

LABOUR MOBILITY AND SKILLS IN RESPONSE, RECOVERY AND POST COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The purpose of this paper is to provide recommendations for labour mobility and skills in the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic and ongoing efforts to regulate domestic and international travel, fill labour gaps and respond to socioeconomic challenges. The recommendations are based on analysis of the current global situation and of the steps taken by governments, the private sector and other stakeholders. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) aims to facilitate the transition towards safe and well-managed labour mobility and ensure better preparedness and a proactive stance leading to more resilience and sustainability.

BACKGROUND AND KEY TRENDS

Due to the rapid spread of the novel coronavirus in early 2020, global human mobility experiences significant disruptions with several States placing restrictions on flights to and from China and later extending to other Asian countries. By March 2020, international movement in Europe, North America and other regions of the world came to a standstill. Not only air, ground and sea travel between States were shut down but also to varying extents internal transportation was disrupted, impacting supply chains and the movement of workers within State borders. While many citizens were repatriated by their governments, including migrant workers, many others remained stranded in their countries of employment, study and temporary residence, or mid-transit.

Soon after the widespread global restriction of cross-border movement, many origin and destination States realized their high dependency on the mobility of workers within certain occupations, such as agricultural, domestic care, construction, health care and maintenance. As demand for health services and care rapidly increased, acute needs were immediately felt in critical services provided by doctors, nurses, but also cleaners, maintenance workers and delivery staff. It became evident how essential all skills are and their contribution to the productivity and efficiency of business.¹ The restrictions also illuminated the complexity and cross-border interconnectedness of labour markets, economies, value chains and supply chains, and the dependence of some sectors on cross-border mobility. The impact on our ability to meet human needs called for urgent attention.

Emergency and ad hoc measures were taken by several States in terms of migration regulation to waive requirements for qualifications and skills in professions essential for maintaining health care and minimizing damage to economy from disruptions related to COVID-19.² In addition, a number of countries introduced exemptions from immigration rules and regulations to prevent migrants falling

¹ For further information, see Migration Policy Centre, “Rethinking Migrants’ Skills and Labour Immigration Policies” (24 April 2020). Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DhagAUUH3fg>.

² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, “Skill measures to mobilise the workforce during the COVID-19 Crisis” (10 July 2020). Available at <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/skill-measures-to-mobilise-the-workforce-during-the-covid-19-crisis-afd33a65/>.

into irregularity, with some creating additional pathways for migrant workers to sustain the supply of labour in affected industries and enterprises.

At the same time, some of the trending labour dynamics such as automation, digitization, e-commerce, and remote work, training and education were accelerated due to the pandemic. The influence of these changes will not only define and shape the world of labour migration and mobility for years to come but also affect the ways cities, communities and certain industries operate. This in turn will impact the nature of work, including the work of migrant workers as important contributors to the life and development of cities and communities.

Cities, the main destination of migrant workers, suffer significantly from COVID-19 prevention measures. City life and business activity either totally halt or significantly decrease depending on how the situation unfolds. This causes a disruption of communication and transportation, forcing businesses, employers and workers, including migrant workers, to seek solutions for maintaining business operations. This has resulted in a rise in e-commerce, the expansion of delivery services to limit face-to-face interactions, increases in telecommuting and e-conferencing, a rise in platform work, as well as a shift to commuting by individual means such as bicycle and scooter. These experiences will likely have a long-term influence on future work and employment modalities and mobility, and even the organization of city life.

In times of economic downturn and global lockdown, resilience is key for the private sector and will likely result in the creation of new localized value and supply chains. New business practices will inform and shape migration trends and mobility corridors, cooperation modalities and skills priorities. Businesses have started to and will continue looking for new labour mobility schemes across occupations, building new partnerships and cooperation less dependent on long distance communication and interaction but rather prioritizing local and regional.³

The impacts of the COVID-19 crisis are continuing to gain further complexity. Many places that initially saw a decrease in infections are now documenting new infection centres and many demonstrate higher infection figures than in the first part of 2020. Some sectors that had opened and returned to operation need to either close again or implement precautionary measures. Many States have requirements for arrivals from other locations based on the epidemiological picture, which can change on a daily basis, adding uncertainty and contributing to higher risks and vulnerabilities for migrant workers.

Socioeconomic and recovery issues are now also gaining priority and are becoming as important as public health considerations. Issues related to unemployment, prospective labour needs, the restoration and creation of new supply and value chains, and labour support are of increasing concern to policymakers. Measures to address these issues are affected not only by the ongoing pandemic but also by the uncertainty and unpredictability of how global and regional situations will unfold.

While unemployment is on the rise, it is neither even across all the sectors, nor long term for many economies. This requires that States find solutions to tackle immediate labour market imbalances, while at the same time ensuring high quality training for workers as currently cut jobs will be different when created again over the next several years.⁴

³ For further information, see SDG Lab, “Inequalities and the Informal Economy: How to move from crisis response to long-term resilience” (12 June 2020). Available at <https://www.sdglab.ch/en/what-we-do/2020/6/12/inequalities-amp-the-informal-economy-how-to-move-from-crisis-response-to-long-term-resilience>.

⁴ International Organization for Migration, “Unlocking Talents for an economic relaunch” (24 June 2020). Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DA4U_ockQ60&feature=emb_logo.

THE BASIS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

Mobility of labour, the significance of which has been confirmed during the COVID-19 crisis, will require new, innovative and effective policies, as well as flexible and responsive solutions. Even though temporarily disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the increasing integration of labour markets and cross-border supply and trade chains are driven by longer-term socioeconomic factors, such as demographic imbalances, forth industrial revolution and common global challenges like climate change. The ability of policymakers in cities, countries, regional and globally to identify common and mutually beneficial solutions will be an important factor for smooth economic recovery and delivering on the Objectives of the Agenda 2030.⁵

Policy development should continue to be guided by **Sustainable Development Goals**



3, 4.4, 4.b, 8.8 and 10.7 (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>) and



The **Global Compact for Safe Orderly and Regular Migration Objectives 5 and 18** which provide a solid framework to address the issues caused by the pandemic (www.iom.int/global-compact-migration).

The following policy recommendations on future migration governance focus on skills and mobility issues; however, they are viewed through the lens of the four basic tenets of the United Nations policy brief “COVID-19 and People on the Move” (June 2020):

- Exclusion is costly in the long run whereas inclusion pays off for everyone.
- The response to COVID-19 and protecting the human rights of people on the move are not mutually exclusive.
- No one is safe until everyone is safe.
- People on the move are part of the solution.

Over the past few months, countries around the globe have been looking at ways to reintroduce safe labour mobility and address the imbalanced impact on labour markets, with rising unemployment in some sectors and labour gaps in others, while being mindful of the ongoing spread of disease. To support these efforts, the proposed policy recommendations are formulated with the view of targeting needs and priorities of the following three main stakeholder groups: 1) governments, to adapt labour

⁵ See IOM Issue Brief “Why Migration Matters for Recovering Better” at www.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/issue_brief_why_migration_matters_for_recovering_better.pdf

mobility policies, 2) migrants, to empower them with skills so they are better equipped for the rapidly changing realities of contemporary labour markets, and 3) businesses, to make them more resilient to current and future challenges. These recommendations may not only alleviate the immediate economic and social pressures caused by the pandemic, but also contribute to developing a better context for labour migration outcomes in a post-COVID-19 world.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Enhance effectiveness, flexibility and future orientation of national labour mobility policies and regulations based on lessons learned.
 - **Develop flexible and responsive mechanisms** for adjusting regulative frameworks for mobility of needed foreign workers along existing and future labour mobility routes, supported by visa mechanisms where applicable.
 - Depending on the situation in specific labour markets and value chains, the list of professions falling under “**shortage category**” may include health workers, administrative and maintenance personnel in the health sector, care workers, cleaners, domestic workers and agricultural workers. This flexibility of regulative regimes, however, should not come at a detriment of safeguarding rights and decent working conditions of migrants, as well as broader development impact of their migration journeys.
 - Include the mobility of needed foreign workers into **future contingency and mitigation planning**, including strengthening the health-care workforce. Promote labour mobility to cover labour-intensive work such as contact tracing, delivery and cleaning services.
 - Continue building on **e-governance solutions** by digitalizing where possible application, documentation, processing and other government services at origin and destination to ensure safe, fast and easy procedures.
 - Address **challenges related to informality** within the broader informal economy and work towards status formalization as well as regularization through existing approaches and methodologies.
 - Facilitate **broader economic mobility** through student exchange, internship and apprenticeship programmes and link them closer to the needs of the labour markets and mobility schemes.
2. Ensure the empowerment and skill development of migrants.
 - Consider State cooperation tools and labour migration mechanisms to formulate emergency measures that **support migrant workers on the basis of equality with nationals in times of crisis**.
 - Ensure inclusion of migrants into **existing social protection and support schemes proposed by governments and business entities**, including by guaranteeing access to and providing clear information on health care services for all migrant workers and members of their families, regardless of their immigration status and formality of employment. Ensure migrant workers have access to rapid and effective responses to COVID-19 through counselling, testing and care.

- Establish closer inter-State cooperation on **pre-departure orientation and support**, with a particular focus on health screening and testing, when required, targeting locations with a high rate of virus spread.
- **Reinforce preparedness of migrant workers** to their migration experience by communicating up-to-date, clear and easily accessible pre-departure information in the native languages on their rights and legal requirements and conditions during all phases of travel, including documentation needed, as well as medical and quarantine requirements, health promotion, continuity of care, and disease prevention measures. Such information should include migrant rights and responsibilities at the destination and in relation to internal mobility and conditions for return.
- Strengthen **skill matching and positive career development outcomes** by building on existing skills recognition avenues, but also considering simplified and flexible options towards institutionalizing the ones that demonstrated effectiveness and viability during lockdown and crisis times. A particular attention should be paid to non-technical and soft skills which are gaining importance in modern labour markets and, hence, should be addressed through innovative approaches towards development, profiling, transfer and recognition.
- Take measures that make training and upskilling accessible to workers in the informal sector, which may result in movement towards a reduction of informality.
- Cooperate in setting up **skills mobility partnerships** or related prerequisites, including through the institutionalization of ad hoc solutions that proved effective during crisis times.

IOM provides elaborated guidance and a list of prerequisites for building effective skills mobility partnerships. Many of these prerequisites, even if taken separately, may serve as effective measures for a recovery plan
<https://eea.iom.int/sites/default/files/publication/document/Skills-Mobility-Partnerships-Infosheet.pdf>

- Activate **diaspora professionals in essential occupations**, such as health professionals, for better preparedness and crisis response, as well as recovery, for example by setting up competencies and skills transfer systems, temporary return or virtual engagement.
 - Identify and support relevant **digital skill development and inclusion** for all occupations.
3. Mobilize private sector as migrant employer to protect migrant rights and well-being as well as support economic recovery and business resilience.
- Look into **complementarities of labour mobility instruments with other economic and sectoral policies**, with a particular focus on those in trade, investment as well as mobility corridors and supply chains that experienced growth during the pandemic crisis. Reinforce those economic corridors with infrastructure, interstate cooperation and coordination mechanisms related to migration regulation, such as bilateral labour migration agreements, visa facilitation, social security cooperation and skills mobility partnerships.

- In addition to an economic corridor approach, mainstream solutions for better governance of transborder mobility within **broader regional integration processes** to support the restart of industries and broader economic ecosystems, which is particularly important for regional common markets, trade blocks and well-established mobility networks.
- **Strengthen capacities of employers** to support migrants on the job with life-long learning and career development by creating incentives for faster and easier access to training, reskilling and upskilling mechanisms. This will enhance economic output and productivity of workers, but also further facilitate cross-border mobility of the labour force and employability in volatile and imbalanced labour markets.
- Support business in **stronger engagement in the design of and participation** in existing labour mobility schemes or by building new ones to underpin emerging supply and value chains and effectively contribute to business resilience and sustainability.
- While applying the necessary regulatory mechanisms to ensure labour standards, **use modern communication technologies** to support opportunities such as distance employment, platform work and telemedicine involving foreign labour and the outsourcing of production means and services.
- Promote partnership between the private and public sector in developing **mutually reinforcing solutions for labour market information systems**, by tapping into opportunities of real time and big data, such as web scraping, employer and business association reporting towards better forecasting.
- **Include migrant employers, entrepreneurs and migrant support organizations** in the development of national policies and community economic recovery strategies and **engage with migrants in the development and updating of these policies and strategies**. Develop additional cooperation mechanisms, with active inclusion of civil society and private sector, to ensure better protection of the rights of migrant workers in times of crisis, using already existing tools such as IOM's "Migrants in Countries in Crisis" and the "Migration Crisis Operational Framework".

Tools for Collaboration:

- International Organization for Migration, “Policy Brief: Enhancing Access to Services for Migrants in the Context of COVID-19 Preparedness, Prevention, Response and Beyond” (6 November 2020). Available at <https://www.iom.int/news/enhancing-access-services-migrants-context-covid-19-preparedness-prevention-response-and-beyond>.
- IOM, “COVID-19: Guidance for employers and business to enhance migrant worker protection during the current health crisis” (10 August 2020). Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/covid-19-guidance-employers-and-business-enhance-migrant-worker-protection-during-0>.
- IOM, “Toolkit for Development Partners: Integrating Migration into COVID-19 Socio-economic Response” (August 2020). Available at <https://eea.iom.int/publications/toolkit-development-partners-integrating-migration-covid-19-socio-economic-response>.
- IOM, “COVID-19: Policies and Impact on Seasonal Agricultural Workers” (27 May 2020). Available at https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/seasonal_agricultural_workers_27052020_0.pdf.
- International Labour Organization (ILO), “Protecting migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic: Recommendations for Policy-makers and Constituents” (30 April 2020). Available at https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/labour-migration/publications/WCMS_743268/lang--en/index.htm.
- IOM, “COVID-19: Guidance for labour recruiters to enhance migrant worker protection during the current health crisis” (24 April 2020). Available at https://vietnam.iom.int/sites/default/files/IOM_Files/Press_Room/News/14Oct2020/COVID-19_Recruiter%20Guidance_Final_V1.pdf.
- ILO and IOM, “Tool for the assessment of Bilateral Labour Migration Agreements Pilot-tested in the African region” (1 October 2019). Available at https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---migrant/documents/publication/wcms_722208.pdf.
- IOM, “Policy guide on Entrepreneurship for Migrants and Refugees” (2018). Available at https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/policy_guide_migrants_refugees.pdf.

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