

## Pandemics and Migrant Workers: Gauging Experiences and Responses

11:30-13:00 (Bangkok time, GMT+7), 10 June 2020

United Nations Virtual Forum on Responsible Business and Human Rights

New Challenges. New Approaches.

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### Background

Southeast Asia and the Pacific is a home to 11.6 million migrant workers, according to the 2018 ILO estimate. The region sees nearly equal rate of labour force participation between its migration and non-migration population. While these numbers signal an increasing trend of economic integration within the region, the recent COVID-19 pandemic highlights that some gaps for inclusiveness and equality for migrant workers still persist.

Migrant workers are among the vulnerable groups that are highly affected by both the spread of COVID-19 itself and the collateral consequences of the policy to halt its spread. They tend to work in precarious jobs with poor working conditions that limit them from practicing necessary precautions and expose them to higher risks. Crowded and poor housing conditions further increase the risks; and barriers due to language, fear of rejection, undocumented status and lack of social protection obstruct their access to healthcare when ill. And emergency public health measures typically exclude or overlook the needs of migrant workers.

The abrupt closure of businesses due to government shutdown and the operational disruptions caused by unexpected crisis have left many migrant workers unemployed. An absence of livelihood and high cost of living in the city leave workers no options but to return home. This mass movement, in turn, risks prompting local transmission in home countries of migrants, especially in rural towns that have insufficient medical facilities and are unequipped for monitoring and testing.

Households in countries of origin rely on remittances sent by migrant workers for livelihood while countries of destination rely on their contribution to keep their economy functions. The absence of migrant workers therefore affect the economy of not just a particular country but the entire region and returning to business as usual might not be easy. In a report detailing socio-economic impacts of COVID-19, the United Nations states that migrants are among those who “stand to suffer disproportionately both from the pandemic and its aftermath” in terms of limited movement, fewer job opportunities and increased xenophobia.

## Session Description

This session will detail the impacts of COVID-19 on migrant workers in Southeast Asia and explore how countries in the region are responding with policies, programmes and strategies to the challenges posed by this health crisis. The panel will discuss broad-ranging implications of the pandemic on the region's economy and labour market in the long run which ultimately will reflect what needs to be done to move toward better inclusiveness and equality for migrant workers; as well as good practices being implemented in terms of policies and/or programmes to mitigate the economic impact of the current pandemic on migrant workers.

## Session Objectives

This session aims to:

- Discuss the economic, social and health impacts that the COVID-19 is having on migrant workers. We will hear directly from migrant workers how the pandemic is disrupting their social and economic activities;
- Discuss lessons relevant to policy makers, social partners and businesses in relation to how to put in place measures to minimize the negative impact on migrant workers in contexts of crisis. Governments of both origin and destination countries in South East Asia will share experiences of addressing the impacts;
- Provide inputs for policymakers, employers' and workers' organisations and non-governmental organizations on actions needed to be taken to support migrant workers during the pandemic health measures and the path to economic recovery.

## Questions

- How is the pandemic affecting you, your work and how it is affecting your family? Is this a common situation to other migrant workers/colleagues? (to be responded by a migrant worker/NGO representing them)
- What is the social and economic outlook of the regional economy when it comes to migrant workers, and the way how they are being impacted by the current pandemic?
- What is the responsibility of host countries to protect migrant workers in this context?
- How is your institution addressing this emergency in relation to the response to migrant workers? What institutional challenges has this posed to it?
- Does the declaration of a state of emergency affect the rights of migrant workers? How? (expert on migration)

- What good practices are being put in place by institutions (governments, social partners, and enterprises) in the region to respond to this situation and the impact it has on migrants?
- How can government and business develop synergies in their actions to most effectively help migrant workers?