on migrant registration and regularization.



- IOM Argentina established a COVID-19 Committee at the onset of the pandemic with participants from governments, donors, and civil society for coordination and ease of communication on assistance to vulnerable migrants. For IOM assistance, a system to assess migrant vulnerability and eligibility was established and implemented. This utilized a system of scoring to ensure the prioritization of assistance based on degree of vulnerability.
- IOM Headquarters expanded its eligibility criteria for its Global Assistance Fund (GAF) to include migrants unable to meet basic needs as a result of a pandemic, in addition to those who have experienced violence, exploitation or abuse or are vulnerable to the same. From July to mid-November, GAF has assisted 241 vulnerable migrants-- 94 males, 109 females, and 39 minors. Assistance provided under GAF includes counselling, shelter, return and reintegration support.



Counter Trafficking

The pandemic has been disproportionately affecting migrants, who are often living in more precarious circumstances and particularly impacted by social and economic disruptions stemming from this public health crisis. Victims of trafficking and those already in exploitative situations face risks of disruptions of their assistance, while other migrants face increased vulnerability to human trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Criminal trafficking and smuggling networks are filling the void created by COVID-19 economic shocks to increase their activity and exploit migrants who are increasingly destitute.

It is critical to ensure the ability to adapt and provide continuity of services to victims of trafficking. This includes dissemination of information about assistance and referral processes and options in appropriate languages for migrants. Accordingly, in response to the heightened risk of trafficking during the pandemic, IOM missions globally were able to employ various solutions.

- IOM Peru adjusted their ongoing counter trafficking efforts in the context of COVID-19. A series of webinars and training sessions were conducted at the national and regional levels to prepare for and respond to the pandemic. These efforts also strengthened technical assistance and support to national and regional counter-trafficking committees. In addition, IOM in Peru conducted awareness raising campaigns on the increased risk of trafficking in persons, reaching over one million people.
- In Nigeria, IOM shifted case management to e-counselling and home-based rehabilitation and direct assistance for returnees and their families, including virtual mental health and psychosocial support. Efforts were also made to ensure the inclusion migrants impacted by COVID-19, including victims of trafficking in national response plans.
- IOM Myanmar co-developed a “Guidance Note for Service Providers Working with Victims of Human Trafficking during COVID-19” with UNICEF and rolled out training to Civil Society service providers who work with Victims of Trafficking.
- In Thailand, IOM has supported the translation of the “Protect-U” to regional languages, allowing Victims of Trafficking to self-identify or, for the general public, to report suspected trafficking even during lockdown. It enables victims or whistle-blowers to send their GPS location on Google Maps and request interpretation service in advance via one feature of the app.
- Many ongoing IOM counter-trafficking projects adapted existing budgets to ensure provision of critical, life-saving personal protection equipment (PPE) to frontline counter-trafficking actors, including both governmental and civil society partners – including in Guyana, Jamaica and the countries of Northern Central America and Mexico. Additionally, IOM missions around the world assisting victims of trafficking have ensured access to COVID-19 tests and medical assistance for beneficiaries who have become symptomatic or required medical services.

Return Assistance

The possibility to provide support to migrants wishing to return home has become limited due to COVID-19. Despite the challenges, IOM has adapted its programmes and continued to support migrants throughout the world to voluntarily return to their countries of origin, wherever feasible. While the principles of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) have remained unchanged during the COVID-19 outbreak, new procedures needed to be introduced in the process to make returns possible and ensure the protection and safety of people. Between July and September 2020, IOM was able to assist 9,976 migrants with return support, compared to 16,382 and 17,630 people assisted in the same period in 2018 and 2019 respectively.

COVID-19 has led to significant challenges both for IOM and its partners in providing direct assistance to migrants such as counselling, the provision of information, referrals, or supporting returns. IOM was able to respond to these challenges through various measures.

- IOM in Germany, and the Western Balkans has developed the Migrant Registration Application (MIRA), through which migrants are able to anonymously request information on return and reintegration programmes for a specific country or leave their contact information so they could be referred to a local return counselling centre and be registered for voluntary return. In Germany, as well as in many countries, most counselling sessions, including psychosocial support moved to virtual platforms such as phones, mobile applications etc.



- IOM in Greece set up 30 phone helplines that operate in 14 different languages so that migrants who are interested or already registered for AVRR can receive accurate and updated information about the procedures, while enhancing their understanding of COVID-19.
- IOM offices in Belize, El Salvador and Mexico, in cooperation with partner organizations, have provided pre-departure medical screenings to confirm people are fit to travel and provided them with information to returnees on quarantine requirements upon arrival.
- Under the current conditions, using charter flights has allowed IOM to assist more people and facilitated negotiation with the governments to open the borders on an exceptional basis when commercial flights were not possible. These charter flights are closely coordinated with the governments of both sending and receiving countries.
- Return support, primarily through charter flights, but also ground transportation and commercial flights, was provided to migrants in various countries including Nicaragua, Belize, Niger, Algeria, the Philippines, and Lebanon. In supporting migrants to return to their home countries, IOM missions also provided humanitarian assistance kits that included food, information, , pre-embarkation health checks, COVID-19 testing where required, and necessary supplies to comply with health protocols prevention measures, and protection against COVID-19. Medical escorts travelled with individuals with significant medical conditions.
- In Nigeria, IOM established a strategy for movements and migrant assistance in coordination with the government's Presidential Task Force. This included screening, testing, isolating symptomatic individuals, physical distancing, hand and respiratory hygiene, and the provision of personal protective equipment.



Reintegration Assistance

Upon return, migrants faced -among other challenges- disruption in their post arrival counselling and reintegration assistance due to remote work modalities, businesses being closed, social and medical services being stretched, etc.

- Similar to pre-departure return counselling, reintegration counselling in the country of origin has been increasingly provided virtually to migrants in most countries. In some countries, psychosocial support to returnees and medical screenings were also organized through videocalls (telemedicine). IOM also provided individualized virtual follow-up on business plans and trainings, cultural orientation, peer networking, while the existing communication platforms were used as platforms for online job trainings.
- IOM Guatemala developed a mobile app for referral of returnees to reintegration services (OportuGuate). The app provides educational, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for returnees.
- IOM Germany has delivered 46 trainings for almost 700 AVRR counsellors virtually as face-to-face trainings were suspended. The online training concept offers three different training components, general training (including COVID-19 developments), on registration and application procedure and on case processing, necessary documentation, and collection of information.



Stranded Migrants

As of July 13 2020, 2.75 million stranded migrants were identified through public or official sources, direct requests to IOM, including migrants identified by IOM or referred to IOM for support by governments including diplomatic and consular offices, civil society partners and other UN agencies.

Migrants have been stranded due to various reasons, including but not restricted to, travel restrictions and the related drop in international flights. Loss of jobs and income, lack of employment opportunities, loss of residence permits and lack of resources to return home have all impacted migrants' ability to return home or continue their travel. As visas and permits expire migrants also face forced return. 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 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. IOM missions globally have employed various measures to ensure the protection of and assistance to stranded migrants.

- A Returns Task Force was set up at IOM Headquarters to address the various requests for support from stranded migrants and governments.
- IOM provided medical screenings and information about the risks posed by the virus to some 3,400 Mozambiquan miners who have been allowed to cross back into South Africa to resume work. Discussions are progressing about providing the same assistance to thousands of agricultural workers.



- Missions in Central Asia have assisted thousands of migrants who were stranded to return to their countries of origin.
- Overall, international cooperation has paved the way for IOM to provide voluntary return assistance to more than 16,368 vulnerable, stranded migrants in recent months, (as of November 2, 2020) in a manner that addresses public health concerns.
- To ensure a whole of system approach, IOM Panama coordinated its operations through the Emergency Response Mechanism (EMR), collaborating with nine UN agencies through the Inter-Agency Human Mobility Group, overseen by the UN Resident Coordinator's Office. IOM Panama also developed local prevention and protection guides and set up a local coordination mechanism to maintain its ability to operate shelters. More specifically, IOM Panama supported the registration of new-borns to prevent Statelessness.
- In the Western Balkans, IOM strengthened remote engagement and assessment tools to help migrants fight peer pressure related to their return and reintegration decisions. Online tools that help migrants better express their needs while providing the necessary privacy and security for their personal data have also been rolled out.
- In West and Central Africa, humanitarian corridors were negotiated to allow stranded migrants to return home. As of mid-August, a total of 2,800 stranded migrants were assisted to return through these corridors.



Assessments and Data

Various changes in programming have been stimulated by COVID-19. With many staff working remotely, and often with an increased caseload of migrants to register, additional digital tools have been developed and rolled out to ensure continuity in case management processes, as well as collection and analysis of data.

- The newly developed IOM Migrant Assistance Portal (IMAP) has also proved to be very useful in these challenging times. It can be easily updated (it is built on Salesforces) and facilitates referrals to external partners and sharing of relevant and useful information in a safe manner. IMAP also allows migrants to self-register in the system and enables automated reporting. Lastly, IMAP allows external stakeholders to refer cases to IOM, further promoting cooperation between assistance providers, and ensuring timely support to migrants. IMAP is being rolled out in the MENA region with Lebanon and Algeria as pilot countries.
- IOM in Somalia introduced a digital feedback and complaints mechanism. This mechanism also works offline to allow beneficiaries living in low-bandwidth locations to raise their concerns, complaints and queries in a safe and private manner.
- IOM developed a regional COVID-19 impact assessment for East Africa (building on an impact assessment already rolled-out in Lake Chad and the Sahel). This assessment will allow IOM to measure the socio-economic outcomes of the pandemic on returning migrants.
- In Bangladesh, Cambodia, Timor-Leste and the Philippines, the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) teams were able to include questions mapping migrant vulnerability and future planning in their flow monitoring projects, allowing IOM to start targeting specific needs of returnee migrants early on in the socio-economic response cycle. In Bangladesh, a total of 2,765 international and internal returnees have been interviewed across 12 districts. In the Philippines, 8,000 returnees will be surveyed.
- IOM Tunisia's Migrant Presence Monitoring (MPM) data collection unit implemented a rapid needs assessment, conducted via telephone interviews, with 66 Key Informants (KIs) in the cities of Grand Tunis, Sfax and Zarzis. The questionnaire examined the impact of COVID-19 on the situation of migrants and their coping mechanisms, the types of assistance currently provided by other agencies in neighborhoods with high presence of migrants, as well as the number of people in need of direct assistance in the three cities.

Cash-Based Interventions

One of the most widely utilized solutions to address the afore mentioned challenges has been through cash-based interventions (CBI). Prior to the pandemic, CBI was primarily used in humanitarian settings, however its use over the course of this year has shown to be an efficient alternative to in-kind assistance. Indeed, CBI might prove to be a safe option to provide rapid relief as it contributes to reducing transmission risks (no overcrowded distribution sites) and allows for remote delivery. Below highlight some of the instances in which cash-based interventions were used during the pandemic.

- In the Sahel and Lake Chad, as part of the EU-IOM Joint Initiative, IOM agreed with the European Union to pilot the provision of cash as part of reintegration assistance. Among the different types of CBI envisaged, some returnees are provided with monthly stipends, others with their reintegration assistance entirely in cash to buy their own equipment, while in some countries, top-ups will be provided to returnees in vulnerable situations. Additional cash assistance is also provided to returnees with tailoring skills through cash for work initiatives, by involving them in the production of personal protective equipment (PPE) for government front liners or for migrants hosted in IOM transit centers.



- IOM Iraq delivered cash assistance to vulnerable migrants in the country who have lost their income due to the pandemic. IOM developed the vulnerability assessment tool to determine eligibility, based on indicators of food and rent insecurity. The assessment also captures specific health vulnerabilities among migrants. IOM missions in Lebanon and Algeria are also using similar tools and the expanded criteria for direct assistance to support migrants during the pandemic.
- IOM Algeria also launched a pilot one-time cash grant for vulnerable migrants along with its partners and government, whereby people can cash the amount in any post office using an SMS code. For those who are unable to reach the post office, IOM is delivering the assistance directly.



Way Forward

The challenges of COVID-19 continue – for migrants and for agencies like IOM who are working to protect and assist them. IOM will continue to develop and enhance the various innovative solutions to ensure the well-being and protection of migrants' rights and to provide support to Member States to enhance their capacity to do the same. The following will be only some of the main areas of focus going forward.

- **Cash-based interventions (CBI)** have proven to be an efficient solution to assist migrants in a wide range of scenarios – from providing reintegration support instead of in-kind assistance to addressing immediate needs of stranded migrants in host countries and those of the most vulnerable. IOM will be working to develop a strategy and guidance on CBI in non-humanitarian settings. In addition, capacity of staff and implementing partners will be strengthened to allow them to use CBI beyond crisis settings.
- COVID-19 containment measures have also necessitated the adjustment of traditional ways of interaction with migrants – which were primarily (and ideally) in person. Social distancing measures and lockdowns required staff to move many of these interactions to **digital platforms**. These have included setting up hotlines for the provision of information, creations of mobile applications, virtual counselling and psychosocial support, remote monitoring and the use of social media for communications and community outreach. There is a need to consolidate some of these digital solutions, with due consideration for confidentiality and protection of personal data, and to enhance them further, to allow IOM staff and its partners to provide essential support.
- **Capacity building** activities for both IOM staff, partners and other stakeholders were severely impacted during the pandemic, as in person trainings were not possible and virtual capacity building using various online platforms had to be conducted. While some in person trainings have been able to resume in accordance with international and national public health guidelines, there is still a large need and demand for virtual capacity building. Delivering trainings online is very different from delivering the same training in person, and therefore requires adjustment in the content, the way it is presented and moderated. While many of these skills have been acquired by IOM staff and their partners in the past few months, there is a need to enhance the guidance available on the types of platforms, online capacity building activities, participation and how to adjust curricula or the agendas. In the coming months, IOM will strive to do exactly this.
- Another area that has proved to be critical during the pandemic is the **availability of resources and services to assist stranded migrants**. With 2.75 million migrants stranded globally¹, it is imperative to have focused fundraising efforts to provide assistance, whether to address immediate needs in the host country or for return and reintegration where possible. While IOM was able to raise some limited funds for this purpose, it remains significantly less than

needed to address the number of requests received from migrants and Member States. IOM staff, where possible, through reprogramming of current projects tried to address this gap in funding, but a more concerted effort is required.

- The pandemic has brought to the forefront the importance of health coverage for migrants and **strengthened health measures** in migrant protection and assistance programming. As travel restrictions have eased and some travel has resumed, we can already see this happening with tests required prior to departure and/or upon arrival. Where these regulations for testing and/or health checks exist, they will also apply to migrants assisted by IOM to return to their home countries. Additionally, as seen during the pandemic response, there was also a need to distribute protection equipment and to conduct health checks as part of programming, particularly in settings such as transit and reception centres. IOM will work to strengthen health measures where necessary and ensure guidance to field missions to ensure compliance with international and national public health requirements.
- IOM will continue to ramp up its **advocacy** efforts to ensure that migrants' rights are upheld. Advocacy measures will focus on areas such as universal health coverage for migrants, their inclusion in national responses and economic relief plans, combatting xenophobia, discrimination and stigmatization against migrants and returnees, suspension of forced returns during the pandemic and adoption of alternatives to detention.

In conclusion, while COVID-19 posed many challenges for IOM's migrant protection and assistance work, it also provided an opportunity to find new and innovative ways to ensure well-being and protection of migrants' rights. It has led to the development and implementation of various ways of delivering assistance and tools that will only enhance protection and assistance activities even in a post pandemic world.



