

IOM Statement on COVID-19 and Mobility

20 March 2020

Overview

- The current outbreak of COVID-19 is – first and foremost – a health issue. However, it is also having an **unprecedented impact on mobility** both in terms of regimes for border and migration management, and the situation of all people on the move, including those displaced by conflict or disaster.
- IOM's 14,000+ staff is working to respond to this public health emergency from the perspective of mobility. In doing so, the Organisation is drawing on its experiences from previous emergencies -- notably the most recent Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo -- and is **working closely with the World Health Organization and other UN Migration Network member agencies and partners** to ensure the integration of migration health concerns across the UN system.
- As a member of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), IOM is supporting the humanitarian system's *COVID-19 Outbreak Readiness and Response*, contributing to **joint guidance and operational approaches to minimise impacts in humanitarian contexts**. IOM is also working with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), **to meet the additional needs stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic while sustaining ongoing humanitarian operations and life-saving programmes** responding to needs that precede this newest emergency.
- IOM's [Global Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan](#), launched on 20 February 2020 and revised 19 March 2020, calls for global financial support for ensuring migrants and mobility considerations are included in preparedness planning in priority countries, including many of the interventions outlined below.
- However, IOM is aware that **the current pandemic will have broad-ranging, long-term humanitarian and socio-economic impact**. While the economic and political implications of this crisis are impossible to fully assess at this moment, there is a need to acknowledge the critical economic inflection points ahead for societies, and the deeper impacts that may be looming for the diverse mobile populations that the Organization serves.
- In the short-term, within countries that have been hardest hit, **migrants are exposed to many of the same vulnerabilities as other citizens, and often to a greater extent**. Foreign nationals are more likely to be in overcrowded households or employed in short-term, or precarious work with limited provision for sick leave. Other migrants, in both regular and irregular status, may have limited access to public health services, or fear accessing such services. They may also be excluded from public health information programming or, when informed, lack the financial means to manage periods of self-isolation or quarantine.
- Across the world, in less affected countries, **displaced populations in camps or camp-like settings are already highly vulnerable to contracting infectious disease**, in conditions where

a virus can more easily spread. Others caught up conflict may be some of the hardest populations to reach and monitor, yet most ill-equipped to protect themselves against infection.

- **Efforts to support all vulnerable groups, including migrants, should be strongly considered to avoid harmful consequences, minimise hardship, as well as reduce public health risk.** Our work to ensure the safety of communities must uphold the **fundamental human rights** of all.
- The below sets out **key concerns and responses**, including the actions that IOM has taken with a number of governments to ensure that migrants, and all those on the move, are taken into consideration in COVID-19 planning and response.

What can we do?

- **IOM's strategic response** focuses on reaching the vulnerable and building operational capacities to address the mobility dimensions of this pandemic. These actions include:
 - **Risk communication and community engagement** activities, by leveraging community networks to ensure public health information is communicated in accessible and culturally appropriate ways to the most vulnerable, including migrants, regardless of status. These have been undertaken in a number of countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Greece and Yemen. In Greece, IOM has conducted information sessions in mainland camps for migrants, translating government information, as well as distributing additional supplies.
 - **Cross-border coordination and capacity building** to strengthen health surveillance at entry and exit points (airports, seaports and land border crossings) in dozens of states, including along Afghanistan's border with Pakistan and Iran. IOM is providing a daily Global Mobility Restriction Overview, as well as Country-Level Restriction Mapping, outlining new and complex travel restriction measures to support colleagues across the organization.
 - **Crisis coordination** to facilitate information exchange between stakeholders. In some European countries, such as Greece, Malta and Norway, IOM is in close and regular contact with government counterparts to coordinate next steps. In Belgium, IOM has set up a crisis management team with the government to ensure no person is left behind.
 - **Trainings for government employees**; IOM has previously undertaken trainings on Standard Operating Procedures at point of entry during health emergencies in the context of Ebola response, in Guinea, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Senegal. This can be extended to address COVID-19 operational needs and be done virtually.
 - **Population mobility mapping exercises** to anticipate needs and prioritise measures by layering information about travel restrictions, points of entry status, airlines and the status of stranded migrants, in collaboration with WHO. These have been undertaken in several countries, including Mongolia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Rwanda and

Tanzania. It is important that governments and frontline response teams have a solid understanding of population movements and mobility dynamics so vulnerable groups can be reached in a timely manner.

- **Enhanced surveillance, and WASH services** at entry points. IOM is increasing water access and hygiene measures at scale across its operations, to minimise the risk of contagion. In other locations, and across Asia, all US-bound migrants undergoing health checks at IOM centres receive information, hand sanitizer and tissues.
- Across all of IOM's activities, priority is given to **mainstreaming protection concerns** within the COVID-19 response to **ensure that our efforts are people-centred, inclusive and do no harm to the populations we assist**. This is guided by an understanding of access and barriers to services and information of different groups, including persons with disabilities, older persons, female-headed households, unaccompanied or separated children, and incorporate gender considerations.
- In view of the **impact of the pandemic on IOM's daily operations**, including the increasing number of travel restrictions, a thorough assessment is being undertaken to ensure the continued safety of the staff, partners and all beneficiaries of the organisation. Thus far, the following actions have been taken:
 - **Temporary suspension of IOM's resettlement programming**, in coordination with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Resettlement, however, remains a life-saving tool for many refugees. IOM and UNHCR are working with states to ensure movements can continue for the most critical emergency cases wherever possible.
 - **Scale-back and/or suspension of a number of migration health assessment programmes, visa application programmes, and operational reduction of family reunification and humanitarian visa programmes**. Where operations continue, IOM has adopted a number of precautionary measures, including the development of specific Standard Operating Procedures for COVID-19, health education and counselling for migrants, and strengthening of pre-embarkation checks.
 - **Virtual counselling for migrants and virtual training sessions for migrants' associations**. In many European countries, IOM has set-up remote communication mechanisms to inform migrants, especially those interested to return home, about the general situation and current restrictions to movements.
- Despite these programmatic changes, IOM is closely following the evolving situation on the ground and remains committed to the safety, wellbeing and protection of all affected populations, irrespective of migration status, staff as well as obligations to Member States and partners. While these programs are currently curtailed, **IOM retains full capacity and readiness to resume operations as soon as conditions allow**.
- Many governments will need to make choices in the coming days regarding the possible suspension of immigration and asylum programming – including visa processing and asylum registration, and services such as voluntary return. IOM emphasises the need to **ensure that these choices do not further marginalise vulnerable mobile groups**, including older persons,

persons with disabilities, or children, **as well as to ensure skeleton support services remain available in spite of restrictions.** We stand ready to advise and assist governments in making these decisions, and particularly how best to support migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, including in humanitarian settings.

- **All migrants, in regular or irregular situations, and including those in exploitative situations, should have access to health information, testing, treatment and care,** so that response teams can include them in contact tracing and community interventions. IOM emphasises the need to ensure accessibility to all through available language translation, and culturally appropriate recommendations and treatment modalities. Based on previous experience, the provision of **mental health and psychosocial support** to affected communities is critical, which can be linked to existing protection and social service systems.
- In line with the International Health Regulations and WHO's Emergency Committee recommendations, IOM remains concerned about the spread of misinformation and the use of **stigmatizing narratives as they can keep people from coming forward with symptoms or for contact tracing,** which in turn can hamper the provision of adequate care and derail efforts to reduce further transmission. **All authorities must make every effort to fight xenophobia, linked to the origin and spreading of the pandemic.**

Looking forward

- The current crisis will have ripple effects for many months, and potentially years. The social and economic impact on the most affected societies has yet to be fully assessed. It will be **necessary to ensure that long-term responses can fully incorporate the situation of those most vulnerable,** and notably migrants and refugees.
- This pandemic brings to our attention yet again the need to address **human mobility dimensions** in global health security and public health strategies with a **whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach** – this will be critical to minimize the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic with urgent and decisive actions, as well as strengthen future preparedness plans.
- **IOM reiterates the need for migrant-inclusive approaches in the overall COVID-19 response** and calls on countries to address the particular needs and vulnerabilities of migrants, regardless of their legal status, in the spirit of Universal Health Coverage. The fight against COVID-19 cannot be won unless the response plans in all countries include migrants, especially those marginalized or in situations of vulnerability.
- Collectively we must live up to the humanitarian imperative and **sustain ongoing life-saving operations** while ensuring the 'do no harm principle' and the duty of care of staff. IOM is fully committed to **not exacerbating vulnerability by leaving humanitarian needs unattended** especially in existing complex crisis settings and fragile states with weak health systems where affected populations will face heightened risks.
- In light of the long-term impact, IOM will continue **to explore new partnerships and business practices** that can ensure the Organization mitigate the effects of the measures taken – now and in the future – to reduce the spread of COVID-19.
- Finally, but most importantly, we should remain vigilant against the stigmatisation of any particular group during this crisis, including migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers, as highlighted by the **UN Migration Network [statement](#).** This is especially important given the uncertain length and impact of this crisis. **Social distancing should not be at the expense of long-term social cohesion.**