Budapest Process
Virtual Group Discussion on Labour Migration in the current Covid19 Pandemic
14th May 2020

Report

The Budapest Process hosted its first virtual meeting two months after the major restrictions on mobility in light of the declared Covid19 pandemic. 14 countries as well as the European Commission, the ILO and ICMPD, were invited to discuss what have been the immediate impacts of Covid19 on labour migration. The meeting was held under Chatham House Rule.

The three-hour discussion was an opportunity for country representatives to share thoughts and observations on concrete challenges related to migrant workers in the current crisis. Participants also discussed labour migration and mobility trends in the short, medium and long run. The ILO presented the latest facts and figures of how COVID19 has impacted labour migrants, which are the main challenges identified in the region and what is ILO’s focus and activities in the current crisis. In addition, two experts intervened sharing their expertise on high-, medium- and low-skilled migration, highlighting their differences. The below summarises some of the points brought forward:

- Most countries are simultaneously sending and receiving countries and deal with a multitude of labour migration aspects, safeguarding their nationals in-country and boosting the national economy, reaching out to their diaspora, sending or receiving labour migrants back while still protecting migrant workers in the country who fill specific national labour market gaps.

- It was striking to note that all countries present have reacted very quickly and put in place several measures regarding labour migrants present in their territories. Most have implemented extended deadlines for residence and work permits as well as e-registration systems to ensure migrant workers have access to national welfare systems and healthcare.

- A multi-stakeholder approach has been favoured by some countries, involving municipalities and CSOs in providing support and information to labour migrants on the current regulations, extensions and also providing some financial report for those in need.

- Acknowledgment that labour migrants fill gaps in the labour markets is key and several specific sectors were mentioned that employ labour migrants who have been impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Sectors impacted include care work, the agricultural sector and seasonal work, which have observed shortages, as well as ICT and academia.

- A special focus on migrants in an irregular situation or working informally is needed as they are the most vulnerable in the current situation. Lack of visibility for these workers constitutes a major problem for any pandemic response plan, especially in the context of a second wave of infections. It is advisable to take a pragmatic approach to situations of irregularity and informality and to consider formalising and regularising them. With the restricted mobility on legal labour migration, irregular migration is likely to increase and needs to be addressed.
In addition, a discussion on the gig economy took place, highlighting that gig workers, many of whom come from the Silk Routes countries and who work on short term and temporary work contracts, have lost their income. Finding alternatives to this parallel labour market with low security and high risk of unemployment is key in the post-crisis situation.

The current access to medium skilled jobs in Europe for labour migrants form the Silk Routes region is a challenge due to the entry requirements based on formal vocational education systems, qualifications and certifications. A number of Silk Routes countries have initiated major TVET reform programmes in the recent years that may become relevant for the European labour market. The current crisis presents an opportunity for “skills making” instead of “skills matching”, also through online learning. In this context, skills partnerships may become more relevant in the COVID-19 crisis as labour market gaps still exist and the Silk Routes countries could be partners for medium skilled jobs.

Specific considerations related to return and reintegration are to be made. Returns from Europe have been affected by the pandemic and have slowed down, while returns from neighbouring countries in the Silk Routes Region and from the Gulf Countries have increased. Specific issues related to returnees’ reception at border crossing points have been raised as well as how to track the health status of returnees. To this end, new tools for return and reintegration are to be brought forward in the coming months for improved cooperation. Successful reintegration of returnees will be a challenge considering low job opportunities.

Remittances have decreased, in some cases nearly ceased, and are expected to continue to decrease. In some cases, reverse flows have been noticed where migrant workers are supported by families in the current crisis. Cooperation on limiting the costs related to these financial transfers is to be considered.

Multilateral and bilateral cooperation on labour migration between sending and receiving countries is needed, especially now, in order to manage new restrictions on mobility. This cooperation should take into account health standards and protection for migrant workers while encouraging mechanisms for continued labour mobility bearing in mind new restrictions and modalities.

The above points will be brought forward to the Joint Regional Working Group Meeting on Labour Migration planned in autumn 2020 and will inform the guiding questions, break-out group topics and further activities of the Budapest Process in the area of labour migration, related to remittances and the role of diaspora or skills partnerships, to name but a few.