

COVID-19: IMPACT ON REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS HOW CAN CHURCHES RESPOND?

Responding to the most vulnerable is one of the three key priorities of the Anglican Alliance.

For several years we have been working in partnership with other organisations to convene regional consultations and establish communities of practice to promote safe migration, tackle human trafficking and address the rights of migrants, refugees and internally displaced people. In the first few weeks of the pandemic, participants from these communities of practice met online to share their experiences of how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting migrants and refugees.

This paper summarises the learning from this task group under four headings:

- the main problems faced by migrant workers and refugees as a result of COVID-19
- the potential impacts of the pandemic on them
- the support they need and what is currently being done to provide it
- guidance for churches on how they can support refugees and migrants during the pandemic (practice principles)

What are the main problems faced by migrant workers and refugees as a result of COVID-19?

- Lack of access to healthcare services, for a variety of reasons including: being unable to pay for them; not being eligible because of immigration status; fear of revealing immigration status / presence in a country; lack of transport or proximity to healthcare provisions.
- Migrant workers are often unable to take time off work out of fear they will lose their job. Migrant workers tend to be in insecure work where there are no 'sick pay' provisions in place. Not being able to rest is likely to make the infection worse for workers who get COVID-19 and could result in further spread of the virus as they continue to work in public spaces.
- Migrant workers and refugees often live in extremely close proximity to others, sharing sleeping and washing facilities with large numbers of people, meaning the virus will spread quickly throughout their communities.
- Migrant communities can be hard to reach, making it difficult to provide resources, education about the virus and current advice on how to stop its spread.
- Lack of sanitation facilities and access to clean water, making it much more difficult for people to wash their hands – the key way to prevent the virus spreading.
- Limited resources to test for the virus amongst these communities, meaning there is less information about how many people have been infected and therefore what scale of help is needed.
- Financial resources made available by governments to tackle outbreaks will rarely be available to/benefit displaced communities.
- Current medical advice for dealing with/preventing COVID-19 involves self-isolation, personal hygiene practice and seeking medical attention to test for the virus. All of these are extremely difficult for migrant/refugee populations who often live in close proximity to others, with a lack of clean water and hygiene facilities and limited healthcare.
- Currently, many migrants who are not able to work are being forced to remain in their accommodation facilities, where there can be hundreds of people living in close proximity. They may have had their wages cut, leaving them trapped and unable to leave.

What could the impact of COVID-19 be on refugee and migrant worker populations?

- Millions of refugees and migrant workers live in countries which have declared outbreaks of COVID-19. The virus could spread extremely quickly among those in refugee/migrant worker camps.
- Malnutrition is common in communities facing humanitarian crises, including amongst displaced people / migrants and in refugee camps. Malnutrition lowers immunity, so an outbreak of COVID-19 in a crowded camp could have severe consequences and, potentially, result in a high number of fatalities.
- People from these communities will often only seek medical help once a situation has worsened and is at a critical level for the individual.
- There has been a rise in the number of refugees seeking work in cities and travelling back and forth between camps and cities, meaning the disease could also spread quickly to other areas or from the city to refugee camps.
- In previous epidemics, migrant workers have been stigmatised due to blaming “outsiders” for the spread of the diseases.
- Some countries have temporarily halted entry to refugees traveling for resettlement because of travel restrictions / border controls due to the virus. This will affect the most vulnerable refugees.
- Many NGOs, particularly those supporting unaccompanied migrant children in Europe, are operating at reduced capacity due to staff and volunteers being unable to work. This is preventing the most vulnerable from having access to shelter, food and other necessities such as mobile phone charging to call health services.

What is being done to help / what support is needed?

- UNHCR are currently working amongst refugee populations to ensure preparedness and prevention amongst communities. They will be closely monitoring and responding to the situation in order to support refugee populations.
- UNICEF are working to provide more supplies of clean water to refugee camps, mobilising medical supplies and running prevention campaigns.
- IOM have launched a global strategic preparedness and response plan to provide support to over 140 countries, working with some of the most vulnerable communities.
- IOM, OHCHR, UNHCR and WHO are jointly advocating for the rights and health of refugees and migrants to be protected in COVID-19 responses.

How can churches support refugees and migrants during the pandemic? Practice principles

- Ensure health information about COVID-19 and how to protect against it is translated, so communities have it in their own language, and that information is circulated to communities who may not have access to online materials.
- Continue trauma support for refugees and migrants, many of whom have fled from very difficult contexts and need ongoing support.
- Reinforce government messages and policies related to COVID-19 to ensure communities are fully informed with correct information.
- Check with local government on issues surrounding immigration enforcement as some laws have been relaxed or changed. This must be communicated to migrant and refugee populations, many of whom are fearful of deportation.
- Tackle any discrimination or hate speech against migrants and refugees, who may be wrongly blamed at times like this or stigmatised as 'the other'. Reinforce Jesus's teaching in Matthew 25:35 - "I was a stranger and you welcomed me."
- Find out what volunteering needs and opportunities there are at support services in your locality and make these known to your congregation and community. Encourage people to volunteer to enable the support service to continue working where some volunteers and employees may be unable to work.
- Provide food and other supplies, including cash transfers where it may be difficult for some to gain access to resources.
- Offer online training to outline what steps need to be taken to protect vulnerable communities.
- Gather teams of volunteers from churches to offer support where there are gaps in provisions.
- Provide stories of what is happening on the ground amongst vulnerable communities in order to inform policy and advocacy work.
- Communication at national and international level between churches and organisations needs to continue to raise awareness of the key issues migrants and refugees may be facing and to share learning and resources.
- Ensure partnerships continue and work together closely on constructing a response.

Resources

<https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/stories/2020/4/5e79e2410/live-blog-refugees-covid-19-crisis.html>

Sources

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