

# Will International Migration Governance Survive the COVID-19 Pandemic?

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## Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic created a worldwide crisis of immobility as international borders closed. All over the world, migrants have been sent home, prevented from taking up opportunities to work in another country, or compelled to return to their origin countries because their jobs have disappeared, leaving them without income at home or abroad. Most agreements on the international movement of people are designed to help people and states deal with the consequences of migration, forced or voluntary. But this new kind of migration crisis—characterized by a *lack* of movement—is largely beyond their scope. Immobility threatens the well-being of migrants and their countries of origin, as well as the destination-country economic sectors that depend on migrant labor. It also calls into question the linkages between migration and development that underlie much of international cooperation on migration. As a result of the pandemic, the governance of international migration is likely to change substantially, in ways comparable to or even greater than the changes that came about after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The most recent addition to the instruments of international migration governance is the one that has the most to offer as states seek guidance on responding to and recovering from the great disruption of migration. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration, adopted by the vast

majority of United Nations members in December 2018, contains a number of objectives that have gained urgency in light of the pandemic. These include reducing vulnerabilities during migration, strengthening consular services, using detention only as a last resort, and providing migrants with access to basic services (such as health care). It also includes several commitments that could help restart international migration, particularly those that call for integrated, secure, and coordinated border management (including prescreening of arriving persons); legal identity and adequate documentation for all migrants; and clear, predictable migration procedures for screening and assessment, in order to refer migrants to the appropriate channels for possible admission and stay. As the migration compact was being finalized, the UN secretary-general strengthened the United Nations' capacity to help states address migration issues by creating a UN Network for Migration. The Network could be particularly valuable as states confront the migration challenges of the pandemic.

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COVID-19 has had a devastating economic effect on migrant workers, their families and communities, as well as their countries of origin, revealing the cracks in the relationship between migration and development. Migrant workers are especially vulnerable to the economic disruptions resulting from efforts to slow the transmission of the virus. They are overrepresented among the groups most likely to lose their jobs—younger workers, those with less education, and those working in the sectors with the steepest drops in employment.

Migrants' loss of work translates directly into loss of remittance income for their families, communities, and countries. An estimated 800 million people depend on remittances for all or part of their income, and remittances are predicted to fall by at least 20 percent in 2020 compared to 2019, amounting to a loss of \$109 billion. For the 30 countries that rely on remittances for 10 percent or more of their gross domestic product, the decline in human security may be more costly in terms of human lives than the virus itself. The International Monetary Fund has warned of balance-of-payments crises as many low- and lower-middle-income countries that have experienced rapid economic growth in recent years slide backwards.

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The international community has a limited array of tools to deal with the migration effects of a crisis such as the pandemic. The first responses to COVID-19 should be similar to those deployed in a natural disaster, in terms of mobilizing emergency

assistance to save lives and reduce suffering, and then helping people recover and rebuild. The international agreements devised to help migrants caught up in earthquakes, floods, and cyclones as well as man-made disasters (chiefly armed conflicts) should be adapted to the needs of a global health crisis. The Migrants in Countries in Crisis (MICIC) Initiative could provide especially useful guidelines.

Once the emergency phase of dealing with the illness, displacement, and hunger caused by the pandemic is underway, it will be important to help migrants who have been compelled to return home because of job losses abroad to integrate into country-of-origin labor markets, including through asset-building livelihood restoration strategies. At the same time, international cooperation along the lines of what is envisioned in the Global Compact for Migration can outline a path toward reopening international migration opportunities safely, restoring the enormous global gains from migration for source and receiving countries alike.

## 1 Introduction

The current toolbox of international migration governance has few instruments for dealing with the impacts of a pandemic of the nature and reach of COVID-19. The post-World War II international agreements on the governance of migration are designed to help people on the move, whether voluntary or forced, as well as to promote cooperation among countries dealing with the consequences of movement. But the major migration consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic is the *loss* of mobility. The dire economic consequences of the inability to move, which threaten the link between migration and development, are beyond the frame of these agreements. The most recent addition to the migration governance toolbox—the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration—does, however, include some commitments whose implementation

can help states respond to the acute stage of the pandemic's disruption of mobility. Several of its other commitments will be essential in restoring international migration.

International travel was the major vector of the virus's spread across borders before community transmission took hold. The travel bans, flight suspensions, and border closures states instituted in an effort to stop the spread of COVID-19 ensured a nearly complete halt to international migration starting in March 2020. Some migrants were stranded in countries of destination while others, without permanent residence permits, were required to return to their countries of origin, and still others chose to return after losing their jobs and incomes abroad. These job losses would become a major vector for spreading the economic pain of the pandemic to communities and countries worldwide, including to places where the infection rate was relatively low.

Even as some international borders started to open selectively in the early summer of 2020, it became clear that the governance of international migration was likely to look very different as a result of the pandemic. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, presented a similar point of inflection, bringing security concerns to the forefront of migration policymaking. COVID-19 brings health concerns to the fore in migration governance, but its impact is likely to be even more sweeping through its indirect effects on levels of economic activity and demand for migrant labor.

This policy brief addresses two interrelated questions: How well equipped is the international community to govern migration cooperatively in the new circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic? And how does the pandemic affect the relationship between migration and development? The exploration of these questions leads to several suggestions for steps that can (1) help countries cope with the migration effects of the pandemic and

(2) restore at least some of the cross-border movements that have brought great benefits to migrants, their employers, and their countries of origin and destination.

## 2 Migration Governance before and after COVID-19

At the very end of 2018, the vast majority of the world's national governments agreed on a broad set of principles and commitments to govern international migration. The adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration in December 2018 gave reason to hope for a new era of international cooperation on cross-border movements. At roughly the same time, the UN system reorganized its component parts that deal with various aspects of international migration, creating the UN Network on Migration to take the lead in the system's support for implementation of the Global Compact. The entry of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) into the UN system as a related agency in 2016 provided credible leadership for the network. Converting the compact's political commitments to concrete action was never going to be easy. The very breadth of the compact demonstrates the vast range of priorities held by the negotiating countries—some overlapping, some far apart. Still, the compact holds substantial areas of concurrence that are ripe for collaboration.

After the Global Compact's adoption in 2018, 2019 was a year of institutional adjustments and planning to translate the compact's objectives into action; 2020 was meant to be the year of implementation. But the COVID-19 pandemic, whose global spread became apparent in the first quarter of 2020, upended priorities, partnerships, and programs of action.

Migration governance at the global level before the pandemic aimed to foster cooperation among states in regulating the movement of people across international borders—mitigating risks and negative outcomes, reducing criminal activity, blocking irregular migration and stay (that is, migration not authorized by a state body or an entity delegated that responsibility by the state), fulfilling bilateral or regional agreements on mobility, promoting the benefits of migration, and so forth. The states that negotiated the Global Compact codified this expansive agenda in a set of 23 objectives. These voluntary commitments by states to cooperate on migration, while fully respecting national sovereignty, established for the first time a negotiated framework for international cooperation on migration across a range of issues that encompassed the interests of countries of origin and destination, as well as transit countries, migrants, and communities affected by migration.

Does the upheaval of the pandemic mean that the Global Compact is irrelevant? Has the new UN Network on Migration been overtaken by events? The picture of migration governance in 2020 juxtaposes the hopes attached to cooperation through the Global Compact and the Network on Migration with the despair of lost lives and livelihoods and the steep decline of vital foreign exchange flows owing to pandemic-induced disruptions of labor migration. The sections that follow explore both sides of this picture and suggest approaches to the governance of international migration that will promote economic recovery from the global recession.

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### 3 Are the Global Compact and UN Migration Network Relevant in the COVID-19 Era?

The answer to both pieces of this question is surely yes, although the salience of different parts of the Global Compact has shifted, and the network has had to adapt to new priorities.

Of the Global Compact's 23 objectives, none have become irrelevant. Several have gained added, real-time urgency as a result of the pandemic. Others will be essential in resuming safe migration. For a list of the compact's objective, ranked by their salience during and after the pandemic, see Table 1.

#### A. Responding to the COVID-19 Crisis

The "urgent" category in Table 1 includes, perhaps most importantly, Objective 15, in which states committed themselves to providing migrants access to basic services, regardless of their migration status. In the midst of the outbreak of a contagious disease, one of the action items listed under this objective (action e) is central: "Incorporate the health needs of migrants into national and local health-care policies and plans, such as by strengthening capacities for service provision, facilitating affordable and non-discriminatory access, reducing communications barriers, and training health-care providers on culturally sensitive service delivery."<sup>1</sup>

"Leave no one behind"<sup>2</sup> is not just a rallying cry but a public-health imperative. If migrants do not have access to diagnosis, testing, treatment, contact tracing, and, eventually, vaccination—or if they are afraid that accessing health services may expose them to apprehension, detention, or deportation—

TABLE 1

**The Global Compact for Migration's Objectives and Their Relevance during and after the COVID-19 Pandemic**

<b>Objectives with Added, Real-Time Urgency</b>	<b>Objectives Essential to the Post-Pandemic Restoration of Migration</b>	<b>Objectives of Ongoing Relevance</b>
7. Address and reduce vulnerabilities in migration	4. Ensure that all migrants have proof of legal identity and adequate documentation	1. Collect and utilize accurate and disaggregated data as a basis for evidence-based policies
13. Use migration detention only as a measure of last resort and work towards alternatives	5. Enhance availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration	2. Minimize the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin
14. Enhance consular protection, assistance, and cooperation throughout the migration cycle	6. Facilitate fair and ethical recruitment and safeguard conditions that ensure decent work	3. Provide accurate and timely information at all stages of migration
15: Provide access to basic services for migrants	11. Manage borders in an integrated, secure, and coordinated manner	8. Save lives and establish coordinated international efforts on missing migrants
	12. Strengthen certainty and predictability in migration procedures for appropriate screening, assessment, and referral	9. Strengthen the transnational response to smuggling of migrants
20. Promote faster, safer, and cheaper transfer of remittances and foster financial inclusion of migrants		10. Prevent, combat, and eradicate trafficking in persons in the context of international migration
	21. Cooperate in facilitating safe and dignified return and readmission, as well as sustainable reintegration	16. Empower migrants and societies to realize full inclusion and social cohesion
23. Strengthen international cooperation and global partnerships for safe, orderly, and regular migration		17. Eliminate all forms of discrimination and promote evidence-based public discourse to shape perceptions of migration
		18. Invest in skills development and facilitate mutual recognition of skills, qualifications, and competences
		19. Create conditions for migrants and diasporas to fully contribute to sustainable development in all countries
		22. Establish mechanisms for the portability of social security entitlements and earned benefits

Source: United Nations, "Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration," July 13, 2018.

they will be a weak link in the chain of measures to contain the virus, with implications for a society's native-born and immigrant members alike. Access to other services are also important in the pandemic, including those related to housing, nutrition, domestic violence prevention, income support, and legal aid.

Other Global Compact objectives that have gained urgency as a result of COVID-19 are Objectives 7, 13,

and 14. Objective 7 urges countries to address the vulnerabilities people can experience during migration. Migrant workers are overrepresented in many sectors where risks are high and opportunities for social distancing are few, such as in the provision of care for children, the elderly, and the sick; domestic work; personal services; and agriculture and food processing. Migrants often face congested means of transport (such as the buses that carry agricultural workers to the fields), crowded dormitories, work-



places where many people labor in close quarters without protective equipment, and other conditions that place them at heightened danger of exposure to infectious disease. Outbreaks of COVID-19 have been traced to migrant dormitories in Singapore and Malaysia, for example.<sup>3</sup> And in Germany, after considerable success in flattening the curve of infections, the government was compelled to call in the army to help control an outbreak of the virus at the county's largest meat-processing plant, which employed migrant workers from Romania and Bulgaria and whose living and working conditions have been strongly criticized.<sup>4</sup>

Risks are also acute for migrants who are placed in detention centers, which like prisons, nursing homes, and other collective living environments, create circumstances in which infection can easily spread. In Objective 13 of the Global Compact, states commit themselves to using detention only as a last resort. After the outbreak of the pandemic, stronger calls have been made to limit or eliminate immigration detention.<sup>5</sup>

Objective 14 calls for states to enhanced consular protection, assistance, and cooperation throughout the migration cycle. Improved consular services are urgently needed by stranded migrants who are rendered destitute by job losses in their destination country and for those who are unable to return home because of widespread flight cancellations. Charter flights arranged by consulates may be the only options for some long-distance migrants. In June 2020, for example, the embassy of Uzbekistan in Moscow had a waiting list of 80,000 Uzbek migrants for charter flights home.<sup>6</sup> Migrants may also expect consulates to provide—or to connect them with charitable providers of—food, shelter, medical care, and other necessities if they lose all income. The traditional consular services relating to documentation, meanwhile, are essential for migrants whose documents expire while they are stranded abroad. The consular networks of low-income coun-

tries are often thin and overstretched by even routine work at the best of times. Wealthier countries of destination may find that supporting country-of-origin consular functions is an efficient and effective way to assist migrants affected by the pandemic.

## *B. Restoring International Migration*

Implementation of another two sets of objectives in the Global Compact will be essential to restoring migration flows as COVID-19 is brought under control (see Table 1). Objectives 4, 5, and 6 are closely related and have to do with the facilitation of mobility, which is important for the resumption of migration, while Objectives 11, 12, and 21 address how states cooperate in ways that recognize their common as well as their distinct interests.

In Objective 4, states commit to “[e]nsure that all migrants have proof of legal identity and adequate documentation.” The second part of this objective will have added importance from now on, as adequate documentation will surely include proof of health status concerning COVID-19, as it currently does in many countries with other communicable diseases<sup>7</sup>—that is, proof of vaccination when a COVID-19 vaccine becomes available, and of the absence of infection in the meantime. Immigration authorities in destination countries will have to agree with countries of origin, or intermediaries such as recruiters or staffing agencies, on what adequate health documentation means in the context of COVID-19.

States will have higher stakes than before in knowing the migrants who enter and stay in their territory so as to be able to ascertain their health status and include them in contact tracing protocols. This gives added importance to the availability and flexibility of legal pathways for regular migration, as spelled out in Objective 5. It will be even less tolerable for employers to fill known labor needs with irregular

migrants who enter without authorization or inspection, or who overstay the terms of their admission. It has always been harmful to societies as a whole for people to work in the shadows, without the protections that can ensure their wages and working conditions do not undercut national standards. The need to guard against the spread of COVID-19 adds another imperative for legal migration channels that are adequate to fill labor needs. Such measures would have the additional, and large, benefit of undercutting a major element of the business model of the migrant smuggling industry.

Objective 6 articulates the related pledge to facilitate fair and ethical recruitment and to safeguard conditions that ensure decent work. As noted above, decent work must explicitly include conditions that protect workers against exposure to disease and ensure that they have equal access to preventative measures, treatment, and care. Meeting the new health requirements of destination countries will involve new costs. Action (c) under this objective prohibits recruiters or employers from “charging or shifting recruitment fees and related costs to migrant workers in order to prevent debt bondage, exploitation, and forced labor.” This should become standard practice for health-related immigration costs in the post-COVID-19 era.

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Perhaps the most important commitments in the Global Compact relevant to restarting international migration are contained in Objectives 11 and 12. States agreed in Objective 11 to “[m]anage borders in an integrated, secure, and coordinated manner.” As is often observed, the spread of the coronavirus has no respect for lines on a map. Cooperation at points of entry—whether on land or at seaports or

airports—is the only way to avoid a chaotic reopening of travel, including for migration. The outcomes pursued in this objective include “ensuring security for states, communities, and migrants” and “facilitating safe and regular cross-border movements.”

Objective 12 is closely related and aims to “[s]trengthen certainty and predictability in migration procedures for appropriate screening, assessment, and referral.” This objective was written with reference to the legal status of migrants, but it is equally applicable to health screening, assessment, and referral. States that are reopening their economies to migrant workers at any level will need to coordinate among themselves and with countries of origin on the measures required for migrant admissions. Cooperation on border management, such as that promoted through the European Union’s Integrated Border Management Strategy, has not traditionally included health measures, being focused rather on irregular migration, cross-border criminal activities, return of unauthorized migrants, and facilitation of legitimate travel.<sup>8</sup> When health-related immigration measures are introduced—as they inevitably will be—they will need to be specific, transparent, and consistent. The stringent health checks used in refugee resettlement programs may provide a model.

Objective 21 of the Global Compact was, throughout the negotiation process, and remains a key commitment for countries of migrant destination: “Cooperate in facilitating safe and dignified return and re-admission, as well as sustainable reintegration.” The challenge of providing safe return in the midst of a pandemic in which asymptomatic transmission is common has persuaded some states to temporarily suspend involuntary returns. The United States, however, has continued to carry out deportations, some of which have been implicated in the spread of the virus in several countries of origin.<sup>9</sup> However, states are unlikely to reopen their borders to immigration unless they are guaranteed cooperation on the re-

turn of people who have no legal right to remain in their territory. Cooperation on sustainable reintegration is crucial if people are returned to low- and middle-income countries suffering from prolonged recession, especially where returned migrants experience stigma and exclusion because of public perceptions linking them to the virus.

### C. *Objectives with Dual Importance*

At least two of the Global Compact's objectives have both real-time urgency and longer-term importance for the resumption of international migration: Objectives 20 and 23, on remittances and international cooperation, respectively.

Migrants' job losses have interrupted the flow of remittances, causing hardship for their families and undermining the fiscal stability of countries of origin, as discussed in Section 1. It is urgent that Global Compact Objective 20—the commitment to make remittances faster, safer, and cheaper—is implemented so that a larger proportion of the remittances that continue to flow reach their recipients. Transaction costs remain stubbornly high despite repeated commitments in multilateral settings to reduce them. Many service outlets such as banks, money transfer operators, and retail outlets that dispense remittance receipts have closed due to the virus, making it difficult or impossible for migrants to send money home to their families. Some of these services may close permanently, owing to the reduced volume of their money transfer business; the resulting reduction in competition may work against efforts to drive down remittance costs.<sup>10</sup> The closure of brick-and-mortar remittance service providers has heightened the importance of making mobile remittance applications more widely available to those on the underserved side of the digital divide.

It goes without saying that both the immediate and longer-term response to the pandemic's effects on migration require international cooperation (Objective 23). Of particular relevance is commitment (e) under this objective, the pledge to “[c]onclude bilateral, regional, or multilateral mutually beneficial, tailored, and transparent partnerships, in line with international law, that develop targeted solutions to migration policy issues of common interest.” International migration promotes economic security in countries of origin and destination; resuming it is a matter of common interest.

### D. *Configuring the UN System for a Role in Migration*

The leadership of the United Nations had been taking steps since at least 2001 to bring migration into the UN system in a meaningful way, realizing that the organization risks irrelevance if incapable of dealing with the great issues of the day.<sup>11</sup> Coordinating and expanding the UN system's ability to handle migration was part of Secretary-General António Guterres's reform plan, designed to respond more adeptly to Member States' needs for assistance and advice on high-priority issues. Migration was, increasingly, one of those issues.

The year 2016 was a turning point, with the IOM entering the UN system as a related organization with deep capacity on migration. The same year, states committed to negotiating the Global Compact for Migration as well as the Global Compact on Refugees. The prospect of the Global Compact for Migration's adoption at the end of 2018 challenged the UN system to organize itself to support Member States in their implementation of the commitments set out in the compact.<sup>12</sup> The Executive Committee tasked the special representative of the secretary-general for international migration and the deputy secretary-general to come up with recommendations to this effect. Supported by an external consultant,



they developed an outline for the UN Network on Migration, which was accepted by the Executive Committee in May 2018. The final version of the Global Compact, adopted in Marrakech in December 2018, welcomed the secretary-general's decision to establish a migration network and requested that he draw on the network to report to the General Assembly every two years on the Global Compact's implementation, related UN activities, and the functioning of the new institutional arrangements.<sup>13</sup>

The network consists of a coordinator, in the person of the director-general of IOM, an executive committee made up of eight UN entities that have “a clear mandate, technical expertise, and capacity in migration-related fields,”<sup>14</sup> a secretariat working under the authority of the coordinator, representatives of the broader network of UN entities, and thematic working groups focused on specific issues. Decisions are made by consensus; in its absence, the coordinator and principals of the executive committee try to find a way forward. Failing that, the coordinator takes the matter to the secretary-general.

Participation in the network is open to any UN agency, related organization, program, office, or regional commission that wishes to be part of it. At its inception, 38 UN entities were members.<sup>15</sup> In addition, other partners—for example, from civil society, the private sector, local governments, or academia—can become members of the working groups. Nonstate participants bring knowledge, dedication, and experience to the working groups. But this, perversely, may blunt the groups' impact, as states may give their conclusions less weight if they believe the groups have been “captured” by advocates who do not give priority to the interests of states.

The UN Network on Migration was not a creation of the Global Compact but is inextricably linked to it. This is both a strength and a liability: Some states that did not endorse the Global Compact may be hostile to the network, but the compact gives the

network a well-defined if broad agenda. Even states that are cool to the Global Compact may agree on the need to coordinate the United Nations' work on migration. The network also enables the United Nations to speak with one voice on migration issues when circumstances demand. It has issued statements since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic on, among other things, the need to suspend forced returns of migrants, the dangers of immigration detention, and the importance of expanding access to services for migrants.<sup>16</sup>

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Any arrangement for coordination and leadership within the UN system can fall victim to a lack of commitment from Member States, leaving a migration apparatus starved of the resources and political backing needed to be effective. Most states have recognized that cooperation on international migration is in their interests—hence the adoption of the Global Compact by 152 states in the UN General Assembly<sup>17</sup>—but they have preferred to fund initiatives and structures individually rather than through the collective mechanisms envisioned in the compact. The Multi-Partner Trust Fund (MPTF)—framed as the start-up-fund element of the capacity-building mechanism envisioned in the Global Compact—received only U.S. \$12 million in pledges, of which U.S. \$9.4 million had been received by October 2020.<sup>18</sup> This is less than half the donor funds that the UN sought for 2019, and the pace of contributions has not picked up in 2020. The enormous demands that the pandemic is placing on national budgets can be expected to make fundraising even more difficult. The mismatch between funding capacity and demand became obvious as the MPTF received 59 concept notes for funding requests from 48 countries

and regions by April 2020, 30 of which were found to be eligible for funding.<sup>19</sup> It remains to be seen whether states will follow through on implementation of the compact and whether, in so doing, they will accept the guidance and assistance of the UN system.

## 4 Migration, Development, and COVID-19

The loss of employment in the recession unleashed by the pandemic has been devastating to workers, their households, and national economies across the board, but migrants are among those most likely to have lost their jobs in the lockdowns and business closures instituted to slow the spread of the virus. In the United States, for example, the unemployment rate for immigrants in April 2020 was 16.4 percent, compared to 14.0 percent for the native born. By June, the rate had fallen for both groups but the spread had widened, as the unemployment rate for native-born workers was 10.7 percent while for immigrants it was 13.8 percent.<sup>20</sup> Immigrant women were especially hard hit: In April 2020, they had the highest unemployment rate in the United States at 18 percent, up from 5 percent in January.<sup>21</sup>

Migrants are especially vulnerable to job loss because they are overrepresented among groups that have suffered the greatest increases in unemployment during the pandemic: workers who are relatively young; have relatively low levels of education; and are working in hard-hit sectors such as tourism, hospitality, retail businesses, transportation, and domestic work. For example, in June 2020, the U.S. unemployment rate was 28.5 percent for food servers and preparers, 21.4 percent for maids and housekeepers, and 20.1 percent for retail salespersons.<sup>22</sup>

Migrants' economic vulnerability is paired with vulnerability to contracting the coronavirus. They are overrepresented in workplaces that put them on the front line of exposure, such as hospitals, nursing homes, and meatpacking and other food processing facilities. Migrants on temporary contracts, such as seasonal agricultural workers and construction workers, often live in crowded accommodations where social distancing is impossible. The Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) in Bangladesh reported that 1,106 Bangladeshi migrants were known to have died by June 21, 2020, after contracting COVID-19 in 19 countries.<sup>23</sup> Migrants who do not speak the local language may not understand health messages about protection from the virus or instructions about how to get care if infected. Worse, they may feel compelled to go to work even while sick, for fear of losing their jobs, wages, or even their legal status.

All over the world, unauthorized immigrants, likely to be working in the informal sector, have been badly affected by the pandemic. In most countries of destination, they have had little or no access to safety nets, and many have had difficulty accessing consular services from their own countries, including repatriation flights. A few countries, such as Ireland, and several local governments, including those of Amman (Jordan), Freetown (Sierra Leone), and São Paulo (Brazil), as well as the two largest U.S. cities, New York and Los Angeles, have made COVID-19 protection and treatment available to all, regardless of immigration status.<sup>24</sup> Other countries, such as Portugal, have extended health care and safety-net benefits to migrants in irregular status for the duration of the crisis, so long as they have a pending application for regularization.

The loss of work is ruinous not only to migrants themselves but also to the households and communities supported by their remittances. An estimated 800 million people rely on remittances for all or part of their income—one out of nine people on earth.<sup>25</sup>

**TABLE 2**  
**Remittances as a Proportion of GDP, by Country, 2019**

<b>30%–40% of GDP</b>		<b>20%–30% of GDP</b>	
Tonga (37.6%)		Kyrgyz Republic (29.2%)	
Haiti (37.1%)		Tajikistan (28.2%)	
South Sudan (34.4%)		Nepal (27.3%)	
		Montenegro (25.4%)	
		Honduras (22.0%)	
		Lesotho (21.3%)	
		El Salvador (21.0%)	
<b>10%–20% of GDP</b>			
Jamaica (16.4%)		Moldova (16.2%)	
Samoa (16.2%)		Kosovo (15.6%)	
The Gambia (15.5%)		Marshall Islands (14.3%)	
Georgia (14.2%)		Zimbabwe (13.5%)	
Nicaragua (13.2%)		Guatemala (13.1%)	
Lebanon (12.7%)		Yemen (12.6%)	
Cape Verde (11.7%)		Comoros (11.5%)	
Armenia (11.4%)		Kiribati (10.9%)	
Senegal (10.5%)		Ukraine (10.5%)	
Bosnia and Herzegovina (10.2%)		Jordan (10.2%)	

Source: World Bank, “COVID-19 Crisis through a Migration Lens” (Migration and Development Brief 32, World Bank, Washington, DC, April 2020).

The World Bank projects a fall in remittances to low- and middle-income countries of 20 percent in 2020 compared to 2019, amounting to a loss of U.S. \$109 billion.<sup>26</sup> The losses will not be evenly felt. Some 30 countries rely on remittances for more than 10 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP), and seven countries for more than one-quarter of their GDP; in the three most remittance-dependent countries in the world—Tonga, Haiti, and South Sudan—remittances make up more than one-third of GDP (see Table 2).

The loss of remittance income will ricochet through migrants’ home communities, where their families’ ability to purchase goods and services creates local employment and income for others. Research in Bangladesh shows that households with a migrant earner, which before the pandemic were relatively better off than households without one, are now worse off as remittance flows have ceased and have not been replaced with locally generated income (see Box 1).

Migrants returning to their origin county may also bring back the virus. Guatemala suspended deportation flights from the United States in April 2020

### **BOX 1** **Reversal of Fortunes for Migrant Households in Bangladesh**

A natural experiment allowed researchers to examine the impact of sudden, widespread job losses on the relative income of the households of Bangladeshi migrant workers, confirming with hard data the supposition that they would be hit hardest by the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers’ project, already underway for several years, compares the household income of Bangladeshi workers who had won the right to work in Malaysia in a government-to-government lottery with that of households in the same communities of workers who did not win a place. From 2013 through 2019, the households of lottery winners had earnings 18 percent to 100 percent higher than lottery losers. But in April 2020, after the lockdown was put in place in Malaysia, lottery winners’ households had 36 percent *less* income than the non-migrant households. Among lottery winners’ households, 10 percent reported zero income for the month, compared with 6 percent of lottery losers’ households.

Source: Ahmed Mushfiq Mobarak, “Mobility and Migration during COVID-19” (presentation at the webinar Early Evidence on COVID-19, Mobility, and Migration, RECOVR webinar series, International Poverty Action and Yale University Initiative on Innovation and Scale, June 11, 2020).

after health officials there said that dozens of deportees had tested positive. Under pressure from the Trump administration, deportations resumed by June, though they were limited to about 400 people per month, compared to about ten times that rate before the pandemic.<sup>27</sup> More than 30,000 migrant workers have returned to Ethiopia since March 2020, some voluntarily after losing jobs, and some through deportations; 927 (and possibly many more) have returned carrying the virus.<sup>28</sup> A group of scholars have constructed a COVID-19 risk exposure index that shows a high correlation between the incidence of the virus in a migrant-origin country and the incidence in countries that have been the most common destinations for migrants from that country.<sup>29</sup>

The early policy responses to the pandemic have had a near-singular focus on COVID-19 cases and deaths and on health-care capacity and costs. Much less attention has gone to the human security consequences of the pandemic's economic fallout, which may end up costing more lives than are taken by the virus directly. This economic pain may be felt even where the incidence of infection is relatively low. The economic damage is transmitted through the loss of remittance income. Migrant workers who are sent home or are stranded abroad and unable to work become an economic burden rather than a support to their families.

Along with migrant workers on temporary visas, members of diasporas with permanent resident status have also lost jobs or suffered reduced earnings that impair their ability to send money to their countries of origin or ancestry. The restoration or replacement of remittance flows will be crucial for the economic recovery of countries of origin, particularly for those highly dependent on remittances, as identified in Table 2. The loss of foreign exchange from remittances will reduce these countries' ability to pay for critical imports and to service debts. It may also lower their sovereign credit rating, forcing them to pay higher interest rates on sovereign borrowing.

The International Monetary Fund has warned of potential debt crises, as countries that rely on remittances for 5 percent or more of their GDP could experience persistent balance-of-payments problems beyond 2020.<sup>30</sup>

In recent years, some of the highest economic growth rates in the world have been in low- and middle-income countries. Migration is part of the success story. Remittance-receiving households invest in better nutrition, housing, health care, and education. But the benefits of migration go far beyond remittance receipts, as the networks connecting migrants and diasporas with countries of origin or ancestry have fostered development through trade, investment, knowledge and technology transfers, transnational philanthropy, and political support.<sup>31</sup> The radical slowdown in international migration and the loss of livelihoods among migrants will contribute to running the clock backwards on the progress made in reducing poverty and food insecurity.

## 5 **Wanted: A Global Framework for Restoring the Link between Migration and Development**

For migrant households and for many countries of origin, getting migrants back into jobs abroad is critical to economic recovery. But it is difficult to see that rehiring migrants will be a priority in most major destination countries, outside of specific sectors such as seasonal agriculture, despite the pleas of corporations that the ability to hire foreign talent is essential to their competitiveness. Destination-country governments will decide which gates will be reopened. The ruling consideration will be the benefits to destination countries; benefits to origin countries are likely to be incidental.

Most traditional migrant-receiving countries will struggle with historically high (or artificially suppressed<sup>32</sup>) unemployment rates among their native-born and permanent resident populations. Many of these countries experienced deep economic recessions in the first half of 2020—for example, a drop in GDP of 10.6 percent in the United States, 11.9 percent in Germany, and more than 20 percent in the United Kingdom.<sup>33</sup> Even so, demand for migrant labor may remain high, as citizens of wealthy countries will likely continue to shun many of the difficult, low-paid jobs often taken up by immigrant workers. This will leave policymakers with a conundrum: how to justify immigration in an era of historically high unemployment. As of mid-June 2020, the United States was the only country to explicitly link post-COVID-19 immigration restrictions to protection of the domestic labor market,<sup>34</sup> yet many countries have labor regulations that permit immigrant admission for employment only in cases where native-born workers cannot be found to do the job.

### A. *Multilateral Frameworks for Responding to Immobility Are Few*

The existing tools for responding to large-scale catastrophes—the most advanced being the Refugee Convention but also the workplan of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC), the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, and the Nansen Initiative Protection Agenda—are designed to deal with events that force people to *leave* their homes, not events that force them to *return* and thereby lose their livelihoods, or that foreclose an anticipated trip for work abroad. Catastrophes that force people to leave or stay away from their places of work, abroad or in another part of their own country, can be just as effective in disrupting livelihoods and compromising health and safety as events that force people to leave their homes. Yet they are not covered by existing instruments fo-

cused on displacement, whether by conflict, persecution, natural disaster, or climate change.

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*The COVID-19 pandemic ... is a disaster characterized more by immobility than forced migration.*

Take the example of disaster displacement. According to the Nansen Initiative's Protection Agenda, which addresses only cross-border displacement, disaster displacement refers to a situation in which people are forced to leave their homes as a result of a disaster such as an earthquake or drought, or to avoid the impact of an immediate and foreseeable natural hazard such as a powerful storm.<sup>35</sup> This happens when vulnerable people are exposed to a natural hazard and, lacking resilience, are forced to move.<sup>36</sup> The UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction promotes multilateral responses to geophysical, hydro-metrological, and climatological hazards, whether slow or sudden onset. It does not include response to public-health crises. The COVID-19 pandemic, which has forced many people to leave their places of work, or prevented them from taking up jobs abroad, is a disaster for migrants, their families, communities, and countries, but it is a disaster characterized more by immobility than forced migration.

One of the few multilateral frameworks applicable to the situation of migrants in the pandemic is the Migrants in Countries in Crisis (MICIC) Initiative, an effort led by the governments of the Philippines and the United States in response to the needs of migrants caught up in conflict or natural disasters. In 2016, MICIC set out 10 principles; 15 specific guidelines (addressing crisis preparedness, emergency response, and post-crisis action); and a compendium of good practices.<sup>37</sup> MICIC was inspired by the uprising in Libya in 2011, in which 800,000 migrants were forced to flee across international borders to avoid increasing violence. IOM ended up assisting some 230,000 of them in returning to their origin



countries. The experience drew attention to the lack of provisions for assisting migrants who find themselves in a foreign country when a natural or man-made disaster strikes. The natural disasters envisioned in the MICIC Initiative are typhoons, earthquakes, floods, and such, but a pandemic is equally a natural disaster and can create similar assistance needs. The MICIC guidelines provide a useful set of strategies for ensuring that migrants are not left out of prevention, treatment, and care provisions, or excluded from relief and recovery measures.

## *B. A Phased Approach to Addressing the Pandemic's Migration Impacts*

The impact of the pandemic will be long-lasting. National and local governmental authorities, multilateral agencies, civil-society organizations, the private sector, and philanthropic organizations will need to act together to relieve the immediate suffering. Their ongoing efforts to restore livelihoods will likely have to focus on the local economy in the first instance, while looking ahead to the arrangements that will need to be put in place to allow international labor migration to resume.

### **Phase 1: Emergency Response**

The first response of all actors must be to include migrant workers who have lost their jobs—especially those stranded without work in countries of destination—in emergency assistance, as well as their families suddenly deprived of remittance income. The World Bank estimates that as many as 60 million people will be reduced to extreme poverty (living on less than U.S. \$1.90 a day) in 2020, and more if the crisis is prolonged.<sup>38</sup> Migrants and their families will be prominent among them.

The immediate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic should be treated as a natural disaster. The MICIC guidelines, in particular Guidelines 9 through 13 on

emergency response, are useful and pragmatic. As former IOM Director-General William Lacy Swing put it, “The [MICIC] guidelines provide practical advice on how all of us can be more effective at managing the mobility dimensions of crises and in protecting migrants.”<sup>39</sup> The guidelines for emergency response are as follows:

- ▶ Guideline 9: Communicate widely, effectively, and often with migrants on evolving crises and how to access help.
- ▶ Guideline 10: Facilitate migrants’ ability to move to safety.
- ▶ Guideline 11: Provide humanitarian assistance to migrants without discrimination.
- ▶ Guideline 12: Establish clear referral procedures among stakeholders.
- ▶ Guideline 13: Relocate and evacuate migrants when needed.<sup>40</sup>

Consular assistance can play an important part in implementing Guidelines 9, 10, and 13. Countries that do not have consular networks capable of providing the needed assistance can have their operations supplemented by donor governments and international organizations. Migrant dormitories and detention centers should be treated in accordance with Guidelines 10 and 13, as these centers often lack the means to protect migrants from infection or to treat them if they become ill.

Migrants rendered destitute and/or food insecure as a result of the loss of income are often left out of safety-net packages, since they are neither citizens of the destination country nor present in the country of origin. The two countries should work together to fill this gap. Funds should be established by employers, recruitment agencies, and destination-country governments to reimburse migrants who have been compelled to return home after paying the multiple transaction costs associated with recruitment, documentation, travel, and visa fees. They may also

need legal and administrative assistance to recover unpaid wages.

## Phase 2: Replacing Lost Livelihoods

As the emergency response unfolds, a second phase of response is needed to support the integration into local labor markets of returning migrants, both international and internal, connecting them to income-earning and asset-building opportunities by every means available. In the early stages, public works projects may fill the gap in means of subsistence. But the fiscal constraints under which many low- and middle-income countries operate may limit their capacity to create employment in this way, which is really a transitional measure between emergency response and longer-term sustainable livelihoods.

Migrants whose premature, unplanned return leaves them with no opportunity to fulfill their savings objectives or, worse, leaves them in debt, will need help integrating into local labor markets already experiencing high unemployment. Some of the techniques that have served to promote higher incomes and greater financial security for the ultra-poor can be used to mitigate the impoverishment associated with the loss of overseas jobs. These include the asset-building strategies of BRAC, the world's largest nongovernmental organization.<sup>41</sup> BRAC started in Bangladesh and played a role in its transition from a low- to lower-middle-income country.<sup>42</sup> It now operates in ten other countries in Asia and Africa and is adept at identifying the neediest in a community and helping them avoid the poverty trap<sup>43</sup> that often keeps the poorest from participating in loan-based assistance programs. Its most basic programs combine asset grants with training and mentoring to build sustainable livelihoods. It has been working to promote the reintegration of returning migrants for some years and has stepped up efforts to assist COVID-19 returnees, meeting flights and providing

emergency assistance as well as psychosocial and economic programs to aid reintegration.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to poverty, returning migrant workers have in many countries been subject to social stigma both as economic failures and as potential carriers of the virus. Programs of testing and quarantine need to be accompanied by social campaigns to dispel unfounded fears and promote recognition of returnees' potential to contribute to the development of their countries and communities.

## Phase 3: Reopening Legal Migration Channels

International migration has contributed to the growth and prosperity of countries of destination and origin, as well as to the well-being of countless migrant households. Restoring the gains of migration is not likely to be a quick or easy process. It will require detailed negotiations to establish the health and safety requirements for reopening legal channels for labor migration. High levels of coordination between origin and destination countries will be needed on such issues as testing at points of departure and/or arrival, setting up humane and dignified conditions for quarantining migrants when necessary, and enforcing rigorous protection against infection at workplaces. Multilateral organizations such as the IOM, International Labor Organization, and World Health Organization could work together to facilitate this process by developing templates for reopening borders to international migration, so that states do not have to start each negotiation from zero.

## 6 Conclusion

States have been making decisions about how to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic unilaterally or, in rare cases, on a regional basis, as in the European Union. No governments have gone beyond that to look at economic recovery on a global scale. Yet the

failure to act globally will leave every country, and the world, poorer. The countries that will suffer most will be those most closely connected to high-income countries through migration, as they may find their internationally mobile workers deemed dispensable, except when it suits the needs of destination countries for “essential” workers or high-end talent.

The Global Compact for Migration makes the case for more robust and comprehensive international cooperation on migration and gives states a rich menu of actions to accomplish the objectives they adopted. The coronavirus pandemic has changed the immediate migration context, but it has not changed the underlying reality that migrants, countries of origin, and countries of destination all benefit from international migration. They can benefit still more if states cooperate—with each other and with other stakeholders—to implement compact’s objectives, which will both help them cope with the crisis and move beyond it. International mobility should be seen not only as a casualty of the pandemic, but as one of the essential building blocks of recovery.

The importance of international migration for post-pandemic economic recovery is routinely overlooked, even in arguments for international solidarity as a matter of self-interest. A typical case was laid out by a distinguished economist in an opinion piece in the *Financial Times*.<sup>45</sup> It makes the case that poor countries struggling to recover from the economic effects of the pandemic may benefit from debt relief and multilateral loans, “[b]ut most of all they will need uninterrupted trade and investment flows to help them build on domestic policies.” The article, like many other analyses, does not mention that migrants’ remittances constitute the largest flow of financial resources to low-income countries, larger than trade or foreign direct investment in almost every case. The article concludes that as a matter of self-interest, “the world’s more industrialized countries need to avoid begging the rest. What

happens elsewhere will not stay there.” The only reference to migration is the threat that economic desperation will result in “mass emigration.” Blindness to the large positive role of migration in the international financial system risks distorting policy responses.

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*The coronavirus pandemic has changed the immediate migration context, but it has not changed the underlying reality that migrants, countries of origin, and countries of destination all benefit from international migration.*

For the medium and long term, after emergency response to the illness and destitution caused by the virus, restoring international migration is one of the quickest and surest ways to promote economic recovery from the devastation caused by the pandemic. Migrant remittances will help restore the national balance of payments in many countries, reboot purchasing power in emerging economies, and reduce pandemic-induced poverty. Remittance flows before the pandemic were three times the volume of official development assistance.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, remittances go directly into the hands of household members, unmediated by bureaucracy and relatively immune to corruption. Mobility can be restarted with minimal risk to health and well-being through close cooperation on border procedures and careful sequencing of sectoral admissions to target the lowest-risk and most migrant-dependent occupations first.<sup>47</sup> Migrants, their families and communities, countries of origin and countries of destination will all benefit if migrants are made part of the “we” in recognizing that we are all in this together.

## Endnotes

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- 13 United Nations, “Global Compact,” paragraphs 45 and 46.
- 14 The Executive Committee of the UN Network on Migration consists of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Labor Organization (ILO), Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), UN Development Program (UNDP), UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA). Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) has become a de facto member of the executive committee, according to the head of the network secretariat. Author conversation with Jonathan Prentice, Head of Secretariat of the UN Network on Migration, May 2020.
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