SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19 AND ACCESS TO SERVICES FOR INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS IN SOUTH CAUCASUS

REGIONAL REPORT

Executive Summary

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To assess immediate and humanitarian needs among international migrants and estimate risks and vulnerabilities related to the COVID-19 pandemic as a basis for future assistance programming, 695 migrants (264 in Armenia, 115 in Azerbaijan, and 316 in Georgia) were surveyed in March-May 2022. This allowed to identify changes in migrants' health status and access to health care, the dynamics of their concerns and future intentions, the sources, and levels of support, as well as the shifting impact of COVID-19 compared to a 2020 assessment, commissioned by IOM. In addition, 25 state officials were interviewed in the three countries, offering further insights into the impact of COVID-19 both now and in the future, including the economic fallout, support, and access to vaccinations.

1.1 MAIN CHARACTERISTICS AND VULNERABILITIES OF RESPONDENTS

The sample included migrants from around 40 countries, over half of which came from the Islamic Republic of Iran and India, with major groups (over 6% each) originating from Pakistan and Nigeria. The respondents are relatively young with the majority under 35 years of age, and 30 per cent in the 18-24 age group. Men account for 64 per cent of the entire sample, although women account for 42 per cent in those surveyed in Armenia and Georgia.

Compared to 2020, migrants' legal status and duration of stay changed, especially in Armenia and Azerbaijan where two-thirds of those surveyed arrived less than three years prior (38% of arrivals to Armenia took place less than a year prior). Work remains a top reason for entry in the region (47%). Thanks to economic recovery following relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions joblessness is less widespread – 8 per cent compared to 24 per cent in 2020. Some sectors, however, were hit hard by the COVID-19 impact. While tourism and hospitality made up 43 per cent of the total employment, in 2020, these sectors were selected by only 23 per cent of the respondents in 2022. In turn, some sectors, which were marginal in 2020 have gained importance since then. 10 per cent of the respondents were employed in healthcare and nearly as many (9%) in education, in 2022.

Nevertheless, a substantial share of migrants have to deal with precarious housing and employment terms – 42 per cent of those are renting apartments in Georgia, and 47 per cent in Azerbaijan - without a formal agreement, and nearly half of those working in Georgia and nearly 70 per cent in Azerbaijan are employed informally. Business ownership is rare among the respondents in Armenia (4%) and Azerbaijan (2%) but has been reported by 16 per cent of those in Georgia.

1.2 MIGRANTS' HEALTH AND COPING WITH COVID-19 PANDEMIC

According to survey results, serious health conditions (most commonly, diabetes, blood, or heart conditions) affected nearly one in ten (9%) of the respondents and as many of their family members. Few migrants are covered with health insurance (none in Azerbaijan, 15% in Georgia and 32% in Armenia). Even fewer family members were reported to be covered, and persons with serious health conditions were least likely to be covered either due to a regulatory gap or the high cost of insurance.

COVID-19 incidence rose significantly between 2020, when 11 per cent reported symptoms, and 2022, when 35 per cent reported symptoms. A large proportion of respondents in Armenia (83%) and Georgia (85%) were tested, but fewer than half (47%) of those surveyed in Azerbaijan took COVID-19 tests. At the same time, levels of concern about the COVID-19 pandemic steeply declined in Armenia and Georgia, but remained high in Azerbaijan.

Only 11 per cent of the total sample faced major difficulties in accessing information on COVID-19 restrictions and protocols. The internet and social media remained the preferred channels for receiving COVID-19-related information, with only 1 to 2 per cent of the respondents receiving information from national institutions, COVID-19 hotlines, embassies, or non-state organizations. The most common source of information on COVID-19 vaccination was social media, followed by government sources. Relatively few of the surveyed migrants (12% of those in Georgia as opposed to 26% in Azerbaijan and 32% in Armenia) know whether they are entitled to free health assistance in case they experience COVID-19 symptoms. A clear difference also emerges with the levels of awareness of the COVID-19 vaccination process – while 88 per cent of those in Georgia and 90 per cent in Azerbaijan answered in the affirmative, only 45 per cent of the respondents in Armenia did so.

Nearly all (89%) the respondents were willing to contact a doctor in case of developing COVID-19 symptoms and a vast majority (84%) would be able to self-quarantine. It is of concern that in Azerbaijan nearly a quarter (24%) would not contact a doctor, mainly due to the high cost of healthcare. Vaccination rates among surveyed migrants are high (91%), exceeding those for the general populations in the destination countries. A smaller share of migrants' family members (77%) were reported to be vaccinated.

1.3 IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ASSISTANCE NEEDS

Only a minority of workers in Armenia and Georgia (44% and 21% respectively) and none of the respondents in Azerbaijan have been employed formally. The COVID-19 pandemic had a different impact on migrant employment across countries: Negative changes (loss of a job or reduced pay) were reported by 80 per cent of those surveyed in Azerbaijan and 65 per cent in Georgia, but fewer than 10 per cent of the respondents in Armenia.

COVID-19 impacted some migrants' housing conditions: Nearly half of the respondents in Azerbaijan had to relocate to find more affordable accommodation, and 20 per cent of those in Georgia and 14 per cent in Armenia were unsure if they would be able to stay in their current place of living.

Access to education significantly improved compared to 2020 and only 15 per cent of migrants with children reported difficulties in this area. However, three issues posed the largest obstacles: “disparities in education due to the interruption during the lockdown”, “rotation/only some pupils can physically attend” and “high tuition fees or lack of resources”.

Although concerns over COVID-19 in general have become less widespread, nearly as many respondents were worried over the possibility of falling sick or of being unable to provide for themselves or their family. One-third of the respondents reported suffering from stress and anxiety, and 29 per cent from depression or loneliness.

Two countries (Azerbaijan and Georgia) have witnessed significant declines in the share of migrants dependent on external support and regionally, the figure stands at 43 per cent. Students are a group, which is most dependent in all three countries, as are those aged 18-24 in Armenia and Georgia as well as the 25-34-year-olds in Azerbaijan. At the same time, only 18 per cent declared having received assistance since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Assistance changed in terms of type of support – while in 2020 hygiene packages were most commonly received, in 2022 cash and food were the most common forms of assistance.

Respondents overwhelmingly (85%) relied on support from family members living abroad. In parallel, an increasing number of migrants interact with hospitals and doctors, while a smaller proportion of migrants rely on community groups. demand for legal services was reported least often in Armenia but was raised by nearly a half of the respondents in Azerbaijan. The main reason for requesting such assistance is the need for counselling on visas and residence permits.

Antipathy, discrimination, and hostile behaviour have been encountered by one in five respondents in South Caucasus and around half of those reporting in Armenia and Georgia and nearly all in Azerbaijan noted that such incidents took place both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Far more respondents declare willingness to stay in the country of destination and only 3 per cent of those surveyed intend to return to their country of origin or to move to another country.