



## COMMENTARY

# COVID-19, economic recession, and the Refugee situation

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The future of labour migration and the situation of labour migrants have received considerable attention under the pandemic (Abella, 2020; Papademetriou & Hooper, 2020). However, less discussion has been made on how the pandemic-induced economic recession impacts refugee populations, especially in developing countries.

The number of forcibly displaced persons in the world surpassed 80 million in mid-2020. This majority were internally displaced people (IDPs), followed by almost 30 million refugees and others forcibly displaced outside their country, and 4.2 million asylum seekers. Around 85 per cent of forced migrants live in low- and middle-income countries (UNHCR, 2020a). The situation of refugees varies according to their history of displacement, type of entry into host countries as well as their settlement patterns (Hugo *et al.*, 2018). Around sixty per cent of refugees live in urban areas, and the remainder live in camp-like settings. While some have officially been recognised as refugees and are privileged to have official documentation, many live in a state of limbo without documentation and ID cards.

Along with travel restrictions such as border closures, strict border management and flight cancellations put in place within and between countries to contain the virus, the resettlement of many refugees has also been hindered. This makes refugees ever more susceptible to the negative economic consequences from the pandemic that will continue to have a major effect on various aspects of their lives. Refugees living in low- and middle-income countries are especially vulnerable to the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Refugees' residence status moderates the effect of COVID-19 on their lives. The loss of housing due to rising rents and unemployment and relocation to more marginalised areas is an inevitable livelihood strategy for many. Living in overcrowded camps or lower-socio-economic urban areas, where adequate social distancing is difficult, poor nutrition is common and access to sanitation is limited, makes refugees and IDPs more vulnerable to coronavirus infection than others. Refugees with an undocumented status are disproportionately vulnerable and disadvantaged in situations like this.

## AFGHAN REFUGEES IN IRAN

Like other countries, many refugee-hosting countries are vulnerable to the socio-economic and health impacts of COVID-19. Unlike the rest of the world, though, hosting countries have the added challenge and responsibility

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to protect their refugee populations. Take for instance, Pakistan and Iran that have been hosting close to 90 per cent of Afghan refugees over the last four decades. Iran has hosted between three to four million Afghan refugees and migrants over the past four decades. About 980,000 Afghans have refugee cards (UNHCR, 2020b), 500,000 reside in Iran on work visas, a limited number have student visas, while a significant proportion reside in Iran without residency permits. Like in many other host countries, those who reside without a legal permit are usually denied access to public and welfare services, including having an ID card, and are consequently unable to have the privileges of banking services and internet access.

The unilateral sanctions imposed on Iran have affected its economy, resulting in unmet demand of jobs by the large cohort of the young and educated population were not met. Estimates show that the amount of investment in Iran's economy in 2018 amounted to less than 65 per cent of the volume of investment in 2011. Also, during the last 7-year period, more than 520,000 people, mostly university graduates, have joined the labour market annually; around 55,000 of whom are classified unemployed (Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour & Social Welfare, 2019). Despite a slight recovery under the 'resilient economy programs' during early 2019 (Abdullahi, 2020), the economic downturn followed by the complexities introduced by the pandemic has led to a rise in unemployment and loss of around 1.6 million jobs for the Iranian population (Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour & Social Welfare, 2020). Consequently, the situation of a large number of Afghan refugees and migrants who are mainly employed in entry-level jobs deteriorated, reducing their remittances and leading to the return of some to their home country.

The situation in Afghanistan is no better. The deteriorating socio-economic and political situation in Afghanistan, compounded by COVID-19, is increasing the pressure on returnees to re-migrate in search of greater safety as well as more stable employment to sustain themselves and their families, resulting in increased demand for smuggler services along the Iran-Afghanistan border (Mixed Migration Centre, 2020b). Already, diminishing access of refugees and migrants to local services and economic opportunities has triggered irregular movements towards other destinations such as Turkey that has been a host country and transit hub for Afghan and Syrian refugees. In 2018, Turkey experienced a substantial increase of irregular arrivals (those lacking legal documentation) and Afghan nationals constituted the largest group of new irregular arrivals. In 2019, the number of Afghan arrivals doubled, and they remained the largest national group of new arrivals (Mixed Migration Centre, 2020a).

The impact of recession shocks on the lives of refugees, who are already among the lower and middle classes of society, is significant. Most work in low-skill and low-pay jobs which are temporary in nature. These unfavourable job conditions force those already living in poverty to look for work and rely on public transport for daily commute. Such exposure makes them more susceptible to coronavirus and related risks. Based on data from eight hosting countries prior to the onset of COVID-19, refugees are 60 per cent more likely than host populations to be working in highly impacted sectors such as construction and food services, manufacturing and retail (Dempster *et al.*, 2020). As a result, COVID-19 will likely lead to a widespread loss of livelihoods and increase in poverty among refugee populations. Most do not have unemployment and retirement insurance and are considered vulnerable groups.

With the lockdown and closure of many factories, offices and economic centres due to the COVID-19 crisis, many migrants and refugees have lost their job opportunities alongside locals and are facing many economic difficulties. Whilst locals have minimal access to government support measures such as subsidies and livelihood packages, refugees and migrants are denied such assistance. As refugees and migrants have limited capital and savings, rising debt and drawing down of individual savings will be extra challenges leading to their anxiety and stress. Child deprivation is likely to exacerbate, especially among boys, as they are forced to leave education to work and support the family. This is evident in many low-income refugee families whose first strategy in such critical situations is to make up for the lost sources of income.

Another major problem facing refugees is continuing access to educational services. After the launch of online education systems many refugee families, especially on the outskirts of cities, have missed out, mainly due to the lack of access or inability to source smartphones, the inability of parents to set up this system, and inadequate coverage of communication services in the group's neighbourhoods. Women and girls are usually more

disadvantaged due to the relative increase in the physical and psychological vulnerability of refugee women during pandemic.

At times when societies face a crisis of recession and unemployment, some may think that refugees are the cause of unemployment and these difficult conditions (Goldstein & Peters, 2014), and this may lead to xenophobia and discriminatory discourse against refugees. The social effects of this discourse, or possible discriminatory treatment of immigrants and refugees, can in some ways be more dangerous than coronavirus itself.

## FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

The negative economic consequences of the pandemic are immense, and recovery from it will take time. The timeline of overcoming the pandemic, its total impacts on employment and loss of jobs are all uncertain. Undoubtedly, the conditions created by the outbreak of the coronavirus will lead to changes in immigration laws, and governments may revise their priorities regarding migration and refugees under the current economic circumstances.

Future direction of policies and programs should include short, medium and long-term plans. Modelling the post-COVID era, taking into account the conditions of refugees and their numbers in the future of the global economy, is a planning necessity for any country. Special attention is to be given to vulnerable groups during and postpandemic. Equitable management of resources and distribution of services is imperative both in the absence of a vaccine and in the rollout phase. In the long run, the resilience of societies must be considered so that in situations like these, individuals and families possess the necessary social safety nets to withstand hardships and difficulties. Supporting host countries must be on the agenda of international organisations and donor agencies enabling them to continue their services to refugees who are disproportionately disadvantaged during and after COVID-19.

In the absence of government support, utilising social potential and strengthening the sense of togetherness and social trust through public awareness campaigns can improve the wellbeing of vulnerable populations and refugees. When public support for refugees is known to fall during economic downturns, policymakers' role in advocating for social and economic inclusion of the needy as well as refugees is vital. Refugees and forced migrants are under-researched in the international migration literature due to limited data availability (Abbasi-Shavazi & Kraly, 2018). Understanding the situation of these vulnerable groups and designing new protection policies warrants further data collection.

## PEER REVIEW

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