

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON PROGRAMMES AND FINANCE**

**Thirty-second Session**

**ENHANCING SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR MIGRANTS AND POPULATIONS  
IN SITUATIONS OF VULNERABILITY, INCLUDING INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS**



## ENHANCING SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR MIGRANTS AND POPULATIONS IN SITUATIONS OF VULNERABILITY, INCLUDING INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS

1. Social protection can be broadly understood as a set of public and private policies and programmes aimed at preventing, reducing and eliminating economic and social vulnerabilities, and addressing inequality, poverty and deprivation and social exclusion. It is important to note that social protection differs between countries and regions according to sociocultural and normative contexts; no common definition of social protection has been agreed by States, organizations or partners.<sup>1</sup> This paper will principally consider the case of regular migrant workers in the formal economy and of IDPs, noting that there is a broader need to understand the social protection of migrants and populations in situations of vulnerability.

2. The gaps and fragilities in migrant social protection at the individual, household and community levels became increasingly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when countries introduced measures to guarantee health protection and income security. According to the International Labour Organization's *World Social Protection Report 2020–22*, only 47 per cent of the global population were effectively covered by at least one social protection benefit in 2020, while 53 per cent obtained no income security at all from their national system. Migrants in particular continue to face multiple barriers in terms of access to and portability of social protection benefits, due to nationality, territoriality and residence conditions; exclusion from social protection laws; restrictions associated with migration status and labour market access; and operational barriers. In 2017, the United Nations report *Promoting Inclusion through Social Protection* estimated that only 59 million migrants out of a total of 258 million had comprehensive access to social protection, with women migrants more frequently excluded and exposed to additional gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities. Yet the universal right to social security, based on the principles of non-discrimination and non-regression, is enshrined in international law and frameworks. For instance, objectives 15 and 22 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration were put forward by States to ensure service provision for all migrants, regardless of immigration status, and to allow them to benefit from non-discriminatory access to social protection in countries of destination, and the portability of applicable social security entitlements in their countries of origin.

3. Ensuring that migrants can access social protection brings positive benefits, including increased equality and social inclusion. It also allows migrants to maximize their own contributions to social protection schemes, which reduces their exposure to socioeconomic risk and vulnerability. Expanding migrant social protection can advance comprehensive social protection coverage and universal access to health care, and contribute to upholding human rights. It furthermore supports attainment of the objectives of the Global Compact, in alignment with the relevant Sustainable Development Goals, particularly [Target 1.3](#) on increasing access to national social protection systems.

4. Including migrants in social protection schemes also brings fiscal benefits for States, as migrants are net contributors to such schemes. In member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, migrants (including those with irregular status) contribute more in taxes and social contributions than they receive in individual benefits.<sup>2</sup> Recent studies to quantify economic losses due to restricted access to health care for migrants show that there are no cost savings in restricting access.<sup>3</sup> Yet few countries grant documented migrants full access to social protection,

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<sup>1</sup> For further information, a range of definitions, including those used by other United Nations agencies and broadly followed by IOM, can be found at [socialprotection.org](https://socialprotection.org).

<sup>2</sup> J. Hennebry, "Securing and insuring livelihoods: migrant workers and protection gaps" in *Ideas to Inform International Cooperation on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration* (IOM, Geneva, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Ursula Trummer and Allan Krasnik, "Migrant health: the economic argument", *European Journal of Public Health*, 27(4):590–591 (August 2017).

even where such systems are well established.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the impact of complex normative frameworks regarding migrant social protection status under international and domestic law results in a lack of uniformity in migrant social protection. It is therefore a matter of urgency to promote gradual, integrated, coordinated and calibrated approaches to expanding social protection coverage for migrants, in alignment with key principles regarding human rights, gender sensitivity and responsiveness to vulnerability.

### **Earned social protection benefits: accelerating access and coverage**

5. Several countries of destination have strengthened migrant social protection in recent years. One example is Morocco, which has adapted its social security system to ensure that it meets the needs of both Moroccans abroad and foreign nationals in Morocco, as part of a human rights-based approach to migration policy. Where comprehensive coverage is lacking in countries of destination, migrant-sending countries have introduced measures for their own workers; although these do not provide full social security protection, which is primarily the responsibility of host countries, they allow vital additional coverage, protection and support. Specific measures used in this way by countries of origin include migrant welfare funds. These were originally developed by countries such as Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand, and have in several cases succeeded in reaching large numbers of migrants, including irregular migrants in some instances. Another measure is the extension of social security coverage to ensure the portability of benefits, enabling beneficiaries to access services such as medical care while they are abroad. Costa Rica, Indonesia and Nepal have recently taken steps in this direction with the expansion of their social security funds to include migrant workers and self-employed individuals abroad.

6. Countries of origin have also considered how to integrate existing social protection measures for their migrants into broader migrant management and social security systems, enhance partnerships with the private sector to ensure more cost-effective delivery, and strengthen oversight measures. In parallel, they have made efforts to digitalize services and raise awareness of social protection provisions among migrants, in order to increase access. All these measures by countries of origin will continue to be key in extending social protection coverage for migrant workers, although it should be noted that each model has its associated challenges and there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Lessons should be learned from those countries which have, over several decades, constantly redeveloped and recalibrated their models of social protection for migrant workers. One such source of learning could be the Philippines, which undertook a major overhaul of its institutional and legal structures to support overseas foreign workers in 2022.

#### **Expanding migrant welfare funds in Africa**

Several African countries, including Kenya and South Africa, have initiated policy frameworks for migrant welfare funds. More broadly, the African Union has adopted a set of guidelines on the development of migrant welfare programmes aimed at supporting its Member States; this is supplemented by a comprehensive capacity-building manual on establishing migrant welfare programmes and a compendium of practices, which provides examples of migrant worker protection measures worldwide. IOM and its partners supported the development of these resources over the period 2021–2023 as part of the Joint Programme on Labour Migration Governance for Development and Integration in Africa.

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations, “International migrants: carrying their own weight” in *Promoting Inclusion through Social Protection: Report on the World Social Situation 2018* (New York, 2018).

## Leveraging innovative informal and community-based social protection schemes

7. Some of the most innovative and significant social protection measures in recent years have been informal and community- or kinship-based protection schemes. In some areas, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa, these schemes may also be structured around religious communities. However, these types of informal scheme remain limited and are unable to provide comprehensive social protection; they should complement rather than replace formal public social protection schemes. A critical first step towards understanding and documenting these informal schemes will be to foster dialogues with the associations involved, including those present in the informal economy, and with diasporas themselves. The issue should also be examined alongside stakeholders in the private sector, multilateral development banks, international financial institutions, social security agencies and other international organizations. The findings could then inform work to integrate migrants as beneficiaries and scale up and formalize such schemes. Remittances are already extensively used as informal social protection and can serve as a source of innovative financing for migrant access to formal contributory social security arrangements in countries of origin; they have the additional advantage of enabling the inclusion of informal workers from recipient households who may not otherwise qualify for social assistance.<sup>5</sup> There are some documented examples of cases where such measures have proven successful, but there is a need to further pilot and share emerging practices in this area.

### Informal social protection measures: the Sudanese Club

In Lebanon, the lack of a robust Government-led social protection system has led to heavy reliance on informal social protection and services. The Sudanese Club provides welfare support, including expenses for medical care, to the Sudanese diaspora community. It is currently exploring the possibility of establishing a formal fund framework for the provision of social protection support to Sudanese migrants in Lebanon.

*Source:* Marius Olivier, "Strengthening migrants' access to social protection in Lebanon" (IOM, forthcoming).

## Bilateral and multilateral agreements and benefit portability

8. Bilateral and multilateral social security agreements and bilateral labour migration agreements are among the most significant measures to ensure the social protection of migrant workers and their family members. Yet limitations in geographical coverage, the number of beneficiaries covered and the benefits provided, in addition to information deficits, mean that such agreements often fail to live up to their full potential. Migrants may contribute to social security schemes in their countries of origin and destination, but if the associated rights and benefits are not portable, they might be unable to maintain or transfer pensions, health insurance and other benefits due to a failure to meet requirements in any of the countries in which they have made contributions.<sup>6</sup>

9. Existing bilateral and multilateral labour migration agreements can be strengthened through reference to basic social security principles and standards, such as the provisions on social protection outlined in the United Nations Network on Migration Guidance on Bilateral Labour Migration Agreements or the African Union Guidelines on Developing Bilateral Labour Agreements. In particular, expanding the geographical coverage of agreements can provide greater social protection consistency for migrant workers and their families. To provide one example, the Ibero-American Multilateral Convention on Social Security, which has been signed by 2 European countries and 12 Latin American

<sup>5</sup> Alexandre Kolev and Justina La, *Financing the extension of social insurance to informal economy workers: The role of remittances* (OECD, Paris, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> United Nations, "International migrants: carrying their own weight" (see footnote 4).

countries, addresses the critical mobility dimension by offering a practical solution to ensure the portability of benefits.<sup>7</sup> Given the technical nature of bilateral and multilateral agreements relating to social security, dedicated support may be needed from IOM and other international organizations to ensure that the agreements allow for sufficient flexibility and incremental expansion. European Union legislation on social security coordination, as contained in successive regulations, provides an example of how access to social protection has been progressively expanded for European Union citizens to cover several other categories in addition to workers.

#### **Increasing migrant understanding of existing portability arrangements**

Low uptake among migrants of schemes governed by bilateral and multilateral agreements is one reason why some agreements have failed to reach their full potential. Labour and social security agreements may not be widely publicized, meaning that migrants may not know they exist. This acts as a disincentive to work in the formal sector, as some migrants mistakenly believe that they would be subject to double taxation.

*Source:* Bilateral engagement with the Ibero-American Social Security Organization (January 2023).

#### **Broadening social protection to other vulnerable groups, specifically internally displaced persons**

10. The *United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement* underscores the importance of addressing the needs of the 60 million internally displaced persons (IDPs)<sup>8</sup> around the globe, including those experiencing protracted displacement. Unlike international migrants, IDPs have not crossed international borders and therefore remain legally under the duty of care of their governments, yet they may not have access to social protection for a variety of reasons, such as the refusal or inability of the government to take on such provision due to war or conflict. IDPs face similar challenges to international migrants in terms of social protection coverage and access, as they may also lack documentation or security of tenure.

11. Factors driving internal displacement include the climate crisis, conflict, economic slowdown and population growth, which all place increasing pressure on natural resources and social systems. Rapid urbanization is also transforming rural areas and increasing food insecurity. In countries facing large-scale internal displacement, government provision of social protection is typically replaced by external humanitarian aid, including cash-based interventions. As the scale of humanitarian need has vastly outpaced available resources, use of available financing must be maximized through increased efficiencies to support greater resilience and guarantee a sustainable impact. Steps to include IDPs in social protection schemes can also be accompanied by financial inclusion and enterprise development measures, which offer opportunities for IDPs to move to stable jobs and become active contributors to the economy and social security schemes. Efforts to increase government involvement in the provision of social protection to IDPs should follow conflict sensitivity principles, particularly in post-conflict situations. Indeed, universal social protection can limit the risk of re-escalation of tensions and increase opportunities for socioeconomic integration.

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<sup>7</sup> Other examples of multilateral social security agreements include the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) Agreement on Social Security, and the Unified Law on Insurance Protection Extension of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

<sup>8</sup> The IOM [Glossary on Migration](#) considers "migrant" to be an umbrella term, which includes internally displaced persons (IDPs) as a subgroup of migrants. However, IDPs are not included within the scope of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration or its objectives related to social protection.

### **IDP-inclusive social protection policy in Ethiopia**

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, there were 4.2 million IDPs in Ethiopia in 2022, with conflict and climate-driven natural hazards such as floods, landslides and drought forming the principle causes of displacement. Work to assist IDPs and improve their access to social protection and jobs in this context is guided by the 2019 Strategic Plan to Address Internal Displacement in Ethiopia and the [Ethiopia Durable Solutions Initiative](#). Efforts are also under way at the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs to develop a manual and operating procedures for extending social protection support to IDPs.

### **Conclusions and next steps**

12. Social protection needs to be integrated more closely into migration governance, notably through (a) strengthened access to legal identity and civil registration, which supports access to formal jobs and legal pathways; (b) inclusion and integration measures for migrants and IDPs, and their family members; and (c) the regularization of irregular migrants in accordance with existing measures in countries of destination, which can help them access formal social protection through formal employment, thereby ensuring that they contribute to the fiscal and social security systems in those countries. Adequate social protection can help prepare displaced populations for pathways towards sustainable solutions. However, there is a need for greater common understanding of social protection, which should include IDPs as well as other groups in situations of vulnerability, such as those experiencing cross-border displacement for reasons associated with climate and environmental change, or due to other protection gaps.

13. By enhancing collaboration and cooperation between countries of destination and origin, IOM and other relevant stakeholders – including the International Labour Organization, multilateral development banks and international financial institutions, civil society and the private sector – can help address fundamental issues such as comprehensive social protection and universal health coverage, including equity in coverage and access to and portability of acquired benefits, in addition to broader issues of equality and social inclusion. IOM is well equipped to provide States with social protection policy advice and support for implementation and capacity development. It can also offer legislative support and guidance, assist with the review of bilateral and multilateral agreements and help strengthen social protection systems for migrants. The Organization is further able to bring countries of origin and destination closer together, improve understanding of different categories of migrants and their associated vulnerabilities, identify innovative and emerging practices for leveraging diaspora contributions and support the extension of social insurance schemes in countries of origin.

### ***Recommendations for IOM***

- Increase the evidence base on social protection, including through support for the collection and analysis of data disaggregated by migration status, research to address gaps in access to social protection schemes and use of the Migration Governance Indicators.
- Develop an institutional strategic framework and structure for social protection to enhance IOM's work in the policy and operational space, and contribute to normative and regulatory approaches to social protection, drawing on appropriate resources and expertise, including through capacity development and appropriate tools.
- Leverage collaborative partnerships and support for transformative change through the United Nations Network on Migration and from other United Nations agencies such as the International Labour Organization, the World Bank, the United Nations Children's Fund, the

World Health Organization, the United Nations Development Programme and the World Food Programme, including through *Our Common Agenda*, the Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions, and the Grand Bargain. This work should also harness new measures in support of implementation of the *United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement*.

- Explore innovative social protection measures for migrants and IDPs, such as ways of leveraging diaspora contributions, including remittances, in conjunction with civil society, other members of the United Nations system, international financial institutions and banks, and the private sector.
- Support global and regional consultative processes – notably in the context of the African Union Regional Economic Communities – and continental and intercontinental discourse on streamlined social protection for migrant workers and IDPs, and their families in the context of migration management, with the involvement of countries of origin and destination. IOM should also increase its engagement as a broker of South–South and triangular cooperation through its regional offices and at Headquarters.
- Support identity management and strengthen the digitalization of benefit systems, including in relation to portability; this should notably cover support for the provision of documentation that gives migrants and displaced persons access to legal pathways and labour markets, and therefore to contributory social security benefits.

#### ***Recommendations for States, including local and city authorities***

- Invest in arrangements in countries of destination and/or origin, as required, and continue to develop legal frameworks, policies and practices to ensure enhanced social protection for migrants in accordance with international norms and guidelines, including in coordination with private employers, in line with the United Nations [Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#).
- Support the negotiation and implementation of bilateral and multilateral social security agreements and bilateral labour migration agreements along key migration corridors and within regional groupings of States, in accordance with global and regional frameworks. Such efforts should provide for flexible and incremental arrangements, including with the support of IOM. Immigration law, trade agreements and social protection provisions should also be further aligned to ensure consistent social protection for migrant workers and their families.
- Strengthen the representation of migrants, IDPs and other participants in the informal economy (including through representative bodies) and undertake information campaigns, including through embassies and consulates, to advise migrants about social protection arrangements and mechanisms.
- Countries of origin, in coordination with diaspora groups and through missions abroad, should consider expanding welfare support and contributory social insurance arrangements to their workers and families abroad, and supporting informal social protection arrangements where appropriate and feasible.
- Countries experiencing large-scale and/or protracted displacement should ensure that national social protection policies and programmes are inclusive of IDPs where possible, and continue to work with humanitarian agencies to support the transition from cash-based humanitarian systems to sustainable social protection systems, including through access to the labour market and government-led social protection schemes.



- During times of crisis, ensure strong horizontal and vertical coordination between national, subnational and local or community authorities to ensure that social protection schemes are accessible to all.