

COVID-19 and the transformation of migration and mobility globally

Temporary migration regimes and their sustainability in times of COVID-19

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Introduction

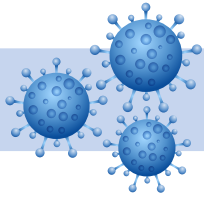
Temporary labour migration schemes featuring enforced transience as a fundamental governing principle have become increasingly prevalent globally. Predicated on easy transnational mobility, these schemes include brokerage-driven migration of South and South-East Asian men and women to low-waged sectors such as construction and domestic work in Gulf countries, Malaysia and Singapore; the recruitment of migrant workers under the Republic of Korea’s Employment Permit System; and the seasonal worker programmes in Australasia, Europe and the United States of America. Under a temporary migration regime, migrants are allowed to labour, but not allowed to stay. Indeed, pathways to permanency are narrowing. Of labour migrants entering Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in 2017, 583,000 held permanent visas while 4.9 million entered through temporary channels, with the latter group growing almost twice as fast year-on-year.²

Temporary migration is characterized by the constant ebb-and-flow churning of migrants across international borders. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on temporary migration is both immediately felt, with the curtailment of mobility and travel during pandemic times, and likely to produce longer-term consequences. In terms of economic ramifications alone, labour migrants account for almost 30 per cent of workers in some of the most affected sectors in OECD countries, while generating impetus for the growth of international remittance transfers, from an estimated USD 126 billion in 2000 to USD 554 billion in 2019.³

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² OECD, 2019.

³ UNSDG, 2020:8.



Bolstered by a “triple win” migration-and-development discourse, the expansion of temporary migration schemes in recent decades is premised on “a neoliberal economic logic, where the value of individual migrants is their productive contribution to labour markets and mutual (economic) benefits for sending and receiving states”.⁴ This logic entails a managerial approach to temporary migration to ensure the transience and non-integration of labour migrants in host societies on the one hand, and the durability of remittance transfers to left-behind families and continual investment in home countries on the other.⁵ More specifically, features of temporariness in labour migration regimes include the use of short-term, time-bound contracts that automatically lapse without continual renewal, with little to no possibility of family reunification or permanent settlement. Low-waged labour migrants are frequently excluded or only partially incorporated into labour laws and welfare support schemes of host nation States, with minimal access to the full range of rights available to citizens.⁶ As their continued sociolegal status in countries of destination depends on the decisions of employers,⁷ low-waged labour migrants are often rendered docile and deferential through “technologies of servitude” at work, while perceived to be outsiders with no right to belong beyond the sphere of work.⁸ These features of temporariness conflate to place low-waged migrants in situations that are hyper-precarious.⁹

In the pre-COVID-19 world, nation States – both sending and receiving – have proceeded on the assumption that the economic logic of deploying migrants as low-cost, surplus labour to enhance economic growth and the social consequences on human well-being can be held in the balance and managed to promote developmental benefits for all. However, as economic nationalism sweeps the world and the uncertainties of international travel chisel away at the foundations of temporary migration schemes, it is important to bring the sustainability of such an approach to migration and development under scrutiny. COVID-19 has rendered the vulnerable even more so, as evidenced on different fronts, from “rising levels of discrimination and xenophobia against migrants” to “food insecurity, layoffs, worsening working conditions including reduction or non-payment of wages, cramped or inadequate living conditions, and increased restrictions on movements or forced returns”.¹⁰

In this light, this paper first discusses a range of short-term policy measures that have been put in place to ameliorate increased vulnerability among labour migrants and uphold the temporary migration regime. A second part of the paper argues that the pandemic compels a rethinking of the way nation States draw on transient migrant

4 Feldman, 2011. Quoted in Collins and Bayliss, 2020:2.

5 Collins and Bayliss, 2020.

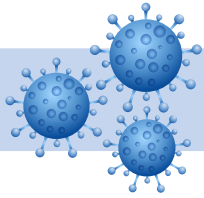
6 Hewison and Young, 2006.

7 Rosewarne, 2010.

8 Rudnycky, 2006:418–424.

9 Lewis et al., 2014.

10 ILO, 2020:1.



labour and clarifies the need to attend to critical areas of policy concern in order to work towards longer-term sustainability of temporary migration.

Increased vulnerability of migrant workers and short-term policy responses

As the weight of the COVID-19 pandemic falls disproportionately on vulnerable groups, including migrant workers, countries that are economically dependent on migrant labour face the challenge of putting in place a range of measures to support migrant workers and avert a spiralling crisis. Apart from humanitarian concerns, Testaverde notes that protecting migrants is also “smart economics” as these measures would also be important in “reducing the risk of transmission for the entire population while helping sustain a source of labor that will be critical to recovery from the economic effects of COVID-19”.¹¹

In the immediate term, lockdown measures in many countries to contain the COVID-19 pandemic have “put social protection provisions to an unprecedented test”.¹² Policy measures targeted at migrant labour are designed to meet urgent needs under exceptional circumstances, rather than to address structural issues underpinning temporary migration schemes. These short-term measures can be divided into four strands: virus testing, welfare, employment and mobility across borders.

Virus testing for migrant workers

As the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic does not distinguish between citizens and migrants, host countries have sought ways to integrate migrants into national plans for COVID-19 testing and screening in order to contain the spread of the disease. Migrants who do not usually benefit from subsidies for medical services in pre-pandemic times are provided with – and in some cases prioritized for – virus testing and treatment as a means of transmission control. For example, Malaysia which hosts 2.2 million legal migrant workers and another estimated 3 million undocumented workers, has made it “compulsory for all foreign workers in all sectors, be it the construction, manufacturing or commercial sectors, to undergo Covid-19 screening” at employers’ cost.¹³ Meanwhile, in stepping up its battle against the coronavirus, Singapore announced an “aggressive” and “systematic” Government-sponsored testing regime targeted at the country’s 323,000 migrant workers living in close quarters in dormitories that have become the epicentre for the coronavirus in the city-State.¹⁴ Similarly, countries as diverse as the Republic of Korea and Saudi Arabia have offered testing and medical treatment free of charge for all COVID-19 infection cases irrespective of nationality.¹⁵

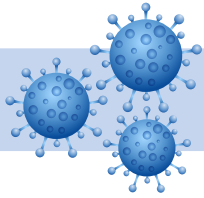
¹¹ Testaverde, 2020.

¹² OECD, 2020:18.

¹³ *The Straits Times*, 2020.

¹⁴ Sin, 2020.

¹⁵ Moroz et al., 2020.



Welfare support for migrant workers

In some countries, access to emergency support in the form of cash or in-kind assistance for stranded migrant workers has been forthcoming, even though major policy efforts have been concerned with closing safety net gaps among more vulnerable citizenry (such as the poor, the self-employed and informal sector workers) at risk of falling through the cracks of existing social protection measures.¹⁶ In the throes of the pandemic, governments and non-governmental organizations have collaborated in providing urgent, direct in-kind support, such as distributing food and providing cash transfers, legal assistance and shelter to migrant workers affected by COVID-19. Workers' organizations, employers' organizations and non-governmental organizations in various countries have also called for the recognition of migrant workers as a vulnerable group and for the incorporation of their welfare needs into support programmes and mitigation plans in order to curb the pernicious effects of COVID-19 on the economy and labour markets.¹⁷

Employment support for migrant workers

As COVID-19 rewrites the world economy, overall labour demand for migrant workers is changing in uncertain ways, with contraction likely in several key sectors and expansion in selected fields such as health care and seasonal agriculture.¹⁸ Employment protection for temporary migrant workers goes against the economic rationale for transient labour, and is at the bottom of the agenda for governments struggling with rocketing unemployment rates among the citizenry. Nonetheless, in some countries that are heavily reliant on migrant labour to turn the wheels of the economy, incentives have been introduced to encourage employers to retain their migrant workforce, particularly in essential services. Financial incentives such as employment subsidies targeted at retaining migrant workers have low priority vis-à-vis citizen employment concerns, but provide leverage in countries such as Singapore, where employers' payments of foreign worker levies have been temporarily cancelled, and the Republic of Korea, where foreign workers under the Employment Permit System are included in fiscal measures to support small and medium enterprises.¹⁹ More common measures include changes to migration regulations, such as extending visas and work permits to ensure that labour market needs can be met;²⁰ regularizing undocumented workers in essential sectors; developing job search and job-matching programmes that help displaced migrant workers find work; and relaxing employment rules regarding changing employers to fill labour market gaps created by travel restrictions.²¹

16 OECD, 2020.

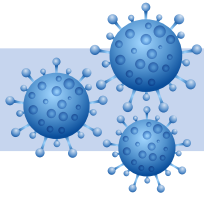
17 ILO, 2020.

18 Ibid.

19 Moroz et al., 2020.

20 Benton, 2020.

21 Moroz et al., 2020.



Transnational mobility for selected migrant workers

As the world grinds to a halt in terms of international travel and many migrant workers remain stranded on either side of borders, the ease of transnational mobility – foundational to the temporary migration regime – can no longer be taken for granted. In response, many countries have introduced exceptions to meet vital labour needs, such as expediting the entry of agricultural workers critical to sustaining farming, food production and supply chains as well as health-care workers essential to meet the heightened demand for medical services in times of COVID-19.²² For other categories of transient migrant workers, however, transnational mobility has become an illusion riddled with difficulties and danger. With the collapse of oil prices and massive layoffs of migrant workers in the Gulf States, host governments (and corporations) unwilling to bear the cost of providing for migrant workers' basic needs of food, housing and health care have turned to pressuring sending countries in South Asia to repatriate their citizens. In the virus-stricken era of low mobility, however, repatriation is slow, staggered and out of step with the magnitude of the issue – in the United Arab Emirates alone, more than 200,000 Indian nationals have registered for repatriation and only a fraction has been successfully repatriated.²³ Migrants also find themselves immobilized in liminal spaces while waiting for repatriation. In Kuwait, undocumented migrants, mainly from Bangladesh, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Sri Lanka and Sudan, were promised re-entry if they volunteered for repatriation, only to find themselves stranded in squalid, insanitary detention camps.²⁴

Temporary migration in the long aftermath of COVID-19

Beyond the unprecedented crisis of 2020, the uncertainties of pandemic resurgence and persistence of depressed economic conditions could lead to reduced demand for migrant workers and tighter border control, as countries turn attention inwards and prioritize national interests. The normalization of these conditions of low transnational mobility may induce technological progress in sectors traditionally dependent on temporary migrants to fill labour shortages, although technological innovation is “unlikely to be able to completely automate away the need for migrant workers, and a sustained recovery is likely to rely on this labor to fill shortages that arise as economies recover”.²⁵

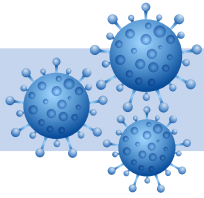
At the same time, the ongoing pandemic should be seen as an opportunity to make much needed, if not long overdue, structural changes to render migration regimes more sustainable. The COVID-19 shock and repercussions for transnational

22 Benton, 2020.

23 Hashmi, 2020.

24 Ullah, 2020.

25 Moroz et al., 2020.



mobility compel us to rethink migrant temporariness and back-and-forth mobility as the underlying principle for sustaining economic growth and labour markets. Temporariness is a “crucial, though little articulated, ingredient in the migration–development nexus” and the pandemic has laid bare the in-built precarity of the temporary migration regime for both migrants and nation States.²⁶ By drawing on the immediate policy responses to deeply entrenched issues made more visible by the crisis, the rest of the paper examines whether short-term fixes have lessons for the longer-term sustainability of temporary migration as a more viable and less precarious tool for human development.

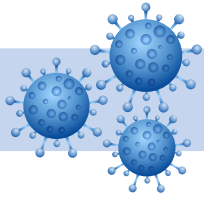
Longer stays, less churn

Temporary migration regimes are based on time-limited visas and short work contracts with few (if any) legal pathways towards permanent residence. The closing of borders at the height of the crisis put a stop to the easy back-and-forth churning of migrant workers across borders – which is highly profitable for the migration brokerage industry – and led to a range of initiatives in some countries to extend work permits and contracts, while allowing migrant workers a degree of labour market mobility and access to job-matching schemes. Particularly in a post-COVID-19 context where a reduced volume of labour migration can be anticipated, offering visas and contracts of longer duration, coupled with skills acquisition opportunities as well as clearer employer responsibility for home leave and repatriation, may be a viable step forward. Longer stays without the uncertainty of contract termination obviate recurring brokerage fees for the individual migrant and are also conducive to skills acquisition and improved labour productivity. Reduced mobility in post-COVID-19 times can mean less unproductive churning and more productive migrants.

Incorporating migrants into national safety nets

The COVID-19 pandemic has created exceptional circumstances, where for the first time in countries dependent on low-waged migrant labour, limited forms of welfare support such as free virus testing, one-off cash transfers and in-kind assistance are extended to transient migrant workers. These welfare measures are not generally targeted at migrant workers in their own right, but are intended to safeguard national interests, including curbing the spread of the virus to the general population and meeting labour needs in key sectors of the economy. It has, however, become patently evident during the pandemic that repatriating excess migrant workers speedily and cheaply, or effectively containing and segregating them from the host society, can no longer be taken for granted. This opens a window of opportunity to reframe transient labour, not only within the economic logic of use-and-discard, but also as an integral part of national labour supply to be safeguarded for more sustainable

²⁶ Rosewarne, 2010:103.



growth and development. Incorporating migrant workers into national safety nets that provide health care and income protection will not only have a positive effect on migrant welfare, but could be a means of future-proofing the economy against the crippling effects of pandemics and other global crises. Sustainable and effective social protection programmes are a “prerequisite for countries to embark on an inclusive recovery post-COVID-19” and the migrant workforce should be incorporated into these plans.²⁷

Integrating migrants as a safeguard against xenophobia

While racism against migrants is certainly not new, the pandemic has unleashed what the United Nations Secretary-General has described as a “tsunami of hate and xenophobia” across the globe.²⁸ In this light, it is all the more important to revisit the commonly held premise that temporary migration provides an “antidote” to excessive nationalist fears of migrants, as it allows for a highly controlled form of entry and exit into nation States that can be calibrated in accordance with industry needs and the degree of social tolerance.²⁹ As the pandemic reveals, in a time of stalled mobility, it is precisely temporary migrants who become easy targets for vilification and blame. This is exacerbated not only because these migrants have little (if not negative) social capital to claim a place in society, but also their presence – often taking the form of highly visible migrant enclaves and gathering grounds – can no longer be quickly excised from host society (as their “temporary” status suggests). Going forward, the pressing need is to create opportunities for building social cohesion that includes migrants in everyday interaction with citizens, rather than fall back on current measures of separation and containment. A more resilient social fabric that can withstand crisis will take efforts on multiple fronts. Investment in inclusive social resilience can take the form of building social ties of interdependence among migrants and citizens, reducing workplace inequalities that produce fixed social hierarchies and perpetuate racially-tinted stereotypes, countering racializing discourse with active promotion of a sense of common humanity, and innovative urban design and provision of common community facilities to avoid sharply segregated migrant communities.

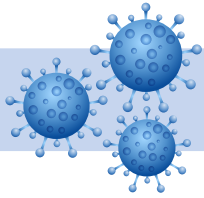
Conclusion

By undermining assumptions that human mobility across international borders can be managed to ensure migrants contribute productively to the labour market, while claiming no foothold on host society, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the need to revisit the impetus to expand temporary migration. This is not a proposition to end temporary migration, but a call to establish contract-based migration on a

²⁷ OECD, 2020:19

²⁸ IOM, 2020.

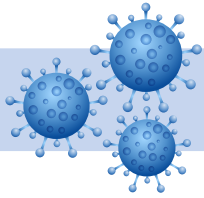
²⁹ Collins and Bayliss, 2020:1.



more sustainable foundation. Beyond government policies to guide and incentivize desirable structural changes, this also requires international and regional cooperation among both sending and receiving States to find effective ways to address the multiple challenges of transnational migration. In a sustainable migration regime in a time of prolonged uncertainty, States will need to work together to find new ways to effect “transnational labour citizenship” characterized by the portability of benefits and services and the enforcement of baseline labour rights.³⁰ As observed in the response of the United Nations to the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis has forced us to confront a choice that cannot be compromised – “go back to the world we knew before or deal decisively with those issues that make us all unnecessarily vulnerable to this and future crises”.³¹ Building on the momentum of short-term policy responses developed in a time of crisis to move the temporary migration regime to a more sustainable and equitable basis would be one such decisive step forward.

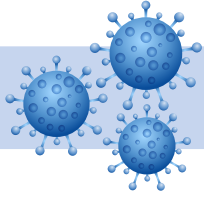
³⁰ Gordon, 2006.

³¹ UNSDG, 2020:20.



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