

WHY MIGRATION MATTERS FOR “RECOVERING BETTER” FROM COVID-19

As recognized in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, human mobility is inextricably linked with sustainable development. **We are reliant – for our health, our food, and our economy – on the movement of people.** Extraordinary mobility restrictions enforced around the world to control the transmission of COVID-19 have immediate and potentially long-term impacts on the attainment of many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Our ability to develop responses that mitigate the negative impacts and protect people on the move and their communities, and **harness the positive power of migration for recovering better**, as called for in the UN Framework for responding to the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19, depends on a good understanding of the effects of the pandemic on human mobility and development.¹ Only then can we mitigate the immediate and long-term negative impacts on migrants and the societies and economies that depend on them.

A HUMAN DEVELOPMENT CRISIS AGGRAVATED BY MOBILITY RESTRICTIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic control measures put in place around the world are having an unprecedented impact on human mobility. In a context of disrupted national and international transport services and where more than 52,000 extraordinary restrictions to mobility have been put into effect by governments and authorities worldwide,² millions of internal migrants who have lost their livelihoods in the cities in which they were based are returning to their places of origin – often in underdeveloped rural areas.³ Similarly, large numbers of international migrants are stranded abroad or unable to return to the countries in which they were employed because of closed borders. Asylum systems have been put on hold in some countries, weakening mechanisms for international protection at a critical time. Whether caught in precarious situations of transit, unexpected situations of irregularity, or simply difficult situations in increasingly fearful, xenophobic, or strained host communities, migrants are finding themselves caught in vulnerable situations. This health emergency is leading to **a combined human mobility and human development crisis** as the situation of people on the move is rapidly deteriorating with direct consequences for migrants themselves as well as the communities that depend on them. Over time, this can force more people to move out of necessity within countries and internationally and lead to increased unsafe and irregular migration.

The full extent of the negative impacts will only become clear over the next few years, but some elements are already emerging with **immediate consequences on the attainment of many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).** **Medium-term and longer-term consequences are unavoidable if human mobility restrictions remain over the next years.**

¹ United Nations Sustainable Development Group, *A UN Framework for the Immediate Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19*. See also the UN Secretary General policy brief (forthcoming) for further information on the importance of including people on the move in COVID-19 response and recovery.

² Data from migration.iom.int; exact figures as of April 2020 as published in the IOM “COVID-19 Analytical Snapshot #23: Travel restrictions and mobility UPDATE, 23 April 2020”.

³ World Bank, *The COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens*, p.12.

The significant contribution of migration to global GDP will decrease (SDG 8)

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, international migrants, who made up 3.5 percent of the world's population in 2019,⁴ contributed nearly 10 per cent of global GDP (roughly USD6.7 trillion to global GDP in 2015—some USD3 trillion more than they would have produced in their origin countries).⁵ If the current mobility restrictions remain over time, this will severely limit the contribution of migration to global GDP with direct repercussions on economies in both developing and developed countries. Reduced human mobility is also likely to cause disruptions to global value chains crippling several sectors of the economy with **direct knock-on effects on world economies and societies** in the immediate and medium term.

Health, food security and decent work is being directly impacted by migrants' reduced access to labour markets (SDGs 2, 3 and 8)

The latest ILO estimates indicate that there are 164 million migrant workers around the world⁶ rendering migrants an important part of the global labour force. This is particularly the case in key sectors vital to economies and societies in the context of COVID-19, such as health and food production. For example, among the 15 countries most affected by COVID-19, at least 10 countries – the United States, Spain, Italy, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, Canada and Switzerland – depend on foreign-born workers in healthcare services.⁷ Migrants also constitute a significant share in other sectors affected by the crisis. For example, nearly 17 per cent of skilled agricultural and fishery workers in the United Kingdom in 2015/16 were foreign-born.⁸ COVID-19 has exacerbated the pre-existing global competition for attracting much needed health workers⁹ and the need to address **labour shortages** in the agricultural sector. In response to these emerging tensions in labour markets, countries like Germany have opened innovative ways for asylum seekers to enter the labour market in the short term to tap into their skill set in health care.¹⁰

Conversely, migrant workers are also being hit hard by unemployment, which has broader socio-economic consequences. Migrants – who are over-represented in informal sectors and often have unstable employment – are among the first to lose their jobs. Migrants could also face significant barriers to re-entering the workforce in host countries due to mobility restrictions, lack of skills and qualifications recognition, or difficulties meeting administrative requirements. Additionally, rapidly increasing numbers of returning migrants who have lost their incomes may aggravate unemployment in countries to which they return while leaving large labour market gaps in others. In this context, some host countries have granted visa extensions and temporary amnesty to migrant workers, and some have suspended involuntary returns, cognizant of the associated risks and challenges.

Nutrition, health and education attainment will be directly impacted by mobility restrictions and an expected sharp decline in remittances (SDGs 1, 2, 3 and 4)

Migrant remittances represent a critical source of external financing in low- and middle-income countries and are directly correlated to nutrition, health and education outcomes in migrant communities depending on them¹¹ and broader societies. In 2019, migrants sent USD554 billion in international remittances to their families, predominantly in low- and middle-income countries.

⁴ UNDESA, *International Migrant Stock 2019*.

⁵ McKinsey Global Institute, *People on the Move: Global Migration's Impact and Opportunity* December 2016.

⁶ IOM, *COVID-19 Analytical Snapshot #10: Economic Impacts on Migrants*.

⁷ IOM Migration Data Portal, *Migration Data Relevant for the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

⁸ IOM GMDAC analysis based on data found in OECD, *Database on Immigrants in OECD Countries (DIOC) 2015/16*.

⁹ IOM, *World Migration Report 2020*.

¹⁰ *The Guardian*, *Germany Calls on Migrant Medics to Help Tackle Coronavirus*.

¹¹ IOM GMDAC, Global Migration Data Portal and World Bank, *World Bank Predicts Sharpest Decline of Remittances in Recent History*.

This represents over three times the amount of official aid received.¹² At a time when countries and migrants' families dependent on remittances need them the most, the World Bank predicts the sharpest decline in remittances in recent history, anticipating a 20 per cent decrease in 2020 due to the economic crisis induced by the COVID-19 pandemic and shutdown measures. For example, the global economic slowdown along with falling oil prices in GCC countries are projected to cause remittances to sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia to fall by 23 per cent and 22 per cent respectively in 2020.¹³ This will affect least developed and middle-income countries, threatening to **reverse progress made in the fight against poverty**.

Aggravation of inequalities associated with migration, forcing potentially more people to move out of necessity (SDGs 1, 10 and 11)

The pandemic will exacerbate the existing high levels of inequality within and between countries, which is an important driver of migration.¹⁴ Over time, this might translate into an increased number of people moving out of necessity, using unsafe and irregular channels. Human mobility restrictions are already **aggravating existing inequalities associated with migration**, with direct repercussions on individuals and societies.

Growing inequalities will be experienced prominently in urban settings, as the impact of COVID-19 on the life of urban communities and on vulnerable and marginalized populations is expected to be immense, with direct consequences on internal and international migrants who represent a large share of urban populations around the world. Migrants in urban settings often find themselves in precarious, informal living and working conditions. Migrants are also over-represented among the urban poor,¹⁵ often experiencing limited access to basic services such as education and health care, including discrimination, language, and cultural barriers. Acknowledging the critical importance of migrants for local economies and their specific vulnerabilities, some cities like New York have been proactively including migrants,¹⁶ irrespective of their migratory status, in measures meant to mitigate the social and economic impact of the pandemic, placing social cohesion at the heart of their action.

Vulnerabilities of migrant women will be exacerbated (SDG 5)

Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex. Migrant women face these same challenges, which are aggravated by their migratory status. Migrant women are also on the frontline of COVID-19 response and recovery, representing a high percentage of the health care, care home, elderly care and domestic care workers, often working in the informal economy with few protections against dismissal and limited access to paid sick leave or social protection.¹⁷ Additionally, migrant women are often employed in the sectors worst hit by business closures, including the service sector and tourism. It is likely that the crisis will roll back fragile gains made on migrant women's participation in the formal labour market – and with it, **knock-on impacts on personal and family income and gender equality**.

¹² IOM, [COVID-19 Analytical Snapshot #10: Economic Impacts on Migrants](#).

¹³ IOM GMDAC, Global Migration Data Portal and World Bank, [World Bank Predicts Sharpest Decline of Remittances in Recent History](#).

¹⁴ IOM, [IOM Institutional Strategy on Migration and Sustainable Development](#).

¹⁵ United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Sustainable Cities, Human Mobility and International Migration, [Migration and Inclusive Urbanization](#).

¹⁶ As reported by Bitta Mostofi, Commissioner, Mayor's Office of Migrant Affairs, New York in the [Second Global Forum on Migration and Development Webinar on the Impact of COVID-19 on Migrants, Migration and Development](#), 30 April 2020.

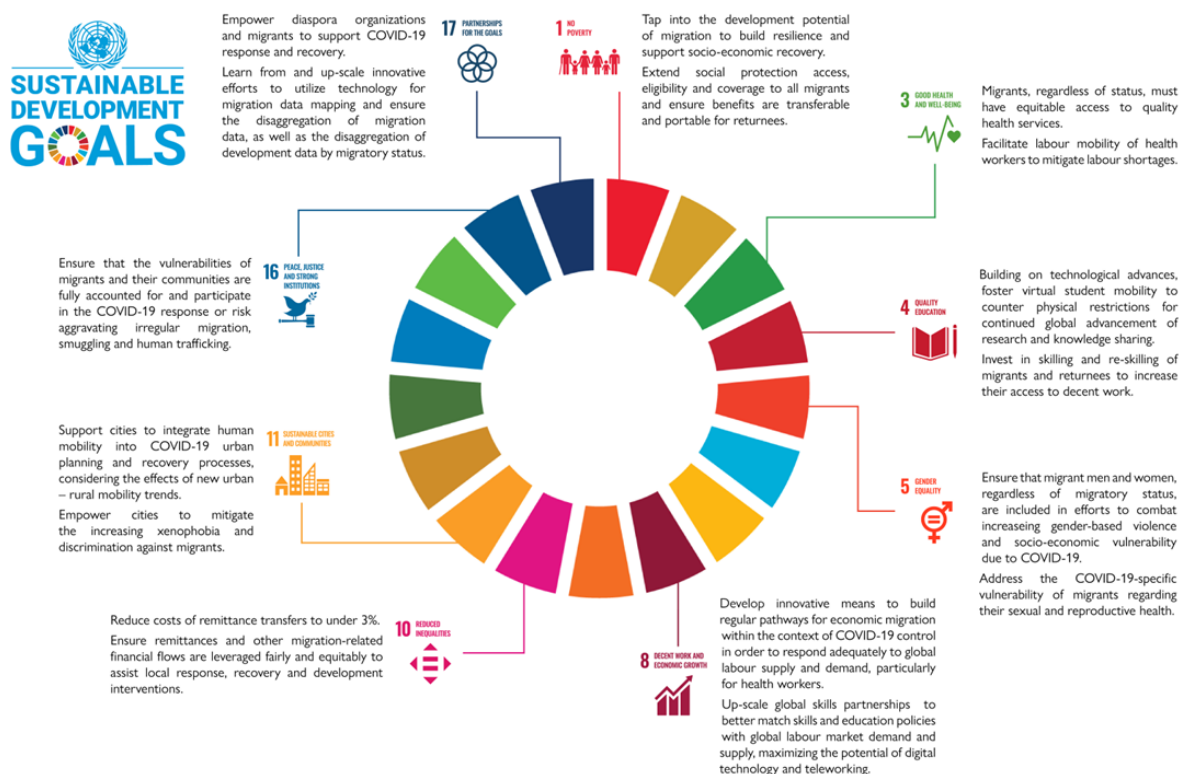
¹⁷ UN Women, [Guidance Note: Addressing the Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women Migrant Workers](#).

LEVERAGING HUMAN MOBILITY FOR “RECOVERING BETTER”

“COVID-19 does not discriminate, and nor should our response, if it is to succeed.”¹⁸ (UNNM)

As the international community is looking for solutions, the needs, rights and potential vulnerabilities of migrants must be fully accounted for in COVID-19 response and recovery efforts at country and international levels. This will not only benefit migrants and the communities that depend on them, but also economies and societies at large given the many ramifications between human mobility and sustainable development.

The graphic below articulates some of the most pressing policy interventions IOM recommends putting forward to harness the power of migration to “recover better” while supporting the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.



To articulate the actions highlighted above, a central focus should be on **protecting the rights of migrants and refugees and addressing xenophobia and discrimination** affecting both internal and international migrants. Failing to meet this obligation would not only mean violating migrants’ rights, but also limiting their much-needed contributions to socioeconomic recovery and putting the attainment of the SDGs at risk.

We must facilitate migrants’ contributions to economies and societies, which means **restoring the conditions for migration to continue being a central enabler of sustainable development**¹⁹ for societies and economies countries of origin and destination for migration. This includes lifting temporary human mobility restrictions while designing smart border crossing measures which mitigate any related health risks of movement. Governments need to address the challenges facing internal migrants through social

¹⁸ UN Network on Migration, COVID-19 Does Not Discriminate; Nor Should Our Response.

¹⁹ IOM, IOM Input to the High Level Political Forum 2020.

programmes and cash transfers. Universal health coverage needs to become a key focus of international cooperation. Through inclusive social, economic and fiscal responses, the skills, resources and business networks of migrants need to be maximized to support the recovery of economies and societies across communities, countries and regions. To achieve this, strong international cooperation is needed with migration being integrated coherently across all policy domains from a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach.

Improved data must be leveraged to strengthen and **refine our understanding of the impacts of COVID-19 on human mobility and development**. Disaggregation of data by migratory status is critical to capture any differentiated impacts on migrant populations and inform successful programme and policy responses. Recognizing that traditional data collection systems such as censuses and household surveys are being disrupted in many countries as a result of COVID-19, it is vital to explore the potential of alternative data sources and data innovation, including for example big data.

COVID-19 recovery efforts also need to be closely connected with migration governance at the international level by employing the Global Compact for Migration, which is anchored in the 2030 Agenda. The Global Compact for Migration presents a roadmap to facilitate safe, orderly and regular migration as coined in SDG 10.7. Its 360-degree vision and guiding principles provide precisely the integrated approach necessary to effectively respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The UN Network on Migration represents a critical convening platform that should be fully leveraged to connect human mobility and socio-economic response in country and effectively contribute to the UN socioeconomic response framework. To help achieve this, it is also important to systematically monitor and track COVID-19 responses that relate to different dimensions of migration.

A “WAKE-UP CALL” ON THE IMPORTANCE OF SAFE, ORDERLY AND REGULAR MIGRATION FOR PROSPEROUS SOCIETIES

The pandemic has brought the importance of migration for prosperous and healthy societies in the limelight while demonstrating the impact of reduced human mobility on sustainable development. The COVID-19 crisis is a “wake-up call,” an opportunity to re-think how we look at migration as our dependency on human mobility for healthy economies and societies has never been clearer. This should translate into smarter policies, revisiting the public discourse on migration and greater international cooperation so we can collectively “recover better” from COVID 19 and reap the benefits of “facilitating orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people” (SDG 10.7) for the benefits of all.

Watch the related video [HERE](#).

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