

“We may not be divided into us and them”

Take-aways of the fifth #FlorenceLive conversation about a post-corona world

#FlorenceLive 5 on Migration, 15 June

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The latest instalment of the STG webcast series asked: What are the implications of COVID-19 for migrants, migration flows and international policies on migration and asylum? A prominent panel featuring Ylva Johansson (European Commissioner on Home Affairs), António Vitorino (Director General of IOM, the United Nations Migration Agency), and H.E. Amira Elfadil (Commissioner for Social Affairs, African Union), moderated by Andrew Geddes (Professor of Migration Studies at EUI and Director of the EUI Migration Policy Centre) provided answers. Some of the main themes were:

- The role and vulnerabilities of migrants and migrant workers in societies under lockdown,
- challenges and opportunities for international cooperation in fighting the (migration) crisis,
- the need for a new narrative on migration, and
- Europe’s role as “go-between” and promoter of international solidarity.

10 key take-aways:

Analysis

1. **A global mobility crisis:** COVID-19 has caused the “largest global mobility crisis in recent history” (Commissioner Elfadil). At the end of March, 91% of the world’s population lived in countries with travel restrictions. The crisis affected severely the movement of migrants and refugees and their acute physical, social and economic situations.
2. **A triple vulnerability:** The crisis exposed vulnerabilities of migrants and refugees in three distinct ways:
 - With **public health systems** under strain, migrants were often among the first to experience lacking access to testing, medical treatment, care and PPE. The situation is particularly acute in refugee camps, for undocumented migrants and migrant workers, and regular and irregular migrants involuntarily deported to their countries of origins.
 - The lockdown of public administrations and emergency policies in many states have hindered migrants to exercise fundamental rights such as seeking asylum and applying for visa, processes that have been delayed or impeded all together.
 - Working disproportionately in industries that are particularly vulnerable to mobility limits, such as tourism and services, migrants’ **workplaces are endangered** in disproportionate numbers. With a majority of migrants working in the informal economy, many lack socio-economic safety nets. Besides, racism and discrimination weaken the socio-economic position of migrant workers both in times of mass lay-offs

and in the economic recovery. Sharply decreased remittances, furthermore, will have economic repercussions in their countries of origin (the World Bank expects a [drop or remittances of 20%](#)).

3. **Migrant workers making lockdowns liveable:** Prolonged lockdowns have, on the other hand, flashed out the vital importance of migrant workers, not least in developed societies. A considerable proportion of the doctors and care workers that confronted the health crisis has migrant background. Migrant workers performed essential jobs also in delivery systems, supermarkets and public cleaning services, thus assuring bearable living conditions in societies under lockdown.
4. **A transnational challenge that reduced international cooperation?** In the crisis, many states resorted to national protective measures, including border closures, forced repatriation of migrants, and the suspension of their commitment to international programmes and norms such as the Global Compact for Migration. This has partly produced adverse effects. In Africa regular migration has ground to a halt, yet human trafficking and irregular migration have risen. International cooperation e.g. in vaccinations programmes conducted by the African Union (AU) with national and international partners, has been interrupted, thus augmenting future health risks on the continent.
5. **Major international efforts underway – and in need for support:**
 - **At the EU-level:** The European Commission will shortly present a proposal for a Common Migration and Asylum Policy. It is premised on the need for a “mandatory solidarity mechanism” (Commissioner Johansson) among EU Member States. It seeks to address imbalances such as the disproportionate intake of arrivals by Southern European Member States or the disproportionate number of applications for asylum in Northern European countries. Member States have yet to agree that acting together offers better solutions than every state acting on its own.
 - **In African:** The [African Union COVID-19 Response Fund](#), part of a [Joint Continental Strategy](#) and administered by the African Centres for Disease Control (CDC), addresses among other issues the concerns of migrants as well as health programmes that have been interrupted due to the COVID-19 emergency. Partners such as the EU and international organisations like GAVI or the UN specialised agencies are needed to help the initiative to succeed.
 - **UN’s migration organisation:** The IOM has been active to ensure that migrants, refugees and displaced persons are included in crisis response and recovery measures at local, national and regional levels, including information campaigns to prevent stigmatisation. Its global medical network (including 60 clinics, 18 laboratories and over 1000 medical workers) has supported public health systems as well as health management in camps.

Recommendations

6. **“We are them”:** A new narrative on migration is needed. Societies may not allow to be “divided into us and them, migrants are part of us and we need them” (Commissioner Johansson). The

vital role migrant workers played in locked-down societies may foster such a new narrative. Along with this should go a renewed effort to fight racism and discrimination. The widespread salience of this issue finds evidence not least in the global protests inspired by the “black lives matter” movement in the U.S.

7. **Protect rights, create legal pathways:** A prime responsibility of states and the international community in the crisis is to protect migrants’ rights to asylum, medical treatment and protection from discrimination on the labour market. Legislation and guidelines on anti-discrimination and inclusive integration (currently underway at EU and AU) are important elements in this process. Furthermore, to support regular migration the legal pathways need to be expanded. Fostering community sponsored resettlements can be one important instrument here.
8. **“Health proofing borders”:** To mitigate the disruption caused by border closures and a potential second wave, investment in infrastructures that minimises the risk of contagion through border-crossings is essential. Interoperability, reciprocity and respect for relevant data privacy regimes will be key. Developed countries need to ensure availability of such infrastructure also in less developed regions, where a lack of resources might impede construction of such infrastructure, in order not to aggravate existing economic disadvantages in confronting the crisis.
9. **International cooperation:** A “global platform for conversation” (Director Vitorino) is required to address effectively the many questions that demand international coordination, e.g. travel regulations, distribution of health equipment, or information exchanges. In particular with respect to migration, a “continent-to-continent dialogue” (Commissioner Elfadil) between Africa and the EU should be started to ensure support and protection for migrants and the continuation of existing health programmes.
10. **Solidarity, or: Europe’s role as “go-between”:** Europe has been at the forefront of deploying solidarity with countries in other regions. In a highly polarised international atmosphere, Europe has an opportunity to act as “go-between” and address the needs of all those countries and regions that do not want to be split between two superpowers. Access to vaccines against the coronavirus will be the “ultimate solidarity test” (Director Vitorino), and Europe should play a central role in ensuring this solidarity.

Online reactions: On Facebook, the event elicited the vivid interest of an international audience and numerous comments and questions. As of 18 June, the video has been viewed some 1800 times.

(Re)watch the conversation at stg.eui.eu/events/FlorenceLive