

Fact-Sheet on the Impact of the Economic Crisis on Return Migration

A. Introduction

Return migration is an integral and crucial component of international migration and concerns nearly every State, albeit to differing degrees. Migration does not always nor necessarily culminate in return and, where it occurs, return may not be permanent. When and if return takes place is not always predictable, either for governments or for migrants themselves.

Including return migration as part of a comprehensive migration management approach is crucial for both countries of origin and destination. Return needs to be balanced against other components of migration policy, including for example the availability of regular channels for labour migration to meet demands in a range of employment sectors. An effective, fair and transparent return policy also ensures the integrity of national immigration and asylum systems. The human rights of migrants are an essential component to be safeguarded in the design and implementation of return migration programmes and policies.

Within the context of the current crisis, the question of return and reintegration of migrants is at the forefront of the discussion, both for countries of destination, implementing or considering voluntary return schemes, and for countries of origin concerned with the return and reintegration of their nationals to situations of unemployment back home.

B. Key findings

The scope and duration of the current economic crisis remain difficult to predict, but it is already possible to identify several developments relevant for policymakers:

- Contrary to popular belief and expectations, there has not been a mass return of migrants to countries of origin.
- IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes assisted 28,000 people to return home in 2008, whereas in 2007 a decrease was observed in a number of programmes particularly in Europe.
- Not all migrants will or are able to return home, especially those with strong social protection in the country of destination, those who have resided in the destination country for a considerable period of time and with family ties, and those with strong social networks, which can support them in difficult economic times.
- Many migrants will adopt a "wait and see" approach preferring to take on new employment opportunities, irregular employment or even overstay on their current visa while waiting for an economic upturn.
- Both destination and origin countries have taken measures in response to the crisis mainly in terms of restrictions on admissions and return.

C. Evidence and trends so far

Evidence of returns:

- The United Kingdom and Ireland have witnessed a rapid turnover of workers from the eight Central and Eastern European countries (A8) that joined the European Union in May 2004 – particularly Poland.
- In China a significant reversal of rural-urban internal migration has taken place. An estimated ten million migrants have returned to their villages because of lay-offs in the manufacturing sector in urban centres.

Policy responses – countries of destination:

Countries of destination across the world have adopted various policy responses, such as restrictions on admissions which have tended to focus on low-skilled sectors, to prioritize the employment of nationals and to change visa requirements, and admission conditions such as minimum salaries as well as the lowering of quota levels.

- South-East and East Asian countries, such as Thailand and the Republic of Korea, and to a certain degree the Russian Federation, have stopped issuing new work permits to or renewing the work permits of foreign workers.

- Spain, the Czech Republic and Japan have instituted voluntary return programmes or so-called "pay-to-go" schemes based on various incentives to encourage return. So far, the take-up rate under these schemes has been modest. In Spain, for example, fewer than 1,400 out of 100,000 eligible migrants signed up on the scheme in the first few months of its operation.

- Canada and Sweden can be considered exceptions: Canada has announced that it will not change its current overall levels of immigration and Sweden is maintaining its demand-driven labour migration model, which it put into place towards the end of 2008.

Policy responses – countries of origin:

Countries of origin have also responded to the crisis mainly in terms of the provision of assistance to returning nationals.

- The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) is providing legal assistance to displaced workers seeking refunds of airfares and placement fees from recruitment agents and employers. "Help desks" have also been established in the provinces to assist retrenched returning migrant workers find jobs at home or abroad.

- Moldova and Nepal are offering reintegration and skills training.

- The Mexican Government as well as the province of Kerala in India have initiated loan programmes for returning migrants who wish to set up businesses.

- Information campaigns or "Crisis Centres" have also been initiated in some countries (Poland, Uzbekistan).

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D. Challenges and Proposals for Further Research

In responding to the crisis and its impact on return migration, there are several challenges to be addressed:

1) Capacity is a prerequisite to developing and implementing effective and humane return policies; to maximizing their positive potential, including development potential; and to minimizing the potential negative impact of such policies. Countries of origin, transit or destination may lack the financial, institutional or operational capacities as well as the human resources to address the multifold aspects of return migration.

2) Most returns are “spontaneous”, whereby the migrant returns voluntarily and without the involvement of States or other national and international actors. Therefore, States need to be prepared for such movements.

However, because not all migrants will or can return, policymakers are faced with the additional challenge to:

1) Ensure that regular migration channels are kept open to meet demand for continuing employment opportunities. There is still structural demand for migrants in many sectors even in times of crisis. Irregular migration only exposes migrants to greater vulnerability to exploitative practices.

2) Combat xenophobia and discrimination as migrants may be stigmatized for job losses that occur. Thus, there is a need to strengthen integration and social protection measures in light of economic pressures to reduce them.

Proposals for further research:

Several knowledge gaps exist with regard to return and reintegration policies and programmes, with the result that:

1) More research and analysis is needed on the broader impact of current return and reintegration policies.

2) Evaluation and analysis of the impact of policies in countries of origin, such as skills training, creation of emergency help desks, etc., is also required.

3) Data on return migration is limited. Better monitoring of return migration is needed in order to improve data collection efforts.

E. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Policy responses to the crisis have been varied. Though returns have occurred and policies have been put in place to address return, the evidence to date does not point to one overarching trend at the global level.

Though, there is no “one-size fits all model” for policymakers, IOM has outlined elements of a comprehensive policy approach, which include *inter alia* return and reintegration. As part of any response to the crisis, States need to take both a short-term and long-term perspective with regard to migration to take account of both labour market needs and wider development objectives.

Main recommendations:

1) Keep regular migration channels open. Entry opportunities should not be tightened as continuing demographic and skill deficits in much of the industrialized world – aging populations and labour forces and dramatically declining birth rates, amounting to longer-term negative population growth – will ensure that human migration is necessary and inevitable.

2) Raise awareness of migrants’ contributions, which calls for measures to inform the general population in destination countries about the valuable economic and social contributions made by migrants, and promote integration.

3) Voluntary return is preferable to forced return. Successful assisted voluntary return and reintegration policies take into account the migrant’s decision, can help avoid the legal and social stigma associated with forced return, consider the home country’s reintegration capacity, help get migrants off to a good start back home and encourage returnees to make effective contributions in their country of origin. In this regard, IOM’s Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme has proven an effective strategy to organize return.

4) Utilize partnerships among countries of destination and countries of origin and all relevant stakeholders as a collective response to the crisis. Bilateral, regional and international dialogue can help countries of origin, destination and transit to build partnerships and cooperatively design and implement effective and coherent return migration policies. Countries can further benefit from multi-stakeholder partnerships that also include migrants, international and civil society organizations, and the private sector.

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