STANDING COMMITTEE ON PROGRAMMES AND FINANCE

Thirtieth Session

ENABLING HUMAN MOBILITY AS PART OF RESILIENT PANDEMIC

PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE

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Introduction

1.   Over the past two years, governments have placed restrictions on cross-border mobility to limit the spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), with varying effects across regions. The profound impacts of the pandemic have shifted priorities for global mobility systems, which have had to integrate public health concerns and risk mitigation measures that are responsive to the local epidemiological situation. In recent months, the progressive rise in vaccination levels and widespread testing across the world have permitted a resumption of cross-border mobility and given governments and the public more confidence in international travel. However, in addition to persistent inequitable access to vaccines, evidence suggests that mobility is becoming more costly and imbalanced, exacerbating existing disparities in opportunities for regular migration, in particular from countries or regions with unequal access to health, immigration and protection services.

2.   Thanks to its extensive expertise in migration health and in immigration and border management, its unique cross-border experience and operational capabilities, and its excellent partnerships with relevant United Nations agencies and other stakeholders, IOM is in a unique position to support Member State efforts to address these challenges. Since the outset of the pandemic, IOM has expanded its programming to include guidance and strengthened preparedness measures at points of entry, real-time monitoring of travel measures and restrictions, and a range of regional and national migrant-inclusive health and socioeconomic measures. In December 2021, IOM hosted a high-level discussion on this issue during the 112th Session of the IOM Council. Over 50 Member States took the floor, and several called for IOM to strengthen coordination between it and the World Health Organization (WHO), and between the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and global health policies. In his concluding remarks, the Director General pledged to host further discussions on the predictability of cross-border mobility at the International Migration Review Forum and other pertinent forums, including IOM governing body meetings. At the time of writing, IOM and its partners had issued a call for governments and United Nations agencies to consider the Review Forum as an opportunity to develop clear, equitable, streamlined and future-focused principles for managing global travel during a pandemic.[1]

3.   COVID-19 has changed the way cross-border mobility is managed for the foreseeable future. We must learn the lessons of the past two years, to ensure that cross-border mobility remains predictable and certain even during times of crisis, while simultaneously fully integrating public health and protection concerns. The safety of, and support for, vulnerable people on the move should remain a priority, even during public health crises. This paper provides a succinct summary of the key concerns that need to be addressed when integrating equitable and predictable human mobility into pandemic preparedness, health emergency response and inclusive recovery. It presents a series of recommendations enabling IOM and Member States to support anticipatory approaches and capacity-building for the future of mobility, through closer cooperation and exchange within a whole-of-government approach. It proposes that the discussions during the Thirtieth Session of the Standing Committee on Programmes and Finance solicit concrete proposals and ideas from Member States on establishing forum(s) for the consistent and coherent international exchange of information and coordination on managing cross-border mobility during future health emergencies and building resilient systems.

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[1]   See Preparedness for the Next Pandemic: Towards a Resilient Global Architecture on Borders and Health, concept note for the side event to be held during the 2022 International Migration Review Forum and co-led by IOM, WHO and the Migration Policy Institute.

The concerns

A two-speed world recovery?

4.   In 2022, with vaccines more widely available yet unequally distributed, efforts are being made to reopen borders, often accompanied by COVID-19 testing or vaccination protocols. The management of cross-border travel nevertheless remains localized and is still largely uncoordinated at the international level, despite commitments under the International Health Regulations (2005), with specific impacts for migrants and people on the move. As a result of the pandemic response and uneven recovery, characterized by inequitable access to testing, treatment and vaccines in several parts of the world, there is a growing risk that migration and mobility will continue to be fragmented. There are already clear signs of a two-speed world recovery that leaves behind less developed countries and further risks stalling socioeconomic development that could otherwise be accelerated through well-managed migration.

Limited coordination and standardization

5.   Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, IOM has tracked the more than 100,000 travel restrictions, border closures and health-related travel requirements imposed by governments globally.[2] Many of these measures were implemented without timely regional or international coordination, as the pandemic prompted countries continuously to modify immigration procedures to adapt to shifting health imperatives, developing conditional entry requirements and changing the way points of entry operated. Emerging evidence shows that a combination of evidence-based risk mitigation measures was the most effective way to tackle the spread of the virus, as opposed to blanket travel bans.[3] The uneven impact of mobility-related pandemic response measures has demonstrated the need to ensure that cross-border mobility safeguards public health and that mobility-related responses to pandemics are well coordinated, to facilitate predictable travel at a reasonable cost and realistic entry and stay criteria for all migrants.

Gaps in effective cross-border data-sharing and technological solutions

6.   Structurally, technology has supported the adaptation of border management practices, thanks to the introduction of contactless tools such as automated border controls, e-health cards, digital vaccine certificates and facial recognition technology.[4] Technological innovations and digitalization have been used to deliver essential information remotely and provide entry- and stay-related assistance and support to migrants using online platforms and e-visa schemes adapted to the pandemic context and local realities.[5] Future use of the digital tools put in place during the pandemic, including digital health certificates[6], requires regional and international cooperation, along with sound technical capacities. Digital solutions will play a key role in future pandemic preparedness and response; they should be designed bearing in mind comprehensive safeguards and data privacy standards, to protect migrants' rights and to ensure that they do not exacerbate vulnerabilities or exclude certain migrants from accessing regular migration pathways.

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[2]   See M. Benton, S. Davidoff-Gore, J. Batalova, L. Huang and J. Zong, *COVID-19 and the State of Global Mobility in 2021* (IOM/Migration Policy Institute, Geneva/Washington, DC, 2022).

[3]   WHO, *WHO advice for international traffic in relation to the SARS-CoV-2 Omicron variant (B.1.1.529)*, 30 November 2021.

[4]   WHO, *Digital Documentation of COVID-19 Certificates: Vaccination Status – Technical Specifications and Implementation Guidance, 27 August 2021* (2021).

[5]   IOM, *COVID-19 Immigration, Consular and Visa Needs and Recommendations*, Issue Brief No. 4 (January 2021).

[6]   IOM, *COVID-19 Digital Health Certificates for Cross-border Mobility and Migration*, Issue Brief No. 6 (August 2021).

> **IOM COVID-19 activities to enable human mobility while promoting public health: examples**
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> In response to the initial waves of border closures and travel restrictions, IOM developed a set of **COVID-19-specific standard operating procedures for front-line border officials at points of entry** and provided national authorities conducting border health assessments with assistance and other resources to implement the International Health Regulations (2005) at points of entry. The standard operating procedures were translated into 16 languages and piloted in ten countries. In 2020, IOM supported Member State and partner preparedness and response measures for COVID-19-related interventions at points of entry in 72 countries.[a]
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> As part of the **Better Migration Management Programme** in South Sudan, IOM has been providing technical assistance to the National Coordination Mechanism on Migration, South Sudan's whole-of-government approach to migration management. Since the start of the pandemic, the programme has been adapted to include mitigating the impact of COVID-19. A key output is the provision of technical assistance to the Technical Task Force to Combat Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants, in order to prevent, reduce and mitigate the risk of both trafficking and smuggling and to protect vulnerable groups affected by the pandemic amid the ongoing crisis. The Better Migration Management Programme is a regional, multi-partner programme co-funded by the European Union Trust Fund for Africa and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.[b]
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> [a] IOM, *Standard Operating Procedures for Front-line Border Officials at the Point of Entry in Response to COVID-19 Outbreak* (2021).
> [b] IOM, *Better Migration Management* (Regional Office for East and Horn of Africa, 2022).

Recommendations

7.   Efforts to strengthen future pandemic preparedness and response mechanisms require Member States, the United Nations system and other stakeholders, including civil society and the private sector, to work together across borders, economies and sectors. It is critical to enhance the predictability and certainty of cross-border mobility, while fully integrating public health and protection concerns and building capacity to manage entry and stay safely and equitably. It is equally important to situate work on human mobility governance within the broader context of societal transformations, such as the changing worlds of work/education and the green transition. The Global Compact on Migration has proved its value as a guiding document able to support Member States throughout the pandemic and the discussions at the Standing Committee's Thirtieth Session should consider the relevant outcomes of the first International Migration Review Forum, held in May 2022. Specific recommendations prepared for consideration at the Forum at the time of writing are noted below.

8.   As the United Nations agency responsible for migration and the coordinator of the United Nations Network on Migration, IOM is well placed to support these efforts by leveraging its technical expertise, operational capacities and partnerships at the global, regional, and national levels. It welcomes feedback from Member States before and during the Standing Committee session and will further refine the contents of this paper for the presentation to be made at that time, based on the Review Forum results and other relevant policy developments in the area of pandemic preparedness.

For IOM

- Support the establishment of a group of friends on the predictability of travel and mobility during health emergencies and of a border management crisis exchange mechanism, to be activated in the event of a regional or global emergency, to ensure consistent and coherent exchanges between Member States on changes in border rules.

- Closely coordinate with WHO, Member States and other stakeholders at the global, regional and country levels, to advocate the inclusion of mobility considerations in the intergovernmental negotiations for the new international treaty on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.

- Continue to work with Member States for equitable access to health services, including vaccinations (in line with the principles of universal health coverage), for migrants and people on the move.

- Strengthen capacities for integrated border management that encompasses health concerns, including by developing, implementing and monitoring guidance and tools such as the IOM Health, Border and Mobility Management Framework[7]. Capacity-building should bolster the integrity of immigration and border management systems for pandemic preparedness and response through multisectoral coordination mechanisms that include WHO, the International Air Transport Association and the International Civil Aviation Organization, at the national and regional levels.

- Strengthen research on and analysis of the impact of health emergencies, including COVID-19, on the mobility and health of migrants and of the consequent reduced mobility on socioeconomic development. Continue to monitor developments in the management of entry and stay procedures, and points-of-entry regulations, during COVID-19 recovery and in any future public health emergencies.

- Support Member State endeavours to simplify and standardize cross-border procedures during health emergencies, by means of, for example, visa liberalization schemes and specific measures for border workers, cross-border traders, border communities and seasonal workers, and promote universal access to legal identity documents, as part of the effort to build resilient migration management systems.[8]

For Member States

- Commit to the establishment of a group of friends and/or a border management crisis exchange mechanism, to coordinate human mobility-related response measures and facilitate the timely exchange of information as core components of future pandemic preparedness and response.

- Build national capacities at, and work across, borders and sectors to ensure that public health resilience is integrated into immigration and border management systems.

- Promote timely inter-agency and international communication between immigration, border, health and customs authorities, notably information-sharing on changing priorities and risks, statistics and cross-border operations.

- Promote common frameworks and the integration of health processes at points of entry to facilitate regular passage and trade, while ensuring that public health imperatives are met.

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[7] IOM, *Health, Border and Mobility Management Framework* (Geneva, 2021).

[8] At its thirty-first session, in November 2022, the Standing Committee will further consider related issues under the theme "Increased availability of labour mobility pathways for inclusive and prosperous societies".

To that end, adapt practices such as one-stop border posts, to promote coordinated approaches in all aspects of border management.

- Ensure that migrants and migration considerations are fully addressed in reviews of the International Health Regulations (2005) and in the intergovernmental negotiations for the new international treaty on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.

- Include migrants in vaccination programmes and overall national health coverage, in line with the principles of universal health coverage.

- Consider migration as a cross-cutting element of analysis and an accelerator for attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals. Encourage reporting on migration policies and programmes in voluntary national review processes, to support the sharing of good practices across countries and regions.