

AGRUMIG Policy Paper

*Between a rock and a hard place:
Early experience of migration challenges under the COVID19 pandemic*



Photo: Ethiopian News Agency/migrant returnees from Lebanon arrive in Addis Ababa, April 2020

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Acronyms

AGRUMIG	Agriculture
CAAT	Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand
CGEM	Confédération Générale des Entreprises du Maroc
COVID19	Coronavirus Disease
DW	Deutsche Well
ECC	Emergency Coordination Centre
HCP	Haut Commissariat au Plan
JSCCB	Joint Standing Committee on Commerce, Industry and Banking
ILO	International Labour Organization
INCE	Institutul National de Cercetări Economice
IOM	International Organization for Migration
KRW	South Korean Won
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PDR	People’s Democratic Republic
IWMI	International Water Management Institute
MSRI	Mountain Societies Research Institute
QR	Quick Response
SMS	State Migration Service
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies
TDRI	Thailand Development Research Institute
THB	Thai Baht
UN	United Nations
USD	United States Dollars
VAT	Value Added Tax
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

1 Executive summary

Context

The global migration context has changed dramatically since the beginning of 2020. Both within and between countries there has been a substantial curtailment in movement. As a result of multiple lockdowns, economic activity has severely declined and labour markets have ground to a halt. In mid 2020, the spectre of mass unemployment in industrialised economies loomed on the horizon. For migrant hosting and origin countries – some are substantially part of both – this poses a set of complex development challenges.

Some speak of a ‘new normal’ emerging, perhaps with less movement, more use of technology and, overall, a reduction in the global transport system that we have become accustomed to using. However, this suggests that there is suppressed demand to move for work elsewhere as well as a change in the nature of labour markets, particularly those that seek to make profits from large wage differentials within and between countries. There is no apparent evidence that this is yet the case; and an eagerness to work abroad, or in cities, remains the norm amongst the burgeoning youth in many low- and middle-income economies.

The wider context of economic shock and changes to social systems, including the widely-reported mass movements of people within – and to some extent between – countries seems to herald a different global migration order. But it is worth asking whether this is really going to be the case, as many of the country examples in this short report make plain (note: this report was compiled from information available at an early stage in the pandemic). Whilst the coupling of health risks with migrant movement may establish new levels of control and scrutiny, and to some degree attach new stigmas to migration in some contexts, the economic imperative of labour demand and supply at an international level means challenges will probably be overcome.

Findings

The seven countries of the AGRUMIG project – China, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Morocco, Nepal and Thailand – are all severely affected by the rupture in migration patterns. The impacts are a complex of factors related to movement into, within and from countries. Some countries are both sending and receiving migrants, others are predominantly sending. Although many migrant communities have been stranded abroad, and some have been repatriated, or have returned voluntarily, the experience varies enormously. Overall, there would seem to have been in reality little migrant return, not just because of the significant travel barriers in place, but because some have opted to remain and continue to seek work. In other words, the rupture is in the logistics of movement, rather than in the economic logic of migration.

Where migrants have been left jobless and marooned in host countries, there has been substantial hardship, but little support provided by their countries of origin. Some have eventually been repatriated, but the challenges of abrupt return without substantial resources to fall back on, and the weight of expectation not fulfilled, can be substantial. In some cases, families had invested heavily and accumulated large debts to send family members abroad. For some who remain in host countries, their situation is tenuous and, if informal and ‘ungoverned’ by an official contract, they may be at constant risk of deportation.

At a wider level, there is perhaps a new ‘health nationalism’ emerging, that is both rooted in class perceptions of risk and the ‘othering’ of foreign communities. Being on the outside coming in implies possible exposure to and transmission of the virus. In a certain sense too, governments may not be keen on too many migrants returning, not so much because of infection risk, but because there are no jobs to return to.

Those living in more crowded communities within countries may be stigmatized by association with ‘breaching’ lockdowns – largely out of necessity due to the informal nature of their working environments and the reality of living in more high-density communities. An emerging ‘moralizing discourse’ can stigmatize the inhabitants of working class neighbourhoods, where there is greater spread associated with proximity and the need to go about their (often informal) livelihood activities. The accusation being that they are not respecting the ‘rules of confinement’. The rupture is also, therefore, perhaps at a societal level, with additional implications for internal migration in some countries.

Livelihoods: For communities of origin, there are immediate impacts including loss of remittance income. There are other effects too, including the impact of mass quarantining of returnees, with attendant stress on their wellbeing. It is apparent that in some countries mechanisms of deprivation and differentiation are present as a result of impacts on migration, leading to more entrenched poverty and possibly slippage into deprivation. The opportunity for successful reintegration of returnees varies according to pre-existing wealth, as does the impact on households who have lost remittances. An example are the successful returnees in Kyrgyzstan who had made earlier agricultural investments at home, and who do not plan to migrate again. It is likely that the current situation will push certain categories of people into poverty again. That gaps may increase and differentiation will increase seems a likely scenario.

‘Sitting it out’ is both a societal and governmental reaction, not least because of the uncertain futures hindering effective planning and responses. It is possible that as a result the larger impacts on (rural) livelihoods may yet to be felt. The sense that these are very early days in this pandemic’s economic impact (and therefore understanding) are widely felt – and premature conclusions are therefore risky. The major effects will be felt more when people (and countries) have run out of reserves and stored assets. The likelihood that a number of people will fall into deprivation is high, and that income gaps will increase as social differentiation progresses.

Governance: Governments are undertaking a range of measures to provide income support and stimulate employment in home areas, mainly related to business entrepreneurship. It is likely that the larger impact on (rural) livelihoods – both impacts of the pandemic and major response measures – may still be round the corner. Longer-term planning options of governments include a stronger focus on agriculture and agro-enterprises, including in China, Moldova and Nepal.

Individuals: Is there evidence of a change in the individual calculus about whether, where and how to migrate? In this early analysis, there seems to be little suggestion that this is yet the case. Currently, there may be a reassessment of risk – particularly related to the likelihood of getting stranded *en route* or in host countries – but there is a lack of definitive data on which to make a clear argument. Part of any calculus change may relate to relative ‘transaction’ costs of migration, and how these are felt and responded to by different migration groups – from older men to younger women – and, indeed, by those intermediaries responsible for facilitating movement.

Possible futures

Despite the ‘rupture’ in migration, there is every indication that structural conditions (e.g. inequalities in access to assets, low employment, import dependence, etc) have yet to change and domestic labour markets in agriculture will resume once transport connections have been re-established. This is likely to lead to continued migration, particularly in countries such as Ethiopia, Nepal, Moldova, Morocco, Thailand and Kyrgyzstan. Nepal seems to have signalled as such in policy through the reissuance of government labour permits from late June 2020. In contrast with Thailand, there have been no changes in how migrants are recruited or in how permits are issued.

Within governance responses have emerged new notions of ‘foreignness’ in economic development. The notion of the migrant as someone from elsewhere, and of those from home areas regarded as being ‘foreign’, distant, etc may grow. Issues of ‘foreignness’ and coming from abroad have left some migrants stigmatized and unwelcome in their own countries due to fears of disease transmission, but

also because some have returned without income. At the same time governments are likely to impose more severe conditions on migration, including closer tracking of who is moving where and how.

The restrictions and banning of free movement are likely to be long-lasting but, when relaxed, will be accompanied by stronger control, including tracking and tracing measures utilizing digital innovations and smartphone use. This may have a significant impact on the future governance of migration, including health ‘passporting’ and other measures involving stronger accounting for, and scrutiny of, movements.

In conclusion, migration and migrants remain high on the development policy agenda. The logic – and individual calculus – of migration has not changed. Economic damage to economies may in fact trigger greater future movement. The sense that this is a critical juncture to progress discussion and dialogue on migration and development remains strong, yet, so far, this critical development issue has received relatively little attention during the COVID19 response.

2 Introduction

The initial task of AGRUMIG was to assess the nature of migration and rural development relationships in seven countries and to consider how stronger governance of systems could enhance development benefits and reduce migration risks and uncertainties. This was premised on migration remaining a major feature of the development landscape. As we are now approaching a situation in which an estimated 50 percent of the global labour force could be unemployed by the end of the year contributing to a 20 percent reduction in international remittances², the task of understanding linkages and finding ways of governing migration more effectively is probably more important than ever.

Evidence emerging from this rapid review of the seven AGRUMIG countries suggests a wide variety of impacts due to the global COVID19 pandemic and a range of responses by governments and people – many of which have been abrupt policy shifts, emerging in near real-time as this report was compiled. The purpose of this report, therefore, is not to establish definitive trends and relationships, but rather to quickly collate some of the observed changes and assess their implications for wider policy environments.

Given the unprecedented nature of the current situation, the environment facing migrants and would-be migrants is one of grave uncertainty. Whether there will be a return to pre-COVID19 ‘normality’ is a key question, but probably premature to ask. Some evidence from case study countries points to major change, but underlying structural trends and features remain the same. People migrate for work because of huge wage differentials, structural underdevelopment of their local economies including an absence of reliable year-round employment, and for a variety of other cultural and behavioural reasons. At present there is no sense that these conditions have changed. If anything, the work imperative may have increased and the wider global political economy may seek even lower wage economies in future in order to ‘recover growth’.

This, therefore, was a brief survey carried out by AGRUMIG partners in China, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Morocco, Nepal and Thailand to provide a snapshot of the situation reached in mid-2020. With so much continuing uncertainty surrounding infection rates and national and international responses to COVID19, the report should only be read as light assessment, providing some early indications and ‘directions of travel’. Events and impacts will change significantly in coming months as the global economic fallout is felt and systems realign themselves to economic retrenchment and, quite possibly, increased economic nationalism.

Our analysis focused on a set of core questions: What is actually happening? How are migrants responding and how are governments responding? What, if any, are the key policy intersections in

² https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/institutional_statement_covid19_28052020.pdf

relation to livelihoods and development, and what, if any, are the migration governance consequences emerging? Broadly speaking the analysis followed the template given below:

	What is happening?	How are migrants responding?	How are governments responding?	What are the key sector intersections?	What are the governance consequences?
Data	Data on flow of people and remittances	New data trends, e.g. migrant returns repatriations (forced & voluntary)	New policy measures, investments, subsidies	Impacts on inequalities, HDI, Gini coefficient, etc	Formal, informal; is there a change in the 'migration industry' (e.g. cost 'per movement')
Policy	Gender disaggregation How have policies changed (or been revived)	What are the new pressures on policy makers	Strictures, laws (e.g. curbing of informal migration)	Inter-sectoral policy changes (agriculture, education, health, etc)	Are policy changes shifting the nature of power to make decisions in particular directions?
Voices	Who is saying what, and why?	Different types of migrants, what are they saying (Seasonal, short-term, gender disaggregated, geographical regions, etc)	Is the government challenged by oppositional politics at any levels on any key issues?	Who is saying what and where; and how much is this in response to others; how do people articulate their own position; is this in political versus economic terms?	Are there voices that are not being allowed to be heard? Are there new voices emerging in debates?

3 Emerging evidence

This section presents a summary of the emerging evidence collected rapidly from AGRUMIG partner countries. Whilst not detailing all of the material provided, it draws together some of the common features.

3.1 Livelihood ruptures – and future challenges

There are clear impacts on livelihood systems in both rural and urban areas across countries. The background to these impacts can vary widely. In some cases impacts are caused by a sudden drop in internal migration to and from urban areas, and between rural areas. This has directly affected rural production systems. In other areas, a slump in remittances is affecting income streams into rural households.

In Ethiopia, reports during the pandemic suggest that many migrants have been unable to send remittances home, either because of lockdown and movement restrictions affecting their working situations, or because of direct job losses. This applies across a range of countries, including migrants in the United States affected by job losses (Samuel, 2020). A substantial number of Ethiopians remit income back home from the US to support their families. Ethiopian migrants in other countries, having been left stranded with no work, are themselves now seeking recourse to social safety nets, including in neighbouring countries such as Kenya.

In Morocco, an estimated 30 percent decrease in remittances from migrants abroad is equivalent to a reduction in GDP of about 5.6 percent at 2019 levels. These remittances include amounts that would have come from seasonal workers in France and Spain, the movement of which the government of Morocco opted to stop on health grounds. Some of the gaps in labour markets in European countries have, in part, been filled by employing local labour. Barriers to the harvesting of agricultural goods in Europe may even provide an opportunity for the export of similar products from Morocco.

In addition to job losses of migrants abroad, COVID19 has resulted in significant job losses in Morocco across a range of sectors – 85 percent in the leather industry, 78 percent in the tourism sector and more

Box 1 Labour and fruit production in Morocco

In fruit production regions in the Middle Atlas and Upper Moulouya, there were two phases: during the first phase, the restrictions on the mobility of agricultural workers were strict, and farmers had difficulty recruiting farm workers, and buyers of standing crops were scarce. Many farms appealed to family and community solidarity at the village level for agricultural and harvesting work. With the approach of deconfinement, controls relaxed within administrative districts, which gave operators the possibility of calling on the labour available in the same locations (Source: AGRUMIG Morocco team)

than 70 percent in the textiles sector (CGEM, 2020). It is possible, and perhaps predictable, that these same job losses will cause social pressures that increase the propensity for further migration – perhaps triggering a new wave of migration when movement is restored.

Migration ‘home’ countries, including Morocco, can also be migration destination countries. In the case of Morocco this includes people from countries in sub-Saharan African who are living in Morocco. Many have been left destitute and have resorted to begging. Evidence of food availability in urban

markets, largely provided by large-scale farms, suggests that this part of the agricultural sector has not suffered from a shortage of labour. However, this is not the case for family farms the labour from which large farms also compete. This represents a further way in which the pandemic situation can further ‘enable differentiation’ of development pathways, with adverse effects felt most by the smallholder farming sector.

Economic disruptions in Thailand have affected tourism, production and export sectors, and supply chains. It is estimated the economy could shrink by 3-5 percent in 2020 and exports decline by 5-10 percent, according to the Joint Standing Committee on Commerce, Industry and Banking. The JSCCB also estimates that some seven million people could lose their jobs as a result of the COVID19 impact.

Box 2 Thai workers in South Korea

South Korea is among the top five destinations for Thai workers, due to higher salary and visa exemption. Only 57,470 out of 209,909 Thais are legally living and working in the South Korea, however. Many Thai workers travelled to South Korea as tourists and overstayed, thereafter working illegally. During the initial COVID-19 outbreak in the South Korea in mid-December 2019, illegal Thai migrant workers were given an opportunity to voluntarily leave, regardless of the length of their period of overstay, without having to pay a fine (20 million KRW or 14,800 EUR) for overstaying their visa and being blacklisted (a ban of up to 10 years), under a new Korean amnesty which began on December 11th and continued until June 30th, 2020 (South Korea Immigration Service, 2019). In early March 2020, the South Korea Immigration Office reported that 5,386 voluntary Thai workers had returned to Thailand. South Korea also announced the temporary halt to the visa exemption for Thais from April 13th, 2020, having employed strict measures to reduce imported cases of Covid-19 into the country. There are some concerns regarding the new Korean amnesty policy, as illegal migrants must register and fill out information such recent job, address, number of workers, etc. Some feel this information might be used for searching and ban illegal migrants in the future. Whilst the Ministry of Labour has initiated a relief package for returnees from South Korea and other countries due to the coronavirus outbreak, this package is only for legal migrants who are members of the Overseas Workers Fund (who can then access THB15,000 compensation after passing a 14-day state or home quarantine). Illegal migrants are not able to access this package. The Department of Employment has identified over 81,562 domestic jobs for returnees from overseas. The Department of Skills development aimed to provide additional training to upskill or re-skill for 30,000 returnees (Source: AGRUMIG Thailand team)

Whilst Thailand’s social security system covers formal workers who have lost their job, it does not cover the 20.4 million informal workers (just over half of all workers), many of whom are migrant workers. In a further sign that COVID19

impacts could include slippage into social deprivation, COVID19 has reduced the negotiation power of informal workers in relation to their employers. As a result, they might suffer wage and benefit reductions or be required to work harder or ensure longer working hours. New graduates or young

labourers, particularly in the tourism and service sectors, may be cut off completely from the labour market (Tancharenpol, 2020).

In China, the government's prevention and control measures have reduced the number of days rural labourers have been able to work and the numbers of unemployed have increased. After the Spring Festival, migrant workers in Guangdong, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Beijing and Shanghai generally postponed their return to work for more than two weeks. Overall, the number of returnee migrant workers dropped significantly (Sang Zhulai, 2020). Migrant farm workers declined by about 3.5 million in 2020 (Ye Xingqing et al, 2020). An estimated 60 percent of migrant workers have not been able to return to work because of the epidemic (Lu Qianwen et al, 2020). Income loss has varied by province, but in the worst-hit Hubei province, the more than 10 million migrant workers there were unable to work for at least a month and short-term losses have been significant, with knock-on effects for rural residents depending on income received from elsewhere.

Depending on the host country, an estimated 10-30 percent of Nepalese migrant workers are expected to lose their jobs as a result of the COVID19 impact, according to the Nepal Association of Foreign Employment Agencies. Livelihood insecurity as a result of COVID19 has already grown, with 10 percent of households in a recent WFP survey (WFP, 2020) reporting loss of a livelihood and 30 percent reporting a loss of income.

Food insecurity is particularly high for those with marginal holdings or who are tenant farmers, where normally migration-related income would cover food needs for part of the year. Most COVID19 assistance from the government, it was reported, came in the form of food aid (nearly 70 percent). In Nepal's far west, agricultural livelihoods are structurally dependent upon seasonal migration to India, which makes up for shortfalls in food once grain stocks are depleted. Any closure of the border with India can therefore have a devastating impact. Many workers have already returned from India due to loss of jobs and the Indian lockdown.

Return migration from Gulf countries is lower, partly because of transport restrictions. Those who were about to migrate must now stay put, and some whose jobs had been lost or who were undocumented are in the process of being repatriated. For some Nepalese women returnees, there is an additional social stigma attached to having migrated, which can cause difficulties when reintegrating back into Nepali communities. In addition, there are differences in accessing credit or financial services once back, due to gender biases (ILO, 2016).

To assist the economy in Nepal, the government has offered a 20 percent rebate on income tax for the fiscal year 2076/77 (Nepali calendar). In addition, the VAT return submission period for the Tourism Sector and Freight Service is now also reduced. Other support measures have been put in place for telecommunications and the import of raw materials for the medicines industry.

According to the Thai government, Thai migrants overseas are either in Central and East Asia (96,486), the Middle East (25,514) or the remainder in Europe and the United States. On return they are quarantined for 14 days and must get a medical certificate and entry approval from the Royal Thai Embassy or Consulate. On entering Thailand, another 14 days of state quarantine are required. With the onset of the pandemic, some seasonal labour migrants – including wild berry-pickers travelling to Finland and Sweden – cancelled their trips. Remittances from Thai migrants significantly decreased due to a number of reasons including loss of jobs, reduced hours, limiting or cutting overtime, and reduced wage levels.

In Moldova, small agricultural producers were affected by the lockdown in two main ways: agricultural activity was forbidden in villages under lockdown and access to markets was limited due to restrictions imposed. The most-affected were small farmers who could not reach local markets and had no other means to sell their products, including through direct delivery to consumers. To help ameliorate this, the Ministry of Agriculture, Regional Development and Environment developed a web-based platform to help small farmers sell their products. Whilst reflecting the potential for the pandemic to serve as a

deprivation and differentiation mechanism, this indicates that the current economic crisis could also serve as a trigger for innovations in market and producer behaviour.

Box 3 Challenge in the Russian Federation

According to Abdusattor Esoev, IOM Chief of Mission for the Russian Federation, in mid-May 60 percent of migrants were unable to pay their rent and more than 40 percent were unable to afford food; “millions of people are teetering on the brink”, he said. The pandemic situation made 30-50 percent of labour migrants from Central Asia unemployed (DW 2020). Considering that informal labour is still very common in Russian, people have not received any compensation after redundancies (Novaya Gazeta 2020). Migrants had difficulties paying for rent which placed many in situations of debt. Thousands of migrants for ‘stuck’ at Russian airports

For migrants from Kyrgyzstan, mainly to Russia, the pandemic-induced reduction in global demand for oil and related oil-price decline has negatively affected Russia’s economy and, by extension, demand for labour. For many migrants this has meant either complete loss of employment or reduction in wages (see Box.1). As a result, it is estimated that remittance inflows from Russia fell by 62 percent in April 2020, compared to the same period in 2019 (ADB and UNDP 2020, p. 61)

In Kyrgyzstan, some migrants have been able to overcome current challenges having previously invested remittances in productive ventures in

home areas, both in farming and in construction. According to one migrant interviewed: “I did not save money whilst I was migrating, I immediately sent everything home, and built a house here. We used to live in a temporary hut before. Everything that I learned in Russia, I use here in a village on a construction site. If you work in the village, you can earn”³.

Some of the livelihood ruptures caused by COVID19 suggest income differentiation is increasing. Some returnees have displayed resilience, such as the individual above, and can chart a successful livelihood on their return. However, the crisis has pushed many households with fewer assets and access to alternative livelihoods into deprivation, not least because of the heavy investment and indebtedness that may be required to assist migration in the first place – particularly in countries such as Ethiopia and Nepal where households take on loans to pay significant upfront fees to middlemen or recruitment agents. An intensified cycle of poverty may then emerge, impacting both returnees who have no source of income, and the households for which foreign remittances were an essential part of securing food and other essentials.

It is worth noting that the very urban nature – and reporting on – COVID19 is a feature of the disease in some countries, suggesting, perhaps, an urban bias to debates on economic impact. This is not surprising perhaps given the high rates of infection associated with proximity between individuals in densely-populated areas. But in Morocco this has meant that, by and large, the countryside as a socio-spatial category has become invisible during the pandemic. According to the High Commission for Planning in May, some 86 percent of cases had occurred in the most urbanized areas of Morocco’s Atlantic coast, where industrial, service and commercial activities are concentrated. Government responses have largely been tailored to the urban situation, however, recognizing that in these working-class neighbourhoods and shanty towns, unsanitary conditions and overcrowding can prevail, assisting the spread of the coronavirus (HCP, 2020). For some in these low-income areas, the choice is, however, as stark as ‘between coronavirus or starvation’. As noted by one author, “Because of the various inequalities which affect them – health, housing, work and transport – households and working-class neighbourhoods are particularly exposed to the virus and ultimately risk paying a very high price for the pandemic” (Gilbert, 2020)

There are important ways in which any urban bias in responding to COVID19 may be a problem. These include possibly creating policy ‘misfits’ with rural areas, but also somewhat blindly ignoring the very many rural-urban linkages that exist, including in terms of seasonal and other migration patterns.

³ Interview with former migrant, Jashtyk community, Batken, 15/04/20.

3.2 Systems stalling, and under stress

Established migration systems are being severely tested by the COVID19 pandemic. There is a lack of transport, increasingly complex border procedures are evolving (where borders are open at all), and travel costs are rising – quite steeply in many cases. In some destination areas, migrants are stranded – both out of work and lacking access to any financial assistance.

In Ethiopia well-established migration systems – both formal and informal – have declined rapidly (see Box 2). The immediate result is that in 2020 remittances to the country may have dropped by an estimated 30-50 percent (UN, 2020).

According to recent data, there have been a number of returnees from countries in the Middle East and elsewhere in East Africa. However, the numbers cited – some 16,400 from April to mid-June 2020 (IOM, 2020) – suggest only a small percentage of migrants abroad have returned. Given the large reductions in remittances, this suggests many are still in destination countries, but suffering a severe depletion in their income.

Box 4 Ethiopia's eastern migration route

One of the busiest routes connecting the Horn of Africa through the Gulf of Aden to the Middle East, more than 90 percent of migrants crossing via this route and staying in Yemen come from Amhara, Oromiya, and Tigray regions of Ethiopia. Following border closures related to COVID19, the number of migrants passing this route and staying in Yemen declined sharply, with a recorded 1,725 in April 2020 arriving in Yemen, in contrast to 11,101 in January, 9,634 in February, and 7,223 in March (Rodriguez, 2020)

Some of the returnees to Ethiopia have come as a result of deportations from countries such as Saudi Arabia. In the case of Lebanon, the COVID19 pandemic has merely exacerbated an already catastrophic economic situation that has led to Ethiopian domestic workers being thrown out of households and left with no assistance (Rose, 2020; Ethiopia Monitor, 2020; El Deeb, 2020).

Part of the wider systems challenge in relation to migration and COVID19 reflects a key element of the AGRUMIG project. That is the link between return and reintegration into economies and societies. In Ethiopia the experience of previous mass deportations from Saudi Arabia in 2013 and 2014 was particularly difficult (Dessalegn, 2019). Reintegration in the current situation is now compounded by difficult quarantine processes that migrants have to observe on returning to home areas. A mandatory 14-day quarantine was imposed in late March and reports from quarantine centres in Ethiopia suggest that unsanitary conditions in some cases may even contribute to infections (ECC, 2020).

After release from quarantine migrants may then face returning to their home areas without any accumulated income. Reports indicate some returnees may feel guilt about returning empty-handed, not least because of the substantial loans households may have taken out to finance their initial migration abroad (Wuilbercq, 2020). In such situations, the challenge of slippage into deprivation may occur, not just for the migrant, but their whole household. The incentive remains, therefore, to 'bounce back' and migrate again, perhaps taking greater risks than before.

In Nepal, an estimated quarter of a million migrants out of some four million abroad are reported to want to return. Only 3.8 percent of recent returnee migrants are women. Most returnees work in construction (28.4 percent), agriculture, forestry and fishing (20 percent) and wholesale, retail, repair and motor vehicles (14 percent) (Nepal Labour Migration Report, 2020). Recent reports suggest that not only have a large number lost their employment status abroad due to COVID19 impacts, but that 115,000 whose labour permits had already been issued by the government could not travel due to pandemic restrictions, including the suspension of international flights out of Nepal.

Not only have flows of people stalled, but goods and services too. In Dhanusha in the Terai of Nepal, people have had to take out loans to buy food supplies, or have borrowed rice from landowners. Before

Box 5 Quarantine uncertainties in Nepal

In a ward of Bideha Municipality in Dhanusha, 29 people have returned – 28 from India and one from Qatar. The returnees from different parts of India, including Maharashtra (Mumbai), Punjab and Gujarat (Surat) were sent to a quarantine facility in Janakpur from the border itself. The Ward Chair said that there was fear of the open border as the migrants could come directly to the village without undergoing any test. He said that 40 people were mobilized to ensure that migrants were taken to quarantine first. Four out of 29 returnees had coronavirus and were undergoing hospital treatment. He said that some internal migrants also returned from Pokhara and Kathmandu. Since it was before the virus had started to spread, they were not sent to quarantine. Some of the migrants from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Malaysia returned 1-2 months back, so they did not have to stay in quarantine. They came during their holidays and have not been able to return due to lockdown. In some communities, concerns were expressed about lack of testing of people in quarantine before allowing them to return home (Source: AGRUMIG Nepal team).

lockdown, cheaper products from India were available, but now people have had to buy more expensive local goods. Local business owners, forced to comply with lockdown regulations, suffered severely-curtailed retail opportunities.

According to a community member in Dhanusha, some migrant workers have been unable to repay their loans for migration or land purchases and some have had to take loans from moneylenders to meet their daily expenses. The Ward Chair stated: “The families without migrant members are only worried about their livelihood. But those with a family member abroad are worried about their livelihoods as well as about the migrant member, and keep worrying about their return”. In other parts of Nepal, the feminization of agricultural production as men migrate

has left women especially vulnerable, including through impacting non-farm rural livelihoods, with local market closures preventing the sale of goods. The concern of some was less the immediate-term impact, but rather the long-term implications of the crisis continuing.

In Kyrgyzstan migrants were both locked into their home country after returning over the winter, and stranded in Russia. At the end of April figures suggested that 6,000 had returned from Russia whilst 10,000 were still seeking to return. This situation also posed the related challenge of migrants returning with COVID19 amid health systems that were already overstretched. Hundreds of migrants from Kyrgyzstan were stuck at borders. The government responded by providing food and shelter for those in extreme need and those stranded at Russian airports, including working with international organizations such as IOM, who launched their own international appeal to support migrants from across Central Asia and the Russian Federation. The government also set up a migrant support fund of 15 million soms to support Kyrgyz migrants abroad.

In many cases, travel bans have affected the physical capacity of migrants to return. Ethiopian Airlines suspended flights to some 30 destinations as part of the government’s COVID19 response, including to key worker destinations in Gulf countries. This accompanied bans by countries on immigration from Ethiopia, including into Saudi Arabia, a key destination (Zelalem, 2020). This has had a direct impact on the migration system, only two years after a ban on overseas labour migration had been lifted (Dessalegn, Nicol and Debevec, 2020).

In Thailand, according to lockdown and social distancing measures, the Thai government has a limited quota for entry into the country over the land border. Many migrants confront other risks of infection at the border including additional costs of accommodation and food. This has resulted in a significant number of illegal entries through land borders, especially between Thailand and Malaysia. In Moldova, all regular flights were cancelled in late March, and only charter flights were allowed, including those arranged to bring people based abroad back home.

The sense of migration systems stalling and under stress is evident across all seven countries, but to varying degrees, not least because countries are so different geographically, socially and economically. The challenge for longer-term development is that these system stresses are triggering possibly longer-

term structural changes in societies and rural economies. This includes deepening deprivation and increasing vulnerability.

3.3 Governance responses – and future uncertainties

Given the impact on migration systems and resulting livelihoods insecurity, there are new governance uncertainties affecting migration. These uncertainties are a result of both the (probably temporary) rupture in migration systems and possible changes in the calculus people apply towards migration decision making – such as ‘what is the net benefit versus risk for me’, ‘how far and for how long should I move, and whether people will move at all beyond their home country, or rather choose internal migration, noting that the stakes have changed in terms of international movement.

In common with other governments, Ethiopia’s initial response was to ban overcrowded public transport (halving numbers of passengers that could be carried locally and nationally), as well as halting the movement of people across the country’s borders (Ethiopian Health Data, 2020), and imposing a mandatory quarantine. The border closures immediately restricted the movement of migrants, leaving some trapped *en route* to and from their destinations (Rodrigez, 2020).

To prevent return may not be a governance strategy in many countries, but in present circumstances, amidst the complicated and potentially serious economic circumstances in which countries find themselves, a massive return of migrants from abroad is potentially problematic. This sheds further light on the reality that migration is an essential part of national economic ‘strategies’, though may not be formally stated as such.

At another level, in some cases the immediate effect of resource diversion to tackle COVID19 has been a reduction in support for migration agencies. In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, the State Migration Service budget was reduced by over 18 percent between 2019 and 2020 as a result of COVID19. It is possible, though no evidence has been presented, that similar situations may exist in other countries, where migration assistance programmes and budgets are squeezed as a result of new development priorities – just at a time when demand for these programmes is likely to be greatest.

In the case of Moldova, the number of migrants returning as a consequence of the pandemic is estimated not to have been high. Countries of destination provided (or extended) residence and working permits to migrants who decided not to return to their home countries. Sometimes, when migrants decided to return, in particular women in the care sector, they then migrated again to another country in the EU or Russia.

The Kyrgyzstan Ambassador to the Russian Federation stated, “More than 60 percent of Kyrgyzstani citizens in Russian were unemployed during COVID19. At the same time there are jobs in construction. There are offers of employment in the Moscow region and in other regions. The Russian economy is stronger and more stable than ours. After quarantine, the economic crisis will continue around the world. I advised our countrymen to wait for the crisis here [to be over] and not to go anywhere”⁴. This admission that home economies can still not (and are even less likely now to be able to) provide employment for large segments of the population was stark, and probably reflects opinion in other countries with substantial outmigration populations.

The institutional ‘crisis management’ involved in responding at national levels to the COVID19 migration challenge includes examples of cross-institutional working, as in the case of the rapid-response group set up under the MFA in Kyrgyzstan, bringing together the SMS, IOM, Ministry of Internal Affairs and leaders of the Kyrgyz diaspora in Russia (OSCE, 2020). This tighter networking around migration in response to COVID19 could be one important avenue for strengthening overall national governance of migration systems, and could form a focus for AGRUMIG working groups in

⁴ Interview with *Azattyk* 23/04/20 <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/30571881.html>

respective countries, namely how to transition from ‘crisis-response’ networking, to longer-term cross-sector and cross-institutional working on migration.

In China, the government's strategy in response to the virus was termed ‘foreign defence importation and internal defence rebound’. This focused on prevention and control of the disease spread in China, including tackling epidemic ‘hotspot’ clusters, as well as promoting the resumption of production by sector and caring for overseas Chinese citizens.

Box 6 The QR health code in China

In February, Hangzhou City in Zhejiang Province took the lead in launching the health code model to manage the entry of people into Hangzhou. People planning to enter the city apply online, and after a review of their health information, are given a colour code (green, yellow, or red). Only someone with a green code can pass into the city, whereas those with yellow or red codes need to follow rules for isolation, and are converted to a green code only when certain conditions are met. The idea of the health code is to achieve an efficient flow of people, enabling resumption of production and other activities, as well as avoiding excessive contact and gatherings. Those who have to home isolate are quarantined in their place of residence and their temperature is measured daily. During isolation they cannot participate in gatherings or group activities. After two weeks of isolation and the absence of symptoms, they are then allowed to continue (Source: AGRUMIG China team).

From the end of April there was a resumption in economic activity, including widespread support measures by the government to stimulate economic activity (e.g. consumption vouchers). The epidemic impact on agriculture was substantial, not least because of the seasonal timing of the epidemic for planting and breeding, impacts on the mobility of migrant workers and poor rural protection conditions (Ye Xingqing, 2020). The impact on the grain industry, for example, including early season rice in parts of southwestern China, was considerable (Zong Yu et al, 2020)

because spring cultivation requires substantial labour for planting, fertilizer application, use of pesticides and operation of farm machinery. It was reported that more than half of service providers could not function normally in this period (Lu Qianwen et al, 2020). The result included shortages of fertilizers leading to price rises from late February onwards (Song Lili et al, 2020). In addition, since the outbreak of COVID19, wholesale food prices for different products rose, for example pork product prices increased by 7.8 percent, japonica rice by 9.6 percent and soybean by 8.5 percent.

The impact on transportation between different regions has also caused prices to rise in some places, but decline in others, including for pork, with a shortage in the south and a glut in the north of the country. Prices have also been severely affected by low demand for fresh products due to the closure of roads, businesses and markets which have affected supply and demand during what is normally the peak consumption season (Wei Houkai, Lu Qianwen, 2020).

China’s measures in response to COVID19 have included speeding up economic reconstruction, including guaranteeing food supplies for essential products. Other measures include streamlining and simplifying government approval processes and promoting online tools to help stimulate economic activity. Many of the measures are aimed at maintaining food supplies to urban areas, and securing the sustainability of rural production mechanisms.

In Nepal, the response has been two-pronged: on the one hand using diplomatic channels to secure current migrant jobs in destination countries, and second, to help create a conducive environment for generating self-employment in commercial agriculture and the restaurant sector, infrastructure projects and under the Prime Minister’s Employment Programme, a 100-day informal employment scheme (see Box 7).

In Thailand authorities locked down the country in late March in Bangkok and adjacent provinces, resulting in an outflow of migrant workers from Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar. ILO estimates that at least 260,000 legal migrant workers have returned to their home countries, but may include those who have returned unofficially (ILO, 2020). By the end of May only around 14,728 Thais had been repatriated from abroad. For informal migrant workers who remain, one challenge is that they cannot afford COVID19 testing and treatment, due to the costs involved and the fear of arrest by authorities.

The Ministry of Finance offered a special scheme for financial relief for informal workers (counting about 14 million people), of some THB5,000 a month for three months, aiming to relieve the financial burden caused by COVID19. The Ministry of Labour introduced a raft of other measures to help boost

Box 7 Nepal's diverse policy responses

Nepal's government has a number of initiatives that support returnee migrants, including: *Recognizing skills and providing soft loans*—providing loans of a million Nepalese rupees (USD8,908) to people who've returned in the past three years for business development (a skills verification test is required); *Youth and Small Enterprise Self-Employment Scheme*—targeting unemployed youth and offers collateral-free loans of up to 200,000 Nepalese rupees (USD1,745) for enterprise establishment (e.g. rickshaw or equipment); *Returnee Migrants Entrepreneurship Award Program*—certificates of recognition and monetary incentives are provided, e.g. sector engagement in 2019 was on poultry farming, metal industries, animal husbandry, garment manufacturing and vegetable farming; *Migrants, agriculture and land management*—under which migrants can engage in agriculture via a 'land bank', with investment capital of USD4.13 million. One challenge, however, is the often-large gap between the kinds of skills acquired in more advanced economies and their capacity to transfer back to Nepal, where mechanisation and industrialisation is far more limited. Other challenges include the difficulty in obtaining loans due to lack of collateral. Some note that many migrants will not necessarily wish to return to the agricultural sector, having changed their lifestyles whilst abroad (Source: AGRUMIG Nepal team).

the skills of unemployed informal workers, and to boost their liquidity. For official migrant workers in Thailand from Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar, in order to reduce their movement back home, the Thai government approved the extension of work permits up to the end of November, and provided exemptions from overstay penalties (World Bank, 2020).

Reacting to the large number of returnees due to COVID19, the Ministry of Labour in Thailand intends to improve its database on overseas Thai migrants and informal workers, to improve monitoring and management during a crisis. The ministry also plans to expand the labour

migrant quota under bilateral agreements with major destination countries such as Taiwan and South Korea and to reduce the amount of irregular or illegal migration, with a view to increasing the numbers of Thai migrants who can access social security and other benefits from Thailand and destination countries.

Overall, the Thai government has devolved responsibility for screening and regulating the home quarantine of returnees. Health volunteers monitor the health of returnees from abroad such as South Korea, China, Malaysia and Indonesia and from areas at high-risk of infection within Thailand. Returnees must report to the village head of health volunteers for a 14-day quarantine at home or in community facilities.

3.4 Back to normality – or something different?

At a global level, the desire to 'act together' has always existed but did not translate into the Global Compact for Migration until September 2016. The Pact is supposed to offer "an opportunity to improve governance in the area of migration and to face the challenges associated with today's migration, and to strengthen the contribution of migrants and migration to sustainable development". The agenda for its implementation has been 'disturbed' by the COVID19 crisis. But perhaps it is more relevant than ever. Arguably now is the time for the pact to show its mettle (See Box 9).

Perhaps the biggest question is whether the migration system, as was, can (and/or should) return to 'normality'? The Global Compact was an attempt to do things differently, but was non-binding on countries. Indications are that the wider systemic drivers of migration remain intact, and may even be stronger than before.

Poverty-induced migration may increase at the same time as economic capacity to absorb migrants could face further limits. Interviews with migrants in Kyrgyzstan revealed that many perceive the current crisis as temporary and expect the removal of restrictions on movement this autumn. This may be a feeling shared widely amongst prospective migrants across the AGRUMIG countries.

Concerns about the situation clearly vary between household type – no migrant household is the same – and coping strategies have varied. In Kyrgyzstan, households with more diversified income sources are less concerned, while households more heavily dependent on remittances have begun to reduce their expenditure. “Those who could not leave, because of closed borders, joined the sowing works, but as soon as it is completed, and the borders will open again, they all will leave”⁵.

In Nepal, in some areas, particularly where there is high outmigration to India, people will ‘re-migrate’ sooner or later, some argue. One informant stated: “This situation has definitely compelled people to think. They might not migrate with the whole family now, and some might stay behind to cultivate fallow land” (AGRUMIG team report). Another key informant who had returned from India, states: “The menial jobs do not pay well here and the government has not made any effort to make the environment favourable for business and investment. So, the last alternative is always India...[some of his friends] have said they will do something in their own village. They have said that they will do livestock farming through new techniques. But they will go back to India after the situation improves”.

Box 8 Stringent controls for Thai returnees

The Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand (CAAT) announced that Thais wishing to return to their country must present two documents to the airline: a medical certificate and a travel certificate issued by the Embassy or Consulate General of Thailand within 72 hours of departure, a so-called ‘fit to fly’ certificate. To get such a certificate, migrants have to prove their 14-day quarantine including location of hotel, their reservation, or house registration to the airline. Requesting such a certificate in many foreign countries is not easy (TDRI, 2020). In addition, the cost of an additional 14-day quarantine prior to travel and medical certification have created additional burdens and costs, particularly for migrants who have just finished their working contracts. They receive no support or extra compensation from either employer or government, and they must cover all extra costs on their own (Source: AGRUMIG Thailand team).

Another suggests that after lockdown is eased, it depends on how the government negotiates with labour-importing countries. “They will earn at least 30,000-40,000 Nepali rupees a month once they migrate. Doing agricultural work [in Nepal] will only earn them 5,000-10,000 Nepali rupees a month.” This implies that the compelling economic logic for migration has not dissipated. But the assumption of earnings capacity abroad may be affected by the

upcoming global slump. Importantly, for those with marginal holdings, migration to India is the only way to meet shortfalls, and therefore position in the agrarian structure is likely to be significant in shaping future migration decisions.

As migration is so entrenched and embedded in existing inequalities, it is doubtful that the crisis will stop migration. Perhaps some who are better off may be able to stay on the land and identify opportunities. But a large-scale change in migration flows is not anticipated. In early July, the Nepali government restarted the issuance of labour permits, in anticipation of a resumption in travel to key countries.

In Thailand, many unemployed (internal) workers who returned home as a result of COVID19 are looking for an opportunity to work abroad after COVID19, particularly in South Korea. They will try to go there either through an official channel or via irregular migration. In Moldova, the government instituted new controls over the compulsory purchase of health insurance by returnee migrants. Previously, although this was a requirement, it was not enforced. The links between migration and health may become stronger and feature more fully in future migration governance decision making. Countries may have to establish systems that can prove their citizens travelling for work are ‘virus free’.

One of the apparent challenges is the effect of the pandemic on stigmatizing migrants. This can be through negative association-building between movement and the epidemiology of COVID19. As described for Morocco, there is a new discourse on ‘us’ (people living in their country, including

⁵ Interview with householder, Jany-Jer Ayil Aimak community, Batken, 18/03/20.

foreigners) and ‘others’ (living abroad, including Moroccans) – the political border becoming a new ‘line in the sand’ for health identity.

4 Implications for future research

The range of observed policy responses to COVID19 seems to fall into three categories: 1) emergency measures to tackle disease transmission that affect capacity for movement (from, within and between home and destination areas); 2) emergency financial and economic measures to tackle home and destination economic problems that result from the rapid decline in economic activity; and 3) longer-term structural readjustments in economic and social/health policy.

A secondary set of important changes relate to the control side of migration, including the use of digital tracking and greater combining of individual health data with movement, including via health tracking apps. Presaging perhaps a greater role for the state in tracking individuals – including those who migrate – this has implications for both the use of data by states and, potentially, the safety of migrants themselves. In future, this may have potential influence over wider systems of migration governance.

From this rapid study, preliminary analysis suggests there is no simple narrative on what is happening, but that amidst the confusion and range of responses, some new, potentially complex, phenomena are emerging. These may include changes to perceptions of migrants in relation to health which, though not known, has become a more mainstream concern of populations. In addition, how migrants perceive ‘risk and reward’ in making migration decisions (and those surrounding them who may be investing in their movement). This may shape where and how people choose to migrate with knock-on effects on systems and, to some extent, the wider ‘migration industry’.

Box 9 Future of the Global Compact for Migration

“This year is supposed to be about bringing the compact from paper to reality. For the first time, states will come together in regional review for a in the second half of 2020 to present and share progress on national action plan. These meetings offer a change to demonstrate the relevance of the compact at a time when the pandemic presents a common challenge to states across the migration continuum. However, governments may have a difficult time bringing attention to the meetings or moving to implementation of tangible compact deliverables at a time they face more pressing domestic concerns. Overhanging all this is the knowledge that the political price to enact the compact was extremely steep for some states and may now have been for naught if the agreement fails to deliver on its ambitions” (Source: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/covid19-global-compact-migration-faces-test>).

Migration is associated with remittance income. The rupture in repatriation of remittances, and of future remittance flow potential, has had a deeper impact on households heavily reliant on remittances for capacity to access food markets. These market relationships will be heavily affected in the near-term and, depending on future migration ‘normalization’, may have longer-lasting consequences.

Whilst analysis suggests that migration is a necessity more than a choice, the post-pandemic situation (assuming one arises) will present a different set of economic opportunities where the demand for and type of labour required may change. This suggests the need to shape future research questions in new ways as AGRUMIG tackles the new situation. A key part of the narrative will be the intersection of health and migration in new ways, how states control and manage data on migration and assess risk, and lastly, how the ‘migration calculus’ by individuals in particular circumstances may change.

Some of this suggests a future will the potential for greater risk and exploitation, and a stronger gap between formal and informal migration, in particular risk where ‘ungoverned’ routes and processes may be associated with crowded spaces and unsanitary conditions. Furthermore, a greater polarisation in migration processes may emerge before international deliberation and rule-making catches up, within an international environment that has possibly become more rather than less fragmented as nationalism(s) overtake collective action in tackling the pandemic.

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