

Migrant workers and the COVID-19 pandemic

KEY MESSAGES

- Migrants play a substantial role in agri-food systems.¹ Measures affecting the movement of people (internally and internationally) and resulting labour shortages will have an impact on agricultural value chains, affecting food availability and market prices globally.²
- Large shares of migrants work under informal or casual arrangements, which leave them unprotected, vulnerable to exploitation, poverty and food insecurity, and often without access to healthcare, social protection and the measures being put in place by governments.
- A dramatic reduction in remittances sent home is expected as a result of the pandemic, with considerable impact on rural livelihoods and food and nutrition security in areas of origin.
- Response measures should focus on protecting workers at the workplace, expanding temporary work permits and ensuring safe mobility within and across countries, matching labour demand and supply, while protecting lives and livelihoods and supporting employment and incomes for the most vulnerable. All migrants should have access to response measures, including health and social protection, regardless of their migratory or working status.

MAIN POLICY ISSUES

Internal and international migrants contribute to agriculture and rural development in many ways, not only by sending remittances or transferring knowledge to their home countries, but also by working in agri-food systems in destination areas. The pandemic has put in the spotlight the vital contribution migrants play in ensuring food supplies.³ Policy issues to be considered are:

- **Measures affecting the movement of people, not only across countries but also within countries, will have an impact on agricultural supply chains. Shortages of labour could disrupt production, as well as the processing and distribution of food.** As the pandemic evolves, concerns emerge about shortages of migrant workers during planting and harvesting. In European countries, this possible shortage could affect a wide range of crops, especially the labour-intensive ones (e.g. tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, strawberries,

¹ Migrant is any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person's legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is (IOM, 2011).

² Official statistics largely underestimate the share of migrants working in agriculture due to lack of data and widespread informality. Evidence from country contexts suggests that shares are substantial, also due to the low entry barriers compared to other sectors.

³ For more information refer to the [FAO Migration Framework. Migration as a choice and an opportunity for rural development](#)

cherries, potatoes, and asparagus). Overall, there may be an estimated shortfall of about 1 million seasonal agricultural workers in Europe, mainly coming from Eastern Europe and Northern Africa. Farmers unions have estimated a shortfall of about 200 000 seasonal workers in France, 300 000 in Germany and 370 000 in Italy.⁴ In [Australia](#), it is estimated that about 50 percent of the labour force in vegetable farms and 30 percent in fruit and nut farms are seasonal and temporary migrant workers. [Canadian](#) farms and food processing operations rely on 50 000 to 60 000 migrant workers, while 30 percent of the workforce in the seafood industry is made up of foreign workers. Migrant workers in the [United States of America](#), hired to fill temporary or seasonal agriculture jobs, make up 10 percent of crop farmworkers; while the seafood industry, particularly in [Alaska](#), brings in more than 20 000 migrant workers annually. The shortage of foreign labour, due to the closure of international borders and enforced travel restrictions, poses a tremendous challenge, with impacts on prices and availability of some products.

- **Migrant workers are being hit hard. Business closures and restrictions to movement, combined with lack or limited access to all forms of social protection, increase migrants' vulnerability to poverty and food and nutrition insecurity.** Loss of jobs and unstable incomes will hinder their capacity to access and purchase adequate and nutritious food for themselves and their families. Measurements of social distancing are impacting services being delivered to migrants, including food delivery to the most vulnerable (e.g. migrants in transit, rejected asylum-seekers, homeless). While migrant workers in many countries are struggling to return to their rural areas of origin, return migrants are increasingly facing discrimination, being stigmatized as COVID-19 carriers. Adding on to school closures and disruptions in school feeding programmes, children in migrant families will be exposed to heightened risks of malnutrition and to child labour exploitation.
- **Many agricultural migrants continue working in indispensable services linked to the food sector. However, many work under informal or irregular arrangements, facing poor housing and working conditions, with no access to healthcare or social protection. They are more likely to be exposed to occupational safety and health hazards, and run a greater risk of contracting and further spreading COVID-19.** Many agricultural migrant workers live and work in precarious conditions, often without access to adequate hygiene, sanitation and protective equipment. In some contexts, heavily overcrowded migrant worker settlements run the risk of becoming centers of infection, leading to increased deaths and stigmatization from the local populations. Many workers carpool to work, sharing a single car or being transported to work on packed buses. Migrants also face barriers in accessing information on protective measures related to COVID-19, due to lack of information provided by employers, language barriers, illiteracy and/or limited access to internet. Undocumented migrants face an additional layer of vulnerability as they often have no access to healthcare or social protection in case they get sick or they stop working.
- **The impacts of the crisis might affect migrants differently, depending on their migratory or working status. If response measures are not adequately designed, many migrants risk of remaining unprotected and vulnerable to exploitation, poverty and food insecurity.** Different types of migrants (e.g. refugees; internally displaced persons; migrant workers; internal or international; permanent, temporary or seasonal; documented or undocumented migrants) might have different access to work permits, social protection programmes, recovery measures and healthcare systems. Little voice is given in this process to the most vulnerable and unprotected workers, including the self-employed, contributing family workers, casual, seasonal, informal and gig workers in the food and agricultural sub-sectors. It is imperative that response measures factor in the different needs faced by

⁴ Foote, N. 2020. COVID-19 measures could cause 'devastating' labour shortage in EU farming [online]. [Cited 7 April 2020]. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/agriculture-food/news/covid-19-measures-could-cause-devastating-labour-shortage-in-eu-farming/>

migrants working in the agri-food sector, considering also gender- and age-specific challenges. Women migrant workers are disproportionately affected due to pre-existing gender segmentation in rural labour markets and widespread decent work deficits. The pandemic is also likely to increase their vulnerability to work exploitation, gender-based abuse and violence at home, at the workplace or while travelling. Additional care responsibilities are likely to increase women's work-burden. Similarly, young migrants are more likely to hold informal jobs. Without adequate support and protection, they will face increased rates of unemployment and working poverty. Young people are also affected by the suspension of education and training. For prospective or return migrants, having no access to vocational training or agricultural business, incubation is likely to impact their capacity to respond to the crisis, create jobs and secure livelihoods.

- **The economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to impact not only migrant workers at destination, but also their families in home countries through a sudden reduction or halt in remittance flows.** Around 40 percent of international remittances are sent to rural areas. Remittances contribute to sustaining the livelihoods of many households, representing about 60 percent of the total annual income. Households heavily reliant on remittances will likely be the worst affected. In an increasing number of sending countries, migrants cannot access the physical remittance sending locations due to lockdowns and many lack alternatives (e.g. digital transfers). Similar challenges are experienced at the receiving end, as remittance recipients cannot access physical payout locations. The scale of the impact on remittances is hard to predict. However, lessons learned from the 2008 global financial crisis and 2011 debt crisis point towards a dramatic reduction in the more than USD 500 billion in family remittances sent home annually. This is likely to affect about one billion people globally who are directly dependent on remittances.⁵

REVIEW OF CURRENT MEASURES AND PRACTICES

Most measures in destination areas focus on the extension of working visas to temporary and seasonal migrants (e.g. **Italy, Australia, New Zealand**). In **China**, the government has issued a notice to ensure that the contracts of migrant workers are not terminated in the case of illness or containment measures. **Germany** announced to ease entry restrictions for seasonal farmworkers. **Portugal** has temporarily given all migrants and asylum seekers full citizenship rights, granting them access to the country's healthcare system. However, regularization of migrants and extension of temporary work permits have been limited to date.⁶

Mechanisms for matching labour supply and demand in agriculture (e.g. in **Germany** or **France**) do not target migrants explicitly. However, if adequate support is given (e.g. providing information in relevant languages, reaching out to rural areas, supporting migrants with limited access to internet), migrants living in those countries could also benefit from those platforms.

Some producers', workers' and employers' organizations have issued guidance on personal and protective measures to adopt at the workplace in agricultural activities. However, specific guidance dealing with vulnerable categories of workers or addressing specific contexts such as remote rural areas (e.g. with poor access to hygiene, water and sanitation) are not specified. Moreover, little mention is made of specific agricultural sub-sectors (e.g. measures to be taken on fishing vessels, in food markets, or in processing facilities).

To date, not many countries have approved response measures, including social protection measures, explicitly including migrant workers. In the cases where basic income protections

⁵ Data from the Remittance Community Task Force (RCTF19) launched by IFAD's Financing Facility for Remittances on 24 March.

⁶ The review is based on a non-exhaustive list of measures gathered as of 31 March 2020.

have been announced, such as in **Bangladesh, Brazil, China, India, Italy** or **Lebanon**, the measures to benefit vulnerable population groups could possibly also include migrant workers.⁷ In Wuhan, temporary assistance was provided to the quarantined migrant population with difficulties for an amount of RMB 3 000 (about USD 425). As of 13 March, it supported 5 839 people with a transfer of RMB 16 100 million (about USD 2 400 000 million).⁸ Concerns remain as regards the coverage of undocumented migrants and migrants working under informal and casual arrangements. **China** is also implementing measures to support job creation and entrepreneurship in rural areas and in the agricultural sector, specifically mentioning migrants.

The situation is rapidly evolving, and more measures are expected to be announced and put in place in the next weeks and months. It is important to continue monitoring how migrants will be targeted or how they will be affected by those measures.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Extend expiring working visas of migrant workers employed in all agricultural sub-sectors.** This will mitigate labour shortages caused by travel restrictions on incoming labour by ensuring that those workers who want to stay do not need to leave the country, while also reducing the possibility of spreading the virus to other areas upon their return.
- **Ensure the safe movement of agricultural workers within countries, including during lockdown, and between countries, allowing exceptions in granting working visas to seasonal agricultural workers.** This will minimize shortfalls and maintain essential services, while retaining workers' safety, health surveillance and containment as the primary criteria.
- **Regularize migrants present in the territory and grant temporary work permits to all.** Regularization and issuance of temporary work permits will ensure that undocumented migrants or those migrants who, under certain circumstances, cannot work (e.g. asylum seekers) can have access to jobs, thereby filling the shortfall of seasonal agricultural workers coming from abroad. This will also ensure that migrants have access to healthcare, support services and social protection measures to mitigate the socio-economic impact of COVID-19.
- **Match the demand for labour of the agricultural sector with the migrant labour supply.** Promote online appeals or other forms of labour matching, giving the opportunity to all migrants present in the country, especially those who lost their jobs due to business closures, to access jobs in the agri-food systems. Promote social dialogue and consultations with producers' organizations to put in place dedicated measures to support smallholder/family farmers and small-medium agricultural enterprises that may face several constraints (e.g. no or limited access to information, ICTs, lack of labour) in matching labour needs.
- **Ensure occupational safety and health measures are put in place and are accessible to all migrants.** Personal protective equipment and related items should be distributed to all workers employed in indispensable services, including those working in the food and agricultural sector. Ensure adequate hygiene and sanitation is provided and social distancing is respected at the workplace (e.g. fishing vessels, farms, fish/farm markets), in housing for migrant agricultural workers (when provided by employers or the state), and on the means of transportation required to reach the fields/workplaces in remote rural areas. Information and awareness-raising campaigns on how to protect oneself and others from

⁷ IMF. 2020. Policy responses to COVID-19 [online]. [Cited 7 April 2020]. <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19#>

⁸ World Bank. 2020. Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures [online]. [Cited 7 April 2020]. <http://www.ugogentilini.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/global-review-of-social-protection-responses-to-COVID-19-2.pdf>

the risk of infection need to be made accessible in languages and communication channels/formats that are understandable and accessible to all migrant workers.

- **Ensure the inclusion of all migrants in the pandemic response and in the measures that are being introduced to mitigate the economic recession caused by COVID-19, regardless of the migratory or working status.** Migrants should be given equitable access to prevention, detection and treatment measures.⁹ Social protection, income smoothing and employment retention measures should be expanded to cover all vulnerable populations, including all migrants. Particular attention needs to be placed on the most vulnerable subgroups, including women, youth and children (including parental care support for migrants working in indispensable services), older migrant workers with comorbidities (such as HIV-AIDS, tuberculosis, diabetes, disability), and on unprotected workers, including the self-employed, contributing family workers, casual, seasonal, and informal workers, and gig workers in the food and agricultural sub-sectors. Time-bound financial and tax relief need to extend to micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in all agricultural sub-sectors owned by migrants.

THE ROLE OF THE FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

In this crisis, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) can play a role in advocating for the rights of migrant workers engaged in agriculture and food systems, and giving voice to the most vulnerable and high risk sub-groups.

FAO will continue mapping and analyzing the policy and programmatic responses to COVID-19, how they affect migrant workers originating or living in rural areas and/or working in the food and agricultural sub-sectors, and their families in rural areas of origin.

FAO can contribute by sharing lessons learned and supporting governments on how to include agricultural migrant workers in the policy and programmatic response to COVID-19, taking into account their differentiated needs based on gender, age, marital, migratory or working status.

FAO will mobilize its technical expertise to design projects and programmes targeting agricultural migrant workers affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including return or seasonal migrants and their families at origin. FAO is also committed in protecting migrant workers in its projects, such as those in which trainings or livelihood interventions are foreseen (e.g. through virtual learning, social distancing, provision of personal protective equipment, access to water and sanitizer, etc.).

FAO will step up its efforts to coordinate actions with governments, United Nations agencies, and civil society organizations to ensure that adequate, comprehensive and coherent emergency and long-term responses are put in place, with due attention to migrant workers in agri-food systems and their families in areas of origin.

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⁹ Special attention should be given to undocumented migrants who might not report illness and seek medical treatment due to fear of being detained or sent to quarantine.