

Reverse migration to rural areas of origin in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

KEY MESSAGES

- The unexpected and unprecedented magnitude of the reverse migration of migrant workers induced by the pandemic has taken a tremendous toll on their communities of origin. This has set the daunting task for under-resourced local governments to meet and accommodate the socio-economic needs of returnees amidst a crisis-stricken and undeniably challenged rural economy.
- The key concerns of returnees and their families are linked to lack of employment and entrepreneurship opportunities, reduction or loss of income and, in some cases, ensuing rise in debt, and reduced household food security.
- While an important share of returned migrant workers in rural areas intend to move back to cities or go back abroad, when it is safe to do so, others may not have the opportunity to migrate again or may wish to stay. At the same time, further heightening of structural challenges prevailing in rural areas may hamper the rebuilding of pandemic-stricken livelihoods.
- The inclusion of returnees and consideration of their socio-economic needs (i.e., social protection, emergency assistance (cash and food support), temporary employment opportunities, relief in loan repayment) in the COVID-19 response and recovery measures is essential, regardless of registration of residence, migratory or working status.
- The immediate vulnerabilities of rural returnees and their families should be addressed, while also investing in medium-to-long-term socio-economic objectives, to allow those who want to stay in rural areas to build sustainable livelihoods.

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF LARGE-SCALE RETURN OF MIGRANT WORKERS

Economies and livelihoods around the world have been impacted tremendously by the pandemic.¹ According to the ILO estimations as of September 2020 (ILO, 2020a), 94 percent of

¹ The research for this information note was carried out between July and November 2020. The situation analysis is based on a secondary data review of the available literature. It captures the main developments related to return migration to rural areas in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and related implications for returning migrant workers, their livelihoods and households at origin. In addition, it provides an overview of the related government support measures. It also provides an overview of the emerging evidence indicating returnees' future aspirations and short-term plans. However, it must be acknowledged that the situation is constantly evolving and, therefore, migration dynamics have been changing throughout the pandemic. In this context, further research is necessary to fully understand the medium- and long-term impacts of COVID-19 on migration patterns and outcomes. The note does not cover the topic of returning migrant workers, who became stranded in countries of destination or transit as a result of enforced mobility restrictions.

the world's workers continue to reside in countries with some form of workplace closure measure in place, with around 70 percent of workers in upper middle-income countries continuing to live with strict lockdown measures in place; while in low-income countries, the earlier strict measures have been relaxed considerably. In many countries, migrant workers represent a substantial share of the workforce and carry out essential jobs in health care, services, construction, agriculture² and agro-food processing. Migrant workers worldwide represent 4.7 percent of the global labour pool, comprising 164 million workers (ILO, 2020b). More specifically, migrant workers engaged in seasonal employment, and their households at origin, suffered an immense setback to their welfare and economic security as a result of the enforcement of lockdown measures adopted since the spring of 2020.

The multiple effects (Mustaquim, 2020; Baverstock, 2020; Khan, 2020) of loss of employment, depletion of savings and fear of COVID-19 contagion have triggered a massive wave of reverse migration in a number of countries, pushing both internal and international migrant workers to return to their homelands, including to rural areas of origin, in search of ways of surviving. Given that close to 40 percent of international remittances are sent to rural areas (IFAD, 2016), it is very likely that rural households, highly dependent on income remitted from abroad, will be considerably affected by the pandemic; and it is precisely in rural areas where a considerable number of migrants have returned.

A clear estimate on the number of returning migrant workers has not yet surfaced as the pandemic and returns continue to evolve and evidence is still being accumulated. However, countries of origin have been continuously updating figures and witnessing a steady influx of returning migrant workers from abroad, which can only attest to the magnitude of this phenomenon in all regions. For instance, Lao People's Democratic Republic (Huaxia, 2020a) welcomed circa 100 000 repatriated nationals as of June 2020; Myanmar (Xinghua, 2020) – over 120 000 returnees from Thailand during March-October 2020; Cambodia (IOM, 2020) – over 100 000 returnees since March 2020; Nepal (ACAPS, 2020) – between 400 000 and 750 000 nationals returning from India during March-June 2020 and at least 400 000 more expected in the long-term; India (Kotoky/Sen, 2020) – 1.8 million were expected to be repatriated as of May 2020; Bangladesh (NewAge, 2020) – 209 345 returnees during March-October 2020; Afghanistan (IOM, 2020d) – over 376 000 returnees from Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran during January – July 2020; Uzbekistan (Interfaxnews, 2020) – approx. 498 000 returnees as of May 2020; Kyrgyzstan (Gezitter, 2020) – circa 100 000 were estimated to have returned since the start of the pandemic; Tajikistan (Longreads, 2020) – over 90 000 returnees in the first six months of 2020; Ukraine (Vinokurov, 2020) – 2 million migrant workers estimated to have returned since the introduction of quarantine measures; Nicaragua (Velásquez, 2020) – over 58 000 nationals returned due to loss of jobs abroad during March- August 2020.

In addition to returning migrant workers from overseas, a significant amount of reverse migration took place internally, from urban centers to rural areas. The pandemic negatively impacted the livelihoods of numerous internal migrant workers, who were predominantly holding informal jobs, and made the return to rural villages very hard due to disruptions of public transport services and movement restrictions. In India (PTI, 2020), according to official data, over 10 million internal migrant workers were forced to leave urban areas and return back home by foot during the March – June 2020 period (the MART report (Mustaquim, 2020) estimates this number to have reached 25 million (ibid., 2020) people). In Peru (Dupraz-Dobias, 2020), some 200 000 workers attempted to make the journey from Lima back to their homes, and were subject to food insecurity and

² The term agriculture refers to all agricultural subsectors, including crop, livestock, fisheries and aquaculture, and forestry.

personal safety-related risks. Venezuelans who had fled the country's political crisis to work in the informal economy in Colombia were also forced to return home, often on foot, leaving them at risk of human trafficking and attacks by armed groups (Response for Venezuelans, 2020). In China (Xiaoguang, 2020) since mid-April 2020, the scale of reverse migration to rural hometowns slowly increased and exceeded 10 million people by May 2020. In South Africa (The Economist, 2020), the lockdown measures prompted between 5 to 6 million people to move home to their villages between late March and the end of May 2020.

Some of the most crucial responses require immediate action from local authorities and rely on their capacity to enforce health and containment measures, to mobilize recovery efforts and to identify temporary economic measures to support the building-back of returnees' livelihoods (OECD, 2020).

The return of migrant workers to their rural areas of origin, even as a temporary short-term solution, poses serious challenges not only to communities of origin, but also to the formal and informal sectors of the rural economy that face the daunting challenge of absorbing these large numbers of returnees into the local labour market. Furthermore, the strain on the already limited local resources (employment opportunities, food, natural resources, etc.) to meet and accommodate the needs of returnees is increasing. At the same time, the loss or reduction of income places many returnees and their households back in the same precarious position they were prior to moving to urban areas or abroad, or worse, possibly reigniting former or heightening existing socio-economic vulnerabilities and in some contexts, being subject again to climate shocks and their adverse repercussions.

IMPACT OF RETURN MIGRATION ON RURAL LIVELIHOODS AND RURAL ECONOMIES

The return of migrant workers to rural areas has impacted the livelihoods of both migrants and their families in a number of ways, often resulting in the exacerbation of their vulnerability. Many returnees now find themselves in precarious situations. Some of the challenges that returning migrant workers face are similar to those of other groups of residents in rural areas in this crisis context and are linked to their employment status (i.e. informal workers, day-labourers, self-employed). However, due to their seasonal or permanent absence and dependence on mobile livelihoods, they often experience greater difficulties and additional constraints, including greater loss of earnings, stigmatization or discrimination related to migration in general or as potential carriers of the virus in the specific pandemic situation, and weaker social capital and social safety nets, often resulting in more challenging access to resources and services.

A. Unemployment

While loss of jobs has been a main driver of reverse migration from abroad and urban centres to rural areas, lack of employment and entrepreneurship opportunities in rural areas of origin is among the key concerns of those having returned. Due to the limited capacity of rural economies to absorb the additional labour force and to generate more jobs in the current pandemic situation, a large share of returnees now find themselves without work in their rural villages. Those able to secure wage employment often work in casual arrangements and earn lower wages compared to those earned in jobs in urban centres or abroad. Some migrant workers also find it difficult to adapt to and reintegrate into rural areas and local labour markets after their return. Long absence from their communities of origin or differences in wages and quality of life

compared to urban areas and abroad are influencing their preferences related to employment and short to mid-term livelihood strategies.

For instance, in Armenia (IOM & WFP, 2020), returning migrant workers have further intensified competition in the local labour markets. While a survey in India (Mohanty, 2020), carried out between July-August 2020, found that about 35 percent of returned migrant workers had no work at all, and a large share of those employed did casual work, and nearly 50 percent were paid less than the minimum wage. An assessment in Viet Nam (IOM, 2020a) showed that 60 percent of returnees interviewed were unemployed. Finding a new job was the biggest challenge for Cambodian (IOM, 2020a) return migrants: 38 percent of respondents, surveyed in June 2020, indicated they were unemployed and 24 percent relied on daily wages. In Bangladesh (Ahmad, 2020), the return of migrant workers to rural areas has reversed the steady rise of wages in the agricultural sector. In Paraguay and Peru (ECLAC & ILO, 2020), agricultural employment rose sharply, possibly reflecting the return of people to their rural areas of origin.

B. Barriers to self-employment

Lack of access to credit is another constraint faced by returnees, in particular for those interested in self-employment, while lack of access to vocational training or agricultural services and business incubation further affects their capacity to respond to the crisis, create jobs and secure livelihoods (FAO, 2020). Furthermore, return migrant workers with few assets or lack of access to land have even more restricted options to earn their living, with non-agricultural opportunities being limited in rural areas. Growing competition for limited resources, including access to land, among those who stayed and those who returned, could lead to new social conflicts and social disruption, as well as increased pressure on natural resources.

For instance, while 10 percent of returnees expressed their intention to be self-employed in a survey in Cambodia (IOM, 2020) 68 percent of these respondents lacked finance to start their own business. In addition, while 24 percent of those interviewed showed interest in participating in training to upgrade their skills, only 1 percent of respondents had taken part in such training. Furthermore, in India (Kukreti, 2020), some return migrant workers are either landless or own only small land holdings, hampering their options to build agricultural livelihoods in their rural areas of origin.

C. Reduction and loss of income

With many rural families depending on remittances and earnings from permanent or seasonal migration, loss of income affects not only return migrants themselves, but also their dependent family members. In India (Mohanty, 2020), for instance, a survey, carried out during June-August 2020, revealed that the income of migrant workers had dropped by 85 percent on average after their return. Similarly, in Bangladesh (Dhaka Tribune, 2020) a survey found that 87 percent of returnees are without a source of income, while 52 percent indicated they were in need of financial aid on an emergency basis.

Reduction of remittance flows can be observed across the globe, with households heavily reliant on remittances being the worst affected. For example, remittances to Haiti (Global Network Against Food Crises, 2020) fell by 9 percent, where they account for about 34 percent of the Gross Domestic Product, while remittances to Colombia and Guatemala (Global Network Against Food Crises, 2020) decreased by 33 and 17 percent respectively compared with 2019. In Lao People's Democratic Republic (IOM, 2020b), it is estimated that a reduced flow of remittances could push as many as 214 000 people into poverty. Around one-fifth of households in Serbia and around one-third of households in Ukraine, surveyed in August 2020 (Bennett, 2020), reported receiving

lower remittances. Contrary to predictions, in Nepal (Prasain, 2020), where 56 percent of households receive remittances from migrant workers (Dhungana & Ghimire, 2020) remittances experienced an increase compared to 2019.³

Moreover, the rural livelihoods of many vulnerable households dependent on seasonal migration have been disrupted, such as in Sahel countries like the Niger (CGAP, 2020) where the spread of the pandemic inhibited rural migrants from migrating to cities after the harvest. Similarly, Nepali (AGRUMIG, 2020) seasonal migrant workers from the far west of the country, where livelihoods are frequently dependent on seasonal mobility to compensate for shortfalls of food, had to return from India due to loss of jobs during the Indian lockdown.

In addition to the depletion of often already meager family savings, in some cases households struggle to pay off existing loans, including those taken out to facilitate migration in the first place, or are forced to go into debt to be able to meet basic needs and to cover expenses for the return of their family members. For instance, in countries such as Ethiopia and Nepal (AGRUMIG, 2020) migrant households often take up loans to cover upfront costs of international migration, while in Kyrgyzstan (Ryskulova, 2020) households taking out loans expect their migrant family members abroad to repay them. Moreover, reports from India (Taskin & Yadav, 2020) show that those left behind, in particular women, took on debt to pay for the costs associated with the return of their migrant family members. In Cambodia (IOM, 2020a), where 38 percent of respondents in a survey reported owing debt, repayment was among the major challenges that migrant workers faced after their return. Furthermore, a survey among migrant workers in Viet Nam (IOM, 2020c) showed that only 37 percent had savings after returning home. Similarly, a survey from Bangladesh (Dhaka Tribune, 2020) found that while 34 percent of returnees had savings to cover living expenses for up to three months, 33 percent indicated they had no savings at all.

D. Food and nutrition insecurity

Loss of jobs and unstable incomes, disruption of local supply chains and simultaneous food price increases due to the impact of the pandemic have hindered the capacity of return migrants and their families to access and purchase adequate and nutritious food for themselves and their families (FAO, 2020b). In this context, rural migrant households often find themselves in a position of trying to cope with the reduction of earnings and to provide for additional family members. Food insecurity is particularly high for those households that largely depend on income generated through seasonal or permanent migration, as they have been marginalized or without alternative income opportunities even before the COVID-19 crisis.

In India (Basu, 2020), the pandemic has emphasized the trend of increasing food insecurity, while farmers have experienced a decline in demand with growing unemployment levels. The level of food insecurity has increased among Venezuelan (IOM&WFP, 2020) migrants who have started to return despite the hardship in their country. In Bangladesh (Nahar, 2020), the return of migrant workers added to the trend that households saw themselves forced to reduce the quantity and quality of food consumption due to declining income and simultaneous food price increase. A survey in Tajikistan (The World Bank, 2020), where more than 80 percent of households reported that they primarily spend remittances on food and other necessities, found that more than 41 percent of households have reduced their food consumption. A phone study in China (Cheng and Feng, 2020) interviewing more than 700 villagers to assess the effects of local and nationwide COVID-19 measures revealed that migrant workers who had returned were forced to buy less

³ However, various factors, including diversion from informal to formal channels and sending cash instead of goods, might be contributing to the rise and forecasts still indicate a gradual, but prolonged decline of remittances due to the pandemic.

food due to decline in income. While the return of migrant workers from Southern African countries (Global Network Against Food Crises, 2020) to their areas and countries of origin has meant an increase of the size of households, they have not been able to add to the resources of their families. In this context, in South Africa (The Economist, 2020), a large share of households that received returnees responded in a survey that they had run out of money for food. In the Sahel (CGAP, 2020), the return of migrants has depleted households' stock of cereals for food consumption.

E. Increased vulnerability and aggravating social, environmental and economic factors

In some cases, returnees face stigmatization and discrimination, as they are perceived as potential carriers of the virus, and as increasing the risk of exposure to COVID-19 (FAO, 2020a). For instance, stigmatization resulted in local communities isolating and, in some cases, even preventing Afghans (IOM, 2020d) returning home from the Islamic Republic of Iran. In Zimbabwe, (The Zimbabwe Mail, 2020) returnees are reported to be hidden from authorities and neighbours.

Moreover, environmental stresses and shocks such as droughts, floods and cyclones have exacerbated food insecurity and the vulnerability of rural populations in the pandemic context. In addition, declines of remittances due to the return of migrant workers to rural areas or job losses at destination following lockdown measures have reduced the ability of households to cope with the impact of weather shocks, potentially triggering negative coping strategies and asset depletion. In the midst of the pandemic, Bangladesh and India (Ahmad, 2020) were hit hard by a cyclone as well as floods that severely affected people's livelihoods resulting in losses of crops, poultry, livestock and fish capture and worsening food insecurity. The return of migrants can put pressure on natural resources and have long-term implications for environmental sustainability. For example, while forests in Nepal (Gill, 2020) have experienced resurgence over the last three decades, this trend could be reversed by large numbers of returning migrant workers.

FACTORS INFLUENCING RETURN MIGRANTS' DECISIONS TO RESUME MIGRATION

While large parts of those who returned to rural areas of origin plan to migrate again, when it is safe to do so, or have already started to return to cities or even abroad, others may not have this opportunity or may wish to stay home instead. Several factors have been identified that influence the decision of return migrants to migrate again or stay in their rural communities.

A. Personal preferences, aspirations, employment and income opportunities

Assessments in several countries with return migrant workers found that while some returnees are interested in staying in their rural villages to build new permanent livelihoods there, large shares of return migrants intend to migrate again to urban areas or abroad for various reasons. Some of those who returned want to resume employment away from their rural villages due to personal preferences or because they consider jobs in urban areas or abroad more attractive and profitable. In general, the lack of productive employment and income opportunities in rural areas of origin has been the key determining factor for rural migrant workers to leave their homes again or for their intention to do so. This group also includes returnees, who'd like to stay home but see no other option than migration because of the structural challenges that made them migrate in the first place, combined with the impacts of COVID-19, further exacerbating their vulnerability. The hardship has even pushed some migrants to already move back to cities or abroad against existing movement restrictions in place in countries of origin or destination.

A survey in Lao People's Democratic Republic (IOM, 2020b), carried out during June-September 2020, for example, found that 36 percent of migrant workers had the intention to leave for a labour destination abroad after the end of the pandemic, while 33 percent planned to stay within the country and 25 percent were still not sure. In Cambodia (IOM, 2020a), 71 percent of returnees from Thailand surveyed between March and June 2020 expressed the desire to re-migrate to Thailand, while 25 percent wanted to stay. A large proportion of those who plan to re-migrate, 86 percent, want to do so after COVID-19 ends. In Myanmar (ILO, 2020c) of returnees surveyed from late March up to late April 2020, 58 percent are planning to migrate again in the long-term, whereas 28 percent want to stay in their areas of origin.

In India (Srivastava & Nagaraj, 2020), concerns were raised in the beginning of the pandemic that large shares of migrant workers would be reluctant to return to urban areas due to the harsh conditions and their negative experience during the lockdown period. However, an assessment (Aajeevika, 2020) showed that 69 percent of returned workers, surveyed in April 2020, planned to go back to cities to work. Some 23 percent were still undecided, whereas 4 percent indicated they would never return to the city for work. In addition, the study found that the size of the family affected the willingness to return to cities, with 83 percent of migrant workers interviewed who had family size of four to eight members intended to re-migrate. Furthermore, in Viet Nam (IOM, 2020c), up to 85 percent of surveyed returnees wanted to migrate again to seek employment opportunities abroad, according to a survey. In Nepal (ACAPS, 2020), where an assessment found that in general a large part of migrant workers had the intention to return to India in search of employment opportunities, drought (Subedi, 2020) affected the livelihoods of farmers so severely that some even migrated to India in search of livelihood options despite still existing travel bans. A survey carried out in Tajikistan during July-August 2020 (Orozaliev, 2020) reported that returned migrant workers who had been unable to find employment abroad were waiting for flights to Russia to resume and for borders to re-open. Finally, some Venezuelans (NBC News, 2020) who returned to their home country at the beginning of the pandemic have begun migrating again despite borders still being closed due to scarcity of livelihoods options at home.

B. Changing migration patterns and government support

The lack of decent work at home is pushing millions of workers to consider migration again as a survival strategy.

As a result of the pandemic crisis situation, migration patterns have started to change in some cases. Some migrant workers unable to travel abroad have moved to urban centres of their home countries. In Tajikistan (Longreads, 2020), for instance, men who usually migrated to the Russian Federation seasonally or permanently, but who weren't allowed to cross the border because of movement restrictions, had started moving to the Tajik capital instead looking for income-generating opportunities. In China (Cheng & Feng, 2020), some migrant workers, unable to return to their former workplaces, closed down due to the negative economic impact in the beginning of the pandemic, were seeking job opportunities closer to their home villages.

Moreover, returned migrant workers are confronted with both fewer job opportunities available abroad and continuous movement restrictions and border closures continue to limit international mobility, even for those that have been able to secure employment and work permits. However, countries are gradually initiating procedures to support the employment of migrant workers in labour destinations abroad, such as by resuming the issuance of work permits for migrant workers, lifting bans on temporarily suspended foreign labour employment, or arranging labour migration agreements.

With the gradual opening up of destination countries, such as the Gulf States, and the resumption of labour demand for Nepali workers, many migrant workers in Nepal (Mandal, 2020a), for example, immediately started to apply for permits to go abroad. Afghanistan (South Asia Monitor, 2020) is working towards a programme that facilitates Afghan migrants to take up work legally abroad. With migration for employment being a key component of the country's economic development, Sri Lanka (Colombo Page, 2020) has started to explore opportunities to send skilled workers to countries with high demand for foreign labour in Asia, but also Europe. Furthermore, Italy (Info Migrants, 2020) granted permission for 18 000 migrants from 30 countries outside the European Union to enter the country to address the shortage of seasonal agricultural workers in agriculture due in part to COVID-19 related restrictions. In Austria (EMN & OECD, 2020), humanitarian, care and health care workers, as well as seasonal workers in agriculture and forestry, could enter from third-countries⁴ with a health certificate confirming a negative PCR test carried out no longer than 72 hours before entry. In Georgia (The Financial, 2020), the government allowed its citizens to resume travel for seasonal work to neighboring Turkey, in a bid to reduce unemployment. Due to a scarcity of manual labour, Costa Rica (The Q Media Costa Rica, 2020) agreed to open its northern border for the entry of temporary Nicaraguan workers to harvest coffee on plantations. Indonesia (IOM, 2020e) announced the reopening of formal migrant worker placement for additional destination countries, increasing the list from 12 countries to 23. Uganda (Times, 2020) has also lifted the ban on labour migration following further easing of COVID-19 restrictions and allowed all licensed companies to resume the sourcing of foreign employment opportunities.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE MEASURES

While the COVID-19 pandemic caught off-guard countries all over the world, many governments did not have effective legislation or state-funded schemes in place to provide sufficient support to migrant workers, including returnees. Additionally, limited evidence for planning, and lack of sufficient capacities and financial resources further hampered a coherent response (Le Coz & Newland, 2021). In this context, public measures accounting for the needs of returning migrant workers to rural areas were often either “modest” or did not materialize soon enough. Nevertheless, various countries have attempted to provide support and developed response and recovery measures mitigating returnees' vulnerabilities and meeting immediate needs, but also addressing challenges linked to their reintegration in communities of origin and harnessing the potential of their return for rural areas.

In Bangladesh (Zahid, 2020), migrants returning to rural areas were not on official lists of beneficiaries and were thus unable to access government support under safety net programmes. However, the Bangladeshi (Sumon, 2020) government pledged to offer training and financial assistance to returning migrant workers, including through the creation of a USD 85 million fund to dispense loans to support returnees in setting up their own enterprises. Cambodia (Leitner, 2020) granted a temporary monthly allowance of USD 40 and planned to deliver additional technical support to incentivize laid-off workers to return to their home provinces and start small-scale farming. An additional USD 50 million was disbursed to provide low-interest loans to farmers and small and medium-scale enterprises, and the Cambodian (IMF, 2020) Government extended the cash relief programme for poor and vulnerable families until the end of 2020.

Skills development opportunities in rural areas aim to support returnees to find wage employment or to start their own business locally. In Myanmar (Htwe, 2020), the skills of international return migrants were registered at local level, to support them in finding jobs in

⁴ Countries that are not a member of the EU and are not Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway or Switzerland.

local sectors. China (Huaxia, 2020b) also announced plans to provide vocational training to at least 7 million migrant workers in each year of 2020 and 2021, including migrants returning to their homeland, in order to increase their employability while stabilizing employment and alleviating poverty. Tajikistan (Longreads, 2020) has established a programme focusing on reintegration and vocational training, providing short-term vocational skills development to migrant workers unable to travel to the Russian Federation. The Government of Uzbekistan (Uz Daily, 2020) is putting in place a vocational training mechanism meant to enhance the employability and to develop skills of vulnerable groups, including migrant workers, for in-demand professions in the labour market.

In India, the government extended the food security scheme (Varma & Anuja, 2020) upon demand from states that experienced large inflows of return migrants. Furthermore, wage employment was provided to returning migrant workers through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (Narayani, 2020), rolling out projects in rural areas to absorb the additional labour force. Moreover, the setup of a national database (Nanda, 2020) registering unorganized labourers, including migrant workers, was planned to facilitate employment and access to welfare benefits. In addition, skills development plans (Shukla, 2020) targeting return migrant workers in 116 districts were announced, assessing their current skills and re-skilling them according to the needs of job markets, including through apprenticeships. In the states of Uttarakhand (PNS, 2020), Bihar (Srivastava, 2020) and Uttar Pradesh (Saxena, 2020) authorities collected data on returning migrant workers to facilitate the creation of self-employment opportunities and job placing in local industries. A large share of migrants returning to their rural villages turned to agriculture (Narayani, 2020) increasing agricultural activities across the country, while the Indian government ensured access to credit for farmers, aiming to keep agriculture alive during the pandemic. In addition, business development (ibid.) in rural areas was financially supported by way of training of up to 15 000 people (ibid.) in various skills and facilitating their access to loans.

In addition to state-run responses to the pandemic, private initiatives in India, Capacita Connect start-up, in cooperation with the Indian Government, developed a database of return migrant workers (Balakrishnan, 2020), matching skilled migrant workers with specific industries. Furthermore, some employers facing labour shortages have incentivized returnees to come back to their workplace in the cities through advanced payments and free travel, or promising additional benefits (i.e. free housing, food assistance or medical insurance). Likewise, farmers dependent on migrant workers (Jaggi, 2020) subsidized transport costs and increased wages.

Nepal is finalizing a reintegration programme (Khadka, 2020) for returnees to be implemented by local governments, aiming to increase jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities, including in the agricultural sector, through skills training and recognition, financial literacy and grant support. Furthermore, the Prime Minister Employment Programme aims to provide a minimum of 100 days of wage employment (Mandal, 2020b) to those in search of income-generating opportunities. Beyond the national level, local governments across the country initiated reintegration programmes for returning migrant workers, including distribution of food supplies (Upreti, 2020); plans to create jobs in the agricultural sector (Mandal, 2020c) building on local resources and skills as well as reward schemes; support of promising business proposals (ibid.) from returnees through the provision of seed money; collection of information (ibid.) such as skills and experience of migrant workers while they were abroad; and the setup of a two-week Employment Programme for Relief (Upreti, 2020), engaging around 500 vulnerable people, including returnees, in repair and infrastructure works to allow them to earn some money for the upcoming festival season. Furthermore, private initiatives (Norec, 2020) contributed to the reintegration of returning Nepali migrant workers, for example through a project led by Nepalese

participants who had to return early from an exchange programme in which they had been learning new farming methods in India. The returned exchange participants built on the acquired skills in India to initiate a project aimed at bridging the gap between the local authorities and local farmers, including facilitating access to information about COVID-19 and available governmental support schemes and providing training in agricultural techniques, learnt in India, to Nepali returning migrant workers.

CONCLUSION: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

- The COVID-19 pandemic situation is still evolving, and the ensuing socio-economic impact is expected to be long-lasting. It is important to take stock of developments and lessons learned in order to further shape the response measures addressing the immediate needs of returning migrant workers and their families and to enhance the impact of reintegration efforts.
- The inclusion and consideration of returning migrant workers' socio-economic needs in the response and recovery measures is essential, regardless of registration of residence, migratory or working status. Social protection, as well as emergency assistance (*cash and food support, temporary employment opportunities, relief in loan repayment*) need to cover all, including returning migrant workers (FAO, 2020b).
- The design of reintegration interventions should engage all stakeholders, and their efforts coordinated in a comprehensive and integrated manner. The immediate vulnerabilities should be addressed, while also investing in medium-to-long-term socio-economic objectives, to allow those who want to stay in rural areas to build sustainable livelihoods. Moreover, data on return migration flows to rural areas and reintegration of returnees, and any evidence on emerging re-emigration trends, should be collected to allow for better planning and development of subsequent support measures and programmes.
- The prevailing structural challenges present in rural areas before the pandemic hit, and further exacerbated by it, make the implementation of such initiatives much more challenging. Therefore, it is crucial to also develop the capacities of all stakeholders, including at local level, and to strengthen the return and reintegration infrastructure on the ground.
- Public health implications constitute an important aspect to consider in the design of reintegration measures and programmes. Therefore, the capacities of national public health institutions at all levels to manage and monitor the health needs of returnees - in the context of testing, tracing, setting up quarantine facilities, information sharing on returnees' health status, and vaccination - should be strengthened.
- Reintegration programmes may consider focusing on the opportunities and potential for rural and agricultural development in communities of origin. Where feasible, returning migrant workers interested in setting-up their own businesses need to be empowered through technical, business and soft skills development. At the same time, programmes should facilitate access to resources (i.e. finance, land) and productive inputs. Initiatives that support effective asset-building for people unable to borrow or repay loans may provide viable short-to medium-term livelihood options (Le Coz & Newland, 2020). Furthermore, investments in the re-skilling and up-skilling of low-skilled migrant labour, in line with labour demand in their areas of origin, are essential to foster their sustainable reintegration. This can be complemented by the establishment of databases covering information on returning migrant

workers (i.e. personal profile, skills set, experience, know-how), which will support the productive mobilization of migrant workers, matching them with available employment opportunities, in their areas of origin, urban centres, or abroad, when it is safe to resume migration. Finally, it is important to raise awareness of existing reintegration packages and programmes (i.e via referral services), clearly spelling out how migrants can access them.

- The combination of structural challenges prevailing in rural areas and their further exacerbation in the pandemic context could compel even more people to move in search of livelihood and survival strategies in the medium- to long-term (IOM & WFP, 2020), while on the other hand some countries still expect more migrants to return to their countries and communities of origin (Le Cos & Newland, 2021). Labour migration to previous destinations might be more difficult, too costly or not possible at all due to movement restrictions. Migrant workers, willing and able to leave, may also need to delay their journey or search for alternative options to migration. In this context, it is also crucial not to overlook that a share of migrant workers who returned may prefer to stay home in their rural villages or already plan to do so.
- Furthermore, safe, regular and orderly mobility of migrant workers needs to be facilitated and further developed. This needs to cover both the return to their homes, as well as seasonal and permanent movement back to areas of destination within countries, including during lockdown, and between countries. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has pointed out the need for better preparation and collaboration between countries of origin and destination. Improvements in decent work for migrant workers will also better enable returning migrants to contribute to their home communities. Occupational safety and health need to be improved to ensure the health of workers in both sending and receiving communities.
- The reintegration of migrant workers in their communities of origin needs to be an integral component of migration schemes from the very start to promote their sustainable reintegration. When reintegration is sustainable, the benefits also extend to communities of origin, where returning migrant workers can significantly contribute to rural development through their skills, knowledge and economic activities.

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