

*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

# Deeper international cooperation on COVID-19 pandemic prevention and control measures in the field of migration administration, with reference to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration

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### Introduction

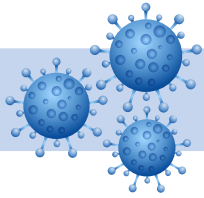
Many governments have set positive examples by including migrants as part of their comprehensive response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These steps include temporarily suspending forced returns and providing visa and work permit extensions, temporary residence, or other forms of regular status. They also include releasing people from immigration detention and finding safe, non-custodial alternative accommodation for them in the community, rather than seeking their deportation.<sup>2</sup> However, the lack of deep international cooperation denies or seriously weakens the rights of migrants, and does not effectively inhibit the spread of related hate, xenophobia, scapegoating and scaremongering against migrants. This not only undermines their own well-being, but more broadly, that of receiving communities which benefit from their diverse contributions to social cohesion. It is imperative for the international community to deepen international cooperation on migration and foster greater synergy to enable humanity as one to win the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Challenges faced by international migration cooperation on COVID-19 pandemic prevention and control

International travel restrictions without deep international cooperation deny or seriously weaken migrants’ right to seek asylum, their right to return and their right

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations Network on Migration, 2020.



to family reunification. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought global mobility to a near standstill with border closures, air travel suspensions and complex restrictions on mobility.<sup>3</sup> According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 215 countries, territories and areas had implemented a total of 52,262 travel restrictions related to COVID-19 by 23 April 2020.

Forcibly displaced and other migrant populations, including people seeking asylum, are among the first to confront the harsh impacts of international travel restrictions and are the most affected by such restrictions. Several countries have closed entry to all foreigners, including asylum seekers.<sup>4</sup>

The right to return is seriously weakened, especially for countries that have large numbers of citizens abroad due to wide-ranging suspensions or reductions in international flights. Thousands of migrants trying to reach their home countries are currently stranded at borders all across the globe, in Asia, Africa, the Americas, or at sea by the shores of Europe, due to border closures.<sup>5</sup> Arrangements for temporary or charter flights are too limited to meet the needs of citizens abroad to return. Approval procedures for temporary or charter flights have become much stricter in many countries. Some countries cannot agree on arrangements for these flights for technical or political reasons. Further, many citizens abroad cannot afford skyrocketing air-ticket prices caused by suspensions or sharp reductions in international flights.

While international travel restrictions have been widely imposed around the world, some countries have gone further, suspending previously issued visas, residence permits and permanent residence permits, without making appropriate exceptions for foreign partners, dependent children and legal guardians of citizens, and permanent residents. Many families with different citizenships are then separated and are not able to reunite in a timely manner to look after each other during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Migrants who travel or live in inadequate and unsafe conditions, without access to water, sanitation and hygiene, including those living in homelessness, overcrowded shelters, informal settlements, camp situations, slums or those with precarious or inadequate housing, face serious trouble in the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 infections in Singapore jumped to close to 14,000 cases, as more than 900 patients were detected on 25–26 April 2020. The majority of these cases were identified among foreign labourers holding work permits in the country and housed in dormitories.<sup>6</sup> Some migrants become homeless because they cannot afford or find

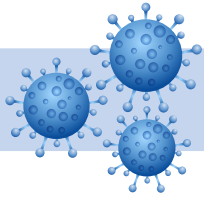
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3 CCSA, 2020.

4 IOM, 2020a.

5 OHCHR, 2020.

6 Hakim, 2020.



accommodation. They exhaust all their money and are without financial support from either the country of origin or of destination. It is not uncommon for locals to refuse to provide accommodation to migrants.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing social and economic disparities, with migrants among these groups facing additional burdens of stigmatization and discrimination. Migrants often face obstacles in accessing health care, including language and cultural barriers, costs, lack of information and the wide-reaching consequences of xenophobic attitudes and behaviours. Undocumented migrants avoid hospitals for fear of identification and reporting, ultimately presenting late with potentially more advanced cases.<sup>7</sup> Anti-foreigner sentiment has surged online and in the streets.<sup>8</sup>

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, United Nations High Commissioners Michelle Bachelet and Filippo Grandi warned that as fear and uncertainty increase, scapegoats are never far away. We have already seen anger and hostility directed at some people of East Asian origin.<sup>9</sup> Individuals perceived as ethnically Chinese or Asian, or belonging to certain ethnic and religious minorities, migrants, and foreigners have been blamed and vilified for spreading the virus.<sup>10</sup> A handful of political leaders have intentionally described COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus”. Such language was advanced through the mainstream media, including *The Australian*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Der Spiegel*, as well as in social media. Other political party leaders have also been pushing anti-Asia sentiments, leading to a rising wave of hate against Asian-Americans. Discrimination and anti-migrant behaviour has extended to citizens returning from countries with high infection rates, who are treated as a source of imported COVID-19. When 14,000 Mozambican migrants returned home from South Africa, concerns grew that cross-border movements could potentially spread COVID-19 in their home country.<sup>11</sup> COVID-19-related hate, xenophobia, scapegoating and scaremongering make targeted migrants more vulnerable to violence, inhibit them from expressing themselves and participating in public debate, expose them to political and social exclusion, isolation and stigmatization, and deter them from accessing medical treatment and other vital services.

### **Good practices in the area of international migration cooperation on COVID-19 pandemic prevention and control**

All countries should coordinate closely to support global efforts to counter the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including proportionate international travel

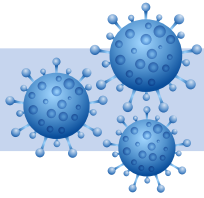
7 Devakumar et al., 2020.

8 Guterres, 2020.

9 Bachelet and Grandi, 2020.

10 United Nations, 2020a:1.

11 United Nations, 2020b.



restrictions in accordance with national regulations and assistance where necessary to repatriate citizens. The United Nations Network on Migration has emphasized in a statement that limitations on freedom of movement should not unduly affect human rights and the right to seek asylum, and that restrictions should be applied in proportionate and non-discriminatory ways.

As a fundamental human right, particularly given the urgent needs arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, each country should unconditionally guarantee the right of all migrants and their families to return to the country of which they are nationals, and receive any of their citizens abroad to avoid forced stays in foreign countries. The entry and exit of foreign families of citizens and permanent residents of those countries should be actively facilitated and exceptions made in suspending previously issued visas and residence permits. The Government of Portugal is working hard to help Portuguese emigrants to return to Portugal in the summer of 2020.

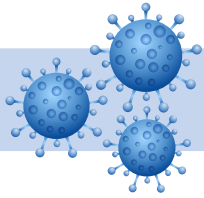
Each country should provide support services for its citizens abroad to help them cope during the COVID-19 pandemic. Actions to limit the right to return are illegal and unacceptable under international migration law. Migrants who are returning to countries of origin, especially those who are returning from countries with high infection rates, must be included without discrimination in national responses, social protection and recovery strategies, and should be protected against stigma and exclusion in both private and public spheres. China invited leading Chinese experts to share COVID-19 prevention tips with citizens abroad via video link, and coordinated with other agencies to send more than 20 medical expert teams to as many countries to provide guidance for citizens abroad. China also helped its citizens abroad get in touch with local health providers and with experts in China, the latter via telemedicine platforms. In addition, China paid particular attention to the well-being of Chinese students abroad, delivering more than 1 million health kits.<sup>12</sup>

The entry and exit of citizens and foreigners involved in COVID-19 pandemic prevention and control should be actively facilitated. For both citizens and foreigners participating in epidemic prevention and control work, China provided 24-hour emergency visa services. Foreigners coming to China to participate in COVID-19 pandemic prevention and control may, according to their work needs, get residence permits for the duration of their work; priority is given to applications for permanent residence by those who make important contributions to COVID-19 pandemic prevention and control.

States of origin, transit and destination should work together to help migrants in serious trouble during the COVID-19 pandemic. The provision of all essential services, including accommodation, food, water and sanitation, should be separate

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<sup>12</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China, 2020.



from immigration enforcement. For homeless migrants, measures could include using short-term rentals, emergency accommodation with no barriers as to their migratory status, and emergency financial aid for migrants who may have been working in the informal economy. Singapore promised that its migrant workforce would not be left in the dirt and would be given necessary care akin to that for Singaporean citizens.<sup>13</sup> The Portuguese Council of Ministers decided in April 2020 to temporarily grant all migrants and asylum seekers currently in the country full citizenship rights.

Global political leaders who maximize trust and minimize fear are critical to reducing anxiety and providing more effective responses during times of uncertainty and crises. The leaders of international organizations, including United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, IOM Director General António Vitorino and national political leaders, including French President Emmanuel Macron and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, have spoken about the critical need to address xenophobia.

The international community should act in solidarity to ensure that public discourse and responses to COVID-19 do not contribute to xenophobia and racial discrimination. Such responses may include steps to prevent, monitor and address stigma and incidents of racism, xenophobia, incitement to discrimination, hatred and violence, and to hold those responsible to account. International reports about COVID-19-related hate, xenophobia, scapegoating and scaremongering are critical for all to know the truth and take appropriate actions. IOM's COVID-19 Analytical Snapshots No. 6,<sup>14</sup> No. 29,<sup>15</sup> and No. 33,<sup>16</sup> are designed to capture the latest information and analysis regarding stigmatization, discrimination and combating xenophobia and racism. The Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council and Chinese for Affirmative Action have jointly documented 1,497 discriminatory and xenophobic incidents in the United States of America from 19 March to 15 April 2020.<sup>17</sup>

### **Proposals for deeper international cooperation on COVID-19 pandemic prevention and control, with reference to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration**

The COVID-19 pandemic has created opportunities to heighten international solidarity and inclusion. As the United Nations Secretary-General said at the meeting of G20 leaders in March 2020, only international cooperation can avoid a worst-case scenario. National efforts should be facilitated by international cooperation, which is one of a set of cross-cutting and interdependent guiding principles of the Global

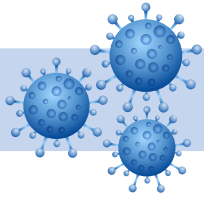
13 Hakim, 2020.

14 IOM, 2020b.

15 IOM, 2020c.

16 IOM, 2020d.

17 Jeung and Nham, 2020.



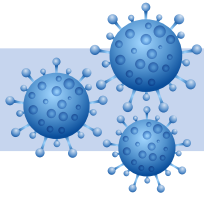
Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, committing States to address migration by international, regional and bilateral cooperation and dialogue. In line with the commitments set out in the Global Compact, States share responsibilities to address each other's needs and concerns over migration, and an overarching obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of all migrants, regardless of their migration status, while protecting the health of all.

Objective 3 of the Global Compact calls for States to provide accurate and timely information at all stages of migration. In this regard, States should stop the spread of misinformation and the use of stigmatizing narratives by promoting and improving systematic bilateral, regional and international cooperation and dialogue to exchange information on migration-related trends, and encourage the sharing of international traveller data and research results on international migration measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. International support should be provided to countries that have been stigmatized for spreading the coronavirus. This includes encouraging international dialogue and understanding among different groups, translating rapid, accurate and balanced information for those most in need into migrant languages, as well as keeping related countries informed of discriminatory and xenophobic incidents.

Objective 7 of the Global Compact calls for States to address and reduce vulnerabilities in migration. To achieve this goal, States should stabilize and revitalize the global economy by stopping COVID-19-related hate, xenophobia, scapegoating and scaremongering, in order to focus efforts on fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. Specific support measures should be applied to ensure that vulnerable migrants in States of transit and destination have access to consular protection and humanitarian assistance, such as accommodation for homeless migrants and health kits for all migrants, with assistance being provided for States and regions with more vulnerable international migrants.

Objective 11 of the Global Compact calls for States to manage borders in an integrated, secure and coordinated manner. To manage national borders in a coordinated manner, States should promote bilateral and regional cooperation, facilitating necessary cross-border movements by enhancing coordination of international travel restriction policies, strengthening dialogue and reaching consensus on international travel restrictions among States of origin, transit and destination. Approval procedures for temporary or charter flights should be relaxed while the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve.

Objective 14 of the Global Compact calls for States to enhance consular protection, assistance and cooperation throughout the migration cycle. In this regard, States should better safeguard the rights and interests of all migrants at all times by



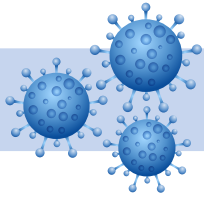
strengthening consular capacities to identify, protect and assist citizens abroad who are in a vulnerable situation because of COVID-19, providing consular support including online medical advice and guidance, and health kits to every citizen abroad in need of help. Support should also include bringing back citizens stranded abroad, through maintaining close contacts among governments of countries of origin, transit and destination and their departments in charge of diplomacy, health, education, police and immigration to facilitate visa extensions, as well as providing medical diagnosis and treatment for citizens abroad.

Objective 23 of the Global Compact calls for States to strengthen international cooperation and global partnerships for safe, orderly and regular migration. To accomplish this, States should support each other and take joint action to address the challenges faced by each country by enhancing multilateral platforms, particularly promoting the role of international meetings and conferences in facilitating the high-level diplomacy needed to address international migration challenges, supporting IOM efforts to play a greater role in global cooperation, as well as establishing a governance mechanism for international coordination on international migration measures responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 outbreak is spreading worldwide, posing enormous threats to the life and health of migrants and bringing formidable risks and challenges to migration administration in States of origin, transit and destination, including border closures, suspensions of visas, waves of xenophobia, and weakened protections of migrant rights. No country can address these new risks and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic on its own. It is imperative for the international community to address each other's needs and concerns over migrants and fight the COVID-19 pandemic through solidarity and cooperation, building a global community of international migration for all.





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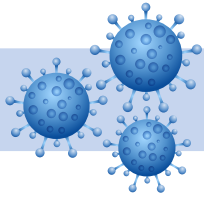
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