

COVID-19: SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT IN GHANA



Briefing Note #6, June 2020

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRANTS IN GHANA

“COVID-19 leaves few lives and places untouched. But its impact is harshest for those groups who were already in vulnerable situations before the crisis. This is particularly true for many people on the move, such as migrants in irregular situations, migrant workers with precarious livelihoods, or working in the informal economy, victims of trafficking in persons as well as people fleeing their homes because of persecution, war, violence, human rights violations or disaster, whether within their own countries — internally displaced persons (IDPs) — or across international borders — refugees and asylum-seekers.”

(UN Secretary General’s Policy Brief on [“COVID-19 and People on the Move”](#), June 2020)

Introduction

Although it started as a public health issue, the current outbreak of COVID-19 is having an unprecedented impact on human mobility. As many borders are closed and travel restrictions extended, questions arise on what impact these measures will have, both socially and economically, on the [estimated 7,224,959 international migrants in the ECOWAS](#) region which has had a free movement of persons protocol since 1979.

This aspect is poignant in Ghana, which has an [estimated 466,780 international migrants](#), the majority of whom originate from other ECOWAS states. The COVID-19 pandemic is also impacting the millions of internal migrants in the country such as female head porters, known as Kayayei. In 2015, the [Ghana Statistical Service reported 6,488,064 internal migrants](#). To protect the fundamental rights of migrants as well as the economic contributions they make to their communities of origin and destination in the short and long-term, it is crucial that migrants, both international and internal, are included in Ghana’s COVID-19 response and recovery plans.

Highlights

- Most international migrants in Ghana come from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region and are low-skilled workers with limited social protection, making them extremely vulnerable in times of crisis;
- Individuals reliant on cross-border trade or employment may seek the services of smugglers and their transnational crime networks to circumvent current border restrictions, exposing themselves to the risk of being exploited and/or abused;
- The most vulnerable, including survivors of trafficking and unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), require increased social protection and access to basic services from the state, including shelter, food programs, access to education and health, during and after COVID-19;
- The decline in wages and employment of migrant workers triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic is predicted to cause a significant reduction in remittances and as such directly reduce the purchasing power of beneficiary households and threaten to push them into poverty;
- Migration should be mainstreamed throughout the national COVID-19 response and recovery strategy.

COVID-19 Impact on Human Mobility

Cross-border circular mobility is common in Ghana, with merchants, farmers, and itinerant traders drawn to cross-border markets, such as those in Aflao, Elubo and Sampa. The halt in these activities due to border closures is not only negatively impacting the economies of vibrant border communities but also has led to many migrants becoming stranded.

International Organization for Migration (IOM) [figures highlight](#) that over 20,000 migrants are stranded at various borders in the West and Central Africa region as well as an estimated 1,800 migrants, including Ghanaian citizens, waiting in transit centers in countries such as Niger. These numbers could rise if mobility restrictions continue, increasing pressure on consular assistance and border management systems.

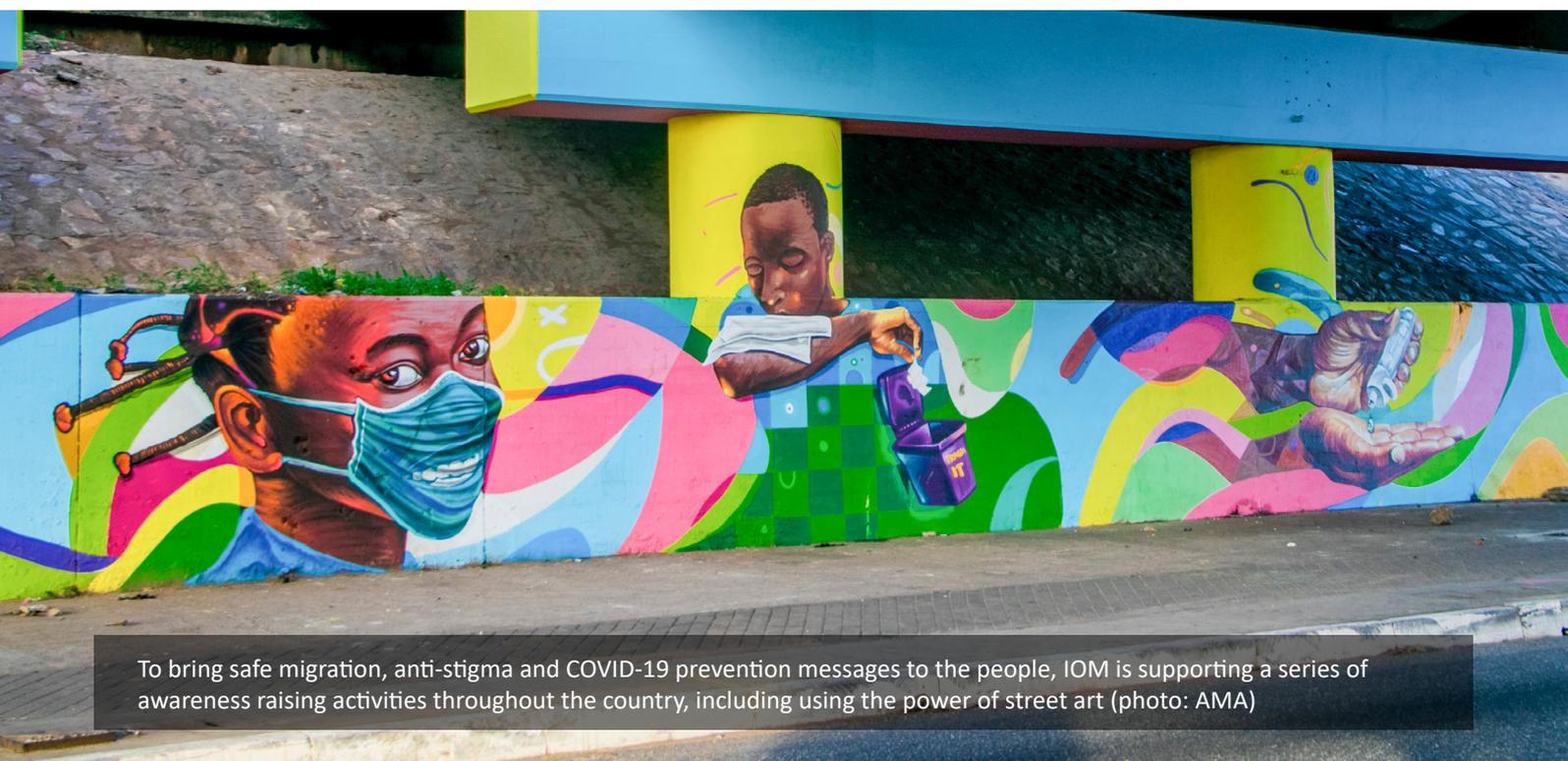
While some are stranded, other migrants are attempting to enter and/or leave Ghana through irregular means due to border closures and heightened border surveillance along regular routes. Such individuals are vulnerable to being exploited by smuggling and/or trafficking networks.

The pandemic will most likely exacerbate existing migration dynamics in the country. Those affected by the loss of their livelihood or limited employment opportunities may decide to move from rural areas to urban centers like Accra or from Ghana to the subregion or beyond, looking for greener pastures.

Situation at Points of Entry (POEs)

Like the Ebola crisis, COVID-19 has put a spotlight on Ghana's national public health emergency management system, particularly the role that Port Health and immigration and border management officials play within it. National border management agencies, including the Ghana Immigration Service (GIS) and Port Health Authority, are key actors in pandemic surveillance and prevention through monitoring of POEs.

A [rapid assessment conducted by IOM Ghana](#) in June 2020 found that less than 30 percent of POEs have Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in place for disease surveillance, infection prevention and control (IPC), and referral of ill travelers. It also found water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) gaps, with access to potable water and the presence of washrooms for travelers remaining a challenge for the majority of POEs, especially at land borders. Only 46 percent of POEs assessed have infrastructure to support temporary isolation of suspected cases and to support screening in a safe manner. Challenges such as these, as well as the existence of many unofficial crossing points, limit the ability of border management agencies to respond to health emergencies or border-related crises at POEs in line with International Health Regulations (IHR).



To bring safe migration, anti-stigma and COVID-19 prevention messages to the people, IOM is supporting a series of awareness raising activities throughout the country, including using the power of street art (photo: AMA)

COVID-19 impact on migrants' livelihoods

ECOWAS economies are dominated by the [informal economy](#) and [agriculture](#). Most migrants in Ghana are low-skilled workers in the informal agriculture and trade sectors with limited social protection. This is because the informal economy is lightly regulated, [making these migrants extremely vulnerable during crises](#) as they are usually the first to lose their jobs and wages.

Undocumented migrants may be overlooked during and after this crisis, [negatively impacting their ability and that of the informal economy to cope](#). The vulnerability of undocumented migrants is exacerbated due to stigmatization as they may be perceived as having brought the virus into their country of destination, as well as may fear detection and deportation, thereby preventing them from reporting illness.

Protection of vulnerable migrants, such as trafficking survivors, unaccompanied and separated children (UASC)

Migrants' resilience and coping mechanisms during crises may be weaker than those of the indigenous population because they are away from their communities which often offer a form of natural social protection. Furthermore, evidence shows that there is an increasing trend of [gender-based violence during the COVID-19 crisis](#). This threatens the lives of domestic laborers and puts

female migrants at risk of being trafficked who may experience increased violence and abuse from their traffickers as they are less able to make a profit.

Migrants living in slums: As with other countries, [many migrants in Ghana live in urban slums wherein they have limited access to WASH services](#). Such migrants and their communities [face increased vulnerability to contracting and spreading the virus](#).

Survivors of trafficking: Restriction measures due to COVID-19 could heighten the vulnerability of survivors of trafficking due to a lack of access to health care, information, protection and support. In addition, providers of protection services to survivors of trafficking and UASC, such as shelters, might reduce or not be able to offer their services in a safe manner due to a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and adequate operational guidance.

Kayayei and domestic workers: Many young girls and women from rural areas across Ghana and neighboring countries work as head porters or behind closed doors in urban homes as domestic laborers. They might bear the burden of caring for sick persons or working without appropriate PPE, making them vulnerable to contracting the virus.

Child migrants: Ghana has a high rate of [child migration](#) from rural areas to urban centers, sometimes involving [movement across international borders](#). Many of these children end up hawking items or begging in the streets, and lack access to healthcare while also suffering maltreatment.



IOM donated PPE & hygiene items to the Prampram Quarantine Centre to better protect staff and returning migrants hosted at the Centre against COVID-19 (photo: IOM Ghana)

Migrant children who are normally enrolled in education run the risk of not being accounted for in school continuation programs, negatively affecting their ability to access education.

Reduced Remittance Flows

The decline in wages and employment of migrant workers triggered by COVID-19 is [predicted to cause a 23 percent reduction in global remittances to Sub-Saharan Africa for 2020](#). Ghana, the second largest [recipient of remittances](#) in West Africa, having received 3.5 billion USD in 2019 or 5.2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), is likely to be impacted by the decline. Remittance inflows are in line with the major destinations for Ghanaian emigrants, including the United States, Nigeria, United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, and Canada – all of which are experiencing economic shocks due to the pandemic. It is expected that many Ghanaian migrants who are supporting their families back home in Ghana through remittances could lose their source of income.

A [2017 IOM Baseline Assessment of Household Remittances in Ghana](#) showed that nearly 80 percent of recipient households relied on remittances for food, education and health. Reduced remittance flows, may push many vulnerable families into poverty.

To mitigate the adverse impact of the pandemic on remittances, the Bank of Ghana has introduced certain policy measures, including reducing the administrative costs of mobile money transactions to encourage increased transfers to recipient families.



Returnee producing face masks to keep his business up and running and contribute to keeping his community safe during the COVID-19 crisis.

Recommendations

- The [Migrants in Countries of Crisis \(MICIC\)](#) Initiative provides globally endorsed principles and practical guidance on how to respond to crises in ways that empower and protect migrants, ensuring that they and host communities recover from crisis. It is important that MICIC principles are integrated into the national COVID-19 response and recovery plans.
- To respond to vulnerable Ghanaian migrants stranded abroad, special consular operational arrangements and humanitarian corridors should be considered to facilitate their return.
- SOPs should be developed at all POEs to guide operations related to the COVID-19 response. To improve IPC, the WASH infrastructure at POEs needs to be enhanced, notably at land borders.
- The Health, Border and Mobility Management (HBMM) framework of IOM offers solutions to challenges at POEs by supporting border authorities and frontline officers in improving prevention, detection and response to the spread of infectious diseases and other health threats along the mobility continuum, with a focus on border areas. Previous IOM interventions in Ghana have effectively used this approach, such as the Global Health Security Agenda (GHS) project during the Ebola Crisis in West Africa.
- Given the potential for increased migration due to a loss of livelihoods, safe migration campaigns should persist both during and after the crisis.
- COVID-19 also threatens the livelihoods of returned Ghanaian migrants, as they often have little financial resilience. Their reintegration should therefore be supported during the crisis to enable them to establish sustainable livelihoods. Similarly, they should be integrated in expanded social protection initiatives.
- Providers of protection services, such as shelters, should be equipped with sufficient training and PPE to be functional during COVID-19.
- To create innovative financial products to address the decline in remittances due to COVID-19, data must be collected and analyzed on sending patterns during the pandemic.