

International Dialogue on Migration 2017
Understanding migrant vulnerabilities: A solution-based approach towards a global compact that
reduces vulnerabilities and empowers migrants
18 – 19 July 2017, Geneva

Panel 1 – Understanding migrant vulnerability: concepts, drivers, protection frameworks and gaps

Understanding migrants' vulnerability is paramount to ensure the protection of all migrants, regardless of their status. Often discussions of vulnerability tend to focus on those migrants with legal definitions and specified protections (e.g. refugees), or on an individual's membership to a group (e.g. women, children, people with disabilities), yet this approach could inadvertently overlook the specific vulnerability each individual has.

Considering vulnerability as the function of membership in a particular group ignores a broader range of factors, from the individual to the structural level, that contribute to the vulnerabilities of particular groups and the individuals within them.

The abilities of individuals or groups to withstand, cope, recover, adapt and transform in the face of shocks varies greatly, so do the structural factors that affect migrants' agency and needs. Understanding what these factors and how they do shape migrants vulnerabilities is the threshold condition for the development of effective responses.

FAO's voices IOM in acknowledging the need for a more complete understanding of the factors that contributed to the individual migrant's or group of migrants' vulnerability, and the resources and capacities they themselves can mobilize to resist or recover from their vulnerability, and which would apply at any stage of the migration process and in any context.

A number of these factors are intimately linked to FAO's mandate and FAO advocates for an increased understanding of the root causes of migratory flows and of the socio-economic factors that impinges migrants' agency.

One could think for example of situations of crises or natural disasters, where security related issues usually outweigh all other considerations when it comes to the decision to stay or leave. In these situations food insecurity and absence of livelihood options, compounded with pre-existing fragilities, are also critical 'push' factors driving migration, affecting migrants' agency and subsequently preventing return.¹

Limited access to livelihood options increases migrants' vulnerability, deplete their assets and affect their food security, not to mention that it increases the resort to negative coping strategies, such as transactional sex or child labour.

¹ A 2017 WFP study found that countries with the highest level of food insecurity, coupled with armed conflict, have the highest outward migration of refugees. Additionally, when coupled with poverty, food insecurity increases the likelihood and intensity of armed conflicts. WFP estimates that refugee outflows increase by 0.4 percent for each additional year of conflict, and increase by 1.9 percent for each additional year of food insecurity. A recent survey conducted by FAO to assess the state of the agricultural sector in Syria reports that 94% of the local community interviewed said that if they received agricultural support this would either discourage people from leaving rural areas and/or encourage them to come back. See: FAO. 2017. Counting the cost: agriculture in Syria after six years of crisis.

Considering how socio-economic factors are perceived and affect individual and communities' agency is therefore essential to have a complete understanding of what migrants' vulnerability are and an important area that all actors should consider when designing responses to assist migrants.

Panel 5 – Promoting resilience and agency in support of vulnerable migrants

By identifying, strengthening and retaining the livelihood capacities of migrants, conditions conducive to solutions can be developed while still in crises. These can strengthen self-reliance and help people seize opportunities, as soon as they appear, paving the way for durable solutions.

In most crisis situations most people stay behind. Structural inequalities, including gender equality, impede the mobility of some and force the displacement of others. Those who manage to flee, often suffer from trauma and losses and need dedicated support to overcome the vulnerabilities they might have acquired as result of their displacement.

Communities receiving large numbers of displaced people are often faced with a variety of challenges and need to be assisted to be able to mitigate the negative impact and harness the opportunities triggered by the new arrivals.

Agriculture and rural development must be an integral part of the solution to tackle the most critical drivers of human mobility and harness its development potential. Maintaining food production and rebuilding the agricultural sector are fundamental conditions to reduce the long-lasting consequences borne by people living in and moving from fragile contexts and to lay the ground for stabilization and recovery.

FAO's experience point to the fact that livelihood interventions not only provide life-saving assistance, but are also aimed at reducing the resort to risky coping strategy that could increase people's vulnerabilities, deplete their assets and resources and fuel tensions between host and displaced populations.

These activities may include direct life-saving food security and livelihood support, facilitating access to natural resources (such as land and water) and markets for displaced, hosts and those trapped in crises. The modalities of these interventions vary depending on the context, and include assets and inputs provision, cash + interventions, capacity building and skills development.

It is also key to create livelihood and work opportunities for returnees in a way that ensures that receiving communities are not negatively affected, and that resources, infrastructure and services are not excessively strained and so to limit the negative impact on social cohesion.

In this respect, support to disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) activities are complementary to efforts to promote inclusive processes that addresses critical issues of land tenure and determination of resettlement areas, and work around and social protection and decent rural employment.