



Seasonal migration in Europe and Central Asia in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

KEY MESSAGES

- Two of the world's top ten remittance-receiving countries relative to gross domestic product are in the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region – Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Inward remittances to ECA are estimated to fall by 8 percent in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Ratha et al., 2020).
- Labour migration from Central Asian countries to the Russian Federation and other countries forms the largest migration corridor in Eurasia (FAO, 2018).
- Mobility restrictions introduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic have prevented seasonal agricultural workers from travelling and earning incomes abroad, with consequences ranging from declines in remittances, affected livelihoods, exacerbated household food insecurity, and hindered access to healthy diets (IOM, 2021).
- The decline in remittances will have a knock-on effect on local economies and, most importantly, on the livelihoods of the families of migrant workers. This implies that many households dependent on remittances will need to reduce their expenditures, with negative implications for food and nutrition security.
- Reduced mobility due to COVID-19 restrictions prevented migrant workers from leaving their areas of origin, resulting in the creation of an abundance of labour supply and the rise of unemployment.

MAIN CHALLENGES

Seasonal migration has been greatly affected by COVID-19 mobility restrictions. More specifically, migrant workers engaged in seasonal employment have suffered an immense blow as a result of the enforcement of lockdown measures, which further increased the uncertainty of their livelihoods and of the welfare and economic security of their households in their countries of origin. Migrants are often employed in the informal sector, which has made them especially vulnerable during the pandemic, as they more easily lost jobs and could not access social security.

Seasonal farm workers are often dependent on the goodwill of their employers in terms of safe workplaces and living arrangements. Gender dynamics also are impacted. While the majority of farm work is carried out by men, women migrant agriculture workers perform key activities for certain crops and in packaging houses. Due to the pandemic, they also face the risk of contagion in contexts of isolation and poorly maintained housing (considering that agricultural workers usually live on the farms) (ILO, 2020).

Border closures and falling labour demand have led to large numbers of migrant workers returning to or staying in their home countries. At the same time, many labour migrants, unable to return, have continued to work in host countries. A number of governments have taken steps to support the repatriation of migrant workers on the condition of strict quarantine measures upon their return, but these returning populations will invariably stretch already under-resourced social services.

Coupled with migrants' loss of employment, the depletion of their savings, and their undocumented status, these circumstances triggered an unexpected wave of return migration, pushing migrant workers to travel back home, 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) rural households are highly dependent on migration as a source of income and will be hit the hardest by a decline in remittances. Moreover, it is precisely in rural areas that a considerable percentage of migrant workers are returning, putting a strain on the local labour market. With the increased labour supply, further exacerbation of long-term unemployment and downward pressure on wages may ensue.

Disruptions and decline of remittance flows, even short-term ones, are expected to have negative consequences on economies, which may require years to build back. This will create heavy economic and labour market burdens on developing countries in the region. Remittances to Europe and Central Asia remained strong in 2019, growing by about 6 percent to USD 65 billion in 2019 (World Bank, 2020). According to the regional economic updates published by the World Bank, the Europe and Central Asia region was expected to experience a 4.4 percent gross domestic product (GDP) contraction in 2020 (World Bank, 2020). Remittances to countries in Europe and Central Asia were estimated to fall by 16 percent to USD 48 billion in 2020 and by 8 percent in 2021 due to the pandemic (World Bank, 2020).

The scale of global economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic varies in different countries of the region. It has been reported that about 2.5 million citizens of Uzbekistan work abroad – with 2 million of them in the Russian Federation (IWPR, 2021). The volume of remittances sent to Uzbekistan from January to July 2020 amounted to USD 3 billion, showing a decline of USD 217 million, or 7 percent, compared to the same period of the previous year (Forbes Uzbekistan, 2020). As in Uzbekistan, the majority of households in Tajikistan depend on remittances. In 2019, more than USD 2.9 billion (35 percent of the GDP) was sent to Tajikistan as personal remittances from the Russian Federation.

With the country's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), remittance inflows to Kyrgyzstan from many Kyrgyz migrant workers in the Russian Federation (and

Kazakhstan) sharply increased and account for a significant share of the country's GDP. Early data from Kyrgyzstan show that the initial lockdown in the Russian Federation was followed by a sharp decline in remittances received in the country, with a year-over-year fall of as much as 60 percent in April 2020 alone (OECD, 2020).

Food security issues have been reported in some ECA countries due to the decline of remittances and rising unemployment. Many poor families face food and nutrition security issues due to decreased income during the lockdown, further aggravated by reduced mobility caused by border closures preventing migrant workers from travelling to destination countries to undertake agricultural activities. Women, youth and persons with disabilities will likely be much more affected, given that they already are disadvantaged in accessing economic and financial resources (FAO et al., 2020).

More than 80 percent of the households in Tajikistan that receive remittances reported that they spend them primarily on food and other basic needs. Over 41 percent of households reported decreased food consumption in May 2020, as opposed to 24 percent in 2019 (World Bank, 2020). In general, food security issues in Tajikistan became more critical in May 2020 across a range of indicators, showing rising numbers of households going hungry, reducing dietary diversity, and worrying over obtaining enough food. In 2020, the World Food Programme estimated that some 47 percent of Tajiks were living on less than USD 1.33 per day, with a third of the population suffering from malnutrition (OECD, 2020). The impact of the pandemic on supply chains and business resulted in significant food price increases (FAO et al., 2020).

In Armenia, almost 261 500 people rely on remittances sent by family members working abroad and on income from temporary and seasonal migration. Nearly 98 percent of all remittances in the country are spent on routine consumption expenses, including food (Armenian Statistical Committee, forthcoming). The local labour market in Armenia, also affected by COVID-19 measures, has not been able to absorb the number of people who usually depend on migration or remittances (IOM and WFP, 2020).

The World Bank already has reported a 30 percent decrease in remittances in Kyrgyzstan in 2020, and this in turn has worsened the well-being of families. According to a rapid needs' assessments in Kyrgyzstan, more than 60 percent of families affected by migration have experienced significant decrease in remittances. Moreover, 30 percent have been facing psychological pressures, and more than 80 percent do not receive any social support payments (FAO et al., 2020).

In the Republic of Moldova, based on research conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics, households that have seen a reduction or cessation of remittances from abroad have a per-person income that is 9.2 percent lower than the income of those that did not record these reductions or losses. The main measure taken by these households to deal with the reduction of income was to reduce food expenditure, by an average of 19.9 percent (National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, 2020).

REVIEW OF CURRENT POLICIES

As a response to COVID-19 implications, several countries in the ECA region have taken steps to ease the socio-economic consequences for returnees, for their households in rural areas, and for those who remained in the countries of destination.

In the Republic of Moldova, the minimum unemployment benefit was set at MDL 2 775 per month (USD 157), mostly to the benefit of returned migrant workers (Gentilini et al., 2020). Additionally, returning migrant workers were included in the list of beneficiaries who could apply for in-advance subsidies for start-up projects from the National Fund for the Development of Agriculture and Rural Environment (Zdg., 2020). United Nations agencies, together with state bodies, have developed a plan of action – a socio-economic response to the implications of COVID-19. The plan includes an assessment of the specific needs and vulnerabilities of returning migrants, the creation of mechanisms for their requalification and reskilling, and other related steps for the purpose of improving their inclusive economic, social and psychosocial reintegration. In the Republic of Moldova, the government has begun enforcing the compulsory purchase of health insurance by returning migrant workers (OSCE, 2020).

In March 2020, the government of Tajikistan planned specific steps to be carried out to achieve long- and short-term goals related to labour, migration and employment. These included providing opportunities for the socio-economic reintegration of returned labour migrants in rural areas through: a) facilitating access of returned migrants to loans enabling them to start their own businesses; b) engaging returnees in seasonal and public works; and c) improving working conditions and developing infrastructures for remote employment.

The UN agencies in Tajikistan also have prepared a plan to address the socio-economic vulnerabilities of migrants that have occurred as a result of the pandemic, introducing various programmes aimed at improving the livelihoods of such vulnerable people as migrants, women and youth. Digital platforms are being established to connect youth, migrants and other interest groups and provide spaces for advocacy and learning. In addition, reintegration assistance to vulnerable returning migrants and their families has been provided. In cooperation with the World Food Programme and the International Organization for Migration, FAO is contributing to programmes aimed at providing alternative income and employment opportunities for returned migrants by leveraging skills learned abroad or reskilling migrants for the domestic labour market (UN in Tajikistan, 2020).

According to official statistics, after the pandemic began about 498 000 labour migrants with no permanent income were forced to return to Uzbekistan because of isolation protocols. In the first half of 2020, the responsible labour authorities provided employment promotion services to 826 000 unemployed citizens. More than 33 000 families were helped via a mechanism that subsidizes low-income families, developing household plots and creating agricultural cooperatives (ICMPD, 2021).

The Government of Kyrgyzstan responded to the crisis by providing food and shelter for those in extreme need. The government also set up a migrant support fund of

KGS 15 000 000 (USD 180 000) to support Kyrgyz migrants abroad (ADB and UNDP, 2020).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Formulate timely short-to-medium-term support measures** targeting the socio-economic reintegration of returnees and enhancing the resilience of their families' livelihoods at home. Utilize the skills and experience of returned migrants for the development of agribusinesses in the countries of origin. This implies sharing experience and using know-how acquired abroad to contribute to agriculture as one of the strategic sectors in many countries of the region.
- **Develop policies and programmes that mitigate the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on returnees (interested to be) engaged with agricultural work**, e.g. access to credit and grant programmes, which could help bridge the financial gap and allow returnees to initiate longer-term livelihood plans in the agricultural sector. The digitalization of agriculture also would encourage the involvement of young people in development programmes and create new employment opportunities – especially for rural populations, including returnees and youth prone to migration – thus increasing the likelihood of their engagement in agribusiness. It is also essential to ensure multistakeholder participation (throughout the entire process of COVID-19 recovery) and support measures targeting the livelihoods of returning migrant workers.
- **Assess how remittance flows can be better harnessed towards generating domestic job opportunities in the rural and agriculture sectors and boosting private sector growth.** Governments should develop financial literacy strategies targeting migrants and their families in rural areas, helping them make productive use of remittances.
- **Equip migrant workers with new skills required for key sectors, including agriculture.** When conditions make it difficult to find a job, new skills and knowledge are needed in key economic sectors. In addition, concerned government agencies – including the ministries of agriculture and microfinance institutions – should arrange specially targeted training programmes on income-generating activities in agriculture for returnee workers.
- **Undertake short-term recovery measures addressing the food insecurity issues of returnees and their remittance-recipient households.** Reintegration mechanisms for returnees need to be enhanced by supporting small entrepreneurs, promoting local agriculture, and protecting local markets for the sale of agrifood products.

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