



Global Forum on MIGRATION & DEVELOPMENT

CIVIL SOCIETY - UAE 2020



2020 GFMD CIVIL SOCIETY PREPARATORY MEETING

Theme 4 – COVID-19: Building Back Better for Migrants

Background Paper

The impacts of COVID-19 on migrants, migration and development: Identifying the gaps underscored by the pandemic and how the GFMD stakeholders can help address them – a Civil Society Perspective

Setting the scene

Regarding the impacts of the pandemic on migrants, migration and development, we would like to make a number of relatively general comments. The first one is that the COVID-19 pandemic has created almost none of the problems faced by migrants today. Today's COVID-19 related problems for migrant communities are yesterday's problems but multiplied by 20 or 30. Rather than creating them, the pandemic has accelerated and amplified, in a dramatic way, pre-existing ones. A very large number of migrants, and not only those in an irregular situation, were already at the margin before the pandemic, were employed in the informal economy or with short-term contracts, having no or little access to basic services, including health, and living in overcrowded accommodation. Like an earthquake, the pandemic has completely destroyed those who were the most fragile and the most unprotected, while leaving shaken but relatively untouched those who were stronger or had access to alternatives, such as unemployment benefits, health insurance, savings, etc. Particularly at risk and impacted are women and children. The pandemic is *exacerbating* gender-based inequalities and violence. Women are faced with increased domestic violence, which was already extremely high before the pandemic, massive unemployment, and further discrimination in access to services and social protection¹. Children in migration are at significant and heightened risk of being negatively impacted². The pandemic has *further* reduced their safe and adequate access to

¹ <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S1473-3099%2820%2930568-5>

² <https://data.unicef.org/covid-19-and-children/#:~:text=With%20COVID%2D19%20putting%20enormous,risk%20of%20disease%20or%20death>

school, health, nutritious food, immunizations, and livelihoods. It has put children at *greater* risk of violence, abuse, exploitation, and separation from caregivers. It has resulted in *more* children under five suffering from acute malnutrition. Just as these risks have increased, access to child protection and psychosocial services has decreased. Children are pushed to embark on dangerous journeys with reduced options of safe and regular pathways and reduced access to countries and services.

Secondly, the pandemic is not only an amplifier of pre-existing problems, deficiencies, and vulnerabilities, it is also a multiplier. Let's explain it with a concrete example. Yemen, a country known for its beauty and unfortunately a very brutal war, must deal firstly with the trauma and the many wounds of the conflict, secondly with the pandemic (in a country where many medical facilities have been destroyed), and thirdly with the economic consequences of both the conflict and the pandemic. *"The interconnectivity of Yemen's economy means that a decline in any of the three major sources of foreign currency – humanitarian aid, oil exports, and remittances – has a significant impact on local purchasing power. Yemen is now facing a decline in all three. The loss of remittances comes as oil prices are plunging, and as a reduction in funding is forcing aid agencies and NGOs in Yemen to close down or scale back various humanitarian programmes, including food aid and subsidies to healthcare workers. A 2 June pledging conference for Yemen fell more than a \$1 billion short of its target, and much of the money promised is unlikely to be delivered for some time"*³.

Thirdly, migration is complex and so is COVID-19. On both fronts, there are often more unknowns than knowns, starting with insufficient and sometimes unreliable data, and ideology as well as politicization playing a disproportionate role. Here again, the COVID-19 crisis, which led to the closing of borders, the mass destruction of jobs, both formal and informal, the cordoning-off of migrant settlements or refugee camps, will probably have a lasting impact not only on health and the economy, but also on migration management, adding to its complexity. There will also be an increased risk of politicization and ideological derailing in the years to come. Willingly or unwillingly, the fight against COVID-19 has created a logic of travel restrictions, border closures and lockdowns, which runs against another logic, the logic of mobility, which is at the core of migration. At the moment it is not clear which logic will prevail, but we fear that restrictions may be the winner.

Fourthly, there have been various responses provided by governments to the COVID-19 crisis, as far as their impact on migrants is concerned. A minority of governments were inclusive and made sure that migrants were part of their public health and social policies, as well as more long-term recovery packages. A number of other governments were neither inclusive nor

³ Iona Craig in the New Humanitarian see at https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/06/16/Coronavirus-Yemen-economy-remittances?utm_source=The+New+Humanitarian&utm_campaign=d9c1879365-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_06_19_Weekly&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_d842d98289-d9c1879365-75519141

openly discriminatory. In some of the latter cases, it was often unclear whether this “migrant-blind” approach was unintentional, due to negligence or reflecting open neglect. Obviously, some countries could be considered as non-discriminatory in light of the fact that, with a few exceptions, the community of States was initially caught highly unprepared and was unable to properly assess the impact of the pandemic. Every policy during the first COVID-19 wave was influenced by the legitimate fear that emergency medical facilities would quickly collapse, that treatments and vaccines were still a long way down the road, and that testing and protective equipment were insufficient. Governments were overwhelmed and after an initial “grace period” were under attack from political parties and interest groups. Being responsible, comprehensive, and inclusive in such an environment is very difficult. But, unfortunately, there is also a third cluster of governments - also a minority, but not an insignificant one. They include countries which “took advantage” of the pandemic to further strengthen already existing restrictive measures or an overtly anti-migrant approach, including pushbacks, forced returns of migrants who were COVID-19 positive, not applying preventive and protective measures for migrants in detention or in dormitories, etc.

Fifthly, many among governments, international organizations and NGO officials keep repeating that COVID-19 and its impact on migrants brings enormous challenges but also opportunities. There is some merit in this approach, and not only wishful thinking⁴. But “opportunities” need to be qualified. They are a tiny light at the end of a very dark and long tunnel. While the daunting challenges are obvious, not least because of the lives destroyed, and the millions of jobs and livelihoods lost, the real opportunities, beyond the symbolic, seem to be well hidden. It will take many years to get back to the kind of “normalcy” we had in 2019, a “normalcy” which often implied discriminated access to basic services for migrants, lack of regular pathways, and exploitation on the workplace. With so many of their own nationals also losing their jobs, it will require extraordinary courage from governments to have inclusive policies during the recovery phase, and start dismantling the past and present barriers placed before migrants. But this courage and basic human solidarity are absolutely necessary if we want to collectively recover.

Recommendations to the GFMD stakeholders

The pandemic has created massive unemployment and it may not be the best of times to explore new avenues, when so much just needs to be repaired. At the same time, we will only get out of economic recession through bold moves, massive financial investments, but also investing in migrant workers, while genuinely involving trade unions, employers, local authorities and NGOs. In order to reverse the worst impacts of the pandemic and address pre-

⁴ See in particular this interesting analysis in the New Humanitarian “Coronavirus: a Window of Opportunity for Action on Migration” <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2020/06/10/coronavirus-migration-policies>

existing problems or discriminations affecting migrants, mobility and development, the GFMD stakeholders, in their respective capacities, are invited to:

1. Ensure that COVID-19 vaccines and treatments are both affordable and made available to all, without any discrimination and regardless of migration status.
2. More generally, ensure that all migrants, regardless of status, have access to basic services, including health, education, food, shelter and social support, without fear of being arrested or deported.
3. Proactively and collectively fight xenophobia, racism and anti-migrant agendas, both pre-dating and exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, recognizing that remaining passive would amount to complicity.
4. Acknowledging that millions of jobs have been lost and that time will be needed to compensate for those losses, adopt, without delay, some urgent measures, including:
 - a) With many people “competing” for scarce jobs, we should all be attentive to the increased risk of exploitation and abuses on the workplace, and we must put in place additional safeguards, monitoring and checks and balances.
 - b) Millions of people, who were previously benefitting from remittances, have now fallen into poverty. Though not the panacea but as an indispensable way of meeting the basic needs of people, expand inclusive humanitarian programmes.
 - c) Many migrants who lost their jobs returned to their country of origin or remained jobless in their country of destination, without being paid their wages or benefits. The non-payment of wages and benefits by unscrupulous employers is particularly appalling at the time of crisis and acute vulnerabilities. Governments in particular, but also local authorities, business leaders and civil society organizations must put pressure on and sanction rogue employers, adopt guiding principles and a code of conduct, and build a transitional justice system to ensure the payment of wages and benefits⁵.
 - d) Many migrant workers who lost their jobs during the pandemic are unlikely to find a new job abroad, not only because of the economic depression but also due their accumulated debts, often contracted with unscrupulous employment agencies. Countries of origin, in consultation with countries of destination, must take robust measures against such agencies and government officials who may be accomplices of those agencies.
 - e) Remittances are expected to suffer an unprecedented and huge decrease, worth around 130 billion US\$, in 2021. With such a grim reality, it is essential that aid spending and development international cooperation are not reduced, and major funders make renewed commitments.
5. Envision, propose and amplify multistakeholder partnerships that engage states - bilaterally and especially regionally - in moving forward on ways to increase the

⁵ See for example the campaign launched by a number of NGOs and networks: <https://justiceforwagetheft.org/>

availability and flexibility of regular pathways where prospective migrants need employment opportunities, and where employers need workers, finding creative ways to develop the necessary skills and human capital while also recognizing an ongoing need in many countries for less skilled workers and ensuring that workers at all skill levels have regular pathways and enjoy the protection in practice as well as on paper that those pathways are supposed to provide.

6. Detention is the one issue where we have seen many positive government initiatives in the past months, aiming at either releasing detained migrants - often in relatively large numbers - or not detaining them. We have now a solid body of best practices, many pre-dating the pandemic, others as a principled response to the health crisis. On these fully tested best practices, we can build an environment where alternatives to detention systematically prevail. Alternatives to immigration detention work, as amply demonstrated by recent pilot projects, which involve a multi-stakeholder approach, and in countries that do not resort - or resort exceptionally - to immigration detention. Let's invest in them, while not forgetting that child detention is never an option. It is against international standards. It is unacceptable and unjustifiable. Such a stance is legal, ethical, common sense and in everyone's interest.
7. Governments must adopt gender sensitive measures addressing violence against women and ensure that services responding to violence against women are treated as essential public services, with adequate funding, and are part of the overall response to the pandemic, including during the recovery phase. Governments must also guarantee that all recovery measures and financial packages are gender sensitive and support women's economic engagement.
8. Governments must guarantee children's rights and prioritise the needs of all children in migration, ensuring their safe and adequate access to:
9. Education. Remote learning and school reopening plans must be inclusive of all children, irrespective of status, gender, or disability, and include the specific needs of migrant children.
10. Protection. Child protection, gender-based violence and psychosocial services should be prioritised and resourced and social workers, social protection and child benefit programmes accessible to migrant children.
11. Sustainable solutions in children's best interests. Children's right to asylum, family reunification and protection must be guaranteed.