

Reflections of The World during the Covid-19 Pandemic On the Lives of Immigrants

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As the Covid-19 epidemic intensified globally, countries began to implement quarantine measures one after the other starting from mid-March. According to the United Nations, 60 thousand decisions were made concerning travel and mobility restrictions in 220 countries. These decisions cause many difficulties that aggravated conditions under the pandemic for immigrants who earned their living by means of temporary mobility. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) made a statement at the end of March when these measures were just implemented, announcing that the Covid-19 global pandemic would be the biggest economic and social shock of the twenty-first century since the September 11 attacks and the 2008 Financial Crisis. According to the statement, in the face of the “deep freeze” that the world would experience, there would be a need for a global-scale mobilization similar to the Marshall Plan implemented after the World War or the New Deal that came into effect after the 1929 Crisis. (OECD, 2020) Meanwhile, in the socio-economic impact assessment of the Covid-19 global pandemic it published in June, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) presented analyses of the situation concerning twelve fundamental areas. Of these, according to the income and job loss assessment, more than half of the estimated 1.6 billion informal workers had lost their jobs, with no savings to draw on. In the area of remittances meanwhile, a drop of 20% was expected on a global scale in the incomes of immigrant worker households. When it comes to food security, it was stated that there would be a global shortage after the year 2020 in many products unless urgent measures were taken. In conclusion, a sharp drop in all gains recorded on the World Human Development Index in the last thirty years was noted as one of the most important findings of the report. (UNDP,

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT FACES AN UNPRECEDENTED HIT SINCE THE CONCEPT WAS INTRODUCED IN 1990



Human Development Index

Immigrants are at the center of the debates on the possible consequences of the Covid-19 global pandemic. Measures to limit human mobility created an important awareness concerning international or national mobile/migrant seasonal workers and refugees (we will be using the term immigrant throughout the article) on a global scale. This unexpected pause in the mobility of millions of immigrants showed how regions of the world that appeared to be separated from each other by deep inequalities were in reality tightly coupled. One of the areas where this connection came to be felt strongest is migrant worker remittances. At a press meeting he organized, Mexican President Obrador made a call to Mexicans abroad, asking them to sustain their remittances as much as possible in order to be able to keep the country’s economy on track.

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While in Romania, the possible visit of immigrants to their home countries was being discussed as a concern in relation to the global pandemic, in Germany, a significant part of the agenda was how the needed seasonal agricultural labor force would be procured for the harvest season that was about to begin. German Minister of Agriculture Julia Klöckner announced on April 8 that they required 300 thousand people and that they were working to enable 80 thousand people to come to their country in the months of April and May, mostly from Eastern Europe.

Migrant worker remittances, which were calculated to be of a volume of about \$700 billion for the year 2018 in both academic studies and reports of various international institutions, have long been seen as an important asset that supports the development process in developing countries. One fourth of Nepal's yearly income for example, is based on these remittances (Akram and Galizia, 2020). The dependency of developing market economies on remittances was underlined in the results of the G-20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors Meeting that took place in mid-April where it was stated that poverty and inequalities would increase due to the Covid-19 global pandemic. The expected drop in this article of income

was around twenty percent (Moroz et al., 2020:5). Because of findings suggesting that remittances, which are seen as an important plank of development in the Global South, prevent migration waves, African countries gained a special significance in this discussion. In a report that it published, the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) compared the possible impacts of the Covid-19 global pandemic on remittances to the 2008 Global Economic Crisis and the 2014 Ebola epidemic, painting a much more pessimistic picture (Bisong et al., 2020). In an analysis of 30 African countries, meanwhile, it was stated that half of households were dependent on remittances in order to sustain their present conditions and that possible interruptions to be experienced would increase the vulnerabilities of these families (Kalantaryan and McMahan, 2020: 20).

Anghel (2020) reported on another situation in Europe in the short article he wrote titled "When Diaspora Meets Pandemic" right at the end of March. Worries that nearly 3.5 million emigrants residing in Western Europe would return to Romania in April for the Easter Holiday and that this would aggravate the wave of contagion catapulted the issue to the top of the agenda. While in Romania, the possible visit of immigrants to their home countries was being discussed as a concern in relation to the global pandemic, in Germany, how the needed seasonal agricultural labor force would be procured for the harvest season that was about to begin made up a significant part of the agenda. German Minister of Agriculture Julia Klöckner announced on April 8 that they required 300 thousand people and that they were working to enable 80 thousand people to come to their country in the months of April and May, mostly from Eastern Europe. The scenes that emerged during the first charter flights from Romania to Germany caused an uproar and the Romanian government ceased the process until necessary regulations were made. When the virus was identified in Romanian workers working in slaughterhouses in Germany in the months that followed, Romania asked that measures be taken concerning the working and housing conditions of their citizens in that country

(Escritt, 2020). In order to compensate for the loss of labor force, Germany, France and Canada organized campaigns to call refugees and youths on unemployment benefits already residing in their countries to the fields.

Three conditions faced by immigrants in the global recession

Based on the monitoring which we initiated for the research that formed the basis of the “Impact of Coronavirus Outbreak on Seasonal Migrant Agricultural Workers and their Children and on Crop Farming” (2020) report of the Development Workshop, which we later continued, we can say that the Covid-19 global pandemic has led to one of three basic conditions for immigrants:

- (a) **Return:** While immigrants who have lost access to their daily means of livelihood and/or certain services with the global recession, have concluded their geographic mobility for a certain period of time during the pandemic, they were forced to embark anew upon a (backward) mobility in an urgent and insecure manner.
- (b) **Stuck in Between:** Immigrants who are in motion for various reasons, who have not yet reached their destination or who are wishing to return because they have lost their present jobs ending up immobilized without income and access to services due to the closure of borders constitutes the second basic condition.
- (c) **Layered Stringency:** The deepening of the state of waiting immigrants are in due to their access to (in)formal income sources they had developed in the process, solidarity networks and various services being restricted by quarantine policies in localities they presently reside in as refugees constitutes the last basic condition.

All three conditions caused production to be hobbled in many sectors, primarily in agriculture, and caused economies based on remittances to be negatively affected. While the dependency on a seasonal/mobile migrant labor force which is deemed the most vulnerable link in the global economy gained visibility with the Covid-19 global pandemic, this awareness did not directly bring an improvement regarding the difficulties faced by immigrants. As the phrase uttered by Swiss author Max Frisch in the 1960s regarding international labor migration “we wanted a labor force, but we got people instead” suggests, what is needed foremost is the necessary labor force for the continuity of certain production processes. The expectation for this need to be met with the lowest economic and political cost, meanwhile, inevitably deepens the humanitarian vulnerabilities of immigrants.

Map 1: Regions where refugees are at high risk during the COVID-19 pandemic: Bangladesh: Kutupalong, Kenya: Kakuma Camp, Lesbos: Moria Camp, Pakistan: North West Border Provinces, Uganda: Bidibidi Camp, Jordan: El Zatari Camp and Venezuela



Map 2: Countries that need temporary migrant labor and develop urgent policies in this area for the sustainability of their economies, especially agricultural production, during the period of the COVID-19 global epidemic: Germany, Australia, Dubai, Finland, India, England, Spain, Israel, Italy, Canada, Qatar, Latvia, Russia, Singapore, Thailand, Turkey and Greece.



A transformed opposition to immigration in the global pandemic

SChugh for example, reminded that migration moved out of the humanitarian context and became an acute security issue through processes like the September 11 attacks (2001) and the Syrian Refugee Crisis (2015), and pointed out that with the Covid-19 global pandemic, the phenomenon this time came to be seen as a threat to security of personal health. Fallon (2020) meanwhile, has been pointing out the need to discuss how the Island of Lesbos, which had been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for the solidarity its residents had displayed during the crossings across the Aegean Sea in 2015, became a stage for Europe's far right within just a few years. The attacks of far-right groups who had come to the island from various European countries, (primarily Germany) on relief organization workers also became a topic of discussion in 2019 (2020).

The vulnerability of immigrants who earn their living through temporary/seasonal mobility can be understood through two fundamental causes which reinforce each other: (a) immigrants not being able to access various rights and services granted to citizens because this increase in the supply of labor that takes place beyond national borders does not have an established legal framework, and (b) the labor that they provide predominantly being employed in informal sectors such as domestic service and live-in nursing, seasonal agriculture, tourism, street vending and construction. Looking at research and statements concerning issues experienced by immigrants in the global recession process, we can compile the following list of main headings (GTÖ, 2020; Kızılay 2020; Plan International 2020):

- They lost their jobs and therefore their incomes, in most situations along with their means of safe housing,
- As in the example of the withdrawal of the teams doing voluntary rescue work in the Mediterranean and the Aegean, when vital services and social centers such as mosques/churches shut down, they lost their solidarity networks,
- They lost their access to basic needs with the suspension of aid campaigns and services,
- They were affected by price rises caused by quarantine measures being reflected onto production,
- Especially immigrants who got stranded on their way were not able to access important services and sufficient information regarding measures concerning the pandemic process because they did not have citizenship rights and language skills,
- Cyclical indebtedness, which has an important role in organizing the seasonal mobility of the mobile/migrant labor force increased because many families lost their jobs,
- The incomes of households in home countries fell because international remittances decreased,
- Educational expenses of children were cut as a strategy to cope with loss of income, child marriages and child labor increased,

- The conditions of women and unaccompanied children who make up an even more vulnerable subset of immigrants were heavily aggravated due to an increase in domestic violence and abuse,
- Anti-immigrant hatred and violence rose to a scary level.

The structural issue lurking in the shadows: The Canada Paradox

Seen within this framework, the stitching together of regions of the world that appear to be separated from each other by inequalities through seasonal mobile/migrant labor mobility may be interpreted as an indicator of what is in fact a structural issue on the global scale. Framing this structural issue will be facilitated by looking at Canada, which has been operating a cyclical migration mechanism since the 1960s to meet its labor needs, which occupies an important place in our survey. Weiler, McLaughlin and Cole have been discussing a contradiction, well-accustomed to in the prevailing situation prior to the Covid-19 global pandemic, as an extension of this structural issue. On the one hand, the international competitiveness of the country's agricultural industry was being presented as the guarantee of the food security of its citizens, while on the other hand it was being said that this competitiveness could only be sustained by hiring seasonal non-citizen labor. However, when we look at the system built on top of this situation, which is assumed as given, we see that workers producing fresh fruit and vegetables cannot access healthcare services and affordable food, while despite Canada seeing itself as a country with almost infinite land in terms of agricultural production, it still faces risk to its food security within its own borders due to its dependence on a migrant labor force. Additionally, while Canada imports food for its own needs, it also rents a seasonal migrant labor force in order to produce crops to export (2017:57). This is the structural issue that was reflected onto the lives of immigrants during the Covid-19 global pandemic period, which we have become accustomed to on the international level and which we may cite as "The Canada Paradox".

Despite not having any direct consequences in terms of ameliorating the vulnerabilities of immigrants so far, the dependency of global economies on seasonal mobile/migrant labor forces becoming visible has triggered an important discussion on the "Post-Covid World". For example, 170 scientists working in the field of development published a short statement at the end of April titled "Planning for Post-Corona: Five proposals to craft a radically more sustainable and equal world" on the Leiden University (The Netherlands) website (Sosial Ekonomi, 2020). The general framework of the statement, which proposed a global paradigm change included preference for sustainable sectors over those who promote over-consumption and support for local and vegetarian food production in order to ensure biological diversity and sustainability.

Various institutions such as the European Union (2020), World Bank (2020), Food and Agriculture Organization (2020), Food and Land Use Coalition (2020), International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies – Migration Reference Group (2020) and the Zolberg Institute (2020) have made statements concerning improvement of the conditions of immigrants, who are the most vulnerable yet one of the most significant actors of the global economy during the Covid-19 pandemic process. Within the broadest framework possible, the priority goal must be to create resilient food systems, an international cooperation framework to support these food systems, and to support communities such as migrant workers against various vulnerabilities, who are of vital importance in terms of sustaining production chains. Within this general framework, it should be considered that the supply of and demand for labor should be met on regional scales in order to support local production which met local needs.

Proposals for ameliorating vulnerabilities which became visible during the global pandemic

- Securing cross-border movements or travel within countries,
- Openly and securely defining the legal status of immigrants in the countries they reside for work,
- Ensuring that this status allows immigrants to access services through which they can meet their basic human needs, primarily healthcare,
- Defining and inspecting the work conditions and wages of immigrants according to certain criteria
- Providing access to banking and digital communication infrastructure in order to sustain remittances in a healthy manner,
- Specializing services and forms of support according to different needs, in light of the fact that there are different special subsets among immigrant communities with various vulnerabilities and needs (such as children, the disabled and women).

Recommendations specific to the Covid-19 global pandemic

- Providing the services needed to meet the basic needs of immigrants who have found, themselves under one of the conditions defined above,
- Supporting both immigrants and their families in their home countries in areas like healthcare, housing and education to compensate for losses of income,
- Being aware of special difficulties that restrictions to be applied for health purposes may cause for immigrants,
- Providing work and housing conditions under which immigrants can take the necessary measures against the pandemic,
- Ensuring access of immigrants to services and information regarding measures taken against the pandemic,

- Protecting immigrants against xenophobia and racism which are on the rise in the pandemic period.

The ILO was saying in a statement made in May, that what we are witnessing in the Covid-19 global pandemic period could be an opportunity to “rebuild better”, especially in the field of agriculture (2000). The idea of a “universal basic income” that Guy Standing has been advocating for years is making impact on a global scale in the ongoing and widening “Post-Covid world” debates (2020). While today it seems hard to say when the pandemic will be brought under control, we have already been accustomed to the fact that its consequences will be on our agenda for many years. When we look at the process through the window of migration, we see that immigrants are the weakest link that the global economic system relies upon and that it is possible to rethink this system in which we all live in a way that will benefit everyone.

Focus: The Eastern Black Sea Region in the first six months of the Covid-19 global pandemic

The production of tea, which is among the topmost important industrial agricultural products of Turkey, has become dependent on the seasonal migrant labor force from Georgia since the mid-1990s due to internal migration out of the region based on professionalization through education. One of the earliest measures against the Covid-19 global pandemic was the closing of the Artvin-Sarp Customs Station for an indefinite duration by a decision taken by the Artvin Governorship on March 18, 2020. From this date on, how the tea and the hazelnut harvest, which concerned 200 thousand families, would take place became an important order of business for Giresun, Ordu, Rize, Samsun and Trabzon. (Cohen, 2020)

Because the situation was still uncertain as of the end of May, the Ordu Municipality announced that it initiated the “Don’t worry about workers and don’t let the hazelnuts wither on the vine” campaign in order to locally balance supply and demand to meet the need for labor (Akçay, 2020). When harvest time came around, Afghan, Uzbek and Senegalese immigrants who were already in the country came to Rize to work; a situation the media reported on with the headline “The tea gardens are like the United Nations” (NTV, 2020).

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