

## COMMENTARY ON COVID-19 AND THE FOOD SYSTEM

### Conceptualizing the nexus of migration and food security during COVID-19

**JAFSCD  
Responds to  
the COVID-19  
Pandemic**



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#### Abstract

Migration has been a part of the livelihood strategy and risk diversification to relieve crises. Food insecurity as a consequence as well as a cause of migration demands review during the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper is an attempt to explore the dynamics and vulnerabilities that ensue from the nexus of migration, food security, and COVID-19, as the economic crisis of COVID-19 seems more intensive when viewed through a migration lens. The vulnerability of the economy based on food imports and remittances is heightened by COVID-19. The whole nexus of migration and food security has shifted; even the positive aspects of migration are predisposed to vulnerabilities.

#### Keywords

COVID-19, Pandemic, Migration, Food Security, Vulnerability

#### Introduction

Migration is a complex and multifaceted reality, driven by various push and pull factors (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], International Fund for Agricultural Development [IFAD], International Organization for Migration [IOM], & World Food Program [WFP], 2018). Push (or conditional) factors include unemployment, income inequality, conflict, food insecurity, crime, and natural calamities, while pull (or prospective) factors include decent jobs, education, security and safety, and gender equality. Food insecurity has been one of the major determinants of national and international migration, driving people to abandon their livelihoods and migrate in search of food security,

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strong social networks, and better livelihood opportunities (Sadiddin, Cattaneo, Cirillo, & Miller, 2019). It also has been argued that migration improves the food security of households by providing the capital necessary for agricultural investment or the economic means to buy food. In addition, research also shows that remittances from migrants to their homes of origin are a crucial instrument for meeting household food security during food crises (Obi, Bartolini, & D’Haese, 2020).

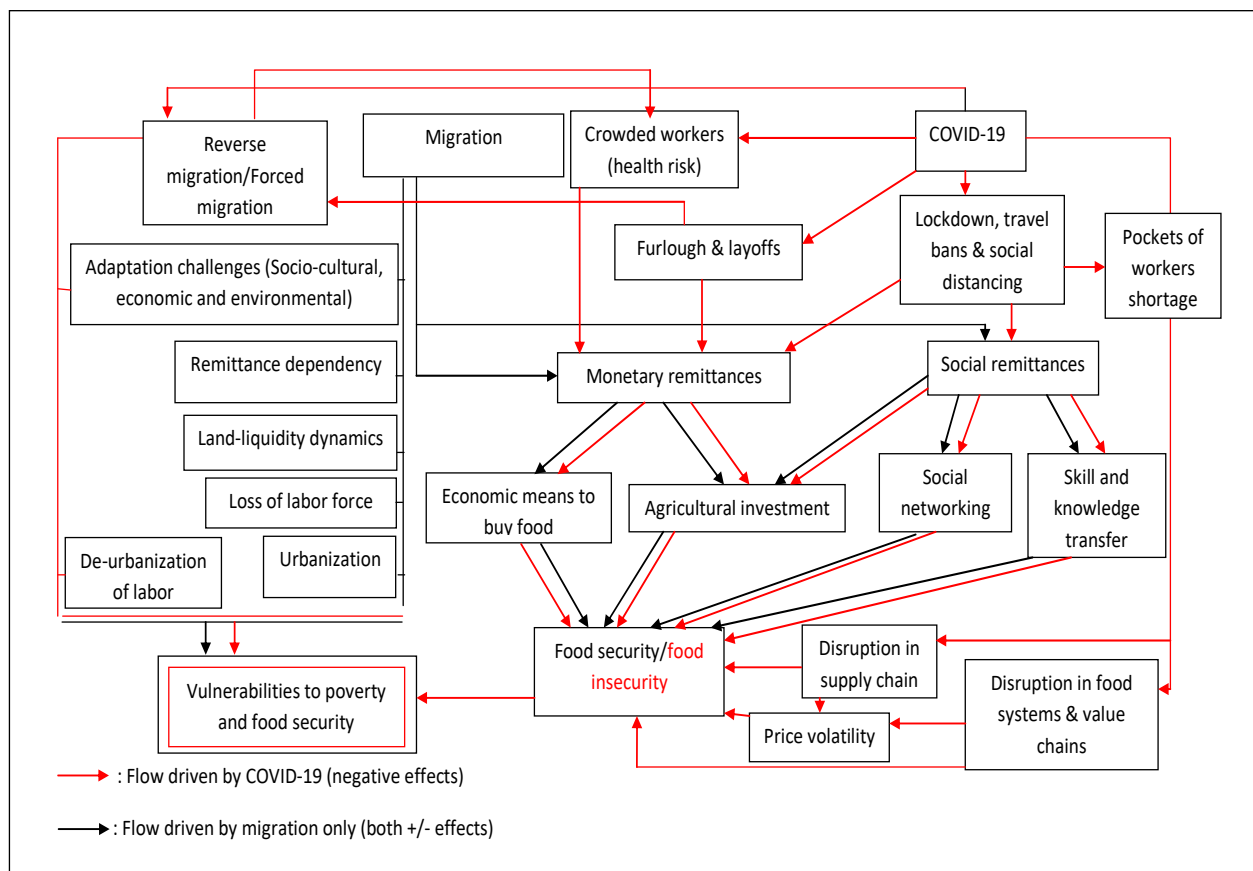
Mobility and migration have been greatly affected by the COVID-19 crisis, making 272 million international migrants vulnerable (IOM, 2020a). Likewise, “the magnitude of internal migration is about two-and-a-half times that of international migration” (World Bank, 2020, p. viii). Migrant workers play a crucial role in global food production and supply chains, doing over 25% of the work (IOM, 2020b). As a result, countries heavily dependent on food imports and remittances would be hit hard by malnutrition and hunger due to the crisis.

### The Nexus of Migration and Food Security during COVID-19

Food insecurity can be a cause as well as a consequence of migration because the impact of migration has both associated vulnerabilities and benefits (Figure 1). The interplay of vulnerabilities and benefits produces net effects that can be positive, negative, or mixed. Worldwide, migration is part of structure change and development processes, leading to rural-to-urban migration.

Rapid urbanization is one of the reasons for the vulnerability of migrants to poverty and food insecurity (Satterthwaite, McGranahan, & Tacoli, 2010). In addition, in many cases the agriculture sector in the countryside becomes more vulnerable and unproductive, leaving farming for women and the aged

**Figure 1. Nexus of Migration, Food Security, and COVID-19**



(Craven & Gartaula, 2015). Other vulnerabilities associated with migration are adaptation challenges at the socio-economic and environmental levels, the need to provide remittances, changes in land-liquidity dynamics, and the outflow of qualified labor (brain drain). Land liquidity is one of the factors encouraging migration decisions (Chernina, Castañeda Dower, & Markevich, 2014), while at the same time adjustment and settlement costs of migration reduce the purchasing power of individuals or households, pushing them toward vulnerability. These vulnerabilities, which could be physical, social, economic, or environmental, are interlinked, leading to a vicious cycle, and could destabilize the food system as a whole.

Migration helps food security through economic remittances and social benefits. Economic remittance works in two ways: increasing the means to buy food and increasing agricultural investment in lands, inputs, or entrepreneurship. This ultimately enhances household food security in both the short term and long term. In terms of positive social outcomes, migration has also been a means to empower women because of the outmigration of men, through direct engagement in migration for economic purposes, and experiencing freedom in terms of enhanced decision-making and mobility and diminished social restrictions. One of the highest youth-migration countries in South Asia—Nepal—is a striking example (Maharjan, Bauer, & Knerr, 2012; Shakya & Yang, 2019). The role of women empowerment in food and nutritional food security is well understood. In addition, social benefits include social networking and the transfer of skills and knowledge, which are an important part of long-term food security.

With the emergence of COVID-19, the whole nexus of migration and food security has shifted; even the positive aspects of migration have become predisposed to the vulnerable side. Migrants in typical settings are susceptible to COVID-19 because of the health risks associated with overcrowding and poor sanitation. Food security is affected harshly according to three major security perspectives: the four pillars concept, the food system approach, and food entitlements (Devereux, Béné, & Hoddinott, 2020). From the four pillars concept and the food system approach perspectives, the availability and accessibility of food are restricted because of impediments to open-air markets, the supply chain, and economic activities. However, Sen's "entitlement approach" places less emphasis on the supply side of food and more on food accessibility arising from the four legal sources at the individual or household level: production-based, labor-based, trade-based, and transfer entitlements (Sen, 1982). The economic functioning of all these bases has already been affected by this pandemic.

Many big companies and enterprises have already called for furloughs and layoffs of workers. For example, two-thirds of the three million Venezuelan migrants in Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru have seen their jobs disappear (WFP, 2020). The lockdowns, travel bans, and social distancing imposed to counter the spread of COVID-19 have temporarily stopped migration and created pockets of labor shortages. Internal labor migration restrictions have limited seasonal income-earning opportunities and crop production. Since the system of lockdowns and social distancing is not a sustainable or long-term strategy, the challenges of repatriation and reintegration are immense, particularly when the future of migrants working abroad is uncertain. The countries with no innovative solutions for internal migrant workers are forced to reverse migration, sending migrants back to their homes from their working places. Most of these locations do not respect lockdowns and social distancing, which further enhances the risk of infection. Large-scale international reverse migration with uncertain futures for migrants at their places of origin could bring social unrest and hunger if they are not able to get work. About 40% of international remittances are sent to rural areas (FAO, 2020), which means that reverse migration will hit hard, mainly at the rural level. The de-urbanization of workers demands adaptation to new socioeconomic and environmental conditions. Poor migrant workers of countries such as Nepal, who have already sold their land for visa application and labor permits, will experience further food insecurity.

Monetary and social remittances are being severely diminished. Remittances are a larger portion of GDP for "poor countries (8.9 percent in 2019), small island developing states (7.7 percent), and those in

fragile and conflict-affected situations (9.2 percent)” (World Bank, 2020, pp. 6–7). Further, it has been estimated that “remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries are expected to drop by around 20 percent to [US]\$445 billion, from [US]\$554 billion in 2019” (World Bank, 2020, p. viii). Family members who depend upon remittances have already been grappling with malnutrition and hunger. The forcible repatriation of Ethiopian and Nepalese migrant workers in the Middle East and Asia, respectively, are two examples. In addition, disruptions of supply chains, food systems, and value chains have disturbed the whole economics of the production system and value chain structure. Pockets of labor shortage have already disrupted farm production, processing, harvesting, and other supply-chain activities, thus putting pressure on prices. For instance, COVID-19–related travel restrictions and illnesses are estimated to have resulted in a shortage of 80,000 agricultural workers in the UK, Spain has a shortage of around 70,000–80,000 workers, and Italy has a shortage of 250,000 workers (International Organization for Migration, 2020b). Every aspect of the nexus of food security and migration is now affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbating food insecurity.

### Recommendations

Policy recommendations in response to the current pandemic and its effects on migrant workers have already been proposed by the FAO (2020):

- “Extend expiring working visas of migrant workers employed in all agricultural sub-sectors.
- “Ensure the safe movement of agricultural workers within countries, including during lockdown, and between countries, allowing exceptions in granting working visas to seasonal agricultural workers.
- “Regularize migrants present in the territory and grant temporary work permits to all.
- “Match the demand for labour of the agricultural sector with the migrant labour supply.
- “Ensure occupational safety and health measures are put in place and are accessible to all migrants.
- “Ensure the inclusion of all migrants in the pandemic response and in the measures that are being introduced to mitigate the economic recession caused by COVID-19, regardless of the migratory or working status.” (FAO, 2020, p. 4)

### Summing Up

Migrant farmworkers—“unsung heroes”—are structurally more vulnerable in multiple ways, and this consequently seems to have deep and pervasive effects on the economy. First, lockdowns and travel bans have resulted in pockets of labor shortages that have disrupted food systems and supply chains, and have affected market prices globally. Second, large numbers of migrant workers and their families are vulnerable to health risks, poverty, exploitation, and food insecurity due to their dependence on remittances. Third, COVID-19 has shown the fragile nature of the labor system and the inefficiency of systems to handle the crisis. Thus, it is now vital to reflect, rethink, and redesign working conditions and labor management in order to save many migrant workers from food insecurity.

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