Rewiring Migrant Returns and Reintegration after the COVID-19 Shock

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the large-scale return of migrants to their countries of origin and stranded millions of others abroad. The combined pressures of the pandemic and the resulting global recession have created an extraordinarily complex policy environment for return, reception, and reintegration. The need for international cooperation on return and reintegration was recognized and incorporated into the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration, adopted in December 2018. But scarcely more than a year later, the spread of the coronavirus to countries around the world prompted uncoordinated border closures and travel restrictions at the same time that many migrants were compelled to leave their jobs and, often, the countries in which they were living. Many were stranded in destination countries and needed help to get home and basic assistance to help them get by in the meantime. And while some countries of destination initially suspended forced removals, others did not, exerting further pressure on origin countries and jeopardizing international cooperation in this field.

The reception of those migrants who have been able to return has posed a daunting challenge to countries of origin. In many, a lack of basic data on the number of migrants abroad, as well as their locations and circumstances, has made planning diffi-cult. That, along with resource constraints and limited administrative capacity, has inhibited a coherent response to the needs of returnees. Few countries of origin, for example, had adequate quarantine facilities for returning migrants, and the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated the importance of both improving monitoring of returns and ensuring appropriate reception conditions. Some of the investments that have been made during this pandemic could pave the way for more solid reception systems in countries of origin.

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Efforts to reintegrate returning migrants into local communities in the midst of a pandemic and an economic crisis have had to combine emergency measures for impoverished returnees with longer-term programs to re-establish livelihoods. The challenges posed by a lack of local job opportunities have been compounded by the loss of migrants' remittances, which provide essential support to migrant households. Many humanitarian and development agencies have reallocated funds to support COVID-19

responses, including reintegration efforts. While the challenges ahead are daunting, some innovations have been born of the necessity to adjust programs to the realities of the pandemic. Examples include online training for returnees and efforts to reopen legal migration pathways in a way that is better managed and more respectful of workers' rights.

The experience of the pandemic highlights the need for both destination and origin countries to be better prepared for disruptions to migration patterns. Lessons for contingency planning can be taken from earlier disruptions, such as the flight of migrants from Libya in 2011, which led to the adoption of the Migrants in Countries in Crisis guidelines. Other guidance, for example on common standards for predeparture health screenings, emergency repatriation, or the strengthening of reception systems, could be enhanced. Importantly, the combination of large-scale returns and widespread recession should point reintegration programs toward the development potential of returning migrants. Investments in asset-building, skills training, and entrepreneurship may position battered economies for rebound when the emergency phase of the pandemic is over. Eventually, international migration will revive and so, paradoxically, the reintegration experience should also prepare people to take advantage of future opportunities to move. A broader conception of reintegration is needed that focuses not only on individual returnees but also on the reintegration of their communities and countries into a healthy global economy and society.

1   Introduction

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, tens of millions of migrant workers have lost their jobs and returned to their countries of origin—either because they were expelled or because they could not afford to stay abroad.[1] Many were also motivated by the wish to reunite with their families in these trying times. Spontaneous returns constitute a natural

phase of any migration cycle, but so many returns in such a limited time are unprecedented. Simultaneously, millions of migrants have found themselves stranded abroad, needing assistance to return to their origin countries and to meet their basic needs in the meantime. Within a few months, the spread of COVID-19 added a dense layer of complications to an already contentious policy area.

Much attention has been devoted to migrant returns and reintegration over the years—including in the New Pact on Migration and Asylum released by the European Commission in September 2020[2]—but with meager progress in terms of international cooperation.[3] The negotiations for the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration marked a major breakthrough with the inclusion of a commitment to "cooperate in facilitating safe and dignified return and readmission" (Objective 21).[4] For many of the major countries of destination, the negotiation of this objective was essential as they saw, and continue to see, return as an essential ingredient of an orderly migration system and an effective response—and deterrent—to irregular migration. The inclusion of "sustainable reintegration" under that same objective may have seemed a token add-on to soften an issue sensitive for many origin countries, but it was not an empty gesture. It added an element of partnership to a process that is often seen as unilateral, showing that sustainable reintegration is essential if return migration is to be more than a revolving door.

Efforts to better cooperate on migrant returns were quickly complicated by the COVID-19 crisis. Cooperation became even more necessary but also infinitely more challenging.[5] More migrants have required assistance to return to their origin countries, but returns have also been made more difficult by border closures. The crisis has also demanded new thinking on how health considerations fit into the return and reception process, from providing health screenings to ensuring that returnees have access to health care. Meanwhile, governments and development ac-

tors have had to plan for reintegration in the context of a global economic and health crisis, with rapidly growing unemployment and longstanding problems of access to basic services. This policy brief examines the effects of the global pandemic on return, reception, and reintegration, and considers how to strengthen return infrastructure and partnerships between countries of origin and destination going forward.

2   Returns during the COVID-19 Crisis: Three Main Trends

Because of COVID-19 and the closure of the many destination countries' economies and borders, an unprecedented number of migrants returned to their origin countries in just a few months. This sudden, large-scale return migration, along with the rapid increase in the number of migrants stranded abroad, constituted major disruptions to international migration.

A.   Large-Scale Returns

From the beginning of the pandemic to October 2020, India assisted more than 600,000 migrants in coming home.[6] Between March and July, more than 100,000 Cambodian migrants returned from Thailand.[7] In April, thousands of Zimbabweans crossed the border from South Africa.[8] And in Latin America, more than 110,000 Venezuelans had returned from Colombia as of October.[9] Comparable trends could be observed in high-income countries as well; in Europe, for example, the pandemic and border closures drove tens of thousands of migrants to return to Eastern Europe.[10]

The scale of returns—and their unpredictable pace—has made it difficult for origin countries and their humanitarian and development partners to manage the arrivals, especially as governments were already facing a daunting health crisis at home. Data on the number of migrants from a particular country living abroad or those likely to return, and from where, have been scarce and imprecise, hindering preparedness (see Box 1). A large proportion of returns have also taken place without oversight from national authorities or international organizations, which has complicated the monitoring of returns and assessments of returnees' needs upon arrival. Amid uncertainties, information gaps, and a lack of capacity, governments have struggled to plan for returnees and their communities. Several countries of origin and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), having rapidly acknowledged these data gaps, launched surveys to capture key trends, including on how many migrants were returning.[11]

B.   Stranded Migrants

In the midst of large-scale returns, an even greater number of migrants have been unable to go home, despite deteriorating conditions abroad. In mid-May 2020, IOM estimated that more than 200,000 Indian migrants were stranded in the United Arab Emirates alone, along with more than 60,000 Pakistani workers.[12] In July, IOM estimated the number of stranded migrants worldwide at 2.75 million.[13] This magnitude created a range of new challenges for international cooperation among border authorities around the world.[14] The demand for assistance for voluntary return increased,[15] but origin countries, IOM, and other partners have not had the budgets or logistical capacity to respond to all these needs. In addition, several operations, including some European voluntary return programs, were suspended during the first wave of the pandemic.[16]

The situation has proved particularly challenging for migrants who did not have legal status prior to the crisis. Some countries announced amnesties for unauthorized immigrant workers (as Kuwait did for Nepalese workers), waived overstay fines, and paid

BOX 1
The Importance of Migration Data for Crisis Planning: The Case of Kerala, India

The first large-scale household survey focused on migration was conducted in the Indian state of Kerala in 1998. Seven more rounds of the Kerala Migration Survey have since been conducted, the most recent in 2018. The results have given the Kerala government a clear understanding of how many of the state's people were living abroad and where, as well as many of the consequences of their emigration (such as volume and uses of remittances, impact on family structure, and so forth). Knowing that many Keralites were studying in China in 2019–20 (including three medical students in Wuhan, who were the first to bring COVID-19 back to Kerala), state authorities knew that the virus would inevitably arrive in Kerala.

By April, when the pandemic was raging across the Gulf states, Kerala was aware that many of its people were stranded without work or safe living conditions. It pressured the Indian government to begin emergency repatriation operations. With a reliable estimate of 2.1 million Keralites abroad, and the supposition that as many as 20 percent might return, the state government prepared quarantine facilities and readied 250,000 hospital beds for migrants and nonmigrants alike. The state also took account of migrants returning from other Indian states. These crisis preparations, layered atop a decentralized state health-care system that performed well in combatting other outbreaks such as the Nipah virus in 2018, kept infections and deaths lower than in other regions of India even as coronavirus cases soared across the country. It also allowed the state to get a head start on planning for the reintegration of returning migrants. Preparedness on the basis of good data was the key to managing the pandemic and its consequences in Kerala.

Source: S. Irudaya Rajan, "Migrants at a Crossroads: COVID-19 and Challenges to Migration," *Migration and Development* 9, no. 3 (2020): 323–30.

for return tickets.[17] But other unauthorized migrants, without access to such benefits, stayed under the radar for fear of being detained if they came forward and asked for assistance. Migrants in fragile states or countries at war, such as Yemen[18] and Somalia,[19] also saw their conditions deteriorate as the support provided by IOM and other aid actors was disrupted.

These difficulties have mainly stemmed from uncoordinated border closures, including on the part of origin countries trying to slow the spread of the virus by limiting, or even preventing, the return of their nationals. For example, from March to July, Morocco closed its borders entirely and no Moroccans—even seasonal workers who had finished their contracts—were able to return.[20] In Nepal, the government established a threshold for the number of repatriation flights per day, leaving tens of thousands of Nepalis abroad in limbo.[21] These measures, often taken hastily and unilaterally, quickly became

a source of tension between destination and origin countries, as destination-country authorities did not want to bear the responsibility of aiding stranded migrant workers. A few months into the pandemic, the United Arab Emirates threatened to suspend migration agreements with South Asian nations if they did not take back their nationals.[22] To prevent a cascade of retaliatory measures, IOM and other international partners strove to restart international cooperation and establish temporary humanitarian corridors for returnees.[23] Gradually, states moved away from sudden border closures to better planned and coordinated mechanisms, allowing more people to go home.

C.   *Forced Returns*

A third major disruption brought by the global health crisis was the suspension of forced returns from several countries, with travel restrictions inter-

rupting air travel and origin countries pleading for a moratorium on deportations.[24] Beginning in March 2020, most European countries put forced returns on hold.[25] But the situation rapidly generated frustration among policymakers, who tried to resume return operations as soon as borders started reopening—especially to the 15 non-EU countries designated by the European Council on June 30, 2020, as "safe" for travel.[26] Italy grew particularly irritated as regular air travel with Tunisia resumed but Tunis refused to fulfill return agreements, at a time when spontaneous arrivals of Tunisian unauthorized migrants on Italian shores were on the rise.[27] Finally, in July, Rome convinced Tunis to allow deportations to start again, and operations intensified in August.[28]

Not all states agreed to suspend forced returns in the first place, despite many calls urging them to do so for public-health reasons, including a formal statement from the UN Migration Network.[29] Among high-income countries, only a few, including the United States, Sweden, and Saudi Arabia, carried out deportations during this period.[30] Several low- and middle-income countries also continued to forcibly return unauthorized migrants, generating diplomatic tensions as well as aggravating health risks for migrants and border communities. For instance, at the beginning of the pandemic, Djibouti sent migrants back to Ethiopia without appropriate health measures, but the two countries eventually engaged in closer coordination to prevent an escalation of tensions at the border.[31]

3 Managing Reception and Reintegration in a Pandemic

Be they forced or voluntary, returns have increased pressure on countries of origin, where governments have had to manage the risk that returnees bring the virus home to their relatives and broader communities. The threat is serious; many migrants are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, as they work in high-risk sectors (e.g., restaurants, distribution, food processing), live in housing that does not allow for social distancing, and lack regular access to health care and testing.[32] The way people travel back to their origin countries, sometimes on foot or in crowded buses or trains,[33] can put them in further danger of infection. Migrants who are deported have faced additional risks, especially when they are kept in detention centers that have become transmission hotspots—as in Mexico and the United States.[34]

A. Reception Gains Added Importance

In these circumstances, the reception conditions for migrants returning to their origin countries have become an even more critical element of the return process than in the past. Governments have paid more attention to registering newcomers and enforcing quarantine measures. A few weeks into the pandemic, many origin countries established quarantine facilities for returnees, by their own means or with the support of IOM and donor governments.[35] In some cases, as in Kerala, India, arrangements for quarantine or treatment, if necessary, were put in place by subnational governments.[36] Most centers have been set up to receive migrants after they travel, but in some instances measures have been put in place for migrants exiting the country; in Bolivia, for example, IOM assisted the authorities in creating a center to quarantine migrants prior to their return to other countries.[37] Despite these efforts, a comprehensive system is often still missing. Many countries are well positioned to regulate arrivals at international airports, but maritime arrivals and crossings at land border points remain more informal. For instance, Ethiopia developed a comprehensive reception system at the airport in Addis Ababa, but the setup is less structured at land borders.[38]

In addition, the limited capacity of quarantine facilities has delayed migrants trying to go back home. From Sri Lanka[39] to Uganda[40] and Myanmar,[41] governments have waited for these centers to empty before welcoming new returnees. All along, budgets have been a main constraint, with a threshold on what resources governments could spend on building, converting, and maintaining these facilities in the context of an economic and health crisis. By May 2020, when the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants reminded states of the necessity of adequate reception conditions, it had also become clear that some of these centers were not compliant with international standards.[42] In Nepal, civil-society organizations reported that several quarantine facilities failed to provide even food and water to returnees.[43] In Malawi and Zimbabwe, conditions in reception centers were so dire that people took risks to escape.[44]

B. Reintegration in the Midst of a Health and Economic Crisis

For countries that send a significant part of their workforce abroad, the hasty return of thousands of migrants has made reintegration challenges even more pressing. The context, however, is hardly conducive to economic reintegration, with a global recession and uncertainty as to when local economies will reopen for good. In Bangladesh, a survey conducted by the nongovernmental organization BRAC in Spring 2020 found that 87 percent of returnees faced difficulties and half of them needed emergency financial assistance.[45] In Cambodia, similar research led by IOM indicated that 45 percent of returnees had difficulties settling in to post-return life, and that of those who reported such difficulties, 95 percent said that finding a job was their chief challenge.[46]

Around the world, migrants have returned to communities whose resilience has already been eroded by the pandemic and lockdown measures, and that

need remittances even more than before.[47] Migrants who returned home just before the pandemic have also been harshly affected. For instance, in Armenia, returnees who had support from the French Office for Immigration and Integration to start catering and agricultural businesses reported some difficulties maintaining their enterprises due to the economic crisis (and, starting in October, the conflict with Azerbaijan).[48]

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In addition to these economic hardships, returnees have faced prejudice triggered by the pandemic, in particular fears that they might be carrying the virus. In Ethiopia, some communities initially did not grasp that quarantine measures for returnees were preventive safety measures and grew concerned that migrants might be infected and spread the virus.[49] These fears are not, in every case, unfounded. Research on the early spread of the virus in Bangladesh and the Philippines constructed heat maps showing that areas linked by migration to countries experiencing high rates of infection were hotspots for the virus.[50] Local and national authorities face the twin challenges of taking steps to prevent transmission by returning migrants who might be infected and at the same time working with local communities to combat exaggerated fears and the resulting stigma attached to returnees.

Returning migrants have also encountered more difficulties than usual in accessing health services, given the strain on health-care systems in many countries. Few places were as prepared as the Indian state of Kerala, which, with a comparatively decentralized and robust health-care system, prepared quarantine

facilities for returning migrants and readied as many as 250,000 hospital beds.[51] Assessments in several settings conducted in recent months have also found many returnees in pressing need of psychosocial support as a result of their experiences with the pandemic, lockdowns abroad, and rushed returns.[52]

As a result, some governments that had not engaged in reintegration assistance in the past have been motivated (or faced more pressure) to assist their returning citizens. Many of these initiatives were deployed as part of broader emergency measures and consisted of connecting returnees with training opportunities or job offers. For instance, the Philippines launched a program that allocated government-owned lands to Manila migrants and returning workers.[53] Bangladesh announced a package for returnees, with small grants on arrival to cover transportation to their homes, soft loans for training or entrepreneurial activities, and compensation for families of workers who died of COVID-19 abroad.[54] In Egypt, the government sought to connect returnees with training or jobs based on information about their skills collected during their quarantine.[55]

Multiple humanitarian and development assistance organizations have also supported reintegration efforts, repurposing funding from existing interventions and directing emergency assistance to the most vulnerable or increasing the amount of the reintegration packages.[56] Deploying all these initiatives has nonetheless been tricky in the context of scarce economic opportunities in many origin countries and the narrow operational capacity of field actors, from local authorities to civil-society organizations to international organizations in areas still enforcing strict health and safety measures. However, the disruption of reintegration programs has had a silver lining, as existing projects have found innovative ways to continue their work—taking some services online, developing digital support measures, and focusing on income-generating activities. For example, the Senegalese-German Center for Jobs,

Migration, and Reintegration is cooperating with the national association Sama Chance to support start-ups in mask production and other job-creating enterprises.[57] The digitalization of some services has cut costs and extended their reach in ways that may prove useful after the pandemic has receded.[58] Care must be taken, however, to make sure that services are still accessible to people who are returning to areas without broadband coverage, who do not have electronic devices, or who, for other reasons, cannot access the internet.

4 Takeaways for the Future of Return and Reintegration

Since the beginning of the pandemic, border closures, unprecedented numbers of stranded migrants, and deportations despite public-health risks have made international cooperation on returns even more important. At the same time, the global health crisis has highlighted how widely the interests of host and origin countries can diverge. Some countries of destination were eager to return migrant workers, whereas countries of origin were already under pressure to manage the health crisis at home and feared a drop-off in what is for many their most important source of foreign exchange earnings: migrant remittances. While the cooperation between states improved a few months into the pandemic, at least in some cases, these initial tensions showed the need for better planning, facilitating, and funding to manage returns, reception, and reintegration.

A. Return and Reception

In countries with large numbers of citizens working abroad, the pandemic has exposed the need for better contingency planning. While it is the first time that so many returns are happening at the same

time globally, there are lessons from similar crises in the past that featured mass returns resulting from a climate event or political upheaval. For example, in the aftermath of the 2002–03 and 2010–11 civil wars in Côte d'Ivoire, thousands of migrant workers returned to neighboring countries and faced tremendous challenges both as they evacuated and then as they tried to reintegrate back home.[59] Building on gaps identified at the time, Ghana subsequently included a reference to "guidelines for the evacuation of Ghanaian nationals abroad" in its 2016 National Migration Policy.[60] Meanwhile, the 2011 uprising in Libya forced some 800,000 migrants to flee the escalating violence and left many stranded in neighboring countries, with little or no access to help from their countries of origin.[61] IOM helped tens of thousands to return to their home countries.[62] The experience gave rise to the Migrants in Countries in Crisis (MICIC) initiative, a multilateral effort to prepare more effective responses in similar situations. In 2016, MICIC produced a set of guidelines to safeguard migrants caught up in conflict or natural disaster while abroad, with practical recommendations such as the drafting of coordination agreements to improve crisis response capacities.[63] Moving forward, such arrangements could be included in memorandums of understanding and bilateral labor agreements.[64] Training on MICIC guidelines could be updated to include lessons learned from the pandemic and previous health crises, such as the Ebola epidemic.[65]

In addition to planning, the COVID-19 crisis has shown the importance of common guidelines for predeparture health screenings, as well as improved reception conditions. It is now clear that countries would gain from agreeing on minimum requirements for their nationals to travel home. IOM has started implementing a set of COVID-19 infection prevention measures,[66] but not all governments have complied with these precautions and instances of deportations without prior testing have been widely reported in the United States.[67]

As for reception infrastructure, governments, IOM, and other partners have deployed many efforts in a short time; for example, the German reintegration program Returning to New Opportunities runs advice centers for returnees in countries of origin and has pivoted to address pandemic-related needs.[68] Nonetheless, many gaps remain in efforts to ensure adequate conditions for returnees. In the majority of origin countries, reception has long been a weak spot in the return process, with migrants being left without government assistance upon arrival, though sometimes helped by civil-society organizations.[69] In states such as Mali,[70] where governments set up dedicated centers for returnees before the pandemic struck, these facilities could be starting points for the upgrade of reception systems. In the future, origin countries and their partners could also explore how to quickly add adequate health screening to reception procedures.

These questions of contingency planning, predeparture measures, and reception conditions ultimately center on the issue of funding, at a time when the finances of donor governments and governments of countries of origin are already strained. While many migrants have paid for their own return trip, some governments organized flights to bring back their nationals, as in the case of Nepal (after a Supreme Court order[71]). Some destination countries in the Gulf and Europe have also funded these journeys, as well as predeparture testing; examples include Kuwait for Sudanese migrants[72] and France and Germany for some Iraqis.[73] In some countries, the private sector has got involved, as a contribution to national solidarity efforts. For example, in Sudan, private initiatives supported voluntary returns and government-related efforts by providing chartered buses for Sudanese migrants stranded in Egypt and paying for protective equipment and reception facilities.[74] For the rest, donors have shown flexibility in pivoting existing programs, but new funding, especially for returns from or to regions that are not among their top priorities, has been limited. Thus,

the EU-IOM Joint Initiative supported returns from Libya to Sudan but could not finance flights from Gulf countries as they were outside of the initiative's scope.[75] Other international donors, from the EU Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations to the U.S. Department of State, Norway,[76] and Germany have also assisted with setting up quarantine centers and the distribution of nonfood items, personal protective equipment, and onward transportation. A more predictable funding stream for these functions, not dependent on the particular interests of donors, could be routed through IOM's emergency fund for crisis situations or the existing but under-resourced UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund for Migration.

B.   Reintegration

In addition to suggesting avenues to improve planning for return and reception, the COVID-19 crisis has presented opportunities to revisit reintegration assistance, starting with the definition of target beneficiaries. Traditionally, reintegration programs have benefited migrants who receive assistance to return under assisted voluntary return schemes or, less commonly, those who have been deported.[77] But the pandemic has shown that a more comprehensive approach to reintegration is needed, one that also includes people who have returned by their own means and might still face great challenges as they try to reintegrate. Where such support could be provided, governments and their partners can start by raising awareness about the reintegration packages available—including who can benefit from them and what they entail—which is often a source of misunderstanding, and even more so in times of crisis.[78]

Given the nature of the pandemic, donors, development and aid actors, and governments need to prioritize some form of humanitarian aid as part of their reintegration support, either by delivering in-kind and cash assistance or topping up existing schemes. Some migrants are destitute upon return, especially if they have been expelled without being paid final wages or completion-of-contract bonuses, or if they have taken on debt to fund their migration. Even those returning through more orderly means may face immediate hardship as they go back to recession-burdened countries. In response, the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees has granted returnees from Germany additional financial assistance, 200 euros per person and 500 euros per family.[79] In Ethiopia, Côte d'Ivoire, and Bangladesh, IOM has distributed cash and other forms of assistance to vulnerable returnees.[80] Donors were often reluctant to hand over cash to returnees in the past,[81] for fear that they might use it to migrate again, but cash-based schemes have emerged as the most practical option in this situation.[82]

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Beyond meeting the immediate needs of returning migrants, however, reintegration programs are being forced to adjust to the extraordinary demands of the pandemic era. Reintegration programs are at once tools of migration management and tools of development cooperation, and they demand coordination within destination-country governments to reconcile the two objectives. The pandemic has tipped the balance toward development priorities in the face of the global recession and mass unemployment in countries of origin, exacerbated in some cases by large-scale migrant returns. It also highlights the importance of cooperation—between countries of origin and destination as well as with other partners, such as the private sector, local and regional governments, diaspora associations, inter-

national and regional organizations, and civil-society organizations (especially those formed by and catering to returnees). Sharing good practices and successful innovations, through such structures as the European Return and Reintegration Network,[83] can be particularly effective at times when any one organization's resources are dwarfed by the landscape of needs.

Just as health is now a top concern for reception assistance, it is also likely to gain a greater role in how stakeholders think about reintegration. In the second half of 2020, governments and aid and development actors focused on raising awareness about COVID-19, collecting more data about the spread of the virus, and, in some cases, adjusting their reintegration programs accordingly. For instance, in Mozambique, social workers have raised awareness about COVID-19 in communities of return.[84] Because doing so is not always possible in person, hotlines—such as one IOM set up in Bangladesh[85]—might prove an effective way to disseminate and collect information, as well to expand access to telemedicine. Finally, a takeaway from the crisis is that further efforts should be deployed to assist returnees in registering with public health care or social security systems.[86] These efforts could build on a variety of experiments predating the crisis, such as the efforts of IOM Sudan to better connect returnees to the national health-care system.[87] Like previous health crises, such as the AIDS epidemic, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the strengths and weaknesses of national health infrastructures in countries both rich and poor. Ultimately, a solid investment in origin countries is needed to build resilient health infrastructure and answer the needs of returning migrants along with those of other residents.

In addition to these humanitarian and health-care priorities, policymakers and development cooperation actors may also wish to reconsider the parameters of economic reintegration. In many places, the local labor market will have great difficulty ab-

sorbing large numbers of returnees. This was often the case even before the pandemic and resulted in many reintegration programs emphasizing entrepreneurship over wage employment. Initiatives that support effective asset-building for people unable to borrow or repay loans may provide viable short- to medium-term livelihood options. BRAC's Programme for the Ultra-Poor,[88] which centers on giving very poor women a productive asset (such as a cow) and training them on how to maximize the asset's income potential and, thereby, get a foot on the economic ladder, is a good example of this approach. In the longer term, however, the focus must be on skills development suited to future economic potential—for example, the skills required in the transition to "green economies."[89]

It is also essential to acknowledge, in the unique context of the pandemic, that a large proportion of returnees likely plan to migrate again once the crisis comes to an end; therefore, start-up grants and other long-term schemes might not match their aspirations as well as, for example, training that might equip them for better jobs abroad.[90] The health of the global economy as a whole requires that international migration again takes its place as a lubricant of productivity and shared growth. Planning for the revival of international migration should therefore be a part of reintegration planning, paradoxical as that may seem. Development actors may support the development of health infrastructure and the mechanisms to meet the documentation needs of future migrants, and they could provide technical assistance to help migrants navigate new requirements for admission to destination countries once they are again ready to admit migrant workers. Focusing on established migration corridors is a logical place to start, through bilateral or regional cooperation.

All this points toward the need to think about reintegration in slightly different terms during the pandemic and to invest, for instance, in skill devel-

opment and future mobility schemes. Training programs must be flexible, as they will operate, at least initially, without clear insight into what the economy after the pandemic will look like. While they may not help relieve the pressure faced by households in the short term—especially in countries where the effects of the pandemic persist—they could still ensure that returnees and their communities are well positioned to access livelihoods once economies reopen.

5   Conclusion

Even as vaccine development and dissemination proceed, many countries are seeing a second or third wave of COVID-19 infections. The devastating economic repercussions of the pandemic are expected to be long-lasting in many countries, particularly in the global South. Questions remain about how to put into practice the first wave's lessons on how to safely facilitate returns, improve reception, and aid reintegration. This is critical, as some countries still expect more migrants to come back. Egypt, for example, foresees that as many as 1 million Egyptians may ultimately return.[91] These returns should be facilitated to prevent more people becoming stranded and remaining separated from their families. At the same time, and despite the widespread recession, planning to help returnees secure their livelihoods must proceed.

Another main lesson learned over the course of 2020 is that a whole-of-government approach to return and reintegration is essential—even more so than before.[92] Health considerations should be integrated into return processes and reintegration infrastructure, and authorities at all levels of government need to work together to this end. Case management and information-sharing among partners will prove critical to monitoring the needs of returnees

and tracing potential sources of infection. Efforts may also be needed to more systematically counter negative perceptions of returnees, including those linked to concerns about the virus' spread. Finally, reliable data on migrants and migration are essential for preparedness—for this and future crises.

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Many of these points, and others relevant to pandemic management and recovery, are central elements of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration.[93] The experience of the global pandemic has demonstrated that pulling up the drawbridge at national borders is neither feasible nor effective in such a closely integrated world. The final objective of the compact, to "strengthen international cooperation and global partnerships for safe, orderly, and regular migration,"[94] has shown its practical as well as aspirational value in 2020.

Working toward sustainable reintegration in the midst of such unprecedented circumstances calls for realism. The focus of reintegration programs is often on returnees themselves, but recovery from the COVID-19 crisis requires a more comprehensive approach, particularly to assist communities affected by lower levels of remittances and other economic disruptions. Reintegration assistance that focuses not only on the outcomes of individuals returning but also on the economic, social, and physical health of their communities and countries—in short, that emphasizes the development potential of returns and returnees—is the kind of assistance this crisis demands.

Endnotes

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Acknowledgments

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