



THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRANTS IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC RETHINKING RESILIENCE

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THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRANTS IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

RETHINKING RESILIENCE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	4
ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS	5
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	6
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	7
I. COVID-19 AND MIGRATION IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION: OVERVIEW	8
I.1 THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION AS A WHOLE	8
I.2 A DEEPER DIVE: OVERVIEW OF SPECIFIC IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON MIGRATION IN THE SUBREGIONS	20
KEY FINDINGS	33
REFERENCES AND USEFUL RESOURCES	37
ANNEX I: SOUTH ASIA CASE STUDY- INDIA AND NEPAL	40
ANNEX II: MARITIME SOUTHEAST ASIA CASE STUDY- PHILIPPINES	53
ANNEX III: MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA CASE STUDY- DAWEI-BANGKOK CORRIDOR	64
ANNEX IV: MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA CASE STUDY- CAMBODIA	74
ANNEX V: INTRAREGIONAL PACIFIC ISLANDS CASE STUDY	83
ANNEX VI: PACIFIC ISLANDS CASE STUDY- TUVALU	90
ANNEX VII: CENTRAL ASIA- TAJIKISTAN	97
ANNEX VIII: CENTRAL ASIA- KYRGYZ REPUBLIC	103

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE I: IMPACT, RESPONSES AND PATTERNS OF RESILIENCE	33
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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AB-PMJAY	-	Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana
AEO	-	Asia Emerging Opportunities
ASEAN	-	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CSO	-	Civil Society Organization
GBV	-	Gender Based Violence
GCC	-	Gulf Cooperation Council
GDP	-	Gross Domestic Product
HIV/AIDS	-	Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
IDP	-	Internally Displaced Persons
ILO	-	International Labor Organization
IOM	-	International Organization for Migration
PPE	-	Personal Protective Equipment
UHC	-	Universal Health Coverage
USAID	-	United States Agency for International Development

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This desk research–based study considered the effects of COVID-19 on migration along four dimensions of resilience (health, governance, gender, and the environment) for the region as a whole, and for the subregions of mainland Southeast Asia, maritime Southeast Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, and the Pacific. Analysis of publicly available materials was supplemented with interviews with key informants in the region.

KEY FINDINGS

- COVID-19 related impacts have affected virtually all migrants, whether moving internally or internationally, through forced or voluntary migration, and via regular or irregular means.¹ For many migrants, the pandemic has aggravated an already precarious situation. Millions have lost jobs or seen substantial declines in income. Hundreds of thousands have returned to their communities of origin. Remittances, on which many migrant families, communities, and national economies depend, have declined, leading to significant hardship for many. While migrants have always experienced some degree of precarity, the pandemic has exacerbated both vulnerabilities and inequalities, including gender and income disparities. Migrant women have been particularly affected by economic hardships and increased gender-based violence (GBV).
- Stigmatization, xenophobia, and discrimination directed toward migrants have increased since the global spread of COVID-19 and have affected migrants in destination areas and transit countries as well as in countries of origin upon their return. Migrants, already stigmatized for their caste, religion, language, national origin, gender, and other (often intersecting) identities, are now also being blamed for spreading the virus.
- The limited access to health care and service delivery (such as water and sanitation) long experienced by migrants has taken on a new urgency during the pandemic.
- The return of migrants to their communities has affected environmental conditions, which are longstanding drivers of migration in the region. There is now growing concern that as governments plan for recovery, environmental standards will be weakened.
- The pandemic has weakened the resilience of migrants, of their communities, and the migration system as a whole. Restoring safe mobility is the key to recovery in the Asia-

¹ Irregular migration is defined by IOM as: “movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination.” Regular migration refers to those crossing an international border through legal, authorized channels. Its, often referred to as undocumented migrants, refer to those who cross an international border outside of legal channels. International Organization for Migration, *Key Migration Terms*. <https://www.iom.int/key-migration-terms#:~:text=Irregular%20migration%20%E2%80%93%20Movement%20of%20persons,of%20origin%2C%20transit%20or%20destination>

Pacific region, and in the meantime, measures are needed to enhance resilience while mobility is interrupted.

I. COVID-19 AND MIGRATION IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION: OVERVIEW

I.1 THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION AS A WHOLE

The emergence of the novel coronavirus pandemic in March 2020 was and is a global health emergency. However, its impact goes far beyond health, affecting all aspects of life in Asia and the Pacific. This study examines the impact of the COVID-19, and particularly the measures implemented to control its spread, on migration within the Asia-Pacific region.

Migration – both internal and cross-border – is common in the Asia-Pacific region. Asia is the region of origin of 40 percent of the world's international migrants (111 million), 66 million of whom live in other Asian countries.² Across the region women make up between 45 – 50 percent of migrants.³ Another 400 million are internal migrants.⁴ India alone has approximately 100 million internal migrants.⁵ While around half of Asia's population lives in cities, those living in rural areas often depend on remittances from relatives working in urban jobs. Migration corridors are well established both within the region (e.g., Myanmar-Thailand) and farther afield (India-Gulf countries, Philippines-United States), with substantial remittance streams flowing along these corridors. In 2018, India was the top recipient of remittances in the world (US\$79 billion), while China was the second (US\$67 billion) and the Philippines the fourth (US\$39 billion).⁶ Though smaller in absolute numbers, international remittances account for substantial percentages of gross domestic product (GDP) in several countries – and more than 25 percent in Kyrgyz Republic, Nepal, Tajikistan, and Tonga – making these economies extremely susceptible to disruptions in remittance flows.⁷

Migration and mobility in Asia take multiple forms. Often voluntary and used to pursue new opportunities, it can also result from conflict, environmental degradation and coercion. Human trafficking for sexual exploitation, forced labor and other purposes is prevalent in the region, with women making up a higher proportion of identified trafficked persons.⁸ The risk of trafficking increases in time of crisis and emergency, as economic need increases and security decreases. Asia is also home to significant numbers of refugees, particularly from Myanmar to Bangladesh, and large numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs), including more than 20 million who were displaced by disasters in 2019.⁹ India, Bangladesh, the

² International Organization of Migration, *World Migration Report 2020*, p. 70. https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/wmr_2020.pdf. However, one of difficulties of migration statistics is the use of different regional groupings.

³ UNDESA 2019 data

⁴ Pedro de Vasconcelos, Fred Frédéric Ponset, Donald F. Terry, and Bibiana Vásquez, *Sending Money Home: Contributing to the SDGs, One Family at a Time*. Rome: International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), 2017. <https://www.ifad.org/en/web/knowledge/publication/asset/39407416>

⁵ Priya Deshingkar and Shaheen Akter, *Migration and Human Development in India* (UNDP, 2009).

⁶ Data from World Bank, "Annual Remittances Data (updated as of Oct. 2019)." Leveraging Economic Migration for Development: A Briefing for the World Bank Board. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2019, p. xvii. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/labormarkets/brief/migration-and-remittances>

⁷ World Bank, *Personal Remittances Received as Percentage of GDP*. 2020. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS>

⁸ UNODC. 2018. *Global Report on Trafficking in Person 2018*, Vienna: UNODC, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GLOTIP_2018_BOOK_web_small.pdf

⁹ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Global Report on Internal Displacement*. 2020. <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2020/>

Philippines and China have experienced recurrent disaster-induced displacement.¹⁰ There are also large numbers of stateless populations in Asia; some, such as the Rohingya from Myanmar, have crossed borders in search of safety. Others, such as those rendered stateless thirty years ago by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, remain within the borders of their Central Asian countries.¹¹

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely disrupted the lives of migrants, both by constraining their movement and by impacting jobs on which migrants depend. As the impacts of COVID-19 send shock waves through the region, this report looks at the impact of COVID-19 on migrants in Asia, focusing on the central question: ***How are Asian migrants affected by and responding to the direct and indirect impacts of COVID-19, what does this reveal about patterns of resilience, and how can external support strengthen resilience to cope with ongoing and future impacts?***

Although various definitions abound, resilience is the ability of households, communities, and countries to manage and adapt to adversity without compromising their well-being.¹² In the context of COVID-19, migrant resilience refers to both the ability of migrants to withstand and recover from the immediate shocks to their lives and livelihoods as well as their ability to be prepared for future shocks.

COVID-19 AS A TRIPLE SHOCK TO THE REGION AND TO MIGRANTS

The World Bank refers to COVID-19's impact as a "triple shock" to countries in the Asia-Pacific region: the pandemic itself, the economic impact of containment measures, and reverberations from the global recession.¹³ The precarity that marks migrant's lives, especially irregular migrants, makes them particularly vulnerable to such shocks.

COVID-19, as a disease, has had different effects on different countries in the region. As of mid-December 2020, the Asia-Pacific countries covered in this study had an estimated twelve million cases, of which almost ten million were in India; 587,000 in Indonesia, 482,000 in Bangladesh; and 443,000 in the Philippines. Six Pacific Island countries have not registered a single case of COVID-19.¹⁴ In efforts to control the spread of the virus, all countries in the region have introduced measures to limit in-person activity and restrict entry to their territories. Millions of internal and international migrants have had to return to their homes of origin. Removing or easing lockdowns has not resulted in a swift return to pre-COVID-19 levels of economic activity. Some unlocked economies, such as India, still have high numbers of cases; local virus clusters are still cropping up; and as yet, no one knows how long the pandemic will last.¹⁵

The global recession has affected Asian migrants working inside and outside the region and their families back home. Destination countries have laid off hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of Asian migrants, many of whom have returned home or been stranded in attempting to do so. In many cases, they have stopped sending funds home. The Asian Development Bank predicts

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ "Stateless Persons in Asia and the Pacific." 2020. <http://worldstateless.org/>

¹² USAID, *The Role of Digital Financial Services in Accelerating USAID's Health Goals*, p. 3.

https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1864/DFS_Accelerating_USAID_HealthGoals.pdf

¹³ World Bank, *From Containment to Recovery: Economic Update for E. Asia and the Pacific*. October 2020.

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eap/publication/east-asia-pacific-economic-update>

¹⁴ World Health Organization. *Coronavirus (COVID-19 Dashboard)*. 9 December 2020. <https://covid19.who.int/table>

¹⁵ Barua, A., "Asia's Economic Recovery: Staggering Along in an Uncertain World." *Deloitte Insights*, August, 2020, <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/economy/asia-covid-19-economic-decline.html>

a drop of between US\$31.4 billion and US\$54 billion in remittances to Asia, down from a total of US\$315 billion sent in 2019.¹⁶

The International Monetary Fund expects emerging and developing Asian economies to contract by -2.2 percent in 2020; in comparison, the average annual growth over the previous decade has been seven percent.¹⁷

As the World Bank warns, not only are the triple shocks caused by COVID-19 keeping more people in poverty and exacerbating inequality, but they are likely to create a class of “new poor.” By the end of 2020, the number of people living in poverty in the region is expected to increase by as many as 38 million, including 33 million who would otherwise have escaped poverty and another five million who have been pushed back into poverty.¹⁸ Migrants are experiencing increased stigma, discrimination and GBV in the context of the pandemic, heightening their vulnerability.

All three shocks affect migrants and challenge their resilience; this research focuses on four interconnected dimensions of resilience: health, governance, gender, and environment.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HEALTH RESILIENCE OF MIGRANTS

Asia may have been the first region to be hit by the pandemic, but several countries in the region were able to successfully mount timely and effective responses that curbed further viral spread.¹⁹ Early assessments suggest that the existence of social health insurance or other universal health care programs in some countries in Asia and the Pacific such as South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam may have contributed to systemic resilience and hence effective and early pandemic response.²⁰ It is important to note though that universality in health care systems tends to apply to citizens only, as in the case in the abovementioned countries.

Migrants have not been exempted from infection. However, the main threats to the health resilience of migrants are three-fold: aggravation of existing barriers to health care access; neglect and worsening of other health conditions unrelated to COVID-19; and exacerbation of dire living and working conditions. These “social determinants of health” drive health inequalities.

Before the pandemic, many migrants in Asia-Pacific, especially undocumented workers, refugees, and internally displaced persons (IDPs), struggled to access health care.²¹ The

¹⁶ Kikkawa Takenada, A., Villafuerte, J., Gaspar, R., and Narayanan, B., *COVID 19 Impact on International Migration, Remittances and Recipient Households in Developing Asia*. ADB Brief No. 148, August 2020, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/622796/covid-19-impact-migration-remittances-asia.pdf>

¹⁷ International Monetary Fund, *Regional Economic Outlook Asia and the Pacific: Navigating the Pandemic, A Multispeed Recovery in Asia*. October 2020. <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/REO/APAC/Issues/2020/10/21/regional-economic-outlook-apd>

¹⁸ World Bank, *From Containment to Recovery: Economic Update for E. Asia and the Pacific*. October 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eap/publication/east-asia-pacific-economic-update>.

¹⁹ On the occasion of the 75th session of the UN General Assembly, *The Lancet*, through its COVID-19 Commission, released a ranking of countries based on the effectiveness of their national response to COVID-19 to date. Most countries in the top-performing tier are from the Asia-Pacific region, namely: Taiwan, Thailand Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, China, Myanmar, Malaysia, Pakistan, and South Korea. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)31927-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)31927-9/fulltext)

²⁰ Asian Development Bank, “How Countries in Asia and the Pacific are Working Toward Universal Health Coverage and Controlling COVID-19.” 2020. <https://www.adb.org/news/features/how-countries-asia-and-pacific-are-working-toward-universal-health-coverage-and>

²¹ Low, W.Y., Tong, W.T., and Binns, C. “Migrant Workers in Asia Pacific and Their Rights to Health.” *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Health* 27(6), 584–587. 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1010539515600007>

pandemic magnified the exclusionary nature of health policies, preventing migrants from accessing information, testing, and treatment. For example, the initial exclusion of low-skilled migrants in Singapore's response led to a second spike in COVID-19 cases, compelling the government to expand testing.²² Despite offering free testing upon arrival to repatriated migrant workers, limited health system capacity in the Philippines and Nepal has led to diagnostic delays and undetected cases.²³ In contrast, Thailand's migrant-inclusive health financing schemes and services included migrants in COVID-19 testing and treatment from the outset.²⁴

Internal migrants, such as those who temporarily stay in cities for work or those forcibly displaced by conflict, also encounter serious access challenges. Limited health insurance portability may impede health care access during a public health crisis. To address this problem, *Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana* (AB-PMJAY), India's government-run health insurance program for the poor, distributed e-cards to migrant workers returning to their home states so they could access COVID-19 testing and treatment in any hospital in the country.²⁵ Meanwhile, the situation is much worse for refugees and IDPs in camps or other settings with minimal health services. In the case of the Rohingyas, Bangladesh and international humanitarian agencies partnered to provide testing, treatment, and information and even trained refugees to become community health workers themselves.²⁶

In addition to barriers to healthcare access, the "COVIDization" of healthcare has led to neglect of other public health issues such as maternal and child health;²⁷ infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, and HIV/AIDS;²⁸ noncommunicable diseases like hypertension, obesity, and diabetes;²⁹ sexual and reproductive health;³⁰ and mental health conditions.³¹ Telemedicine and other digital health options may provide alternatives for primary care consults and continuity of care for these common health conditions.³²

²² Koh, D., "Migrant Workers and COVID-19." *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 77, 634-636. 2002. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/oemed-2020-106626>

²³ Asis, M., "Repatriating Filipino Migrant Workers in the Time of the Pandemic." Migration Research Series No. 63, International Organization for Migration. 2020. <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mrs-63.pdf>; Baniya J., Bhattarai, S., Thapa, B.J., and Pradhan, V., "COVID-19 and Nepali Labour Migrants: Impacts and Responses." Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility, Kathmandu, Nepal. 2020. https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/CESLAM_research-paper-x-covid-19.pdf

²⁴ Tuangratananon, T., Suphanchaimat, R., Hanvoravongchai, P., and Khor, S.K., "In Thailand, Noncitizen Health Matters." *Think Global Health*. 2020. <https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/thailand-noncitizen-health-matters>

²⁵ Sharma, N.C. "Migrants to receive covid care via Ayushman Bharat scheme." *Mint*. June 11, 2020. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/migrants-to-receive-covid-care-via-ayushman-bharat-scheme-11591818496462.html>

²⁶ Barua, A. and Karia, R.H., "Challenges Faced by Rohingya Refugees in the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Annals of Global Health* 86(1), 129. 2020. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5334/aogh.3052>; Rahman, A.T. and Yeasmine, I., "Refugee Health Workers Lead COVID-19 Battle in Bangladesh Camps." United Nations High Commission on Refugees Asia-Pacific. 2020. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2020/7/5f198f1f4/refugee-health-workers-lead-covid-19-battle-bangladesh-camps.html>

²⁷ Robertson, T., Carter, E.D., Chou, V.B., et al., "Early Estimates of the Indirect Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Maternal and Child Mortality in Low-Income and Middle-Income Countries: A Modelling Study." *The Lancet Global Health* 8(7), E901-E908. 2020.

²⁸ Sands, P., "HIV, Tuberculosis, and Malaria: How Can the Impact of COVID-19 Be Minimised?" *The Lancet Global Health* 8(9), E1102-E1103. 2020.

²⁹ Dyer, O., "Covid-19: Pandemic Is Having 'Severe' Impact on Non-Communicable Disease Care, WHO Survey Finds." *BMJ*, M2210. 2020.

³⁰ Riley R., Sully S., Ahmed Z., and Biddlecom A., "Estimates of the Potential Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Sexual and Reproductive Health in Low- and Middle-Income Countries." *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 46, 73-76. 2020.

³¹ Walker, D., Krubiner, C., and Chalkidou, K., "Mental Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic: What We Knew, What We Now Know, and What We Still Don't Know." Center for Global Development. 2020. <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/mental-health-and-covid-19-pandemic-what-we-knew-what-we-now-know-and-what-we-still-dont-know>

³² Lai, S.H.S. and Tang, C.Q.Y., "Telemedicine and COVID-19: Beyond Just Virtual Consultations—The Singapore Experience." *Bone & Joint Open* 1(6), 203-204. 2020.

Finally, the pandemic response also worsened the social determinants of health, especially for migrants. Joblessness among migrant workers who are stranded in destination countries or repatriated back home causes significant mental stress and threatens their long-term economic security, in turn limiting their access to adequate and nutritious food and clean water. Low literacy, language differences, and lack of Internet connectivity, especially among impoverished refugees and displaced persons, also restrict their ability to access life-saving information about COVID-19. Physical distancing is difficult to implement in overcrowded housing facilities or makeshift settlements.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON GOVERNANCE AND MIGRATION

National governments have led large-scale responses to COVID-19, and most governments in the Asia-Pacific region responded quickly with policy measures to stem the spread of the virus, including mobility restrictions, lockdowns, and border closures. Implementation of these policies has helped contain the virus but has also generated profound and enduring consequences for economic well-being and human rights across the region, with migrant workers among the most affected. In some countries, governments have used the crisis as a pretext for adopting repressive measures, including restrictions on freedom of assembly and speech. Security forces have (at times) used heavy-handed means to enforce lockdowns, including beatings, arrests, and shootings, with these tactics primarily used on informal sector workers and those in poverty who already face substantial vulnerabilities.³³

Migrants' vulnerability in the context of COVID-19 is rooted in part in their living and working conditions.³⁴ Migrants are more likely to live in cramped quarters where social distancing is impossible, and they are more likely to work in jobs that cannot be done remotely. Thus, those in industries such as tourism and garment manufacturing that have been heavily impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns have been at higher risks of job loss; at the same time, those working in health care, domestic service, food delivery, manufacturing of personal protective equipment (PPE), and other essential positions have been at higher risks of contracting COVID-19.³⁵ These risks have disproportionately affected women migrants, as the hardest-hit sectors have been the highly feminized sectors of accommodation and food services; wholesale and retail trade; real estate, business, and administrative activities; and manufacturing.³⁶ Occupational segregation has therefore put women at greater risk of losing their jobs or having hours reduced as a result of COVID-19.

In addition, laws and policies in place to bolster resilience to such shocks—including many of the aid packages issued in response to COVID-19—often exclude migrants or inadequately cover them. For instance, millions of migrants working in the informal economy across the Asia-Pacific region were ineligible for stimulus packages and compensation provided to formal workers who lost their jobs. Stigma

³³ Rajiv Narayan, "How Covid-19 Has Been Battering Human Rights: An Asia-Pacific Perspective," *GlobalAsia* 15, no. 2 (June 2020): 101, <https://www.globalasia.org/data/file/articles/12558f8365ba16c4ff9b84d5357957e8.pdf>

³⁴ Please see the previous health section for a detailed discussion of health-related migrant vulnerability.

³⁵ Health care workers have also experienced stigmatization, harassment, and assaults linked with fear of COVID-19.

³⁶ International Labour Organization (ILO), "ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the World of Work. Third Edition: Updates Estimates and Analysis." April 2020. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_749399.pdf

and xenophobia toward migrants in the context of COVID-19, including by state actors, has further exacerbated migrant vulnerability.

Policy measures restricting mobility have profoundly affected migrants, particularly as economies contract. In India, the nationwide lockdown pushed millions of rural-urban migrants into a situation of extreme vulnerability overnight, shuttering worksites and leaving many without income or access to shelter, including construction workers whose food and accommodation had been provided by their employers. The order also forbade migrants from returning to their villages to stem the virus's spread, leaving them without access to family support networks or government social protection that was legally tied to their sending areas. In Russia, border closures left hundreds of migrants from Central Asia sleeping in Russian airports, awaiting any opportunity to return home. Tajiks and Uzbeks were also stranded at the Kazakh border as they sought to return home. Thousands of Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek workers who were preparing for seasonal migration to Russia simultaneously found their migration prospects cut off.

Cross-border migrants with work visas have experienced myriad legal issues in the context of COVID-19, as their status is generally tied to a job with a single employer and because social protection schemes almost never include unemployment insurance.³⁷ With businesses closed, such migrants have found their legal status in the destination country at risk, and the loss of a salary has hampered their ability to pay loans originally taken out to fund migration or to pay for travel back home (where border restrictions allow). Such challenges have been magnified for irregular migrants without work contracts who generally lack access to social or labor protections; informal and irregular migrants were among the first to lose their jobs, and those who have continued to work remain vulnerable to exploitative working conditions, including non-payment of wages and long hours.

Migrants across the region are also experiencing increasing stigmatization, xenophobia, and challenges to their rights. Migrants have suffered disproportionate violence by law enforcement authorities and impunity by state actors tasked with managing government responses to COVID-19, including in short-term shelters, detention centers, and camps for returning migrants (both domestic and international).³⁸ On May 1st, the government of Malaysia arrested hundreds of undocumented migrants, including asylum seekers and children and detained them in camps “to ensure that they did not move around and spread the disease,” according to the Chief of Police;³⁹ migrants were held close together, increasing their risk of infection, while those conducting the raids were clothed in full PPE. Migrants have experienced stigmatization not only in destination areas, but also upon return, as communities and governments may fear that migrants are bringing COVID-19 home with them.

Singapore's response to COVID-19 demonstrates the risk inherent in policies and programs that are not inclusive of migrants. The Singaporean government initially focused only on Singaporean citizens in the country's contact tracing measures, bringing transmission in the non-migrant population under control.

³⁷ Losing a job with that employer can therefore result in a loss of one's visa and legal status in the destination country. See also: World Bank, “Potential Responses to the COVID-19 Outbreak in Support of Migrant Workers,” *Living Paper* Version 10 (June 19, 2020), 6. <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/428451587390154689/pdf/Potential-Responses-to-the-COVID-19-Outbreak-in-Support-of-Migrant-Workers-June-19-2020.pdf>

³⁸ Narayan, R., “How Covid-19 Has Been Battering Human Rights: An Asia-Pacific Perspective.” *Global Asia in Focus: Ongoing Dimensions of Asia's Fight Against Covid-19* 15(2) 100–106. June 2020. https://www.globalasia.org/v15no2/focus/how-covid-19-has-been-battering-human-rights-an-asia-pacific-perspective_rajiv-narayan

³⁹ “Malaysia Migrant Raids ‘to Reduce Covid-19 Spread,’” BBC News. May 2, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52515000>

Soon after, the country's migrant dormitories, where Bangladeshi and Indian migrants were housed 12 to 20 in a room, became COVID-19 hotspots. Cases in these migrant dorms ultimately accounted for over 50,000 infections and 94 percent of Singapore's cases.⁴⁰ Ensuring targeted and inclusive policies is essential for a comprehensive government approach, but it is challenging, particularly in areas with large numbers of irregular migrants, where language barriers, lack of health coverage, and fears of deportation may keep migrants from seeking a virus test. The invisibility of these migrants, who may transmit the virus locally or bring it back to their origin communities, presents a significant challenge for governments working to control the pandemic. Effective responses such as those in South Korea have included measures that encourage migrants to come forward, including free testing and medical treatment for all COVID-19 patients, and the use of firewalls between health officials and immigration enforcement to assure migrants that they will not be deported if they seek medical care.⁴¹

Notably, some of the most successful efforts to support migrant resilience have been implemented at the local level by local governments and civil society organizations (CSOs) that understand community needs, are poised to act quickly and nimbly, and have the trust of the community through long-established relationships.⁴² In India, CSOs stepped in to serve a range of functions in support of migrants' immediate needs, often in coordination with local and state government. CSOs deployed volunteer networks to provide food, water, cash, lodging, medicine, and footwear to migrants who began walking home in response to the national lockdown.⁴³ They also played an important facilitation role between migrants and government, including by registering migrants for state benefits and helping migrants negotiate the complex process of accessing state-sponsored trains home when these became available.⁴⁴ CSOs also conducted rapid assessments of migrants' needs and advocated on behalf of migrants at the state and national levels, including through direct involvement in policy and decision-making bodies.⁴⁵

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON GENDER AND MIGRATION

Evidence suggests that the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 are being felt more acutely by women. COVID-19 has exacerbated existing gendered inequalities in migration, intensifying discriminatory and harmful norms and, in turn, undermining migrant resilience. The gendered impacts of COVID-19 on migrants can be viewed through the lens of employment, safety and security, and access to services.

For women in the region, migration opportunities are largely limited to employment in domestic work, manufacturing, the service industry, and entertainment, as well as informally supporting a partner's work. For men, the primary sectors include construction, agriculture, and fishing. The International Labor Organization (ILO) reports that women have lost more jobs than men in almost all countries reporting.⁴⁶ These job losses will be amplified for migrant women who are highly represented in informal employment

⁴⁰ Ministry of Health Singapore, "COVID-19 Situation Report." October 2, 2020. <https://covid19.moh.gov.sg/>

⁴¹ World Bank, "Potential Responses to the COVID-19 Outbreak in Support of Migrant Workers." *Living Paper* Version 10, 10 June 19, 2020. <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/428451587390154689/pdf/Potential-Responses-to-the-COVID-19-Outbreak-in-Support-of-Migrant-Workers-June-19-2020.pdf>

⁴² In India, for example, the COVID Action Support Team, a network of 200 CSOs, came together quickly in April 2020 to provide assistance to migrants and others in their communities at the local level on a national scale. <https://coastindia.org/>

⁴³ Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), *Response of Indian Civil Society Towards COVID-19* (PRIA, July 2020), 15, https://www.pria.org/knowledge_resource/1594293825_Response%20of%20CSO%20towards%20covid19.pdf

⁴⁴ Ibid, 14.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 16.

⁴⁶ ILO, "ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the World of Work. Sixth Edition: Updates Estimates and Analysis." September 2020. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_755910.pdf

sectors and are more likely than men to be undocumented.⁴⁷ Omission from labor law protections and no access to legal support, social protection, or support to return home compound the impact of losing employment for women migrants in the informal sector.⁴⁸

The manufacturing sector has slowed substantially with examples including Myanmar's US\$4.6 billion garment sector laying off many predominantly internal female migrant workers without pay. Domestic work (a sector that is characterized by high levels of informality and exclusion from labor laws and that disproportionately employs migrant women) has also been directly impacted, with families responding to the pandemic by either terminating the contracts of their domestic workers, or restricting their movement and increasing their duties.⁴⁹ For migrant domestic and care workers, physical proximity, lack of freedom of movement, informal employment, and irregular migration status can also increase their risk of infection.⁵⁰ These are also characteristics of the sex work industry where reduced demand coupled with mobility restrictions have resulted in lower income and increased risk.⁵¹ In predominantly male sectors of work, movement controls and border closures have stranded migrant fishermen offshore and trapped construction workers in overcrowded accommodation.⁵²

Although women migrant workers' employment is often characterized as unskilled and low waged, research indicates that they send a higher proportion of their lower earnings home than men.⁵³ For migrants who are able to work during the COVID pandemic and still have earnings to remit, they can face challenges accessing traditional forms of remitting which may be inaccessible due to movement control orders and closures of remittance service providers. This is a particular challenge for women who commonly have lower access to formal banking systems and are less likely to use digital technology for remitting.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ ILO and IOM, *Risks and Rewards: Outcomes of Labor Migration in South-East Asia*. Bangkok: ILO and IOM. 2017. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_613815.pdf; ILO and UN Women, *Protected or Put in Harm's Way? Bans and Restrictions on Women's Labor Migration in ASEAN Countries*. Bangkok: ILO and UN Women. 2017. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_555974.pdf; ILO and IOM, *Risks and Rewards: Outcomes of Labor Migration*. Bangkok: ILO and IOM. 2017; UN Women, *Gender-Responsive Prevention and Management of the COVID-19 Pandemic: from Emergency Response to Recovery & Resilience*. New York: UN Women. March 2020. <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/news%20and%20events/in%20focus/covid-19/gender-responsive-prevention-management-covid19.pdf?la=en&vs=1519>

⁴⁸ ILO. *ILO Brief: COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy: Immediate Responses and Policy Challenges*. ILO. May 2020. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/briefingnote/wcms_743623.pdf; UN Women, *Guidance Note: Addressing the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women Migrant Workers*. 2020. <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/guidance-note-impacts-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-women-migrant-workers-en.pdf?la=en&vs=227>

⁴⁹ International Domestic Workers Federation. "The Impacts of COVID-19 on Domestic Workers and Policy Responses." IDWFED. May 2020. https://idwfed.org/en/resources/idwf-policy-brief-the-impacts-of-covid-19-on-domestic-workers-and-policy-responses/@@display-file/attachment_1; Soares, A-P., "From Where I Stand: 'Domestic Workers Should also Be Entitled to a Salary during Times of Crisis.'" UN-Women. May 5, 2020. www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/5/from-where-i-stand-ana-paula-soares

⁵⁰ IOM. *COVID-19 and Women Migrant Workers: Impacts and Implications*. Geneva: IOM. 2020. <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/the-gender-dimensions-of-the-labour-migration.pdf>

⁵¹ UNAIDS, "Feature Story: COVID-19 Responses Must Uphold and Protect the Human Rights of Sex Workers." April 24, 2020. https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2020/april/20200424_sex-work; Platt, L., Elmes, J., Stevenson, L., Holt, V., Rolles, S., and Stuart, R., "Sex Workers Must Not Be Forgotten in the COVID-19 Response." *The Lancet* 396(10243): 9–11. July 4–10, 2020. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7228722/>; Wheeler, S., "Sex Workers Struggle to Survive Covid-19 Pandemic: Criminalisation Makes a Bad Situation Worse." Human Rights Watch. May 4, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/04/sex-workers-struggle-survive-covid-19-pandemic>

⁵² Santos, A.P., "Philippine Fishermen Stranded at Sea by Pandemic: 'We Think About Jumping Overboard.'" *Los Angeles Times*. September 9, 2020. <https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/philippine-fishermen-stranded-sea-pandemic-we-think-about-jumping-overboard>

⁵³ IOM. *COVID-19 and Women Migrant Workers: Impacts and Implications*

⁵⁴ ILO. *Digitalization to Promote Decent Work for Migrant Workers in ASEAN: Thematic Background Paper for the 11th ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour (AFML) (29–30 October 2018)*. Bangkok: ILO. 2018; ILO and UN Women, *Mobile Women and Mobile Phone: Women Migrant Workers' Use of Information and Communication Technologies in ASEAN*. Bangkok: ILO and UN Women. 2019.

Migrant women's return has also disrupted the global care economy, which relies on women's labor and increased the unpaid care burden on women. Where traditionally unpaid gendered domestic and care duties had been discharged to migrant women, allowing women to seek paid employment outside of the home, the return of migrant domestic workers will likely reverse this trend. The repercussions will ripple down the global care chain as migrant women return home and resume the unpaid domestic and care burden, their domestic workers (often internal migrants) will also lose their jobs. Indeed, many of the rapid assessments undertaken across the region have indicated a steep increase in the time women are spending on domestic and care duties compared to men.⁵⁵

The gendered impacts of COVID-19 are also evident through the lens of safety and security, particularly in the rise of violence toward and harassment of women. This has been largely attributed to increased stress, economic insecurity, disruption of protective networks, and enforced movement controls, which can increase isolation and limit a victim's ability to leave.⁵⁶ The situation is further magnified for migrant women who face multiple intersections of discrimination and violence based on race, ethnicity, nationality, and migration status, with risk of violence from employers, law enforcement officials, and front-line service providers.⁵⁷ Reports indicate increased physical and verbal attacks by patients, relatives, and colleagues against women migrant workers in the health sector and by employers against care and domestic workers in lockdown.⁵⁸ Violence against women returning to their countries of origin can also result from increased tensions due to loss of employment and stigma that sees the returning women as an infection risk.⁵⁹ In the Pacific, 50 percent of women report a correlation between COVID-19 and increased violence in Fiji.⁶⁰ In the Kyrgyz Republic cases of domestic violence have increased by 67 percent.⁶¹ Where seasonal migration typically reduces intimate partner violence, lack of migration has increased risks for women in the home. Traditional norms that identify men as the breadwinner can mean that perceived masculinity is undermined when work and income is unavailable, this can translate into increased stress, frustration and violence within the home. Increases in violence have also been linked to increased alcohol consumption during lockdowns.⁶²

⁵⁵ UN Women. 2020. Surveys show that COVID-19 has gendered effects in Asia and the Pacific. UN Women, 29 April 2020, <https://data.unwomen.org/resources/surveys-show-covid-19-has-gendered-effects-asia-and-pacific>

⁵⁶ UN Women, *The First 100 Days of COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific: A Gender Lens*. Bangkok: UN Women. 2020. https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2020/04/ap_first_100-days_covid-19-r02.pdf?la=en&vs=3400; WHO, *COVID-19 and Violence against Women*. April 7, 2020. <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331699/WHO-SRH-20.04-eng.pdf?ua=1>

⁵⁷ UN Women, *Action Brief: A Guide for Action to Stem Increasing Violence Against Women amid the COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and the Pacific*. May 2020. https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2020/05/final%20evaw%20roap%20action%20brief%20covid-19_4%20may%202020_1.pdf?la=en&vs=744; UN Women, *Guidance Note: Addressing the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women Migrant Workers*.

⁵⁸ UN Women, *Guidance Note: Addressing the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Women Migrant Workers*; UN Women, *In Focus: Gender Equality Matters in COVID-19 Response*. New York: UN Women. 2020; Chulov, M., "Pandemic Raises Fears Over Welfare of Domestic Workers in Lebanon." *The Guardian*. April 16, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/apr/16/pandemic-raises-fears-over-welfare-of-domestic-workers-in-lebanon>

⁵⁹ Po, S., "Coming Home in COVID-19 Times: Migrant Workers Follow Cambodia's Directives." *Cambodianess*. April 11, 2020. <https://cambodianess.com/article/coming-home-in-covid-19-times-migrant-workers-follow-cambodias-directives>

⁶⁰ UN Women. "Across the Pacific, Crisis Centres Respond to COVID-19 amid Natural Disasters." June 10, 2020. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/feature-pacific-crisis-centres-respond-to-covid-19-amid-natural-disasters>

⁶¹ OECD, *COVID-19 Crisis Response in Central Asia*

⁶² Charoensuthiphan, P. 2020. Virus driving up domestic abuse, *Bangkok Post*, 19 November 2020, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2021987/virus-driving-up-domestic-abuse>

Compounding the increase in violence is the reduction in access to services, as services are shut down or downscaled due to movement controls and money being diverted away to COVID-19 response services.⁶³ As services accessed through phones and the Internet replace face-to-face service provision, language barriers, lack of information, lower access to digital technology, and in the case of domestic workers, employer-enforced bans on accessing phones limit migrant women's access.⁶⁴

Increasing unemployment among the poorest and surges of irregular movement of displaced and returning migrants are also bolstering the conditions in which trafficking in persons can thrive.⁶⁵ This has been reported in India where an increase in child trafficking and forced labor has been linked to deepening poverty.⁶⁶ The threat of increased human trafficking is also a particular risk for women who are more likely to be migrating (and therefore returning) through irregular channels and engaging the services of irregular brokers. In addition, COVID-19 has reduced the ability of frontline service providers to identify and respond to trafficked persons, while further isolating those who are currently in a trafficked situation. A risk also exists that as labor migration restarts, it will further bifurcate migration options. While one set of options is being driven by employers and countries who want to demonstrate that their migration pathways are safe, regular, and "COVID secure", migration routes are also being used that are characterized by irregularity, insecurity, and coercion. Due to a mix of gender norms and structural gender barriers that dictate their form of migration, women have traditionally had less access to the more formalized and regular migration opportunities, and post-COVID may face a higher risk that their opportunities and realities are increasingly characterized by informality, insecurity, and irregularity.

Increased poverty and the closure of schools have exposed young women and girls to a greater risk of trafficking and child marriage.⁶⁷ The risk is further intensified for displaced persons, including the Rohingya; reports indicate that Rohingya refugee girls in Bangladesh camps are being sent to Malaysia where they have been promised to Rohingya men.⁶⁸

Across the region, there have been multiple stories of increased solidarity and community support in the face of COVID-19. Women have been at the forefront of many of these initiatives, from arranging community food to making masks and hand sanitizer. Specific examples include the Domestic Workers Union in Sri Lanka organizing a food bank program, providing food for 400 domestic workers who had

⁶³ Spotlight Initiative, *COVID-19 and Women Migrant Workers in ASEAN*. Bangkok: ILO. June 2020, https://www.spotlightinitiative.org/sites/default/files/publication/COVID-19_and_Women_in_ASEAN.pdf; WHO, *COVID and Violence Against Women*.

⁶⁴ UN Women, *Action Brief: A Guide for Action to Stem Increasing Violence Against Women amid the COVID-19 Pandemic in Asia and the Pacific*; IOM, *COVID-19 and Women Migrant Workers: Impacts and Implications*

⁶⁵ UNODC, *Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Trafficking in Persons: Preliminary Findings and Messaging Based on Rapid Stocktaking*. Vienna: UNODC. 2020. https://www.unodc.org/documents/Advocacy-Section/HTMSS_Thematic_Brief_on_COVID-19.pdf

⁶⁶ CNN. 2020. India sees increase in child trafficking amid pandemic, 22 October 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2020/10/22/india-forced-child-labor-coronavirus-covid-19-watson-pkg-intl-hnk-vpx.cnn>

⁶⁷ "Coronavirus Despair Forces Girls across Asia into Child Marriage." *Aljazeera*. September, 2 2020.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/2/coronavirus-despair-forces-girls-across-asia-into-child-marriage>;

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)32112-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)32112-7/fulltext); O'Donnell, M., Akmal, M., and Hares, S., "A New Survey on the Risks of School Closures for Girls." *Center for Global Development*. April 2020. <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/new-survey-risks-school-closures-girls>

⁶⁸ Karim, N., "More Children Wed, Risk Trafficking in Rohingya Campus in Pandemic." *Thomson Reuters Foundation*. September 17, 2020 <https://news.trust.org/item/20200917152456-un9ib/>; Beech, H., "For Young Rohingya Brides, Marriage Means a Perilous, Deadly Crossing." *The New York Times*, 17 October 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/17/world/asia/rohingya-child-brides.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage§ion=World%20News>

lost their jobs.⁶⁹ In Cox's Bazar, Rohingya women organized to form networks through which they could raise COVID-19 awareness for women in the camps.⁷⁰

ENVIRONMENTAL DIMENSIONS OF THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRATION

Dominant patterns of migration in the Asia-Pacific region are from rural areas, where people depend on land and environmental resources, to urban or peri-urban areas where living space is constrained. Enormous diversity exists within each of these zones. The nature of environmental challenges in the Asia-Pacific region associated with COVID-19 impacts on migration is therefore highly contextual.

Migration and COVID-19 relate to the environment in four main ways. First, environmental drivers of migration may cause people to leave their homes to seek work elsewhere. For example, young people and sometimes entire families move to Ho Chi Minh City as well as to closer towns in search of urban jobs as farming in the Mekong Delta becomes riskier due to saline intrusion, sea level rise and more frequent storms associated with climate change, and sediment capture by upstream dams that reduces soil fertility.⁷¹ Environmental drivers include natural disasters such as tropical cyclones, which have become more frequent and more intense as a result of climate change. They also include slow-onset effects of climate change such as sea level rise, forced relocation by dams and other development-induced migration, and land grabbing. These drivers are also the results of degradation of the resource base on which livelihoods depend, sometimes resulting from competition from larger external players. An example is the decline in near-shore fisheries in Dawei, Myanmar that has induced small scale fishers to seek part of their income elsewhere, including migration to Thailand. Environmental drivers almost always combine with other factors in individuals' decisions to move. Pacific Island states and low-lying deltas face particular challenges from global warming, inducing migration.⁷² As such, environmental conditions also limit return options. Women are disproportionately affected by deteriorating environmental conditions, for example availability of fresh water or of fuel in places where they already do much of the collection over increasing distances. Where male migrants are absent from the household, such burdens are all the greater.

Second, the impacts of COVID-19 on migration have environmental effects, which in turn exacerbate challenges for migrants. For example, in border areas such as Mae Sot in Thailand where migrants seeking to return to Myanmar have been stranded as a result of sudden closure of crossing points in response to the pandemic,⁷³ pressure on local resources has become acute. In Vanuatu and Fiji, Cyclone Harold

⁶⁹ IDWFD. 2020. Domestic workers at the front lines: Newsletter #37, 14 August 2020, https://idwfd.org/en/resources/idwf-e-newsletter-37-14-august-2020/@display-file/attachment_1

⁷⁰ UN Women: The first 100 days of COVID-19 in Asia and the Pacific: A Gender Lens

⁷¹ Entzinger, H. and Scholten, P., "Relocation as an Adaptation Strategy to Environmental Stress: Lessons from the Mekong Delta in Vietnam." *International Organization for Migration*, vol. 1, pp. 8, November 2015, http://login.ezproxy.lib.umn.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1761664828?accountid=14586%0Ahttp://primo.lib.umn.edu/openurl/TWINCITIES/TWINCITIES_SP?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&rft_val_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:book&genre=book&sid=ProQ:PAIS+Index&

⁷² DECCMA, "Climate Change, Migration and Adaptation in Deltas. Key Findings from the DECCMA Project." 2019, https://generic.wordpress.soton.ac.uk/deccma/wp-content/uploads/sites/181/2017/02/online-version_small_Climate-Change-Migration-and-Adaptation-in-DeltasKey-findings-from-the-DECCMA-project.pdf; Campbell, J. and Warrick, O., "Climate Change and Migration Issues in the Pacific." Suva, 2014, <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/migpractice/docs/261/Pacific.pdf>

⁷³ The Irrawaddy, "Out of Work, Out of Options: Myanmar Migrant Workers in Thailand Scrape by during COVID-19." *Global Voices*, July 22, 2020, <https://globalvoices.org/2020/07/22/out-of-work-out-of-options-myanmar-migrant-workers-in-thailand-scrape-by-during-covid-19/>

combined with COVID-19 to exacerbate both emergencies.⁷⁴ Migration has also reduced access to land in areas where customary rights depend on its productive use, for example in Karenni State in Myanmar where male labor migration has left women with triple burdens of full-time working of the land, domestic chores and child raising. In turn, this has reduced their ability to continue farming and hence to maintain their claims over customary land.⁷⁵ COVID-19 has shown that access to land becomes particularly important in times of crisis simply in having somewhere to go. Tuvalu, for example, is a country where a key response to the pandemic has been to return to native islands and villages. Yet migrants elsewhere have found that not only their own undocumented land but also common land has been enclosed by powerful local interests in their absence.⁷⁶ Losing access to wild resources to such enclosures removes a partial safety net that could otherwise ameliorate hardship.⁷⁷

Third, environmental conditions shape migrants' resilience to the effects of COVID-19 and associated restrictions, whether in terms of living space in crowded cities such as Bangkok or Mumbai, through declining access to environmental resources as a safety net as at Tonle Sap, or through control over land as refuge and/or as an alternative source of livelihood as in the case of Pacific Island states whose migrants are returning to the land and ocean for basic food security (see case study on Tuvalu).⁷⁸ COVID-19 exacerbates many pre-existing environmental challenges that migrants face in several ways. Confined and often unsanitary living space becomes a greater hardship when migrants and their families are laid off, stranded, and forced to spend more time in their living quarters, and evidence from China indicates that more crowding intensifies and extends the duration of virus spread.⁷⁹ The decline in prices for fish and other seafood as the international markets where demand has hitherto been based are shut off due to border closures, for example at Dawei in Myanmar, exacerbates the already meager living fishers make in decimated resource endowments. In Bangladesh, COVID-19 intersects with severe climate change challenges including impacts of cyclones such as Amphan that hit the country in May 2020, saltwater intrusion, and continuing erosion of coastal land in the heavily populated Delta.⁸⁰ Further, the decline in remittances resulting from the COVID-19 crisis has revealed the widespread inadequacy of land and environmental resources in supporting poor rural families in their own right, with "left behind" women, children and elderly particularly affected.

Fourth, "building back" options include opportunities to work toward more sustainable approaches but also risks that shortcuts will be taken in land acquisition and environmental safeguards in the rush to get

⁷⁴ Graue, C., and Wasuka, E. "Coronavirus Distancing Measures Lifted as Cyclone Harold Lashes Vanuatu." ABC News, September 3, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-06/vanuatu-cyclone-harold-coronavirus-measures-suspended/12124640>. Also see Cowley, A., "Fiji Gender, Disability and Inclusion Analysis COVID-19 and TC Harold." Suva, 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Fiji_GDIA_COVID19TCHarold_30Jun20_FINAL_signed_off_updated_22July2020.pdf

⁷⁵ Rungmanee, S., et al., "Migration and Women's Land Tenure Rights and Security in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region: Case Studies from Thailand, Lao PDR and Myanmar." Bangkok and Chiang Mai, 2021.

⁷⁶ See for example, Awasthi, P., "Amid COVID-19 Lockdown, Land Disputes Arise in Bihar." *The Week*, May 20, 2020, <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2020/05/20/amid-covid-19-lockdown-land-disputes-arise-in-bihar.html>

⁷⁷ For example, wild vegetables for migrants stranded on the Thailand-Myanmar border. See Bohwongprasert, Y., "Out of Work and Out of Options." *Bangkok Post*, September 22, 2020, https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/social-and-lifestyle/1989575?cx_placement=editorpick#cxrecs_s

⁷⁸ Engblom, A., Lephilbert, N., and Baruah, N., "COVID-19: Impact on Migrant Workers and Country Response in Thailand," Bangkok, 2020, p. 6, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms_741920.pdf. See also Udas-Mankikar, S., "Informal Migrants in Maximum City." Mumbai, April 2020, [https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/informal-migrants-maximum-city-64959/Yawar_and_Kitara_T.,_et_al.,_\"Reducing_COVID-19_Risk_through_Population_Relocation_and_Closed_Borders:_Effects_of_Pandemic_Emergency_Measures_in_a_Small_Island_State.\"_Online_blog,_2020,_Environmental_Migration_Portal_3/9/20.](https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/informal-migrants-maximum-city-64959/Yawar_and_Kitara_T.,_et_al.,_\)

⁷⁹ Rader, B., et al., "Crowding and the Shape of COVID-19 Epidemics." *Nature Medicine*, 2020, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41591-020-1104-0>

⁸⁰ Badrul Ahsan, S., "In Bangladesh, Covid Adds to a List of Maladies." *The Interpreter*, October 8, 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/bangladesh-against-covid-19-and-diplomatic-maladies>

projects up and running. These measures are already foreshadowed in streamlined processes for land alienation for industrial projects in India and truncated environmental assessment processes under Indonesia's Omnibus Law.⁸¹ Both of these options have implications for future migrant opportunities in terms of access to land and a healthy environment. Enhancing migrant resilience and building back better is linked to ecological resilience in many ways. For example, resilience is based on access to environmental resources and on robust environmental governance systems. The literature is growing on "building back better" in global terms through investing in green infrastructure, and the environmental implications of rebuilding from COVID-19 could be either retrenchment or displacement of carbon-intensive production.⁸² Rebuilding also provides opportunities to incorporate environmental conditions that enhance migrant resilience, for example improved dormitory design and access to common/public space. Attention also needs to be given to the importance of access to land for livelihoods and to rural living space for returnees where long-term return of migrants risks placing further strains on rural livelihood systems, creating tensions in communities where land, forest resources, fisheries and access to water are already under strain. These issues have been flagged in the case of Pacific Island countries. Heightened pressure on the already much diminished Tonle Sap fishery during 2020 as a result of pandemic-induced job losses elsewhere have similarly created tensions, some of them expressed in ethnic terms (see for example, case study on Cambodia). Such tensions are not simply an outcome of increased demographic pressures; rather, they arise through inequalities and ambiguities in access rights to land and resources. Tenure systems and governance arrangements, among other factors, determine such access. Effective points of intervention are likely to be systemic in nature rather than directly in environmental rehabilitation.

1.2 A DEEPER DIVE: OVERVIEW OF SPECIFIC IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON MIGRATION IN THE SUBREGIONS

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRATION IN MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA

The overwhelming pattern of international migration within mainland Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam) is to Thailand, which in 2019, housed an estimated 4.9 million international migrants, including 3.9 million from the four other countries of the subregion.⁸³ Myanmar migration to Thailand alone accounts for 27 percent of all intra-regional migration in Southeast Asia. In addition to registered migrants, more than 800,000 informal migrants from neighboring countries work in Thailand.⁸⁴ While similar numbers of men and women migrate, occupational patterns are quite gender specific.⁸⁵ In addition, women are more likely to migrate irregularly and work in informal sectors, with less access to labor rights and social protection. Many migrants bring their families, and they have access to subsidized health insurance, although the uptake is not universal, with irregular migrants in particular often reluctant to access such arrangements (See case study on Myanmar-Thailand). Migrant children also

⁸¹ Weigold, A., "Land Acquisition, Labour Reform and a Mobile Workforce: Modi's Grand Plan." Nedlands, WA, 2020, <http://www.futuredirections.org.au/publication/land-acquisition-labour-reform-and-a-mobile-workforce-modis-grand-plan/>; BBC News, "Indonesia: Thousands Protest Against 'Omnibus Law' on Jobs," October 9, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54460090>

⁸² Hepburn, C., et al., "Will COVID-19 Fiscal Recovery Packages Accelerate or Retard Progress on Climate Change?" *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 36(20): 1–48, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/graa015>

⁸³ Harkins, B., "Thailand Migration Report 2019." Bangkok, 2019, p. XI. <https://reliefweb.int/report/thailand/thailand-migration-report-2019-enth>

⁸⁴ Harkins, p. 12

⁸⁵ Rungmanee, S., et al., "Migration and Women's Land Tenure Rights and Security in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region: Case Studies from Thailand, Lao PDR and Myanmar." Bangkok and Chiang Mai, 2021.

have access to free schooling, but more than half remain out of school due to a) ancillary costs associated with schooling; b) barriers put in their way by some school administrators; and c) language and other cultural differences between the host community and the children's migrant parents.⁸⁶

Apart from the international migration to Thailand, internal migration is now significant in all mainland Southeast Asian countries. Internal rural-urban migration has been a defining factor of Thailand's economy since the 1960s, and many rural families depend on remittances for part of their income, particularly in the poor northeastern region. Since the 1990s, rural-urban migration has accelerated in Cambodia and Vietnam for work in labor-intensive industries, such as the garment industry, employing more women than men, such as garments, and Myanmar has more recently begun to follow this trend. Rural-rural migration also remains important, both internally and across borders, for agricultural work. Migration from rural Laos to provincial towns and to Vientiane is increasing, but migration from rural Laos remains more heavily oriented to urban centers in Thailand. In addition, migrants from all five mainland Southeast Asian countries work in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the Middle East.

The most significant refugee movement in mainland Southeast Asia is that of 1.1 million Rohingyas from Myanmar. Most of these are in highly vulnerable conditions in camps in eastern Bangladesh, but more than 100,000 of them are also in Malaysia.⁸⁷ Forced migration in the region is also associated with dam construction and other infrastructure development, such as the Chinese high speed railroad currently being built in Laos.⁸⁸ Environmentally induced migration from the Mekong Delta and other vulnerable parts of Vietnam is both spontaneous and assisted. In some cases, assisted migration is over quite short distances to move people away from areas susceptible to flooding and to make way for infrastructure such as protective dikes. In other cases, it involves more spontaneous and longer distance migration, particularly to Ho Chi Minh City, as saline intrusion, increased flooding frequency, soil acidification and other environmental changes reduce the viability of farming.⁸⁹

With the exception of Myanmar from September 2020 onward, mainland Southeast Asia has seen extremely low rates of COVID-19 infection and little local transmission since May 2020. In Thailand, the system of village health volunteers is key to this success, and the long-standing scheme has a parallel program for migrant health volunteers working within their own communities. The overwhelming majority of volunteers are women, who tend to play the predominant role in care occupations.⁹⁰ Vietnam has been a global leader in containing the pandemic, including a swift and effective response to a second wave. While recording public health successes, loss of income from economic activity, in which migrants play an important role, has heavily affected the region's economies. Hence a loss of remittances has occurred; prior to the pandemic, these remittances were estimated at between US\$6 to US\$10 billion

⁸⁶ Harkins, p. XII

⁸⁷ FORUM-ASIA, "Human Rights in Southeast Asia in Times of Pandemic." Bangkok, 2020, p. 50, <https://doi.org/10.19184/jseahr.v1i2.5293>

⁸⁸ AsiaNews, "Thousands of Families Displaced by Laos-China Railway, Still Awaiting Compensation." AsiaNews, July 21, 2018, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Thousands-of-families-displaced-by-Laos-China-railway-still-awaiting-compensation-44486.html>; Hirsch, P., "The Shifting Regional Geopolitics of Mekong Dams." *Political Geography* 51, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2015.12.004>

⁸⁹ Entzinger, H., and Scholten, P., "Relocation as an Adaptation Strategy to Environmental Stress: Lessons from the Mekong Delta in Vietnam." *International Organization for Migration*, vol. 1, p. 8, November 2015,

http://login.ezproxy.lib.umn.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1761664828?accountid=14586%0Ahttp://primo.lib.umn.edu/openurl/TWINCITIES/TWINCITIES_SP?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&rft_val_fmt=info:ofi/fmt:kev:mtx:book&genre=book&sid=ProQ:PAIS+Index&

⁹⁰ Narkvichien, M., "Thailand's 1 Million Village Health Volunteers—'Unsung Heroes'—Are Helping Guard Communities Nationwide from COVID-19." World Health Organization, 2020, <https://www.who.int/thailand/news/feature-stories/detail/thailands-1-million-village-health-volunteers-unsung-heroes-are-helping-guard-communities-nationwide-from-covid-19>

from Thailand to neighboring countries.⁹¹ The industries most affected include tourism and the garment industry.

Government responses to COVID-19 commenced with severe internal lockdown measures in Thailand and Vietnam during March-April 2020, with major impacts on migrant incomes. Many migrants returned from Thailand, with estimates of 90,000 returning to Cambodia; 120,000 to Laos; and 100,000 to Myanmar,⁹² but many stayed in their countries of destination even on diminished incomes. From late March until the time of writing (November 2020), all Thailand's international borders have been closed. Those who did decide to return to their home countries suddenly found themselves unable to do so, with some migrants remaining stranded at the borders.⁹³ In Cambodia, the government encouraged internal migrants who had lost work in the cities to return to their rural homes, but many had little or no land to which to return as a result of land grabbing, insecure tenure and foreclosures that have plagued the country's rural poor (see case study on Cambodia).⁹⁴ Diminished economic activity in Thailand severely affected the country's small businesses.⁹⁵ The pandemic also coincided with an exceptionally dry year that presented problems for farming and for the fisheries in the Mekong River Basin on which many depend, particularly in Cambodia.⁹⁶ In Cambodia, the country's poor have been unable to service micro-loans, which have multiplied in recent years and have both been behind the reasons for migration and been exacerbated by the expenses incurred in such migration.⁹⁷

Livelihoods in rural mainland Southeast Asia depend on complex combinations of farming and remittances, and circular mobility has reshaped agrarian relations in complex ways.⁹⁸ The implications for rural areas of truncated migration associated with COVID-19 are only starting to be understood, but their scope is wide and deep, including access to land, labor practices, and new sites of poverty. A particular concern is the further concentration of land holding as debtors default on loans and are forced into distress sales.

All countries in the region depend on tourism.⁹⁹ Given their role in hospitality service provision, women have been disproportionately affected. In Thailand, the particular hardships faced by sex workers during the pandemic, who have been unable to access state support, have led to calls to "build back better" and use the experience of COVID-19 to press for more regularized and recognized working conditions.¹⁰⁰ In Cambodia, the tourism industry in Siem Reap has been devastated, compounding loss of remittance

⁹¹ Harkins, p. XIV

⁹² Engblom, A., Lephilbert, N., and Baruah, N., "COVID-19: Impact on Migrant Workers and Country Response in Thailand." Bangkok, 2020, p. 3, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms_741920.pdf

⁹³ Ngamkham, W., and Charoensuthipan, P., "Migrants Struggle to Return Despite Sealed Borders." *Bangkok Post*, July 26, 2020, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/special-reports/1957543/migrants-struggle-to-return-despite-sealed-borders>

⁹⁴ Natalia Scurrah and Philip Hirsch, The political economy of land governance in Cambodia, Mekong Region Land Governance Program, 2015. http://www.mekonglandforum.org/sites/default/files/Political_Economy_of_Land_Governance_in_Cambodia_FA.pdf

⁹⁵ Parks, T., Chatsuwan, M., and Pillai, S., "Enduring the Pandemic : Surveys of the Impact of COVID-19 on the Livelihoods of Thai People." Bangkok, 2020, <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/enduring-the-pandemic-surveys-of-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-thai-small-businesses/>

⁹⁶ Asian Development Bank, "Asian Development Outlook 2020 Update: Wellness in Worrying Times." September 2020. <https://www.adb.org/what-we-do/economic-forecasts/september-2020/theme-chapter>

⁹⁷ Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights, "They Escaped the Worst of COVID-19. Now Cambodians Face a Debt Crisis." Phnom Penh, 2020, <https://www.central-cambodia.org/archives/4420>. See also: IOM, *Cambodian Return Survey*, 2020. <https://migration.iom.int/reports/cambodia-returning-migrants-survey-2020>

⁹⁸ Rigg, J., et al., "More Farmers, Less Farming? Understanding the Truncated Agrarian Transition in Thailand." *World Development* 107, 327–337, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.03.008>. See also Kelley, L.C., et al., "Circular Labor Migration and Land-Livelihood Dynamics in Southeast Asia's Concession Landscapes," *Journal of Rural Studies* 73, 21–33, November 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.11.019>

⁹⁹ Kishimoto, M. and Manabe, K., "Southeast Asia Faces Budget Deficits If Tourist Numbers Drop 50%." *Nikkei Asian Review*, March 18, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Datawatch/Southeast-Asia-faces-budget-deficits-if-tourist-numbers-drop-50>

¹⁰⁰ Surang Janyam, Dusita Phuengsamran, Jamrong Pangnongyang, et al, Protecting sex workers in Thailand during the COVID-19 pandemic: opportunities to build back better, *WHO South-East Asia Journal of Public Health* 9(2). September 2020.

income from Thailand and environmental conditions at Tonle Sap Lake that have decimated fishing livelihoods (see Cambodia case study).

Sharp-edge issues associated with migration in mainland Southeast Asia include continuing problems of human trafficking. Smuggling of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to Malaysia reportedly increased threefold during March- April 2020 due to fears of COVID-19 in crowded refugee camps around Cox's Bazaar.¹⁰¹ Labor abuses in Thailand's fishing industry have largely affected migrant workers, attention to which has intensified in recent years. The region's sex industry is another long-standing site of migrant abuse. Thailand excluded sex workers from its unemployment aid packages provided during the pandemic.¹⁰² Poor working and living conditions and labor abuses such as withholding of wages continue to affect migrants disproportionately, particularly as regulations tie migrants to their sponsoring employers. The uncertainties of employment and restrictions on movement incurred by the pandemic exacerbate these vulnerabilities.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRATION IN MARITIME SOUTHEAST ASIA

In terms of migration patterns, maritime Southeast Asia can be divided into three main groups: the larger, predominantly sending countries of Indonesia and the Philippines; the smaller, more economically advanced receiving countries of Singapore and Brunei Darussalam; and Malaysia, which both receives (from other Asian countries) and sends (primarily to nearby Singapore) migrant workers. A small volume of cross-border migration also occurs between Indonesia and Timor-Leste, which currently holds observer status in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The Philippines has a long history of international labor migration, with more than 10 percent of its population living overseas.¹⁰³ In recent decades, an increasing number of Indonesians have also begun migrating abroad, mainly for employment.¹⁰⁴ At the same time, almost 40 percent of the population of Singapore, Southeast Asia's most prosperous nation, are foreign-born, ranging from highly paid expatriates from Europe and North America to male construction workers and female household workers from Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines.¹⁰⁵ Undocumented workers are also present in the subregion's destination countries, although the actual scale is hard to estimate.¹⁰⁶ For example, the Malaysian government's official count of Indonesian migrants in its territory is around one million, although the Indonesian embassy in Kuala Lumpur puts the actual figure around 2.5 to 3 million.¹⁰⁷ Internal inter-island migration for employment is also a characteristic of the archipelagos of the Philippines and Indonesia. Both countries also have a significant population that has been forcibly displaced due to climate-related

¹⁰¹ Interpol, "COVID-19 Impact on Migrant Smuggling and People Trafficking." June 11, 2020, <https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2020/COVID-19-impact-on-migrant-smuggling-and-human-trafficking>

¹⁰² "COVID-19 Has Been Devastating for Sex Workers Across Asia-Pacific. Here's Why." *Ariana*, August 18, 2020 <https://www.arianalife.com/topic-type/news-feature/covid-19-has-been-devastating-for-sex-workers-across-asia-pacific-heres-why/>

¹⁰³ International Organization for Migration, "Country Migration Report: The Philippines 2013." 2013. https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/cmreport_philippines2013.pdf

¹⁰⁴ International Organization for Migration, "Labour Migration from Indonesia." 2010. https://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/shared/shared/mainsite/published_docs/Final-LM-Report-English.pdf

¹⁰⁵ Fenn, M., Singapore's Foreigner Problem. *The Diplomat*, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/02/singapores-foreigner-problem/>

¹⁰⁶ Alemia, C., "Undocumented Migrant Workers: Hidden and Helpless in ASEAN." *Rappler*, 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/world/asia-pacific/plight-undocumented-migrant-workers-asean>

¹⁰⁷ Walden, M. and Wijaya, S., "Millions of Indonesian Migrant Workers Face Hardships in Malaysia amid COVID-19 Fallout." *ABC News* July 25, 2020. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-26/indonesians-face-hardship-in-malaysia-amid-coronavirus-fallout/12486548>

natural disasters and ongoing violence and armed conflict.¹⁰⁸ These internally displaced persons and those living in chronic poverty are also at greater risk of human trafficking.¹⁰⁹

COVID-19 has had disproportionate effects within the subregion. Initially, Singapore had the highest numbers in the region: in April 2020, 94 percent of cases originated in migrant dormitories, a percentage that persists.¹¹⁰ Aggressive contact tracing and other measures eventually led to rapid containment and suppression.¹¹¹ Since June, the Philippines and Indonesia have overtaken Singapore as having the most reported COVID-19 infections and deaths in ASEAN.¹¹² Meanwhile, the rapid pre-emptive measures of Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam helped keep the incidence of COVID-19 cases at low levels.¹¹³

COVID-19 has exacerbated many challenges that migrant workers in the subregion encounter throughout the migration cycle. Migrant workers who stayed in destination countries face problems related to health care access, job security, and discrimination. Exclusion of migrant workers from health care in Singapore led to a second wave of infection.¹¹⁴ While Brunei Darussalam offers free random testing to migrant workers, undocumented workers must pay up to 400 ringgit (US\$93) for testing.¹¹⁵ Crowded living conditions, as in the case of migrant dormitories in Singapore or detention centers in Malaysia, have become breeding grounds for infection clusters.¹¹⁶

Low-skilled migrants whose contracts expired or who were laid off have risked falling into undocumented status. Undocumented women migrant workers in Malaysia who work as agency cleaners, working in multiple households per day, increasingly risk infection. Filipino and Indonesian women domestic workers who are in between jobs or awaiting visas have no choice but to stay in packed facilities, as in Hong Kong.¹¹⁷ In some cases, undocumented workers had no alternative but to hide to avoid paying fines or being deported, which will prevent them from returning once they are safely able to return.¹¹⁸

¹⁰⁸ Asian Development Bank, "Facing the Challenge of Environmental Migration in Asia and the Pacific." ADB Briefs No. 9, 2011, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/29090/adb-brief-09-environmental-migration.pdf>; Internal Displacement Monitoring Center – Philippines: <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/philippines> and Indonesia: <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/indonesia>

¹⁰⁹ Caballero-Anthony, M., "A Hidden Scourge." Finance & Development, International Monetary Fund, 2018, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2018/09/human-trafficking-in-southeast-asia-caballero.htm>

¹¹⁰ Idrus, P.G., "New Dorms for Migrant Workers in Singapore Right Step." Anadolu Agency, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/new-dorms-for-migrant-workers-in-singapore-right-step/1872157>

¹¹¹ Tan, H., "Singapore Is Committed to Containing Coronavirus Pandemic even as Daily Cases Fall, Politician Says." CNBC, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/24/singapore-is-committed-to-containing-coronavirus-pandemic-even-as-daily-cases-fall.html>

¹¹² Southeast Asia Covid-19 Tracker. Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker-0>

¹¹³ Shah, Ain Umaira Md, Safri, Syafiqah Nur Azrie, Thevadas, Rathedevi, et al. (2020). COVID-19 outbreak in Malaysia: Actions taken by the Malaysian government. International Journal of Infectious Diseases, 97, 108-116; Bodetti, A. "How Brunei Beat COVID-19." The Diplomat. June 22, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/how-brunei-beat-covid-19/>

¹¹⁴ Tsendro, J., "COVID-19 Testing Completed for All Migrant Workers in Dormitories, Except 'a Few' Quarantine Blocks: MOH." Channel News Asia, 2020, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/covid-19-foreign-worker-dormitories-testing-completed-quarantine-13001482>

¹¹⁵ Khan, A.U., "Brunei's Response to COVID-19." The ASEAN Post, 2020, <https://theaseanpost.com/article/bruneis-response-covid-19>. Also see: Sukumaran, T., "As Malaysia's Coronavirus Lockdown Lifts, Migrant Workers Return to Dangers of Life in '3D'." South China Morning Post, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3092084/malaysias-coronavirus-lockdown-lifts-migrant-workers>

¹¹⁶ Iwamoto, K., "Singapore's Migrant Dormitories Emerge as Hotbed for Coronavirus." Nikkei Asia, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Coronavirus/Singapore-s-migrant-dormitories-emerge-as-hotbed-for-coronavirus>. Also see: Nortajuddin, A. "Malaysia's Immigration Depots: COVID-19 Hotspots?" The ASEAN Post, 2020, <https://theaseanpost.com/article/malaysias-immigration-depots-covid-19-hotspots>

¹¹⁷ Magramo, K., "Coronavirus: Crowded Dorms Putting Domestic Helpers at Risk of Infection, Advocates Say, as Second Worker Confirmed Positive." South China Morning Post, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/3096525/coronavirus-crowded-dorms-putting-domestic>

¹¹⁸ Ara, A., "Illegal Migrants in Brunei Exposed to Pandemic." The Financial Express, 2020, <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/national/illegal-migrants-in-brunei-exposed-to-pandemic-1585880084>

Crackdowns against undocumented migrants also deter them from coming forward to receive aid or access testing and treatment.¹¹⁹

Meanwhile, repatriation also poses problems. Due to limited assistance from the Indonesian government, dozens of Indonesian migrant workers traveled unsafely from Malaysia back home by boat.¹²⁰ While free testing is guaranteed to migrant workers returning to the Philippines, limited testing capacity and logistical difficulties led to prolonged and unnecessary quarantines.¹²¹ Responding to the heightened risk of violence and trafficking of returned migrants, UN Women has supported the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection in Indonesia to develop a Cross-Sectoral Protocol on the Protection of Women Migrant Workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹²²

In addition, outbound migrants were unable to assume their jobs abroad due to travel restrictions.¹²³ Hiring freezes imposed by destination countries also rendered prospective migrants unemployed, a precarious situation that the economic recession is likely to prolong.¹²⁴ In some cases, outbound migrant workers were able to leave, only to carry the virus unknowingly to other countries.¹²⁵

Finally, regarding internal migration, repatriated migrants were stuck in Manila and Jakarta, and temporary workers in cities could not immediately return to their town of origin, all because of travel restrictions and limited transport options.¹²⁶ These locally stranded individuals, most of them jobless, were then further subjected to poor living conditions such as overcrowded temporary shelters and limited access to necessities such as food and health care. Furthermore, they also faced discrimination even from their own communities, who fear that they may inadvertently bring COVID-19 back to their hometown.¹²⁷ The arrival of the typhoon season in the Philippines also required evacuations of disaster victims, making social distancing measures harder to implement.¹²⁸

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRATION IN SOUTH ASIA

¹¹⁹ Ambrose, N.S., "Malaysia's Marginalized and Covid-19." The Asia Foundation, 2020, <https://asiafoundation.org/2020/05/13/malysias-marginalized-and-covid-19/>; Widadio, N.A., "Indonesia's Economic Migrants Vulnerable in Malaysia." Anadolu Agency, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/indonesia-s-economic-migrants-vulnerable-in-malaysia/1840341>

¹²⁰ Wahyuni, N.C. and Sihaloho, M.J., "Indonesia Repatriates Nearly 70,000 Migrant Workers from Malaysia." Jakarta Globe, 2020, <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/indonesia-repatriates-nearly-70000-migrant-workers-from-malaysia>

¹²¹ Robles, A., "Coronavirus: Philippines Allows Thousands of OFWs Trapped in Quarantine Limbo to Go Home." South China Morning Post, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3085993/coronavirus-thousands-ofws-trapped-philippines>

¹²² UN Women Indonesia, "COVID-19 response." June 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/un_women_indonesia_covid-19_country_brief_20200609_revised.pdf

¹²³ Mogato, M., "'My World Stopped Spinning'. Life on Hold for Millions of Philippine Migrant Workers." The Jakarta Post, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2020/07/23/my-world-stopped-spinning-life-on-hold-for-millions-of-philippine-migrant-workers.html>

¹²⁴ Hutt, D., "Mass Unemployment The New Normal in SE Asia." Asia Times, 2020, <https://asiatimes.com/2020/05/mass-unemployment-the-new-normal-in-se-asia/>

¹²⁵ Hui, Z., "HK's New Coronavirus Wave Linked to Philippines." Global Times, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1196899.shtml>; Esmaguel, P. II, "Traveler from Philippines among New Zealand's New COVID-19 Cases." Rappler, 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/world/asia-pacific/traveler-philippines-new-zealand-new-covid-19-cases>

¹²⁶ Astiarani, Y., "Internal Migration in Indonesia and Its Impact on Covid-19." Global Asia, 2020, https://www.globalasia.org/v15no3/cover/internal-migration-in-indonesia-and-its-impact-on-covid-19_yunisa-astiarani; Zurbano, E., "Pandemic Leaves 4.1M Filipinos Stranded." Manila Standard, 2020, <https://manilastandard.net/mobile/article/326003>

¹²⁷ Chavez, C., "'Locally Stranded Individuals (LSI)' Only Those with Families in Receiving Provinces,' Says Head of League of Provinces." Manila Bulletin, 2020, <https://mb.com.ph/2020/08/09/locally-stranded-individuals-lsi-only-those-with-families-in-receiving-provinces-says-head-of-league-of-provinces/>

¹²⁸ Lema, K., "Pandemic Hampers Philippines Mass Evacuation as Typhoon Hits." Reuters, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-asia-storm-philippines-idUSKBN2200YB>

High levels of internal and international labor migration, primarily of low- and semi-skilled workers, characterize South Asia.¹²⁹ Internal migration, particularly from rural to urban areas, is a feature of all countries in the region and is driven by rural poverty, rural-urban inequality,¹³⁰ climate change vulnerability,¹³¹ and the adverse effects of environmental degradation on agriculture;¹³² India alone has an estimated 100 million internal migrants.¹³³

South Asia sends a large number of migrant workers to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, with India sending 9.4 million workers in 2019, Bangladesh 3.4 million, Pakistan 3.3 million, and Nepal just more than 800,000.¹³⁴ The region sends smaller by significant streams of migrants to Malaysia and Singapore.¹³⁵ The vast majority of these migrants are male, with only Sri Lanka sending similar numbers of men and women abroad. Male migrants to GCC countries and Southeast Asia are most often employed in construction and production, while women are disproportionately engaged in the service sector, particularly in domestic work.¹³⁶ There is substantial intra-regional migration as well, with the most prominent streams directed toward India. In 2019, 3.1 million Bangladeshis and more than half a million Nepalis resided in India.¹³⁷ Migrants from Nepal are legally entitled to work in India under the 1950 Friendship Treaty, so migration along this corridor is relatively inexpensive.¹³⁸ As a result, Nepalis of lower socioeconomic status generally use the Nepal-India migration corridor; their families, in turn, are highly reliant on their remittances: 85 percent of remittances from India are spent on daily consumption, compared with 50 percent of remittances from GCC countries and Malaysia.¹³⁹

Millions of Bangladeshis migrate to India for work each year through a border that is porous but not open. The Bangladesh-India migration corridor is highly politicized, and as a result, most Bangladeshi workers remain in irregular status in India. This lack of legal status has been linked to several vulnerabilities among Bangladeshi migrants, including diminished access to health care and risk of abuse by police and border guards.¹⁴⁰ India's Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, has exacerbated these vulnerabilities by providing

¹²⁹ India and Pakistan also send high-skilled workers to Europe and North America.

¹³⁰ Babu P. Remesh, "Movement of peoples in South Asia calls for building solidarities, collective action," *The Indian EXPRESS*, September 10, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/labour-migration-in-south-asia-women-migration-coronavirus-6589719/>

¹³¹ Michael Kugelman, "Climate-Induced Displacement: South Asia's Clear and Present Danger," *Wilson Center*, September 30, 2020.

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/climate-induced-displacement-south-asias-clear-and-present-danger>

¹³² The Asia Foundation, *Labour Migration Trends and Patterns*, Kathmandu: The Asia Foundation, 2013:46.

<https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/LabourMigrationTrendsandPatternsBangladeshIndiaandNepal2013.pdf>

¹³³ Deshingkar and Akhter's widely accepted estimate of 100 million migrants was first suggested in their 2009 UNDP working paper. Priya Deshingkar and Shaheen Akter, *Migration and Human Development in India* (UNDP, 2009). Nayyar and Kim, using India Human Development Survey (IHDS) data put the number of internal circular migrants at 200 million in 2011-12. Gaurav Nayyar and Kyoung Yang Kim, "India's Internal Labor Migration Paradox: The Statistical and the Real." (Policy Research Working Paper, No. 8356, World Bank, 2018), <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/29416>. The Government of India estimates for inter-state migrants are as high as 60 million and inter-district migrants as high as 80 million. Government of India, "India on the move and churning: New evidence," Chapter 12 in *Economic Survey*, Ministry of Finance (2017), 265. <https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/budget2017-2018/es2016-17/echap12.pdf>

¹³⁴ United Nations DESA

¹³⁵ In 2019, there were 578,082 Nepalis and 410,195 Bangladeshis in Malaysia, and there were 127,189 Indians; 109,537 Pakistanis; and 68,430 Bangladeshis in Singapore. South Asian migrants accounted for 8.3 percent of Singapore's total population in 2019. United Nations DESA.

¹³⁶ Rakhee Thimothy and S.K. Sasikumar, *Migration of Women Workers from South Asia to the Gulf*, 2012:23.

https://www.ucs.pitt.edu/global/sites/default/files/migration_women_southasia_gulf.pdf

¹³⁷ United Nations DESA, *International Migrant Stock*, (2019),

<https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates19.asp>

¹³⁸ Migration from Nepal to India costs approximately \$83, compared with a cost of \$1333 for migration from Nepal to the Middle East. Maheshwor Shrestha, "Push and pull: A study of international migration from Nepal" (unpublished manuscript, April 2016):9-10.

<http://economics.mit.edu/files/11477>

¹³⁹ Acaps, *Migrant vulnerability in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal*, October 2020: 8.

https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20201012_acaps_thematic_series_on_migrant_vulnerability_in_south_asia_0.pdf

¹⁴⁰ The Asia Foundation, *Labour Migration Trends and Patterns*, Kathmandu: The Asia Foundation, 2013:51.

<https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/LabourMigrationTrendsandPatternsBangladeshIndiaandNepal2013.pdf>

protection and a path to citizenship only for non-Muslim migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.¹⁴¹ The high level of informal labor migrants conduct across South Asia, with more than 80 percent of workers in Bangladesh, Nepal, and India engaged in the informal economy, means that even those migrants who are not in irregular status are vulnerable because of their livelihoods, risking dismissal and non-payment of wages.¹⁴²

National lockdowns in March 2020 left many of these migrants jobless, and millions returned home. In India, where the government halted buses and trains to keep the population in place, migrants walked toward their villages, sometimes hundreds of kilometers, with little food or money, in the country's largest migration since the Partition of India (see case study on the impacts of India's lockdown on Indian internal migrants and Nepali cross-border migrants).¹⁴³ In Bangladesh, the Prime Minister's announcement that food, shelter, and cash assistance would be provided in rural areas through the "Return-to-Home" program accompanied lockdowns,¹⁴⁴ and telecom data show that as many as ten million migrants left Dhaka in the days following the announcement.¹⁴⁵ Many international migrants who lost their livelihoods also rushed to return home, streaming back across borders where possible and via chartered flights where necessary.¹⁴⁶ In Pakistan, repatriating migrants were joined by those who had been traveling abroad for religious gatherings, including to Iran, a COVID-19 hotspot.¹⁴⁷

The return of international migrants to India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan contributed to the diffusion of COVID-19 in these countries.¹⁴⁸ Although systematic quarantines were put in place for returning migrants, uneven implementation reduced the efficacy of these programs.¹⁴⁹ India now has the second highest number of COVID-19 cases in the world at 9.7 million, and the third highest number of deaths.¹⁵⁰ Since July, the country has documented a "rural surge," with COVID-19 cases increasing more rapidly in rural and semi-rural than in urban areas, a concern given the lower capacity of rural health systems.¹⁵¹ Compounding the problem, evidence from rural areas in India and elsewhere in the region increasingly indicates that people are avoiding testing, quarantine, and other COVID-related health measures either due to stigma associated with the disease and/or because they feel they must prioritize income generation over a possible period of quarantine.¹⁵²

¹⁴¹ Disinformation campaigns against Muslims have increased in India during the pandemic, including the fabricated association of Muslims with the spread of COVID-19. Shakuntala Banaji and Ram Bhat, "Disinformation against Indian Muslims during the COVID-19 pandemic." LSE. September 24, 2020. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2020/09/24/disinformation-against-indian-muslims-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

¹⁴² Acaps, *Migrant vulnerability in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal*, October 2020: 3. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20201012_acaps_thematic_series_on_migrant_vulnerability_in_south_asia_0.pdf

¹⁴³ Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Manoj Chaurasia, "India racked by greatest exodus since partition due to coronavirus," *The Guardian*, March 30, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/india-wracked-by-greatest-exodus-since-partition-due-to-coronavirus>

¹⁴⁴ UNB Dhaka, "Face corona 'war' with compassion," *The Independent*. March 26, 2020. <http://www.theindependentbd.com/home/printnews/242490>

¹⁴⁵ Rupert Stone, "COVID-19 in South Asia: Mirror and Catalyst," *Asian Affairs*, 51, (2020):3, 542-568, doi: 10.1080/03068374.2020.1814078 <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2020.1814078>

¹⁴⁶ India evacuated hundreds of thousands of workers who had become stranded abroad due to Covid-19, using naval ships and the national airline. Jeffrey Gettleman and Sameer Yasir, "India Starts Bringing Home Hundreds of Thousands Stranded Amid Coronavirus," *The New York Times*. May 8, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/08/world/asia/india-coronavirus-repatriation.html>

¹⁴⁷ Jean N. Lee et al. "Migration and the Diffusion of COVID-19 in South Asia," *Financial Access Initiative Working Paper*, 2 (2020): 5.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 4.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 4.

¹⁵⁰ <https://covid19.who.int/table> Accessed December 9, 2020.

¹⁵¹ Sonali Acharjee, "The rural surge," *India Today*. September 12, 2020. <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20200921-the-rural-surge-1720878-2020-09-12>

¹⁵² Karan Deep Singh and Jeffrey Gettleman, "'Rural Surge' Propels India Toward More Covid-19 Infections Than U.S.," *The New York Times*. October 8, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/08/world/asia/india-covid-19-rural.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>

Many South Asian migrants have also remained in destination areas during the pandemic, including those working in essential positions and those who were stranded due to mobility and legal restrictions. Those in essential positions, including South Asians working in Malaysian PPE factories and those building the infrastructure for the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, have been able to retain their jobs during this time of economic insecurity and to continue sending remittances home. However, some have reported salary reductions and increasingly difficult working conditions, including excessive hours and overcrowded dormitories despite COVID-19 risk.¹⁵³ For instance, in Qatar, where the government has introduced wage protections¹⁵⁴ and other emergency measures to support migrant workers during the pandemic, migrants have remained vulnerable to non-payment of wages because the system that binds them to a single employer makes reporting labor violations difficult, as they may fear reprisal from the employer who also sponsors their work visa.¹⁵⁵

Refugees have also faced more difficult conditions in the context of COVID-19. Bangladesh, which hosts more than one million refugees from Myanmar, has used COVID-19 to justify pushing Rohingya migrants back to sea.¹⁵⁶ For those in refugee camps, COVID-19 containment measures coupled with damage caused by the monsoon, have made it difficult to meet their basic needs, including shelter and bathing; increased economic vulnerability; and contributed to feelings of insecurity.¹⁵⁷ Gender-based violence, including child, early, and forced marriage, has been increasing amid these added pressures, while movement and access restrictions limit the ability of case managers to operate in the camps and to provide gender-responsive protection and assistance.¹⁵⁸

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

The dominant flow of migrants in Central Asia is from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan into Russia. At the outset of the pandemic, between 2.7 and 4.2 million Central Asian labor migrants resided in Russia.¹⁵⁹ The other key destination for Central Asian migrants is Kazakhstan, with data indicating that 3.7 million of the 5.5 million migrants in Central Asia (excluding the Russian Federation) are in Kazakhstan; of these, 63 percent are from Central and South Asia.¹⁶⁰ Whereas the gender balance of migrants is largely equal across the sub-region, there are country variations with international migration from Tajikistan, for example, being predominantly male (see case study on Tajikistan for more on the gendered dynamics of migration). Labor migration is also gendered in terms of labor market insertion, with women more likely to work in the service industry and men in construction.

¹⁵³ Shashank Bengali, "These gloves help fight COVID-19. But they're made in sweatshop conditions," *Los Angeles Times*, September 22, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-09-22/covid-19-malaysia-gloves-forced-labor>; Human Rights Watch, "Qatar: Little Progress on Protecting Migrant Workers," August 24, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/24/qatar-little-progress-protecting-migrant-workers>

¹⁵⁴ "Qatar to pay workers in quarantine full salaries," *Al Jazeera*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/01/qatar-to-pay-workers-in-quarantine-full-salaries/>

¹⁵⁵ Faras Ghani, "How coronavirus shutdown affected Qatar's migrant workers," *Al Jazeera*, June 11, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/6/11/how-coronavirus-shutdown-affected-qatars-migrant-workers>

¹⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch, *Malaysia: Allow Rohingya Refugees Ashore*, 18 April 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/18/malaysia-allow-rohingya-refugees-ashore#>

¹⁵⁷ Acaps, *4 Months of COVID-19 programming restrictions: A summary of consultations detailing Rohingya experiences in the camps*, August 2020:1, https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20200825_covid_19_explained_edition_8.pdf

¹⁵⁸ Acaps, *Rohingya Response: Impact of COVID-19 on gender programming*, June 2020: 2, https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20200608_acaps_coxs_bazar_analysis_hub_rohingya_response_covid19_and_gender_0.pdf

¹⁵⁹ OECD, *COVID-19 crisis response in central Asia*, OECD, June 4, 2020, <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-response-in-central-asia-5305f172/#section-d1e1010>

¹⁶⁰ UNDESA, *International Migrant Stock 2019*, <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates19.asp>

Internal migration is also significant in the region with internal migrants making up 12.7 percent of migrants in the Kyrgyz Republic, 12.5 percent of migrants in Tajikistan, and 9.3 percent of migrants in Kazakhstan.¹⁶¹ Environmentally induced migration is considered a significant type of internal migration, driven by a mix of industrial legacies of the former Soviet Union such as contaminated land and pollution and the floods and landslides that result from melting mountain glaciers and earthquakes (see case study on Kyrgyzstan for more on internal migration and the intersection with climate change).¹⁶² Where outmigration has long been associated with the drying up of the Aral Sea, climate change is exacerbating degradation of biodiversity and ecosystems, detrimentally impacting the water and agricultural resources on which rural economies rely.¹⁶³

Migration in the sub-region sits on a spectrum from voluntary to non-voluntary migration, with people migrating voluntarily to seek new opportunities and others being tricked, coerced, or forced to move. The region is also home to more than 100,000 stateless persons.¹⁶⁴ Tajikistan hosts the largest number of refugees of any country in Central Asia, with more than 5,000 refugees, largely from Afghanistan. Those with a precarious status may face difficulties accessing accurate information about COVID-19 and may live in conditions that increase the risk of trafficking in persons which is primarily associated with forced labor and sexual exploitation in Kazakhstan and forced labor in the cotton harvest in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.¹⁶⁵ As discussed in the Gender section above, the context of COVID-19 has increased the conditions in which trafficking in persons can thrive. In particular, the Central Asian countries face the triple threat of lost migration remittances, lost employment at home, and lost migration opportunities.

Of the five countries in the region, the Kyrgyz Republic has the highest rate of COVID-19 with 11,651 cases per million and 200 deaths per million (as of 9 December 2020).¹⁶⁶

While migration itself is predominantly regular due to visa-free regimes, many labor migrants in Kazakhstan and Russia work without official registration. In March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian Federation closed all non-essential business, suspended all international air travel, and effectively closed its borders.¹⁶⁷ This resulted in millions of migrant workers losing their jobs; women were among the first to suffer the consequences due their heavy employment in the service sector and as cleaners, which were the first jobs to go (see Tajikistan case study).¹⁶⁸ Without employment, migrant workers could not cover the costs of rent and work permits, and border closures simultaneously made returning home impossible (see Tajikistan case study). Hundreds of workers ended up stranded at Russian airports for weeks, with reports of migrants going on hunger strikes and riot police being deployed to remove

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Gemenne, F., and Reuchlin, P., *Central Asia, Forced Migration Review*, March 2008, <https://www.fmreview.org/climatechange/gemenne-reuchlin>; ADB, *Climate change and migration in Asia and the Pacific*, Manila: ADB, 2011, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/7C240AE3C0B2EE0949257830001BB23B-Full_Report.pdf

¹⁶³ Asian Development Bank, "Climate Change and Migration in Asia and the Pacific." Manila, 2011, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/7C240AE3C0B2EE0949257830001BB23B-Full_Report.pdf

¹⁶⁴ UNHCR, *The 2019–2021 Regional Strategy for Central Asia: Addendum—in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic*. 2020. https://www.unhcr.org/centralasia/wp-content/uploads/sites/75/2020/09/UNHCR-CA_Strategy-2020-screen.pdf

¹⁶⁵ UNODC. 2018. *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons*, Herndon: UNODC, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GLOTIP_2018_BOOK_web_small.pdf

¹⁶⁶ World Health Organization Coronavirus Disease Dashboard (COVID-19), https://covid19.who.int/?gclid=CjwKCAjwiaX8BRBZEiwAQOxGxwLxkV8Jn59OavZMrXfiYq8F5K_Pxu629bW84WPcxjYqMEbVOu8b0xoChEwQAvD_BwE

¹⁶⁷ The Diplomat, "Coronavirus exposes Central Asian Migrants' vulnerability." April 10, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/coronavirus-exposes-central-asian-migrants-vulnerability/>

¹⁶⁸ Open Democracy, "Russia's labor migrants are caught between poverty and a pandemic." May 7, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-labour-migrants-covid19/>

migrants from planes forcibly as borders closed and flights were cancelled.¹⁶⁹ For those who remained, overcrowded accommodation and lack of access to mobility passes (needed for moving around and only accessible to those with registered employment), led to COVID-19 outbreaks among migrant communities.¹⁷⁰ As many of the workers had been informally employed, they could not claim the compensation the government offered for lost employment, although the compensation itself was limited and did not cover the loss of earnings for those who could claim it.¹⁷¹ While the Russian Government announced that migrants would have equal access to medical assistance should they need it, reports indicated multiple incidents of discrimination faced by migrants seeking health care.¹⁷²

For families of migrants at home, international remittances sent by migrant workers dried up. In the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan, remittances comprise a significant part of national GDP at 29.2 percent and 28.2 percent, respectively.¹⁷³ The remittances from Russia to Tajikistan sent in March 2020 were half those sent in March 2019.¹⁷⁴ Coupled with the economic downturn (in Tajikistan, the economic damage to date is reported at US\$650 million)¹⁷⁵ and the rising cost of food in countries of origin, migrant families are struggling to cover their basic needs (see Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan case studies). This is in addition to reports that families have had to send money to their relatives in lockdown in Moscow.¹⁷⁶ International and non-governmental organization (NGOs) including the IOM have responded to the pandemic's impact on migrants and their families by helping migrants to return home; they have also distributed food, hygiene, and protection bundles.¹⁷⁷ Concerns exist, however, that not only will the domestic market be unable to provide work for returning migrants, but that their return will further pressure already strained social and health systems.¹⁷⁸

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRATION IN THE PACIFIC

Presently, the dominant directions of migration in the region are from island states to Australia and New Zealand, where migrant worker schemes provide seasonal income. Whereas the gender composition of this migration has predominantly skewed toward men aged 20–39 years, shifts toward migration into hospitality and care sectors have increased women's migration.¹⁷⁹ These migration schemes have ceased

¹⁶⁹ The Diplomat, "Coronavirus exposes Central Asian Migrants' vulnerability." April 10, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/coronavirus-exposes-central-asian-migrants-vulnerability/>; AFEW, *Migrants in need. COVID-19 and the impact on labor migrants' health, income, food and travel*. August 3, 2020, <http://afew.org/headlines/migrants-in-need-covid-19-and-the-impact-on-labor-migrants-health-income-food-and-travel/>

¹⁷⁰ Open Democracy, "Russia's labor migrants are caught between poverty and a pandemic." May 7, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-labour-migrants-covid19/>. Also see: International Partnership for Human Rights, "Human Rights Impact Assessment of the COVID-19 Response in Russia". 2020, <https://www.iphronline.org/human-rights-impact-assessment-of-the-covid-19-response-in-russia.html>

¹⁷¹ AFEW, "Migrants in need. COVID-19 and the impact on labor migrants' health, income, food and travel." August 3, 2020, <http://afew.org/headlines/migrants-in-need-covid-19-and-the-impact-on-labor-migrants-health-income-food-and-travel/>

¹⁷² Ibid; Open Democracy, "Russia's labor migrants are caught between poverty and a pandemic" May 7, 2020, www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-labour-migrants-covid19/; see also <https://www.interfax.ru/moscow/706926>

¹⁷³ World Bank, "Migration and Remittances Data. Remittance inflows." 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/migrationremittancesdiasporaissues/brief/migration-remittances-data>

¹⁷⁴ OECD, "COVID-19 crisis response in central Asia." June 4, 2020, <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-response-in-central-asia-5305f172/#section-d1e1010>

¹⁷⁵ Reuters, "Tajikistan says migrants returning from Russia, Kazakhstan." April 17, 2020, <https://in.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-tajikistan-economy-id1N8N2C52DK>

¹⁷⁶ Bloomberg Quint, "Virus leaves thousands of migrant workers stranded in Russia." August 15, 2020, <https://www.bloombergquint.com/global-economics/virus-leaves-thousands-of-migrant-workers-stranded-in-russia>

¹⁷⁷ AFEW, "Migrants in need. COVID-19 and the impact on labor migrants' health, income, food and travel." August 3, 2020, <http://afew.org/headlines/migrants-in-need-covid-19-and-the-impact-on-labor-migrants-health-income-food-and-travel/>

¹⁷⁸ OECD, *COVID-19 crisis response in central Asia*

¹⁷⁹ ILO, "Labour Mobility in Pacific Island Countries." November 2019, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-suva/documents/publication/wcms_712549.pdf

due to COVID-19, and Pacific Islanders approved to travel have been put on hold, although visas of workers already in those countries have been extended. Meanwhile, Fiji has evacuated some of its nationals who were working overseas when the borders were closed.¹⁸⁰ Migration pathways also exist within and between countries in the region, most notably internal migration from remote outer islands to capitals and to Fiji from smaller island states, such as Kiribati, Solomon Islands, and Tonga. This is particularly the case for young people seeking education or pursuing livelihoods beyond agriculture and fishing. (See case study on Pacific intra-regional migration.)

The Pacific countries have long been highly dependent on migrant remittances; for example, they account for 17.7 and 40 percent, respectively, of Samoan and Tongan GDP.¹⁸¹ Coupled with the collapse of the tourist industry, declining remittances are increasing economic hardship in the region.

By far the largest economic impact of COVID-19 in the Pacific has been the loss of tourist income. Fiji, where 40 percent of the economy is related to tourism,¹⁸² is expecting an economic contraction of more than 20 percent in 2020.¹⁸³ In Fiji 279 hotels have closed and in July, analysts predicted that 500 businesses may go bankrupt.¹⁸⁴ Those countries least dependent on tourism are faring better; for example, Tuvalu, with a virtually non-existent tourist industry, is anticipated to register the region's only positive economic growth for the year (see case study on Tuvalu for more detail on the economy and the impact of COVID-19 on internal migration).¹⁸⁵ Migration has been an important safety valve for the region, relieving some of the pressures of insufficient employment opportunities for the region's population. As migration pathways have been closed, at least temporarily, the pressures on the economy are increasing.¹⁸⁶

However, the Pacific Islands have mainly fared well in terms of COVID-19 infections. Governments in the region have closed their borders and imposed restrictions on internal migration. Only the two largest countries have had significant outbreaks, Papua New Guinea (684 cases) and Fiji (44 cases), and the rest remain largely COVID-free. The fragile nature of health systems in most countries makes governments wary of opening borders.

Several countries are seeing spontaneous and/or government-sponsored returns to rural areas and outlying islands and toward traditional sources of livelihood that had previously lost importance. While subsistence agriculture has long been a resilience strategy used in the Pacific Islands to mitigate the impact of economic downturns, challenges in terms of availability of land, pressure on inshore fisheries, and ability for village-level physical and social infrastructure to cope with the influx of migrants are significant. There

¹⁸⁰ Ackman, M. and Taulealo, T., "COVID-19 and Pacific Labour." *The Interpreter*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/covid-19-and-pacific-labour>. Concern exists in both Australia and New Zealand about the impact of losing Pacific agricultural workers on food security. Government of Australia, *Joint Media Release with the Hon Michael McCormack and the Hon Allan Tudge MP – Supporting the Agricultural Workforce during COVID-19*, April 4, 2020, <https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/davidlittleproud/Pages/supporting-agriculture-workforce-covid-19.aspx> <https://www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Centre/Speeches/Prime-Minister-Voreqe-Bainimarama%E2%80%99s-Speech-On-COVI>

¹⁸¹ World Bank, database on remittances, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TR.F.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS>

¹⁸² Tan, Y., "Cyclone Harold and coronavirus: Pacific Islands face battle on two fronts." *BBC News*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52268119>

¹⁸³ Kalinga Seneviratne, "Fiji's tourism workers turn to farming and fishing as COVID-19 ravages the industry." *IDN-Depth News*. 29 September 2020. <https://www.indepthnews.net/index.php/sustainability/health-well-being/3878-fiji-s-tourism-workers-turn-to-farming-and-fishing-as-covid-19-ravages-the-industry>

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Asia Development Bank, *Developing Asia' Economic Outlook*, September 2020, <https://www.adb.org/what-we-do/economic-forecasts/september-2020>

¹⁸⁶ Jane McAdam and Jonathan Pryke. *Climate Change, Disasters and Mobility: A Roadmap for Australian Action*. Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law. October 2020. https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/Policy_brief%2010_Climate_Change.pdf

have also been reports about the use of chemicals in farming to boost yields; however this comes at the cost of loss of organic certification that had increased rural income potential in recent years.

In addition to ongoing economic migration drivers, the Pacific region faces environmental pressures, particularly stemming from climate change. The Pacific is exposed both to sudden-onset disasters such as tropical cyclones, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions and to long-term effects, such as increased storm surges, ocean acidification, and changes to precipitation. Indeed, Vanuatu and Tonga are rated one and two on the global Disaster Risk Index.¹⁸⁷ Low-elevation atoll nations such as Kiribati and Tuvalu are particularly vulnerable to the effects of sea level rise. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimates that at least 50,000 Pacific Islanders risk displacement every year by natural disasters.¹⁸⁸

In April 2020, when Cyclone Harold hit Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu, all four countries had prohibited international flights and imposed curfews in response to COVID-19. While people were allowed to evacuate to shelters, social distancing in the evacuation sites proved to be impossible. International aid workers were not allowed to enter Tonga, the hardest-hit country, for fear of them importing the virus. Overcrowded conditions and difficulties for women to access latrines were accompanied by reports of increased sexual and gender-based violence.¹⁸⁹

More Pacific Islanders are likely to be compelled to move in the future because of the effects of climate change. Evidence suggests that such movements will follow traditional paths of economic migration and that men will often be the first to migrate, meaning that resilience to pandemics that close borders will be an important element in future livelihood security.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ “Vanuatu and Tonga Top the World for Disaster Risk.” Radio New Zealand, February 2019, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/383558/vanuatu-and-tonga-top-the-world-for-disaster-risk#:~:text=Vanuatu%20has%20been%20identified%20as,for%202018%20ranked%20172%20countries.&text=The%20report%20by%20German%20researchers.flooding%20and%20sea%20level%20rise>.

¹⁸⁸ Du Parc, E. and Bolo Speith, N., “Tropical Cyclone Harold and COVID-19: A Double Blow to the Pacific Islands.” IDMC, April 2020, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/expert-opinion/tropical-cyclone-harold-and-covid-19-a-double-blow-to-the-pacific-islands>

¹⁸⁹ Pacific Humanitarian Team Update, April 16, 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/PHT%20Sitrep%209_TC%20Harold_21042020.pdf

¹⁹⁰ UN University Environment and Human Security, “How does climate change affect migration in the Pacific?”

https://unfccc.int/files/science/workstreams/research/application/pdf/part2_unu-ehs_oakes_vandergeest_poster.pdf; Mcleod, E. et al., “Raising the voices of Pacific Island women to inform climate adaptation policies.” *Marine Policy* 93, 178–185, July 2018.

KEY FINDINGS

The following table highlights the key impacts, responses, and resilience measures that emerge from the foregoing analysis.

TABLE 1: IMPACT, RESPONSES AND PATTERNS OF RESILIENCE			
DIMENSION OF MIGRANT RESILIENCE	PANDEMIC IMPACTS	MIGRANT RESPONSES	EXISTING MEASURES TO ENHANCE RESILIENCE
Governance/Policies/ Human Rights	<p>Mobility restrictions, including border closures, have been imposed.</p> <p>Migrant workers, particularly women, have been disproportionately affected by job losses.</p> <p>Migrants have been deported, including some whose legal work visas were canceled in the wake of COVID-related business closures.</p> <p>Policies and laws providing social and labor protections have largely excluded migrants, as have many aid packages.</p> <p>Xenophobia and discrimination have increased.</p> <p>Migrant savings are being depleted, remittances have declined, and more debt is being incurred.</p>	<p>Migrants have been stranded without incomes in destination countries.</p> <p>Migrants have returned to sending countries.</p> <p>In countries where xenophobia and discrimination have targeted specific migrant groups, return migration of these groups has been particularly pronounced.</p> <p>As migrants face severe economic pressure, they are taking on jobs under more precarious working conditions, including re-migration through irregular channels.</p>	<p>Efforts to strengthen migrants' resilience have occurred at the local level through local government and CSOs that understand community needs and have the trust of migrants.</p> <p>Australia, Bahrain, Hong Kong, New Zealand, and other countries have extended the work permits of migrants in country during the pandemic.</p> <p>South Korea has loosened regulations on employment for temporary migrants already in the country.</p> <p>In the Philippines, the government is providing training and upskilling to some returned migrants in preparation for re-migration after the pandemic. China has launched an e-learning skills development program that includes migrant workers.</p> <p>Governments see the Global Compact on Migration as an important means of strengthening regional and international cooperation.</p>
Health	<p>Because of employment types and living conditions, migrants have been more exposed to the virus.</p> <p>Migrants are less able to access health and social protections available to citizens and may not be able to access insurance</p>	<p>Migrants who manifest COVID-19 symptoms cannot receive timely testing.</p> <p>Due to exclusionary COVID-19 responses, migrants have to pay out of pocket for testing.</p>	<p>In Thailand, migrant workers from nearby Mekong countries are not excluded from COVID-19 testing and treatment.</p> <p>Gradual inclusion of migrants in COVID-19 testing and treatment is occurring.</p>

TABLE 1: IMPACT, RESPONSES AND PATTERNS OF RESILIENCE

DIMENSION OF MIGRANT RESILIENCE	PANDEMIC IMPACTS	MIGRANT RESPONSES	EXISTING MEASURES TO ENHANCE RESILIENCE
	<p>entitlement when they migrate.</p> <p>Migrants are reluctant to turn to health services for non-COVID-related issues.</p> <p>Migrants experience mental stress, financial hardship, and food insecurity, which can affect physical health.</p>	<p>Migrants are reluctant to turn to health services for non-COVID-19-related health issues.</p>	<p>The AB-PMJAY use of e-cards for insurance portability has been helpful.</p> <p>Telemedicine offers an alternative to primary care visits.</p> <p>Some assistance is provided to alleviate immediate impacts, especially to refugees and IDPs.</p>
Gender	<p>Women migrants are more likely than men to lose their jobs.</p> <p>Migrant women more likely to be undocumented and work in the informal sector, meaning unemployment compounded by lack of access to labor rights protection and social protection.</p> <p>Economies at the macro and micro level are impacted by reduced remittances and disruption to the global care chain, which is predominantly occupied by women.</p> <p>Violence against women, especially domestic violence, is increasing and includes violence in the workplace, at border sites, and on return.</p> <p>Availability of physical services is reduced, including health care.</p> <p>Young women and girls are exposed to greater risk of child marriage, forced marriage and human trafficking.</p> <p>Hardships are enhanced for women refugees.</p>	<p>Losing formal employment may lead migrant women into informal employment.</p> <p>Returning through irregular channels.</p> <p>Resuming unpaid domestic and care duties in their homes of origin.</p> <p>Experiencing economic and physical violence without support or services.</p> <p>Marrying their children, mainly girls, as coping mechanisms.</p>	<p>Women migrants in migrant families and displaced women strengthen established networks to undertake COVID-19 prevention and response interventions.</p> <p>Publication of tips for employers of domestic workers during the pandemic.</p> <p>Governments increasingly providing relief measures for informal workers.</p> <p>Shelter services and alternative accommodation and income generation opportunities provided for migrant women experiencing violence.</p> <p>Increasing interventions targeted at preventing child marriage.</p> <p>Establishing and strengthening mechanisms focused on identifying women's and girls' vulnerability to trafficking in persons during the pandemic.</p>

TABLE 1: IMPACT, RESPONSES AND PATTERNS OF RESILIENCE			
DIMENSION OF MIGRANT RESILIENCE	PANDEMIC IMPACTS	MIGRANT RESPONSES	EXISTING MEASURES TO ENHANCE RESILIENCE
Environment	<p>Job losses associated with COVID-19 force migrants back to their rural homes.</p> <p>Migrants find themselves with reduced incomes in cramped living conditions</p> <p>Migrants are stranded at borders.</p> <p>Natural disasters such as cyclones compound COVID-19 isolation impacts.</p> <p>Environmental drivers of migration preclude return options.</p> <p>Revised legislation geared to “building back faster” threatens shortcuts in project approval that may affect that environment and displace affected people.</p> <p>Reduced monitoring of poaching and illegal logging.</p>	<p>Competition for land and natural resources including fisheries.</p> <p>Pressure on local environmental resources.</p> <p>Forced to forego social distancing and other COVID-19 protection measures.</p> <p>Migrants remain in host locations despite loss of income.</p> <p>Civil society mobilization against environmentally regressive legislation.</p>	<p>Access to land and natural resources maintained in home villages through secure formal tenure or recognition of customary tenure.</p> <p>Community forestry and other collective support measures.</p> <p>Provision of common living space in migrant dormitories.</p> <p>Some returned migrants taking up subsistence and small-scale agriculture.</p> <p>Options floated for building back better, not faster.</p>

So what does this mean for policy? Migrants’ resilience has been weakened as a result of the ‘triple shocks’ brought about by COVID-19: the health impacts of the pandemic itself, measures undertaken to prevent the spread of the virus, and the global recession. While most governments in the region assume that both international and domestic migration will be restored when the pandemic comes to an end, in the immediate term, migrants are presently in precarious positions and need assistance to survive. Migrants who have lost their jobs or had their incomes reduced and who remain in their countries of destination need access to health care and to relief funds made available to nationals. Those at risk of trafficking and gender-based violence need access to support services. Migrants who have returned to their countries of origin are also in need of relief funds but also support to re-establish their livelihoods, including opportunities to retrain and acquire new skills which will help them either migrate again when conditions permit or to find jobs in their home countries. In this context, this research has shown the key roles played by local civil society organizations in responding to needs of migrants in particularly vulnerable situations. Diaspora groups and individual migrants overseas continue to play important roles in supporting the survival of returned or stranded migrants. At a time when traditional humanitarian actors face difficulties in traveling, supporting local civil society organizations could be a way of ensuring the survival of migrant families facing these unprecedented shocks.

While restoration of migration is seen as key to global economic recovery,¹⁹¹ and indeed international migration has historically been essential to global development and prosperity,¹⁹² the re-establishment of existing migration corridors is likely to take some time. The past decade has witnessed the growing ‘securitization’ of border; COVID-19 has added a new element of health security to both border control and immigration policies and it is likely that governments will re-open their borders cautiously and will be even more vigilant in border management. This is likely to mean fewer and slower regular migration channels which in turn may lead migrants to use irregular means of entry.

But in spite of these uncertainties about how soon – and how rapidly international migration channels will be restored, the basic fact remains that developed countries need migrants to supplement their work force – particularly in agriculture, services and manufacturing. And the countries of origin need migration to mitigate the pressures of population growth (and particularly the youth bulge) on economies that cannot provide jobs for all of those in need of livelihoods. The particular political dynamics that gave rise to the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) are still in play. Stronger international cooperation is needed to create more pathways for regular migration, to ensure more effective and humane border control policies and to ensure that the rights of migrants are upheld.

¹⁹¹ Indeed, that was the theme of the 2020 Intergovernmental Migration Dialogue organized by the International Organization for Migration

¹⁹² Cite McKinsey report – 3% of world’s population, responsible for 10% of global GDP. Beth to track down.

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ANNEX I: SOUTH ASIA CASE STUDY- INDIA AND NEPAL



Photo Credit: Amal KS NPR/Hindustan Times

IMPACT OF INDIA'S LOCKDOWN ON INTERNAL MIGRANTS AND CROSS- BORDER MIGRANTS FROM NEPAL A CASE STUDY ON INDIA AND NEPAL

Overview

This case study explores the impacts of India's lockdown on Indian internal migrants and Nepali cross-border migrants, including the ways in which policies—both those in place before the lockdown and those issued in the context of COVID-19—have affected migrants' resilience to shocks. COVID-19 has exposed the precarity with which migrants live in India and the weaknesses in the legal and policy frameworks meant to protect them. The pandemic has also heightened discrimination toward migrants, as fears that migrants may be spreading COVID-19 through their movement has led to increased stigmatization of this group in both India and Nepal.

Despite the public outcry that arose in India from the sight of millions of migrants taking to the streets for long and dangerous walks home and the recognition that insufficient protection drove this return migration, much of the support provided to migrants over the course of the pandemic has been piecemeal.

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As India now attempts to rebuild its economy in the wake of COVID-19, the Government's focus has been on supporting and protecting business, including through the weakening of established labor protections. With migrant families still reeling from the shock of job losses and lost remittances, many are already returning to India's cities to take up work under conditions of even greater precarity.

Internal migration in India

The scale of internal migration in India is vast, with an estimated 100 million internal migrants in a population of 1.3 billion.¹ Migrant workers account for 17 to 29 percent of India's total workforce,² with agriculture and construction absorbing most migrant labor.³ Migrant workers are overwhelmingly male; however, the share of female labor migrants has been increasing since 2000.⁴ The largest numbers of migrants originate in the less developed states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, while wealthier states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Delhi receive the most migrants,⁵ with urban districts receiving the highest numbers of migrants.⁶

Several factors drive labor migration within India: the degradation of natural resources, limited access to land and resources, and unemployment push migrants from rural areas, while higher wages and better employment opportunities draw migrants toward cities.⁷ Prior to COVID-19, labor migration had been accelerating in India for two decades in tandem with India's rapid economic growth,⁸ but the nationwide lockdown in March 2020 abruptly reversed this trend, with tens of millions of migrants returning to rural sending areas.

Nepal-India cross-border migration

The border between Nepal and India is open, and citizens of both countries can cross freely.⁹ Because migrant border crossings are not recorded, data on the number of Nepali workers in India are imprecise, although estimates range from a few hundred thousand to a few million.¹⁰ Nepalis are legally allowed to

¹ Deshingkar and Akhter's widely accepted estimate of 100 million migrants was first suggested in their 2009 UNDP working paper. Priya Deshingkar and Shaheen Akter, *Migration and Human Development in India* (UNDP, 2009), http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdrp_2009_13.pdf. Nayyar and Kim, using India Human Development Survey (IHDS) data put the number of internal circular migrants at 200 million in 2011-12. Gaurav Nayyar and Kyoung Yang Kim, "India's Internal Labor Migration Paradox: The Statistical and the Real," (Policy Research Working Paper, No. 8356, World Bank, 2018), <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/29416>. The Government of India estimates for inter-state migrants are as high as 60 million and inter-district migrants as high as 80 million. Government of India, "India on the move and churning: New evidence," Chapter 12 in *Economic Survey*, Ministry of Finance (2017), 265. <https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/budget2017-2018/es2016-17/echap12.pdf>

² Government of India, "India on the move and churning," 265.

³ Habitat for Humanity, *Leaving the City Behind: A Rapid Assessment with Migrant Workers in Maharashtra*, 2020; Chennai: Terwilliger Center for Innovation in Shelter, 4, https://www.habitat.org/sites/default/files/documents/Leaving-the-City-Behind_Rapid-assessment-with-migrant-workers-Maharashtra.pdf.

⁴ Government of India, "India on the Move," 265.

⁵ *Ibid*, 268.

⁶ *Ibid*, 269-70.

⁷ Soumya Chattopadhyay and Srijan Das, "Problems of Migrant Workers in India: A COVID-19 Perspective." *Multidimension Magazine*, May 13, 2020. <https://multidimensionmagazine.com/2020/05/13/problems-of-migrant-workers-in-india-a-covid-19-perspective/>

⁸ Government of India, "India on the Move," 264.

⁹ Those crossing the border are not required to produce identification to cross, although they may be subject to interrogation from security personnel, customs officers, or those working to combat trafficking, and documentation may be requested at that time. Sanjay Sharma and Deepak Thapa, "Taken for Granted: Nepali Migration to India." Working paper 3, 2013; Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility, 10, <https://www.ceslam.org/books-and-reports/151561115958>

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 2.

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work in India and can, in principle, avail themselves of the same privileges as Indian citizens with the exception of voting rights.¹¹ The ease of cross-border movement to India makes migration to India relatively inexpensive when compared with migration from Nepal to Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCCs) or Malaysia,¹² and as a result Nepali migrants of lower socioeconomic status generally use the Nepal-India corridor.¹³ Many of these migrants are seasonal workers from rural areas in Nepal's West who move to India to work during the agricultural off-season in Nepal. Most of these migrants participate in low-skilled work in India's informal economy, with no job security and few protections. These migrants' families are highly dependent on their remittances: 85 percent of remittances from India are spent by households on daily consumption, compared with 50 percent of remittances from GCC countries and Malaysia.¹⁴ The precarity of these migrants' situations is evident in the fact that 86 percent of cross-border migrants who return to Nepal after migrating to India continue to work in the informal economy in Nepal (compared with 31.2 percent of Nepali migrants returning from overseas destinations).¹⁵ This implies that cross-border migration is, for many of these migrants, an essential survival strategy rather than a path toward upward mobility.

Transit through the Nepal-India border

Migrants also use the Nepal-India migration corridor to circumvent the formal processes and regulations that the Government of Nepal has implemented for safe migration overseas. For example, Nepali law bans citizens from working in domestic service in GCC countries, but unscrupulous agents may facilitate the cross-border migration of Nepali women to India where they "begin" their migration journey to the Middle East. Nepali migrant women who cross into India on their own can be targeted by traffickers posing as recruitment agencies who may lie to them about the work they will be doing at the destination, or who may sell them to a third party.¹⁶ Because Nepali law requires that migrants depart from a Nepali airport and possess all required Department of Foreign Employment documentation, transiting through India puts migrants at risk and limits their access to protections and justice in both the destination country and in Nepal.¹⁷ Transiting through India means that these migrants are not documented by the Nepali Government when they arrive for work in GCC countries; as a result, these women are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, including confiscation of passport, nonpayment or partial payment of wages, excessive working hours, and physical and sexual abuse.¹⁸ The Kafala system, which is in place in a number of GCC countries, heightens this vulnerability because it confers a migrant's legal status through her

¹¹ These rights are granted under the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the Government of India and the Government of Nepal. *Ibid.*, 4.

¹² Migration from Nepal to India costs approximately \$83, compared with a cost of \$1,333 for migration from Nepal to the Middle East. Maheshwor Shrestha, "Push and Pull: A Study of International Migration from Nepal." Unpublished manuscript, April 2016, 9–10, <http://economics.mit.edu/files/11477>

¹³ Sharma and Thapa, "Taken for Granted," 10.

¹⁴ Acaps, Migrant Vulnerability in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal, Thematic Series: Migration. October 2020, 8. https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/products/files/20201012_acaps_thematic_series_on_migrant_vulnerability_in_south_asia_0.pdf

¹⁵ Government of Nepal Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, Nepal Labour Migration Report 2020. 2020; Kathmandu: Government of Nepal, 43.

¹⁶ Katie McQue, "How Nepal's Migration Ban Traps Female 'Modern Day Slaves' in the Gulf." *The Guardian*, February 14, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/feb/14/how-nepals-migration-ban-traps-female-modern-day-slaves-in-the-gulf>

¹⁷ Sharma and Thapa, "Taken for Granted," 13–14.

¹⁸ McQue, "Nepal's Migration Ban."

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employer: a migrant who attempts to escape an abusive employer is therefore at risk of losing her status and being criminalized.¹⁹

The impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on migrant workers in India

On March 25, the Indian Government launched a full national lockdown to stem the spread of COVID-19. With only four hours' notice, all trains, buses, and taxis were halted, and 1.3 billion citizens and residents were ordered to stay at home. The Government of India invoked the Disaster Management Act of 2005 to impose the lockdown, giving the Central Government broad authority to direct states to implement pandemic response.²⁰ The speed with which the lockdown was implemented, however, meant that state governments had little time to prepare, and confusion about the restrictions was widespread among implementing authorities and the populace.²¹ Food outlets, banks, medical facilities, gas stations, and other essential services were excluded from the lockdown, yet there were reports of police shutting down grocery stores²² and forcing journalists and medical personnel (both considered essential personnel) off the street.²³ Non-governmental organizations and others providing support at the local level also had little time to prepare. The flood of people who attempted to return home in these circumstances made it clear that the lockdown policies did not adequately account for the socioeconomic circumstances of many people in India, where 95 percent of the workforce is informal (with little or no social protection)²⁴ and where many people live in situations where social distancing is impossible.

Migrant workers in India's cities found themselves in particularly dire circumstances. They were among the first to lose their jobs as businesses were shuttered, and most did not have enough savings to sustain themselves for the three-week lockdown period (which was subsequently extended three times). Construction workers and others who lived and ate at their worksites found themselves without shelter or food as lockdowns began. With the lockdown declared, migrants faced a choice between remaining in the city and relying on authorities to meet their basic needs or undertaking a long and dangerous journey back home (with the risk of contracting COVID-19 *en route* or being arrested for violating the lockdown).²⁵ An estimated 30 million people—including Indian internal migrants and Nepali cross-border migrants—began walking home in these circumstances, many traveling hundreds of miles on foot without sufficient food or water.²⁶

¹⁹ Hari KC (doctoral candidate, Balsillie School of International Affairs, Wilfrid Laurier University), in discussion with the author, November 2020.

²⁰ Jayati Ghosh, "A Critique of the Indian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Journal of Industrial and Business Economics* 2020; 47: 522. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40812-020-00170-x>.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 522.

²² Jeffrey Gettleman and Kai Schultz, "Modi Orders 3-Week Total Lockdown for All 1.3 Billion Indians." *The New York Times*, May 24, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/world/asia/india-coronavirus-lockdown.html>

²³ These essential service providers were exempted from mobility restrictions. Ayan Sharma, "Attacks on Journalists, Migrant Workers Struggling to Go Home: India's Lockdown Is Taking a Toll." *Newslandry*, March 24, 2020. <https://www.newslandry.com/2020/03/24/attacks-on-journalists-migrant-workers-struggling-to-go-home-indias-lockdown-has-worrying-implications>

²⁴ Ghosh, "A Critique," 522.

²⁵ Wesley Wu-Yi Koo and Xina Li, "Food Security in a Pandemic: Lessons from India's Lockdown." *INSEAD Knowledge*, October 19, 2020. <https://knowledge.insead.edu/strategy/food-security-in-a-pandemic-lessons-from-indias-lockdown-15401>

²⁶ Nadia Nooreydzan, "The Long Walk Home." *Delayed Gratification* April–June 2020; 39: 97. <https://www.slow-journalism.com/stories/the-long-walk-home>

On March 26th, the Government announced Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY), a \$22 billion financial stimulus package to cushion the Indian economy and mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the poor and vulnerable, including migrant workers. The package included food aid, direct cash transfers, and livelihood support and was built upon 12 existing social protection schemes, including the Public Distribution System (PDS), which provides food subsidies to those below the poverty line.²⁷ However, urban poor households were inadequately covered by PMGKY²⁸ and unorganized workers²⁹ were excluded from the scheme, leaving millions of migrant workers and informal sector employees without emergency support through this mechanism.³⁰ Migrant workers in construction, for instance, could only access PMGKY benefits if they were formally registered and held a Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) card, which, according to Jan Sahas, excluded approximately 94 percent of workers in that industry.³¹ In addition, many migrants simply did not know about relief available through the various components of PMGKY: rapid assessments by India Migration Now and Dwara Research found that 47 percent of migrant respondents were unaware of such programs as late as mid-April.³² The Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN), which has been tracking and supporting migrants in distress since the start of the lockdown, found that as of May 1st, only 18 percent of migrants in the network had received government food rations.³³ Similarly, policies such as the Ministry of Home Affairs' directive that employers pay workers full wages and that rent not be collected from stranded migrants went unheeded in many cases: SWAN found that only 11 percent of migrants in its network had received pay from their employers during the lockdown.³⁴

Although interstate travel was against lockdown restrictions, several state governments attempted to organize transportation to help migrants return to their home states. Three days into the lockdown, the Government of Uttar Pradesh, the state with the largest number of outmigrants, announced that it would send 1,000 buses to bring migrants home.³⁵ Within hours of the announcement, hundreds of thousands of migrants arrived at Delhi's Anand Vihar bus terminal, but only 70 buses arrived.³⁶ As crowds attempted to scale the buses, police beat migrants with batons, trying to enforce social distancing in the crowd. Many of those who did not secure transport that day continued to walk toward their homes. Where possible, some rode partway on the beds of tightly packed cargo trucks for exorbitant fares, with reports of Nepali

²⁷ Harshita Agrawal et al., "PM Garib Kalyan Yojana: Coverage, Identification and Implementation." Unpublished manuscript, typescript.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁹ "Unorganized worker" was first defined under the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act (UWSSA, 2008) as a home-based worker, self-employed worker, wage worker in the unorganized (informal) sector, and a worker in the organized sector who is not covered by Labor Acts mentioned in Schedule 11 of the Act. Under new Labor Codes that have replaced UWSSA, workers not covered under any dimensions or benefits of the Labor Codes are "unorganized workers." Jose Vattakuzhy, "Unorganized Workers Count Labor Codes for Nothing." Readers' blog, The Times of India, October 11, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/unorganisedworkers/unorganised-workers-count-labour-codes-for-nothing-27009/>

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

³¹ Jan Sahas, *Voices of the Invisible Citizens: A Rapid Assessment on the Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown on Internal Migrant Workers*. 2020; New Delhi: Jan Sahas, 17. <https://respect.international/voices-of-the-invisible-citizens-a-rapid-assessment-of-the-impact-of-covid-19-lockdown-on-internal-migrant-workers/>

³² Habitat for Humanity, *Leaving the City Behind*, 4.

³³ SWAN "32 Days and Counting: COVID-19 Lockdown, Migrant Workers, and the Inadequacy of Welfare Measures in India". 2020, 14. <https://aidindia.org/32-days-and-counting-swan-report-on-migrant-workers-in-lockdown/>

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Lauren Frayer and Sushmita Pathak, "Coronavirus Lockdown Sends Migrant Workers on a Long and Risky Trip Home" National Public Radio, March 31, 2020. Accessed November 16, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/03/31/827647382/coronavirus-lockdown-sends-migrant-workers-on-a-long-and-risky-trip-home>

³⁶ Nooreydzan, "The Long Walk Home," 97.

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migrants being charged even higher rates than Indians.³⁷ Migrants who did have money reported being denied service at roadside establishments out of fear that they could be carrying the virus.³⁸ On the fifth day of lockdown, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued an order to state and union territory administrations to restrict the movement of migrants and to keep them in the nearest shelter for a minimum of 14 days.³⁹

Migrants and Ration Card Portability

The Indian Government's Public Distribution System (PDS) provides access to staples at heavily subsidized prices for those living below the poverty line. The ration card used to access this benefit has traditionally been tied to one's home subdistrict, but in recent years some state governments have made it easier for migrants to access rations in destination areas through intrastate and interstate portability. An analysis of mobility data in the days following the lockdown showed that those who held ration cards with intrastate portability were less likely to move during lockdown, particularly if their ration card had been portable for a significant period of time (e.g., since 2015 rather than 2019) or if it was paired with the biometric *Aadhaar* card, India's digital national ID. Those migrants without portable ration cards or those who did not possess ration cards at all, including cross-border migrants from Nepal, were much more likely to leave destination areas in the wake of the lockdown.

In response to the massive flows of migrants in March and April 2020, the Supreme Court of India asked the Central Government on April 28th to consider expanding the One Nation, One Ration Card plan to cover the entire country so that eligible beneficiaries can access their entitlements anywhere in the country; the plan has since been expanded with a target of March 2021 for full coverage. Migrants will benefit from this national coverage for several reasons. Not only will the system enable migrants to access their grain quota in any location, but it will also enable a household's quota to be divided and accessed in different locations, supporting access for family members who do not travel with the migrant. In addition, the national scheme will help reduce discrimination against beneficiaries, particularly women and those of lower castes, by enabling beneficiaries to easily switch to a new provider.

Sources: Koo et al, 2020; Interview with Prakash Madai, NEEDS Nepal; Mamata Pradhan and Devesh Roy, "'One nation one ration card' can transform lives," *The Hindu BusinessLine*, July 30, 2019.; Government of India Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution, "One Nation One Ration Card – Journey so far and journey ahead," August 19, 2020.

Several states also announced social protection measures in the days following the lockdown order, including increased rations or access to future rations for PDS beneficiaries and economic assistance for ration card holders.⁴⁰ Civil society organizations (CSOs) and charities provided relief to workers as well,

³⁷ Interview with Nepali academic, November 8, 2020.

³⁸ Asad Hashim, "The Ticking Time Bomb of Nepal's Returning Migrant Workers," Aljazeera. June 10, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/06/10/the-ticking-time-bomb-of-nepals-returning-migrant-workers/?gb=true>.

³⁹ Sourya Majumder, "Why a Comprehensive Legal Framework to Protect Migrants' Rights Is Urgently Needed," *The Caravan*, May 3, 2020, <https://caravanmagazine.in/law/why-a-comprehensive-legal-framework-to-protect-migrants-rights-is-urgently-needed>.

⁴⁰ Agrawal et al., "PM Garib Kalyan Yojana," 15–16.

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including through hotlines and networks that they set up quickly around the country to provide assistance. Indian citizens and members of the diaspora also set up giving campaigns to help support these efforts.⁴¹

State governments began setting up shelters and relief camps for migrants, and migrants who were stopped at police checkpoints between states were directed to these shelters.⁴² By mid-April, 600,000 persons were being housed in such shelters, many desperate to be allowed to return home.⁴³ In May, state governments began organizing trains to take migrants back to their homes. However, migrants who were already impoverished were required to pay the train fare, and little water and food was made available; at least 80 deaths were recorded on these trains in May.⁴⁴

Weaknesses in social protection for migrants

The migrant crisis that emerged in the context of COVID-19 has exposed the extent to which laws and policies to protect migrants have inadequately built resilience to shocks, given uneven implementation and lack of oversight. The Inter State Migrant Workmen Act, for example, requires that migrants be documented and registered in their host states and provides for benefits, including equal wages, displacement allowances, provisioning of suitable accommodation, and free medical facilities.⁴⁵ However, poor implementation and enforcement of this Act meant that the government relief package targeting construction workers through their BOCW registration left 94 percent of migrant workers in construction without this relief. Similarly, the Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act 2008 provides for the social security and welfare of unorganized workers and obliges state governments to ensure a provident fund, injury benefits, skill upgrading, and other workers' benefits.⁴⁶ However, the Government did not initiate the process of creating a unified database to assign an Unorganized Workers Identification Number (UWIN) to every worker, a requirement of the Act, until 2018.⁴⁷ And only in the wake of the migrant crisis has the Government resumed discussions on the UWIN card.⁴⁸

As discussed in the earlier box, the PDS system, which is set up to provide rations to those in need, excluded many migrants in destination areas due to portability issues. In addition, many eligible households lack cards due to inclusion errors, with economists estimating that more than 100 million people entitled

⁴¹ See ChaloGive for COVID-19 online giving campaign by U.S. nonprofit Indiaspora, which raised \$1 million in 10 days and partnered with the Indian nonprofit Goonj to provide relief.

⁴² SWAN, "32 Days and Counting," 8.

⁴³ Geeta Pandey, "Coronavirus in India: Desperate Migrant Workers Trapped in Lockdown," BBC News, April 21, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52360757>.

⁴⁴ Anisha Dutta, "Railway Protection Force Reports 80 Deaths on Shramik Trains," Hindustan Times, May 30, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/railway-protection-force-reports-80-deaths-on-shramik-trains/story-psl3EenY4B0uUYMRvkChL.html>.

⁴⁵ Hamsa Vijayaraghavan, "Gaps in India's Treatment of Refugees and Vulnerable Internal Migrants Are Exposed by the Pandemic," Migration Policy Institute, September 10, 2020, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/gaps-india-refugees-vulnerable-internal-migrants-pandemic>.

⁴⁶ Alok Kumar Yadav and Jivesh Jha, *Socio-Legal Impacts of COVID-19: Comparative Critique of Laws in India and Nepal*. 2020; Aligarh: Rajmangal Publishers, 42.

⁴⁷ K.R. Shyam Sundar, "May Day 2020: COVID Pandemic Places Spotlight on Seven Glaring Labour Rights Issues," The Wire, May 1, 2020, <https://thewire.in/labour/may-day-2020-covid-pandemic-labour-rights>.

⁴⁸ Yogima Seth Sharma, "Unorganised Sector Workers May Get IDs," The Economic Times, May 31, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/unorganised-sector-workers-may-get-ids/articleshow/76124747.cms>.

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to food rations under Indian law do not have ration cards.⁴⁹ Such ration card issues left many without food and contributed directly to the large numbers of migrants risking a long journey home on foot.

For Nepali migrants, access to services and relief was even more difficult. Even prior to the pandemic, migrants from Western Nepal experienced barriers to accessing healthcare services in India, including lack of insurance, lack of an *Aadhaar* card, low wages, unsupportive employers, discrimination at healthcare facilities, and limited information about the locations of healthcare services.⁵⁰ In the context of the pandemic, stigmatization of migrants, particularly of foreign migrants whom many viewed as potential carriers of COVID-19, exacerbated barriers to access. The physical and mental stress of the arduous return journey was also compounded for Nepalis, who had farther to travel and who had to cope with a closed international border and additional quarantine once they had crossed.

At a broader level, the legal frameworks in both India and Nepal failed to lay down the duties of the government toward citizens in the event of a pandemic. While existing legal frameworks give substantial authorities to both governments in the event of a disaster, these laws do not include provisions that oblige the government to provide compensation for those impacted by lockdowns or to ensure essential services to citizens.⁵¹

Return and reintegration: Indian internal migrants

Once migrants reached their villages, they benefited from what the IDFC Institute, an Indian think tank focused on economic and social growth, has termed “a clear rural bias” in PMGKY, particularly through rural livelihood support programs. PMGKY increased the minimum wage of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, which guarantees 100 days of wage employment per year for manual labor in rural areas, and more than 40 million households found work through the scheme in the first 25 days of June (nearly twice the monthly average since 2012).⁵² In addition, PMGKY supported cash transfers through the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi scheme, which provides small landowners with cash transfers to buy agricultural inputs. The return of migrants to rural areas, combined with pandemic-related uncertainty, has increased agricultural activity and acreage farmed, with even the smallest landholders cultivating their plots.⁵³ These programs have renewed an interest in farming among some returning migrants. One return migrant who had worked in a call center in the city started a dairy farm upon his return, noting, “I am looking on it as a business opportunity because everything is shut in the city due to coronavirus. And we feel much safer at home.”⁵⁴ The trauma that many migrants experienced over the course of the lockdown and arduous journey home, coupled with government-supported livelihood opportunities in rural areas, has led many to begin rebuilding their lives in their home

⁴⁹ “100 Million Indians Fall through Gaps in Food Safety Net, Economists Urge Rethink on Covid-19 Relief,” Scroll.in, April 15, 2020, <https://scroll.in/article/959235/100-million-indians-fall-through-gaps-in-food-safety-net-economists-urge-rethink-on-covid-19-relief>.

⁵⁰ Pratik Adhikary et al. “Accessing Health Services in India: Experiences of Seasonal Migrants Returning to Nepal,” BMC Health Serv Res 2020; 20(992), <https://bmchealthservres.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12913-020-05846-7>.

⁵¹ Yadav and Jha, Socio-Legal Impacts of COVID-19, 101–103.

⁵² <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/economy/mgnrega-demand-for-work-up-74-in-june-71964>

⁵³ Vedika Inamdar and Sumati Thusoo, “COVID-19 Reverse Migration Calls for Long-Term Rural Development Planning,” The Wire, October 16, 2020, <https://thewire.in/rights/covid-19-reverse-migration-long-term-rural-development-planning>.

⁵⁴ Anjana Pasricha, “Pandemic Triggers Reverse Migration from India Cities to Villages,” VOA News, July 24, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/pandemic-triggers-reverse-migration-india-cities-villages>.

communities. Beyond the initial support to returning migrants, the Government launched the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan public works program aimed at creating jobs for more than 6 million return migrants while building durable infrastructure in rural areas.⁵⁵

And yet, a rapid assessment of migrant workers in Maharashtra undertaken by Habitat for Humanity in August 2020 found that 59 percent of migrants were willing to re-migrate to the destination state (compared with 22 percent who said they would remain in rural areas and 18 percent who were unsure),⁵⁶ despite the hardships they had faced in job loss and on the journey home. Of those willing to re-migrate, 71 percent said they would return to the same place of employment once travel restrictions were lifted.⁵⁷ Their willingness to re-migrate was rooted primarily in the belief that livelihood opportunities would be limited in rural areas once the various stimulus packages ended.⁵⁸ Moreover, less than one percent of those respondents expressed interest in remaining in origin areas for long-term work under government schemes.⁵⁹ A separate study conducted by the Aga Khan Rural Support Program (India) et al., which surveyed 4,835 households across 11 states found that nearly two-thirds of migrant workers who had returned to rural areas during the lockdown period had either re-migrated to destination areas by early August or wished to do so, noting a lack of skilled employment opportunities in villages.⁶⁰

Industries employing substantial numbers of migrants have also expressed confidence that migrants will return to cities. In April and May, several states relaxed labor regulations to improve the business climate in the context of COVID-19.⁶¹ Workdays have increased from eight to 12 hours (six days a week), wages have been reduced, and curbs have been placed on workers' negotiating power.⁶² These developments have triggered widespread discontent and protests among trade unions and advocates for workers' rights. Despite calls for greater protections given the severe vulnerabilities that were exposed by migrants' plight under lockdown, those who are now returning to work in India's cities face even greater vulnerabilities than they did when lockdowns began.

Return and reintegration: Nepali cross-border migrants

Nepalis who reached the India-Nepal border, many after days of walking, found it closed. Nepal went into lockdown on March 22nd, including closure of the open border between India and Nepal on March 24th to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Rather than allow Nepali migrants to cross the border and return home, authorities in Nepal and India made an informal agreement to provide food and shelter to those stranded at the border.⁶³ Given the porous nature of the border, some crossed back to Nepal

⁵⁵ Atul Sarma and Shyam Sunder, "Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan: Will the Scheme Be of Help?" Financial Express, July 15, 2020, <https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/garib-kalyan-rojgar-abhiyan-will-the-scheme-be-of-help/2024107/>.

⁵⁶ Habitat for Humanity, Leaving the City Behind, 18.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ "Two-Thirds of Migrants Have Returned to Cities or Wish to Do So: Survey," The Hindu, August 3, 2020.

<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/two-thirds-of-migrants-have-returned-to-cities-or-wish-to-do-so-survey/article32259526.ece>.

⁶¹ Vijayaraghavan, "Gaps in India's Treatment"

⁶² Nooreydzan, "The Long Walk Home."

⁶³ Subina Shreshta, "Hundreds of Nepalese Stuck at India Border amid COVID-19 Lockdown," Aljazeera, April 1, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/1/hundreds-of-nepalese-stuck-at-india-border-amid-covid-19-lockdown>.

illegally, without undergoing quarantine.⁶⁴ Thousands more remained stuck at the border⁶⁵ for more than three weeks, quarantining on the Indian side. Only after the Supreme Court ordered the Government on April 7th to allow Nepali citizens back home were these migrants permitted to cross the border.⁶⁶ Upon entering Nepal, they were met by representatives from their local government, who brought them to their home districts to begin a process of quarantine in Nepal. The Federal Government had instructed provincial and local units to set up quarantine facilities for returning migrants to World Health Organization standards, and 6,747 were established around the country.⁶⁷ However, the quarantine facilities did not fully meet standards, with ten percent lacking hygiene kits (including masks, sanitizers, and toiletries), 15 percent lacking beds, and 16 percent lacking toilets.⁶⁸ Protection and safety issues also arose, including overcrowding that led to rapid spread of the virus and sexual assaults of women in quarantine facilities.⁶⁹ Migrants have also faced stigma linked to fear and anxiety around COVID-19, with 32 percent of municipalities reporting stigmatization and discrimination toward returning migrants,⁷⁰ both from community members and from government authorities.⁷¹

The number of migrants returning from India was much higher than expected,⁷² with an estimated 750,000 migrants returning from India to Nepal by early June,⁷³ so many of the centers filled to capacity quickly. In response, those without symptoms were asked to remain under quarantine at home, with monitoring of home quarantine conducted by health workers or local elected officials through home visits or phone calls.⁷⁴ The Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility found that many returning migrants were also able to reach home without being tested for COVID-19 or following any quarantine measures.⁷⁵ Some of these were migrants who avoided detection in crossing the border, and others were migrants whom authorities sent home due to a lack of capacity in quarantine centers and/or a shortage of testing materials.⁷⁶

A major issue in the response has been a lack of data on the number of Nepalis working in India. Interviews with migration experts in Nepal reveal a lack of attention to the Nepal-India migration corridor, despite the fact that India remains the most popular destination for Nepali migrants, accounting for approximately 40 percent of all migrants from the country.⁷⁷ Nepal's Government does not consider those crossing the Nepal-India border to work as "migrants,"⁷⁸ and they remain outside the legal frameworks set up for overseas migration. Not only do these migrants lack the protections available for Nepali overseas

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Jeevan Baniya et al., Covid-19 and Nepali Labour Migrants, 2020; Kathmandu: Center for the Study of Labour and Mobility, 39.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶⁷ International Organization for Migration (IOM), "Rapid Assessment on Impacts of COVID-19 on Returnee Migrants and Responses of the Local Governments of Nepal." 2020; IOM, 11, https://nepal.iom.int/sites/default/files/publication/FINAL_REPORT_IOM.pdf.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶⁹ Baniya et al., Covid-19 and Nepali Labour Migrants, 43.

⁷⁰ IOM, "Rapid Assessment," 20.

⁷¹ Hashim, "The Ticking Time Bomb."

⁷² "Rapid Impact Assessment Report—COVID-19 and Nepali Labour Migrants, Impacts and Responses." International Labour Organization, August 6, 2020, https://www.ilo.org/kathmandu/info/public/news/WCMS_752722/lang-en/index.htm.

⁷³ Baniya et al., Covid-19 and Nepali Labour Migrants, 41.

⁷⁴ IOM, "Rapid Assessment," 18.

⁷⁵ Baniya et al., Covid-19 and Nepali Labour Migrants, 41.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁸ Prakash Chandra Madai (Deputy Executive Director, NEEDS Nepal) in discussion with the author, November 2020.

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migrants, including training, insurance, and handling of grievances,⁷⁹ but they remain ineligible for the Government's employment generation schemes and programs for returning migrant workers. Existing programs that returnees from overseas destinations can access include Recognized Prior Learning, which certifies skills and experience gained by migrants abroad; Soft Loans to Returnee Migrant Workers; Facilitation of Returnee Entrepreneurs; and targeted programs at the provincial level, including mobilization of returning migrants for employment in priority sectors for economic development of their home provinces.⁸⁰ This ineligibility extends to the Nepali women who have returned from GCC countries during the pandemic after migrating through India. As a result, the migrants who have returned from India to Nepal now find themselves in dire straits, having lost months of income on which their families depend for basic needs and with no access to programs in place to support returning migrants. Many are already crossing the border back into India to work. According to Prakash Chandra Madai of National Environment and Equity Development Society (NEEDS Nepal), approximately 1,000 migrants are now returning to India each day in search of work,⁸¹ even though the border has yet to officially reopen. Having crossed the border illegally, and in the context of weakening labor protections in India, these migrants are at heightened risk of labor exploitation, increasing informality, and abuse.

The following tables describe lessons and recommendations from this study. The first is an overall recommendation and the subsequent tables relate specifically to India and Nepal.

Table 1: Lessons and Recommendations	
Lessons	Recommendations
CSOs supporting migrants are an important source of resilience for migrant communities in both sending and destination areas. These national-level and community-based organizations provide essential services to migrants, including in the context of emergencies, and fill critical roles in information dissemination. They also facilitate migrants' access to government programs and services and advocate on their behalf.	During the COVID-19 crisis, provide support to migrants by working through CSOs that are well established in migrant communities. These organizations have the trust of migrants, understand community needs, and are well positioned to deliver support effectively, including to the most vulnerable migrants. In the post-pandemic period, USAID should continue engaging and supporting these organizations to ensure their long-term sustainability, given the critical role they play in bolstering migrant resilience to shocks as they occur.

Table 2: Lessons and Recommendations (India)	
Lessons	Recommendations
Migrants are falling through the cracks of the different registration systems for social and labor protections,	Support efforts to include all eligible residents of India in relevant registration systems, with special attention given to migrants, religious minorities, scheduled castes, the urban

⁷⁹ The Foreign Employment Act 2007 regulates the process of foreign employment and protects the rights of migrant workers. It also enables the Government to enter into agreements on migrant labor with other countries and regulates the behavior of recruitment agencies. IOM, "Rapid Assessment," 117.

⁸⁰ Government of Nepal, Nepal Labour Migration Report 2020, 62.

⁸¹ Prakash Chandra Madai (Deputy Executive Director, NEEDS Nepal) in discussion with the author, November 2020.

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Table 2: Lessons and Recommendations (India)	
Lessons	Recommendations
weakening their resilience to job loss and other economic shocks.	poor, and other vulnerable populations. In particular, support efforts to include all citizens under a comprehensive identity card that enables nationwide access to benefits.
CSOs played an important facilitation role between migrant workers and the various levels of government during the COVID-19 crisis, helping migrants to access government aid and services to which they were entitled and advocating to government on behalf of migrants' needs.	Support the establishment of migrant worker centers in origin and destination areas with large numbers of migrants, using a collaborative process that engages state government together with CSOs. These centers can serve as information hubs on critical issues impacting migrants and can provide services such as facilitating migrants' registration and access to government-supported social protection programs.
Despite the weaknesses in protection systems revealed during the pandemic, the Indian Government has continued to weaken labor protections further to support an economic rebound in the wake of COVID-19.	Support CSOs that advocate for migrant workers' rights, including in the informal sector, through public advocacy, research, and engagement with government in policy development.

Table 3: Lessons and Recommendations (Nepal)	
Lessons	Recommendations
A lack of systematic data collection on the number of Nepali migrants who travel to India for work makes it impossible to accurately target and fund programs supporting these migrants and keeps them "invisible" in government discourse on migration.	Support efforts to collect systematic data on Nepal-India migrants, including through the census. While no national program to count or track Nepal-India migrants presently exists, several initiatives can be built upon and leveraged toward this objective. Data systems were created at the local level in the context of COVID-19 to track returning migrants in quarantine centers. Provincial parliamentarians in the Far West have also expressed interest in implementing a data system at border checkpoints. USAID may consider supporting local initiatives to collect data and track migrants where substantial political will exists, with the objective of eventually working toward a national system.
The Government of Nepal has developed a strong legal framework for the safe migration of Nepalis overseas for work; however, Nepali migrants who work in India are excluded from this framework and the protection it provides.	In tandem with developing a more accurate understanding of the number and profile of Nepali migrants who travel to India for work, support can be provided to include Nepal-India migrants under the social protection schemes available to overseas migrants, including insurance for migrants and livelihood opportunities for returnees.
The ban on women migrant workers entering domestic work in GCC countries creates irregular migration flows through	Support a shift from protectionist policies toward protections for Nepali women migrants and prospective migrants. This can include advocacy to replace the ban with bilateral

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12

Table 3: Lessons and Recommendations (Nepal)	
Lessons	Recommendations
India, increasing the risk of trafficking and labor exploitation and significantly increasing the vulnerability of these migrants.	agreements between Nepal and destination countries where many Nepali women currently work in domestic service. Other support measures could include increasing ethical recruitment opportunities for women who want to migrate (including to countries where women are not currently migrating in large numbers) and providing additional livelihood opportunities through employment generation programs in Nepal.

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13

ANNEX II: MARITIME SOUTHEAST ASIA CASE STUDY- PHILIPPINES



PROMOTING THE HEALTH OF OVERSEAS WORKERS AND INTERNAL MIGRANTS DURING COVID-19 A CASE STUDY ON THE PHILIPPINES

Overview

This case study examines the numerous challenges—especially health issues—migrants face in the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a predominantly sending country, the Philippines has long embraced the enormous task of protecting the health and wellbeing of Filipino migrant workers throughout the entire cycle of migration. This task became much more salient when COVID-19 disrupted economies and largely halted global mobility. Domestically, aggressive lockdowns stranded repatriated workers and urban migrants in major cities, while recent typhoons related to climate change resulted in forced displacement, interrupting social distancing measures. The country's long experience with labor migration and disaster response enabled existing government mechanisms to address health and other needs of labor migrants and internally displaced persons, though the unprecedented scale of the pandemic has magnified old problems and exposed new ones. While promoting migrant health is a prominent theme in the Philippines' experience, other dimensions such as governance, economy, gender, and the

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1

environment also feature in this case study. The Philippine example provides insights on how to address migrants' health needs, especially in times of crisis such as pandemics and even climate change. It also underscores the importance of having multi-sectoral migration governance systems in place before crises develop.

COVID-19 in the Philippines

The Philippines, due to its proximity to China, was one of the first countries to report cases of what would later be named COVID-19.¹ However, only in March, after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, did the country enforce a national lockdown.² The delay in initiating international travel restrictions and the lack of robust contact tracing systems led to a dramatic rise of cases during the early months of the pandemic, thereby prolonging lockdowns, especially in highly urbanized areas. The aggressive lockdown deemed one of the strictest and longest in the world,³ was only relaxed later in the year, though as of the time of writing, school closures, telecommuting arrangements, and other social distancing measures continue to be implemented throughout the country.

As of December 11, 2020, the Philippines has reported 447,039 cases and 8,709 deaths (1.9 percent of cases) due to COVID-19.⁴ From August to October 2020, the Philippines was at the top of the ten countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), followed by Indonesia, a country with almost twice its population.⁵ Since then, the Philippines has gradually decreased the number of newly reported cases, showing signs of flattening the curve (Figure One).

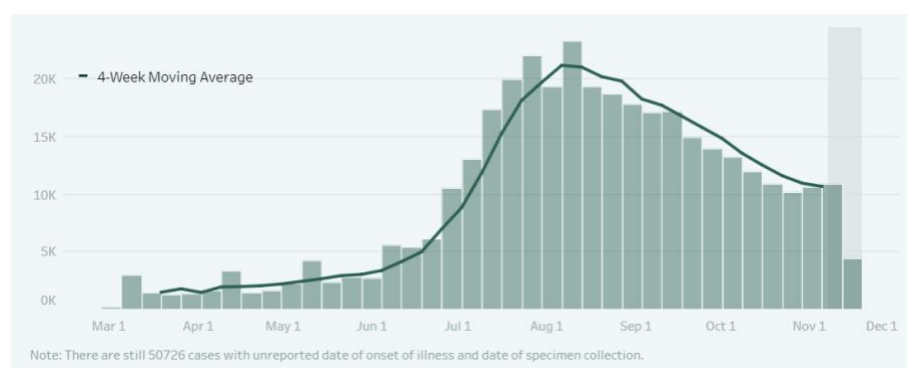


Figure 1: Weekly Reported Cases of COVID-19 in the Philippines⁶

¹ E.M. Edrada, E.B. Lopez, J.B. Villarama, et al., "First COVID-19 Infections in the Philippines: A Case Report." *Tropical Medicine and Health* 2020; 48, 21, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41182-020-00203-0>.

² "Metro Manila to Be Placed on Lockdown Due to Coronavirus Outbreak." Rappler, March 12, 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/metro-manila-placed-on-lockdown-coronavirus-outbreak>.

³ "Longest Lockdown Blamed for PH Economic Meltdown." Manila Bulletin, September 1, 2020, <https://mb.com.ph/2020/09/01/longest-lockdown-blamed-for-ph-economic-meltdown/>.

⁴ Department of Health COVID-19 Tracker, <https://www.doh.gov.ph/covid19tracker/>.

⁵ "PH Overtakes Indonesia as ASEAN Country with Most COVID-19 Case." Rappler, August 6, 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/coronavirus-cases-philippines-august-6-2020>.

⁶ Department of Health COVID-19 Tracker, <https://www.doh.gov.ph/covid19tracker/>.

Migration in the Philippines

The Philippines has a long history of migration and diaspora that can be traced back to colonial times when Filipinos were sent to the United States as plantation farmers shortly after the turn of the 20th century.⁷ In the 1970s, the country incorporated labor migration into its economic policy, in response to growing demands for foreign workers by both high-income countries and emerging markets. Since then, the Philippines has been a major exporter of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs)—from nurses and seafarers to construction workers and domestic helpers—to nearly 200 countries and territories. The Commission on Filipinos Overseas puts the most recent estimate of overseas Filipinos at more than ten million, which is roughly ten percent of the country's total population.⁸ The top destination countries for overseas Filipinos include the United States and several countries in the Gulf region, though Malaysia and Singapore are also major destinations for Filipino migrant workers.

Much international migration by Filipinos is temporary, mainly for employment reasons. Remittances sent back by overseas workers to their families left behind have contributed on average at least ten percent to the country's gross domestic product in recent years. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the steady flow of overseas remittances to the country kept the Philippine economy afloat.⁹ Despite political uncertainties across the globe, personal remittances from OFWs reached a record high of \$33.5 billion in 2019, which was 3.9 percent higher than the \$32.2 billion recorded in 2018.¹⁰

Because of the country's longstanding experience with facilitating orderly labor migration, the Philippines through time has established an elaborate system of government agencies that deal with various aspects of the migration experience. Different agencies, notably the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA)—the largest migrant social insurance in the world¹¹—provide a wide range of services that address needs of Filipino migrant workers throughout the migration cycle. Several national laws, the most important of which is the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995,¹² cemented the protection of migrant rights and welfare as central in labor migration policy.

Recent developments in Philippine migration governance foreshadowed the importance of protecting migrant health during a global health crisis. In 2016, the Department of Health created a National Policy on the Health of Migrants and Overseas Filipinos, which established the country's Migrant Health Program and a multi-stakeholder Philippine Migrant Health Network.¹³ These

⁷ International Organization for Migration, Country Migration Report: The Philippines 2013. 2013; Philippines, Manila: IOM, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/cmreport_philippines2013.pdf.

⁸ Commission on Filipinos Overseas, <https://cfo.gov.ph/yearly-stock-estimation-of-overseas-filipinos/>.

⁹ "Global OFW Deployment, Dollar Remittances Grow Despite Global Crisis." Department of Labor and Employment, May 24, 2009. <https://www.dole.gov.ph/news/global-ofw-deployment-dollar-remittances-grow-despite-global-crisis/>.

¹⁰ "OFW Remittances Hit Record High of \$33.5 Billion in 2019." Rappler, February 17, 2020.

<https://www.rappler.com/business/overseas-filipino-workers-remittances-2019>.

¹¹ D.R. Agunias and N.G. Ruiz, "Protecting Overseas Workers: Lessons and Cautions from the Philippines." 2007; Migration Policy Institute, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/MigDevInsight_091807.pdf.

¹² Government of the Philippines. Republic Action No. 8042. Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995.

[http://www.poea.gov.ph/laws&rules/files/Migrant%20Workers%20Act%20of%201995%20\(RA%208042\).html](http://www.poea.gov.ph/laws&rules/files/Migrant%20Workers%20Act%20of%201995%20(RA%208042).html)

¹³ Government of the Philippines. Department of Health. National Policy on the Health of Migrants and Overseas Filipinos. Administrative Order No. 2-016-0007. https://cfo.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/Legal_Mandate/1.-A.O.-No.-0007_National-Policy-on-the-Health-of-Migrants-and-Overseas-Filipinos.pdf

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newly created mechanisms coordinate efforts for advancing migrants' health such as migrant health education, regulation of predeparture medical screening, and medical repatriation, among others.

Biggest repatriation of overseas Filipinos in history

Prior to the pandemic, the Department of Health and other government agencies conducted emergency repatriation for overseas Filipinos who were caught up in places experiencing political instability, conflict, and natural disasters and medical repatriation for those who became ill but could not afford healthcare abroad. The COVID-19 pandemic has put existing repatriation protocols to the test on an unprecedented scale.

During the first months of the pandemic, stranded migrants in need of assistance overseas and migrant civil society organizations complained about the slow repatriation process. International travel bans, strict health protocols, and limited institutional capacity constrained the initial phase of the repatriation program. Through OWWA, returning OFWs receive free testing, food packets, and temporary shelter in more than 100 quarantine facilities in Metro Manila and nearby provinces. Initially though, OFWs experienced extended quarantines beyond the required 14 days as the limited number of laboratories could not catch up with the volume of tested individuals awaiting results.¹⁴ Meanwhile, non-OFWs had to shoulder all the costs attendant to testing and room and board while under quarantine.

Along with citizens who stay in the Philippines, repatriated OFWs also receive assistance for COVID-19 testing and treatment through PhilHealth, the country's national health insurance program.¹⁵ Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Philippines made a commitment to achieve Universal Health Care (UHC). The 2019 UHC law declared all Filipinos – including those living overseas – as automatic members of PhilHealth.¹⁶ Even prior to this law, OFWs have already been part of PhilHealth, as it was made a requirement for overseas employment. PhilHealth covers some of OFWs' healthcare spending abroad as well as that of their families left behind at home. Nonetheless, during the time of COVID-19, PhilHealth was not spared from controversies such as corruption allegations¹⁷ as well as payment delays to laboratory facilities – which then led to OFWs getting stranded in quarantine hotels.¹⁸ PhilHealth also announced that because of dwindling funds due to pandemic-related expenses, it will delay the full implementation of UHC to at least mid-2021, which will affect comprehensive healthcare coverage for migrants and non-migrants alike.¹⁹ OFWs were also campaigning that they be spared from scheduled premium

¹⁴ "OFWs Struggle through Prolonged Quarantine in Gov't 'VIP Treatment.'" Rappler, May 31, 2020.

<https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/ofws-struggle-coronavirus-quarantine>.

¹⁵ "PhilHealth sets new benefit package for COVID-19 testing." PhilHealth, June 3, 2020.

https://www.philhealth.gov.ph/news/2020/test_pckge.php#gsc.tab=0; "PhilHealth guarantees continuing coverage for Covid-19 patients." PhilHealth, April 16, 2020. https://www.philhealth.gov.ph/news/2020/cont_coverage.php#gsc.tab=0

¹⁶ "UHC Act in the Philippines: a new dawn for health care." WHO Philippines, March 14, 2019.

<https://www.who.int/philippines/news/feature-stories/detail/uhc-act-in-the-philippines-a-new-dawn-for-health-care>

¹⁷ "Corruption allegations rock Philippine health insurance corporation amid COVID-19." Devex, September 14, 2020.

<https://www.devex.com/news/corruption-allegations-rock-philippine-health-insurance-corporation-amid-covid-19-98048>

¹⁸ "4K OFWs stranded due to PhilHealth issue with PRC: Bello." Philippine News Agency, October 20, 2020.

<https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/119134>

¹⁹ "PhilHealth: UHC law seen to be implemented by mid-2021." Philippine Daily Inquirer, June 19, 2020.

<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1294172/fwd-philhealth-uhc-law-seen-to-be-implemented-by-mid-2021>

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increases,²⁰ and legislators were even considering to amend the UHC law and delist OFWs as PhilHealth contributors.²¹

Due to the Philippines' strict lockdowns, some Filipino returnees ended up being stranded in the capital, forcing them to stay in dank and crowded dormitories. Because of the limited support provided to stranded returnees and loss of income resulting from unemployment, stranded returnees had to scrape together the limited money they had to prepare communal meals.²² Such dire conditions also put migrant returnees, who may have arrived disease free, at risk for COVID-19 infection.

Nonetheless, the repatriation procedure gradually improved through the course of the pandemic.²³ As of November 20, 605,168 overseas Filipinos have returned to the country, including 255,772 seafarers.²⁴ The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) reported that it has conducted at least 55 chartered flights from 19 countries using its Assistance to Nationals Fund since the beginning of the pandemic, and more flights are being planned for the coming months.²⁵ Among the repatriated migrants, 10,375 were confirmed COVID-19 patients, and six have died.²⁶

The shift from high earnings overseas, to unemployment upon return, can push families that depend on remittances below the poverty line. Recognizing this imminent problem, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) has provided a one-time financial assistance of PhP 10,000 (\$200) to returning migrant workers,²⁷ though many OFWs reported delays in cash disbursement.²⁸ While this amount is insufficient to compensate for lost income and to sustain families throughout the entire period of unemployment, there is recognition that limited national financial resources will also need to help millions of non-migrant Filipinos who require financial help as they weather the economic impact of the pandemic.

Filipino seafarers in particular have borne the brunt of the pandemic. An estimated one out of four seafarers worldwide comes from the Philippines.²⁹ Because of their unique circumstances, seafarers have been among the most difficult to locate and assist, leading to huge delays in

²⁰ "PhilHealth reiterates increase for OFW premium payments; online petition seeks repeal." GMA News Online, April 29, 2020. <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/money/companies/736080/philhealth-reiterates-increase-for-ofw-premium-payments-online-petition-seeks-repeal/story/>

²¹ "House joint panel OKs move to amend UHC law, delist OFWs as PhilHealth contributors." CNN Philippines, April 18, 2020. <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/8/18/house-panel-uhc-amendment-delist-ofw-philhealth-contributors.html>

²² A. Almendral, "Crucial Yet Forgotten: The Filipino Workers Stranded by Coronavirus." Asian Review, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big-Story/Crucial-yet-forgotten-the-Filipino-workers-stranded-by-coronavirus>.

²³ For a more detailed chronicle of the repatriation process during the early phase of the pandemic, see M.M.B. Asis, "Repatriating Filipino Migrant Workers in the Time of the Pandemic." Migration Research Series No. 63, 2020; International Organization for Migration, <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mrs-63.pdf>.

²⁴ Department of Health, "Beat COVID-19 Today: A COVID-19 Philippine Situationer." Issue 206, November 19, 2020, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1k8TBRVRA8C9t3l9QbCjYISptJ5JMer/view?usp=sharing>.

²⁵ Presented by the Department of Foreign Affairs during the 4th National Conference on Migrant Health on November 18, 2020.

²⁶ Department of Health, "Beat COVID-19 Today."

²⁷ Department of Labor and Employment, "OFWs Displaced by COVID-19 to Get 10k." April 8, 2020, <https://www.dole.gov.ph/news/ofws-displaced-by-covid-19-to-get-10k/>.

²⁸ "Delayed: Cash Aid for Households, OFWs, Workers, Farmers; LGUs Told to Act Quickly, or Else...." One News, April 29, 2020, <https://www.onenews.ph/delayed-cash-aid-for-households-ofws-workers-farmers-lgus-told-to-act-quickly-or-else>.

²⁹ W. Depasupil, "Filipino Seafarers Top Choice." The Manila Times, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2016/04/30/business/filipino-seafarers-top-choice/259323/>.

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repatriation.³⁰ Those who eventually returned to the Philippines struggled to find new employment, as they possess highly specialized skills that unfortunately are not useful for jobs on land.³¹ Repatriated Filipino sailors must wait for their shipping companies to resume operations or change crews so they can embark on ships again, which has become less predictable due to the pandemic.³²

Filipino migrants who stayed abroad

While hundreds of thousands have already returned to the Philippines, most Filipino migrants chose to remain abroad. The Department of Labor and Employment reported that while 469,959 OFWs had lost their jobs as of October 2020, 104,813 of them refused to return home and opted to stay abroad.³³ As of November 20, there are 11,545 confirmed cases of COVID-19 among Filipinos in 82 destination countries, according to the Department of Foreign Affairs, which collects data from Philippine embassies and consulates abroad.³⁴

Among Filipino migrants who stayed overseas, undocumented migrants are the most vulnerable to both contracting the virus and suffering the indirect consequences of the pandemic response.³⁵ They have no employment contracts (and therefore, no employment visas) and are ineligible for any health benefits. For undocumented migrants who are homeless, living in encampments or in immigration detention centers, the risk of infection is greater due to closer proximity with co-inhabitants and poor living conditions overall. Meanwhile, pandemic-associated lockdowns are also expected to disproportionately affect domestic workers, who are mostly women.³⁶ The exploitation that some domestic workers already experienced during the pre-pandemic era may have worsened, as they are now locked in their employers' house due to stay-at-home orders. Because entire families are at home all day and children are out of school, domestic workers face the risk of assuming more household chores and even working on their legally mandated day off.

Being away from one's family abroad already causes loneliness and anxiety. The pandemic could aggravate such mental stress further.³⁷ Mental wellbeing, especially that of migrants who stayed abroad, can deteriorate for several reasons: isolation while staying at home; COVID-19 infection and deaths among colleagues and peers; uncertainty about future employment; concern for family left behind in the Philippines, among other factors. In the Philippine embassy in Macau, a mobile

³⁰ "Filipino Seafarers Stranded in Uruguay Plead to Come Home." Rappler, August 3, 2020, <https://rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/filipino-seafarers-stranded-uruguay-plead-come-home>.

³¹ G.K. Lontoc, "Supporting Seafarers in the New Normal." 2020; Ateneo de Manila University Department of Economics, <http://ateneo.edu/sites/default/files/downloadable-files/Policy%20Brief%202020-17.pdf>.

³² K. Yoshida and J. Endo, "Asian Ports Tighten Quarantine, Leaving Sailors Stuck at Sea." Nikkei Asian Review, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Business-trends/Asian-ports-tighten-quarantine-leaving-sailors-stuck-at-sea>.

³³ "Nearly Half a Million OFWs Displaced, Infected by COVID-19—DOLE." Manila Bulletin, October 1, 2020, <https://mb.com.ph/2020/10/01/nearly-half-a-million-ofws-displaced-infected-by-covid-19-dole/>.

³⁴ The Department of Health (DOH) conducts separate tracking of COVID-19 cases among Filipinos abroad in accordance with the International Health Regulations and the World Health Organization. As of November 20, the DOH reports 2,616 COVID-19 cases among overseas Filipinos, which is 22 percent of the total number reported by the DFA. However, as of November 20, 510 foreign nationals staying in the Philippines have been confirmed to have COVID-19.

³⁵ "Undocumented Filipino Migrants among the Hardest Hit Amid Pandemic." Bulatlat, May 28, 2020, <https://www.bulatlat.com/2020/05/28/undocumented-filipino-migrants-among-the-hardest-hit-amid-pandemic/>.

³⁶ R. Begum, "Domestic Workers in Middle East Risk Abuse Amid COVID-19 Crisis." Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/06/domestic-workers-middle-east-risk-abuse-amid-covid-19-crisis>.

³⁷ "Lockdown Takes Emotional Toll on Overseas Workers." Manila Standard, May 26, 2020, <https://manilastandard.net/mobile/article/324530>.

application was introduced to provide mental wellness support to OFWS.³⁸ Meanwhile, in places outside of Asia, Filipinos, being Asians, also become victims of discrimination and xenophobia.³⁹

Depending on their legal status, Filipino migrants who stayed abroad may receive different kinds of assistance from governments of destination countries. The Philippine government also extends help to Filipinos who stayed abroad. For instance, like repatriated migrants, OFWs who opted to stay in destination countries, including those who are undocumented, were also made eligible for the one-time financial assistance (\$200) provided by OWWA. In addition to the earlier problem of insufficient financial aid, OFWs abroad also had to face the hassle of physically submitting application requirements to Philippine Overseas Labor Offices, which can be inaccessible especially to those working in distant areas outside the city. Meanwhile, OWWA also launched two Facebook pages dedicated to providing updates and assistance to OFWs in distress worldwide. Finally, in addition to the assistance provided by the Philippine government through its embassies and consulates, one of the major sources of support are the Filipino diaspora communities, which have provided temporary shelters, food assistance, and even psychosocial support to their compatriots stranded abroad.

Locally stranded individuals in major cities

Just as international travel bans and border closures heavily reduced people's movement between countries, domestic lockdowns and stay-at-home orders also affected individuals' mobility within the Philippines, similar to the experience of other countries. Right after the announcement of a national lockdown in March, temporary migrants working in major cities, especially in Metro Manila, rushed to return to their home provinces, breaking social distancing measures, crowding inside inadequate public transport options, and eventually resulting in the spread of the coronavirus to other parts of the country.

Meanwhile, those who were not able to return home on time—due to limited transport options and the quarantine already taking effect—ended up stranded in transit. Locally stranded individuals (LSIs), as they were later popularly called, had no choice but to stay in cramped temporary shelters, or worse, in bus stations and local airports. Migrant workers who were successfully repatriated back to the Philippines but were subjected to prolonged quarantines upon arrival due to delays in laboratory test results also ended up becoming LSIs, as they could not return to their home provinces due to travel restrictions and inadequate transport services. Unfortunately, local governments in municipalities and cities outside of Metro Manila have expressed opposition to receiving returnees out of fear that these migrant workers and stranded individuals might carry the coronavirus with them, fueling local outbreaks. In August, a national survey estimated that because of the nationwide lockdown, some 3.5 million working-age Filipinos were stranded in various parts of the country at some point during the pandemic.⁴⁰

³⁸ Department of Labor and Employment, "Mobile App Offers Mental Wellness for OFWs in Macau." August 26, 2020, <https://www.dole.gov.ph/news/mobile-app-offers-mental-wellness-for-ofws-in-macau/>.

³⁹ "Coronavirus: Filipino Mistaken as Chinese, Gets Punched in Italy." MSN News, February 28, 2020, <https://www.msn.com/en-ph/news/world/coronavirus-filipino-mistaken-as-chinese-gets-punched-in-italy/ar-BB10x2jn>.

⁴⁰ V. Barcelo and R. Lopez, "Lockdown Leaves LSIs Scrambling." Manila Standard, 2020, <https://manilastandard.net/mobile/article/330653>.

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While stranded, LSIs faced various problems, from inadequate shelter and limited access to food and other basic commodities, to unemployment and even discrimination from local governments of their own hometowns. Initially, upon pressure from local governments, the National Government required returning stranded individuals to undergo COVID-19 testing. The mandatory COVID-19 testing, which LSIs must pay for out of pocket, also made returning to their hometowns more difficult. To assist LSIs trapped by travel restrictions, the National Government launched a program to facilitate the return of LSIs back to their provinces. In the last week of July, LSIs were brought to the Rizal Memorial Sports Complex for COVID-19 testing before transport back to their provinces. Unfortunately, about 8,400 LSIs crowded into the stadium, violating the physical distancing rule, with many of the LSIs not even provided with masks, creating a super-spreader event.⁴¹ The Government eventually scrapped its plan to require all LSIs to undergo the swab test and instead placed this responsibility on the receiving local governments.⁴²

Forced displacement due to natural disasters

While the nationwide lockdown produced locally stranded individuals in major cities, climate-related extreme weather events such as typhoons and extreme flooding that beset the Philippines during the pandemic also led to the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Filipinos. The confluence of these natural disasters with COVID-19 has further complicated the sustainability of the domestic pandemic response. Families affected by natural disasters faced a dilemma: either stay at home and protect themselves from the coronavirus while their houses were inundated if not destroyed or move to cramped evacuation centers, usually in public schools or other public buildings, to escape flooding at the expense of breaking social distancing measures and worse, contracting the virus.

On May 14th, while the Philippines was still struggling to contain the virus and under nationwide lockdown, Typhoon Vongfong slammed the Eastern Visayas region, displacing approximately 150,000 residents.⁴³ Meanwhile, in November 2020 alone, two major typhoons hit the country. On November 1st, Super Typhoon Goni struck Luzon, the country's biggest island, killing at least 20 people and displacing more than 517,000.⁴⁴ Local governments reported that approximately 170,000 houses were either damaged or destroyed, and the typhoon left substantial damage on the order of \$230 million. More than a week later, Typhoon Vamco wreaked havoc across the same island on November 11–12, affecting more than three million people and prompting 283,656 people to seek refuge in 2,205 evacuation centers.⁴⁵ When Typhoon Vamco arrived, some 82,900 people were still displaced in the provinces affected by Typhoon Goni. In all these disaster events,

⁴¹ "Thousands of Stranded Filipinos Crammed into Rizal Stadium amid COVID-19 Risks." Interaksyon, July 27, 2020, <https://interaksyon.philstar.com/politics-issues/2020/07/27/173672/thousands-of-stranded-filipinos-crammed-into-rizal-stadium-amid-covid-19-risks/>.

⁴² "National Gov't Stops Requiring PCR Tests for Locally-Stranded Individuals." Rappler, July 30, 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/national-government-no-longer-requiring-pcr-test-coronavirus-locally-stranded-individuals>.

⁴³ "Typhoon Vongfong Displaces 150,000 during a Pandemic in the Philippines." Climate Action Network International, June 4, 2020, <http://www.climatenetwork.org/amboPH>.

⁴⁴ UNOCHA, "Philippines: Typhoon Goni Situation Report #1." November 12, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/philippines-typhoon-goni-situation-report-1-november-12-2020>.

⁴⁵ UNOCHA, "Philippines: Super Typhoon Goni (Rolly) and Typhoon Vamco (Ulysses)—Flash Update No. 5 (as of 17 November 2020, 9 p.m. local time)." <https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/philippines-super-typhoon-goni-rolly-and-typhoon-vamco-ulysses-flash-update-no-5>.

residents had no choice but to break quarantine and relocate to makeshift evacuation centers in anticipation of possible landslide, storm surge, and flood.

Because of its geography and climate vulnerability, the Philippines is no stranger to natural disasters.⁴⁶ Historically, about 20 typhoons pass through the Philippines from the Pacific each year, and climate change is expected to increase these typhoons' frequency and severity. Nonetheless, the country has existing laws, government agencies, and cross-sectoral mechanisms for disaster risk reduction and planning and response and recovery that helped minimize casualties, especially in recent years. However, responding to a natural disaster during a pandemic is certainly something that has never been experienced before. Government officials acknowledged the complexity of evacuating thousands of people and relocating them to temporary shelters while observing social distancing measures to prevent the spread of the virus.

Emerging challenges ahead

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Philippine Government's response to various challenges faced by Filipino migrants, especially those repatriated to the country, has improved over time. For instance, free testing continues to be offered to migrant returnees upon arrival at the airport as of the time of writing.⁴⁷ Laboratory testing capacity has also greatly increased since the start of the pandemic, from one accredited laboratory in March to 168 in November. Consequently, returnees are no longer subjected to prolonged, unnecessary, and even unsafe quarantines. The declining cases of COVID-19 nationwide and the gradual resumption of local travel have also prevented repatriated migrants from being stranded in the capital and enabled them to eventually return to their hometowns.

As an end to the COVID-19 pandemic remains out of sight until a vaccine is available worldwide, the availability of employment opportunities for migrants from the Philippines and other major sending countries is expected to decline. However, Filipino workers, being highly skilled and conversant in English, are some of the most sought after in the world, especially in major industries such as healthcare, construction, information and communication technology, shipping, and domestic work. For instance, in the middle of the pandemic, some high-income countries that are facing health worker shortages have expressed interest in hiring more Filipino nurses.⁴⁸ These are good signs for Filipinos' continued employability overseas, though other, less prioritized sending countries may bear the brunt of lower demand for foreign workers.

Nonetheless, the Philippines will need to grapple with the growing number of unemployed migrants, including repatriated workers, outbound migrants whose employment contracts were put on hold or even canceled, and those whose plans to work abroad were curtailed by the

⁴⁶ For more information about the Philippines' disaster profile and risk reduction policies and mechanisms, see UNDRR, *Disaster Risk Reduction in the Philippines: Status Report 2019*. 2019; Bangkok, Thailand: United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, https://www.unisdr.org/files/68265_682308philippinesdrmstatusreport.pdf.

⁴⁷ "Free Swab Testing for Returning OFWs at NAIA Still On." Manila Bulletin, October 28, 2020, <https://mb.com.ph/2020/10/28/free-swab-testing-for-returning-ofws-at-naia-still-on/>.

⁴⁸ "Coronavirus: Demand for Filipino Nurses Increases in Europe." DW, March 26, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-demand-for-filipino-nurses-increases-in-europe/a-52927591>.

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pandemic.⁴⁹ In anticipation of this challenge, the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) launched reskilling and upskilling programs for returning OFWs so they can be reintegrated into the local workforce and increase their chances of getting a new job.⁵⁰ TESDA specifically aims to train OFWs to become contact tracers to contribute to expanding the country's contact tracing system, which will be needed until the pandemic is over. Meanwhile, another option being considered is to conduct the retraining and reskilling sessions in destination countries, to be implemented in Philippine embassies and consulates abroad.⁵¹

Overseas remittances benefit families left behind and the Philippines' overall economy. Contrary to earlier projections, personal remittances from Filipinos abroad even grew during the early phase of the pandemic. In July 2020, overseas Filipinos sent \$3.085 billion in remittances, 7.6 percent more than the \$2.867 billion sent in the same month in 2019.⁵² However, one month later, remittance inflows decreased drastically by 4.1 percent compared with the amount the previous year.⁵³ The continued job losses among OFWs are expected to hurt remittance inflows to the Philippines until 2021, with the contraction in 2020 expected to be as high as ten percent. Such reduced financial flow will not only affect the whole Philippine economy, but also families relying on labor migration to weather the long-term economic recession brought about by the pandemic. Hence, financial assistance, in addition to new employment opportunities, will need to be continuously provided to newly unemployed returning migrants in the coming months. The Philippine Government recently committed to allocate PhP two billion (US \$41 million) for financial assistance to at least 200,000 OFWs as part of the next round of the Philippines' economic stimulus package.⁵⁴

Finally, as climate change ensues, natural disasters such as typhoons and extreme flooding are expected to continue afflicting the Filipino people in the future, even before the pandemic is over. Therefore, more massive internal displacement can be anticipated, which will complicate the task of observing social distancing and containing the virus. The country will therefore need to revisit its disaster risk reduction and response plans to incorporate pandemic control in pre-emptive evacuations before the typhoon arrives. Such planning will ensure safe and orderly relocation that will eventually save lives from both the virus and the natural calamity.

While waiting for the COVID-19 vaccine and the eventual resolution of the global health crisis, the Philippines and other predominantly sending countries will need to brace for the pandemic's long-term implications, especially for international labor migration. The initial responses to migrant workers' immediate needs, such as emergency repatriation and financial assistance, must

⁴⁹ "Gov't Braces for Close to 300,000 Returning Jobless OFWs." Manila Bulletin, September 25, 2020, <https://mb.com.ph/2020/09/25/govt-braces-for-close-to-300000-returning-jobless-ofws/>.

⁵⁰ "TESDA Rolls Out Training Programs for OFWs Displaced by Pandemic." UNTV, October 9, 2020, <https://www.untvweb.com/news/tesda-rolls-out-training-programs-for-ofws-displaced-by-pandemic/>.

⁵¹ "More than 55,000 OFWs Back in Phl: Retraining, Reskilling Abroad Suggested Instead of Going Home." One News, June 11, 2020, <https://www.onenews.ph/more-than-55-000-ofws-back-in-phl-retraining-reskilling-abroad-suggested-instead-of-going-home>.

⁵² "Beating Forecasts: OFW Remittances Rise 7.6% in July 2020." Rappler, September 15, 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/business/ofw-remittances-july-2020>.

⁵³ "Contraction in OFW Remittances Seen until 2021." Philippine News Agency, October 15, 2020, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1118702>.

⁵⁴ "2M Local Workers, OFWs to Get Aid from Bayanihan 2: Bello." Philippine News Agency, September 18, 2020, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1115896>.

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continue as more consider returning home in the coming months and years. However, the country must also begin transitioning to long-term planning to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic on migrant workers who lost their jobs and who will need to restart their lives anew back at home. Meanwhile, the perennial vulnerability of the Philippines to climate change will mean more natural disasters in the future alongside the pandemic. As the recent calamities in the Philippines demonstrate, the two crises have compounding effects on each other, and the resulting internal displacement of populations increase people's exposure to the virus while destroying their livelihoods and impacting their health.

The following table describes the assessment team's lessons and recommendations:

Table 1: Lessons and Recommendations	
Lessons	Recommendations
Pre-pandemic systems of multisectoral migration governance enabled the Philippines, a predominantly sending country, to mount immediate responses to emerging health needs of migrant workers (such as emergency repatriation and reintegration assistance) during this time of global health crisis.	Distill the lessons from the Philippine experience and communicate them to other predominantly sending countries in Asia so they can take advantage of the COVID-19 moment to establish such migrant-responsive policies, institutions, and protocols.
Because the end of the pandemic remains far out of sight, the needs of migrant workers will evolve from immediate concerns such as access to testing, financial aid, and travel assistance to more long-term challenges emanating from repatriation and unemployment.	Develop long-term plans and programs that create and expand economic and learning opportunities for migrant workers, such as retooling programs, support for local entrepreneurship, and allocation of sufficient financial assistance in economic stimulus packages.
As climate change continues, natural disasters are expected to happen while COVID-19 continues to spread, thereby complicating pandemic response and driving internal displacement of populations, as experienced for the first time in climate-vulnerable and disaster-prone Philippines.	Integrate climate adaptation, disaster preparedness, and migration governance in the COVID-19 pandemic response, especially in communities and countries that are highly vulnerable to climate change and natural disasters.

ANNEX III: MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA CASE STUDY- DAWEI-BANGKOK CORRIDOR



Photo Credit: Voice of America/Chiravuth Rungjamratsamsi AP 2017.

MYANMAR-THAILAND MIGRATION, COVID-19 AND THE ENVIRONMENT: A CASE STUDY ON THE DAWEI- BANGKOK CORRIDOR

Overview

This case study analyzes how COVID-19 exacerbates precarity faced by migrants from Myanmar to Thailand. It initially looks at environmental dimensions of migrant livelihoods and then considers other areas of impact. A particular focus on the Dawei-Bangkok corridor brings migrant experiences into sharper perspective.

An environmental entry point

The movement of people from Myanmar to Thailand is the largest international migration pathway within Southeast Asia and the 10th largest in the Asia-Pacific region.¹ Within this overall migrant flow lie more specific corridors. In this case study, we look primarily at the movement of people from the Dawei region to Bangkok to establish a finer-grained understanding of migrant experiences and the challenges to enhancing resilience than is possible from a wider frame of reference. However, we contextualize this corridor within the broader picture of Myanmar-

¹ IOM, World Migration Report; 2020; 72, https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/wmr_2020.pdf.

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Thailand migration. The case study is based on interviews with civil society workers supporting migrants and conducting research among them on both sides of the border² and on secondary materials referred to in the text.

The Dawei-Bangkok movement has numerous dimensions, but as an entry point, we explore environmental dimensions of the corridor. People living in and around Dawei face many livelihood uncertainties. A proposal dating back to 2008 for a special economic zone including a port and petrochemical complex requires sequestering several thousand hectares of land, displacing entire communities, and putting agricultural livelihoods at risk, while also holding out possibilities—but no guarantees—of local job creation.³ The main occupation in Dawei is near-shore fishing from small family-owned boats. Women and children are involved in fishing-related work. This occupation has faced increasing challenges due to declines in fish stocks and intensifying competition from large trawlers, particularly as new technologies such as powerful lamps have allowed larger boats to practice unsustainable and illegal methods including in near-shore fishing. In turn, small boat owners have been forced to invest in larger engines that allow them—also illegally—to fish outside the ten-mile line that is supposed to delimit fishing grounds of smaller and larger boats. Many of the larger commercial boats are financed through Myanmar owners by Thai backers, and fish sold off these Thai-financed boats are registered as Myanmar rather than Thai vessels, in part because of European sanctions imposed on Thai fish products because of illegal, unreported, and unregulated practices. At the same time, limited farmland and absence of alternative job opportunities have driven many from Dawei, as from elsewhere in Myanmar, to seek work in Thailand. In some cases, entire families move, while in others, individuals send remittances to support family back home in Dawei as part of diversified household livelihoods.

The context of Myanmar-Thailand migration

In 2019, 1.86 million migrants from Myanmar were recorded as living and working in Thailand, as are several hundred thousand unregistered migrants. Migrants come from many parts of Myanmar and from diverse ethnic groups including Burmese, Shan (Thai Yai), Mon, Dawei, Palaung, and others. In northern Thailand, some longer-standing migrants register as stateless highlanders, in the hope that their children born on Thai soil may find pathways to Thai citizenship despite the many obstacles they face.⁴

The number of Myanmar migrants in Thailand has increased steadily since 1990 and surpasses that of other neighboring countries (Figure 1). Migration is driven by the poverty and risks of sole dependence on agricultural livelihoods, in part due to small and insecure land holdings, in part to weather variability, and in part to low prices for products. For those seeking wage labor, minimum daily wages in Thailand that are three times the common daily wage in Myanmar draw many across the border. Lack of steady wage-earning opportunities in places such as Dawei also drives

² Unless indicated through footnoted references, information in this case study is derived from interviews with civil society workers and researchers working with migrants. Specific information is not attributed to individuals, but a list of those interviewed is detailed in Annex I of the main report.

³ For an official description of the project see <http://www.dawaisez.gov.mm>. Civil society concerns within Myanmar and Thailand are summarized at <http://www.earththailand.org/en/document/40>.

⁴ “No name, no rights: the long road to Thai citizenship.” *Voice of America*, 2 October 2018. <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia/no-name-no-rights-long-road-thai-citizenship>

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migration. Additional motivations to migrate are to earn income to service debts, such as those incurred by investment in fishing boats, and to build new houses. The costs of migration are quite high, typically involving an agent fee of about \$800, creating barriers for the poorest of the poor to migrate.

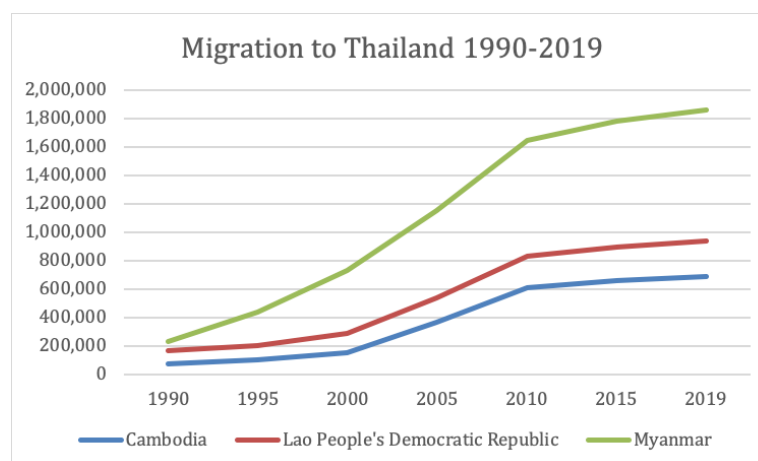


Figure 1: Migration to Thailand from neighboring countries, 1990–2019

Source: UNDESA

Note: The figures presented here likely exclude at least several hundred thousand irregular migrants from all three countries, whose inclusion would bring total numbers of migrants from Thailand's neighbors to between four and five million.

Prior to the pandemic, Myanmar migrants in Thailand already faced challenges. While Thailand offers migrant laborers benefits that are absent in other labor destination countries, including access to social security and health benefits, migrants face barriers to accessing these benefits as a result of information deficits and employer intransigence. Irregular migrants often avoid accessing services for fear of arrest or deportation. Within this group, women tend to suffer disproportionately, for example through lack of access to sexual and reproductive healthcare. Discrimination against migrants results in a heavy degree of social isolation in everyday life, even though many migrants spend years or even decades in Thailand. Most migrants live in dormitories or in rudimentary construction camps, usually in cramped conditions. However, the large number of Myanmar migrants and the length of time that many have spent in Thailand have led to the development of support networks among migrants and various civil society initiatives among Thai non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in support of migrant rights and basic working and living conditions.

Myanmar workers in Thailand fill five main areas of employment. In Bangkok and Chiang Mai, a large proportion of unskilled construction labor comes from neighboring countries. Factory labor in some industries is similarly dominated, notably seafood processing at Mahachai to the west of Bangkok. Labor on fishing boats involves mainly male Myanmar and Cambodian migrants. Near border areas in particular, Thai farmers depend on migrants for agricultural labor, often involving unregistered migrant workers. This is particularly the case for Lao migrants working on farms in

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northeastern Thailand, whose shared language with Isan and ease of crossing the Mekong River makes avoiding the formalities of migrant registration relatively straightforward.⁵ Service sector employment in hotels and domestic work is heavily migrant-dependent and is largely filled by women. The pandemic has affected all these areas of employment. Environmental living conditions among migrants in Bangkok are poor; most live in crowded dormitory accommodation or, especially in the case of construction workers, in makeshift camps. Domestic workers often live with their employers in cramped quarters and highly isolated conditions and access to common or public space is limited.

Migrant experiences of and responses to the pandemic

“When the garment factory where Tin Tin* worked for over a decade shut down in Mae Sot due to the financial impact of Covid-19 earlier this year, the 37-year-old Myanmar migrant resorted to picking wild water morning glory along a canal near her shanty home to cook and eat.” *Name changed for privacy.

Source: Yvonne Bohwongprasert, “Out of work and out of options.” *Bangkok Post*, 22 September 2020
<https://www.bangkokpost.com/life/social-and-lifestyle/1989575/out-of-work-and-out-of-options>

Thailand’s and Myanmar’s experiences of COVID-19 have differed significantly, shaping responses. Figure 2a shows the early spike in cases in Thailand, the first country outside China to record a local infection. At that time, with the infections peaking in late March, Myanmar was little affected. As businesses closed during Thailand’s lockdown starting in late March, many migrants sought to return to Myanmar at a time when many were planning to visit family for the April New Year celebrations. Some made it back before the borders closed, while others were stranded at the border, particularly at the Mae Sot-Myawaddy crossing. An International Organization for Migration survey of migrants in Mae Sot in April found that more than half had lost income and between 25 and 50 percent were entirely without work.⁶ Others preferred to sit things out in Bangkok, concerned about the likely difficulty and expense of returning to resume jobs.

Figure 2b shows that Myanmar infections only took off in September. As a result, borders that had been re-opened to goods were once again closed. In fact, significant numbers of migrants were reportedly able to return from Myanmar through irregular crossing points.⁷ Thailand’s lockdown ended in May, and many factories re-opened. Despite a high level of unemployment among Thais, few were prepared to take the place of Myanmar migrants in the generally low-paid and arduous employment niches that migrants fill.

⁵ Soimart Rungmanee, “Illegal but Licit: Migrant Mobility and the Negotiation of Legality in the Northeast Thai-Lao Borderlands.” *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 2016; 57(2): 221–231.

⁶ International Organization for Migration, “Rapid Assessment: COVID-19 Related Vulnerabilities and Perceptions of Non-Thai Populations in Thailand 2020. Bangkok. <https://thailand.iom.int/iom-thailand-covid-19-response>

⁷ Eg Assawin Pinitwong. “Three Myanmar Migrants Nabbed in Mae Sot for Illegal Entry. *Bangkok Post*. November 8, 2020. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2016083/three-myanmar-migrants-nabbed-in-mae-sot-for-illegal-entry>.

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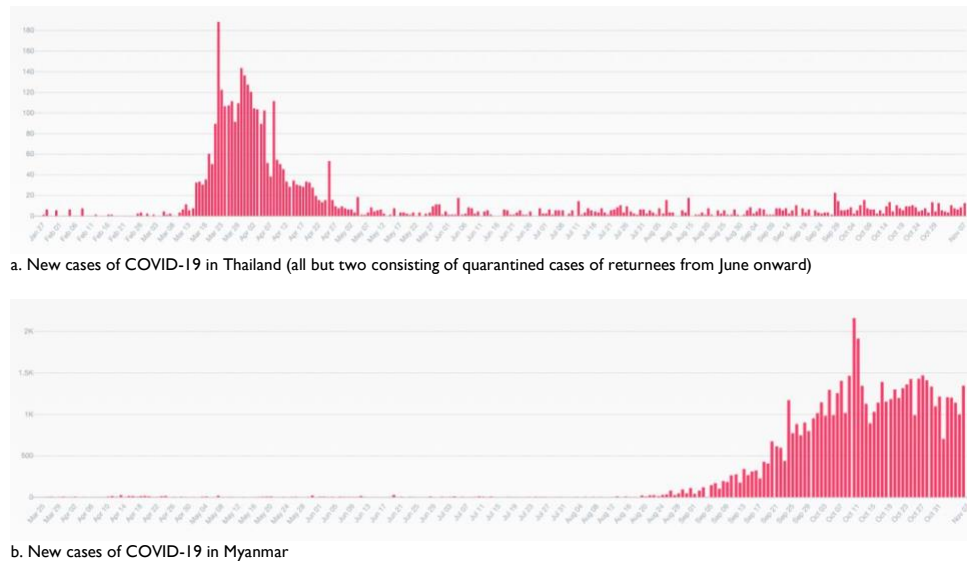


Figure 2: COVID-19 new case curves in Thailand and Myanmar, January, 31–November 7, 2020
 Source: Figures from Department of Disease Control, Thailand, and <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/> for Myanmar, both reported in <https://coronavirus.app/map> (accessed November 7, 2020).

The pandemic closed factories in which Myanmar migrant workers make up the main part of the workforce. An example is the seafood processing plants at Mahachai, west of Bangkok, whose closure not only affected the labor force but also fishing livelihoods in Dawei as the transport of fish via the Phu Nam Ron border crossing was closed off. Registered migrant workers who were laid off have been eligible for wage support through social security provisions, but many irregular workers have no such safety net.

Access to environmental resources has shaped the experience of the pandemic among migrants from Myanmar to Thailand in three main ways. For return migrants and the families of migrants who remain in Myanmar, resource-based livelihoods have become even more difficult. For those stranded in Thailand with reduced or no incomes, reliance on natural resources is part of their survival strategies. And for those living in crowded conditions in Bangkok, the longer time spent in dormitories as working hours have declined and the squeezing of even more individuals into small living spaces to save on rent as incomes have withered have exacerbated the impacts of crowding.

The pandemic has exacerbated challenges to already declining fishing-based livelihoods around Dawei as described previously. This has been due both to the general fall in prices associated with declining demand and to the barriers to transport of fish within Myanmar and across the border at Phu Nam Ron to the Mahachai market destination. Prices have fallen more than 20 percent. The only remaining market access to Thailand is at Ranong. Agricultural products with limited local demand in Dawei, including durians and cashews, have also seen price drops as border closures and internal restrictions within Myanmar have blocked off the markets for them in

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Thailand. This has aggravated what was already a very poor season for durians and other exported fruit due to low rainfall. Enhanced desire for alternative local employment has made the proposed special economic zone an even more locally divisive issue.

An interviewee who works for a local civil society organization (CSO), Dawei Watch, reported that nearly all the 2,000 households in his community has a family member working in Thailand. A survey reveals that remittance income has dropped significantly. Many have had to sell or pawn possessions such as motorcycles. While some have borrowed against their homes or land, to date no foreclosures have been reported.

Meanwhile, in their places of work in Thailand, migrants face environmental challenges related to crowded living conditions. Restrictions on movement and loss of income caused by pandemic-associated measures have worsened these challenges.

Migrants have coped with their precarious circumstances through individual means, spontaneous community measures, and support from CSOs. Individually, many migrants have cut down on food purchases, have relinquished individual accommodation to save money, have moved into shared dormitory units, and have reduced remittances to family members in Dawei. Community support has been facilitated in part by the concentration of migrants in particular areas. In Bangkok, many Dawei migrants live and work around the Or Tor Kor Market area near Jatujak weekend markets. Others live in Samut Prakan, in particular Phra Pradeng and Phra Pathom Jedi Districts on the western side of the Chaophraya River. Many CSOs have worked with migrant workers on access to services and on rights issues since before the pandemic hit, and some key individuals provide a bridge between the Thai civil society workers and the migrant community. Information is provided on and for migrants through websites such as the Thai and Burmese language Dawei Journey (သွေးသွေး) Facebook site,⁸ which produces and hosts videos depicting migrant experiences of the pandemic.

For example, in one 16-minute video, migrant workers mobilize to collect money to support COVID-19-affected communities in Dawei. A multilingual Dawei activist, who grew up in Thailand as the daughter of Dawei and Mon migrant workers, documents the activity by interviewing migrants in a dormitory room in Phra Pradaeng who come from Bago, Dawei, Mudo, Tanausri, Ayeyarwady, and Mon State. Donations come from migrant workers themselves and Thai supporters and in this event raised 12,030 baht—or about 40 days wages. The workers talk about being unable to return home because of COVID-19. The video also gives public health messages to those watching in Myanmar. They talk about the residual economic effect of reduced income as overtime pay has declined. The video indicates the community solidarity being shown during difficult times and serves a public information function that educates the wider Thai public about the circumstances of migrants in their midst.⁹ Another video includes interviews with workers from Dawei as they join the Thod Kathin festival at Chomnimit Temple in Phra Pradaeng, involving several ethnic groups in traditional dress. Myanmar migrants have had a close relationship with this temple since around 2012 and in 2019 raised 300,000 baht for the temple.

⁸ Facebook page: Dawei Journey. https://www.facebook.com/visitdawei/about/?ref=page_internal

⁹ Facebook page: Dawei Journey. Video. https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=354424815655875&ref=watch_permalink

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In turn, the temple serves as an important spiritual site, public space, gathering point, and source of funerary assistance and other mutual support for the diverse Myanmar migrant community, including many non-Buddhists. Again, this both fosters a sense of solidarity among multiethnic Myanmar migrants and gives the Thai audience a sense of shared culture with the migrants.¹⁰ Another video from mid-October talks about the worsening COVID-19 situation in Myanmar, and in Dawei in particular, including reports of the first local transmissions among the population in rural communities.¹¹ Internationally, the BBC Media Action Yay Kyi Yar site provides important information to migrants specifically on COVID-19 prevention and other relevant issues.¹²

Several organizations have provided support; the peace organization Spirit in Education Movement works with migrants both in Bangkok and in Dawei and is involved in coordinating support, for example, through the Dawei Journey site. Dawei Watch, which has a background in mobilizing opposition to some of the environmentally destructive projects proposed for the Dawei Special Economic Zone, has surveyed communities affected by loss of remittance income and difficulties in selling products. In Thailand, Mae Fah Luang University in Chiang Rai and Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok have carried out studies of migrant workers from Myanmar; those involved in the Mae Fah Luang University study have also advocated on behalf of migrants. Chiang Mai University has studied the ways in which urban expansion affects the urban poor, including one sub-study of Shan (Thai Yai) migrants from Myanmar in the Wat Pong Noi area. The study is led by a well-known human rights law academic, Somchai Preechasilpakul.¹³

Gender, health, and governance considerations

The gender-specific impacts of COVID-19 on migrant workers from Myanmar include loss of jobs in industries employing mainly female labor such as seafood processing. Domestic violence associated with crowded living conditions and stresses of reduced income remains a concern. A rapid assessment carried out by CARE International shows that border closures and deteriorating health services have affected pregnant women.¹⁴

In public health governance terms, Thailand is often singled out as a model for other countries. Its success in containing the pandemic has been attributed to the effectiveness of village health volunteers. Extending this scheme to migrant health volunteers has doubtless assisted in public education and local control measures that have helped the country avoid a Singapore-type experience of outbreaks in the migrant community. The extension of health insurance to migrants is also an important safety net, but the uptake is far from universal, with about half of all migrants

¹⁰ Facebook page: Dawei Journey. Video, <https://www.facebook.com/900118733335120/videos/372471817139031>

¹¹ Facebook page: Dawei Journey. Video, <https://www.facebook.com/visitdawei/videos/336411640791926>

¹² “Yay Kyi Yar: Making the most of migration and money.” BBC Media Action. https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/where-we-work/asia/myanmar/yay-kyi-yar?ns_linkname=corporate&ns_campaign=bbc_media_action&ns_mchannel=social&ns_source=facebook&fbclid=IwAR1k1FzIKDUtJ1HBJsSsHYs4O2-R3s3rn5PEEmmM136VQeFIgQODR9kbOrDI

¹³ Somchai Preechasilpakul was also part of a group advocating early in the pandemic for a more inclusive set of government support measures for those suffering income losses during the March–April lockdown. See Ana Salva “Thailand: The Coronavirus Suicides.” *The Diplomat*, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/thailand-the-coronavirus-suicides/>

¹⁴ CARE. *Rapid Gender Analysis of COVID-19: Gendered Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Migrants in Thailand – June 2020*. CARE, 14 August 2020. <https://reliefweb.int/report/thailand/rapid-gender-analysis-covid-19-gendered-impact-covid-19-pandemic-migrants-thailand>

failing to access the social security and health insurance options.¹⁵ In part, this is because not all employers are prepared to do the required paperwork and in part because unregistered migrants themselves wish to keep a low profile. A study in Ranong showed that conflicting objectives between ministries led health authorities to seek to involve all migrants in the Health Insurance Card Scheme, while economy-oriented ministries were more concerned with limiting coverage to registered migrants.¹⁶ Access to social security benefits in the form of wage relief equivalent to 62 percent of former wages that is open to migrant workers has not gained the coverage because relevant apps are only in the Thai language and many migrants do not know their full range of entitlements, despite the announcement of a multilingual government hotline.¹⁷ Coverage also requires employers to register employees' redundancies,¹⁸ and without a Thai bank account, they cannot receive benefits. Furthermore, Thai employers hiring workers from Myanmar in special economic zones in border areas, for example at Mae Sot, evade responsibilities by employing migrants on repeated 90-day contracts, using the border pass provisions in such zones to sidestep requirements for memorandum of understanding- based sponsorship. Support of community organizations has helped to overcome such barriers in some cases, but their reach is far from universal.¹⁹ IOM has produced materials in regional languages informing workers of rights to social security payments and other relevant information, but the reach of such materials is unclear.²⁰ Some publicized cases show employers independently taking care of their longstanding migrant workers through food relief, with the expectation that once the economy recovers they will continue to depend on one another.²¹ Such informal relief measures in the destination country, are welcome, but consideration needs to be given to families and communities left behind who faced significant challenges in pre-pandemic times and now experience reduced support.²²

The other main governance concern affecting Myanmar migrants in Thailand is the stop-and-go nature of border openings and possibilities of visa extension. Migrants who tried to return home in mid to late March 2020 were stranded by the very short window between announcement and promulgation of the border closure. Advocates pressed the Thai Government to alter rules allowing workers to renew work contracts and associated visas without having to return home.²³ The Thai Government duly extended permission to stay for seasonal workers and for workers who had entered the country under MOU arrangements between Thailand and neighboring

¹⁵ Titiporn Tuangratananon et al., "In Thailand, noncitizen health matters." *ThinkGlobalHealth*.

<https://www.thinkglobalhealth.org/article/thailand-noncitizen-health-matters>

¹⁶ R. Suphanchaimat, "Health Insurance Card Scheme' for Cross-Border Migrants in Thailand: Responses in Policy Implementation & Outcome Evaluation." 2017; London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, <http://researchonline.lshtm.ac.uk/view/creators/15afa5cf2859f41068d58678a880b29.html>.

¹⁷ Chosert Supasitthumrong, "Thailand's Ministry of Labor formalizes further COVID-19 relief through social security fund." *Tilleke and Gibbins*. 21 April 2020. <https://www.tilleke.com/resources/thailand-s-ministry-labor-formalizes-further-covid-19-relief-through-social-security-fund>; See also: "Migrant workers affected by COVID-19 can claim unemployment benefits." *National News Bureau of Thailand* 30 April 2020. <https://thainews.prd.go.th/en/news/detail/TCATG200430163434719>

¹⁸ Penchan Charoensuthippan, "Migrants see lives upended by downturn." *Bangkok Post*. 4 May 2020.

<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1912084/migrants-see-lives-upended-by-downturn>

¹⁹ Human Rights and Development Foundation made a case in August 2020 for migrants in special economic zones to receive similar support as those with insurance and for the Government to close loopholes: <http://hrdfoundation.org/?p=2383>

²⁰ IOM Thailand, *IOM Thailand COVID-19 Response*. <https://thailand.iom.int/iom-thailand-covid-19-response>

²¹ Thai PBS news item at Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/553532068140018/posts/1533313156828566/?vh=e&d=n>

²² Naramul Nirathron, "Social Protection for Those Who are Left Behind as a Result of Migration: Myanmar Case Study and Proposed Recommendations for Consideration." *Thammasat Review* 2018, 1: 93-110. <https://sc01.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/tureview/article/view/130509>

²³ This Voice of America video documents examples from northern Thailand in June: <https://www.voanews.com/covid-19-pandemic/thailands-migrant-workers-struggle-qualify-aid-during-pandemic-0>

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countries until July 31st in the first instance and then for subsequent periods.²⁴ In November, the Government announced that those on four-year contract arrangements due to expire in 2021 would be allowed to extend for an extra two years without having to return to Myanmar.²⁵

The following table highlights the recommendations from the assessment team:

²⁴IOM Thailand, *COVID-19 Flash Update: Government guidance affecting migrant workers and their employers in Thailand and neighbouring countries*. IOM. 4 June 2020. <https://thailand.iom.int/sites/default/files/COVID19Response/04-06-2020%20IOM%20Flash%20Update%20on%20COVID-19%20for%20Migrant%20Workers%20in%20Thailand.pdf>

²⁵Chatrudee Theparat and Penchan Charoensuthipan. "Labor shortage a blessing for migrant workers," *Bangkok Post*. 10 November 2020. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2017363/labour-shortage-a-blessing-for-migrant-workers>

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Table 1: Lessons and Recommendations	
Lessons	Recommendations
Many existing support networks are assisting migrant workers in accessing services and informing them of their rights, both informal and civil society based, including several Thai NGOs working with Myanmar-based counterparts.	Support should work through the more effective and longstanding civil society networks that are based on established relationships of trust rather than through larger-scale, overly bureaucratic organizations.
COVID-19 impacts in destination locations intersect with structural and pre-existing aspects of migrant precarity.	Programs that address access to health, labor, and housing conditions will assist migrants to cope with future shocks.
Environment, natural resource, and land-related factors are among the drivers of migration from Myanmar, and long-term options for return migrants and for providing choices on whether to migrate in the first place require attention to origin and destination conditions.	Continue support for programs related to security of land tenure and natural resource governance in Myanmar, including, for example, fisheries law reform and enforcement.
Thailand provides social security and health insurance options to migrants that are not available in some other destination countries, but many migrants nevertheless fall through cracks in the system. Integrating migrant workers into safety nets, including social security and health benefits, is good not only for migrant workers but also for economy/society/public health in host countries.	In seeking policy reform in other countries in the Asia-Pacific region, facilitate observation of the Thai approach. At the same time, work with Thai authorities and civil society organizations to learn from the pandemic experience about how to extend coverage of health insurance and social security more comprehensively.
Migrant precarity is based on conditions at points of origin, the journey (both ways) between origin and destination), and at destination locations.	Migrant support needs coordination across borders, for example, the work carried out by SEM.
Single-employer requirements associated with MOUs/sponsorship place migrants in positions of vulnerability, particularly in a situation of job losses such as during the pandemic.	Work at the policy level to explore more flexible arrangements that allow workers to move between employers/locations in the destination country.
While the pandemic has heightened the desire for locally available jobs at Dawei, civil society groups remain opposed to the kind of industrial development being proposed, in particular the petrochemical industry.	Work with local groups to explore alternatives that are not destructive of the environment and people's health, for example, sustainable fishing and tourism, which are preferred to development such as that seen at Map Tha Phut in Thailand. The build back better initiatives should emphasize local employment.
Returning home and then re-entering Thailand are costly for migrants. Costs are both for the trip itself and for the fees and paperwork involved in border crossing and visas.	As migrants have become a structurally integral part of Thailand's labor force, longer stays and advance provisions for events that lead to border closures should be explored at the policy level.
Temples provide a physical and social space for mutual community support.	Ways for migrants to congregate beyond their own living quarters should be explored, for example in culturally significant spaces such as temples and mosques.

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ANNEX IV: MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA CASE STUDY- CAMBODIA



MIGRANTS, COVID-19, AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN CAMBODIA A CASE STUDY ON SIEM REAP

Overview

This case study, which focuses particularly on Siem Reap, explores how impacts of COVID-19 on Cambodia's economy intersect with other severe livelihood challenges that the country's poor face. The primary focus is on internal migration, but the impacts of lost remittances from Thailand are also considered. Many of the livelihood challenges exacerbated by the pandemic are environmental in nature.

An environmental entry point

Internal and international migration from rural areas in Cambodia has increased rapidly in recent years. As a country until recently highly dependent on its land and natural resources, Cambodia has seen many of its rural poor turn to urban-based livelihoods. Within the country, this has occurred as the country's tourism industry has boomed and as new industries such as garment factories have brought hundreds of thousands of workers into jobs highly dependent on global supply chains. Many migrants pursuing these new opportunities find themselves in precarious employment and living conditions.

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This study focuses on one location that features various dimensions of precarity: Siem Reap.¹ An environmental crisis in the collapse of the fishery at Tonle Sap Lake, the source of livelihood for more than one million people and the main source of food protein in the country,² exacerbates the hardships experienced by migrants and their families in this province. By October 2020, fish catches were reportedly down 70 percent on an already very poor 2019 season, and exports had fallen 84 percent.³ Severe drought during the early part of the wet season resulted in poor yields of rice and other crops, and devastating floods late in the season resulted in further heavy losses.⁴ Furthermore, in Siem Reap, as elsewhere in the country, problems in access to land and associated environmental resources mean that moving back to the family farm only serves as a livelihood cushion for some. Most rural households depend on multiple sources of income, including farming, fishing, and migrant remittances, so the concurrent impact on these bases of livelihood has been particularly difficult when combined with the loss of local income resulting from pandemic-induced business closures.

The country's international tourism sector employs an estimated 1.03 million Cambodian workers who directly or indirectly depend on tourism spending.⁵ The most significant location is Siem Reap, due to the 2.6 million annual visitors to the Angkor Wat complex. An indicative figure is that 89 percent of the country's tour guides were employed here in 2015.⁶ Siem Reap is Cambodia's largest source of foreign exchange income from tourism, yet it is also one of the poorest provinces in Cambodia on a per capita income basis.⁷ Because of the geographical concentration of tourism, many who depend on it have moved from other provinces. Employment in the sector includes direct jobs in hotels, tour guide companies, interprovincial transport, and restaurants and indirect and often more informal jobs such as motorbike taxi drivers, masseurs, other services, and jobs in the construction sector.

The context of migration and livelihoods in Cambodia

Notwithstanding the still largely rural composition of Cambodia's population, mobility in the country is longstanding. From wartime displacements of the early 1970s, to the upheavals and relocations of the Khmer Rouge era, to the protracted civil war during the 1980s, and to post-war seeking of land on which to make a living, Cambodians have been on the move for decades. More recently, new migration patterns have seen movement from rural-based livelihoods upon which about 79 percent of Cambodians continue to depend, and on which land- and natural

¹ Insight from interviews with social researchers based in Siem Reap, Phnom Penh, and Battambang supplement international sources. Specific information is not attributed to individuals.

² Althor et al. "Large Scale Environmental Degradation Results in Inequitable Impacts to Already Impoverished Communities A Case Study from the Floating Villages of Cambodia." *Ambio* 47. 2018. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13280-018-1022-2>

³ Luke Hunt, "Amid Drought and Flooding, Cambodian Fish Catches, Exports Fall Precipitously." *The Diplomat*, October 27, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/amid-drought-and-flooding-cam...&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_5d4083d243-6e5ebfad80-380867409

⁴ "Deadly flooding displaces thousands across Mekong region." *Al Jazeera*. 11 October 2020.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/11/deadly-floods-displace-thousands-in-cambodia-vietnam>

⁵ Asian Development Bank. *Tourism Sector Assessment, Strategy and Road Map for Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic Myanmar, and Vietnam (2016-2018)*. ADB. 2017. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/227186/clmv-tourism-sector-assessment.pdf>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Asian Development Bank, *Cambodia Country Poverty Analysis 2014*. <https://www.adb.org/documents/cambodia-country-poverty-analysis-2014>

resource-based occupations play a significant part for 67 percent, to Cambodians working in metropolitan areas.⁸ Internal migration is more significant in numerical terms than international migration.⁹

Four main patterns of migration exist. First, and largely extraneous to this study, are large numbers of landless or land-short farmers who have moved in search of land from core rice-growing agricultural areas to upland provinces in the country's northeastern provinces of Ratanakiri and Monduliri and to the Cardamom Mountains in the southwestern provinces of Pursat and Koh Kong. Rural-rural migration continues to be the largest category of migrants.¹⁰ Second is migration to Thailand, which is based on the large wage differential between the two countries and Thailand's demand for low-skilled labor from neighboring countries and on the relative ease and low cost of crossing the land border. Third, and more recent, is more costly but also more remunerative migration to northeast Asia, particularly the Republic of Korea, largely through organized schemes, and to Malaysia. Fourth, and numerically more significant than international migration, is migration from rural to urban parts of Cambodia, where three main destinations predominate. As the capital and largest city, Phnom Penh has attracted most migrants. Garment factories employ at least 600,000 workers, most of them women internal migrants. Construction and informal sector jobs associated with the city's boom also employ large numbers of migrants. Sihanoukville has also boomed with Chinese investment, creating many jobs in the construction sector. Finally, Siem Reap's tourism boom associated¹¹ with the Angkor Wat temple complex has seen large numbers of rural migrants seek jobs directly in tourism-related activity and indirectly in construction and informal sector jobs.

Migrant experiences and responses to the pandemic

"It's a fire sale: Sell your house, pay your debts, go to Thailand and start again," Pheap said. "I am one of the lucky ones. I managed to stay ahead of my debt, but there are others who have borrowed so much that they will never come back."

Source: "Land to lose: coronavirus compounds debt crisis in Cambodia," 21 September 2020. *Channel News Asia*.
<https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/cambodia-microfinance-debt-poverty-land-covid-19-13128622>

Despite its rudimentary public health system, COVID-19 affected Cambodia very lightly in public health terms, for a range of hypothesized reasons including cultural factors, experience with previous epidemics and the still largely rural nature of the population. As of November 9th, the country had seen fewer than 300 cases and no deaths. However, the country's poor have been hard hit economically due to downturns in economic activity and restrictions on movement. Loss of manufacturing jobs and loss of tourism income on which so many depend have affected migrants. By the end of April, more than 100,000 workers had lost their jobs in the Phnom Penh–

⁸ UNESCO, *Overview of International Migration in Cambodia: Policy Briefs on International Migration in Southeast Asia 2017*. Bangkok.
<https://bangkok.unesco.org/sites/default/files/assets/article/Social%20and%20Human%20Sciences/publications/Brief%20-%20-%20Country%20Brief%20-%20Cambodia.pdf>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kimkong Heng, "What lies behind Cambodia's surprising coronavirus success?" *Nikkei Asia*, 2 June 2020.
<https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/What-lies-behind-Cambodia-s-surprise-coronavirus-success>

based garment factories, whose closure was forced by loss of overseas orders.¹² The partial loss of Everything But Arms preferential trade access to the European Union as of August 12th in response to Cambodia's deteriorating human rights situation has exacerbated the economic slowdown, affecting 20 percent of exports in the garment and footwear industries.¹³ There are many reports of laid-off workers not being paid their due entitlements.¹⁴

Cambodia's third case of COVID-19 occurred in Siem Reap in early March, which was followed by closure of schools and other public places. By the end of the month, the country's land borders had been closed,¹⁵ and in early April, a temporary interprovincial travel ban was imposed for the period through the Cambodian New Year. Considered essential workers for the economy, those employed in garment factories were given exemptions but had to undergo 14-day quarantines on their return to Phnom Penh.¹⁶ Early in the pandemic, 90,000 Cambodians returned home from neighboring countries, mainly from Thailand. This move was fueled by fears that returning would be impossible later and that migrants might find themselves unemployed and stranded in a country with more cases than in Cambodia (Figure 1).¹⁷ The returnees were required to quarantine for 14 days, with little government financial or logistical support for doing so.¹⁸ Siem Reap Province had the third largest number of returnees.¹⁹

¹² Ate Hoekstra. "Coronavirus brings trouble to Cambodia's garment industry." DW. 29 April 2020.

<https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-brings-trouble-to-cambodias-garment-industry/a-53284224>

¹³ Uch Leang. "20% of EBA withdrawal effect." Khmer Times. 24 August 2020. <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50756228/20-of-eba-withdrawal-effect/>

¹⁴ "Cambodia: Construction workers face unpaid wages while COVID-19 pandemic and flooding cause disruption of construction activities." Business and Human Rights Resource Center. 11 November 2020. <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/cambodia-construction-workers-face-unpaid-wages-while-covid-19-pandemic-and-flooding-cause-disruption-of-construction-activities/>

¹⁵ Becki Bolsover, "COVID-19's impact on Cambodia." GVI. Nd. <https://www.gvi.co.uk/blog/covid-19s-impact-on-cambodia/>

¹⁶ Galileo de Guzman Castillo, "Cambodia COVID-19 Situationer". Focus on the Global South. 2020. <https://focusweb.org/cambodia-covid-19-situationer/>

¹⁷ USAID and Winrock International, "Situational Assessment of Labor Migrants in Asia: Needs and Knowledge during COVID-19 Series Brief I: Cambodia. 2020. Washington DC. https://winrock.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/migrant-study_cambodia.pdf

¹⁸ Castillo, "Cambodia COVID-19 Situationer."

¹⁹ See IOM COVID-19 Response Situation Report, https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/situation_reports/file/covid-19_response_iom_cambodia_sitrep_13apr-15may_2020.pdf

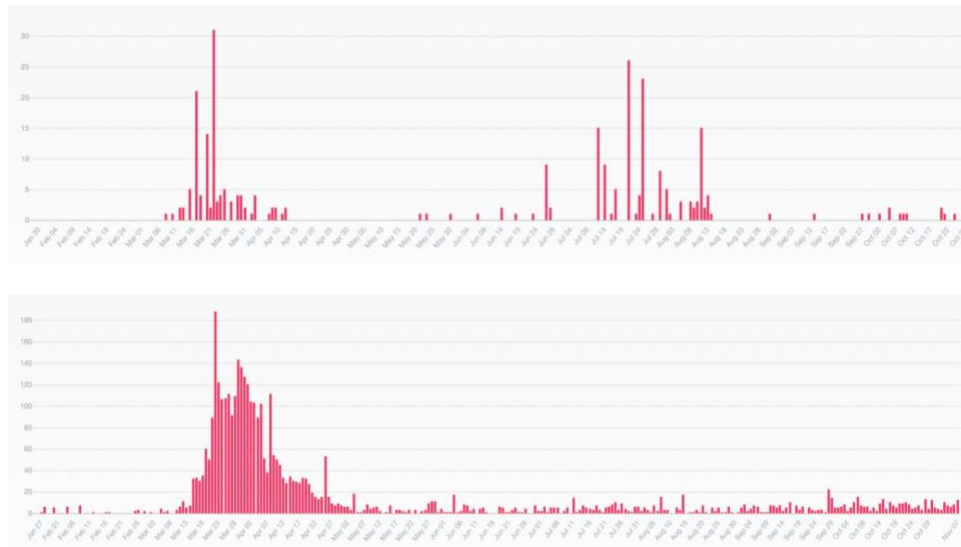


Figure 1: New cases of COVID-19 in Cambodia (top) compared with Thailand (bottom) January 31–November 7, 2020. <https://coronavirus.app/map>

The complete shutdown of the international tourism industry in Siem Reap led to the closure of the airport; to widespread closures of hotels, restaurants, and other businesses; and to the collapse of informal employment that was the basis of livelihood for many. The loss of jobs has affected both locals and migrants from other provinces.²⁰ As international tourism came to a halt and hotels, restaurants, and other enterprises shut down, many migrants were observed loading up possessions and returning to their home provinces. Since then, domestic tourism has seen a partial income recovery, but on a much smaller scale than provided by the international sector. Small businesses such as restaurants have been devastated and now face debt service problems that eclipse concerns about the pandemic itself.²¹

To gauge the impact of COVID-19 on migrants in Siem Reap and more widely in Cambodia, understanding concurrent crises that have created a kind of “perfect storm” of vulnerability is necessary. The losses of local tourist income, of remittance income from Thailand, and of jobs among family members in the garment and footwear sector in Phnom Penh combine with at least five other major hardships that intensified during 2020—four of which are environmental in nature. The first is the failure of the reversal of the Tonle Sap River, which normally occurs between late May and mid-June and lasts until October, filling up Tonle Sap Lake and providing the basis for its enormously productive fishery. Low flows all the way along the Mekong River meant that the normal eight to nine meter increase in river levels at Chatomuk, the confluence of the Tonle Sap and Mekong at Phnom Penh, failed to occur. The result has been a near-total loss

²⁰ Castillo, “Cambodia COVID-19 Situationer.”

²¹ Isa Rohany, “Siem Reap locals: ‘Debt haunts us more than COVID-19.’” *Cambodianess*. 31 March 2020. <https://cambodianess.com/article/siem-reap-locals-debt-haunts-us-more-than-covid-19>

of catch in what was the world's largest freshwater fishery, which has provided millions of people in Siem Reap and other provinces surrounding the lake food and income, but which has been under increasingly severe pressure for some time.²² The second environment-related hardship is the drought that afflicted Cambodian farmers with record-low rainfall during the early part of the wet season.²³ The third is a set of damaging floods in September and October as a result of typhoons that had already caused havoc in the Philippines and Vietnam and that drenched lower northeastern Thailand and much of Cambodia, destroying large areas of ripening rice and forcing the closure of some remaining garment factories, including about 40 factories in Kandal and Kompong Speu alone.²⁴ Both the drought and the floods have been attributed to climate change, which has also increased the frequency and severity of the tropical storms that normally affect the region at this time of year.

The fourth resource-and-environment-related hardship that intersects with resilience to COVID-19-related vulnerability is the steady rise in landlessness among the rural poor. This has occurred in Cambodia as a result both of land grabbing, particularly in areas where tenure is insecure, and as an outcome of debt-induced distress sales of land. This connects to the fifth main hardship: Cambodia's severe micro-credit crisis, which has come to a head in 2020.²⁵ There are 2.6 million outstanding micro-credit loans in a country of 3.5 million households. Average household debt of \$3,370 is equivalent to two years' average per capita gross domestic product.²⁶ An important reason for borrowing is to finance migration, which involves agent fees and the cost of the move itself. Many families struggled to meet debt repayments even prior to the pandemic, and income losses have pushed many into effective default. Anecdotal accounts and published studies suggest that relatively few formal foreclosures have occurred, as micro-credit institutions are not permitted to assume ownership of land. However, many indebted families have had to sell land to third parties to relieve their debt burdens. Local authorities reportedly helped creditors negotiate and sometimes coerce such distress sales.²⁷ This situation further limits the "return to the land" options for those who have lost their urban jobs during the pandemic, which in any case is not a viable option at an aggregate level.²⁸ A survey of indebtedness among laid-off garment workers paints a stark picture of how these multiple livelihood crises combine.²⁹

The reported coping mechanism for those on greatly reduced incomes is foregone consumption, including reduced food expenditure. This mirrors the way in which the Cambodian poor

²² Althor et al. "Large Scale Environmental Degradation Results in Inequitable Impacts to Already Impoverished Communities A Case Study from the Floating Villages of Cambodia": <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13280-018-1022-2>

²³ See meteorological situation report January–July 2020 at <https://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/Situation-report-Jan-Jul-2020.pdf>

²⁴ Tran Techseng, "Floodwaters disrupt production at factories, affecting 16,000 workers." VOD News, 21 October 2020. <https://vodenglish.news/floodwaters-disrupt-production-at-factories-affecting-16000-workers/>

²⁵ David Hutt, "Can Cambodia's Looming Microfinance Disaster Be Averted?" *The Diplomat*, October 9, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/can-cambodias-looming-microfinance-disaster-be-averted>

²⁶ Castillo, "Cambodia COVID 19 Situationer."

²⁷ LICADHO, "Collateral Damage: Land Loss and Abuses in Cambodia's Microfinance Sector." 2019. Phnom Penh, <https://www.licadho-cambodia.org/reports.php?perm=228>

²⁸ World Bank, "Cambodia Economic Update: Cambodia in the Time of COVID 19." 2020 Phnom Penh. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/cambodia/publication/cambodia-in-the-time-of-covid-19-coronavirus-economic-update-may-2020>

²⁹ CATU, CENTRAL and LICADHO. "Worked to Debt: Over-Indebtedness in Cambodia's Garment Sector." 2020 <https://www.licadho-cambodia.org/reports.php?perm=230>

responded to the 2008 food price spikes. Community-level support mechanisms are relatively few, but kin-based support comes in the form of low- or no-interest loans and shared food by those who have surplus; additionally, rice distribution by the Red Cross has served as another safety net measure. Those who have lost informal earning opportunities in cities, for example, motorbike taxis, have tried their luck in district towns or back in their home villages, on greatly reduced incomes but also with smaller expenses.

For those with some investment capital but not much land, some in Siem Reap are trying their hand at new agricultural activities such as raising frogs, or other land-intensive activities such as raising ducks or chickens. Among the poor, scavenging and small-scale recycling have increased noticeably, involving significant numbers of children. Many wealthy people seek to buy land, whose price has not declined during the pandemic, but more people are willing to sell. Part-time fishing has increased noticeably, but in a severely depleted fishery, which puts even more pressure on those living in floating villages on the Tonle Sap Lake, who face increased competition. Heavy competition and conflict are reported between Cham migrants displaced from the Chatomuk area next to Phnom Penh and ethnic Vietnamese fishers on Tonle Sap, who number among Cambodia's poorest people and are normally entirely dependent on fishing. Online selling has been a noticeable growth industry, even among quite poor families in very small-scale operations. This activity has noticeably spread from middle class to less educated participants.

Governance and gender considerations

Government responses to the pandemic have involved a combination of closures of tourism and entertainment places, together with a limited set of cash transfers targeted at those who already had been identified as poor and to laid-off workers in defined sectors, including garment factories and tourism. Prime Minister Hun Sen exhorted those who had lost their urban jobs to return to family farms,³⁰ an option that is unlikely to ameliorate the situation of the majority of farmers who are near landless and unable to survive on the family farm alone.³¹

At the societal level, the pandemic in Cambodia has resulted in a shunning of groups suspected of carrying the virus. Early on, migrants returning from Thailand or from provinces where early outbreaks had occurred were isolated within their home communities. A common story in villages is of relatives asking returnees to stay in the chicken coop for the first two weeks following their return. On the positive side, awareness and caution with respect to the disease most likely helped to contain its spread. More perniciously, however, it has led to widespread discrimination against whole population groups, especially those who previously faced prejudice, most notably the Muslim Cham minority as reports associated infections with those who had participated in religious events in Malaysia and inside Cambodia.³²

³⁰ Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights, "They Escaped the Worst of COVID-19. Now Cambodians Face a Debt Crisis." <https://www.central-cambodia.org/archives/4420>

³¹ Len Ang. "Will Cambodia's Shift in Focus to Farming Work?" *The Diplomat*, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/will-cambodias-shift-in-focus-to-small-scale-farming-work/>

³² Castillo, "Cambodia COVID-19 Situationer."

The hardships particularly burdens women in many ways. Unlike rural-to-rural migration, where most migrants are men, there are more women than men rural-urban migrants.³³ Most of those who have lost jobs in garment factories are women. In the division of labor within Khmer households, women are often left to deal with the difficult negotiation of debt repayments.³⁴ Many fishing-related occupations, from post-harvest processing to marketing, are largely done by women, and these have been hard hit both by the decline in catches and by demand- and logistics-related challenges during the pandemic.³⁵ The pandemic has also exacerbated an already relatively high level of domestic violence in Cambodia.³⁶

The following table describes the lessons learned and recommendations from the assessment team:

TABLE 1: LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	
Lessons	Recommendations
Dependence of more than two-thirds of Cambodia's population on land, natural resources, and environmental goods means that crises such as drought, floods, and reduced river flows affect the rural poor particularly severely.	The inherently risky nature of rural livelihoods requires social insurance measures parallel to those found in leading-edge sectors of the economy to assist in coping with environmental shocks.
Resilience in rural Cambodia has largely been considered in the context of rural socio-ecological systems that support farming. The high rate of internal and international migration and the consequences of a shock such as the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that livelihood resilience needs to be considered within an expanded frame of reference.	Given the rapid increase in internal and international migrants from rural Cambodia, rural development programs that seek to build resilience should incorporate migration and associated remittances into the diversified livelihood portfolios that support resilience against external shocks. Support for fairer migration pathways should be advocated, for example through "employer pays" models to cover agent costs.
The pandemic has exacerbated what are essentially structural issues, with contingent environmental crises sitting on top of all of these.	Structural issues including insecure and unequal access to land suggest that long-term resilience is built through measures that address inequalities and insecurities in access to resources.
Those most affected are those relying on global value chains, whether through migration, export-dependent factory work, or tourism.	While most of the leading edges of the Cambodian economy expose workers and farmers to the vagaries of global markets, regional employment, and international visitors, safety nets based on ability to live on more

³³ UNESCO. "Overview of Internal Migration In Cambodia." https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326626956_Precarious_Debt_Microfinance_Subjects_and_Intergenerational_Dependency_in_Cambodia

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ UNEP, "COVID-19 opens a can of worms for fisherwomen in Cambodia." UNEP. 14 July 2020. <https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/covid-19-opens-can-worms-fisherwomen-cambodia>

³⁶ "Cambodian groups ask government to combat gender-based violence in COVID-19 response." Cambodian Center for Human Rights. 8 April 2020. <https://ifex.org/cambodian-groups-ask-government-to-combat-gender-based-violence-in-covid-19-response/>

TABLE 1: LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	
Lessons	Recommendations
	localized food and income generation opportunities should be a component of development strategies.
Micro-credit is increasingly out of control, with loose attention by lenders to ability to service loans, who rely instead on collateral, especially land.	Micro-credit lending practices should be reviewed thoroughly, which otherwise threaten to undermine resilience and further concentrate land in the hands of the wealthy.

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ANNEX V: INTRAREGIONAL PACIFIC ISLANDS CASE STUDY



COVID-19, CLIMATE CHANGE, AND INTRAREGIONAL MIGRATION A CASE STUDY ON THE PACIFIC

Overview

This short case study explores the interrelationships among climate change, COVID-19, and intraregional migration in the Pacific. Pacific Island countries are among those most at risk from the impacts of climate change. At the same time, economic pressures have long been drivers of Pacific migration. Today, measures that have largely been successful in limiting the spread of COVID-19¹ have had dire consequences for the economies of the region—and have severely limited migration that has long functioned as a safety valve for responding to growing economic and environmental pressures.

An environmental entry point

Pacific Island countries (PICs) have long sounded the alarm about the impact of climate change on their societies, cultures, and even their continued existence as independent nation-states. In 2018, Pacific leaders adopted the Boe Declaration on Regional Security, which identifies climate change as the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security, and well-being of the peoples of the

¹It is important to note that the 1918 influenza pandemic resulted in a mortality rate as high as 22 percent in some Pacific Island countries, and more recently outbreaks of arboviral disease and measles have had serious effects on Pacific populations. T. Craig, A.E. Heywood, and J. Hall, "Risk of COVID-19 Importation to the Pacific Islands through Global Air Travel." *Epidemiology and Infection* 2020;148(E 71): 1–5, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7113321/>.

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Pacific.² Today leaders in the region are drawing links between COVID-19 and climate change. As Meg Taylor, Secretary-General of the Pacific Islands Forum said, “the COVID-19 public health emergency and its ensuing humanitarian and economic fallout offers a glimpse of what the global climate change emergency can become—if it is left unchecked and if we do not act now.”³ Both climate change and the pandemic are global threats to all regions that demand a collective response.

Intraregional cooperation among PICs has historically been strong, particularly on climate change, and the present crisis may further strengthen these ties as Fijian Prime Minister and incoming chair of the Pacific Islands Forum, Vorege Bainimarama, remarked, “Now as we face these dual crises—climate change and contagion— island nations must stand together with a more united voice than ever before.”⁴ Migration has played an important role in strengthening relations among PICs, and its resumption in the post-COVID-19 world will be important to the region’s recovery and development.

At the regional level, the Pacific Islands Forum has invoked the Biketawa Declaration, which was designed to facilitate regional assistance in times of emergency to member states. The principal instrument of the Forum to respond to the current health crisis is the Pacific Humanitarian Pathway on COVID-19 to coordinate assistance in areas such as “expediting medical assistance, expediting customs clearance of medical supplies and facilitating diplomatic clearances for chartered flights and commercial shipping.”⁵

As detailed in the main body of this report, the restrictions that were implemented to control the spread of COVID-19 have had a devastating impact on the economies in the region, particularly those that depend on tourism and/or remittances for their development. In this respect COVID-19—like climate change—is acting as a threat multiplier in the region. While economic and environmental pressures for migration are building, measures to control COVID-19 limit people’s ability to move. The pressures to migrate are increasing even as the “safety valve” of migration pathways has been blocked.

Economic and environmental drivers of migration in the Pacific

As detailed in the case study on Tuvalu in this report, much of the migration in the Pacific has been internal, particularly from rural to urban and from outer islands to central ones. Urban growth rates have far outpaced rural population growth everywhere in the Pacific. Migration patterns have changed over the past two decades with more women migrating for economic reasons,⁶ resulting in the depopulation of rural areas where mainly the very young and the elderly

² Jane McAdam and Jonathan Pryke, *Climate Change, Disasters and Mobility: A Roadmap for Australian Action*. 2020; Kaldor Centre, 10, https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/Policy_brief%2010_Climate_Change.pdf.

³ Meg Taylor, “COVID-19 and Climate Change: We Must Rise to Both Crises.” Pacific Islands Forum, April 17, 2020, <https://www.forumsec.org/2020/04/17/covid-19-and-climate-change-we-must-rise-to-both-crises/>.

⁴ Kalinga Seneviratne, “Fiji’s Tourism Workers Turn to Farming and Fishing as COVID-19 Ravages the Industry.” Indepth News, <https://www.indepthnews.net/index.php/sustainability/health-well-being/3878-fiji-s-tourism-workers-turn-to-farming-and-fishing-as-covid-19-ravages-the-industry>.

⁵ Permanent Mission of Tuvalu to the United Nations, “A Message from the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat.” April 16, 2020, <https://www.un.int/tuvalu/news/message-pacific-islands-forum-secretariat>.

⁶ Vijay Naidu and Linda Vaie, “Internal Migration in the Pacific Islands: A Regional Overview.” *Journal of Pacific Studies* 2016;35(3), <http://jps.library.usp.ac.fj/gsd/collect/ips/index/assoc/HASH0192/fa75ec3d.dir/doc.pdf>.

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remain.⁷ And yet employment opportunities in the region's cities are limited and the environmental consequences of increasing urbanization are alarming.⁸

Given the region's youth bulge,⁹ PICs are simply not creating enough jobs to meet the demand.¹⁰ In this context, labor migration has come to function as both an essential component of development and as what many authors call an "escape" or "release" valve. Presently more than a million Pacific Islanders—of the region's 2.3 million population—live outside their immediate region, particularly in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States (see Table Two). Skills mismatch is also a serious problem, with highly skilled workers from PICs going abroad and workers from India, the Philippines, and other countries immigrating into professional managerial and technical positions in PICs.

Climate change

As economic forces are driving people to move to find jobs, environmental factors—particularly the impacts of climate change—are likely to drive further migration within and beyond the region.¹¹ However, most governments in the region have been reluctant to consider migration as a form of adaptation (Kiribati under President Anote Tong is an exception).¹² Rather they have prioritized climate change mitigation and adaptation measures to enable their populations to remain in their communities.

Countries within the region face diverse pressures. The four exclusively atoll countries—Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Tokelau, and Tuvalu¹³—have extremely constrained natural resources and high vulnerability to sea level rise, salinization of fresh water, and coastal erosion. Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization estimates that the human-carrying capacity of small islands is around 100 people per square kilometer. In 2015 Nauru and Tuvalu had 563 and 367 persons per square kilometer, respectively, while Kiribati (excluding Kiritimati Island) had 251 persons per square kilometer. These figures are increasing in Tuvalu and Kiribati, and rapidly so in the case of Kiribati.¹⁴ Curtain and Dornan¹⁵ considered the likelihood of migration of three atoll islands—Kiribati, Nauru, and Tuvalu—which are highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change yet have few migration opportunities. While Australia and New Zealand

⁷ Naidu and Vaikse, "Internal Migration in the Pacific Islands," p. 102.

⁸ For example, South Tarawa is home to more than half of Kiribati's population with a population density like that of Hong Kong. In Kiribati youth unemployment was 54 percent in 2010 but fell to 17.12 percent in 2015.

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.NE.ZS?locations=KI>

⁹ McAdam and Pryke, *Climate Change, Disasters and Mobility*.

¹⁰ Dung Doan et al., *Pacific Labor Mobility, Migration and Remittances in Times of COVID-19: Interim Report*. World Bank. 30 November 2020. <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/430961606712129708/pdf/Pacific-Labor-Mobility-Migration-and-Remittances-in-Times-of-COVID-19-Interim-Report.pdf>

¹¹ Carol Farbotko, Celia McMichael, Olivia Dun, Hedda Ransan-Cooper, Karen E. McNamara, and Fanny Thornton, "Transformative Mobilities in the Pacific: Promoting Adaptation and Development in a Changing Climate." *Asia Pacific Policy Studies* 2018; 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.254>

¹² For discussion of Kiribati's Migration with Dignity initiative, see Nic Maclellan, "Kiribati's Policy for 'Migration with Dignity,'" *Development Policy Blog*, January 12, 2012, https://devpolicy.org/kiribati_migration_climate_change20120112/, and Ben Walker, "An Island Nation Turns Away from Climate Migrate, Despite Rising Seas." *Inside Climate News*, November 20, 2017, https://www.ion.int/sites/default/files/press_release/file/om-vanuatu-policy-climate-change-disaster-induced-displacement-2018.pdf.

¹³ Note that some consider Nauru to be an atoll country and that other countries also have atolls.

¹⁴ Richard Curtain and Matthew Dornan, *A Pressure Release Valve? Migration and Climate Change in Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu*. 2019; Development Policy Centre, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Migration-climate%20change-Kiribati-Nauru-Tuvalu.pdf>.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 1.

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are clearly the preferred migration destinations, opportunities for residents to migrate are insufficient. They estimate that by 2030, around 64 percent of I-Kiribati adults aged 20–44 years (66,000 people), 47 percent of Tuvaluan adults (4,900 people), and ten percent of Nauru adults (780 people) will want to migrate but be unable to do so.¹⁶

Economic drivers of international migration

Historically, Australia and New Zealand have dominated international migration from the region. Among some smaller PICs, the overseas population far outnumbers the population in the home countries;¹⁷ these diaspora populations maintain links with homelands and send remittances that contribute significantly to those countries' economies. In some cases, notably New Zealand and the United States, free movement rights have been extended to citizens of some PICs.¹⁸

In addition, Australia and New Zealand have developed bilateral labor migration schemes that are open to either selected Pacific Island countries or, in a few cases, to all countries in the region.¹⁹ Most of these migration schemes are temporary, with established circular migration, although New Zealand has a long-standing Pacific Access Visa that enables 75 citizens each from Kiribati and Tuvalu and 250 Tongan and Fijian citizens selected by ballot to receive permanent residency in New Zealand.²⁰ However, demand for such places far outstrips supply with 16 applications for each ballot selected.²¹ Both Australia and New Zealand are considering expanding labor migration programs within the region.

Permanent migration outside the region has contributed to the economies of PICs through remittances and reduction of population pressures on scarce environmental resources. One of the major costs of permanent migration in PICs is skill loss; the permanent migration of skilled workers has entailed negative effects of brain drain, especially in the Polynesian countries and Fiji. In particular, the permanent migration of doctors and nurses and skilled workers in industry, tourism management, and various professional services has long-term impacts on the economies and health systems of PICs. Temporary and seasonal migration has less of an effect on skill loss. And there are broader societal impacts from the loss of able-bodied young men for community work to marital dissolution, family abandonment, and cultural transgressions.²²

Intra-Pacific labor migration has also increased, although it remains dwarfed by migration to Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. Only 18 percent of the migrants from the 12

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2. Also see: Robert Oakes, Andrea Milan, and Jillian Campbell, "Kiribati: Climate Change and Migration: Relationships between Household Vulnerability, Human Mobility and Climate Change." Report No. 20. 2016; Bonn: UN University: Institute for Environment and Human Security, https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:5903/Online_No_20_Kiribati_Report_161207.pdf; Andrea Milan, Robert Oakes, and Jillian Campbell, "Tuvalu: Climate Change and Migration: Relationships between Household Vulnerability, Human Mobility and Climate Change." Report No. 18. 2016; Bonn: UN University Institute for Environment and Human Security, https://collections.unu.edu/eserv/UNU:5856/Online_No_18_Tuvalu_Report_161207_.pdf.

¹⁷ International Labor Organization, *Labor Mobility in Pacific Island Countries*. ILO Office for Pacific Island Countries, November 2019, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-suva/documents/publication/wcms_712549.pdf.

¹⁸ In the case of New Zealand, residents of the Cook Islands, Niue, and Tokelau are considered to be New Zealand citizens with free access; the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau have open access to the United States, having signed Compacts of Free Association. ILO, *op cit*.

¹⁹ For a summary of these diverse programs, see ILO, *op cit*.

²⁰ Curtin and Dornan, *op cit*, p. 4.

²¹ McAdam and Pryke, *op cit*.

²² ILO, *op cit*.

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countries covered in this study have moved within the region: 88 percent live in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States (Table Two). Because Fiji has the most advanced education and skills training systems in the Pacific region, Fijians have found employment in several Pacific states and in various occupations including as teachers, nurses, various managerial positions, and in the tourism and hospitality industry. While all PICs are destination countries for some skilled professional and managerial workers, the largest numbers of foreign workers are employed in Papua New Guinea and Fiji.²³ Migration for education is also substantial, but mostly temporary. For 50 years, the University of the South Pacific has been a “jewel in the crown” of Pacific regionalism with campuses in 12 island nations, about 20,000 students, and 1,500 staff.²⁴

The Forum Island Countries have indicated interest in exploring more opportunities for intraregional labor mobility; however, the fact that skill shortages exist largely in the same areas across PICs limits the scope for meeting skill shortage needs with intra-Pacific labor migration.²⁵

COVID-19 and migration

The restrictions PIC governments imposed in response to COVID-19 included an almost total ban on travel. Migrant workers who were present in Australia and New Zealand were generally able to have their visas extended, and a very small number of repatriation flights were organized, although many report that their earnings had declined as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions and they were unable to access income assistance or other relief measures.²⁶ Some migrant workers were able to transition to work in the agriculture to bolster food security during the pandemic, but for those Pacific Islanders who had been approved to work in Australia or New Zealand, there were substantial pre-departure non-refundable costs (for example, for visas, tickets, and health/police checks), many of which were financed through loans. However, the temporary and seasonal migration schemes are likely to restart after COVID-19 as the demand for seasonal workers in Australia and New Zealand remains strong.²⁷ This is particularly the case in Australia, where the flow of backpackers, which provide temporary labor, has fallen dramatically.

Travel restrictions hit intraregional migration similarly hard. More than other regions, the Pacific Islands depend on air travel to maintain relationships within the region and the suspension of flights was painful. As of October 2020, there is only one flight per week from Auckland to Fiji,²⁸ occasional flights between Brisbane and Nauru, and a few repatriation flights in the region. In September 2020, Fiji “opened Pacific pathways to Tuvalu, Kiribati and Tonga, extending a lifeline of passenger air travel to these countries at a time when it is badly needed.”²⁹

²³ ILO, *op cit*.

²⁴ Jonathan Pryke, “Hard Knocks at University of the South Pacific,” Lowy Institute, June 18, 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/hard-knocks-university-south-pacific>.

²⁵ ILO, *op cit*, p. vi.

²⁶ <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iom-rapid-assessment-report.pdf>

²⁷ Kirstie Petrou, “Pacific Labor Schemes.”

²⁸ <https://fj.usembassy.gov/us-citizen-services/covid-19-information/>

²⁹ Fiji Focus, September 9, 2020, <https://www.fiji.gov.fj/getattachment/0ff32cea-2507-4381-b02b-2f1fd3ac364a/Fiji-Focus-Issue-14-Volume-11-September-9-2020.aspx>.

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In sum, in the immediate term labor migration schemes have been put on hold. In the medium term (post-COVID-19 recovery), they will likely be restored, although at what level remains to be seen. In the long term, however, given the economic and population pressures within the PICs, a fundamental re-thinking is needed about economic pathways within the region, including Australia and New Zealand, about the balance between temporary and permanent migration and the costs and benefits of such migration to PICs. These questions are all the more urgent when climate change is added to the mix. These labor migration schemes were not planned with climate change adaptation in mind but are now considered to be potential pathways to support PICs affected by climate change.³⁰

The following table describes lessons learned and recommendations from the assessment team:

Table 1: Lessons and Recommendations	
Lessons	Recommendations
COVID-19 has significantly impacted Pacific economies, from the collapse of the tourism industry to a decrease in migrants' remittances. Restoring intraregional and international migration will be key to the region's recovery.	The governments of Australia, New Zealand, and the PIC countries should be encouraged to engage in dialogue to consider the future role of regional migration pathways to respond to long-term environmental and economic pressures.
The urgency of the present situation highlights the need to think creatively about ways of upskilling potential migrants from the Pacific to respond to labor market needs both within and beyond the immediate region.	Support should be given to academic and civil society organizations in the region to assess present upskilling programs, such as the Australia Pacific Training Coalition, and to suggest ways of building on these experiences to create resilience
Both climate change and economic pressures for migration are likely to continue in the foreseeable future.	Climate resilience should be incorporated into developmental programs, and governments and civil society actors in the region should be encouraged to consider migration as a climate change adaptation strategy.

³⁰ Farbotko *et al.*, *op cit.*, p. 5.

Table 2: Migrant Stock as of Mid- 2019 by Destination and Origin															
Destination	Total to destination	Total from within region to destination	Percent from within region	Fiji	Kiribati	Marshall Islands	Micronesia	Nauru	Palau	Papua New Guinea	Samoa	Solomon Islands	Tonga	Tuvalu	Vanuatu
Melanesia	123,564	9,428	8%	413	1,050	0	0	0	0	617	302	1,060	1,415	419	4,152
Fiji	14,038	3,775	27%		791						302	717	1,359	419	187
Papua New Guinea	31,212	432	1%	84								222	27		99
Solomon Islands	2,532	975	39%	100	259					552					64
Vanuatu	3,245	444	14%	229						65		121	29		
Micronesia	117,978	18,917	16%	733	508	385	12,942	1,527	2,374	0	21	71	18	338	0
Kiribati	3,022	2,343	78%	514				1,527						302	
Marshall Islands	3,296	639	19%	118	276		245								
Micronesia (Fed. States of)															
Nauru	2,819	419	15%			94			286		21		18		
Palau	2,114	440	21%	101	232							71		36	
Polynesia	5,066	410	8%				410								
Samoa	68,374	19,409	28%	1,168	74	0	0	11	0	52	16,297	9	1,398	141	259
Tonga	4,035	306	8%	111	11			5		37		9	61	59	13
Tuvalu	3,752	691	18%	473							218				
	238	126	53%	54	63			6			3				
WORLD	271,642,105			222,633	4,370	8,205	21,819	2,421	2,650	219,126	124,403	4,234	74,433	3,276	7,346
Australia	5	694,916		3											
	7,549,270	130,593	1.80%	79,424	782	52	31	772			32,173	2,581	13,002	211	1,565
New Zealand	1,068,739	138,920	13%	56,344	1,575					1,438	54,108		23,940	1,515	
United States	50,661,149	108,452	>1%	50,561		7,761	8,708				20,201		21,221		

Source: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Migrant Stock, 2019*.

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ANNEX VI: PACIFIC ISLANDS CASE STUDY- TUVALU



A RETURN TO TRADITION? A CASE STUDY ON TUVALU

Overview

This case study explores the approach taken by Tuvalu, a small Pacific Island country, to the COVID-19 pandemic. Tuvalu has previously been dependent on internal and international migration as a livelihood adaptation pathway. This study documents the demographic and livelihood responses to near-complete closure of the country, returns from the capital to the outer islands, and the reversals entailed thereby. While Tuvalu's circumstances are quite specific, in particular the country's extreme geographical isolation, some wider lessons in the building of resilience might apply to other parts of the Pacific and even farther afield. The study also raises questions about the viability and sustainability of Tuvalu's approach and considers how external assistance can address related challenges.

An environmental entry Point

As a Polynesian country made up of three low-lying reef islands and six atolls, Tuvalu faces challenges associated with climate change, limited land, and sustainable management of marine resources. With a 2018 population of approximately 11,500 people living on 26 square kilometers of land, population density is high.¹

¹ Australian Government. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Tuvalu: Development Cooperation Fact Sheet*. February 2020. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/development-cooperation-fact-sheet-tuvalu.pdf>

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Natural resources are an important part of the basis for Tuvalu's economy. The sale of fishing rights to international tuna boats within the country's 200-mile exclusive economic zone dominate government revenues. The Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) governs this arrangement, and the eight member countries control more than half the world's skipjack tuna catch.² This also provides employment for about 50 Tuvaluans as monitors on tuna boats.³ Near-shore fishing is under increasing extractive pressure, and nets and pollution have damaged reefs. In response, the Funafuti Conservation Zone was established in 1999 on the western side of Funafuti Lagoon to protect marine species.⁴ Two crops dominate agricultural production: coconuts and *pulaka* (swamp taro), supplemented by household gardens. These are also threatened by climate change, as saline intrusion into the subterranean freshwater lens would not allow continued cultivation of either of these crops.⁵

The extreme low-lying nature of Tuvalu puts it at the forefront of island states threatened by climate change. The country is listed as extremely vulnerable according to the global Environmental Vulnerability Index.⁶ Sea level rise during the current century is projected to make parts of Tuvalu uninhabitable. Climate-induced changes in fish migration patterns would increase variability in the value of the fishing licenses that are the mainstay of the country's foreign exchange income, in turn raising the importance of the Tuvalu Trust Fund to spread income over longer time periods.⁷ Other issues associated with climate change are salinization of drinking water supply, although most freshwater is derived from collected rainfall. Bleaching of corals surrounding the islands has decayed reefs and moved fish offshore, increasing costs of fishing as larger and sturdier boats are needed.⁸

Context: Migration in the Tuvalu economy

The public sector, relying on government revenues and foreign aid, heavily dominates formal employment in Tuvalu.⁹ Australia, Japan, and New Zealand provide more than two-thirds of the country's aid,¹⁰ including programs related to addressing climate change challenges.¹¹ The Republic of Korea and the European Union are also significant donors. U.S. assistance largely takes place through regional and international organizations and development banks.¹² Unlike many other

² Parties to the Nauru Agreement. Website. <https://pnatuna.com/About-Us>

³ Matthew Dornan, "The Pacific Islands Tuna Cartel Is Boosting Jobs by Watching Fish." *The Conversation*, March 4, 2015, <https://theconversation.com/the-pacific-islands-tuna-cartel-is-boosting-jobs-by-watching-fish-38177>.

⁴ Tuvalu Government. Department of Tourism. *Funafuti Conservation Area*. https://web.archive.org/web/20130509065808/http://www.timelesstuvalu.com/tuvalu/export/sites/TTO/Attractions/funafuti_conservation_area.html

⁵ Amelia Holwaty Krales, "As danger laps at its shores, Tuvalu pleads for action." *New York Times*, 18 October 2011.

<https://green.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/10/18/as-danger-laps-at-its-shores-tuvalu-pleads-for-action/>

⁶ Environmental Vulnerability Index. <http://www.vulnerabilityindex.net/download-reports/>

⁷ <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Pages/aid-investment-plan-aip-tuvalu-2016-17-to-2019-20> The Tuvalu Trust Fund was established with assistance from the UK, Australia and New Zealand to cover shortfalls in the country's annual budget.

⁸ Tafue Lusama, "Tuvalu plight must be heard by UNFCCC." *The Drum Opinion*, 20 November 2011.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20120403164107/http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/3701422.html>

⁹ ODA accounts for 42 percent of gross national income. Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map.

https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/archive/pacific-aid-map-country-profiles/downloads/LOWY2192_TUVALU.pdf

¹⁰ See Lowy Institute interactive Pacific aid map:

https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/archive/pacific-aid-map-country-profiles/downloads/LOWY2192_TUVALU.pdf.

¹¹ Australian Government. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. *Development Assistance in Tuvalu*.

<https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/tuvalu/development-assistance/Pages/resilience-environmental-climate-change>

¹² US Government. Department of State. *US Relations with Tuvalu*. 27 February 2020. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-tuvalu/>

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Pacific Island countries, Tuvalu does not have a substantial tourism sector, largely due to its remote location. Additionally, approximately 15 percent of the male workforce are seafarers on international boats. The Asian Development Bank supports this occupation through the Tuvalu Maritime Training Institute. It is an important—albeit declining—part of the remittances that are the largest source of income on outlying islands that otherwise depend on subsistence fishing and farming.¹³ Education takes all secondary school age children away from their native islands to the country's two (boarding) secondary schools on Funafuti and the outer island of Vaitupu.¹⁴

Tuvalu migration takes three main forms. There is internal migration, predominantly to the main island of Fongafale, and specifically to the capital Funafuti, which is home to 60 percent of the country's population. Internal migration from outer islands to towns on larger islands is a recognized but under-researched phenomenon compared with international migration, both in Tuvalu and more generally in the Pacific.¹⁵ Seasonal worker schemes in Australia and New Zealand dominate international migration. New Zealand maintains an annual quota of 75 places for Tuvalu labor migrants. Tuvalu migrants also move to other Pacific island countries. Figure One shows the destination countries for migrants in 2019. In 2020, approximately 20 percent of Tuvalu's population lived overseas. Projections suggest that this will rise to 30 percent by 2050 but that much larger numbers will be seeking to emigrate. A study published in 2019 indicates that three-quarters of Tuvalu households envisage future emigration in full or in part. The same study sees few options for viable migration away from Funafuti to outer islands in the case of an environmental catastrophe in the capital.¹⁶ In 2014, a test case in the New Zealand courts saw consideration of a family's asylum claim on the basis of climate-forced migration.¹⁷

¹³ Asian Development Bank. *Tuvalu Marine Training Project*. 2011. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/project-document/60747/32407-013-tuv-pcr.pdf>

¹⁴ Tala Simeti and Jess Marinaccio. "How is Tuvalu securing against COVID-19: a response from Funafuti." *DevPolicy Blog*, 22 April 2020. <https://devpolicy.org/how-is-tuvalu-securing-against-covid-19-a-response-from-funafuti-20200422-3/>

¹⁵ Vijay Naidu and Linda Vaie, "Internal Migration in the Pacific Islands: a regional overview." *Journal of Pacific Studies*. 35 (2): 2016. <http://jps.library.usp.ac.fj/gsd/collect/jps/index/assoc/HASH0192/fa75ec3d.dir/doc.pdf>

¹⁶ Richard Curtain and Matthew Dornan, "A Pressure Release Valve? Migration and Climate Change in Kiribati, Nauru and Tuvalu." 2019; Development Policy Centre, Australian National University. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Migration-climate%20change-Kiribati-Nauru-Tuvalu.pdf>

¹⁷ The claim for New Zealand residence was ultimately successful, but not for climate-related reasons. Rick Noack, "Has the era of the 'climate change refugee' begun?" *Washington Post*, 7 August 2014. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/08/07/has-the-era-of-the-climate-change-refugee-begun/?arc404=true>

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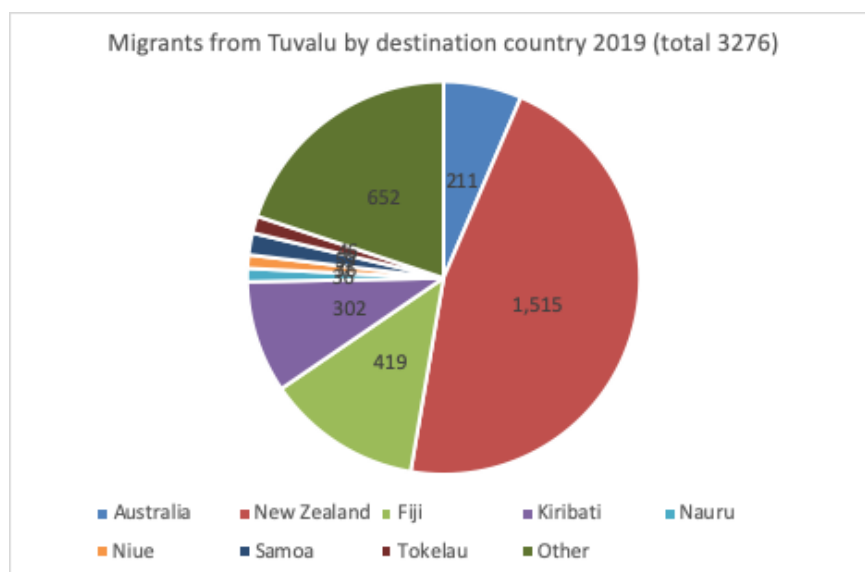


Figure 1: Migration from Tuvalu by Destination Country
 Note: 581 of the 652 migrants in the category "Other" are listed under Russian Federation, for reasons as yet unexplained.
 Source: UNDESA

Migrant experiences of Tuvalu's pandemic responses

Ten months after the pandemic swept much of the world, Tuvalu remains free from COVID-19. The country's health system would be sorely challenged were the pandemic to reach its shores, particularly given the prevalence of illnesses that would produce co-morbidity risks, such as diabetes and heart disease.¹⁸ The country ranked 181 out of 195 in the Global Health Security Index.¹⁹ High population densities on the atoll nation mean that controlling rapid spread within the community would be difficult. For these and other reasons, the Government of Tuvalu declared a state of emergency and closed all borders on March 20, 2020, in response to the first case of COVID-19 in Fiji.²⁰ At the time of writing (November 2020), the borders remain closed except to vessels carrying essential supplies. Only one supply vessel normally operates between islands.²¹

As in many other countries, the cessation of population movement in and out of Tuvalu has had significant economic effects. This is despite the fact that Tuvalu is one of the Pacific countries with relatively low dependence on tourism and on remittance income, albeit with a high and increasing

¹⁸ Anna Watanabe, "Vulnerable Pacific Islands 'lock down' against coronavirus," *Kyodo News*, 27 March 2020, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/03/1c2e2391ccbb-focus-vulnerable-pacific-islands-lock-down-against-coronavirus.html>
¹⁹ Global Health Security Index: Building Collective Action and Accountability. NTI and Johns Hopkins University. 2019 <https://www.ghsindex.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2019-Global-Health-Security-Index.pdf>
²⁰ Carol Farbotko and Taufiki Kitara, "How Is Tuvalu Securing against COVID-19?" *DevPolicy Blog*, April 6, 2020, <https://devpolicy.org/how-is-tuvalu-securing-against-covid-19-20200406/>
²¹ Australian Government. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. *COVID Response Plan: Tuvalu*. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/covid-response-plan-tuvalu.pdf>

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reliance on imported food. COVID-19 did affect Tuvalu, but in ways quite distinct from countries such as Fiji, Cook Islands, and others whose tourism sectors were impacted by restricted population movement.

The fact that Tuvalu was only just recovering from the impacts of Cyclone Tino, which hit the country in January 2020, magnified economic challenges.²² However, Tuvalu's overall macroeconomic position is not as severe as that of many other countries, and the economy is on course to register positive economic growth, albeit reduced from about four to two percent in 2020.

The country's response to declining economic activity and potential food shortages that could eventuate from interrupted movements of vessels has been to encourage cultivation of staple crops in the capital and on outlying islands, for example through seedling distribution. It is also promoting the use of traditional food preservation, such as fish drying, and stockpiling measures. Village authorities manage such stockpiling at a community level. In addition, government food security measures include stringently applied regulation of pricing and issuing of food vouchers.²³

Government measures also encourage return to home islands to engage in traditional practices of horticulture, fishing and food preservation, and the Government has the authority to mandate such returns and to restrict movement in the opposite direction. By the end of May 2020, 1,500 of the capital's 6,500 people had voluntarily moved back to outer islands, increasing their population by 35 percent, and even more had moved to the mainly uninhabited islets around Funafuti Lagoon, which were opened for resettlement to those who lacked ancestral lands to which to return. Each of the outlying islands received \$500,000 plus \$40 per person to assist with the relocation and its impact on service provision.²⁴ Relocation to the outer islands is part of a \$4.9 million COVID-19 response package, which also supports repatriation of Tuvaluan students from overseas.²⁵

Return movement to the outer islands has put pressure on environmental resources. Because most return to their islands of origin, kinship ties and practices of sharing mean that support is forthcoming for returnees. On the other hand, already limited resources, including living space and family lands (*kaitasi*), need to be shared.²⁶ High population densities mean that land and fisheries are particularly affected. Water shortages are another major challenge, making on-going programs providing clean drinking water particularly important.²⁷ Increased population densities

²² Ibid. <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/covid-response-plan-tuvalu.pdf>; "Post-cyclone: state of emergency remains for Tuvalu." Radio NZ. 3 February 2020. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/408724/post-cyclone-state-of-emergency-remains-for-tuvalu>

²³ Farbotko and Kitara, "How Is Tuvalu Securing against COVID-19?" *DevPolicy Blog*, April 6, 2020, <https://devpolicy.org/how-is-tuvalu-securing-against-covid-19-20200406/>

²⁴ Taufieki Kitara et al. "Reducing COVID-19 risk through population relocation and closed borders: effects of pandemic emergency measures in a small island state." International Organization for Migration Environmental Migration Portal, n.d. <https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/blogs/reducing-covid-19-risk-through-population-relocation-and-closed-borders-effects-pandemic-louisa> Gibbs. "How COVID-19 is affecting women's economic empowerment in the Pacific and what we can do about it." *Australian Aid*, 28 July 2020. <https://pacificwomen.org/news/how-covid-19-is-affecting-womens-economic-empowerment-in-the-pacific-and-what-we-can-do-about-it/>

²⁵ UNESCAP. Tuvalu Policy Responses. 13 May 2020.

https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Tuvalu_COVID%20Policy%20Responses.pdf

²⁶ Kitara et al, op cit. <https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/blogs/reducing-covid-19-risk-through-population-relocation-and-closed-borders-effects-pandemic>

²⁷ Catherine Wilson, "Brining clean water on tap to rural villages in Polynesian island nation of Tuvalu." *InterPress Service*. 18 November 2020. <https://www.ipsnews.net/2020/11/bringing-clean-water-on-tap-to-rural-villages-in-polynesian-island-nation-of-tuvalu>

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and associated construction risk exacerbating coastal erosion and other ongoing environmental problems.

However, relocation measures also have the potential to reinvigorate local food production and to encourage healthier diets,²⁸ partially reversing the country's dependence on imported processed foods.²⁹ Dilemmas are involved, particularly with the relocation of secondary students back to their home islands; what may be gained in revival of customary knowledge associated with such moves may also lead to lost educational development.³⁰ In these senses, environmental themes are at the forefront of Tuvalu's COVID-19 migration challenges, and longer-term environmental drivers and constraints are behind the country's relatively high emigration rate.

The extent to which relocation to the outer islands and resumption of customary practices will last into and beyond the COVID-19 emergency is unclear. Reports suggest that many are accommodating well to the reconnection with family and traditions. However, the more individualistic, quasi-urban lifestyle to which internal migrants have become accustomed in the capital could cause tensions with communal practices and village authority. The relocation could also pose even greater challenges to climate change adaptation and to associated emergency responses across the widely scattered archipelago.³¹

An International Federation of the Red Cross situation assessment in October 2020 found significant differences between the ways that women and men were experiencing pandemic-induced hardships. Whereas men were more concerned with issues of transportation and movement, women's concerns were with food security and the increased pressure that movement back to the outer islands was placing on land and environmental resources.³² The Tuvalu Gender Affairs Department did a rapid assessment and found that 81 percent of women interviewed were experiencing a greater burden of care work, which is reducing their ability to make money through activities such as making handicrafts.³³

The following table describes the assessment team's lessons learned and recommendations.

²⁸ Carol Farbotko and Taufiki Kitara, "How Is Tuvalu Securing against COVID-19?" *DevPolicy Blog*, 6 April 2020. <https://devpolicy.org/how-is-tuvalu-securing-against-covid-19-20200406/>

²⁹ S.G. McCubbin, T. Pearce, J.D. Ford, and B. Smit, "Social–Ecological Change and Implications for Food Security in Funafuti, Tuvalu." *Ecology and Society* 2017; 22(1): 53, <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-09129-220153>.

³⁰ Farbotko and Kitara op cit. <https://devpolicy.org/how-is-tuvalu-securing-against-covid-19-a-response-from-funafuti-20200422-3/>

³¹ Kitara et al, op cit. <https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/blogs/reducing-covid-19-risk-through-population-relocation-and-closed-borders-effects-pandemic>

³² International Federation of Red Cross Red Crescent Societies. *Tuvalu: COVID-19*. <https://go.ifrc.org/emergencies/4296#details>

³³ Gibbs, op cit. <https://pacificwomen.org/news/how-covid-19-is-affecting-womens-economic-empowerment-in-the-pacific-and-what-we-can-do-about-it/>

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Table 1: Lessons and Recommendations	
Lessons	Recommendations
Tuvalu's economic growth has been affected less than that of Pacific Island countries that are more dependent on tourism, and it has been able to fall back on its own resources to a greater extent than many others.	The lessons from Tuvalu's relative self-reliance and the policy measures that have supported recalibration of livelihoods can be explored to support resilience in remote parts of other Pacific countries.
While short-term responses involve return to more subsistence-based livelihoods on the outer islands, studies suggest that longer-term aspirations will see emigration as the main adaptation pathway to ease population pressure and environmental risks.	Development assistance measures should be based on creating real alternative options for different groups in Tuvalu, accommodating both those who wish to remain for cultural/lifestyle reasons, while also creating more viable pathways for managed and secure migration for those who choose to leave.
Issues of resilience associated with COVID-19 are intimately bound with two other key aspects of livelihood, economy, and environment in Tuvalu: climate change and migration, both internal and external.	A national resilience framework should incorporate all three issues (COVID-19, climate change impacts, and migration) rather than be segmented.

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7

ANNEX VII: CENTRAL ASIA- TAJIKISTAN



COVID-19, INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION AND THE WOMEN LEFT BEHIND

A CASE STUDY ON TAJIKISTAN

Overview

This case study focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on migration between Tajikistan and Russia. By considering this migration corridor from a gendered perspective, the case study seeks to understand how the pandemic has affected men and women differently, including migrants and migrant families.

Gender dynamics in Tajikistan

Tajikistan ranks 137 of 153 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report 2020, ranking lower than other countries in the subregion.¹ The general trend in the years since independence in 1991 has been to re-adopt more traditional values and behaviors, which has resulted in increased violence

¹ World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2020. 2020; Geneva: WEF, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf.

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against women and women's exclusion from the political and socioeconomic sphere.² The practice of early (child) and often polygamous marriages also contributes to the exclusion of women from education and other opportunities. When looking at the 30 percent of youth not in education or employment, 90 percent are girls.

Data on international migration

Following Tajikistan's independence, the economy took 15 years to return to its pre-independence level. This slow recovery was heavily reliant on mining and agriculture and marked by low wages and high levels of poverty. While agriculture is a key economic sector (accounting for around 22 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP)), the geography of Tajikistan makes it vulnerable to climate change and natural disasters. In addition, the socioeconomic context means that adaptive capacity to address or mitigate the impact of climate change is low.³

Although 62 percent of the population of around nine million are of working age, 55 percent of the working-age population are not economically active.⁴ In this context, migration is seen as a key economic strategy for Tajikistan citizens. Research indicates that between 30 and 40 percent of households have at least one member working abroad.⁵ In 2019, remittances accounted for 29.7 percent of the country's GDP.⁶

Most Tajik migrants (estimated at 92 percent) migrate to Russia, making up around one-fifth of Russia's immigrant labor. Entry to Russia has historically been straightforward, with multiple flights and the ability to enter on Tajik passports. Stricter entry requirements introduced in 2015 and 2018 mean that while Tajik migrants can still enter Russia without a visa, they must register their place of residence within seven days of arrival and apply for a one-year work permit within one month.⁷ According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Russia, more than one million Tajik labor migrants are working in Russia. However, an estimated 40 percent of Tajik labor migrants do not complete the registration requirements and remain as irregular migrants who do not appear in the official statistics.⁸ While migration to Russia can be seasonal (spring and summer), many migrants stay from year to year, finding year-round work and settling in Russia.

² UNSDG, Integrated Socioeconomic Response Framework to COVID-19 (ISEF) for Tajikistan. 2020; UN: Bishkek. <https://unsdg.un.org/resources/integrated-socio-economic-response-framework-covid-19-tajikistan>

³ PRISE, "Migration, Remittances and Climate Resilience in Tajikistan." Working Paper: Part I. 2017; CAREC, http://careco.org/eng_P2%20VPI%20Migration.%20remittances_FIN.pdf.

⁴ JICA, "Migration, Living Conditions and Skills: Panel Study—Tajikistan, 2018." 2019; Dushanbe: JICA, https://www.jica.go.jp/jica-ri/publication/booksandreports/202003_02.html.

⁵ E. Lemon, "Dependent on Remittances, Tajikistan's Long-Term Prospects for Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction Remain Dim." Migration Information Source, November 14, 2019, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/dependent-remittances-tajikistan-prospects-dim-economic-growth>.

⁶ World Bank, "Remittance inflows." 2019; Washington, DC.

⁷ Lemon, "Dependent on Remittances."

⁸ *Ibid.*

Gendered dynamics of international migration

The average Tajik migrant is a 34-year-old married male with five dependents.⁹ An estimated one-third of working-age men are working abroad. Women make up only around 18 percent of migrants.¹⁰ The work available for migrants in Russia is typically low skilled. Men work in construction, light industry, agriculture, and services, and women work in the service sector as cleaners and caregivers.¹¹ A 2018 study found that a quarter of women reported that the skills and experience gained in migration were of no use to them in that they did not add value to their existing skillset or help them to secure better employment on return to Tajikistan.¹²

While 71 percent of Tajik migrants are married (either legally or through the Islamic ritual ceremony of Nikoh), a significant characteristic of migration from Tajikistan is the prolonged absence of men and high divorce rates (commonly while the men are still overseas). A 2012 study of Tajik male migrants found that around half engage in extramarital affairs while overseas, and many settle with new wives and families.¹³ Statistics from 2015 indicate that one in ten divorces in Tajikistan involved a migrant partner.¹⁴ In the same year, the International Organization for Migration estimated that 250,000 women had been left in Tajikistan to care for children with no money being sent home by their migrant husbands or partners.¹⁵ The extent of the problem of migrant men leaving their wives and partners is so significant that veteran activist and head of local human rights non-governmental organization Perspektiva Plus describes it as a “national tragedy.”¹⁶ While divorce of a legally recognized marriage results in the wife’s ability to claim half of the assets acquired by the couple in the course of the marriage as well as the husband’s obligation to pay maintenance, where the marriage is by Nikoh there are no legal rights, and dissolution can result in the wife having no property and no income for her children.¹⁷

With many working-age men working outside of the country, and many not remitting to their wives as promised or expected, Tajik women have increasingly become heads of households, solely responsible for generating family income.¹⁸ Rural women have been compelled to fill a demand for seasonal agricultural labor in Tajikistan during the summer months.¹⁹ In particular, older women (who find that younger women are securing traditional female jobs such as care

⁹ A. Gordina, “Socio-Economic Responses to COVID-19 and Declining Remittances in Tajikistan,” October 6, 2020, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/socio-economic-responses-covid-19-declining-alexandra-gordina/articleId=6719289882457518080>.

¹⁰ Lemon, “Dependent on Remittances.”

¹¹ JICA, “Migration, Living conditions and Skills.”

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ M. Dustmurod, “Tajikistan’s Migrant ‘Widows.’” Institute for War & Peace Reporting, May 22, 2015, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/tajikistans-migrant-widows>.

¹⁴ R. Dadarkhujaev, “Tajik Labor Migration Boosts Divorce Rates.” Institute for War & Peace Reporting, January 27, 2015, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/tajik-labor-migration-boosts-divorce-rates>.

¹⁵ Dustmurod, “Tajikistan’s Migrant ‘Widows.’”

¹⁶ IWPR Central Asia, “Tajikistan’s Abandoned Wives.” Institute for War & Peace Reporting, March 30, 2017, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/tajikistans-abandoned-wives>.

¹⁷ Dadarkhujaev, “Tajik Labor Migration Boosts Divorce Rates.”

¹⁸ UN Women Europe and Central Asia, “Calls for Coordinated, Gender Sensitive Strategy for Migrants in Tajikistan.” Un Women, May 3, 2018, <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/04/news-calls-for-coordinated-gender-sensitive-strategy-for-migrants-in-tajikistan>.

¹⁹ Lemon, “Dependent on Remittances.”

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work and cleaning) increasingly work informally as handywomen, which may include mowing grass, building garden beds, and laboring.

The impact of COVID-19

In response to the threat of COVID-19, Russia and Tajikistan closed their borders on March 18th and 20, respectively. On March 30th, Moscow authorities ordered a citywide lockdown, closing businesses and prohibiting people from leaving their homes save for key exceptions.²⁰ Three months of restrictions on movement and business followed in Russia, during which the Government closed all nonessential businesses including construction, services, and manufacturing.²¹

The lockdown in Russia resulted in widespread job losses among migrant workers with reports initially coming in from women who were working in the sectors hit first.²² One survey found that 74 percent of migrant workers were fired or sent on long-term leave without pay.²³ With their income interrupted, and unable to cover expenses including rent and employment permits, many migrants had no option but to return to Tajikistan, only to find that they were unable to return. A survey undertaken in June and July 2020 found that 46 percent of Tajik labor migrants had not returned due to border closures and travel restrictions. Fourteen percent cited financial difficulties as the reason for not returning and 38 percent still had work.²⁴

The experiences of Tajik migrants in Russia during the lockdown differed depending on migration and employment status. Registered migrants in formal employment were able to apply for permits to move outside of their homes and could benefit from relief offered to registered workers. Unregistered migrants, often living in cramped and overcrowded conditions, faced heavy fines if caught outside without a permit. The Russian Government provided some relief to migrants, exempting them from paying for their work permits until July, but by the end of April even those migrants who had received a paycheck for March were running low on funds. The loss of income in Russia quickly led to a reduction in remittances to Tajikistan. Despite this, Tajik families of migrants tried to find money to send to migrants in Russia, many of whom wanted to leave but were unable to do so.

The return to Tajikistan and disrupted migration

Following initial reports that COVID-19 was on the rise globally, Tajikistan reported a sharp rise in returning migrants in February and March 2020. The ability to return was cut short when the

²⁰ KPMG, "Russia—Travel and Immigration Restrictions Due to COVID-19." April 6, 2020, <https://home.kpmg/xx/en/home/insights/2020/04/flash-alert-2020-154.html>.

²¹ Gordina, "Socio-Economic Responses to COVID-19 and Declining Remittances in Tajikistan."

²² E. Ivashchenko, "Russia's Labor Migrants Are Caught between Poverty and a Pandemic." Open Democracy, May 7, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-labour-migrants-covid19/>.

²³ Muhojir, "In Moscow, due to the Pandemic, 75% of Migrants Were Left without Work." September 17, 2020, https://muhojir.info/news/1169?fbclid=IwAR1y7yADaGGLUqVWhLA07KBpvdv1o-8lcm6_b3D9miZmh-xLr5T0EaUFhFM.

²⁴ UNDP, "Impact of COVID-19 on Lives, Livelihoods and Micro, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (MSMEs) in Tajikistan." 2020; Dushanbe: UNDP, <https://www.tj.undp.org/content/tajikistan/en/home/library/impact-of-covid-19-on-lives--livelihoods-and-micro--small-and-me.html>.

borders closed and flights were cancelled. Eventually, charter flights resumed on May 24th, more than two months after the borders first closed. The large number of applicants for repatriation overwhelmed the Tajik authorities, who had to stop adding names to the waiting list of migrants wanting repatriation at least once. International donors and agencies worked with each other and with the Government to support the repatriation of thousands of Tajik nationals. By October the Tajik authorities estimated that 70,000 citizens had returned.

The pandemic also interrupted seasonal migration, with hundreds of thousands of Tajiks unable to migrate to Russia for spring and summer 2020.²⁵ This represents a 57 percent decrease in 2020 compared with 2019 Ministry of Labor figures.²⁶ Of those unable to migrate, only 32 percent were able to secure some paid work in Tajikistan.²⁷

The situation in Tajikistan

The compounding factors of lost remittances, returning workers, and lack of seasonal migration have added pressure to the economic situation for migrant families and households in Tajikistan. In April, the Tajikistan Government ordered farmers to grow more vegetables and grain instead of inedible crops to support food security in the country and called on households to use any land plots they had to grow food.²⁸ In addition, the First Deputy Minister of Economic Development and Trade Ashurboy Solekhzoda confirmed in October that Tajikistan had experienced inflation of 5.1 percent in the first nine months of 2020, including increases in food prices by 6.3 percent, nonfood items by 3.8 percent, and paid services by 3.7 percent.²⁹ A World Bank survey conducted in May found that more than 40 percent of households in Tajikistan had cut down on food consumption due to these economic stresses.³⁰ The Government's response to the pandemic was mixed, with authorities claiming that the country was virus free well into April 2020. Reports in May, however, confirmed that earlier COVID-19 deaths had been attributed to pneumonia because of a lack of testing.³¹ By the time testing was underway in May, the already weak health system was struggling to keep up with infections.³² This mixed response was potentially detrimental to people's trust in the Government.³³

Returning migrants and those unable to migrate faced physical and mental health impacts with limited access to social protection and job opportunities. This contributed to household and

²⁵ C. Putz, "Tajiks Stuck in Russia, Flights Home Cancelled." *The Diplomat*, November 3, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/tajiks-stuck-in-russia-flights-home-cancelled/>.

²⁶ F. Najibullah, "Meat, Butter Considered 'Luxuries' as Tajiks Face Steep Price Hikes." *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, November 1, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/meat-butter-considered-luxuries-as-tajiks-face-steep-price-hikes-/30923885.html>.

²⁷ UNDP, "Impact of COVID-19 on Lives."

²⁸ Najibullah, "Meat, Butter Considered 'Luxuries.'"

²⁹ Sputnik, "Why Prices Are Rising: Response from the Ministry of Economic Development of Tajikistan." *Sputnik*, October 31, 2020, <https://ti.sputniknews.ru/economy/20201031/1032190003/tajikistan-prodykty-rost-tsen-minekonomrazvitiya.html>.

³⁰ Bloomberg, "Coronavirus Leaves Thousands of Migrant Workers Stranded in Russia." *The Straits Times*, August 17, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/europe/virus-leaves-thousands-of-migrant-workers-stranded-in-russia>.

³¹ RFE/RL, "Tajikistan's Official Coronavirus Stats Don't Reflect Reality, RFE/RL Investigation Finds." *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-official-coronavirus-stats-don-t-reflect-reality-rfe-rl-investigation-finds/30692651.html>.

³² Najibullah, "Meat, Butter Considered 'Luxuries.'"

³³ UNSDG, "Integrated Socioeconomic Response Framework to COVID-19 (ISEF)."

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wider community tension.³⁴ Similar to the global trend, the detrimental economic and social outcomes of COVID-19 are likely to disproportionately affect women. In a country where a quarter of women reported experiencing physical or domestic violence in 2017, this has likely increased under COVID-19, as data show it has in neighboring states including Kyrgyzstan.³⁵ Although data on the direct impact of interrupted migration and remittances on violence in migrant households are not yet available, presuming that tensions in such households may well lead to increases in intimate partner violence is reasonable. International donors and agencies have responded to immediate needs, in particular food security. The Asian Development Bank has committed \$30 million to improving livelihood and employment opportunities, particularly for migrants and women. The United Nations has also responded with a Socioeconomic Response Plan, which aims to empower women in addressing the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19, in particular by ensuring they are involved in dialogue around and implementation of programs.³⁶

The following table describes the research team's key lessons learned and recommendations:

Lessons	Recommendations
Heavily reliant on remittances, Tajikistan has lost remittances from existing and returned migrants and from the reduction in migration in the 2020 spring/summer season.	Livelihood and resilience projects need to recognize the impact of reduced migration on the economic situation of many Tajik households and the likelihood that men will be prioritized for existing and new livelihood and employment opportunities. These opportunities should be effectively accessible by men and women.
The socioeconomic stresses resulting from the pandemic have increased the risk of domestic and gender-based violence and may further result in more gender-detrimental norms.	Broader prevention work is needed to address detrimental traditional norms and ideas around gender and focus on the need for unity and teamwork in building back better. This can include working with women's organizations to ensure that women's voices are included in the dialogue around post-COVID-19 recovery.
The narrative of women-headed households has been lost in the discourse on migration in the context of COVID-19.	Undertake research to understand how these women-headed households have responded to COVID-19.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid

ANNEX VIII: CENTRAL ASIA- KYRGYZ REPUBLIC



COVID-19 AND INTERNAL MIGRATION: A CASE STUDY ON KYRGYZSTAN

Overview

This case study analyzes the gendered impacts of COVID-19 on internal migrants in Kyrgyzstan, particularly in the cities of Bishkek and Osh. Informed by research on the gendered dynamics of internal migration and the gendered impacts of COVID-19, the case study seeks to understand how the intersection of gender and migration may make the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 more acute for women internal migrants.

Gender dynamics in Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan has undergone several violent uprisings, most notably violent clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010, and cases of sexual violence during this time were numerous.¹ The gender dynamics in Kyrgyzstan can be understood through the legacy of this violence combined with traditional ideas of gendered roles that see women primarily as wives, mothers, and homemakers. Sexual violence, forced marriage, and child marriage are widespread practices. Data from 2014 indicates that 22.1 percent of forced marriage and 24 percent of all marriages involve children.² Before COVID-19, six out of ten women experienced physical and

¹ UN, *Gender in Society Perception Study: Kyrgyz Republic*. 2018; Bishkek: UN Women. <https://kyrgyzstan.un.org/en/16177-gender-society-perceptions-study>

² Multi-indicator cluster research, UNICEF 2014, quoted in UN Gender in Society Perception Study, *Ibid.*

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sexual violence.³ Traditional perceptions of gender labor divisions also prevail, and most men and women believe that a woman must take care of the house and children and men should earn the money. This manifests in women facing high rates of unemployment and high rates of informal employment. These perceptions also mean that women undertake the disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic and care duties. Land, property, and other assets are more likely to be registered in men's names, and one in five men and women consider that the head of the household (generally male) should control spending. When applied to migration, these gendered norms manifest as perceptions of migrant women being immoral while migrant men who create new families in migration are not seen as immoral.⁴

Internal migration in Kyrgyzstan

The population of Kyrgyzstan is around 6.5 million people, approximately a third of whom live below the national poverty line. Migration is a key economic strategy in Kyrgyzstan, and international remittances account for 29.6 percent of gross domestic product (GDP).⁵ The common reasons given for migration are to find employment or for personal and family reasons (for example migrating with or to join family). Given the impact of climate change in Kyrgyzstan, however, the environment is likely to become an underlying factor in much migration. Climate change has manifested in the landlocked and mountainous country of Kyrgyzstan as landslides and floods, the result of retreating glaciers and changing rainfall. The region is also prone to earthquakes, which has led to the direct displacement of communities but also changes to water flow, seasons, and agricultural and herding routines. As income-generation activities in rural regions are largely limited to agricultural activities, there is little resilience to decreasing incomes.⁶ Migration is seen as a strategy to address this economic need.⁷

Official figures indicate that 12–18 percent of the population of Kyrgyzstan migrates internally. This figure is likely much higher when accounting for those individuals who move seasonally and those who migrate without registering their new residence.⁸ Almost half of internal migrants live in Bishkek (43.9 percent).⁹ While low residency registration means that the official data for Bishkek reports only a few thousand migrants, this figure is more likely to be around 50,000 in a city of more than one million.¹⁰ Survey data indicate that around three-quarters of internal migrants do not register their new residency when they migrate.¹¹ Registration requires individuals or households to either own property or have notarized permission from the owner

³ UN Women, "Eliminating Violence against Women." 2020; <https://eca.unwomen.org/ru/where-we-are/kyrgyzstan/ending-violence-against-women>.

⁴ UN, Gender in Society Perception Study.

⁵ Data found in "Annual Remittances Data (updated as of Oct. 2019)." World Bank, Leveraging Economic Migration for Development: A Briefing for the World Bank Board. 2019; Washington, DC: World Bank, xvii, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/labormarkets/brief/migration-and-remittances>.

⁶ Lira Sagynbekova, "Environment, Rural Livelihoods, and Labor Migration: A Case Study in Central Kyrgyzstan." *Mountain Research and Development* 2017; 37(4): 456–463. <https://doi.org/10.1659/MRD-JOURNAL-D-17-00029.1>.

⁷ A. Hill, C. Minbaeva, A. Wilson, and R. Satylkanov, "Hydrologic Controls and Water Vulnerabilities in the Naryn River Basin, Kyrgyzstan: A Sociohydro Case Study of Water Stressors in Central Asia." *Water* 2017; 9(5): 325. (In IOM World Migration Report, 2020, https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/wmr_2020.pdf

⁸ M-Vektor, Center for Public Opinion Studies and Predictions, and Central-Asia Barometer, Internal Migration in Kyrgyzstan. 2018; Bishkek: IOM. <https://kyrgyzstan.iom.int/internal-migration-kyrgyzstan>

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Zhypariza Zhumagazieva, "Invisible Migration with Visible Consequences." *EUCAM Commentary No 40*, 2020; Center for European Security Studies. <https://eucentralasia.eu/2020/01/invisible-migration-with-visible-consequences/>

¹¹ M-Vektor et al., Internal Migration in Kyrgyzstan.

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of the property they live in.¹² Many landlords either refuse, or levy a high charge, to provide this permission.¹³ The primary benefit of registration is access to free medical services, education, and the documentation required to find formal employment. These are harder to access without registration. Women report facing more difficulties due to lacking residency registration, largely because of their greater need to access these services as primary caregivers for children and the elderly, if not for themselves.¹⁴ A new law simplifying the registration process has been debated inside and outside of Parliament but has yet to be adopted, largely because of resistance from Bishkek citizens.¹⁵ Employment is largely in manufacturing, construction, and hospitality/services, sectors that are also characterized by informality.¹⁶ Lack of registration compounded by high levels of informality in the job market result in around 50 percent of internal migrants having no access to social benefits, including annual leave, sick leave, or maternity leave.¹⁷

Gendered dynamics of internal migration

While women and men internal migrants both work, women are more likely than men to identify “personal or family” reasons for their migration and men more likely to cite economic reasons. Women make up a slightly higher proportion of internal migrants in Kyrgyzstan but represent a higher proportion of “nonworking migrants” (at 61 percent—note that this does not count domestic or care duties as work) and a lower proportion of working migrants. Around two-thirds of internal migrants report being married, with more women being married than men.¹⁸ Many women internal migrants who migrate with their husband have been subjected to forced marriage, a practice still known as “bride kidnapping”: 15 percent of women internal migrants surveyed in 2018 had been “kidnapped” for the purposes of marriage; almost half of them without their consent.¹⁹ While outlawed in 2013, “bride kidnapping” remains prevalent in Kyrgyzstan where it is linked to internal migration due to the perceived attraction of abducting rural girls for this practice. In addition to the abduction and forced nature of the marriage itself, violence within these marriages is also prevalent and likely higher than the already high prevalence of physical or sexual violence against women in Kyrgyzstan.²⁰

The impact of COVID-19

The official infection rate of COVID-19 in Kyrgyzstan in November 2020 was around 9,500 cases per million (almost 50 percent over the global average of 6,720).²¹ Reporting rates vary significantly between rural and urban spaces, with the rate being twice as high in Bishkek. The

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ This included the fear that migrants will be able to register themselves at an address without the owner’s consent, see Zhumagazieva, “Invisible Migration with Visible Consequences.”

¹⁶ ADB and UNDP, *COVID-19 in the Kyrgyz Republic: Socioeconomic and Vulnerability Impact Assessment and Policy Response*, August 2020. <https://www.adb.org/documents/covid-19-kyrgyz-republic-socioeconomic-vulnerability-impact>.

¹⁷ M-Vektor et al., *Internal Migration in Kyrgyzstan*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ While the term “kidnapping” is still commonly used, the practice has various forms, from abduction and forced marriage to a consensual arrangement with the bride to be and parents knowing in advance that the groom plans to come and take the bride away, see M-Vektor et al., *Internal Migration in Kyrgyzstan*.

²⁰ UN Women, “Eliminating Violence against Women.”

²¹ CSSE, COVID-19 Data Repository by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University, 2020; <https://github.com/CSSEGISandData/COVID-19>.

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first peak of the pandemic occurred in July when the number of daily cases reached 1,108. A second wave is expected in winter with the number of cases per day in November being around 500 and rising. Lack of transparency and limited testing has, however, raised questions about the extent to which reported numbers accurately reflect the rate of infection on the ground.²²

The Government responded to the initial threat of the pandemic by declaring a state of emergency on March 25, 2020, that lasted until May 11, 2020. This manifested in terms of closing down businesses and public spaces, banning mass gatherings, and introducing a curfew from eight in the evening to seven in the morning.²³ The economic shutdown and restrictions on movement hit the economy hard. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development predicts that the Kyrgyzstan economy, already heavily reliant on international donor support, will shrink by 9.5 percent in 2020.²⁴ This economic shock has resulted in significant job losses with an estimated 1–1.8 million of the 2.6 million (formal sector) workers losing their jobs, according to the Ministry of Labor and Social Development (this figure will likely be higher when accounting for informal sector workers).²⁵ Furthermore, the impact of lost remittances from international migrants losing their employment could amount to a further decrease of up to four to five percent of GDP by 2021.²⁶ While this may not directly impact internal migrants, it may economically impact their wider families or households more broadly, either through the demand for more support from their home communities, or the need to support returning migrants.

During the state of emergency, the Ministry of Labor and Social Development identified poorer families for support, predominantly in the form of food support. Eligible households were identified through the residency register meaning that unregistered internal migrants were not identified for this support. Absent savings or external support, some internal migrants returned to their rural communities, often finding on their return that their families had little capacity to take them back in and no economic opportunities were available for them. Many stayed, however, on the basis that more opportunities would exist for them in the cities than back home, for fear of infection, and possibly because stigma around migrants carrying the infection prevented them from returning. A rapid assessment undertaken by the International Organization for Migration indicated that more than a third of families did not have any savings when the pandemic struck, and another third did not have enough savings to last more than a month.²⁷ By the end of the six-week lockdown more than two-thirds of migrant families had no savings or funds in reserve.

²² P. Stronski, "COVID-19 Exposes the Fragility of Central Asia." 2020; Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/09/03/covid-19-exposes-fragility-of-central-asia-pub-82660>.

²³ A. Kurmanbekova, "In Kyrgyzstan, Quarantine Carries Increase Risk of Domestic Violence for Women." 2020; *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/ru/news/2020/04/13/340553>.

²⁴ O. Dzyubenko and O. Auyezov, "Coronavirus Lit Fuse in Kyrgyzstan, Spreading Unrest in Putin's Back Yard. *Reuters*, October 8, 2020, <https://fr.reuters.com/article/uk-kyrgyzstan-protests-pandemic-analysis-idUKKBN26T2MD>.

²⁵ OECD, "COVID-19 Crisis Response in Central Asia." 2020; OECD. These numbers should be interpreted in the context of Kyrgyzstan's relatively high share of informal employment. <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-response-in-central-asia>

²⁶ ADB and UNDP, COVID-19 in the Kyrgyz Republic.

²⁷ UNICEF and IOM, "Rapid Needs Assessment of the Challenges Facing Migrant Workers and Their Families Impacted by the COVID-19 Outbreak." 2020.

Several contributing factors meant that the pandemic hit women hardest.²⁸ Assessing the gendered impacts of COVID-19, a United Nations report found that women and men have lost working hours at the same rate, but that 80 percent of women surveyed reported an increase in time devoted to unpaid domestic chores and care (of children and the elderly). In addition, three-quarters of women reported that they now worked from home.²⁹ These factors combined saw women's home-based activity (both paid and unpaid) intensify.

Domestic violence (against women) has also risen. Three hundred and twenty-five cases were reported between March 25th and May 15th in areas where the state of emergency was declared—a 65 percent increase from the same period in 2019.³⁰ In Bishkek alone 162 cases were reported in that period.³¹ This figure is likely only a fraction of the actual numbers of cases because one-third of survivors of domestic violence do not want to seek help and those who do are prevented by the physical lockdown or they are afraid of contracting the virus.³² Recent survey data also indicate higher prevalence, finding that 32 percent of respondents reported a perceived increase in domestic violence; the figure was twice as high in urban than in rural areas.³³ Lack of reporting can also be due to limited knowledge of how or where to seek help. Findings from a rapid gender assessment reported that 40 percent of Kyrgyz women respondents did not know where to seek help in cases of domestic violence.³⁴ Many women also know that the options for women who do report abuse are limited. This is particularly the case for those women who lack a marriage certificate (which is common) and struggle to claim welfare for themselves or their children if they leave the family home. For internal migrant women, the lack of social or family network providing the option of a safe haven, makes leaving an abusive home particularly difficult.

Crisis centers for victims and survivors of domestic violence—which already provide very limited services with only 15 non-governmental organization centers in the country—were suspended and moved online during the pandemic.³⁵ Support from international donors, including USAID, was provided in the form of funding for support and services for victims and survivors of GBV. In addition, in July 2020 a Parliamentary Council on Women's Rights and Combating Violence was established, comprising members of parliament, representatives of state institutions, and civil society organizations. The Council has called for an amendment to the Code of Criminal Procedure to provide for immediate detention of GBV abusers for up to 48 hours.³⁶

²⁸ M. Grzegorzczak, "Unemployment Surges in Kyrgyzstan as Impact of COVID-19 Hits Economy," *Emerging Europe*, August 28, 2020, <https://emerging-europe.com/news/joblessness-surges-in-kyrgyzstan-as-impact-of-covid-19-hits-economy/>.

²⁹ UN Women, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Women's and Men's Lives and Livelihoods in Europe and Central Asia: Preliminary Results from a Rapid Gender Assessment," 2020; UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia.

³⁰ UN Women, "In Kyrgyzstan, Pandemic-Related Domestic Violence Increases Vulnerabilities," *UN Women*, August 13, 2020, <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/8/in-kyrgyzstan-pandemic-related-domestic-violence-increases-vulnerabilities>.

³¹ A. Akisheva, "Women Face-to-Face with Domestic Abuse during COVID-19 Lockdown: The Case of Kyrgyzstan," *CAP Paper No. 238*, 2020; Central Asia Program, <https://centralasiaprogram.org/archives/16842>.

³² UN Women, "In Kyrgyzstan, Pandemic-Related Domestic Violence Increases Vulnerabilities."

³³ UN Women, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Women's and Men's Lives and Livelihoods in Europe and Central Asia."

³⁴ UN Women, "Gender Assessments in Europe and Central Asia Reveal Pandemic's Devastating Impact on Women," *UN Women*, July 21, 2020, <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/7/gender-assessments-reveal-pandemics-devastating-impact-on-women>.

³⁵ Akisheva, "Women Face-to-Face with Domestic Abuse."

³⁶ UNDP, "The UN in Kyrgyzstan Warmly Welcomes the Establishment of Gender Council under Jogorku Kenesh," *UNDP Kyrgyz Republic*, July 1, 2020, <https://www.kg.undp.org/content/kyrgyzstan/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2020/07/undp-welcomes-gender-council.html>.

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More women reported difficulties accessing healthcare under COVID-19, which may also be connected to obstacles in accessing public transport. Data also indicate that women experienced more difficulties securing food.³⁷ Evidence of community solidarity was demonstrated through the actions of women entrepreneurs in the cities, as they collected and shared food and water with those most in need.

While the data on the impacts of COVID-19 are not disaggregated by internal migration status, it is reasonable to surmise that the situation for internal migrant women may be even more acute given compounding factors such as increased isolation in the home, informal employment resulting in a lack of social protection or unemployment benefits, and lack of residency registration reducing access to services.

Predicting that forced and child marriage may increase as a result of COVID-19 is also reasonable. Perceived insecurity has previously led to more child marriages and arranged marriages, with parents wanting to protect their daughters from external threats to either economic or physical security. This practice increased after the 2010 conflict, and child marriage is increasing in the context of COVID-19.³⁸ The same strategy may be used post-COVID-19, in families that cannot afford to keep their daughters. The Kyrgyzstan Women Peace and Security National Action Plan 2018–2020 includes provisions for addressing violence against women during emergencies, including training the employees of authorized bodies in preventing, combating, and responding to GBV in emergency situations and improving the quality of services provided to victims of emergencies, including violence.³⁶

Post-COVID-19 potential

In April and May alone, the Government reported that more than 25,000 international migrants had returned, primarily from Russia and Kazakhstan. While many will re-migrate, an initial influx of internal migrants to Kyrgyz cities including Bishkek and Osh is anticipated. The sudden presence of an economically active body of people has caused concerns that the inflows of returnees will increase tensions. Conversely, some believe that the returnees will bring improvements in the form of new ideas, investment, and business innovation. Depending on where they are returning from, returnees can also bring more progressive ideas around gendered norms, particularly where women returnees demonstrate greater confidence and independence.

³⁷ UN Women, “The Impact of COVID-19 on Women’s and Men’s Lives and Livelihoods in Europe and Central Asia.”

³⁸ UN, Gender in Society Perception Study; see also “Coronavirus despair forces girls across Asia into child marriage.” *Al Jazeera*, 2 September 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/2/coronavirus-despair-forces-girls-across-asia-into-child-marriage>

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The following table highlights the team's key lessons and recommendations:

Table 1: Lessons and Recommendations	
Lessons	Recommendations
COVID-19 has highlighted key structural factors with a significant impact on women in Kyrgyzstan and likely a greater impact on internal migrant women.	Continue to invest in work to combat gendered norms and stereotypes that view women solely as wives, mothers, and domestic help and advocate for effective equality, including through the promotion of women's leadership and economic empowerment.
COVID-19 has increased domestic violence. Limited access to support and services is compounded for migrant women who lack marriage status and residency status and have COVID-19-related barriers to accessing services and support.	Increase access to temporary and permanent shelter for internal migrant women and children regardless of residency or marriage status.
Previous situations of insecurity have increased GBV and forced and child marriages. COVID-19 should be considered a trigger that may result in a similar rise.	Review and revise the Women Peace and Security National Action Plan to incorporate measures that prevent the rise in crisis-related GBV. These could include working with men to address perceptions of masculinity that are connected with health and the ability to provide and how violence stems from the frustration of these perceptions, i.e., when no work is available.
Communities can demonstrate resilience through social protection, and returning migrants can bring economic, social, and cultural ideas and practices that can positively influence norms, particularly gender norms.	Strengthen societal networks of support through community-based organizations and local business, including strengthening localized planning and response committees that can incorporate the voices and ideas of returning migrants while building resilience to future shocks.

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7