

*This paper is part of a series of short “think pieces” by IOM’s Migration Research High Level Advisers on the potential changes, impacts and implications for migration and mobility arising from COVID-19. Designed to spark thinking on policy and programmatic responses to COVID-19 as the impacts continue to emerge globally, the papers draw upon existing and new evidence and offer initial exploratory analysis and recommendations.*

## COVID-19 and the transformation of migration and mobility globally

# Stranded irregular migrant workers during the COVID-19 crisis: The question of repatriation

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### Introduction

The negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the population of the world has reached cataclysmic proportions. Many months after the pandemic was announced, there is still uncertainty as to whether, how, to what extent and for how long various responses to prevent the spread of disease and facilitate coronavirus eradication will remain in place. However, one fact is certain: the negative health and socioeconomic consequences of the coronavirus pandemic and the response plans will most hurt refugees, irregular migrants and rejected asylum seekers.<sup>2</sup> While the multidimensional deprivation experienced by all of these groups is at unprecedented levels, irregular migrant workers are coping with disturbing situations that provide warnings on long-standing dilemmas in global migration governance. These migrants may continue to work in precarious conditions (if their employers allow them) and risk being infected in an unsafe work environment, while lacking access to public health services; or they may quit or lose their jobs and risk living in extreme poverty with the added risk of deportation, given the strict implementation of lockdowns and self-isolation measures in host countries.<sup>3</sup> In addition, States have pursued policies of border closures, travel bans and repatriation to avert threats to public health in their countries. For most individuals on the move, “returning home” appears to be a viable option to protect themselves from COVID-19 health risks. For irregular migrants, considering “returning home” to save their lives is another riddle complicating their pandemic-bound lives.<sup>4</sup> They may view “returning home” as losing their chances of working, earning their livelihood abroad and supporting

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2 Lau et al., 2020.

3 Guadagno, 2020; World Bank Group, 2020.

4 Kathiravelu and Heller, 2020; IOM, 2020a.



their families back home; risking the consequences of a treacherous return journey; and paying fines for irregular stays in the host country, with consequent travel bans. However, if they do proceed with a “return” decision, they then risk facing issues with the availability, capacity and affordability of travel, as well as the strict policies governing cross-border mobility that are applied to irregular migrants.

With this background, this paper briefly discusses the social, economic and health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of irregular migrants, and focuses on the responses to the following questions:

- (1) How do stranded irregular migrant workers experience insecurities and uncertainties in their lives during the COVID-19 crisis?
- (2) How and why do irregular migrants struggle with the repatriation process?
- (3) How can the repatriation process be improved through multilevel cooperation for global migration governance?

### **Irregular migrant workers and the COVID-19 crisis: Locked in and locked out**

Although State actors officially criminalize irregular migration, irregular migrant workers are an integral part of national economies in many parts of the world.<sup>5</sup> There is ample evidence to show that irregular migrant workers across the world are employed in various industries and services from textiles to domestic work, from food and the tourism industry to construction, depending on the context. The unregistered status of these workers often causes several problems; they are more likely to be exploited by employers, but are less likely to voice grievances about their employers or the authorities. Since they cannot join unions and organize, they face difficulties in improving their wages and working conditions; as they continuously face the risk of deportation, they remain silent about severe and exploitative work conditions, mostly in “3-D jobs”.<sup>6</sup>

Historically, migrant workers in general, and irregular migrant workers in particular, are more likely to experience significantly more severe difficulties during times of crisis in the host society, regardless of the nature of the crisis (e.g. armed conflicts, uprisings, natural disasters and pandemics). For instance, in 1990–1991, the Gulf War negatively impacted the lives of millions of migrant workers in Iraq and Kuwait, forcing them to return home.<sup>7</sup> Similar experiences were also observed during the uprisings and subsequent conflicts of the so-called “Arab Spring” in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>8</sup> These historical examples clearly illustrate the ways in which

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5 Samers, 2001.

6 Düvell, 2006; Massey, 2009.

7 Van Hear, 1995.

8 Russeau, 2011.



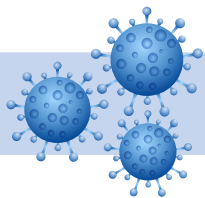
migrant workers are both locked into and locked out of the countries in which they reside; their access to economic opportunities and social services in host countries is restricted or denied, yet they are unable to return home or move elsewhere, rendering them stranded.

These conditions are strikingly similar for migrant workers during the COVID-19 crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a direct negative impact on migrant workers' daily lives, with some of these migrants immediately considering escaping from these negative consequences by returning home. In recent months, dozens of cases globally have highlighted the challenges surrounding repatriation processes. For instance, tens of thousands of migrant workers from India and Pakistan lost their jobs across the Gulf States – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman – as a result of the economic downturn caused by the pandemic.<sup>9</sup> Many of these workers wanted to return home, but commercial flights had stopped by the time they were ready to take them. Host States appeared keen to prevent and control the coronavirus from spreading among migrant worker populations, especially in cases where migrants reside in overcrowded housing and camps, whether by instituting preventative measures or by encouraging these migrants to return to their countries of origin. In response to the situation, certain home countries in South-East Asia, such as India and Pakistan, started organizing special flights to repatriate their citizens from the region. However, the process presents a huge challenge to all involved. According to reports from mid-May 2020,<sup>10</sup> while around 200,000 Indian nationals registered to be repatriated from the United Arab Emirates, only around 2,000 persons were flown back to India every week. Similarly, more than 60,000 Pakistani nationals in the United Arab Emirates registered to be repatriated, but only 9,000 of them returned home on flights organized by the Pakistani Government. While the home country governments intended to increase the number of weekly flights, there was also a need to prioritize the return of migrants with certain profiles before others, such as migrants on short-term visas, those suffering from medical emergencies, pregnant women and the elderly. Due to the limited number of seats available on flights, and while accounting for these variables, even those who meet the prioritization criteria have encountered difficulties in being assigned to a return flight. In addition, while national governments have worked to facilitate the repatriation process, migrants are still expected to pay for their flights and their 14-day stay at a quarantine facility once they arrive home. This financial factor has influenced not only migrants' access to the repatriation process, but also their willingness to return.

In contrast with regular migrant workers, irregular migrant workers – who are residing without legal status and are often restricted to the most precarious jobs

9 Hashmi, 2020.

10 Ibid.; World Bank Group, 2020.



within the least-regulated segments of the economy – have been particularly vulnerable to the devastating conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic environment. In general, COVID-19 implies a shock for all migrant workers, but the consequences for irregular migrant workers are quite asymmetric: many irregular migrant workers lose their jobs (and housing, in the case of domestic-care workers) without prior notice; for many the risk of infection increases, because of their poor living conditions; if infected, they are forced to choose between risking arrest and deportation if they do access treatment, or risking their lives if they do not; and, infected or not, they are stranded in the host county with very limited possibilities of returning home.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, for many irregular migrant workers, their situation as “locked in and locked out” worsens as the COVID-19 crisis continues.

Given the worsening conditions that irregular migrant workers face, there have been various governmental attempts to ease their difficulties. The concrete initiatives made by the Italian and Portuguese Governments provide us with two good examples. The Italian Government passed a law on 13 May 2020 paving the way for around 200,000 irregular migrant workers to apply for six-month legal residency permits.<sup>12</sup> Portugal’s decision in March 2020 to treat people with pending immigration or asylum applications as residents for the duration of the coronavirus crisis has been regarded as an effort to guarantee that irregular migrants have access to health care and social services during the pandemic.<sup>13</sup>

In other cases, however, the return decision becomes the only option to solve the “locked in and locked out” question surrounding irregular migrant workers. Their irregular status further complicates repatriation processes. The following cases are drawn from three different parts of the world to illustrate the experiences of irregular migrant workers stranded during the COVID-19 crisis: Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Ecuador, Colombia and Peru;<sup>14</sup> migrants in the corridor stretching from Ethiopia to Somalia, Djibouti and Yemen, then to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries;<sup>15</sup> and Armenian irregular migrant workers in Turkey.<sup>16</sup> Across these diverse groups, the common characteristics are their increasing vulnerability due to the pandemic, the decline of their survival capacities in the host countries, and consequently, their reconsideration of the decision to return home. Many of these migrant workers have an irregular status without the formal right to reside in the different host countries and many of them have lost their jobs due to the pandemic and associated restrictions. In the absence of social protection and safety

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11 Guadagno, 2020; World Bank Group, 2020.

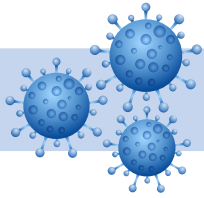
12 D'Ignotti, 2020.

13 Da Silva, 2020.

14 Acosta, 2020.

15 IOM, 2020b.

16 Kucera, 2020.



nets that protect only the regular migrants, irregular migrants began to consider returning home as a viable survival strategy, which was not an option in the pre-COVID-19 period.

These three cases of stranded migrant workers are explored to illustrate the complexities surrounding the repatriation question of migrant workers during the COVID-19 crisis. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of Venezuelan irregular migrants – who fled persecution, poverty and political turmoil in their country and have been living in neighbouring countries for several years – face multiple difficulties, because they are unable to access basic health and hygiene facilities, have lost their livelihoods, and risk deportation. Lacking shelter, social protection, access to health-care services and livelihoods, many Venezuelan irregular migrants became desperate and expressed their desire to return home.<sup>17</sup> However, due to diverse pandemic-related measures such as border closures, curfews and internal lockdowns, return arrangements were difficult to organize and pursue. By the end of April 2020, around 12,000 Venezuelan migrants had returned to their home country in 290 buses. In addition, approximately 45,000 migrants who had entered the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela clandestinely walked back across the border, with the total number of returnees being around 57,000.<sup>18</sup> Due to the cancellation of domestic flights and intercity buses within Colombia, Venezuelan returnees had to walk for long distances on their journey home. One of the Venezuelan migrants described their dilemma as stranded migrants with the following statement: “They want to get rid of us, yet they’re not allowing us to leave.”<sup>19</sup> Reports from the field explain that these migrants are receiving some assistance during their return journeys from local humanitarian organizations and regional governments, but this assistance is considered as insufficient, given the diverse needs. Various State and non-State actors and organizations have appealed to the international community for an urgent increase in support.<sup>20</sup>

The migration route that extends between the Horn of Africa and the Arab Peninsula presents another remarkable example of being “locked in and locked out”. This corridor stretches from Ethiopia to Somalia, Djibouti and Yemen, onwards to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries; and the majority of migrants using it are Ethiopians, Somalis and Yemenis, among other nationalities. Due to the pandemic-related restrictions on movement, nearly 2,000 Ethiopian transit migrants found themselves stranded in Djibouti on their way to the Arab Gulf States.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in Yemen, thousands of migrants were stranded at international borders and within governorates, including thousands of migrants stranded at the border between

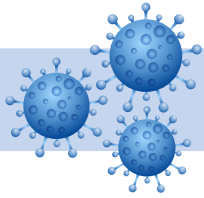
17 Acosta, 2020.

18 NPR, 2020.

19 Ibid.

20 IOM and UNHCR, 2020.

21 IOM, 2020b.



Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Regional smuggling networks appear to have facilitated migrants' journeys on foot, either towards their intended destination or back to Ethiopia at the risk of remaining stranded due to the closure of the borders. Meanwhile, international organizations operating in the region are unable to provide repatriation assistance, because of the travel restrictions adopted by governments in the region. As one example, the International Organization for Migration's operations are on hold, and consequently IOM has not been in a position to provide voluntary return support for Ethiopian migrants stranded in Djibouti.<sup>22</sup>

### **A case of good practice in good governance**

To shed light on the reality of migrant workers' vulnerabilities during the COVID-19 crisis, the case of Armenian migrant workers in Turkey is particularly significant.<sup>23</sup> Despite the long-established tension between Armenia and Turkey, and the lack of diplomatic relations between them, a dynamic migratory system exists, bringing thousands of Armenian migrant workers to Istanbul; the majority of those migrants live and work in the city irregularly. An estimated 10,000 Armenian irregular migrants work in Turkey in a variety of jobs, ranging from domestic work to the textile industry.<sup>24</sup> The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the vulnerabilities faced by these migrant workers, given their limited rights to access health care and other social services, their living and working conditions and their uncertain legal status. Naturally, these migrant workers fear becoming infected, alongside experiencing job insecurity and difficulties affording food and accommodation. As a result, some Armenian migrant workers started to consider returning home, but return was not easily achieved, due to national and international restrictions on movement, as well as the absence of diplomatic relations between the two countries. This situation raises the complicated issue of how to proceed with repatriation in the absence of diplomatic ties. The challenge in this context has been to address this question to the greatest extent possible in consultation with all parties concerned. The various actors involved appear to have found a way to cooperate regarding this issue. It was reported that the Armenian Government sought the mediation of the Georgian Government to facilitate an evacuation corridor through Georgia for buses carrying Armenian migrants.<sup>25</sup> On the Turkish side, Government authorities expressed readiness to assist in the repatriation of Armenian citizens during meetings with the spiritual leader of Turkey's ethnic Armenian community. Consequently, this approach represents a successful operation, repatriating a few hundred stranded migrant workers and providing a good example of "good governance and cooperation" in the international arena, despite the lack of diplomatic ties.

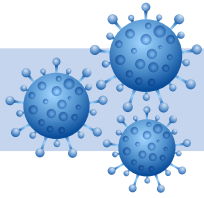
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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Kucera, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Grigoryan, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Asbarez, 2020.



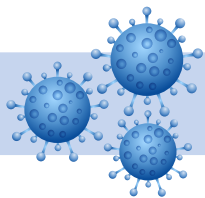
### Concluding remarks

This paper provides an alert to the emerging evidence that if irregular migrants' legal, socioeconomic, public health and institutional challenges are left unattended by all the relevant public and private actors, not only will the irregular migrants' own health and well-being be in peril, but so also will global public health. The paper concludes by noting that in the COVID-19 context, global migration governance actors may seize a unique opportunity to validate the imperative for international collaboration to redesign repatriation policies in ways that will support the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, while producing a constructive effect on long-overdue efforts to improve the lives of stranded irregular migrants around the world. The paper argues that actionable repatriation policies will take account of irregular migrants' fundamental rights, as individuals on the move who are subject to persistent structural disadvantages wherever they are, and which aim to remove the constraints that existing cross-border mobility regulations place on their return decisions. Only then is repatriation likely to become a feasible policy option for States and an attainable survival strategy for stranded migrants in times of global life-threatening crises of any sort.

In closing, it would be wise to suggest a concrete recommendation for the multilateral processes that the world faces in the COVID-19 environment in the context of irregular migrant workers and their repatriation issues. Although there is no direct reference to the cases of irregular migrant workers in the 1990 UN Migrant Worker Convention, it is argued that the philosophy behind this Convention ensures the protection of any type of migrants in any emergency situation.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, the content and values of the Convention should be revisited and promoted in dealing with migrant workers in crisis situations, such as COVID-19, regardless of their legal status.

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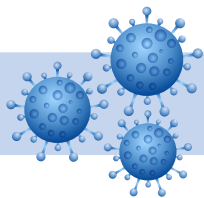
<sup>26</sup> Bosniak, 1991.



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