COVID-19 AND MOBILITY[1]

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have an unprecedented and devastating global impact, including on migration and thereby, people on the move. Where much of the world is dependent upon well-functioning and safe mobility for economic development, it is estimated that the pandemic stalled migration in 2020 by 27%[2]. Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been impacted.

Faced with limited mobility opportunities and extreme movement restrictions, migrants[3], including displaced populations, have become - and in many instances remain – stranded, unable to work, unable to access social benefits and protection, or to update their legal status. Encountering tremendous difficulties during the pandemic, COVID-19 has exacerbated structural inequalities amongst migrants, hindering respect for and protection of their human rights as well as social inclusion.

At the same time, 19 to 30 million additional people living in fragile and conflict-affected settings have been pushed into extreme poverty; threatening to double the number of food insecure individuals to 270 million globally[4] and increasing the potential negative drivers of migration and displacement on a global scale. 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.

> COVID-19, whilst exposing the risks certain groups face, has also highlighted that migrants are at the frontlines of COVID-19 responses and crucial to recovery, as well as providing a significant contribution to the societies they live in.

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[1] This document replaces the 2020 IOM statement on COVID-19 and mobility. It articulates both the humanitarian and development arch in pandemic response towards recovering through a mobility lens.

Cross-cutting areas include accountability to affected populations, gender, green economy and broader alignment with environment and climate change agenda, conflict sensitivity, partnership, people-centered approach, disability, inclusion, PSEA, risk communications, and community engagement.

[2] UNDESA (2021)

[3] **IOM Definition of "Migrant":** An umbrella term, not defined under international law, including a number of well-defined legal categories of people, such as migrant workers; persons whose particular types of movements are legally-defined, such as smuggled migrants; as well as those whose status or means of movement are not specifically defined under international law, such as international students. International Organization for Migration, Glossary on migration, IML Series No. 34, 2019, available HERE

[4] World Bank (2020), Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020: Reversals of Fortune. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Migrants, often at the forefront of the vaccine development and volunteerism to support local populations, undertake jobs critical to the good functioning of essential services, such as healthcare roles. Yet despite being fundamental to the pandemic response as essential workers, people on the move have been targeted and stigmatized. They have fallen victim to racist, xenophobic acts and hate crimes. Undertake low-paid, risky jobs, often without social benefits and protection. In other cases, they are excluded from national vaccination schemes. In other cases still, social and public health measures have not been inclusive in their design or implementation, leaving migrants behind.

COVID-19 is having very different impacts around the world but is a pertinent reminder as to how inter-connected our lives today are. Migration and mobility must be recognized as indispensable to the pandemic response to ensure the well-being and public health of all, as well as setting out the course for recovery to build back better. No one is safe until all are safe.

This document outlines priorities for joint action by States and the international community at large to continue addressing the impacts of COVID-19, focusing on response and recovery from a mobility perspective. Through inclusive approaches to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, our global society will be able to recover faster, better, and in a more sustainable manner.

This document can be read alongside IOM's Global Strategic Response and Recovery Plan (SRRP), which outlines four strategic areas of response:

1. Ensure continuation of essential services, mitigate risks and protect displaced persons, mobile populations and host communities.

2. Scale-up essential public health measures and promote mobility sensitive health systems.

3. Mitigate the longer-term socio-economic impacts of COVID 19, contribute to restarting human mobility and empower societies for self-reliance.

4. Inform response and recovery efforts by tracking the impact of COVID-19 on human mobility and strengthen evidence-based decision-making through data.

IOM'S CALLS TO ACTION ON COVID-19 AND MOBILITY

- **Leave no one behind by including migrants in response and recovery plans.**

The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated acute inequalities in access to health, social protection, and economic development. As many countries move into a deeper phase of the pandemic response and recovery, persons in vulnerable situations will be further impacted, particularly those in countries in crisis and transition. Mobile populations, including some host communities, are at risk of being left behind, affected specifically by the deepening economic instability.

Ensure continuation of access to essential services and life-saving services, mitigate risks and protect displaced persons, mobile populations and host communities.

Assistance provided should include, but not be limited to, shelter and improved living conditions (also reducing the risk of COVID-19 transmission), non-food items, multipurpose cash assistance, food security, housing, land and property, livelihoods, protection and other essential services. Assistance should remain accessible, needs-based and targeted, with specific attention to the gendered nature of needs as well as those of children, the elderly, and people with disabilities.

Humanitarian assistance should further be supported by a clear approach to mitigate the longer-term socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, with a specific focus on stabilization and resilience building.

- **Protect and facilitate the health of mobile populations without discrimination.**

Every individual has the right to health, irrespective of migration status. COVID-19 has exposed, in stark reality, that universal health coverage and access to essential health services are needed without discrimination to ensure that the right to health is accessible to all.

Scale-up Essential Public Health Measures and Promote Mobility Sensitive Health Systems to promote access and inclusion.

Moving forward, it is essential that health is an integral part of mobility management. Migration systems need to better integrate health considerations, including for example, health-capacitated border management systems and procedures, improved health and sanitary conditions, and access to critical health services in an equitable manner. This will support the prevention, detection, and response to COVID 19 and other public health threats in communities and at borders. Mental health and psychosocial support should also be provided in addition to infection prevention and control.

- **Guarantee full inclusion of migrants in national vaccination programmes.**

Mobile populations are usually among those who are either excluded from or face multiple barriers in accessing basic health services. While millions of migrants, including displaced persons, are currently included in immunization campaigns led by national health authorities, the UN and other aid organizations, far too many are not. It is often the poorest, those who find themselves in irregular situations, people displaced by natural disaster or conflict, and other vulnerable groups, who do not have equitable access to immunization services.

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National COVID-19 vaccination plans should be developed and implemented in line with international recommendations and public health evidence, with priority given to those most at risk, regardless of legal immigration status.

National governments are responsible and accountable for the health – and vaccination – of all people living within their borders regardless of their residence and legal status. Including migrants in national COVID-19 vaccination plans is not only the right thing to do, it is also the effective thing to do. This pandemic has shown that when it comes to public health, no one is protected unless everyone is protected. Countries need to implement measures to ensure that access to the COVID-19 vaccines exist in practice as well as in principle- fairly and equitably distributed across countries as much as within countries. Similarly, the proposed COVAX Humanitarian Buffer is only a measure of last resort and should not stand to replace a well-managed vaccine roll-out plan, inclusive of all migrants irrespective of their legal status; nor should it be provided unless in situations of critical, humanitarian need, in the absence of other options.

Support should further be provided to risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) activities (including community dialogues, feedback mechanisms, production of IEC materials, campaigns) to ensure that all are informed and able to avail of their rights. See, for example, the UN campaign Only Together for support to the fair and equitable global access to vaccines.

- **Reduce protection-related risks and vulnerabilities, and combat racism, xenophobia and exploitative practices.**

COVID-19 response and recovery plans should be rights-based, people-centered and inclusive in order to guarantee the protection of human rights of all migrants. Despite their critical role as essential workers, migrants have time and again faced instances of discrimination, stigma, social exclusion and even hate speech or crime, as a direct consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and disinformation around it. To mitigate the likelihood of emergent social tensions or localized conflict related to COVID-19, civic dialogue should be promoted to support social inclusion and acknowledge the contribution of migrants. Approaches should be sensitive to digital inequality, and specific measures taken to ensure that virtual spaces are inclusive as well as gender, age, and disability-appropriate.

Mitigate new or exacerbated community tension and conflict related to COVID-19.

In other instances, the pandemic, as in other times of crisis, has increased vulnerabilities and created new opportunities for the exploitation of migrants and gender-based violence, including trafficking in persons. The pandemic has not only brought a spotlight to the precarious situation of many migrants; but has aggravated these violations and structural vulnerabilities too often faced before, destabilizing to societies as a whole. Policies and measures should provide migrants with access to reliable and up-to-date information as well as direct assistance and protection.

Ensure that the pandemic does not create new or enhanced conditions for the exploitation and abuse of migrants.

Migrants are also facing rights violations due to increasingly strict border closures and the erosion of rights at borders. Some are left stranded, or arbitrarily detained under the pretext of quarantine. Many are unable to seek asylum, or to return to their countries of origin.

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Stranded migrants should be supported to return voluntarily to their countries of origin, have their situation regularized, and/or benefit from future safe migration opportunities when the situation allows.

Those migrants who return to their country of origin should be provided with reintegration assistance, to support the sustainability of their return. Efforts will need to be doubled to ensure ethical recruitment and standards in the labour market, while maintaining key channels of entry to decent work for migrants.

- **Leverage mobility as a means to achieve effective COVID-19 socio-economic recovery and build back better.**

The crisis has highlighted our dependence on internal and international mobility, as well as the importance of migrant workers as an essential part of the work force and contributors to economic development. Governments and societies can mitigate the socio-economic impact and recover better by strengthening international mobility systems that foster inclusive socio-economic recovery and sustainable development to empower societies.

Include and empower people on the move to support socio economic recovery

Efforts are needed to support the secure and humane restarting of mobility, including the reopening of borders and scaling up essential public health measures to allow for and facilitate safe, orderly and regular mobility. While some sectors reliant upon migrant workers have been heavily impacted by the pandemic, others, such as seasonal agricultural work critical for food supplies, continue to experience demand. Fluctuations should be well managed not only to meet supply and demand needs but equally, ensuring that those who migrate are not left in precarious situations, vulnerable to exploitation and violence, including against women and children. Similarly, sensitive to climate change, socio-economic recovery efforts need to support the shift to a green economy and promote the creation of green jobs, environmentally sustainable growth and cross-sectoral opportunities, notably for youth.

Recovery investments should be risk-informed and include migrants in preparedness and disaster risk reduction planning, including against any future pandemics. For those in displacement contexts, durable solutions to socioeconomic recovery, resilience and community stabilization are key to also mitigate the likelihood of emergent conflict related to COVID-19.

- **Promote safe, orderly and regular migration through innovation.**

COVID-19 has challenged many well-established migration governance practices, but it has also spurred the adoption of some migrant-friendly policies and innovative practices, which should be reviewed and formally adopted beyond the emergency measures. COVID-19 should not be used as an excuse to implement restrictive migration policies, tighten admission and stay requirements or deliberately worsen conditions faced by migrants during immigration and consular procedures. Similarly, the pandemic should not be an excuse to increase detention of migrants under the pretext of quarantines, nor the detention of minors or separation of families. Instead, there is an opportunity to strengthen international cooperation, immigration systems and border crossing mechanisms to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on human mobility and shape advancements forward.

Seize the opportunity to rethink migration policies and processes and approaches to more fully integrate migration governance imperatives and to ensure better – and safer – managed migration going forward, in compliance with international law.

Safe and accountable technological innovations and digitalization have been key to delivering essential information, including access to education, and support to migrants and communities in times of the pandemic. Structurally, technology has further supported the adaptation of border management practices and visa, work and residency permit processing to the pandemic context and realities.

Utilise technology and innovation to manage migration in a way that integrates global health security and protection considerations with human security with safeguarding against digital inequalities.

Policies and practices which support safe and inclusive internal and international mobility should be showcased, upheld, and reinforced, including possible integration into relevant international, regional, and national frameworks. Processes surrounding access to regular pathways need to be adapted to migrants' needs, taking into account accessibility and avoiding a growing digital divide that risks heightening existing vulnerabilities. Digitalization at borders must not be used to discriminate or in a manner not guaranteeing human rights, such as the right to privacy. Similarly, technology and digital innovation should be examined for how it could be used to support migration in the post-COVID-19 period. The digital gap needs to be closed to ensure equitable and inclusive access to information and services.

- **Inform response and recovery efforts by tracking the impact of COVID-19 on human mobility and strengthen evidence-based decision-making through data.**

Collecting timely information from mobile and displaced populations is a challenge that has become even more pronounced during COVID-19. Face-to-face data collection such as needs assessments, household, censuses and other types of surveys have been disrupted in many places. Recognising that migrants are being both disproportionately affected by the pandemic and at the same time undertaking an essential role in response, it is crucial that improved data and analysis on migrants be collected and shared for a more targeted and evidence-based response, including data on migrants in situations of vulnerability.

Improve data and analysis efforts to better understand the impacts of COVID-19 on mobility and counter misinformation.

There is a need for varied, adapted and flexible data collection/acquisition methods. Investing in innovative remote monitoring and assessment tools is critical, as is the support of capacities of national statistical offices. With the widespread association of misinformation related to COVID-19, the need for robust data, collected in a clear and transparent manner, is imperative.

- **Work together and recommit to mobility through solidarity and effective implementation of the GCM.**

For a better, inclusive, and rights-based post-pandemic future, migrants will be - and must be- an integral part in collective, global efforts of governments and other actors to return to normal life. We have been reminded during the COVID-19 pandemic of something that we have always known; transboundary challenges can be met only through multilateral efforts. It is crucial that the challenges and opportunities of international migration unite, rather than divide us. In face of serious challenges, many of the positive innovations and policy changes to respond to COVID-19 find their place in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM).

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The global response to COVID-19 presents a unique opportunity to reimagine human mobility from the ground up, to implement the vision of the GCM to ensure that no one is left behind; to build back better; to work towards safer, healthier, more sustainable and inclusive mobile societies.

The GCM provides a supportive road map to speed up response and recovery efforts and keep the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in sight.

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.

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