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Migrants deserve better protection

While exposing how essential they are to the system, the pandemic has grave consequences for migrants and refugees

Read this article in German.

The coronavirus pandemic is exposing many inequalities, forcing them out of their shadowy existence and into the public eye. The latest example concerns the lousy working conditions in Germany's meat industry. Almost all of those affected by the coronavirus outbreak in this industry are workers with migrant backgrounds. If there is one thing the pandemic has shown, it is how dependent individual sectors of the economy are on work performed by migrants. Alongside the meat industry, this is particularly apparent in the construction sector, agriculture, healthcare and in cleaning jobs.

At least the pandemic now appears to be bringing about a cautious change in thinking. The myth that seasonal workers picking fruit and vegetables perform 'unskilled work' has given way to the realisation that working the fields constitutes skilled labour. After recovering from the virus, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson acknowledged the dedication of his nurses – 'Jenny from New Zealand and Luis from Portugal'. According to the OECD, over 30 per cent of doctors and a good 20 per cent of nurses in the United Kingdom are foreign-born.

During the pandemic, Portugal granted all migrants and asylum seekers full citizenship rights. Italy is planning one of the largest regularisation programmes for people without a valid residence status ever seen in Europe's history, allowing around 600,000 people who frequently work in the agricultural, fishing, care and domestic work sectors without contracts to apply for a legal residence permit.

For its part, the German government is now looking to put a stop to exploitative practices in the meat industry by launching a workplace safety programme. Trade unions estimate that 80 per cent of workers in the meat industry – most of whom come from eastern Europe – are employed under what is known as a '*Werkvertrag*', a task-specific labour

arrangement whereby workers are hired by subcontractors and do not receive all the benefits of regular employees. Let's hope that these initial positive responses will become the frequently cited 'new normal' for migrants in the long run.

Abject working conditions and lower remittances

Yet as encouraging as these first steps might be, they cannot hide the fact that the situation for most migrant workers across the world is bleak. For them, the pandemic meant numerous restrictions and, in some cases, a threat to their livelihoods. Working remotely is simply not an option for the legions of low-wage workers. Those who live in their employer's homes, such as migrant domestic staff, have so far been one of the most vulnerable groups. In countries such as Lebanon, their lack of protection in the crisis increasingly resembled a form of modern slavery. Female domestic workers whom their employers can no longer afford are simply being abandoned outside their home country's embassy, effectively making them homeless.

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Containment measures are also creating severe economic hardship in some cases because of precarious or temporary employment and in the informal sector with no access to social protection, paid sick leave or support for loss of earnings. Government assistance packages to deal with health threats and job losses are not available to many migrants. This is even more problematic for people with an irregular residency status.

In Qatar, 40,000 people were quarantined in mid-March after an outbreak of Covid-19 in one of the country's largest mass housing facilities for migrant workers, where they were then guarded by police and the military. In Singapore, over half of migrant workers, some of whom have to share a single room with 20 other people, were infected with Covid-19. In a nutshell, the more precarious the work and the worse the working conditions, the higher the rate of infection.

The loss of jobs and income as a result of Covid-19 is causing a fall in remittances sent by migrants to their families back home, with devastating repercussions for the around 800 million people who depend on the money. These transfers are a vital source of income and act as a form of insurance in times of crisis for many people in developing

countries. Remittances have been shown to have a positive impact on economic growth.

In 2019, it was estimated that migrants sent money and goods valued at USD 554bn to their home countries with medium or low income. These transfers of money and goods accounted for at least 10 per cent of gross domestic product in 28 countries. For 2020, the World Bank is now predicting an almost 20 per cent decrease in money transfers, slashing countries' foreign exchange earnings and, in particular, causing the economic situation of numerous households from Mexico and Nigeria to Ukraine to nosedive. Less migration means less money being sent home, more inequality and increased vulnerability.

Cramped camps and slowed-down bureaucracy

The situation of the vast numbers of people fleeing their homes is even more perilous. The latest figures from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) indicate that almost 80 million people are currently displaced, slightly more than half within their own country. The Covid-19 pandemic is also making the situation worse in the regions where they seek shelter, as refugees are the first to feel the consequences of the economic and social upheaval.

Unlike how it is usually portrayed in populist diatribes, many refugees are in work, mostly taking up precarious and frequently informal employment that can be ended from one day to the next. For instance, more than half of refugees surveyed by the UNHCR in Lebanon had already lost their livelihoods by the end of April and 70 per cent reported having to skip meals. This had enormous psychological repercussions – children were pulled out of school, many refugees were forced into begging or prostitution to survive and were at risk of falling into the hands of human traffickers.

Cramped living conditions increase the speed at which the virus spreads. People living in refugee camps are particularly affected as these are some of the most densely populated places on the planet. To their residents, calls for social distancing must seem like a cruel joke. The people living in intolerable conditions in overcrowded camps on Greek islands are facing the same problem. Cases of coronavirus infections on the Greek islands led to camps such as Moria being placed under preventative quarantine. An outbreak would be catastrophic for the refugees.

Only a very small number

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of resettlement schemes, which did not begin to gradually resume until June, exacerbated this situation. Moreover, countries have begun to slow down due legal proceedings and bureaucratic processes. The US, for example, has introduced an increasing number of restrictions that have been adopted indiscriminately because of courts closing and hearings being postponed. In Italy, the number of asylum cases has been cut dramatically because only one person is allowed to enter the office at a time. Many countries are turning people away at the border and, at times, did not accept any visa or asylum applications.

The 'new normal'?

Now, there is a risk that these temporary measures will become more permanent. In this context, the first objective needs to be a return to the old normal and the old standards so that work can then continue on the improvements that are so urgently needed. The UN's Global Compact on Refugees can serve as an invaluable tool: It underscores the principle of shared responsibility, focusses on those directly affected and their human rights, incorporates diverse stakeholders such as the private sector, cities and the refugees themselves and advocates allowing refugees to access to national health care systems. However, humanitarian aid is strapped of cash. The UNHCR, for example, has consistently received only half of its funding in recent years. Especially in times of a pandemic, however, a quick and flexible response would require payments to UN agencies over multiple years and that are not earmarked for one specific purpose.

Discussion of the Global Compact for Migration may have gone quiet, but the compact's commitment to 'safe, orderly and regular migration' is more important for the UN during the pandemic than ever. Working together with migrant civil society, the UN Network on Migration, which was founded two years ago, has compiled a huge number of recommendations that could serve as a foundation for progressive solutions regarding a 'new normal' for global migration. These include initiatives to provide access to social security and state benefits – especially in the healthcare sector – regardless of residency status and without fear of deportation, as well as safer and cheaper ways to transfer money.

Migration policy, including in Europe, is often shaped by resistance, a

lack of courage and fear of xenophobic voters. Resolute implementation of the two Global Compacts in collaboration with migrants and refugees themselves could indeed represent 'an opportunity to reimagine human mobility' in the midst of the massive challenges posed by the pandemic, said the UN Secretary-General.

Only a very small number of the evacuations of refugees from camps on Greek islands promised by EU member states have gone ahead so far. The EU Commission's 'Pact on Asylum and Migration' must, at long last, find a long-term approach that is consistent with international and EU law and with European values. The German presidency of the European Council in 2020 must also address this humanitarian catastrophe – the EU's credibility as an advocate of human rights and proponent of global solidarity is at stake.



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