



Güven Sak¹

*TEPAV Area Studies Program Director
TEPAV Managing Director*

Omar Kadkoy²

Policy Analyst

EVALUATION NOTE

ALLEVIATING COVID-19 MISERY OF THE FORCIBLY DISPLACED: G20 ACTION

Background

The world is now engaged in containing the COVID-19 breakout and its consequences. In the age of Coronavirus, however, forcibly displaced people should not be left behind: Of the world's 79.5 million forcibly displaced, out of whom 45.7 million are internally displaced people (IDPs), 20.4 million are refugees, and 4.2 are million asylum seekers, all should be at the forefront of the G20's agenda.

COVID-19 and IDPs: Unknown fate

The spread of the virus exacerbates already stretched structural shortcomings in both countries of origin and hosts. Take for example Syria, the almost decade long war has forcibly displaced 11.7 million Syrians: a staggering 55 percent of the pre-war Syrian population in 2010. To seek safety, the 6.1 million internally displaced Syrians relocated to other Syrian provinces or built makeshift camps next to borders – the densest being across from Turkey's border where 1.04 million Syrian IDPs reside in 1,277 camps.³⁻⁴ Applying physical distancing in makeshift camps is burdensome since tents are tightly squeezed next to each other. Therefore, the potential spread of the virus is higher and exposes IDPs to a greater risk of contracting COVID-19. The

¹ https://www.tepav.org.tr/en/ekibimiz/s/1027/Guven+Sak_+PhD

² <https://www.tepav.org.tr/en/ekibimiz/s/1315/Omar+Kadkoy>

³ Demographics in Northwest Syria as at 27 April 2020, Syria Response Coordinators Group <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=3418984491479581&set=pcb.3418984851479545>, accessed 17 May 2020 and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/nw_syria_sitre_p14_20200514.pdf, accessed 17 May 2020

⁴ Karagoz, Lale Koklu. (2020). Turkey Red Crescent Provides Tents for Idlib Refugees, Anadolu Agency <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkish-red-crescent-provides-tents-for-idlib-refugees/1735713>

situation in northwestern Syria, however, remained miraculously optimistic until mid-summer of 2020. According to the minister of health in the Syrian Interim Government, the results of the 1,585 tests conducted until late June 2020 were negative.⁵ Yet, from another perspective: only 0.0004 percent of the 4.09 million people in northwest Syria have been tested. The negligible number of conducted tests is rooted in capacity shortages. The World Health Organization (WHO) shipped 5,000 test kits to Idlib in mid-April. However, there is only one polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test machine in the Syrian province.⁶ As such, the announcement of the situation on the ground made by the health minister is far from being realistic. Then the unfortunate occurred. The minister announced the first case of COVID-19 in early July. The patient was a health professional working at a hospital.⁷ Since then and the testing capacity increased with two new PCR devices.⁸ By early December, the number of positive COVID-19 cases was 17,527.⁹ The worrisome development is the spread of the virus in the IDP camps where containment measures are too fragile to avoid a catastrophe.¹⁰ The situation in northeastern Syria is equally dim. By April 2020, only 48 tests, with one positive result, have been carried out in a region with a population of more than two million people of whom 700,000 are IDPs.¹¹⁻¹² Recently, the number of positive COVID-19 cases was 7,256.¹³ Equally alarming is that residents in the two regions lack adequate access to clean water and run short on hygiene items – two crucial components in personally combating COVID-19.¹⁴ The conditions that Syrian IDPs endure are more or less similar to IDPs in Yemen, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Colombia, and Ethiopia.

COVID-19 and forcibly displaced migrants: Policy responses in Lebanon and Jordan

The situation of forcibly displaced people is equally hazardous in hosting countries. Lebanon, now pseudo-home to almost one million Syrians, is on the brink of economic collapse. Less we forget, 73 percent of Syrians in Lebanon live below poverty line of \$3.84 per person per day.¹⁵ The vast majority of the nearly one million Syrians are undocumented and live in shelters that are “either overcrowded, below standards or in dangerous condition,” including populated and expedient camps.¹⁶ Hence, the risk is twofold. First, lack of IDs means inability to access

⁵ Retrieved from Twitter account of minister of health in the Syrian Interim Government <https://twitter.com/DrMaramAlsheikh/status/1268629141554892808>, accessed on 21 June 2020

⁶ As rebel-held Syria fears virus, just one machine is there to test. Reuters <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-syria-north/as-rebel-held-syria-fears-virus-just-one-machine-is-there-to-test-idUSKCN21W1F2>

⁷ Retrieved from Twitter account of minister of health in the Syrian Interim Government <https://twitter.com/DrMaramAlsheikh/status/1281271785510576134>, accessed on 30 September 2020

⁸ Recent Developments in Northwest Syria – Situation Report No. 20 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/recent-developments-northwest-syria-situation-report-no-20-9-september>

⁹ Retrieved from Twitter account of minister of health in the Syrian Interim Government <https://twitter.com/DrMaramAlsheikh/status/1336028615851565059>, accessed on 15 December 2020

¹⁰ Ten-fold increase in COVID-19 cases add new challenges in northwest Syria. Reliefweb <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/ten-fold-increase-covid-19-cases-adds-new-challenges-northwest-syria>, accessed 30 September 2020

¹¹ Syria: Aid restrictions hinder COVID-19 response. Reliefweb <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-aid-restrictions-hinder-covid-19-response>, accessed 17 May 2020

¹² Syria internally displaced persons, returnees and internal mobility <https://easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/easo-coi-report-syria-idps-returnees-internal-mobility.pdf>

¹³ Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Response Update No. 13 <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-covid-19-response-update-no-13-9-december-2020>

¹⁴ Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene. UNICEF <https://www.unicef.org/syria/water-sanitation-and-hygiene>, accessed 17 May 2020

¹⁵ Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon <https://www.unhcr.org/lb/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2019/12/VASyR-2019.pdf>

¹⁶ Ibid

formal health services. Second, it means fear of deportation for being undocumented. The solution envisioned by the Lebanese government to assist Syrians, which is similar to that of Bangladesh where 1 million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar in camps¹⁷, is imposing stricter curfews and overwhelmingly leaving Syrians to fend for themselves.¹⁸

The confinement of Syrians to camps is present in yet another hosting country: Jordan. Syria's southern neighbor hosts 1.3 million Syrians of whom 124,444 live in camps.¹⁹ Since mid-March, the Jordanian government confined Syrians in camps to their tents until further notice.²⁰ Syrians living out of the camps were, just like Jordanians, subject to a nationwide curfew. Nevertheless, economically surviving the period of restriction is difficult: 80 percent of Syrians in Jordan, whether in-or-out of camps, are under the poverty line and only 2 percent of them have financial savings.²¹ This dire financial situation of Syrians in Jordan hampers accessing the subsidized health services: 82 percent of Syrians borrow money when in need of accessing urgent health services²² - a grave concern in times of a pandemic, especially when knowing that Syrians suffer from higher rates of chronic and acute health conditions compared to Jordanians.²³ In response, and to assist the most affected by the consequences of COVID-19, the Jordanian government announced a national scheme to financially support Jordanian and non-Jordanian workers. The eligibility covers only workers registered with social security services. According to Jordanian officials, 15,000 Syrians are eligible to benefit from the aforementioned scheme. This represents only 8 percent of formally working Syrians registered with social security services in Jordan.²⁴ Hence, placing the 2017 employer-and-position-free scheme, which obliged Syrians to buy health insurance policies instead of registering to social security coverage, on a petri dish for a revisit.²⁵

COVID-19 and the country hosting the largest population of forcibly displaced migrants

The 3.6 million Syrians in Turkey are not better off, but the national and local policy responses are different. There are around 813,000 informal Syrian workers within the Turkish labor market.²⁶ Consequently, and because of COVID-19's impact on the economy, they face either layoffs or reduction in working hours. Under normal circumstances, informal employment of Syrians has come hand in hand with forms of inequality. A recently published study showed that the monthly income of informal male Syrian workers was 1,337 Turkish Liras in 2017 when

¹⁷ Coronavirus: Bangladesh locks down a million in Rohingya camps. BBC <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52227924>

¹⁸ Lebanon: Refugees at Risk in COVID-19 Response. HRW <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/02/lebanon-refugees-risk-covid-19-response>

¹⁹ Jordan – Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/36>

²⁰ Refugees at Risk in Jordan's Response to COVID-19. Reliefweb <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/refugees-risk-jordan-s-response-covid-19>, accessed May 17 2020.

²¹ Fafo: The Living Conditions of Syrian refugees in Jordan – Results from the 2017-2018 survey of Syrian refugees inside and outside the camps <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/67914>

²² Public health access and health seeking behaviors of Syrian refugees in Jordan <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/74447>

²³ Health challenges and access to health care among Syrian refugees in Jordan: a review <http://www.emro.who.int/emhj-volume-24-2018/volume-24-issue-7/health-challenges-and-access-to-health-care-among-syrian-refugees-in-jordan-a-review.html>

²⁴ “[Majority of Syrian workers left out of protection as a consequence of corona].” Syria Direct, accessed 17 May 2020

²⁵ Jordan issues first-of-its-kind work permits to Syrian refugees in the Arab region https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_568722/lang--en/index.htm

²⁶ Syrian refugees in the Turkish labor market. ILO https://www.ilo.org/ankara/publications/WCMS_738602/lang--en/index.htm, accessed 17 May 2020

the official net minimum wage for registered workers in 2017 was 1,777 Turkish Liras. Female Syrian workers were subject to further exploitation as they made 1,083 Turkish Liras a month.²⁷ Gender disparity is not unique to Syrians, but could be greater when considering the gender pay gap among Turkish workers.²⁸ In 2020, the official net minimum wage is 2,324.²⁹ In relation, a new study also showed that wages of informal Syrian workers witnessed a slight increase, making somewhere between 1,500 and 1,800 Turkish Liras a month. Unfortunately, the long years of subjectivity to exploitation normalized labor inequality in the mindset of Syrian workers: 40 percent of Syrians consider themselves working under “normal” conditions. These “normal” conditions entail being in debt. The average monthly expense of a Syrian household is 1,000 Turkish Liras or less for only 20.6 percent of Syrians. Whereas it is at least 2,000 Liras or more for 72.6 percent of Syrian households.³⁰ What is more, almost half of Syrians in Turkey are under the poverty line. This precarious financial situation forces them to borrow money to either pay rent or buy food.³¹ Together with the absence of necessary basic conditions, for example 1 in 5 Syrians do not have access to clean water and 1 in 3 do not have access to basic hygiene items, combating the Coronavirus and its consequences turns into a near impossible mission.³²

To assess the impact of COVID-19 on the labor market, TEPAV, the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey, surveyed 3,033 individuals in 12 provinces, of whom 43 percent were Syrians and 57 percent were Turks. The provinces were Adana, Bursa, Gaziantep, Hatay, Istanbul, Izmir, Kayseri, Kilis, Konya, Mardin, Mersin, and Sanliurfa. The results showed that 32 percent of participants stated that their jobs were affected by COVID-19. Meaning, the jobs of the remaining two-thirds were also affected one way or another by the virus. Overall, the results of the study demonstrate that the toll of the virus is greater on women and Syrians. Turkish and Syrian women represent 6 percent of the total participants and 93 percent of their jobs were affected – indicating either reduction of business activities, being on unpaid leave, shutting down or being laid off.

Among those who stated that their jobs were affected, 36.5 percent of Syrians reported being either laid off or put on an unpaid leave. Whereas only 11.9 percent of Turks reported in the same way. As for assistance, only 5.5 percent of Syrians benefited from aid programs, overwhelmingly being in-kind aid. On the other hand, 13 percent of Turks benefited from the social assistance program announced by the Ministry of Family, Labor, and Social Services that provided 1,000 Liras per affected household. Lastly, being in possession of a vocational qualification certificate lessens the negative impact on income. Indeed, the percentage of participants without a vocational qualification certificate and whose income was negatively affected is 73 percent compared to 46.5 percent of participants with a vocational qualification certificate. Most importantly, 1.4 percent of participants with a vocational qualification

²⁷ Syrian Refugees in the Turkish Labour Market. ILO https://www.ilo.org/ankara/publications/WCMS_738602/lang--en/index.htm, accessed 17 May 2020

²⁸ Gender earnings gap in the formal labor market in Turkey. World Bank <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/25365>

²⁹ “Net account of minimum wage and cost for employer.” Turkish Ministry of Family, Work, and Social Services <https://ailevecalisma.gov.tr/asgari-ucret/>, accessed 17 May 2020

³⁰ “[Research on Syrians in Turkey: average monthly expense is 2,061 Liras].” The sample of the research is 4,428 including Syrians and non-Syrians, source: “[What does the research on Syrians say and doesn't say?]”

³¹ Comprehensive Vulnerability Monitoring Exercise (CVME), round 4. WFP Turkey country office

³² Multi-sectoral needs assessment of Syrians in Turkey, Doctors of the World 2019 <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Multi-Sectoral%20Needs%20Assesment%20of%20Syrian%20Refugees%20In%20Turkey.pdf>

certificate reported increase in wage during economic slowdown compared to 0.2 percent without one.³³

To underline, the financial safety net of Syrians is not strong enough to withstanding prolonged reduction in working hours or layoffs during a pandemic. Therefore, there is greater stress and priority for developing inclusive policy responses to curb the impact of COVID-19.

Indeed, the Turkish government launched a national campaign consisting of three phases to support 2.3 million households with financial and in-kind assistance.³⁴ While this campaign addresses the urgent needs of Turkish citizens, Syrians were not left out. The Directorate General of Migration Management asked the Joint Syrian-Turkish Committee to prepare a list of the most affected Syrians households. Although the type of assistance was not disclosed, the list consisted of 300,000 Syrian households.³⁵ Considering that the average size of a Syrian household has 5.5 members, this means 1.65 million Syrians in Turkey are negatively exposed to the consequences of the Coronavirus. However, it remains unclear whether the delivery of the financial assistance entered into effect or not.

At the local level, metropolitan municipalities in Istanbul and Ankara launched inclusive support campaigns. In Istanbul, all registered foreigners, including the near half a million Syrians, are entitled to benefit from the metropolitan municipality's social assistance program.³⁶ At the capital, the metropolitan municipality announced that subscribers who cannot pay their water bills will not be cut off, and water supply would continue for two months.³⁷

Lending a hand to individuals in need during a pandemic is not the sole responsibility of the government. Private individuals, through Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), play a crucial role as well. For example, one NGO launched an online donation campaign to help Turks and refugees pay their rent.³⁸

COVID-19 and the collateral damage of social distancing: Forcibly displaced students

Currently, the only control variable in our possession for protection is social distancing. While physical distancing is a protective measure, distance learning can be an unaffordable luxury when it comes to forcibly displaced students. The policy of suspending schools as a temporary containment measure turned into a common practice in numerous countries. As an alternative, ministries of education resorted to piloting e-learning or broadcasting lessons on national TV channels. This type of learning requires being in possession of necessary devices (e.g. computers, tablets and/or television) and enjoying access to the internet. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Turkey ranks below the OECD

³³ How has COVID-19 affect Turkey's labor market? <https://www.tepav.org.tr/en/haberler/s/10170>

³⁴ “[Minister Selcuk: outreach of the 2nd phase will cover 2 million and 300 thousand households in need]” <https://www.ailevecalisma.gov.tr/tr-tr/haberler/bakan-selcuk-2-faz-sosyal-yardim-ihiyac-sahibi-farkli-2-milyon-300-bin-haneyeye-verilecek/>

³⁵ “[The Joint Syrian-Turkish Committee is working on reactivating IDs of Syrians to benefit from Red Crescent Services]”*

*: The Joint Syrian-Turkish Committee was established in July 2019 after a meeting between Turkey's minister of Interior and the head of National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces. Establishing the committee was in the aim of following up with the situation of Syrians in Turkey.

³⁶ “[Assistance campaign from Istanbul metropolitan municipality to registered refugees]” Evrensel <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/402370/ibdden-kayitli-multeciler-icin-yardim-kampanyasi>, accessed 17 May 2020

³⁷ “[Those Owing Water Utility Bills Will Not Be Cut From Water For Another Two Months]” <https://www.birgun.net/haber/ankara-buyuksehir-den-koronavirus-karari-borcu-olan-yurttaslar-icin-iki-ay-su-kesintisine-gidilmececek-291543>

³⁸ Retrieved from Twitter account that announced the campaign “[Solidarity for rent]” <https://twitter.com/KonakMulteci/status/1262012604219867143>, accessed 17 May 2020

average of students with access to internet.³⁹ Put in context, out of Turkey's 25 million households 2.7 million do not have access to internet. As for availability of information technology devices, 18 percent of Turkish households have a desktop computer, 27 percent have a tablet, 38 have a laptop, and 99 percent have mobile phones.⁴⁰ In the aftermath of COVID-19, Turkey's ministry of national education switched to e-learning via the online education platform (EBA). However, 6 million of Turkey's 18 million students could not access EBA.⁴¹ The forcibly displaced students in Turkey are not better off. While Syrian and Afghan students also suffer from the lack of internet and the necessary devices to follow with e-classes,⁴² the parent's poor command of Turkish, which is needed to either secure the access to the platform or help children with homework, compounds the fortune of the lucky students who have internet and adequate devices to join EBA.⁴³

Education is a human right and no student's education should be interrupted during the pandemic. However, responses in dealing with the consequences of the pandemic is rather about the domestic "have-nots," whether among native or migrant individuals or groups, as opposed to "haves." Therefore, responses, whether national through the support of an international organization like Save the Children's activity of distributing 250 electronic tablets with internet to students in Turkey⁴⁴, or local like the one in Gaziantep where the governorship in cooperation with different stakeholders launched a campaign to provide 100,000 students with tablets of which only 60,000 have been secured so far⁴⁵, require further support to expand coverage and include all students in need of assistance so they secure access to online education.

COVID-19 and informal migrant workers: Situation in circular migration

The impact of the pandemic is perhaps more severe on developing countries, where the majority of the forcibly displaced people are located, yet the situation is not only specific to them as developed countries are also on the same boat.

Agricultural crops in the United Kingdom, France, and Germany are almost ravaged due to travel bans in the era of the pandemic. The temporary termination of circular migration is creating shortages in seasonal migrant workers, namely from Eastern Europe, needed for the harvesting season. Realizing their importance in the agricultural sector, the European

³⁹ Learning Remotely When Schools Close: How Well Are Students and Schools Prepared? Insights from PISA <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/learning-remotely-when-schools-close-how-well-are-students-and-schools-prepared-insights-from-pisa-3bfd1f7/#figure-d1e108>

⁴⁰ "[Effects of Coronavirus on Education in Turkey – Students Explain the Digital Divide]" <https://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/turkiyede-koronavirusun-egitime-etkisi-v-dijital-ucurumu-ogrenciler-anlatiyor/>

⁴¹ "[While 6 million students cannot enter EBA, Minister Selçuk announces the distribution of 500 Tablets]" <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/421416/6-milyon-ogrenci-ebaya-giremezken-bakan-selcuktan-500-bin-tablet-mujdesi>

⁴² "[Coronavirus pandemic and unemployment at the door, kids away from distance learning]" https://www.evrensel.net/haber/400230/koronavirus-salgini-ve-issizlik-kapida-cocuklar-uzaktan-egime-uzak?a=96356?utm_source=paylas&utm_campaign=twitter_ust&utm_medium=haber

⁴³ "[A Survey on Access to Children Rights During COVID-19 in Istanbul: Experiences of Refugee Children]" <https://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/Covid-19-surecinde-istanbulun-farkli-yerlesimlerinde-cocuklarin-haklarina-erisimi-arastirmasi-multeci-cocuklardan-deneyimler.pdf>

⁴⁴ Global covid-19 response, situation report No.3. Save the Children https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/17638/pdf/save_the_children_global_covid-19_situation_report_3.pdf, accessed 30 September 2020

⁴⁵ "[The campaign of 'pending tablet' has started in Gaziantep]" <https://ilkha.com/egitim/gaziantep-te-askida-tablet-kampanyasi-baslatildi-137986>, accessed 30 September 2020

Commission dubbed seasonal migrant workers as “critical” and asked its member states to cooperate and set specific procedures facilitating the arrival of the needed workers while ensuring their health and safety.⁴⁶ In the meantime, Angela Merkel’s decision to open Germany’s border and welcome more than one million migrants over the course of 2015 is paying off: 156,000 asylum seekers are available to fill the gap in the German agricultural sector.⁴⁷

Italy is one of the countries that has been hit the hardest by COVID-19 during its early breakout. Following suit of other countries, Rome shut down its borders and thus prevented seasonal workers from entering the country. Primarily due to the shortage of 350,000 seasonal migrant workers,⁴⁸ Italy may face food shortages with 25 percent of its harvest under the threat of being lost.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, shutting the borders in the face of migrant seasonal workers is unfolding in two ways. First, just like everywhere else, is proving that seasonal workers are critical to do the necessary jobs that remain unattractive to locals. Second, shortage in seasonal workers is bringing positive policy amendments for undocumented migrants in Italy. The Italian government announced it will temporarily regularize undocumented migrants to fill labor shortages in key sectors. The Italian Prime Minister reflected on the decision as a “major step forward,” as one estimate puts the number of undocumented immigrants to be at 560,000.⁵⁰ The scheme also covers Italians in the informal economy. The new regulation, needless to say, has certain criteria for undocumented immigrants to meet, namely skills, but beneficiaries will enjoy equal rights.⁵¹ The decision is far from holistic since it is valid for only 6 months, but reforms are often partial and gradual. The Italian government is heading in the right direction. Yet, it must complement the decision by enacting other policies in order to sustain the regulation’s positive effect in the long term.

A similar situation exists outside of the bloc as well. The seasonal migrant workers, from Georgia and Central Asia, who used to work in the Black Sea region and harvest tea leaves cannot enter Turkey. Thus, creating a shortage of 40,000 foreign seasonal workers and exacerbating the situation of Turkish tea growers.⁵² Fortunately, Turkey’s reservoir of asylum seekers and refugees, namely from Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Senegal, jumped to the rescue, filled the shortage, and saved the season.⁵³ Needless to say, the workers can use the paycheck to survive the period of economic stagnation and lack of work.

⁴⁶ Coronavirus: Commission presents practical guide to ensure the free movement of critical workers https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_545

⁴⁷ Over 150,000 refugees could work on farms to fill labor gap: German government <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/23713/over-150-000-refugees-could-work-on-farms-to-fill-labor-gap-german-government>

⁴⁸ E’ ora di regolarizzarli “[Time to Regularize]” <https://www.ilfoglio.it/politica/2020/04/14/news/e-ora-di-regolarizzarli-312855/>

⁴⁹ Thousands of undocumented migrants to get Italian work permits <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/thousands-undocumented-migrants-italian-work-permits-200513181704599.html>

⁵⁰ Migration issue opens rifts in Italy’s coalition amid COVID-19 crisis <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-italy-politics/migration-issue-opens-rift-in-italys-coalition-amid-covid-19-crisis-idUSKBN22021Y>

⁵¹ Italy to grant residence to undocumented migrant workers during coronavirus crisis <https://www.thelocal.it/20200514/italy-to-grant-residence-to-undocumented-migrant-workers-during-coronavirus-crisis>

⁵² Tea pickers on high demand amid travel curbs <https://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/tea-pickers-on-high-demand-amid-travel-curbs-154426>

⁵³ Çayda, Gürcü işçilerin yerini mülteci işçiler aldı “[Refugees replace Georgian workers to harvest tea]” <https://multicimediyasi.org/2020/06/09/cayda-gurcu-iscilerin-yerini-multeci-isciler-aldi/>

The situation of seasonal workers is an example of the greater pool of migrant workers who are more vulnerable to risks of unemployment and loss of wages in economic crises in destination countries. During the global financial crisis in 2009, the percentage of unemployed foreign-born individuals in the European Union jumped to 16.4 percent from 11.1 percent in 2007.⁵⁴ Migrant workers who lost their jobs generally consider returning to their countries of origin. This time, repatriation is not an option since international travel services have been suspended to curb the spread of COVID-19. Remaining in hosting countries, however, and living in cramped migrant dormitories, like the ones in Singapore, raises the odds of the virus spreading since social distancing is next to impossible.⁵⁵ Domestic migrants are not spared the consequences either. The world largest lockdown in India left millions of internal migrants jobless, making them unable to return to rural areas from the urban economic spaces where they had migrated to for better opportunities.⁵⁶

COVID-19 and remittance: A lifeline for families left behind

The common denominator between unemployed and stranded migrants, whether internally or international, is the reduction of financial support sent to families back home. Received remittance as a percentage of Gross Domestic Production (GDP) is integral to many economies and represents a lifeline for households, especially in poorer economies. Most notably, remittance impacts development along different lines, including alleviation of poverty, investment in human capital, and entrepreneurship activities. The United Nations in 2015 endorsed remittance as a means to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). In relation, the World Bank estimations suggest that remittance's share of GDP was the highest in low-income economies and stood at 6.6 percent in 2018. Similarly, it was 4.4 percent in lower middle-income economies; 1.5 percent in middle-income economies; 0.7 percent in upper middle-income economies; and 0.3 percent in high-income economies.⁵⁷

The outbreak of COVID-19 is having a negative spillover on remittance. The impact varies regionally and is subject to the pandemic's impact on the hosting economies of foreign migrants. The flow of remittance to East Asia and the Pacific is estimated to have dropped by 13 percent in 2020. This is largely reflective of the economic performance in the USA and Hong Kong SAR, China for being the largest sources of remittance to the region. In Europe, the most affected countries are Italy and Spain. The Mediterranean countries are also the main destinations for migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean. Therefore, the remittance inflow to Latin America and the Caribbean is estimated to fall by 19.3 percent. Likewise, the almost complete shutdown of certain economic sectors, such as construction and hospitality, will negatively affect remittance inflow to Sub-Saharan Africa and is estimated to decrease by 23.1 percent. Moreover, the economic slowdown due to the breakout of COVID-19 and the stumbling oil prices, affecting particularly large producers like Russia and GCC, will decrease

⁵⁴ Migration and development brief 32: COVID-19 crisis through a migration lens

<https://www.knomad.org/publication/migration-and-development-brief-32-covid-19-crisis-through-migration-lens>

⁵⁵ Singapore fights third wave of coronavirus infections <https://www.ft.com/content/bdd48cc5-3d03-4741-8a68-20530a61c09e>

⁵⁶ Mass exodus sparks coronavirus concerns in India <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/30/india/gallery/india-lockdown-migrant-workers/index.html>

⁵⁷ World Bank: Personal remittance, received (% of GDP) <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS>

remittance inflow to Europe and East Asia by 28 percent, to South Asia by 22 percent, and to both the Middle East and North Africa by about 20 percent each.⁵⁸

Equally important to remittance is the associated cost of sending it. Globally, the cost of sending remittances is 6.79 percent with an average remittance of around \$200.⁵⁹ The cost of sending remittance depends on many reasons, but namely transparency of the financial market. Other reasons include but are not limited to an underdeveloped financial sector, limited competition, and lack of documentation allowing migrants to access the financial services. Moreover, the cost of sending remittance is grouped into corridors consisting of country pairs: sending and receiving. In the regions discussed above, the most expensive corridor is South-Africa to China and in the Pacific region the cost of sending remittance is 25 percent. On the other hand, the cheapest corridor is from Russia to Azerbaijan in Europe and Central Asia region where the cost of sending remittance is 2.1 percent. Worldwide, the cost of sending remittance in other corridors ranges between the aforementioned percentages.⁶⁰

Lower costs of sending remittance means more disposable income for migrants and thus a higher incentive to remit. Heading toward lowering costs requires two mechanisms. The first one is about educating migrants about the cheapest mean to send remittance. What comes to mind here is Greenback 2.0 – an education program by the World Bank aimed at increasing the efficiency of the market for remittances.⁶¹ The second one is about increasing competition in the global remittance market. The cost of remittance depends on its facilitation. Banks charge the highest fees. They are followed by money transfer operators (MTOs), like Western Union and MoneyGram, and traditional post offices. The cheapest instrument of sending remittance is via mobile operators.⁶² Thus, increasing competition in the global remittance market and further assist migrants and their families to make the most out of the process requires fostering technological solutions.

Urgent Recommendations for the G20

Due to the coronavirus pandemic making life more miserable for forcibly displaced people, a greater responsibility falls on the shoulders of the international community to ease the burden on both countries of origin and those hosting. The G20 should take the lead and:

1. Support the World Health Organization (WHO) in providing direct health assistance to both refugees in hosting countries and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the countries of origin, especially for those who are unable to observe social distancing measures due to overcrowded make-shift camps.
2. Foster city-twinning partnerships. Forced displacement and COVID-19 are both urban problems requiring urban responses. Responding timely and effectively requires a level of know-how that may not be available in all localities. Therefore, sharing previous and

⁵⁸ Migration and development brief 32: COVID-19 crisis through a migration lens <https://www.knomad.org/publication/migration-and-development-brief-32-covid-19-crisis-through-migration-lens>

⁵⁹ World Bank: Remittance prices worldwide – making markets more transparent <https://remittanceprices.worldbank.org/en>

⁶⁰ Migration and development brief 32: COVID-19 crisis through a migration lens <https://www.knomad.org/publication/migration-and-development-brief-32-covid-19-crisis-through-migration-lens>

⁶¹ Project Greenback 2.0 Remittances Champion Cities <https://remittanceprices.worldbank.org/en/project-greenback-20-remittances-champion-cities>

⁶² World Bank: Remittance prices worldwide, issue 24 (2017) https://remittanceprices.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/rpw_report_december2017.pdf

current knowledge is essential to remedy the structural shortcomings in countries hosting forced migrants and combating the Coronavirus at the same time.

3. Work with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) in designing additional development assistance programs to refugee hosting countries with the aim of sustaining the livelihood prospects of refugees and IDPs.
4. Work together with International Organization of Labor (ILO) in providing livelihood support to circular migrants in Romania, Ukraine, the Central Asian Republics and others who could not come to work in Germany, Turkey and other countries due to travel bans.
5. Promote and expand investments in ICT infrastructure and set a target for broadband internet access for students, particularly in developing countries which are on the wrong side of the digital divide and hosting the majority of refugees.
6. Engage with the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) with an urgent focus on inclusive measures to extend devices (e.g. tablets) and work with national stakeholders to provide internet access to all children in need to ensure their participation in online education programs that are expected to last for at least a year now.
7. Pledge to reduce the cost of sending remittance to 5 percent. It was on the G8 agenda in 2009 and on the G20 agenda in 2011 and 2014, but the goal is yet to be achieved. Reducing the cost of sending remittance means saving money for migrant families and thus improving their living conditions. Furthermore, the reduction in costs will assist developing countries amplify the benefits of the remittance-development nexus.