



ICRC



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Global Migration Lab  
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# Locked down and left out?

Why access to basic services for migrants is critical to our COVID-19 response and recovery

A report by the Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab





Credit: Philippine Red Cross (2020)

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Cover photo caption: Abdul Karim Adamou (Niger Red Cross animator and volunteer) and Ali, a 32-year-old migrant originally from Guinea Conakry, sew masks during a psychosocial activity in Niamey in March 2020. Photo credit: Noemi Monu, Danish Red Cross.

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## Executive summary

This report was prepared by the newly established Red Cross Red Crescent (RCRC) Global Migration Lab and draws on research conducted by eight National RCRC Societies (National Societies) from Australia, Colombia, Egypt, Ethiopia, the Philippines, Sudan, Sweden and the United Kingdom. It provides evidence of the direct and indirect impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and related policy measures on migrants' access to basic services, including vaccines.<sup>i</sup>

As a global humanitarian network with a presence in 192 countries, the International RCRC Movement (the Movement) approaches migration from a purely humanitarian perspective. The Movement uses a deliberately broad description of migrants to include all people who leave or flee their home to seek safety or better prospects, usually abroad, and who may be in need of protection or humanitarian assistance. RCRC actors seek to respond to humanitarian needs and address risks and vulnerabilities, without seeking to encourage, discourage or prevent migration. As auxiliaries to states in the humanitarian field, National Societies work to address the protection and assistance needs of migrants all along their journeys, regardless of their legal or migratory status, in accordance with the Fundamental Principles of the Movement.

This report builds on existing research on the impacts of COVID-19 on migrants by providing further insights into common barriers to accessing basic services across a range of migration contexts – including for undocumented or irregular migrants, people seeking asylum and refugees, indigenous migrants, migrants in transit, migrants on temporary visas or residency permits, returning migrants and those left stranded due to the pandemic. It also explores the extent to which migrants are being included in COVID-19 vaccination policies and plans globally.

Country-level data collection and analysis took place between July and December 2020, with additional desk research conducted until early February 2021. In total, more than 3,250 migrants were surveyed and/or interviewed and discussions held with over 150 key stakeholders, representing community leaders, local authorities, government representatives, local, national and international humanitarian and development organizations, and RCRC staff and volunteers.<sup>ii</sup>

The findings confirm migrants continue to face significant humanitarian consequences due to the exacerbation of existing barriers to basic services and the evolution of new challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although not all findings apply uniformly across the countries examined, and

likely not to all countries outside the scope of the research, key barriers identified during the pandemic include: exclusion based on legal status; inaccessible information – both in language and channels of dissemination; insufficient or unavailable services; financial barriers; inconsistent application of relevant laws and policy; fear, health and safety concerns; lack of relevant documentation; and digital exclusion.

COVID-19-related policy measures, including lockdowns and movement restrictions, while aimed at improving public health outcomes, have contributed to migrants' inability to meet their basic needs and live in safety and dignity. The most significant impacts identified in the report include: risks to physical health; worsening mental health conditions; severe economic effects – namely, an overwhelming level of loss of employment or livelihoods; food insecurity; and challenges in accessing adequate shelter to remain safe and healthy. While pandemic-related policy measures have also affected broader communities, the evidence confirms migrants have experienced disproportionate impacts due to vulnerabilities associated with barriers to support and the circumstances of their journeys. Migrants are also at risk of heightened stigma and discrimination and being left behind in the roll out of COVID-19 vaccines, generating individual and public health concerns.

The report welcomes the measures taken by some governments to mitigate the impacts of the virus and facilitate access to basic services for migrants – such as relaxations in visa compliance or flexibility in residency permit renewals and inclusion of migrants in free COVID-19 testing and treatment. However, emergency responses for migrants, particularly undocumented migrants and those with temporary status, have tended to be inconsistent with pandemic support measures put in place for nationals or permanent residents. Migrants have frequently been excluded from socio-economic support policies, despite playing key roles in response and recovery efforts, being over-represented in employment sectors hard-hit by the pandemic and being impacted by the same prevention and control measures as host communities. Indeed, COVID-19 has further exposed systemic barriers and underlying inequalities in access to basic services for migrants and has widened support gaps, with increasing concerns as to whether countries will include all migrants, irrespective of legal status, in COVID-19 vaccination policies and roll-out strategies.

Addressing barriers to basic services for migrants is in everyone's interest. Drawing on the evidence presented, in the context of the current pandemic and in preparation for future health emergencies, governments, donors, and development and humanitarian actors should listen to and be guided by the voices, expertise and experience of migrants.

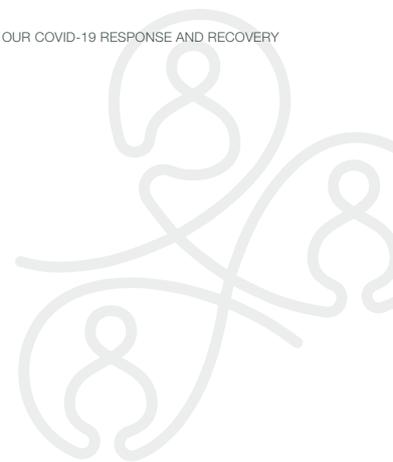
It is the primary responsibility of states to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of migrants, including their economic and social rights. The report recommends that states work together with other stakeholders to:

1. Ensure all migrants, irrespective of legal status, are included in local and national COVID-19 responses that guarantee access to basic services, including healthcare, housing, food, water, sanitation and hygiene services, psychosocial support, education, emergency support and protection services.
2. Ensure all migrants, irrespective of legal status, have effective access to timely, accurate and reliable information on COVID-19 (and any future pandemics) in a language they understand and through accessible dissemination channels. This information should include prevention measures and when, where and how to access testing, treatment, vaccines and other relevant supports.
3. Ensure all migrants, irrespective of legal status, are included in COVID-19 testing, treatment and vaccination policies and roll-out strategies and have equal access to testing, treatment and vaccines.
4. Ensure all migrants, irrespective of legal status, who have lost their livelihoods and are unable to meet their basic needs are included in pandemic-related socio-economic support (now and in the future).
5. Continue to adapt existing laws and policies to ensure inclusive access to basic services and complement any policy changes with operational guidelines and awareness training for frontline responders to ensure entitlements in law are realized in practice. This includes addressing formal barriers preventing migrants from accessing services, such as amending restrictive rules and/or working to limit the loss of temporary visa status and regularise status for people without visas, but also informal barriers, such as information gaps, language issues and prohibitive costs. Furthermore, migrants must have safe access to humanitarian assistance without fear of arrest, detention or deportation. In all circumstances, the primary consideration should be to treat migrants humanely, taking into account their specific vulnerabilities and protection needs, and to respect their rights under international law.

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i. For the purpose of the research, basic services include those considered as essential for the well-being and the dignity of migrants such as, but not limited to: access to healthcare, including COVID-19 testing, tracing, treatment and vaccine; access to timely, reliable and culturally appropriate information; shelter; food; water, sanitation and hygiene services; livelihoods and income support; and protection services.

ii. ICRC did not provide any information obtained as part of its bilateral and confidential dialogue with authorities.



## The Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

**Humanity** The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

**Impartiality** It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

**Neutrality** In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

**Independence** The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

**Voluntary service** It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

**Unity** There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

**Universality** The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.



**None  
of us is  
safe until  
all of us  
are safe.**