

# PROMOTING INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES AND INCLUDING MIGRANTS IN COVID-19 RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

This issue brief is one of four that IOM, the UN Migration Agency, has drafted to support stakeholders in their discussions on the recommendations of the UN Secretary-General's report on the implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, ahead of the inaugural International Migration Review Forum in May 2022. The brief draws on the extensive policy and operational experience IOM has acquired working around the world in close cooperation with States partner agencies, civil society, the private sector, academia as well as migrants themselves, and presents insights and ways forward to support the implementation of the Secretary-General's recommendations.

## Why does the Secretary-General's report highlight the issue of migrant inclusion in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

In 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to have an unprecedented and devastating global impact, including on migration and people on the move. Much of the world is dependent upon well-functioning and safe mobility for economic development. Yet, it is estimated that in 2020 the pandemic slowed the growth of international migration globally by up to 27 per cent.<sup>1</sup> Progress towards the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals has been significantly and negatively impacted by adverse health and socioeconomic impacts linked to the pandemic.

Furthermore, mutual trust and cooperation, the principles that underpin inclusive societies, can be eroded in times of crisis and lead to structural forms of discrimination towards minorities. With the current pandemic, many migrants have been excluded from accessing basic services and have been targets of discrimination and racism, leading to wider divides in societies. In this context, there is an increasing risk that future access to migration becomes even more fragmented, stalling equitable economic and social development. More than ever, global cooperation is necessary to enhance the predictability of cross-border mobility, while fully integrating public health concerns and building capacity to manage admission and stay safely and equitably.

## What are some of the issues at stake?

The Secretary-General's Report outlines the extent to which COVID-19 has fundamentally recalibrated the implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and

Regular Migration, at the national but also local level. The far-reaching impacts of the pandemic have forced many States to enact widespread and swift changes in immigration policies to respond to changing realities. Indeed, the need to implement effective migration governance is even more urgent than when the Compact was adopted in 2018.

The pandemic has increased the vulnerabilities of many migrants and their communities, with mobile populations experiencing increased risk of COVID-19 infection, restricted or non-existent access to health services and social protection, job losses, discrimination, protracted family separation, or unsafe and undignified returns. Rapidly changing limitations on travel and entry have restricted opportunities for regular channels of admission, stay, work and return. Too often, migrants have been scapegoated, blamed and even attacked for the perceived spread of the virus, despite so many of them working in sectors critical to COVID-19 response and recovery, not least crucial health-care roles.

However, the pandemic has also prompted positive changes such as the implementation of humane migration policies that offered alternatives to detention, such as the closure of immigration detention facilities or the release of detained migrants into non-custodial alternatives with access to health-care services; or the adoption of flexible measures that prevented migrants from falling into irregular status, such as extending visas and migrants' employment contracts.

The good practices outlined in the Secretary-General's Report demonstrate how States can make concrete positive changes in crisis situations. The development and implementation of such policies offer hope for a future of migration governance centred on inclusive societies.

<sup>1</sup> *International Migration 2020 Highlights*, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, New York.

## Ensuring the engagement with migrants and local communities

The full involvement of migrant and local communities is necessary to ensure the success of public health interventions that limit the spread of COVID-19. In that respect, clear risk communication and community engagement strategies are vital for community uptake of essential public health and biomedical interventions.<sup>2</sup> For instance, it is important to work in close collaboration with trained community health workers in various countries to ensure that migrants, displaced populations, and communities have access to timely, context-specific, and reliable information. Community event-based surveillance are also integral to efficient disease surveillance systems, and IOM supported national governments in 29 countries to strengthen such surveillance systems at local levels. Ensuring that the views and concerns of local communities are fully addressed through needs assessments is another priority, such as when the Rohingya community was consulted in 2020 to inform the development of COVID-19 responses. In all these cases, the full participation of affected communities was integral to the success of the programmes' implementation.

## Combating xenophobia and promoting migrant inclusion

Mistrust towards migrants rose during the pandemic, putting them at increased risk of discrimination. Efforts to promote cohesion and combat xenophobia are needed to counter the impacts of harmful misinformation linking migrants to the spread of COVID-19. For instance, the development of community-driven digital platforms on countering xenophobia and hate speech such as the [XenofobiaCero Online Platform](#) and the [One Step Closer campaign](#) help promote a positive and fact-based narrative on migration. Digital solutions that facilitate migrants' equitable and continued access to services through distance learning, skills and language training are another example of how to bridge existing divides.

## Ways forward

As underscored by the Secretary-General in his report, the Compact has proved its value as a guiding document for States throughout the tumult of the pandemic. In the lead-up to the inaugural IMRF, which will help States commit to better common action on pandemic preparedness and response as part of broader efforts to improve migration governance,

IOM wishes to present considerations on how to promote inclusive societies and include migrants in COVID-19 response and recovery. These are listed below, beneath the relevant recommendations from the Secretary-General's report, which have been shortened here for brevity.

**Secretary-General Recommendation:** Grant all migrants access to essential health services (paragraph 98)

- Strengthen research and data analysis on the impact of health emergencies, including COVID-19, on mobility and the health of migrants, as well as the impact of reduced mobility on social and economic development.
- Strengthen capacity-building support for health-integrated border management, including development, implementation and monitoring of guidance and tools.

**Secretary-General Recommendation:** Include migrants and returning migrants in development, social protection, and socioeconomic response and recovery frameworks (paragraph 99)

- Systematically include migrants and migration considerations in COVID-19 response and recovery planning, including at the local level and across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus.
- Develop targeted interventions that address xenophobia and hate speech, through public communications campaigns and community-based social mixing activities that facilitate inclusion of migrants and social cohesion.
- Address structural racial and ethnicity-based discrimination by improving infrastructure, services and local inclusive governance (including community engagement mechanisms) in areas with high levels of multidimensional deprivation.
- Invest in digitalization initiatives and migrants' digital inclusion in COVID-19 response and recovery.
- Recognize the potential of diasporas as development actors with specific capacities, skills and networks who support their home and host societies.

**Secretary-General Recommendation:** Establish mechanisms to separate immigration enforcement activities from service provision (paragraph 100)

- Prioritize access to universal health coverage for mobile populations, regardless of their immigration status.
- Extend special COVID-19 initiatives to migrants in situations of informality and irregularity such as ad hoc financial, mental health or employment support and access to multilingual hotlines.
- Strengthen the capacity of national and local “duty bearers” to ensure inclusion of all migrants, regardless of their immigration status, in consultations, planning and implementation of COVID-19 social protection measures.

<sup>2</sup> IOM'S Covid-19 Preparedness and Response Achievements Report 2020, IOM, Geneva (pp. 23–24).