



Mobility Shutdown

The Impacts of COVID-19 on Migration in Asia and the Pacific

By Lawrence Huang

INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM

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Migration Policy Institute

March 2024

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Executive Summary

Four years after COVID-19 first prompted countries to close their borders, policymakers are now in an opportune position to evaluate the impacts of pandemic-era restrictions on migration and mobility. Governments in Asia and the Pacific imposed some of the strictest and longest-lasting limits on movement of those in any world region, triggering a collapse in migration, stranding migrants abroad for months, and prompting mass returns that strained health and reintegration systems. But the region also kept COVID-19 cases and deaths low for the first two years. To help inform policymakers' preparations for future crises, when they inevitably come, there is a clear need to better understand the costs and benefits of this region's approach to managing COVID-19 through strict travel measures.

Many countries in the region had recent experiences with public-health crises, such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in East and Southeast Asia, which prepared them to respond to COVID-19. Japan's pandemic response plan even outlined potential travel measures the country could implement in such a situation. Most governments aimed to eradicate the virus and continued with this approach even as the rest of the world reopened. Thus, the Asia Pacific region helps to illuminate how, when, and why travel measures are successful, as well as the limitations of even the most successful border health policies. This is a story in two parts:

The Asia Pacific region helps to illuminate how, when, and why travel measures are successful, as well as the limitations of even the most successful border health policies.

- ▶ **Travel measures were effective at first because countries implemented them earlier, stricter, for longer, and along with tight domestic measures.** East Asia implemented the first travel measures within days of the earliest recorded COVID-19 cases, and restrictions were tight, including banning citizens who were abroad from returning and up to 28-day quarantines. These travel measures were accompanied by strict domestic measures (both when the virus first began spreading and when it inevitably surged). In many cases, especially in island countries, these travel measures helped to keep case numbers low, albeit only temporarily, which allowed governments to lift strict domestic measures and return to a more normal life.
- ▶ **When travel measures reduced cases and deaths, it became difficult to lift them and reopen.** In some cases, even when a country's government wanted to reopen, its residents had become so accustomed to a zero-COVID lifestyle (and the lack of lockdowns and self-isolation that came with no domestic transmission) that they resisted reopening plans. Moreover, because the virus was not actively spreading in their community, many residents of these countries felt less urgency to get vaccinated; this made reopening a tricky balancing act between convincing the public that reopening would be safe and convincing them to get vaccinated ahead of an inevitable surge of cases as borders reopened.

The Asia Pacific region's shutdown has had lingering impacts on migration. The region is highly diverse and includes destination countries such as Australia, rich countries with little permanent immigration such

as Japan, sending countries such as the Philippines, and hubs of mixed migration such as Malaysia and Singapore. The COVID-19 pandemic stopped virtually all movement across this spectrum:

- ▶ **Return migration:** The region saw millions of migrants return to their countries of origin (more than 3 million to the Philippines alone), forcing governments to balance efforts to eradicate the virus through strict limits on incoming travel against the need to allow their citizens to return. Countries chartered repatriation flights and helped returnees to quarantine and access COVID-19 tests, but they were still unable to meet the scale of the demand to return.
- ▶ **Labor mobility:** Labor migration collapsed in early 2020, and the movement of lower-skilled migrant workers was often most affected. The lack of new labor migrants led to labor shortages (such as in Malaysia's palm oil industry) and prompted some countries to rethink some aspects of their ongoing efforts to address long-term demographic and economic needs through migration, such as opening permanent migration pathways (in Japan) or rebalancing from temporary toward higher-skilled, permanent migration (in Australia and New Zealand). The flow of migrant workers leaving also stopped abruptly in the pandemic, but emigration from countries in the region rebounded more quickly than immigration.
- ▶ **Students and tourists:** Strict travel measures triggered a large, sustained drop in international students moving to Asia and the Pacific (and therefore loss of revenue in countries' education sectors). This decline lasted into 2021, when student migration recovered in most other regions. Students could usually leave Asia and the Pacific for education, but few students entered the main destination countries in the region (Australia, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand). Travel measures also devastated the tourism industry, leading to massive job losses in tourist-dependent economies in the Pacific and Southeast Asia.

Governments turned to innovative policy measures to keep people moving. These included contactless travel systems (and even plans for a new "pandemic-proof" airport in Singapore) and travel bubbles (quarantine-free travel agreements between two or more countries), though these burst easily with even a small increase in COVID-19 cases in one or more of the countries involved. Other countries built specialized quarantine facilities or invested in digital health credentials to verify travelers' vaccination or testing status.

In addition to its impacts on mobility, the pandemic also disproportionately affected migrants, who often live or work in unsafe conditions that made them vulnerable to the virus. All countries in the region committed to giving regular migrants access to health care and vaccinations but in practice excluded unauthorized migrants, refugees, and others who lacked documentation or were dissuaded from accessing care by concerns about immigration enforcement. At the same time, migrants in the region contributed to the health and socioeconomic response to the pandemic, most notably through their financial remittances, which grew in some countries, even during the pandemic's initial economic crisis, and were encouraged through tax incentives and digital tools to lower transaction costs.

Looking ahead, the Asia Pacific region's experience highlights crucial lessons for managing mobility during and after crises. Travel measures can be effective if they are used efficiently and alongside domestic restrictions, but they must be equitable, streamlined, and time-bound, and countries must have the

digital and built infrastructure to help keep essential travelers moving. When migration does shut down, governments need coordinated plans to protect migrants (including those without legal status) and to prepare for return migration (including scalable systems to repatriate migrants safely). Ultimately, extended mobility shutdowns in Asia and the Pacific triggered labor shortages and devastated the education and tourism sectors, and when the travel measures worked, they stayed in place for longer than necessary. Governments should use the COVID-19 experience to revisit their migration systems' objectives, policies, and institutions—from labor migration to student mobility—to ensure that these systems are resilient and prepared for the next public-health crisis.

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic sparked an unprecedented global shutdown in cross-border movement. Border closures started in East and Southeast Asia in early 2020 and quickly spread through the entire Asia Pacific region, and in some cases, they stayed in place for more than two years. The early success of closures in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan in slowing the spread of the virus and in some cases achieving zero COVID-19 cases, prompted the rest of the world to shut down. For example, New Zealand's scientific advisors cited Taiwan's success to justify shutting the country's borders.¹ But over time, the success of these measures waned, and their costs multiplied.

In the first weeks of the pandemic, hundreds of thousands of people were stranded abroad or forced to return to countries unprepared to reintegrate them (particularly in South and Southeast Asia). In the months that followed, countries barred some citizens from returning home or leaving the country (e.g., Australia) and forced travelers to navigate expensive and arduous travel measures (e.g., three-week quarantines in Fiji, Hong Kong, the Marshall Islands, and Singapore). Perhaps more concerning, all types of migration remained shut down for much of the next three years.

This near-total shutdown in mobility in the region had major socioeconomic consequences.

This near-total shutdown in mobility in the region had major socioeconomic consequences. Three years without normal labor migration triggered intense labor shortages and revealed underlying precarity in labor markets across the region. The shutdown in tourist movements devastated small island countries and forced them to lean further on international donors and lenders.² Without students, the Australian higher education sector lost AUD 1.8 billion in just one year.³ Moreover, the collapse in cross-border movement was mostly one-way: emigration rebounded much quicker than immigration simply because it was much easier to leave than to enter these countries.

1 At first, New Zealand planned to take a mitigation approach, but after learning more about the virus and seeing the success of other countries, it pivoted to an eradication approach. See Associated Press, "New Zealand Took Early Lessons from Places Like Singapore, Taiwan to Beat Covid-19: Scientist," *South China Morning Post*, June 17, 2021.

2 Alexandre Dayant, Roland Rajah, and Riley Duke, "A Changing Aid Landscape in the Pacific," *The Interpreter*, December 16, 2022.

3 Universities Australia, "17,000 Uni Jobs Lost to COVID-19" (media release, February 3, 2021).

Given the pandemic's unprecedented shock to mobility and border regimes across the globe, the Migration Policy Institute's Task Force on Mobility and Borders during and after COVID-19 is exploring opportunities to improve international coordination regarding border management during this public-health crisis and looking ahead to future emergencies. This report is part of a series of regional case studies that cover Asia and the Pacific, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and South America. Each offers in-depth analysis of regional trends and policy developments.

The Asia Pacific region is a clear distillation of the immense costs and benefits of using border measures to tackle public-health risks. This report examines the trade-offs of taking stricter approaches to border management. It looks most closely at East Asia, the Pacific islands, Southeast Asia, and the Trans-Tasman area (i.e., Australia and New Zealand), which implemented stricter mobility responses to COVID-19 than South Asia and the rest of the world. It then outlines how these measures affected migration, from migrant returns to labor migration and student mobility. The final section looks at policy responses to the pandemic—including novel travel measures such as digital health credentials and an increased focus on diaspora engagement—and offers good practices that could be continued or replicated beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 COVID-19 Travel Measures in Asia and the Pacific

Governments in Asia and the Pacific used travel measures earlier, more strictly, and for longer than those in other world regions. Asian countries, particularly those in East Asia, were informed by their previous experiences with viruses such as Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) in 2015 and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2002–03. For instance, Japan's infectious disease plan outlined specific travel-related policies—including quarantine and pausing visa processing—that could be used in case of such viruses.⁴ Asian countries were the first to implement travel measures, despite the World Health Organization's decision not to recommend travel restrictions. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan started screening travelers from Wuhan, China, in the first week of January 2020 and banned travelers from parts of China by the end of the month.

These strict border measures in East Asia were quickly replicated across the rest of the Asia Pacific region and stayed in place throughout 2020 and 2021, even as the rest of the world began to reopen. By March 2020, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan had managed COVID-19 surges by closing their borders, so other governments quickly followed suit.⁵ Australia and New Zealand soon shut their borders, and Pacific island countries, without exception, closed their borders to almost all incoming traffic. These restrictions were exceptionally strict, and Australia and New Zealand were among the very few countries that barred their citizens who were abroad from returning. By mid-2020, many other regions had begun to switch from outright restrictions (e.g., travel bans and visa cancellations) to health conditions (e.g.,

Governments in Asia and the Pacific used travel measures earlier, more strictly, and for longer than those in other world regions.

⁴ Japanese Cabinet Secretariat, Cabinet Agency for Infectious Disease Crisis Management, "National Action Plan for Pandemic Influenza and New Infectious Diseases" (planning report, June 7, 2013).

⁵ See, for example, Associated Press, "New Zealand Took Early Lessons."

quarantine and testing), but Asia and the Pacific did not.⁶ South Asia seemed closest to reopening in 2021, until it became the epicenter of the Delta variant of the virus that caused borders to shut across the region.⁷ Rather than *lifting* blanket travel restrictions and allowing travelers to enter if they quarantined or showed proof of vaccination or a negative test (as most European countries did in 2021), most countries in the Asia Pacific region either stayed shut for almost all travelers or offered limited exemptions to travel bans coupled with strict quarantine. Even these health requirements (when applied) were unusually strict: Hong Kong required a 14-day hotel quarantine, while Fiji required 28 days.⁸

Strict travel measures stayed in place across much of the Asia Pacific region because they were successful, at least at first. Granted, these measures often did not fully prevent the virus from entering a country, and they were most effective in countries with the border health capacities to monitor and test arrivals. India and Nepal, for example, closed their previously open shared border, but they lacked the border personnel and equipment to prevent people from crossing this porous land border or even to test migrants who entered through official border crossing points.⁹ Still, these travel measures were particularly successful in most of Asia and the Pacific, keeping case numbers manageable and public-health impacts low. These travel restrictions also allowed governments to lift some of their domestic measures, such as lockdowns and mask mandates, making life easier for their local population by keeping borders closed. In 2020 and 2021, successful use of travel measures relied on two conditions:

- ▶ **Early implementation of travel restrictions:** In many Pacific island countries, borders closed quickly enough to prevent the virus from entering. These were the exceptions. Most of these countries have only air and sea borders, which were easier to close than land borders, and few incoming travelers from virus hotspots. Most other countries could not entirely prevent the virus from arriving, but early use of travel measures was still crucial to keeping the initial surge of cases low (such as in Thailand and Vietnam) and managing future surges.
- ▶ **Quick (re)implementation of strict domestic measures:** Many early pandemic “success stories” in Asia and the Pacific (such as Australia, Fiji, South Korea, and New Zealand) experienced large-scale surges at some point in 2020–21, during which the government took strict domestic measures, such as lockdowns, to stop community spread. South Korea, for instance, saw COVID-19 cases surge in February 2020 (peaking at 909 reported on February 29), but a combination of strict travel restrictions and domestic testing and lockdowns reduced daily cases to single digits by April.¹⁰

6 Restrictions outnumbered health requirements in Africa, the Caribbean, East and Southeastern Europe, and the Middle East. By contrast, Asian countries tended to keep travel restrictions rather than moving to health requirements. Even South Asia, which was the least reliant on travel restrictions by the end of 2020, still used these restrictions more than South America, the Middle East and North Africa, the Caribbean, and sub-Saharan Africa. See Meghan Benton, Jeanne Batalova, Samuel Davidoff-Gore, and Timo Schmidt, *COVID-19 and the State of Global Mobility in 2020* (Washington, DC, and Geneva: Migration Policy Institute and International Organization for Migration, 2021).

7 The Delta variant underscores the challenges to keeping the virus out: By the time the World Health Organization had declared Delta a “variant of concern” on May 11, Pakistan and Bangladesh had already closed their borders to India (April 11 and April 25, respectively), yet both countries still suffered large, Delta-driven surges. See Benton, Batalova, Davidoff-Gore, and Schmidt, *COVID-19 and the State of Global Mobility in 2020*.

8 Jennis Naidu, “COVID-19: Suva Lockdown Lifted, Quarantine Period Extended To 28 Days,” *Fiji Sun*, April 16, 2020.

9 Sujeev Shakya, “India-Nepal Open Borders and the Pandemic” (brief, National University of Singapore, Institute of South Asian Studies, September 9, 2021); Arjun Poudel, “Unmanaged Border Crossings May Expose Nepal’s Achilles Heel in Stemming Covid-19,” *The Kathmandu Post*, September 24, 2021.

10 Justin McCurry, “Test, Trace, Contain: How South Korea Flattened Its Coronavirus Curve,” *The Guardian*, April 22, 2020.

Governments in the Asia Pacific region did explore tools to reopen, usually with minimal effect. They repeatedly tried to create travel bubbles or travel lanes, which allowed travelers to move between one or more countries without quarantine. Australia and New Zealand announced plans for a travel bubble in May 2020, but such efforts relied on coordination, trust, and shared risk tolerance and assessments. The Trans-Tasman bubble quickly became a one-way bubble, allowing New Zealanders to enter Australia but not vice versa, because the New Zealand government was concerned about rising case numbers in Australia. The bubble burst entirely within three months, once New Zealand also began recording small numbers of cases.¹¹ Other travel bubbles were implemented in India, Malaysia, New Zealand (with countries other than Australia), Singapore, Vietnam, and many of the Pacific islands, among others, but none lasted long-term. These bubbles burst when cases spiked, even if cases were increasing in both countries (and travelers from both countries thus posed similar risks).

The success of strict travel measures was self-perpetuating: the better they worked, the harder it became to remove them and reopen. Even when countries announced plans to reopen, they were often delayed because of the emergence of new variants of the virus or spikes in case counts.¹² Two challenges were particularly difficult for governments trying to reopen their borders:

- ▶ **Public opinion:** When travel restrictions worked, public opinion did not always support reopening. In Australia, public opinion became fixated on the “double donut” days, when zero case numbers or deaths were recorded. Because the country achieved the double donut on some occasions, the goal of eradicating the virus seemed realistic, and people became accustomed to living relatively normal lives without lockdowns or mass tests. Meanwhile, the costs of border closures were projected onto migrants and those outside of Australia.¹³
- ▶ **Domestic preparedness:** When travel measures successfully prevented large-scale community transmission of the virus, they perversely cut the incentive for the community to get vaccinated. For example, in Australia and China,¹⁴ many people were unconcerned with the risks of the virus or felt they did not need to get vaccinated until case numbers increased or borders reopened. This made reopening a riskier process.

Travel measures therefore seemed to have two destinies: They were either effective and became self-reinforcing, so reopening borders was incredibly fraught; or they failed and were unable to prevent or suppress the spread of the virus.

11 Julie Weed, “Remember the ‘Travel Bubble’? Here’s How It Burst,” *The New York Times*, August 28, 2020.

12 Reuters, “Singapore Resumes Border Reopening after Pause Due to Omicron Outbreak,” Reuters, February 16, 2022; Reuters, “New Zealand Delays Border Reopening to February over Omicron,” Al Jazeera, December 21, 2021; Biman Mukherji, “India Reverses Decision to Resume International Flights over Fears of an Omicron-Fueled Outbreak,” *Fortune*, December 2, 2021.

13 Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan and Meghan Benton, “Public Confidence in Pandemic Mobility Systems” (discussion paper prepared for a working group meeting of the Migration Policy Institute’s Task Force on Mobility and Borders during and after COVID-19, October 2021).

14 John Ruwitch, “Why Vaccine Hesitancy Persists in China — and What They’re Doing about It,” National Public Radio, December 9, 2022.

BOX 1**China: From the “Closed Loop” Olympics to a Chaotic Reopening**

China took the strictest and longest approach to eradicating COVID-19 of any country in the world. The Chinese government closed the country’s borders to almost all migrants and made citizens trying to return undergo multiple tests and lengthy quarantine. Along with travel measures, China took a dynamic clearance approach to internal COVID-19 restrictions, using localized mass testing and lockdowns where cases occurred (including keeping millions of people in its major cities in their homes) and cutting off these locations from the rest of the country until cases were eradicated. These strict measures were largely able to stop sustained spread of the virus. For instance, the Beijing Winter Olympics, held in February 2022 amid the height of the Omicron-variant-induced global surge in COVID-19 cases, was expected to shift China toward reopening. Instead, the country operated an incredibly strict “closed loop” of routine testing and specialized quarantine facilities coupled with bans on large audiences and most social interaction, with only 347 COVID-19 infections officially recorded. These restrictions were costly—and were only possible because of the government’s unique capacity to impose draconian surveillance capabilities—but they kept the virus spread low.

China’s mostly closed borders helped to eradicate the virus for almost three years, but they made reopening harder. Vaccination rates remained low by the time borders reopened, both because of vaccine hesitancy (including concerns that vaccines available in China were less effective than those used elsewhere) and because people became accustomed to living mostly without COVID-19, while few people had immunity from being exposed to the virus. China planned to reopen to some visa holders in late 2020 but stopped as case numbers grew globally, even though China itself did not experience a surge in cases.

China reopened in January 2023 with virtually no warning, as COVID-19 infections in China began to increase and public opinion turned against restrictions. Unlike Australia, where public opinion constrained efforts to reopen, China’s government had kept travel restrictions in place for so long that the Chinese public turned against the measures, especially once they saw the rest of the world restart normal cross-border travel in 2021 and 2022. Coupled with a lack of transparency and data sharing, this sudden reopening prompted other countries to reimpose testing requirements on arrivals from China, and Morocco even reimposed a travel ban on travelers from the country. Because the country was poorly prepared to reopen, the virus seems to have spread rapidly throughout the country, with the limited public evidence available indicating potential large-scale increases in deaths and severe illness.

Sources: Hao Zha et al., “Chinese Provincial Government Responses to COVID-19” (working paper, University of Oxford, January 25, 2022); Bloomberg, “China Could Stay Shut for All of 2022: Goldman Sachs,” Al Jazeera, January 5, 2022; Sue-Lin Wong, “China Is Unlikely to Re-Open Its Borders in 2022,” *The Economist*, November 8, 2021; Chad De Guzman, “What We Learned about COVID-19 Rules at the 2022 Olympics,” *Time*, February 21, 2022; Sabrina Tavernise, “A ‘Zero Covid’ Olympics” (The Daily podcast, *The New York Times*, February 4, 2022); John Ruwitch, “Why Vaccine Hesitancy Persists in China — and What They’re Doing about It,” NPR, December 9, 2022; Paul Haenle, “China’s Zero COVID Policy Is a Double-Edged Sword,” updated December 1, 2022; Alexandra Stevenson, “China Says It Will Do More to Vaccinate Older People against Covid,” *The New York Times*, November 29, 2022; Alexandra Stevenson, Zixu Wang, and Tiffany May, “As China Lifts Pandemic Border Controls, Mixed Feelings at Home and Abroad,” *The New York Times*, January 8, 2023.

3 Impacts on Cross-Border Movement

The COVID-19 pandemic shut down cross-border mobility in Asia and the Pacific, and given the severity and longevity of the region's travel measures, these movements took a long time to recover. In many places, it was not until 2022 that the first signs of recovery could be seen. Labor migration collapsed across most countries and skill levels, although labor emigration recovered quicker than immigration, partly because large numbers of migrants returned home in early 2020, often involuntarily, and many struggled to find jobs and restart lives there, so many were ready to migrate again as soon as they could. Other forms of cross-border mobility echo this dramatic drop, with student migration and tourism rapidly declining (although student emigration, like labor emigration, recovered quicker than immigration).

Overall, the Asia Pacific region stands as an outlier for how quickly and completely mobility halted. The sudden and prolonged mobility shutdown covered all aspects of movement, from short-term air travel to permanent immigration. On one end of the mobility spectrum, air travel dropped far earlier in Asia and the Pacific than in the rest of the world (31 percent in February 2020, compared to a 10 percent global average).¹⁵ Air travel in the Asia Pacific region continued to drop throughout 2020 (95 percent lower than pre-pandemic levels by February 2021) and remained at only half of pre-pandemic levels by mid-2022.¹⁶ On the other end of the mobility spectrum, permanent immigration levels also dropped in 2020, and in many cases dropped again in 2021. In the first year, permanent migration dropped in Japan and South Korea (61 percent and 32.8 percent, respectively), before dropping again in 2021 (37 percent and 5 percent).¹⁷ Even as permanent migration began to recover in many other high-income countries, permanent migration to many countries in Asia and the Pacific continued to drop, largely because borders in this region stayed shut to new migrants for much of 2021.

In many places, it was not until 2022 that the first signs of recovery could be seen.

15 International air passenger rates in Asia were 31 percent lower in February 2020 than in February 2019. The next biggest drop was North America, at 3 percent. See Oxley David, "Air Passenger Market Analysis" (brief, International Air Transport Association, March 2020).

16 Michael Doran, "IATA's Willie Walsh Says China the Last Market with Severe Covid Restrictions," Simple Flying, October 7, 2022.

17 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *International Migration Outlook 2022* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2022).

BOX 2 Data Considerations

Migration data are notoriously poor in Asia and the Pacific. The region is huge and highly diverse, with multiple regional institutions that overlap but do not always share data on migration, so no single actor collects migration data across the region. Some subregions, notably the Pacific islands, often lack basic population data because not all countries conduct censuses regularly. Few countries share data on irregular migration and displacement. In part, this is because many borders are porous, especially in Southeast and South Asia, where people move through less-regulated crossing points that are not consistently monitored (and where, during the pandemic, health measures were inconsistently applied). In an International Organization for Migration (IOM) study of six land points of entry between Laos and Thailand, only four remained open in mid-2022, and only two used health measures such as temperature checks and antigen testing. Given the lack of comprehensive data, this report focuses on regular rather than irregular movements and traces overall policy and migration trends, rather than comparing each specific country's migration numbers.

Similar data limitations also apply, to a lesser extent, to return migration. In some countries, return migration was highly regulated and organized (e.g., the Philippines), but migrants may have returned irregularly in other countries where they often worked in neighboring countries (e.g., Nepal) or the governments lacked capacity to register all returnees. Even regular labor migration is not reported consistently and often not promptly. Unauthorized migrants make up a significant portion of the labor supply in many Asia Pacific economies, but they are not counted systematically—for example, during the pandemic activists estimated that one province of Thailand had 400,000 migrant workers, many of whom were unauthorized, compared with official records of 260,000.

Sources: IOM, *Asia Pacific Migration Data Report 2021* (Bangkok: IOM, 2022); Nanchanok Wongsamuth, "Migrant Workers Suffer as Coronavirus Cases Surge in Thailand," Reuters, January 8, 2021; IOM, "Population Mobility Monitoring. Province Report: Nong Kha" (displacement tracking matrix data brief, IOM, Bangkok, 2022).

A. Return Migration

One of the pandemic's first and most striking impacts on migration was the enormous number of migrants stranded abroad or forced to return home suddenly. Stranded migrants were most prevalent in the Asia Pacific region along with the Gulf Cooperation Council states, where most migrant workers are from Asia.¹⁸ The return movements were equally enormous (India received 1.1 million repatriation requests by September 2020),¹⁹ posing real risks for governments trying to suppress the virus and straining national and local reintegration capacity.²⁰ Migrants stranded abroad often suffered the worst, especially in the first weeks when many lost jobs and were unable to return home (at the extreme, including suicides²¹).

Governments across Asia and the Pacific provided repatriation assistance and chartered flights for huge numbers of their nationals. The Philippines returned 3.3 million overseas foreign workers in about two

18 International Organization for Migration (IOM), "Covid-19 Impact on Stranded Migrants" (issue brief, September 30, 2020).

19 S. Irudaya Rajan and H. Arokkiaraj, "Return Migration from the Gulf Region to India Amidst COVID-19," in *Migration and Pandemics: Spaces of Solidarity and Spaces of Exception*, ed. Anna Triandafyllidou (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 207–25.

20 Camille Le Coz and Kathleen Newland, *Rewiring Migrant Returns and Reintegration After COVID-19* (Washington: DC, Migration Policy Institute, 2021).

21 Migrant Rights, "Migrants Take Their Own Lives as Covid19's Psychological Impact Worsens," updated April 26, 2020.

years.²² In 2020 alone, Pakistan reportedly returned 300,000 citizens, and Bangladesh returned more than 408,000 labor migrants.²³ By May 2020, 413,000 migrants registered on an official state portal to return to just one state in India (Kerala).²⁴ These return patterns continued throughout 2021, often because migrants living abroad lost their jobs, lacked health insurance or social protection, or their contracts or visas expired, so they were forced to return (or in some cases, they were forced to leave by their host-country governments, especially in Gulf Cooperation Council countries).

Many countries experiencing mass returns had already imposed limits and conditions on incoming travel. Thus, they struggled to balance the need to meet the demand for return with their aim to eradicate the virus by keeping the number of international arrivals low. Migrant workers returning to the Philippines, for example, had to book quarantine accommodations before arrival, test negative before leaving quarantine, and coordinate with the central government to travel safely back to their home province.²⁵ The government covered many of the costs involved (testing, accommodation, food, and transportation), but not all returnees benefited (women were disproportionately excluded).²⁶ Quarantine requirements and limits on flight arrivals or the number of arrivals from certain countries were de facto caps on the number of migrants who could return each day. In India, migrants abroad even filed legal challenges against the government's border closures because they were unable to return.²⁷ While there is only minimal research on this link, one study found that return migration was associated with higher case numbers in India and Pakistan but not in Bangladesh (though this was difficult to measure because testing was not widely available in the first months of the pandemic, when most migrants returned).²⁸

In the Philippines, the USD 20.6 million Assistance-to-Nationals Fund ... ran out in the first months of the pandemic.

Moreover, the financial costs of tightly regulated, controlled return processes were high. Booking charter flights, tests, and quarantine facilities was expensive. In the Philippines, the USD 20.6 million Assistance-to-Nationals Fund (which was used to charter flights for migrants to return home) ran out in the first months of the pandemic, so the government asked migrants to delay their return home until new legislation could replenish these funds.²⁹ Governments also had to shoulder the costs to reintegrate these migrants, for instance, with direct cash transfers and skills training.³⁰ Many people who returned had not planned to do so, and they reported higher levels of debt and reduced incomes, challenges in finding employment,

22 UN Network on Migration, "Philippine COVID-19 Response in 5Rs: Relief, Repatriation, Recovery, Return, and Reintegration," updated June 7, 2022.

23 Jong Woo Kang and Ma. Concepcion G. Latoja, *COVID-19 and Overseas Filipino Workers: Return Migration and Reintegration into the Home Country—the Philippine Case*, 21st ed. (Manila: Asian Development Bank, 2022); Ayesha Qaisrani, *New Trends on Return and Remigration in the COVID Era? Evidence from Bangladesh and Pakistan* (Vienna: International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2022).

24 Express News Service, "5.63 Lakh Non-Resident Keralites Register Online to Return Home," *The New Indian Express*, May 4, 2020.

25 Kang and Latoja, *COVID-19 and Overseas Filipino Workers*.

26 Kang and Latoja, *COVID-19 and Overseas Filipino Workers*.

27 India's Supreme Court struck down these challenges. See Rajan and H. Arokkiaraj, "Return Migration from the Gulf."

28 Jean N. Lee et al., "Migration, Externalities, and the Diffusion of COVID-19 in South Asia," *Journal of Public Economics* 193 (January 2021).

29 Enrico Fos, "Philippines' Submission of the Voluntary GCM Review" (survey report, Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, Office of the Undersecretary for Migrant Workers Affairs, October 30, 2020).

30 Kang and Latoja, *COVID-19 and Overseas Filipino Workers*. Not all countries invested in returnees; India, for example excluded returned migrants from its economic stimulus package. See Rajan and H. Arokkiaraj, "Return Migration from the Gulf."

and social stigma associated with their return,³¹ which in some cases seemed to increase their desire to remigrate abroad.³² Labor emigration restarted relatively quickly in Asia and the Pacific, but data are not available to match individual emigrants with the people who returned during COVID-19, so it is difficult to tell the extent to which people who returned eventually left again.

B. Labor Migration

Before the pandemic, large-scale labor migration was common into, within, and out of Asia and the Pacific. The region hosted 24 million migrant workers in 2019, or 14 percent of all international migrant workers worldwide, and major destinations for these workers included Australia, China, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, and Thailand.³³ Labor migration in the region is often temporary or circular, even to countries with long histories of immigration, such as Australia. Migrant workers also left countries in Asia and the Pacific in large numbers, mostly moving within the region but also leaving it (e.g., migrants from Asia made up 31 percent of all migrants in the United States in 2021).³⁴ These labor emigrants largely come from Bangladesh, China, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. The shutdown on labor emigration and immigration therefore posed critical risks to labor markets, remittances, and economic resilience in these countries. The drop in new labor migration (both immigration and emigration) was sharp, and in light of the continued use of travel restrictions, it showed few signs of recovery in 2021. Labor emigration, however, recovered quicker than immigration, and both started to bounce back to a greater degree in 2022.

Destination Countries

Labor immigration ground to a sudden halt in the early months of 2020 as countries closed borders, banned flights, and canceled visas. Officially recorded labor migration inflows dropped, though in some cases migrants may have still moved for work without authorization. In most cases, labor immigration continued to drop throughout 2021, creating economic challenges in key sectors where migrants were over-represented. Given the dearth of new workers, many governments in the region were forced to rethink which migrants and how many are needed to fill labor shortages and boost economic productivity in the short and long term.

Travel restrictions led to a huge drop in all types of labor immigration. Australia's travel restrictions were among the strictest in the world, with firm caps on how many people could fly into the country on any given day, restrictions even on citizens returning to the country, and long hotel quarantine requirements. In this extreme case, labor migration dropped dramatically across all categories of workers because strict entry and exit restrictions made would-be migrants unable or unwilling to go to Australia for work. This drop involved

31 Kang and Latoja, *COVID-19 and Overseas Filipino Workers*.

32 Melissa R. Garabiles and Maruja MB Asis, *Remigration or Reintegration: What Explains the Intentions of Overseas Filipino Workers?* (Manila: IOM Philippines Country Office, 2022).

33 International Labor Organization (ILO), *ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers: Results and Methodology* (Geneva: ILO, 2021).

34 Mary Hanna and Jeanne Batalova, "Immigrants from Asia in the United States," *Migration Information Source*, March 9, 2021.

labor migrants entering on both temporary visas (33 percent) and permanent visas (17 percent).³⁵ Even greater was the decline in the number of migrants arriving via the working holiday program (77 percent), which allows young people to work for up to three years in Australia and is an important source of unskilled labor primarily in the horticultural, agricultural, and tourism sectors.³⁶

The number of migrant workers across many large destination countries in Asia and the Pacific dropped as migrants returned home in the early months of the pandemic and then were unable to remigrate because of closed borders. This impact tended to be larger for lower-skilled migrants. In Thailand, the drop in migrant workers was immediate—the stock

In Thailand, the drop in migrant workers was immediate—the stock of migrant workers shrank by 14 percent between January and March 2020—as many workers returned to their countries of origin.

of migrant workers shrank by 14 percent between January and March 2020—as many workers returned to their countries of origin (primarily Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos). But the drop was bigger for “general” migrant workers compared with skilled migrant workers in Thailand (see Figure 1). Far fewer skilled migrant workers were forced to leave the country in the first place because they worked in sectors less affected by the pandemic³⁷ and were less economically vulnerable.³⁸ The number of officially recorded and authorized skilled and general migrant workers did not fully recover in 2022, although it is possible many overstayed visas rather than leaving the country.³⁹

35 The permanent migration program in Australia allows migrants to apply from outside Australia or from inside (typically for those converting from temporary to permanent visas). In 2020, the number of migrants applying from outside Australia dropped by 23 percent, compared with only a 14-percent drop in the number of migrants applying from inside Australia. See Australian Department of Home Affairs, *2020 – 21 Migration Program Report: Program Year to 30 June 2021* (Canberra: Australian Department of Home Affairs, 2021); Australian Department of Home Affairs, *2019 – 20 Migration Program Report Program Year to 30 June 2020* (Canberra: Australian Department of Home Affairs, 2020); Australian Department of Home Affairs, *The Administration of the Immigration and Citizenship Programs*, 7th ed. (Canberra: Australian Department of Home Affairs, 2021).

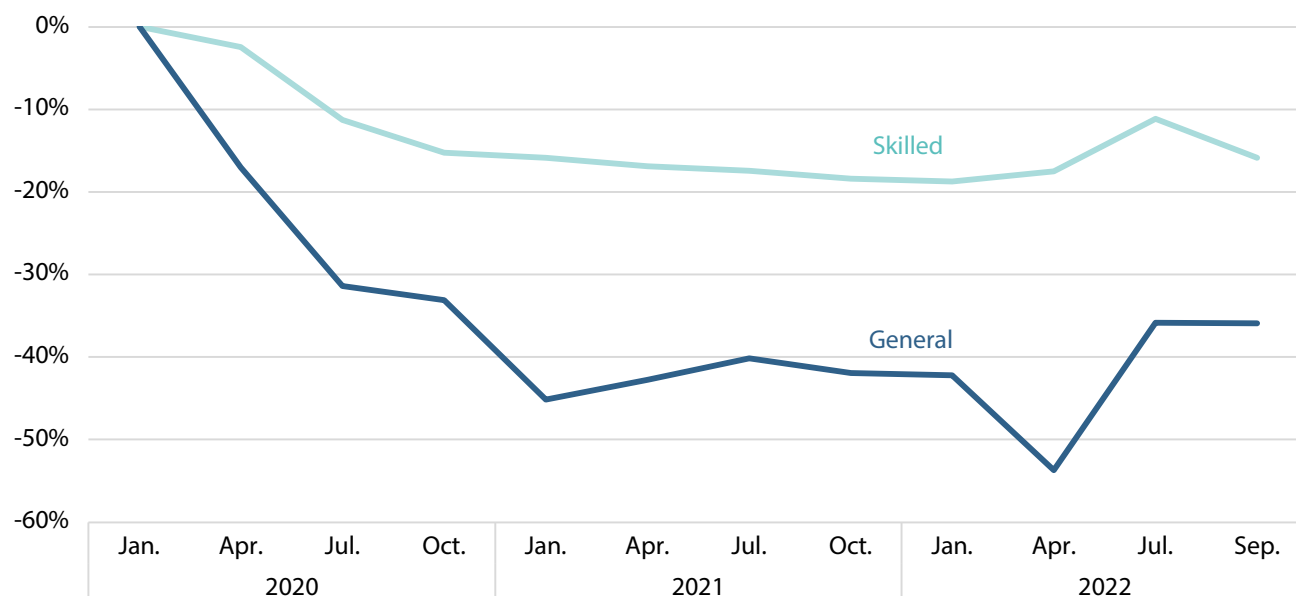
36 Julian Leeser et al., *Final Report of the Inquiry into the Working Holiday Maker Program* (Canberra: Parliament of Australia, 2020).

37 Migrants work across highly diverse sectors in different countries across Asia and the Pacific, making it difficult to assess how the pandemic’s impacts on the most vulnerable sectors (for example, domestic work or service sectors broadly versus manufacturing or food-related sectors, which tended to be more resilient) may have affected migrant employment. For instance, in Thailand, 57 percent of employed migrants work in industry, compared with 39 percent in Malaysia, underscoring that migrants worked in very different sectors in each country. See ILO, *Measuring Labor Migration in ASEAN: Analysis from the ILO’s International Labour Migration Statistics (ILMS) Database* (Bangkok: ILO, 2022).

38 For instance, the number of highly skilled migrants in Thailand (those under Section 62 visas, primarily managers, directors, and technicians) began to drop in April 2020 but stabilized by October at 90 percent of April levels. By contrast, the number of migrants entering under bilateral labor migration memorandums of understanding (unskilled migrants) continued to drop throughout 2020, and had dropped by one-third in April 2021. Author calculations based on statistics from Thailand Department of Employment, “Monthly Statistics,” accessed February 15, 2023.

39 Chonticha Tangworamongkon, “Triangle in Asean Quarterly Briefing Note: Thailand (July – September 2022)” (briefing note, ILO, 2022).

FIGURE 1

Change in the Number of General and Skilled Migrants on Work Permits in Thailand, 2020–22

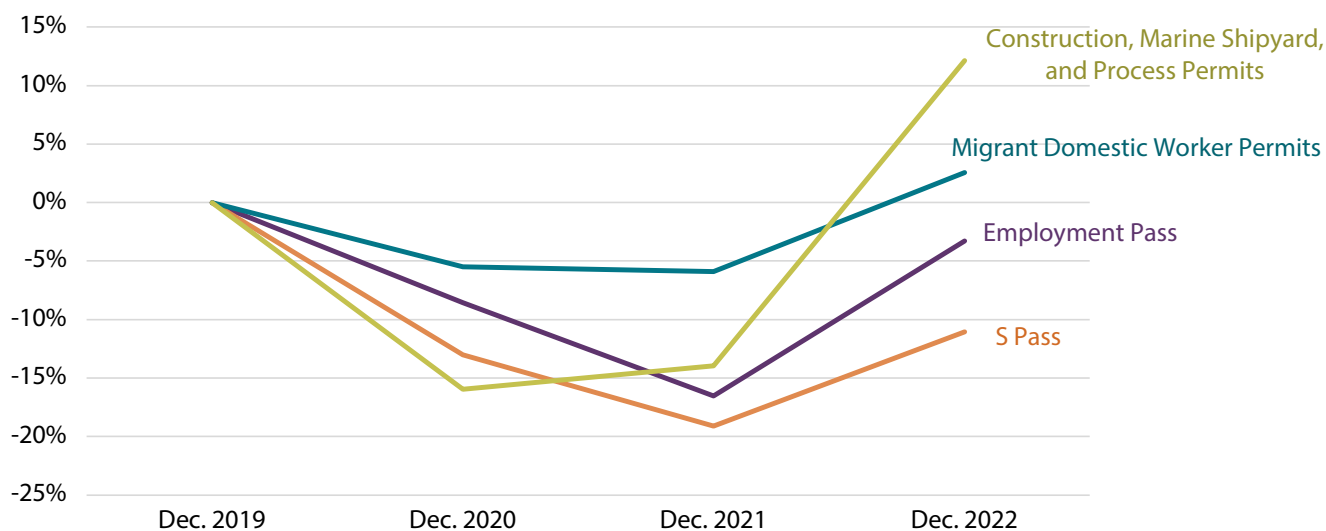
Note: Data compare the number of migrant workers in Thailand in each quarter against January 2020 levels.

Source: Government of Thailand, Foreign Workers Administration Office, “ข้อมูลสถิติรายเดือน,” accessed February 26, 2023.

Governments prioritized certain types of labor migrants over others. Unlike in Thailand, the number of higher-skilled migrant workers in Singapore decreased more and for longer than construction workers and domestic workers (see Figure 2). In the first year of the pandemic, the number of construction workers decreased more than the number of mid-level skilled workers (S Pass holders) or professionals, managers, and executives (Employment Pass holders), but these higher-skilled programs continued to decline into 2021, even as other types of labor migration started to recover. However, this may not reflect a difference in the workers’ resilience but instead the government’s decision to tighten conditions and restrictions specifically on higher-skilled immigration to protect local workers from competition. The government increased salary requirements on these visas (twice for the S Pass, in May and again in September 2020), “given the weakness in the job market and uncertain growth outlook” and to provide “support to businesses that are in a position to retain or expand local employment.”⁴⁰ And so, even as the number of migrant workers in Singapore began to recover in 2022, this recovery was weaker in higher-skilled visa classes.

40 Singapore Ministry of Manpower, “Tightening of Work Pass Requirements” (news release, August 27, 2020). The lack of a recovery in 2021 may also come down to Singapore’s reimposition of travel restrictions on Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka after the spread of the Delta variant in May 2021. See Asian Development Bank (ADB) Institute, ILO, and OECD, *Labor Migration in Asia: COVID-19 Impacts, Challenges, and Policy Responses* (Tokyo, Bangkok, and Paris: ADB Institute, ILO, and OECD Publishing, 2022).

FIGURE 2

Change in the Number of Foreign Workers in Singapore, by Visa Type, Late 2019–Mid-2022

Note: Data compare the number of foreign workers in each visa class in December of 2020–2022 against the number in December 2019.

Source: Singapore Ministry of Manpower, “Foreign Workforce Numbers,” updated 2022.

Without new migrant workers arriving in many Asian and Pacific countries, governments responded in differing ways. Some governments took steps to retain their existing population of migrant workers. Meanwhile, some actors (such as unions) saw the drop in migrant labor as a potential opportunity for native workers to gain better bargaining power.⁴¹ In Australia, the government even publicly called for temporary visa holders to leave the country so the government could prioritize its own citizens and migrants with essential skills such as nurses.⁴² Taiwan lifted penalties (e.g., entry bans, lower fines) to encourage people who overstayed their visas to come forward and leave the country, though with limited success.⁴³ By contrast, other countries across the region used visa extensions to keep migrant workers who were already in the country for longer periods. For instance, such policies allowed all migrant workers in New Zealand and those with specific visas in Japan and Thailand to stay in those countries without falling into irregular status. But these efforts had a limited effect, compared with the dramatic drop in migrant worker arrivals, and labor shortages still occurred. As early as August 2020, the drop in Indonesian migrant workers going to Malaysia led palm oil companies to fast-track mechanization and try to recruit local workers.⁴⁴

41 Brendan Coates, Alex Ballantyne, and Will Mackey, “Shutting down Migration Did Not Kickstart the Economy,” Grattan Institute, February 10, 2022.

42 Angus Thompson, “Australia Shouldn’t Have Kicked out Temporary Workers: Albanese,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 29, 2022.

43 Pei-Chia Lan, “Shifting Borders and Migrant Workers’ Im/Mobility: The Case of Taiwan during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 31, no. 3 (September 2022): 225–46.

44 Mei Mei Chu, “Pandemic Forces Malaysian Palm Industry to Rethink Reliance on Foreign Labour,” Reuters, August 17 2020.

BOX 3**A Growing Need for Labor Migrants in Japan**

COVID-19 emerged just as Japan was reforming its labor migration system, disrupting the country's efforts to welcome more migrants to address pressing labor shortages and demographic imbalances. The reforms, passed in December 2018, opened the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) Pathway 1 (for medium-skilled migrants) and Pathway 2 (for higher-skilled migrants) to supplement the existing Technical Intern Training Program (TITP), a temporary labor migration program that provides skills and language training to low-skilled trainees and interns. The government was already facing challenges to implementing SSW—testing requirements were difficult and bureaucratic, and both employers and migrants showed little interest—when COVID-19 arrived, bringing even more challenges to attracting migrant workers.

On the surface, the SSW program seems to have expanded rapidly, but this does not mean Japan has actually welcomed large numbers of new migrant workers. The SSW program expanded from 1,600 workers in 2019 to 87,000 workers in 2022, but much of this growth is from TITP holders moving to the SSW program. The number of TITP holders dropped from 411,000 in 2019 to 276,000 in 2021, partly because of TITP holders who left after their five-year visa expired but mostly because of the large number who moved to the SSW program. Once TITP holders undergo enough training, they can take a test to transfer to SSW, which gives them access to higher-paid jobs. In the SSW program's first year, nine out of ten participants had transferred from TITP. In June 2022, of the 87,000 SSW holders, 66,000 came from the TITP.

Labor immigration began to recover from 2022, amid further reforms to attract migrant workers. The number of SSW workers reached 200,000 by November 2023, a significant increase but not enough to be on track to reach the targeted 345,000 SSW holders by 2024. As Japan works to address long-term demographic decline (experts predict the country will need 6.74 million migrant workers by 2040), the government has proposed expanding the number of sectors eligible for SSW and replacing the TITP with a new program that would allow workers to switch employers more easily. These reforms reflect Japan's serious need for migrant workers, but it remains to be seen if the country will be able to substantially reform its migration and integration systems to attract the needed works.

Sources: Japanese Ministry of Justice, Immigration Services Agency and Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, Director of Human Resources Development, “外国人技能実習制度について,” accessed February 15, 2023; Japanese Ministry of Justice, Immigration Services Agency, “特定技能在留外国人数の公表,” accessed February 15, 2023; Asian Development Bank (ADB) Institute, International Labor Organization (ILO), and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Labor Migration in Asia: COVID-19 Impacts, Challenges, and Policy Responses* (Tokyo, Bangkok, and Paris: ADB Institute, ILO, and OECD Publishing, 2022); Deborah Milly, “Japan's Labor Migration Reforms: Breaking with the Past?,” *Migration Information Source*, February 20, 2020; Kantaro Komiya, “Japan Must Quadruple Foreign Workers by 2040 to Meet Growth Target - Report,” Reuters, February 3, 2022; Maximilien Rehm, “What Will Japan's Great Reopening Mean for Immigration Policy?,” *The Diplomat*, November 11, 2022; Newland Chase, “JAPAN – New Visa System Launched,” updated April 27, 2023; Mainichi Japan, “Japan Gov't Proposes Adding 4 Industries to 'Specified Skill' Visas for Foreign Workers,” *The Mainichi*, February 23, 2024; Kyodo News, “Japan OKs New Foreign Trainee Program to Strengthen Rights Protection,” *Kyodo News+*, February 9, 2024.

BOX 4**Lockdowns and COVID-19 Impacts on Migrant Workers**

Migrant workers in many countries in Asia and the Pacific were subject to harsh mobility restrictions, surveillance, and immigrant enforcement during the pandemic. These measures were often discriminatory: foreign workers in Hong Kong were required to get tested for COVID-19 in December 2020 and May 2021, but no other occupation or group faced similar targeted requirements. Both governments and employers imposed these restrictions: in Hong Kong, family employers, not the authorities, often banned foreign domestic workers from leaving their homes during their state-mandated rest days.

Governments also targeted migrant workers living in dormitories or cramped living conditions. Migrant workers often have limited housing options, whether they live in dormitories under guest worker programs in East and Southeast Asia or simply lack the resources to rent larger homes. Therefore, migrants often could not socially distance or quarantine by themselves if sick, so the virus spread quickly in these buildings. In Singapore, the government heightened inspections of areas where migrant workers congregated, threatening to revoke their work passes unless they dispersed. In Taiwan, some local authorities banned migrants from leaving their dormitories and workplaces, even though the rest of the country was not locked down. One city in Australia locked down 3,000 people inside public housing apartments, disproportionately migrants and refugees, with no notice. The government ombudsman later found that the government's actions, which were based on a review of documents that falsely suggested that "the [apartment] towers were a hotbed of criminality and noncompliance," violated human rights.

Discriminatory and disproportionate restrictions on migrants' movement, livelihoods, and social interaction are not new in Asia and the Pacific, but COVID-19 exposed the lack of systematic and full protection of migrants' rights and dignity in the region. Even as countries began to "live with COVID-19," they continued to restrict migrant workers to their dormitories (e.g., in Singapore); this suggests that governments have not learned from the COVID-19 experience the importance of addressing underlying issues such as exclusion and unsafe living conditions that made these measures necessary in the first place.

Sources: Yuk Wah Chan and Lan Pei-Chia, "The Politics of Sanitization: Pandemic Crisis, Migration and Development in Asia-Pacific," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 31, no. 3 (2022): 205–24; Ingrid Lui et al., "We Also Deserve Help during the Pandemic: The Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Foreign Domestic Workers in Hong Kong" (preprint, medRxiv, 2021); Sallie Yea, "This Is Why Singapore's Coronavirus Cases Are Growing: A Look inside the Dismal Living Conditions of Migrant Workers," *The Conversation*, April 29, 2020; Adam Hancock, "Singapore Migrant Workers Labour under COVID Curbs," *Al Jazeera*, January 30, 2022; Zhuo Tee, "Coronavirus: MOM Will Revoke Work Passes of Migrant Workers in Large Gatherings If They Refuse to Disperse," *The Straits Times*, March 25, 2020; Laura Antona, "The New Normal or Same Old? The Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Live-in Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore," *London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) Southeast Asia Blog*, updated November 4, 2020; Deborah Glass, *Investigation into the Detention and Treatment of Public Housing Residents Arising from a COVID-19 'Hard Lockdown' in July 2020* (Melbourne: Victorian Ombudsman, 2020).

Origin Countries

Countries in Asia and the Pacific also send significant numbers of labor emigrants to other countries, both in the region and outside it. Labor emigration ground to a halt in the first months of 2020 as destination countries shut down immigration processing and placed limits on arrivals, but the demand to leave remained strong, and emigration picked up again relatively quickly.⁴⁵ For instance, hundreds of thousands of labor emigrants returned home during the pandemic, often with high debt burdens from paying brokers and immigration visa fees before they left (and sometimes the costs of flights, testing, and quarantine when they returned), so many were ready to migrate again as soon as they could.⁴⁶

The shutdown in labor emigration was relatively short-lived. In April 2020, almost no migrant workers left the largest sending countries in the region.⁴⁷ But this emigration generally began to recover in 2021, in some cases already exceeding pre-pandemic levels (e.g., in Nepal) and in other cases spiking in late 2021 (e.g., increasing in Bangladesh from 74,000 outbound workers in the third quarter of 2021 to 299,000 in the fourth quarter). Labor emigration restarted quicker to destination countries and regions with looser travel measures (e.g., movement to Europe and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries rebounded more quickly than movement within Asia).⁴⁸ Malaysia was the biggest pre-pandemic destination for Indonesian migrant workers, but it did not reopen until late 2022; instead, the 2022 recovery in Indonesian labor emigration was driven by migrants moving to Hong Kong and Taiwan, which reopened earlier and overtook Malaysia as the biggest destinations.⁴⁹ Still, Indonesian labor emigration to Malaysia spiked once it became easier to travel to that country, and by 2023 it was nearing pre-pandemic levels and had overtaken migration to Hong Kong again.⁵⁰

Patterns of emigration for health-care workers—always in demand, but particularly so in a public-health crisis—varied widely across the region, depending on the priorities of both origin and destination countries. Demand for such workers remained strong in destination countries, including many that offered exemptions from travel measures for health-care professionals or even introduced new programs to target them.⁵¹ Countries in Asia, notably India and the Philippines, are major sources of international health-care workers.⁵² Because destination countries tended not to restrict these workers' immigration, emigration in this sector did not always decline as it did in others: in Pakistan, nurses were the only occupation that left

45 Often, the sudden border closures meant many people with approval to migrate abroad for work had their approvals canceled. In Nepal, 115,000 "aspirant migrants" had their labor permits canceled, and 328,681 had pre-approvals postponed. See Padma Khatiwada et al., *Status of Nepali Migrant Workers in Relation to Covid-19* (Kathmandu: IOM, 2020).

46 Kate Hooper, *Reassessing Recruitment Costs in a Changing World of Labor Migration* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2022).

47 Five of the largest sending countries sent almost no migrants in April 2020: Bangladesh, India, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. See ADB Institute, ILO, and OECD, *Labor Migration in Asia: COVID-19 Impacts*.

48 Aiko Kikkawa, Kijin Kim, Raymond Gaspar, and Pitchaya Sirivunnabood, "COVID-19 and the Deployment of Labor Migrants from Asia: Lessons Learned and Ways Forward" (brief, ADB, October 2022).

49 Author calculations based on data from Indonesian Migrant Worker Protection Agency, "Statistik Perlindungan Dan Penempatan," updated 2022.

50 Indonesian Migrant Worker Protection Agency, "Data Penempatan dan Pelindungan Pekerja Migran Indonesia Periode Tahun 2023," updated January 31, 2024.

51 Benton, Batalova, Davidoff-Gore, and Schmidt, *COVID-19 and the State of Global Mobility in 2020*. See also UK Government, "Government Launches Health and Care Visa to Ensure UK Health and Care Services Have Access to the Best Global Talent" (news release, July 24, 2020).

52 James Buchan, *COVID-19 and the International Supply of Nurses: Report for the Council of Nurses* (Geneva: International Council of Nurses, 2020).

in greater numbers in 2020 than 2019.⁵³ In 2021, Indonesia even launched new bilateral labor migration agreements to send its nurses abroad, though the numbers were quite low.⁵⁴ By contrast, the Philippines prevented nurses and medical workers from leaving to work internationally.⁵⁵ The government eventually lifted this moratorium in December 2020 but kept a very low quota of 5,000 workers for 2021 (later raised to 7,000) to maintain its domestic health-care worker supply during the pandemic.⁵⁶ The government later suggested that it would “trade” nurses for vaccine supplies, allowing more nurses to go to countries that donated vaccines to the Philippines.⁵⁷

The collapse in labor emigration was driven primarily by destination countries closing borders, but sending countries’ policies also shaped these trends. Some countries made it harder for their residents to leave: Brunei required citizens and permanent residents to be vaccinated to leave the country,⁵⁸ and until April 2022, unvaccinated Australian citizens needed an exemption to leave the country.⁵⁹ Other barriers to worker emigration were de facto: in Nepal, delays in rolling out vaccinations, coupled with many other countries’ requirements that travelers show proof of vaccination, prevented many would-be Nepali migrants from leaving because they could not enter their destination countries.⁶⁰ However, some major sending countries did introduce measures to help labor migrants leave during the pandemic. For instance, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka prioritized would-be migrant workers for vaccines accepted for entry into their destinations (some destination countries accepted only the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine or other types), while Bhutan, Cambodia, Thailand, and others converted their predeparture orientations to a virtual format so they could continue holding these trainings without the risk of spreading the virus.⁶¹ These sending country efforts helped, but ultimately, labor emigration only restarted at scale when destination countries began to accept migrants again.

In Nepal, delays in rolling out vaccinations, coupled with many other countries’ requirements that travelers show proof of vaccination, prevented many would-be Nepali migrants from leaving.

53 Author analysis of data from Pakistan Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, “Statement Showing Number of Pakistani Workers Registered for Employment Abroad During the Period 1971-2023 (up to January), Category-Wise Emigrations,” accessed February 21, 2023.

54 ADB Institute, ILO, and OECD, *Labor Migration in Asia: COVID-19 Impacts*.

55 Karl Lester M Yap, “Philippines Bars Nurses from Working Abroad as Limit Is Reached,” Bloomberg, June 5, 2021.

56 ADB Institute, ILO, and OECD, *Labor Migration in Asia: COVID-19 Impacts*.

57 Neil Jerome Morales, “Philippines Offers Nurses in Exchange for Vaccines from Britain, Germany,” Reuters, February 23, 2021.

58 Prime Minister’s Office Brunei Darussalam, “Guidelines for Travel Into and Out of Brunei Darussalam Air – Land – Sea” (guidelines, August 10, 2022).

59 Australian Department of Home Affairs, “Unvaccinated Australian Citizens and Permanent Residents,” updated April 14, 2022.

60 Chandan Kumar Mandal, “The Woes of Migrant Workers to Get Vaccines and Certification,” *The Kathmandu Post*, August 3, 2021.

61 Kikkawa, Kim, Gaspar, and Sirivunnabood, “COVID-19 and the Deployment of Labor Migrants from Asia.”

BOX 5 How Labor Migration Priorities Changed during COVID-19

COVID-19 triggered large-scale labor shortages around the world, including in Asia and the Pacific. Immigration shutdowns exacerbated labor needs across all subregions and highlighted challenges to managing future economic growth in the highly diverse region. The immediate shutdown in cross-border mobility led to sector-specific shortages in sectors where migrants made up huge proportions of the workforce, such as construction, tourism, and manufacturing. In response, many governments worked to speed up visa processing in these sectors, attract migrant workers, and incentivize local workers to take up these jobs. These efforts, however, did little to prevent severe labor shortages, for instance, in Malaysia's palm oil sector, which continued to face shortages even three years into the pandemic.

As the pandemic evolved, governments turned to their full suite of tools to meet labor market needs through migration. These included expanding the number of shortage sectors to facilitate labor migration in New Zealand and working to attract investors and higher-skilled migrants. Other countries introduced new pathways for high-skilled workers, such as Singapore's more flexible, longer ONE Pass program and Thailand's long-term resident visa for skilled workers, wealthy individuals, and pensioners. Other countries rethought their entire migration strategy to be effective for a post-COVID-19 world: Australia, for example, went through an extensive review to launch a new migration strategy that covers everything from economic productivity to demographic decline. In short, COVID-19 has prompted a flurry of efforts to foster more long-term migration thinking beyond the pandemic.

Sources: Linda Arthur and Derek Hondo, eds., *Strengthening Active Labor Market Policies to Drive an Inclusive Recovery in Asia* (Tokyo: ADB Institute, 2022); Suttinee Yuvejjattana, "Thailand Is Short of 500,000 Foreign Workers after Government Lifted Most Covid Bans," Bloomberg, July 12, 2022; Michael Neilson, "Immigration Announcement Sees Expansion of Green List to Help Fill Labour Shortages," New Zealand Immigration Concepts, December 13, 2022; Tess McClure, "New Zealand to Cut 'Low-Skill' Immigration and Refocus on Wealthy," *The Guardian*, May 17, 2021; Liz Lee, Rozanna Latiff, and Mei Mei Chu, "Malaysia Firms Turn down Orders as Migrant Labour Shortage Hits," Reuters, June 13, 2022; Australian Department of Home Affairs, "Migration Strategy," accessed March 2, 2024; Thailand Board of Investment, "LTR: Long-Term Resident Visa" (brief, June 2022); KPMG, "Singapore – New ONE Pass and Other Key Immigration Enhancements" (GMS Flash Alert 2022-161, September 13, 2022).

C. Students and Tourists

COVID-19 also shut down other forms of shorter-term mobility, such as that of international students and tourists. In both cases, border restrictions shut down inbound movement for multiple years, far longer than in other regions. This led to a weaker and slower recovery of the international student and tourism sectors and underscores the socioeconomic impacts of the Asia Pacific region's disproportionately strict and prolonged travel restrictions.

Student inflows dropped and remained low, even as student migration restarted in the rest of the world. Almost half of international students in the world come from Asia.⁶² Countries in the region (notably, China and India) send large numbers of students, but there are also important net importers of students (Australia and New Zealand).⁶³ The number of students *leaving* countries in Asia and the Pacific to study dropped but

⁶² ADB Institute, ILO, and OECD, *Labor Migration in Asia: Impacts of the COVID-19 Crisis and the Post-Pandemic Future* (Tokyo, Bangkok, and Paris: ADB Institute, ILO, and OECD Publishing, 2021).

⁶³ Countries that receive more students than they send include Australia, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, and New Zealand. See Amitendu Palit, Divya Murali, and Mekhla Jha, "Student Mobility in the Asia-Pacific and South Asia: Trends and Impact of COVID-19 – NUS Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS)" (working paper, National University of Singapore, Institute of South Asian Studies, September 7, 2021).

at rates similar to those in the rest of the world.⁶⁴ Fewer students left China for the United States, perhaps because they were unable to return home easily for academic breaks, but a 19-percent increase in students from India compensated for this drop.⁶⁵ By contrast, the number of students *entering* countries in Asia and the Pacific collapsed. By the 2021 academic year, new student visas had dropped by 97 percent in New Zealand and 90 percent in Japan, even as they exceeded pre-pandemic levels in other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (see Table 1). This collapse posed considerable risks to the higher education sector in these countries. Australian universities lost AUD 1.8 billion in revenue in the first year of the pandemic,⁶⁶ while those in New Zealand received just half of their pre-pandemic revenue in fees from students.⁶⁷ These governments granted exemptions to students and piloted programs to bring them into the country despite travel restrictions, but these were small-scale, and even once borders reopened, the initial recovery was slow.⁶⁸ Although student migration covered globally by 2022, it took more time in Asia and the Pacific, and had yet to reach pre-pandemic levels in New Zealand.

TABLE 1

Residence Permits Issued for Study in OECD Countries in Asia and the Pacific, 2019–22

	2019	2020	2021	2022
Australia	159,800	76,500	62,200	193,200
Japan	121,600	49,700	11,700	167,100
South Korea	35,300	28,300	38,600	57,200
New Zealand	23,700	5,700	800	10,300
Average, Rest of the OECD	48,600	23,300	51,500	62,200

Notes: Data refer to tertiary students. Numbers are rounded to the nearest 100. "Average, Rest of the OECD" excludes countries for which 2019 data are unavailable.

Source: OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2023* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023).

Tourism shut down across the world in the first year of the pandemic, but the impacts were particularly severe in the Asia Pacific region. Both tourist arrivals and departures in the first year collapsed,⁶⁹ and by July 2022, the region still welcomed less than half the pre-pandemic number of tourists. The devastating impact of COVID-19 travel measures is particularly important because tourism is essential to many of the region's economies. Job losses in tourism-related sectors in 2020 were four times higher than in other sectors, leading to 1.6 million job losses in Brunei, Mongolia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam.⁷⁰ Similarly, within the Pacific islands, countries that were more reliant on tourism felt greater economic losses.⁷¹ Tourism did not begin to recover in earnest until 2022, even though countries tested travel bubbles and other measures to attract tourists throughout the pandemic, largely because such efforts often failed and did not

64 Open Doors, "2021 Fast Facts" (fact sheet, 2021).

65 Open Doors, "Fast Facts 2022" (fact sheet, 2022).

66 Cait Kelly, "'Looking down the Barrel': Australian Universities Face Nervous Future Post-Covid," *The Guardian*, January 29, 2022.

67 John Gerritsen, "Covid-19: Figures Reveal Education Sector Losses in International Student Fees," RNZ, August 24, 2022.

68 Universities Australia, "Progress Made in Overseas Student Arrivals, but Recovery Phase Still Lies Ahead," updated December 13, 2022.

69 Data are not collected systematically on tourist departures by country or region, but in countries with available data, departures dropped more on average from Asia and the Pacific than the rest of the world. Author analysis of data from World Bank, "International Tourism, Number of Departures," accessed February 15, 2023. Note, data from 2020 are incomplete.

70 ILO, "ILO Research Highlights Massive COVID-19 Impact on Tourism Employment in Asia and the Pacific," updated November 18, 2021.

71 Todd Schneider and Mouhamadou Sy, "Pacific Islands Monitor" (issue no. 14, International Monetary Fund, 2021).

give tourists much confidence that they could leave and return as planned. Across the region, international tourism started its recovery only when testing and quarantine requirements were relaxed or lifted.⁷²

4 Policy Trends and Innovations

Given the severe impacts of COVID-19 on mobility in Asia and the Pacific, governments across the region undertook important policy reforms to both manage the immediate crisis and, eventually, to lay the groundwork for a more effective response to future global public-health crises. However, there is a risk that these policy measures remain siloed within the health sector and exclude the impacts of such crises on migrants and mobility. Countries had experienced similar crises before COVID-19 but did not develop systems to improve protection and provide services to migrants, or formulate more balanced, evidence-informed plans for border policies. And as the COVID-19 crisis has receded, some countries have already launched new health preparedness and global health strategies that, once again, are not integrated with mobility policy considerations.⁷³

This section outlines the key policy tools that have been developed across Asia and the Pacific. It identifies good practices that countries could maintain or replicate in non-pandemic times, along with concrete steps to prepare for the next cross-border public-health crisis.

A. Leveraging the Full Spectrum of Travel Measures

The uniquely global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for better international cooperation to manage cross-border threats. Despite its history with infectious diseases and the presence of regional forums such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, and the Pacific Island Forum, the Asia Pacific region lacked a coordinated approach to managing borders during the pandemic. Without such coordination, governments independently began to build the physical and digital infrastructure that would allow them to restart travel while minimizing COVID-19 risk.

Several countries across the region announced plans to revamp their travel processes and infrastructure to be COVID-19-safe and contact-free. This built on efforts early in the pandemic to digitalize services for migrants and returnees, which the Philippines called their “no touch, no contact” solutions to support overseas foreign workers.⁷⁴ Two types of investments were particularly promising: contactless travel and quarantine facilities. Efforts to make travel streamlined and contactless were not new, but countries made big strides toward this goal. Perhaps most ambitiously, Singapore has

Several countries across the region announced plans to revamp their travel processes and infrastructure to be COVID-19-safe and contact-free.

72 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation data indicate that lifting testing requirements was associated with a 92-percent increase in arrivals and relaxing quarantine with a 107-percent increase. See Emmanuel A. San Andres et al., *COVID-19 and Cross-Border Mobility in the APEC Region: Addressing Uncertainties at the Border* (Singapore: Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, 2022).

73 See, for example, Japanese Prime Minister’s Office, “Global Health Strategy Outline,” accessed February 29, 2024.

74 Sarah Lou Arriola, “Philippines’ Submission of the Voluntary National Review for the Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration” (working document, Global Compact for Migration, April 6, 2022).

approved the design of its pandemic-proof airport terminal, which would allow the government to scale travel up and down more easily and keep people on different flights separate, though this will take at least a decade to build.⁷⁵ However, such investments do not make sense for many countries in the region, especially across ASEAN and South Asia, because so much of their travel is over land or maritime borders.

Meanwhile, governments in countries such as Australia, China,⁷⁶ and Hong Kong⁷⁷ have built new facilities and systems for quarantining travelers instead. Many of these facilities, including in Australia and China, were billed as permanent infrastructure ready to be reactivated for the next pandemic. But although these countries have dropped their quarantine requirements for incoming travelers, they have not yet figured out

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how to use these spaces for other purposes (to justify the expense of building and maintaining them) while retaining the flexibility to quickly reconvert them to quarantine spaces as needed. Finding alternative uses may be difficult because in some cases these facilities were built far away from population centers to minimize the risk of community transmission. By contrast, Hong Kong adapted its electronic

quarantine wristband system (which tracked the location of arriving travelers to ensure they stayed in home quarantine) to enforce self-isolation of COVID-19 patients, although this stopped once self-isolation orders were no longer issued.⁷⁸ This illustrates the value in multipurpose digital tools, and the reality of mission creep: some of these tools should be used only in times of emergency, and there is a real risk that governments could use COVID-19 as an excuse to unnecessarily restrict, surveil, and otherwise securitize movement.

75 Anurag Kotoky, "Changi Terminal 5: Pandemic-Proof Airport Closer to Reality in Singapore," Bloomberg, August 22, 2022.

76 Bao Zhiming and Kelly Wang, "Shanghai Plans to Build \$221m Permanent Quarantine Center," Nikkei Asia, October 28, 2022.

77 Reuters, "Hong Kong Races to Build Isolation Facilities as COVID Cases Surge," Reuters, March 9, 2022.

78 Uptin Saiidi, "Hong Kong Is Putting Electronic Wristbands on Arriving Passengers to Enforce Coronavirus Quarantine," CNBC, March 18, 2020; Sinéad Baker, "Hong Kong Is Making COVID-19 Patients Wear a Tracking Bracelet so They Can't Leave the House," Business Insider, July 11, 2022.

BOX 6 Digital Health Credentials

Highly effective and reliable vaccinations and tests were crucial to restarting global mobility. As part of this, governments needed a method to verify that a traveler was vaccinated (or had a negative test or recently recovered from COVID-19): a digital health credential. These tools, which had the added benefit of allowing automated verification of travelers' credentials and thus cutting down lengthy wait times in airports and other ports of entry, relied on international coordination to share technical specifications and digital information so that travel and border staff could verify the credentials of travelers from other countries. Regional credential systems were proposed throughout the pandemic, but few were put into practice. Most countries developed their own systems (Australia and Japan adopted the system proposed by the International Civil Aviation Organization). But the Digital Infrastructure for Verifiable Open Credentialing (DIVOC) software—developed in India and used in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka as well—created a de facto subregional system. However, this system was not adopted universally, even within South or Southeast Asia, let alone across all of Asia and the Pacific.

Digital health credentials are among the lowest-hanging fruit for governments to prepare now for future public-health crises. DIVOC, for example, is already being used to register polio vaccinations and could become an everyday element of childhood immunization and sharing health information with doctors, schools, and governments when people migrate. Efforts are ongoing in other regions to build some support for such tools: the Inter-American Development Bank is supporting technical forums in Latin America, and the African Union implemented its Trusted Travel digital vaccination platform. But the Asia Pacific region could lead the way. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum has endorsed voluntary principles on digital health credential interoperability to build momentum to work on this topic. Since then, Indonesia—as president of the Group of Twenty (G20) from late 2021 to late 2022 and with the support of the World Health Organization, OECD, and others—piloted an initiative to support verification of digital credentials across borders, and the importance of interoperability was referenced in the G20 Leaders Declaration. Investing in data sharing and coordination to set up a global system to verify these credentials could be an important step in preparing for the next public-health emergency.

Sources: Azusa Sato and Anit Mukherjee, "How Far Have Southeast Asian Countries Come with Digitizing Vaccination Certificates?" *Ideas to Action*, October 7, 2021; Lawrence Huang, *Digital Health Credentials and COVID-19: Can Vaccine and Testing Requirements Restart Global Mobility?* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2022); Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, "Annex B – Voluntary Principles for the Interoperability of Vaccination Certificates in the APEC Region," accessed February 15, 2023; Matthew Horwood, "G20 Leaders Sign Declaration to Create Global Vaccine Passport System," *Western Standard*, November 17, 2022.

B. *Engaging and Protecting Migrants and Diasporas*

Another set of policy measures have focused on supporting countries' resident migrants as well as their diasporas. These policies have covered everything from the initial crisis, to access to social protections and health care, to leveraging diaspora members' skills and remittances. These measures were needed for two reasons: migrants and people on the move were often among the most vulnerable and hardest hit by the health and economic dimensions of the crisis, and they also had important skills and resources that were needed in this period.

Governments across Asia and the Pacific gave migrants access to health care and vaccines during the pandemic, but this often did not include all migrants. Thailand organized hotlines for foreign workers to get COVID-19 information in multiple languages, and all countries in the region extended access to vaccination and health care to migrants, at least on paper and at least for migrants with regular status.⁷⁹ Of 40 national vaccination plans reviewed in the region, 30 explicitly included refugees and asylum seekers, 34 included regular migrants, 25 included unauthorized migrants, and 25 included internally displaced persons (IDPs). However, in practice, only 19 countries included unauthorized migrants and 10 included IDPs (numbers that are in line with other regions).⁸⁰ Displaced Afghans in Pakistan and Iran, Rohingya in Bangladesh, and refugees in India all faced de facto barriers because of their lack of documentation or formal recognition (which led to lower vaccination rates)⁸¹ as well as barriers to proving vaccination (e.g., unauthorized migrants could not use Thailand's MorPhrom app to prove vaccination, which employers sometimes required).⁸² Exclusion from vaccine access along with threats of immigration enforcement,⁸³ strict lockdowns, and health screenings targeted to migrant workers (see Box 4) may have ultimately deterred some migrants from getting vaccinated. Migrants' vaccination rate in Thailand was about 60 percent of the national average in late 2022.⁸⁴ Vaccine hesitancy was another key issue in migrant communities, even in countries with very high vaccination rates such as Australia,⁸⁵ underscoring a need for a more sensitive, inclusive approach to vaccination throughout the region.

Besides providing services to migrants, governments in Asia and the Pacific also actively engaged migrants and diasporas, especially to incentivize continued remittance-sending. The Asia Pacific region is highly remittance-dependent (it included seven of the top ten remittance-receiving countries in 2021),⁸⁶ and countries were generally quite successful at keeping remittances flowing despite economic crises in many places where they have large diasporas (e.g., in the Gulf Cooperation Council and the United States). Remittances to South Asia and the Pacific islands actually grew each year between 2019 and 2021, especially in the

The Asia Pacific region is highly remittance-dependent ... and countries were generally quite successful at keeping remittances flowing despite economic crises in many places where they have large diasporas.

79 IOM, "Migrant Inclusion in Covid-19 Vaccination Deployment" (IOM Country Office Review, March 2022); Sabine Henning et al., *Asia-Pacific Migration Report 2020: Assessing Implementation of the Global Compact for Migration* (Bangkok: UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2020), 172.

80 IOM, "Migrant Inclusion in Covid-19 Vaccination Deployment."

81 Jhinuk Mukhopadhyay and Gauri Thampi, "Persistent COVID-19 Vaccine Inequity Has Significant Implications for Refugees and Other Vulnerable Migrants," *Migration Information Source*, April 18, 2022. For instance, vaccination campaigns in Rohingya camps in Bangladesh started later than in the rest of the country. In India, it took a civil-society lobbying effort to force the government to lift the requirement of formal documentation for vaccinations, which excluded almost 200,000 refugees without formal status.

82 World Health Organization, "Thailand's Migrant Vaccination Programme Ensures No-One Is Left Behind," updated March 23, 2022.

83 Emily Fishbein and Tu Jaw Hkawng, "Fear of Arrest among Undocumented Risks Malaysia Vaccine Push," *Al Jazeera*, August 6, 2021.

84 Anushma Shrestha, "Promoting COVID-19 Vaccine Uptake among Migrant Communities in Thailand," updated November 14, 2022.

85 Migration Council Australia, *Supporting COVID-19 Vaccination Program Rollout to Migrant and Refugee Communities in Australia* (Canberra: Migration Council Australia, 2022).

86 Dilip Ratha et al., *A War in a Pandemic: Implications of the Ukraine Crisis and COVID-19 on Global Governance of Migration and Remittance Flows* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2022).

most remittance-dependent subregions and countries.⁸⁷ Much of the resilience in remittance flows comes down to the countercyclical role of diaspora members (who tend to send more money home after crises such as natural disasters) and successful efforts to keep migrants employed in certain countries.⁸⁸ But governments' diaspora engagement efforts also proved essential to continued remittances. Remittance inflows in Bangladesh and Pakistan, for instance, increased substantially in 2020, due to several factors. Both countries had just implemented tax incentives to attract remittances and to encourage those already sending informal (and therefore uncounted) remittances to send them through formal channels.⁸⁹ And because the Hajj (the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca) was canceled for most people, many Bangladeshi and Pakistani migrants found themselves with more funds available to send remittances.⁹⁰ In the Pacific, the proliferation of digital tools kept remittances flowing: transfers had reportedly grown up to 400 percent in 2020, even though the new tools had high transfer fees and costs.⁹¹ The strength of family ties was likely the most important factor driving remittance resilience and growth, along with the fact that many diaspora members reached into savings and took out loans to support their families back home, but digital tools and policy incentives also played a role.

5 Recommendations

The Asia Pacific region exemplifies the pandemic's diverse impacts on migration and people on the move. The crux of the issue is that, for the most part, the region was able to prevent large COVID-19 case numbers and deaths in the first year, relying on strict, blanket, and prolonged travel restrictions. But countries then found it incredibly difficult to reopen, and these travel restrictions, which generally stayed in place for more than two years, had a debilitating impact on migration, creating major socioeconomic impacts and knock-on effects for human capital and demographic growth in the long term.

This region is both a model to replicate and a cautionary tale for the next global health crisis, but a fuller, final accounting on its pandemic approach is needed, along with more research on pandemic-era policies' impacts on migrants and migration (including more comprehensive, timely data on people on the move

87 At the subregional level, remittances form an average of 11 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in the Pacific islands and 6.5 percent in South Asia and grew during the pandemic, compared to 0.05 percent in East Asia and the Trans-Tasman, where remittances dropped much further. At the national level, eight of the ten most remittance-dependent countries had increases in remittances in 2020, while of the ten least remittance-dependent countries, eight had decreases. For example, Australia's and New Zealand's remittances decreased by 50 percent and 68 percent, respectively, but remittances make up only 0.1 percent of their GDP. By contrast, remittances in many of the Pacific islands (Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu) increased greatly (62, 18, and 145 percent), and remittances make up large proportions of their GDP (31.5, 43.9, and 7.9 percent, respectively). Author calculations based on data from the World Bank's Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development, "Remittances Data—Remittances Inflows," accessed December 2, 2023; Dilip Ratha, Eung Ju Kim, Sonia Plaza, and Ganesh Seshan, *Resilience: Covid-19 Crisis through a Migration Lens* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2021).

88 For instance, diasporas in Gulf Cooperation Council countries sent far less in remittances because they were often excluded from social safety nets or returned home; for example, remittances flows to Indonesia, whose biggest migrant worker destination is the Gulf, dropped by 17 percent in 2020, compared with only a 0.7 percent drop in the Philippines, where destinations are far more diversified and many migrants live in the United States, where the economic impact was smaller and social benefits often included migrants. See Ratha, Kim, Plaza, and Seshan, *Resilience: Covid-19 Crisis through a Migration Lens*.

89 South Asia also had the lowest transaction costs for remittances of any region. See Ratha, Kim, Plaza, and Seshan, *Resilience: Covid-19 Crisis through a Migration Lens*.

90 Ratha, Kim, Plaza, and Seshan, *Resilience: Covid-19 Crisis through a Migration Lens*.

91 Nicolas Zomboulis, "Pacific: Significant Growth in Digital Remittances," ABC Pacific, October 4, 2020; Stephen Howes and Sherman Surandiran, "Pacific Remittances: Holding up despite COVID-19," Devpolicy Blog, Development Policy Centre, November 15, 2020.

across the region). Policymakers within the region and beyond could incorporate lessons from the Asia Pacific region's experiences during COVID-19 as they prepare for the next global health crisis, including by:

- ▶ **Using travel measures in clear, equitable, streamlined, and future-focused ways.** These four guiding principles, advanced by the Migration Policy Institute, offer touchstones for governments seeking the balanced use of travel measures.⁹² In Asia and the Pacific, travel measures were often clear, insofar as the region used strict measures for everybody; in that sense, they were easy to understand and implement. However, the region failed in being equitable and streamlined. Travel measures were so strict and stayed in place for so longer that they posed significant, and unequal, burdens on travelers (e.g., quarantine costs could be prohibitive). And while the region's initial pandemic response can arguably align with these guiding principles, the years-long shutdown in global mobility not only caused confusion, inequalities, and inefficiencies, but also had social and economic costs that far outweighed the benefits.
- ▶ **Investing in the infrastructure needed to use travel measures effectively in the future.** Countries in Asia and the Pacific have worked to build and enhance the future-focused tools needed to make travel measures (when needed next) as painless and effective as possible. From quarantine facilities to digital health credentials, the region has provided promising examples of tools that could facilitate better responses to the next pandemic, if they are built, maintained, and used when the time comes. But continued financing and political will are needed to make these tools outlast the public focus on COVID-19. At best, these tools can flex up and down during crisis, but certain built infrastructure (such as quarantine facilities and pandemic-proof airports) are more difficult to adapt once built. Even so, governments can invest in multipurpose tools such as digital portals for passengers, which can allow them to share proof of negative tests before departure but can also share passport and travel histories to streamline registration and customs processes in non-emergency period as well.
- ▶ **Setting up systems to repatriate and protect migrants.** Governments in Asia and the Pacific struggled to return people quickly, safely, and sustainably to their countries of origin once the pandemic hit. Better systems are needed to be able to scale up returns during times of emergency such as public-health crises, disasters, or conflicts. This could include developing contingency planning to organize or charter additional flights and transportation; partnerships with destination countries and employers on cost-sharing; coordination between migration and health departments in case health measures (e.g., testing, quarantine, mask wearing, and social distancing) are required; and stronger reintegration programs to address returning migrants' vulnerabilities, debt burdens, and social stigma.
- ▶ **Preparing to restart cross-border movement quickly.** Cross-border movement across the globe has largely rebounded from the pandemic, but this recovery is still weakest in Asia and the Pacific. Even within this region, countries that loosened restrictions earlier saw migration recover more quickly: in 2021, estimated permanent immigration to Australia was 13 percent lower than 2019 levels and 8 percent lower in New Zealand, compared with 61 percent in Japan and 32 percent in South Korea.⁹³

92 Lawrence Huang and Meghan Benton, "Managing Mobility in the Pandemic Era Requires World to Buy In on Shared Principles" (commentary, Migration Policy Institute, May 2022).

93 OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2022*.

Tourism is higher in the Pacific islands, South Asia, and the Trans-Tasman area, subregions where travel measures were lifted earlier. Exemptions to travel measures to facilitate the entry of tourists or students did not solve the problem; only lifting these restrictions did. If the next public-health crisis requires strict travel measures, governments should be prepared to reopen quicker, relying on better coordinated and more consistent strategies to communicate with the public ahead of reopening as well as plans to ramp up vaccination and boost health systems' capacity before reopening.

- ▶ **Managing the knock-on effects of travel measures on labor migration and migrants.** In many countries across the region, COVID-19 prompted or furthered efforts to rethink labor migration systems. While existing data do not make it possible to fully understand the pandemic's impacts on labor migration, broken down by sector and skill level, it is crucial to examine how this sudden shock changed the profile of arriving migrants and employers' ability to recruit the workers they needed, in order to build technical and policy systems to keep this matching going amid future public-health crises. Promising efforts to review and reform migration strategies in Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and other countries show that some governments are prioritizing long-term thinking about migration and labor markets, but more work is needed in other countries in the region.

The impacts of COVID-19 on borders and mobility in Asia and the Pacific were unprecedented, yet the crisis has already begun to fade out of public focus. By 2023, the last zero-COVID holdout, China, had reopened and travel into the country had restarted. Travel measures—notably vaccination and testing requirements—have disappeared, and their stifling impact on migration and mobility has lifted (in many cases, migration surged beyond pre-pandemic levels). Still, three years of missing migration had massive economic effects, especially in countries that had the strictest travel restrictions and saw the greatest drops in migration, and it will have knock-on effects for labor markets and human capital in a region already struggling with economic and demographic change. But for now, the pandemic's story can be told in two chapters: in the first, travel measures had immediate success in managing the spread of the virus, and in the second, these measures had a profound, devastating, and lingering impact on migration and mobility. The evidence from this region therefore points to a fundamental need to rethink how to use travel measures—not discarding them entirely, but with a clearer understanding that migration and mobility cannot recover while they are still in place.

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About the Author



LAWRENCE HUANG

 @Lawrence_Huang9

Lawrence Huang is a Policy Analyst with the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) International Program. He primarily works on climate and migration, including intersections with development, social cohesion, labor migration, and protection. He also supports MPI's work on borders and mobility, including MPI's Task Force on Mobility and Borders during and after COVID-19.

Previously, Mr. Huang worked as a consultant at the International Organization for Migration (IOM), where he led capacity-building and knowledge management in an 11-country global program on migration and sustainable development. Earlier, he was an Editor at the *Oxford Monitor of Forced Migration* and co-ran the annual conference of the Oxford Migration Studies Society.

He holds a master's degree in migration studies from the University of Oxford, funded by the Healy Scholarship at St. Cross College, and a BA in government with honors from Georgetown University.

Acknowledgments

This report was produced for the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Task Force on Mobility and Borders during and after COVID-19, in collaboration with the International Organization for Migration, the Government of Australia, and MPI's Transatlantic Council on Migration, which is supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the governments of Australia, Canada, Germany, Norway, and Sweden.

The author thanks Yumeka Kawahara and Beatrice Dain for their research assistance, Tashryn Mohd Shahrin and Vidya Ramachandran for their help in identifying resources and data, and Emmanuel A. San Andres for insights on travel measure data in the region. The author also thanks Kate Hooper and Meghan Benton for their detailed and thoughtful review, Sue Kovach and Lauren Shaw for editing the report, and Michelle Mittelstadt for strategic outreach.

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Design: Sara Staedicke, MPI
Layout: Liz Hall
Cover Photo: IOM/Anat Duangchang

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Suggested citation: Huang, Lawrence. 2024. *Mobility Shutdown: The Impacts of COVID-19 on Migration in Asia and the Pacific*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

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1275 K St. NW, Suite 800, Washington, DC 20005
202-266-1940

