

Assessing the Implications of Covid-19 for South–North International Migration

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic represents one of the most profound global disruptions to human mobility in modern history. Prior to 2020, globalization had accelerated cross-border movement, enabling millions to migrate from the Global South to the Global North in search of work, education, and safety (Stiglitz, 2002; Todaro & Smith, 2009). However, the onset of the pandemic drastically altered this trajectory, leading to unprecedented restrictions on movement. By April 2020, more than 45,000 travel measures had been enacted globally (International Organization for Migration, 2020). Migration between the South and North—driven by economic disparity, political instability, and educational aspirations—was severely interrupted. While global migration has historically shown resilience, the pandemic exposed inequalities in health systems, border governance, and social protection (Gamlen, 2020). Migrants faced heightened xenophobia, job losses, and precarious living conditions, while destination countries tightened entry requirements and increased surveillance.

This paper examines the implications of COVID-19 for South–North international migration, exploring key areas including labour mobility, remittances, education migration, humanitarian concerns, and vaccine inequality. The aim is to provide insights for policymakers, researchers, and migration stakeholders seeking to strengthen post-pandemic mobility governance.

PRE-COVID-19 SOUTH–NORTH MIGRATION DYNAMICS

Before COVID-19, international migration was expanding steadily. The United Nations (UN, 2019) estimated that over 272 million international migrants existed globally, an increase of more than 50% since 2000. Of these, roughly 60% resided in high-income countries, primarily in North America and Europe. Migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America formed significant segments of the South–North migration corridor (OECD, 2019). Despite growth in migration, political and social tensions were rising. The 9/11 attacks in the United States and the European refugee crises of 2015–2016 led to heightened border controls and political backlash against migrants (Leffler, 2011; Collier, 2013). Anti-immigration rhetoric became politically potent, notably during the Trump administration’s “America First” era (Stokes, 2018). Nonetheless, economic and educational “pull factors” continued to drive migration northward, with migrants contributing significantly to host-country economies while sending remittances home (World Bank, 2020).

COVID-19 IMPLICATIONS FOR SOUTH–NORTH MIGRATION

Labour Migration and Unemployment

The pandemic severely affected global labour markets. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023), approximately 114 million jobs were lost globally in 2020, disproportionately affecting migrants in precarious employment sectors such as hospitality,

construction, and healthcare. Migrant workers from the Global South faced higher risks of layoffs due to border closures, visa delays, and discrimination in access to unemployment benefits (OECD, 2021).

Automation and remote work trends further disrupted migrant labour demand. Companies in Europe and North America increasingly adopted digital platforms, reducing reliance on physical labour. This shift widened the digital divide, placing low-skilled migrants from the South at a disadvantage (Gamlen, 2020). Consequently, the pandemic intensified job insecurity and reduced new labour migration opportunities.

Table 1: Selected Labour Market Impacts on South–North Migrants During COVID-19

Sector	Impact on Migrants	Source
Hospitality	High layoffs, reduced contracts	ILO (2023)
Healthcare	Moderate job losses, increased risk exposure	OECD (2021)
Construction	High job losses, site closures	Gamlen (2020)
Remote Work/IT	Limited access for low-skilled migrants	OECD (2021)

Decline in Remittances

Remittances are a critical economic lifeline for many countries in the Global South. The World Bank (2023) reported a 1.4% global decline in remittance flows in 2020—the sharpest fall in a decade. Countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal experienced significant reductions in inflows due to job losses among diaspora communities.

Lower remittances exacerbate poverty and limit access to education, healthcare, and basic needs (IOM, 2022). Many African migrants remit up to 25–50% of their earnings (Collier, 2013), highlighting the socio-economic vulnerability triggered by the pandemic.

Education Migration and the Crisis of Export Education

The pandemic disrupted international student mobility, a key component of South–North migration. In 2020, mobility dropped by nearly 70% in countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia (OECD, 2022). Online learning could not fully replicate the experiential, networking, or economic benefits of physical mobility. Border closures and delayed visa processing caused “involuntary immobility” (Martin & Bergmann, 2020), leaving many students stranded. By 2023, enrolments were recovering, but high tuition costs, health documentation requirements, and travel restrictions continued to limit accessibility (UNESCO, 2023).

Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Humanitarian Gaps

Refugees and asylum seekers experienced worsening conditions. Resettlement programs were suspended, leaving thousands in limbo. The UNHCR (2022) reported that fewer than 35,000 refugees were resettled globally in 2020—a 50% decline from 2019. Camps in Kenya, Jordan, and Bangladesh faced overcrowding and limited healthcare, intensifying infection risks.

Restrictive asylum policies in Europe and North America reinforced exclusionary migration practices. Closure of humanitarian corridors contradicted the principle of non-refoulement, undermining global solidarity (IOM, 2022).

Vaccine Inequality, Xenophobia, and “Vaccine Nationalism”

COVID-19 vaccine access revealed stark inequalities between North and South. By early 2022, high-income countries secured nearly 75% of available vaccine doses, leaving many low-income countries with under 10% coverage (UNDP, 2023). This “vaccine nationalism” delayed mobility recovery for unvaccinated migrants (Nicolas, 2021).

Xenophobia also surged, with migrants scapegoated as infection vectors in several European states (OECD, 2021). These narratives deepened social exclusion, limiting employment, education, and social integration opportunities for migrants from the South.

POLICY REFLECTIONS AND POST-PANDEMIC PROSPECTS

The pandemic offers lessons for post-crisis mobility governance:

1. Digital Infrastructure & Labour Market Inclusion: Investment in technological training can reduce dependency on migration for economic survival.
2. Equitable Healthcare Access: Global cooperation is required to ensure all populations have access to vaccines and healthcare.
3. Integration into Recovery Policies: Host countries should offer legal pathways, protections against discrimination, and recognition of skills acquired abroad.
4. Strengthening Global Coordination: Organizations such as WHO, IOM, and UNHCR must enhance cooperation to safeguard humane and safe mobility during crises.

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has fundamentally reshaped South–North international migration. Labour disruptions, reduced remittances, vaccine inequities, and rising xenophobia have exacerbated pre-existing inequalities. Migrants from the South remain disproportionately affected, facing economic and social exclusion.

Recovery requires cooperation between sending and receiving countries, prioritizing equitable access to health, education, and mobility. Promoting inclusive migration is both a moral and economic imperative for global resilience.

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