

## Mitigating the Impacts of COVID-19 on Migrants and Food Security in the Global South

by *Sujata Ramachandran and Jonathan Crush*

### Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities among migrants, particularly those involved in South-South migration, leading to heightened risks of poverty, food insecurity, and marginalization. The pandemic disrupted global migration patterns, hindered access to essential services, and severely impacted the livelihoods of millions of migrants. Governments in the Global South faced the dual challenge of mitigating these impacts while fostering inclusive recovery strategies. This policy brief provides recommendations for governments to address the immediate and long-term challenges posed by the pandemic on migration and food security, as well as planning for future pandemics. Key areas include enhancing social protection, ensuring healthcare access, safeguarding migrant livelihoods, supporting remittance flows, combating xenophobia, and strengthening regional and international cooperation.



© MiFOOD Network 2024  
Balsillie School of International  
Affairs, 67 Erb St West, Waterloo,  
Ontario, Canada N2L 6C2

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic represented an unprecedented global crisis with far-reaching implications for international migration and food security. While the virus affected populations worldwide, its impacts were disproportionately severe on migrants, particularly those engaged in South-South migration – movements between countries of the Global South. These migrants, who often worked in the informal sector and lacked access to social protection, were among the most vulnerable to the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic. This policy brief aims to provide governments in the Global South with actionable recommendations to address the challenges faced by migrants during and after the pandemic and to prepare for future pandemics. The recommendations focus on ensuring that migrants are better protected during the crisis and included in broader recovery efforts to build more resilient and equitable societies.

### Key Challenges

#### Global Crisis of Immobility

The pandemic led to widespread travel restrictions, border closures, and other containment measures that severely disrupted global migration patterns. This created what was termed a “crisis of immobility,” where millions of migrants were stranded in destination countries or forced to return to their countries of origin under extremely

This publication is funded by an  
Operating Grant from the Canadian  
Institutes of Health Research (CIHR)  
and a Partnership Grant from the  
Social Sciences and Humanities  
Research Council (SSHRC)

difficult conditions. The sudden halt in migration flows had profound economic and social consequences, particularly for migrants who relied on cross-border movement for their livelihoods. Many migrants found themselves in precarious situations, with little or no access to support systems in either their host or home countries. The crisis also disrupted the implementation of key global migration governance processes, such as the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and the Global Compact for Migration. These disruptions threatened to roll back progress made in recent years towards more orderly and safe migration.

### **Increased Vulnerability to Poverty and Food Insecurity**

Migrants, particularly those working in the informal economy, were disproportionately affected by the economic downturn caused by the pandemic. Many lost their jobs or saw their incomes drastically reduced due to lockdowns, business closures, and other containment measures. This loss of income had a direct impact on their ability to afford basic necessities, including food. Food insecurity became a pressing issue for many migrant households, both in destination countries and in their countries of origin. The economic shocks of unemployment, disappearing income, and reduced remittances hit migrant-sending households especially hard, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities. In many cases, migrants were unable to access social protection mechanisms that could have helped them cope with these challenges, further deepening their vulnerability.

### **Limited Access to Healthcare and Social Protection**

Access to healthcare and social protection was a significant challenge for migrants during the pandemic. Many migrants, particularly those who were undocumented or on temporary visas, faced substantial barriers to accessing healthcare services. These included language issues, lack of knowledge about the healthcare system in their host country, and fear of deportation or other negative legal repercussions. The pandemic highlighted the gaps in social protection systems that left many migrants without access to essential services. In many countries, migrants were excluded from national COVID-19 relief packages, such as unemployment benefits, and social security measures. This exclusion not only exacerbated their immediate vulnerability but also undermined their ability to contribute to recovery efforts in the long term.

### **Gender-Specific Impacts**

The COVID-19 crisis had gender-specific impacts on migrants, particularly women. Women migrant workers were overrepresented in sectors that were severely affected by the pandemic, such as domestic work, healthcare, and hospitality. Many lost their jobs, and those who remained employed often faced increased risks of exposure to the virus due to the nature of their work. In addition to the economic challenges, women migrants were at heightened risk of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, which surged during the pandemic. Many women migrants were in precarious living situations, often tied to their employers through restrictive contracts that limited their mobility and access to support services. These challenges were compounded by the lack of access to healthcare and social protection.

### **Decline in Remittances**

Remittances – the funds sent by migrants to their families in their home countries – are a vital source of income for millions of households in the Global South. The pandemic led to a significant decline in remittance flows, as migrants lost their jobs or faced reduced incomes. This decline had severe consequences for households that relied on remittances to meet their basic needs, including food, education, and healthcare. The World Bank projected that remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries would decline by approximately 7% in 2020 and 7.5% in 2021 due to the pandemic. This reduction in remittances exacerbated poverty and food insecurity in many migrant-sending regions and communities, particularly in countries that were heavily dependent on these flows. The decline in remittance receipts also had broader macroeconomic implications, as it reduced the availability of foreign exchange and affected the balance of payments in many countries.

### **Xenophobia and Discrimination**

The pandemic fueled xenophobia and discrimination against migrants in many parts of the world. Migrants were scapegoated and blamed for the spread of the virus, leading to an increase in hate speech, violence, and discriminatory policies. In some cases, governments used the pandemic as a pretext to introduce more restrictive immigration measures or to justify the exclusion of migrants from national relief efforts. This rise in xenophobia and discrimination further marginalized migrant communities, making it even more difficult for them to access the support they needed

during the pandemic. It also undermined social cohesion and fueled divisions within societies, hindering collective efforts to respond to the crisis.

## Policy Recommendations

COVID-19 exposed significant gaps in global, regional, and national preparedness for health crises, particularly concerning the protection and inclusion of migrants. To mitigate the impacts of future pandemics, governments must prioritize migrant-supportive pandemic preparedness, ensuring that vulnerable populations, including migrants, are safeguarded. Migrants and their households are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity during crises such as pandemics due to factors such as job losses, reduced remittances, and limited access to social protection. To address these challenges and ensure food security for migrant populations, governments must implement targeted interventions that consider the unique circumstances of migrants. Below are key recommendations for governments and other stakeholders such as international organizations and NGOs.

### Enhancing Access to Food Assistance for Migrants

*Inclusive Food Assistance Programming:*

- Ensure that food assistance programs are inclusive of migrants, regardless of their legal status. This includes extending eligibility for food vouchers, cash transfers, and in-kind food distributions to migrant households. Programs should be designed to reach both documented and undocumented migrants, who may face barriers to accessing traditional social safety nets.

*Mobile Food Distribution Centres:*

- To reach migrants who may be living in isolated or informal settlements, establish mobile food distribution centres. These centres can deliver essential food items directly to communities where migrants reside, ensuring they have access to adequate nutrition even during lockdowns and movement restrictions.

*Culturally Appropriate Food Aid:*

- Food assistance provided to migrant households should be culturally appropriate, considering the dietary preferences and religious practices of diverse migrant communities. This ensures that food aid is not only accessible but also acceptable and effective in meeting the nutritional needs of migrants.

### Supporting Economic Stability to Reduce Food Insecurity

*Employment Support and Job Retention for Migrants:*

- To mitigate food insecurity, implement job retention schemes and provide employment support to migrants. These measures include wage subsidies, financial incentives for employers to retain migrant workers, and access to temporary work opportunities in essential sectors such as agriculture and food production.

*Facilitating Access to Remittances:*

- Given the importance of remittances in supporting the food security of migrant households, facilitate access to remittance services during pandemics. This includes lowering transaction fees, ensuring the availability of remittance services even during lockdowns, and promoting digital remittance platforms to make sending money home easier, safer, and cheaper. This will ensure that migrants can continue to send and receive funds during lockdowns and other pandemic-related restrictions.

*Financial Assistance for Migrant Households:*

- Provide targeted financial assistance to migrant households that are at risk of food insecurity due to income loss. This assistance could come in the form of direct cash transfers, emergency grants, or interest-free loans to help migrants and their families purchase food and other necessities.

*Support for Women Migrants:*

- Targeted interventions are needed to support women migrant workers, who faced unique challenges during pandemics. This includes providing access to safe housing, healthcare, and protection from domestic violence. Governments should also consider measures to support women's economic empowerment, such as access to credit, skills training, and business development programs, particularly in the informal economy.

### Strengthening Social Protection and Safety Nets

*Expanding Social Protection Coverage:*

- Expand social protection programs to include migrant workers and their families, ensuring they have access to benefits such as unemployment insurance, food aid, and healthcare. Expanding coverage can help prevent food insecurity by providing a safety net for migrants who lose their income during a pandemic.

*Rapid Response Mechanisms for Food Security:*

- Develop rapid response mechanisms that can be activated during a crisis to address the immediate food security needs of migrant households. These mechanisms should include emergency food distributions, temporary expansions of social safety nets, and partnerships with NGOs to reach vulnerable migrant communities quickly.

*Social Insurance Schemes for Migrants:*

- In addition to direct assistance, explore the creation of social insurance schemes that specifically cater to migrant workers. These schemes can provide income support during periods of unemployment or illness, reducing the risk of food insecurity for migrant households during a pandemic.

## Promoting Community-Based Food Security Initiatives

*Support for Migrant-Led Food Initiatives:*

- Support migrant-led food security initiatives, such as community kitchens, food cooperatives, and urban gardening projects. These initiatives can empower migrant communities to produce and distribute food locally, enhancing their resilience to food insecurity.

*Partnerships with Civil Society Organizations:*

- To reach migrant populations effectively, governments should partner with civil society organizations that have established relationships with migrant communities. These organizations can play a critical role in distributing food aid, providing nutritional education, and advocating for the food security needs of migrants.

*Engaging Migrants in Local Food Systems:*

- Create more opportunities for migrants to engage in local food systems, such as through employment in agriculture or food distribution networks. By integrating migrants into local food systems, governments can help ensure that migrant households have stable access to food and are able to contribute to the food security of their communities.

## Addressing Structural Barriers to Food Security

*Legal and Policy Reforms:*

- Enact legal and policy reforms that remove barriers to food security for migrants, such as restrictions on access to social services based on legal status. Ensuring that all

migrants have the right to access food assistance and social protection is essential for preventing food insecurity during a pandemic.

*Inclusive Data Collection and Monitoring:*

- To effectively address food insecurity among migrants, governments need accurate data on the food security status of migrant populations. This includes collecting disaggregated data on food access, dietary diversity, and nutritional outcomes among migrants. Such data should inform targeted interventions and policy responses.

*Advocacy for Migrant Rights:*

- Organizations should advocate for the rights of migrants at both the national and international levels, ensuring that food security is recognized as a fundamental human right. This includes participating in global forums and pushing for international agreements that protect the food security of migrant populations.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated the vulnerabilities of migrants in the Global South, particularly those involved in South-South migration. The economic, social, and health challenges faced by these migrants required urgent and coordinated action from governments to ensure their protection and inclusion in recovery efforts. Implementing the recommendations outlined in this brief could improve migrant food security outcomes in both origin and destination countries in future crises. A focused, evidence-based approach is essential to building more resilient, inclusive, and equitable food-secure societies in preparation for future pandemics.

## Acknowledgement

This Policy Brief is based on MiFOOD Paper No. 1 and was generated and edited with the assistance of ChatGPT 4.0 and Writefull.

## References

1. Ahmed, D., Benavente, P. & Diaz, E. (2023). Food insecurity among international migrants during the

- COVID-19 pandemic: A scoping review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(7), 5273.
2. Chikanda, A., Crush, J. & Tawodzera, G. (2020). Urban food security and South-South migration to cities of the Global South. In J. Crush, B. Frayne & G. Haysom (Eds.), *Handbook on Urban Food Security in the Global South* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar), pp. 261-281.
  3. Choitani, C. (2017), Understanding the linkages between migration and household food security in India, *Geographical Research*, 55(2), 192-205.
  4. Choitani, C. (2023). *Migration, Food Security and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
  5. Crush, J., & Caesar, M. (2017). Cultivating the migration-food security nexus. *International Migration*, 55(4), 19-27.
  6. Crush, J., & Tawodzera, G. (2017). South-South migration and urban food security: Zimbabwean migrants in South African cities. *International Migration*, 55(4), 88-102.
  7. Obi, C., Bartolini, F. & D'Haese, M. International migration, remittance and food security during food crises: the case study of Nigeria. *Food Security*, 12, 207-220.
  8. Smith, M. & Wesselbaum, D. (2020). COVID-19, food insecurity, and migration. *Journal of Nutrition*, 150(11), 2855-2858.
  9. Sulemana, I., Anarfo, E. & Quartey, P. (2018). International remittances and household food security in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Migration and Development*, 8(2), 1-17.
  10. Triandafyllidou, A. (Ed.) (2021). *Migration and Pandemics Spaces of Solidarity and Spaces of Exception* (Cham: Springer).