



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia

Impact of COVID-19 on Seasonal and Circular Migration

30 September 2020

What: Virtual meeting (Zoom Webinar live streamed to YouTube)

When: 30 September 2020, 10.00-11.30 AM (Budapest time)

Language: English-Russian (simultaneous translation to be provided)

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected the socio-economic situation in Europe and Central Asia, and FAO plays an important role in understanding, assessing and supporting Governments in the region to respond to the induced impacts and challenges, affecting the livelihoods of migrant workers and their rural households heavily dependent on remittances. To identify best innovative practices to respond to the pandemic, FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia is organizing a series of webinars to facilitate a multi-stakeholder dialogue through knowledge sharing and exchange of experiences among relevant actors in the countries in Europe and Central Asia region. Issues of particular concern to the region include cross-border trade, domestic food markets, food value chains, livestock, and food security and nutrition.

This webinar organized on 30 September is part of these series, and is dedicated to seasonal and circular migration and the related topics. Seasonal migration is the process when the migrant worker moves for employment purposes, based on **seasonality** (i.e. following the agricultural seasonal calendar) and therefore migrates for only a part of the year. Circular migration happens when the migrant moves **repeatedly** between countries or areas, whether temporary or long-term.

Following the enforced border restrictions and adopted lockdown measures, ensuing developments have seriously impacted seasonal/circular mobility processes. Many migrant workers were unable to reach work, as well as closure or downsizing of businesses, resulted in job losses and suspended foreign labor supply. In addition, it has pushed many migrant workers to return to their rural areas of origin with no earnings accumulated or alternative employment opportunities in sight. At the community level, there has been a decline of remittances for at least 19 percent (World Bank), which will have a knock-on effect within local economies and most importantly on the livelihoods of the families of working migrants.

These negative outcomes also carry a high risk of food security deterioration, indefinite unemployment, limited access to healthcare services, halting of plans to productively invest the anticipated remittances



and the overall worsening of rural households' ability to sustain steady livelihoods and further deepening of rural poverty.

The circumstances created during the pandemic have severely affected both harvesting and crop planting seasons around the world. Moreover, the COVID-19 induced disruptions inside agrifood systems have revealed systemic vulnerabilities and challenges (i.e. improper implementation of and/or lack of information on occupational safety and health (OSH) measures, limited access to and insufficient financial resources for purchasing essential inputs, lack of capital, reduced transportation, unsteady supply of inputs and subsequent spikes in prices, closure of food markets, etc.) putting households' resilience and self-sufficiency to the test in the face of persisting COVID-19 shocks.

Through this webinar, FAO is providing a platform for sharing information among countries and stakeholders on addressing COVID-19 impacts and challenges in the food and agriculture sector in Europe and Central Asia and in particular in the areas of seasonal and circular migration.

Key Issues to be discussed during the webinar

Seasonal and circular migration was greatly affected by COVID-19 implications. During the lockdown, the migrant workers were either unable to travel to their destination countries to work or they were stranded in the destination countries without any possibility to earn money or even return home. In both cases, the situation was adverse in terms of sending remittances to their families and financially supporting the household. Through migration lens, the medium to long-term implications of COVID-19 on economic situation of many countries in the region could be long and severe for many, especially for those living in poor rural areas. According to the latest regional economic updates published by the World Bank, economic growth could fall to 4.4 percent in Europe and Central Asia and one of the sharpest declines of remittances is expected to be in Central Asia- about 28 percent due to both the pandemic, as well as decrease of oil prices.

Decline of remittances means that many poor families cannot make their ends meet due to shortage of income during the lockdown. This also implies food security issues and lack of access to healthy diets. In addition, vulnerable households' food security is severely affected due to closed borders and consequently, due to the inability of migrant workers to travel to destination countries to undertake agricultural activities. With the beginning of the harvesting season, the issue of labour supply in the agriculture sector became more evident specifically for those countries heavily relying on foreign workforce. Hence, given the seasonality of agriculture, the food security concerns would inevitably emerge later in the year due to labor shortages.

On the other hand, the fact that many migrant workers, in the light of adopted pandemic mitigation measures were forced to remain in their countries of origin might result in increasing pressure on the labor market and soaring unemployment rates in rural areas. As a result, we will see a surge in labor supply especially in such economies already facing with un- and under-employment, and are greatly dependent on remittances. With the increased labor supply, further exacerbation of long-term unemployment and downwards pressure on wages might be noticed. This will be accompanied by issues of minimum salaries and consequently, by unreported employment trends in many developing countries. On a positive note, more available labor force at home could also open up more opportunities to develop



the agricultural sector. It could also mean fostering the returnees' knowledge and experience gained abroad for the economies of their countries of origin. The webinar will facilitate the exchange of experiences on how Governments are coping with and mitigating the COVID-19 impacts following seasonal/ circular labor migration disruptions, the unemployment and labour supply challenges and opportunities in ensuring the food security of migrants' rural households and the regional outlook on the effective usage of savings from remittances.

Key messages:

- Mobility restrictions, preventing migrant workers from travelling and earning their income abroad, lead to a decline in remittances, thus affecting their livelihoods, exacerbating their households' food insecurity, as well as hindering access to healthy diets. Short-term programmes and new state policies are essential for addressing food security issues of returnees and their remittance-recipient household members.
- Governments highly reliant on foreign labor force and with remittance-dependent communities should develop policies and programmes mitigating the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, addressing the issues of unemployment and poverty. Such programs can be: e.g, access to credit and grant programmes, matching grants, which could help to bridge the financial gap and allow returnees to initiate their longer-term livelihood plans.
- Mobilizing the needed workers domestically in migrant receiving countries to meet seasonal demand for harvesting can address the shortage of agricultural workers. The targeted groups can be unemployed people, youth, and seasonal migrants from other sections.
- Some migrant receiving countries, like Germany have already introduced policies allowing agriculture workers to extend their visas. However, health conditions of these migrant workers and those that have the opportunity to travel to destination countries during the pandemic are at stake.
- Maintaining ethical recruitment practices and introducing occupational safety and health measures for employment and housing of seasonal migrant workers need to be ensured in order to adequately respond to the new public health rules, such physical distancing, acceptable hygiene and sanitation standards, and accommodation facilities.

Speakers:

- **On Remittances:** KNOMAD, World Bank (TBC)
- **On food security of returnees:** (FAO)
- **On employment and regulating/controlling wages:** ILO (TBC)
- **Interventions from country representatives in the region on adopted mitigation support measures for returning migrant workers:** (Russia, Moldova, Central Asia)

Target audience:

National stakeholders, including public and private sector, International Organizations, CSOs and academia in Europe and Central Asia region.