

STRANDED AND VULNERABLE IN TIMES OF COVID-19

SITUATION AND NEEDS OF VULNERABLE FOREIGN MIGRANTS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS



In Georgia IOM prioritized provision of humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable foreign migrants often in irregular situations.

As international mobility came to standstill and nations restricted movement across their borders, it has been widely accepted that the Covid-19 has put foreign migrants, those temporarily outside their country of origin as well as populations dependent on mobility in a particularly vulnerable position. Critical needs prevail among foreign migrants in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, deriving from the health risks associated with the disease, barriers in access to medical care and COVID-19 vaccination, but are also strongly exacerbated by the socio-economic consequences of preventive measures implemented by the Governments and lack of access to mitigating support measures.

This regional brief focuses on the situation and needs of vulnerable migrants in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, specifically irregular and undocumented migrants, low-skilled or low-income migrant workers, foreign students, and rejected asylum seekers. Findings presented are extracted from a regional survey conducted by IOM among vulnerable foreign migrants in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia in October and November 2020. This survey has generated a comprehensive evidence-based assessment on the living conditions and COVID-19 related needs of foreign migrants in the whole South Caucasus region. In total, 725 foreign migrants – nationals of 50 countries – together with 38 Key Information Providers (KIPs) and 12 government representatives were surveyed¹.

The regional survey was conducted within the framework of IOM's 2020 Global Response to the needs of vulnerable migrants in the South Caucasus in the aftermath of COVID-19 funded by the U. S Department of State, Bureau of

¹ Due to a substantial lack of accurate sample frames, a non-probability sampling approach was adopted, and respondents were selected through a snowball method, i.e. they were reached through the established local network of research partners and key informants and/or based on the recommendation of surveyed foreign migrants. This approach is often used when interviewing hard-to-reach population, such as undocumented foreign migrants. researchers were advised to diversify as much as possible the typology of respondents in order to provide a comprehensive representation of the most vulnerable groups. Depending on the situation on the ground, face to face interviews were the preferred mode of administration, although mixed modes were occasionally employed due to COVID-19 measures.

Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM). It built upon the findings collected in spring 2020 through a Rapid Needs Assessment⁶ conducted in Armenia and Georgia and aimed to generate a comprehensive evidence-basis on the vulnerable groups' status and COVID-19 related needs in the whole South Caucasus region. With the support of PRM, IOM provided humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable foreign migrants and their families in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in September – December 2020. For most, this aid constituted the only source of support.

Immigration Dynamics in the South Caucasus

According to UN DESA, the stock of foreign migrants² in the South Caucasus adds up to 523,000 individuals, nearly half of which in Azerbaijan, 36% in Armenia and 15% in Georgia. Refugees and persons holding humanitarian status account for around 4% of the total stock of foreign migrants. However, of the more than 250,000 (foreign-born) migrants estimated to be resident in Azerbaijan, a large share (around 60%) are likely ethnic Azerbaijanis who moved from Armenia during the late 1980s and early 1990s.³ Similarly many of the 191,000 (foreign-born) migrants estimated to be resident in the Republic of Armenia⁴ are ethnic Armenians who fled Azerbaijan during the same time frame.⁵ Conversely, in Georgia, the National Statistics Office, Geostat, reports a higher number of immigrants – around 97,000 individuals in 2019.⁶

FOREIGN MIGRANTS IN ARMENIA

The Republic of Armenia has traditionally been seen as an origin or transit country for migration, possibly to the Russian Federation and the West. However, arrivals of foreign migrants seeking to work and study in the country are increasing. As of 31 December 2019, 16,648 foreign migrants had valid residence status in the Republic of Armenia, of which 5,000 were temporary (up to 1 year), 7,482 were permanent (up to 5 years) and 4,166 were special (up to 10 years). These comprise several thousands of foreign students (including those from Diaspora) mainly coming from Syrian Arab Republic, Islamic Republic of Iran, India, as well as the United States of America, the Russian Federation and other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries. According to the 2019 statistics from the Migration Service, Syrians, Iraqis and Iranians lead the list of asylum seekers and refugees – most of which are ethnic Armenians fleeing due to political instability and conflict. Yemenis are among the new countries of origin of citizens seeking refuge.

FOREIGN MIGRANTS IN AZERBAIJAN

In Azerbaijan, migration of foreign migrants is driven mainly by labour migration, whereas student mobility and asylum play only a minor role. Labour migration flows are mostly driven by Georgia and the CIS countries, most notably the Russian Federation, although inflows from Turkey and the Islamic Republic of Iran have been increasing each year since 2013. As for students, in most cases they come from Asian countries and, to a lesser extent, from geographically close countries (such as Turkey, Islamic Republic of Iran, Georgia, The Russian Federation, Iraq, and Turkmenistan) with language and/or ethnic ties as well as a common history. At different times Azerbaijan received asylum seekers from the Russian Federation (Chechnya), the Islamic Republic of Iran, Afghanistan and other countries, mostly due to military conflicts in these countries.

² Foreign migrant stocks are estimates of "the total number of foreign migrants present in a given country at a particular point in time". United Nations data on these stocks are based mostly on the country's population that is born abroad, and (where this information is not available) on holding a foreign citizenship.

³ Many of the around 50,000 Georgia-born and almost 29,000 Russia-born migrants appear to be Azerbaijani citizens too. Other groups of foreign migrants include persons born in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Ukraine – all of which have high shares of Azerbaijani citizens. Baseline study on migration in Azerbaijan, Study developed within the framework of the EU funded Support to the Implementation of the Mobility Partnership with Azerbaijan (MOBILAZE) project, MOBILAZE and ICMPD, Vienna, 2018. Azerbaijan 2019 census results confirm these findings since only around 15,000 individuals are foreign citizens (0.2%). Available online: <https://www.stat.gov.az/source/demography/ap/?lang=en>

⁴ Source: Migration Service of Armenia. Available online: http://www.migration.am/general_information?lang=en.

⁵ In addition to flows from Azerbaijan, substantial inflows of ethnic Armenians also occurred from Iraq and especially from Syrian Arab Republic due to political instability and conflict in both countries. Baseline research on irregular migration in the Republic of Armenia, IOM, Yerevan, 2013. Available online: https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/baseline_research_irregular_migration_eng.pdf

⁶ This figure includes Georgian citizens who live overseas and are also referred to as migrants (56% in 2019). If these are excluded, immigrants were primarily citizens of Russian Federation, Turkey, Azerbaijan and India. It is worth noting that while UN DESA, calculates the number of immigrants based on the "foreign-born population" category, Geostat data on immigrant flows is based on border-crossing information. Available online: <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/322/migration>

FOREIGN MIGRANTS IN GEORGIA

There are several data sources on the number of foreign migrants in Georgia. According to Geostat, there were 96,864 immigrants in Georgia in 2019, over half of them being citizens of Georgia. Countries from the South Caucasus (14%) and the Russian Federation (31%) – mainly the Russian Federation itself and Ukraine – still account for the largest share of foreign migrants' stock, however flows from new countries are increasing for the purpose of education (universities are increasingly enrolling students from India, Nigeria, Kenya and Iraq) or work (work permits are increasingly granted to nationals of People's Republic of China, India, Iraq, and the Philippines). Other notable countries of origin of foreign migrants confirmed also by residence permit statistics and census, appear to be Turkey, Islamic Republic of Iran, India, People's Republic of China, Greece, Israel, Egypt and the USA. The majority of persons holding humanitarian status in Georgia are citizens of Iraq and Ukraine.

1. MAIN CHARACTERISTICS AND VULNERABILITIES OF RESPONDENTS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS



Highest number of migrants, who received humanitarian assistance from IOM in Armenia come from Lebanon. Other countries of origin included Cuba, India, Iraq, Lebanon, Ukraine, United Kingdom.

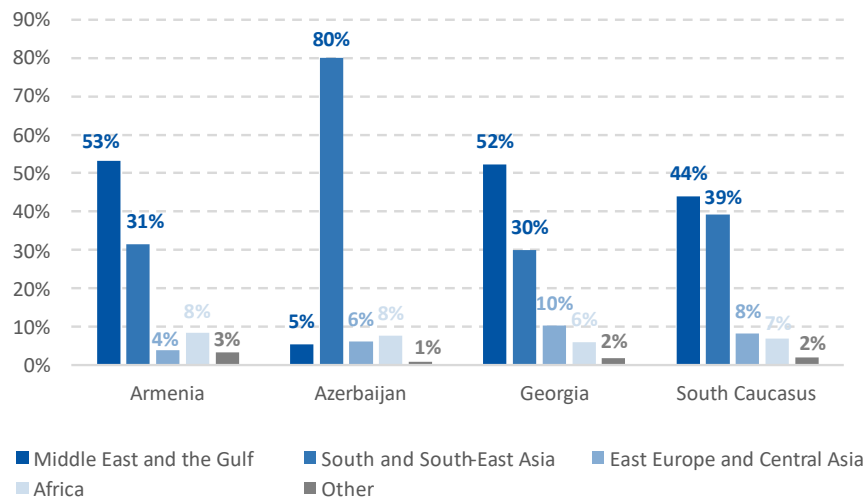
IOM's survey has allowed sketching the profiles of larger foreign migrant communities who share similar characteristics, such as nationals of the same region of the world,⁷ with a special focus on stranded and most vulnerable individuals – irregular and undocumented foreign migrants, low-skilled or low-income foreign migrant workers, foreign students, and rejected

asylum seekers. As precise population characteristics of vulnerable foreign migrants in the South Caucasus have not previously been mapped, the sample provides an indication of the characteristics of vulnerable and stranded foreign migrants in the region informing this inquiry.

Based on the data of surveyed vulnerable foreign migrants, **the average respondent is a single young male who entered the South Caucasus region from the Middle East and the Gulf** (with majority from the Islamic Republic of Iran and Iraq) **or South and South-East Asia** (with majority from India). **Other surveyed communities include nationals of Eastern European and Central Asian** countries (with majority from Russian Federation and Ukraine) **and Africa** (with majority from Nigeria). **The main two reasons for migration are education and work**, which, in turn, define the two main typologies of respondents: students and labour migrants. Around 15% of respondents fled conflict or persecution in the country of origin, nearly all of which originate from the Middle East and the Gulf. **Most have entered the South Caucasus over 3 years ago; with only 15% of recent arrivals**, nearly all of which are students.

⁷ For the purpose of the analysis four main regions were identified: Middle East and the Gulf, South and South-East Asia, East Europe and Central Asia and Africa. For more details, see Section 8 of the report.

FIGURE 1 – Foreign migrants by main area of nationality



HEALTH

Notwithstanding specific differences, foreign migrants tend to share similar demographic and socio-economic characteristics that increase their vulnerability to the current situation. Despite their relatively young age (32 years on average), **around 15% reported that they suffer from serious health conditions⁸** which can increase the risk of serious adverse outcomes of COVID-19. This aspect also highlights their need to regularly access healthcare in a period where access is often delayed or restricted and raises the issue of their participation in upcoming vaccination campaigns.

EMPLOYMENT

The economic status of foreign migrants is equally vulnerable in many respects. Most active foreign migrants⁹ are (or were) employed or self-employed in the sectors that were mostly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as hospitality, tourism, retail/sales and constructions (60% overall). By the time of the survey, **around half of them have already lost their job, while 16% are employed with informal contracts**, meaning that the level of protection offered by these arrangements is very low and often ruled by the “last to come, first to go” practice.

At the same time, **most foreign migrants (not only students) are strongly dependent on external support.** Nearly 60% of respondents rely on external sources of income – in most cases, money sent by family in home countries.

HOUSING

Informal arrangements are often the norm when it comes to housing too: over one third of respondents do not have a formal agreement/contract (35%), meaning that they are more exposed to the risk of losing their accommodation. **Co-sharing a house or apartment with people other than family is also very common (35%)** and, if added up with the share of people living in dormitories (4%), hostels (10%) and temporary housing (2%), it translates into **over one in two respondents unable to maintain physical distancing.**

LEGAL STATUS

Foreign migrants are also more likely to end up in “uncertain” legal status: over one in five respondents do not have a valid visa or residence permit – 13% overstayed their visa or permit, 4% have applied for it and 5% have been refused asylum or are undocumented foreign migrants. Their condition excludes them from accessing social protection schemes and compromises their access to basic services for fear of detention and/or deportation.

KNOWLEDGE OF LANGUAGE

Despite a good command of languages (80% of respondents speak English and 13% Russian), **nearly 60% cannot master the official language of the country they are in – 15% of which cannot speak English or**

⁸ The most common reported health issues are: blood/heart conditions, diabetes, muscle-skeletal conditions, hypertension/high blood pressure and kidney/liver disease.

⁹ Active foreign migrants include employed and self-employed individuals and individuals who lost their jobs and are currently unemployed.

Russian. As a consequence, **most respondents tend to interact with groups that belong to their close community only**, such as other foreign nationals or students,¹⁰ **and rely on limited or weaker support networks**. Language barriers severely impact access to employment and, ultimately, integration.

RISK OF MARGINALIZATION

Although no evidence was found of rising acts of xenophobia, stigma and discrimination since the start of

the COVID-19 pandemic, still **one in four respondents reported the occurrence of discrimination, verbal abuse and/or physical incidents** (24%, corresponding to 172 individuals). These incidents can deepen their feeling of marginalization, also considering that **only one third of individuals who suffered discrimination had received counselling support** related to the incident at the time of the interviews.

2. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON VULNERABLE FOREIGN MIGRANTS IN SOUTH CAUCASUS

Although it is too early for a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the assessment shows that the situation of foreign migrants is very different from Spring 2020 when the pandemic had not yet reached its most acute phase in the South Caucasus.¹¹ The survey conducted by IOM at the onset of the 2nd wave of the pandemic reveals that given the sudden disruption in international mobility and uncertainty caused by COVID-19 outbreak, many foreign migrants have become stranded in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, lost their income, and born significant health risks. The uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 outbreak also made access to reliable and updated information a very challenging issue.

Several months after the experience of the first lockdown, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on foreign migrants has proved severe and new concerns have emerged aside of old ones. The most pressing relate to the capability of foreign migrants to withstand the socio-economic consequences at a longer-term, given their informal status, their limited access to social support schemes, their dependence on families abroad and on weaker support networks in host countries and, and their difficulties in switching to remote tools (including teleworking, remote education and access to public services online).

2.1. Access to work and income

The survey revealed that **over 80% of respondents working in the sectors of tourism and hospitality lost their job or had to close their business or suffered a reduction of earnings and/or shifts**. Similar figures were found in other sectors, such as agriculture, construction and services/retail. Among respondents living with family, **around one in two reported that at least another family member had experienced similar effects** and had lost his/her job or witnessed a reduction in earnings.

Negative economic effects propagate well beyond national borders, due to the strong linkage between foreign migrants' well-being and remittances. In this sense, both ends of the chain were affected. **Most respondents who are supported by family abroad – often students and other not-working individuals – are**

having trouble in receiving funds. Similar difficulties were reported by the share of respondents (15%) who are supporting children or other dependents at home. If difficulties persist, the decision to repatriate in the face of insecurity or inability to stay will follow, with no assurance that foreign migrants will be able to (re)enter the South Caucasus once the emergency is over.

2.2 Accommodation

Figures on housing are self-evident of the rapidly deteriorating conditions of foreign migrants. **Between March and November 2020, around 30% of respondent left their accommodation and moved into cheaper or shared housing** due to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to its lengthening, around 35% fear “that they won't be able to stay in their present accommodation at short term”. According to interviews,

¹⁰ This behaviour can often be observed with regard to employment and housing, with labour migrants working with co-nationals and foreign students co-sharing their accommodation.

¹¹ The economic impact on the EaP region is further exacerbated by the recent collapse in oil prices, which directly hits Azerbaijan and Belarus but also affects other EaP countries, particularly Armenia and

Georgia, through its impact on trade and remittances. OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19), COVID-19 crisis response in Eastern Partner countries. Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-response-in-eastern-partner-countries-7759afa3/>

only 6 individuals received some kind of shelter assistance – and only 15% (105 foreign migrants) were provided with immediate cash assistance.

2.3. Legal assistance

Respondents also identified the need for legal assistance and counselling (23%). Although deadlines to obtain or renew documents were extended, delays and difficulties in accessing online services were often reported, with 40% of respondents stating that they “would reach out to a lawyer if his/her services were available for free”. The legal status is the main correlate with legal needs and the **highest figures were found among undocumented foreign migrants, those whose residence permit/visa expired or whose asylum request was rejected.** Counselling on visa and/or work permit are the most urgent issues; around one in ten

foreign migrants reported language barriers; the same share has difficulties in accessing public services.

2.4. Education

Despite limitations, education activities are ongoing and nearly no one reported that schools/universities were closed and that they (or their children) had stopped attending due to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹² **Nevertheless, students and families have suffered of the climate of uncertainty and the “stop and go” of regular education (in person). Around 30% of students cannot follow online lessons** (they are still missing computer and/or Internet connection) and around 10% cannot attend labs or research activities. **Disparities in education following the lockdown were reported in around 25% of cases. Language support was also voiced out – especially by families with school-aged children.**

3. COVID-19, PRECAUTIONARY MEASURES AND HEALTH NEEDS

It is commonly recognized that barriers in accessing information on health measures as well as barriers in accessing local health care assistance can increase the vulnerability of foreign migrants and puts them at an increased risk of contracting Covid-19. Although nearly all respondents stated that they would reach out to a doctor, hospital or health centre in case they develop COVID-19 symptoms, **only one in four respondents are aware that they are entitled to receive free medical assistance (included testing).**

Limited access to health services strongly depends on the lack of a health insurance system available to migrants to help them sustain healthcare costs: the share of respondents who are fully covered by health insurance ranges from as low as **2% in Azerbaijan and 6% in Armenia to 39% in Georgia.**

In fact, **the unaffordability of healthcare emerges as the most pressing issue of foreign migrants:** as much as 65% of respondents stated that they would reach out to a doctor and 22% would reach out to a psychologist if [their] professional services were available for free.

The level of concern for the COVID-19 pandemic and its long-lasting consequences are widespread: nearly all respondents expressed a high or moderate concern, with only around 15% of individuals “rarely” or “not at all” worried. As a consequence, most foreign migrants have been suffering of stress/anxiety, depression/loneliness and even anger.

Students are not exempt – as a matter of fact, young individuals (aged 18-24), especially those hosted in dormitories, report the highest level of isolation. Middle-aged individuals (aged 35-54), on the other hand, were more likely to report stress or anxiety – in their case, the presence of family, although easing the feeling of isolation, provides an additional emotional and economic “burden”.

The fear of catching the disease and losing the means to provide for themselves are the most reported concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic. **Nearly 20% of individuals fear that “they won’t be able to leave the country and return home”, around 10% that they will become more isolated and around 5% that “they will be arrested because they have no documents”** – even if in need, these individuals may be unwilling to access basic services (including healthcare) for fear of detention or deportation.

On the positive side, this high level of concern has helped setting up a virtuous circle where foreign migrants follow protective measures most of the time, if not always. Nearly all respondents stated that they managed to “always” cover their nose and mouth in public and increase hand washing/sanitizing; around three quarters “always” kept physical distancing in public and avoided crowded gatherings (and the remaining quarter did so “most of the time”). **The most difficult measures to**

¹² Around 65% of surveyed foreign migrants are either directly in education (76%) or have at least one school-aged child (24%).

follow are avoiding public transport – as most foreign migrants tend to use it quite intensively¹³ – **and wearing PPEs**: around 15% of respondents

“never” observe them, increasing their risk of exposure to the contagion.

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC HIGHLIGHTS

ARMENIA

The average respondent is a childless young male from the Middle East and the Gulf (mostly the Islamic Republic of Iran). Other relevant groups include nationals of India, the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Nigeria. Most are non-working/students or unemployed individuals, often relying on financial support by families abroad. Over half of those receiving support are experiencing issues in receiving funds. Most active foreign migrants lost their job/closed their business and/or suffered a reduction of pay or shifts. Hospitality and constructions are their main sectors of activity. Conditions of living are rapidly deteriorating: since March 2020, around 40% of respondents left their accommodation and moved into a cheaper one or are now co-sharing. Health needs (including psychosocial support) are very urgent due to widespread lack of medical insurance. High costs, language barriers and limited availability of facilities were often reported. Nearly 20% of respondents reported developing symptoms that could be associated with COVID-19, only half of them were tested and 20% were positive (6 individuals). Nearly half of students or families with school-aged children reported issues with online learning mostly due to lack of computer or internet and lack of language support. Around 20% of respondents are in need legal counselling, mostly on visa and language assistance. Discrimination or other types of intolerant behaviour were reported by one-third of respondents. Depression, feeling of isolation, stress and anger were also very frequently mentioned. Around 15% of respondents received some kind of assistance, either cash or food, most of which from international organizations or embassies/consulates of their countries of origin. Around one in four respondents are still willing to leave the country, nearly all of which are encountering obstacles to their departure.

AZERBAIJAN

The average respondent is a childless young male from South and South-East Asia (mostly Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh). Fewer respondents are from East Europe and Central Asia, the Middle East and the Gulf, and Africa. Nearly all are non-working/students or unemployed heavily reliant on financial support from families. Over 40% arrived less than one year ago and nearly all hold a valid permit to stay.

Financial concerns are widespread: over 80% of active foreign migrants lost their job/closed their business and/or suffered a reduction of pay since March 2020, most reported similar effects on other household members. Many respondents are also worried as they are unable to comply with precautionary measures, such maintain physical distancing, self-isolate and quarantine, since they live in shared housing or hostels and extensively use public transport. Students often reported an inability to follow sanitary and hygienic rules in school or university. Health needs are extremely urgent due to the widespread lack of medical insurance and the high share of respondents suffering from serious health conditions (20%). Nearly half of students or families with school-aged children reported issues with online learning mostly due to lack of teachers, rotation of pupils, lack of transportation, disparities in education. Around 30% of respondents need legal counselling, mostly on visa and work permits. Around one in four respondents received assistance, either food, shelter or hygiene items, mostly from embassies/consulates of countries of origin or international organizations. Around one-third of respondents are willing but unable to leave the country, due to lack of funds, border closure and/or lack of flights and would like to receive assistance in doing so.

GEORGIA

There are two main groups of respondents: individuals from the Middle East and the Gulf (mostly Iranians and Iraqis) and South and South-East Asians, nearly all of which Indians. The former are mainly middle-aged individuals who fled conflict and entered the country more than three years with their families, and the latter are relatively younger students who entered the country alone. Smaller groups come from Eastern Europe and Central Asia (most

¹³ As such, KIPs advised to conduct regular and daily disinfection of public transports and common areas.

of which from the Russian Federation and Ukraine) and Africa (most of which from South Africa, Eritrea and Nigeria). Around one-third of respondents are females and around one-quarter are over 45 years. Income and livelihood insecurity appears to be very urgent: around 80% of active foreign migrants lost their job/closed their business and/or suffered a reduction of pay or shifts since March 2020. Hospitality, tourism and retail/sales are their main sectors of activity, all of which were badly hit. Around 40% of foreign migrants who are financially supported reported issues in receiving funds. Deteriorating livelihood impact on foreign migrants' access to housing: since March 2020, around 20% of respondents left their accommodation and moved into a cheaper or co-shared one. Most reported issues in terms of health include high costs, language barriers and limited availability and/or overcrowding of facilities. Nearly 30% of students or families with school-aged children reported issues with online learning mostly disparities in education after the lockdown and lack of computers/Internet connection.

Around 25% of respondents need legal counselling, mostly on visa, work permits and access to public services. 5% of respondents are rejected asylum seekers or do not have documents. Discrimination or other type of intolerant behaviour were reported by 26% of respondents, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Around 40% of respondents received some kind of assistance, either cash, COVID-19 related information and hygiene packages. Main providers were international organizations, university, local organizations and/or community. Nearly all respondents feel comfortable to stay in Georgia during the COVID-19 pandemic (86%).

4. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

IOM anticipates a continued deterioration of living conditions for foreign migrants amid the protracted pandemic crisis in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and a growth in need for humanitarian and return assistance among this group. Global economic consequences of the pandemic will likely deprive additional foreign migrants in the South Caucasus of financial support from their families in countries of origin – especially foreign students and foreign migrants in irregular situations. Locally, any emerging employment opportunities are unlikely to be available to foreign migrants due to the high demand for employment by the domestic workforce. The need for safe housing will become even more critical among foreign migrants struggling to cover living expenses. Due to the ongoing epidemiological situation, some international travel routes remain limited, rendering independent returns or departures complicated and very costly, further increasing the needs for Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) and flexible immigration policies. IOM also strongly recommends the inclusion of foreign migrants in Coronavirus vaccination plans in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, regardless of residence status. The inclusion of foreign migrants with irregular status is particularly important given the high levels of vulnerability among this population.

Foreign migrants ought not to be left behind in society-wide measures. In fact, explicit targeting by special measures is needed to address their specific vulnerabilities. It is important to ensure that health systems are sensitive to the needs of foreign migrants and deliver affordable and accessible services regardless of immigration status. Governments can strengthen support measures in response to COVID-19 pandemic through a well-coordinated, holistic and equitable approach when no one is left behind, including foreign migrants residing in the South Caucasus. The recommendations below target the Governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, but their implementation will likely require coordination with a multitude of State and non-State actors, private and public institutions, and international partners.

4.1 OVERARCHING RECOMMENDATIONS

- Identify a specific agency/body within the State system and activate or (re)orient its activities to take on responsibility for specific COVID-19 mitigation measures targeting foreign migrants.
- Strengthen the interaction mechanism between humanitarian organisations and state agencies in charge of foreign migrants.
- Conduct monitoring of most vulnerable groups and communities of foreign migrants on a regular basis and develop an effective mechanism for the identification of the most vulnerable individuals and communities as the crisis further unfolds its negative effects.

4.2 SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

HEALTH

- Remove – at least temporarily – existing barriers to full health care access for foreign migrants and ensure that the most vulnerable access the needed checks, critical medicines and treatment.
- Ensure the provision of psychosocial counselling within universities or schools to mitigate the effects of the lockdown and quarantine on students.
- Raise foreign migrants' awareness and understanding of their rights and ensure people do not avoid seeking treatment or testing because they do not have insurance or documents.
- Adopt a migrant-inclusive approach to the COVID-19 response, including access to the vaccination campaign, in compliance with IOM calls.¹⁴

EMPLOYMENT

- Widen foreign migrants' access to existing welfare programs and develop new schemes specifically targeting foreign workers in the informal economy.
- Sustain employers who engage foreign migrants with incentives – such as reduced taxation or subsidies – in order to renew their contracts and retain workers.
- Provide hardship funds to self-employed foreign migrants, especially targeting the sectors who suffered most from the cessation or slowdown of activity, such as tourism and hospitality.
- Facilitate access to credit of foreign business owners and advocate for delay of debt servicing.
- Ensure that foreign migrant workers can access the necessary PPEs to reduce their risk of contagion at work or while using public transportation to reach the place of work.

LIVELIHOODS

- Extend COVID-19 support measures (income support schemes, housing provision programmes and rental subsidies/exemptions) to undocumented and/or informally employed foreign migrants.
- Promote fundraising events to establish emergency funds in order to provide foreign migrants with immediate financial assistance to sustain urgent expenses, such as rent and healthcare.
- Ensure the implementation of a proper control mechanism in terms of fair access to housing.
- Ensure regular disinfection of collective spaces, including hostels, dormitories, public transport.

EDUCATION

- Provide free tutoring to university students and families with children with educational needs.
- Develop and implement interactive curricula more adaptive to the learning needs of students.
- Promote adult education to improve foreign migrants' language and IT skills and facilitate their (re)qualification in the job market, their access to information and online public services.

LEGAL SERVICES

- Facilitate timely access to immigration services in relation to regularization of stay (residence/work permits/extensions, visa requirements).
- Establish consultative centres for foreign migrants offering multi-professional support and targeted consultations (interpreters, counsellors, legal professionals).

MOBILITY

- Facilitate the mobility choice of foreign migrants and their families, whether this means returning to countries of origin or (re)entering the South Caucasus after leaving during the pandemic.

¹⁴ After the inclusion of foreign migrants in the new US Administration's national strategy for COVID-19 response in January 2021, IOM has called on all countries to follow similar migrant-inclusive approaches and adopt practices to account for all foreign migrants, such as: ensure an adequate number of vaccine doses is planned for and procured to include foreign migrants and that delivery systems are fit-for-purpose; reduce the number of administrative hurdles for foreign migrants to access health care and vaccines, including high costs and proof of residence or identity; actively reach out to foreign migrant communities through linguistically and culturally competent communication methods to build trust, inform and engage in programming; offer guarantees that vaccination will not lead to detention or deportation; strengthening health systems and setting up mobile vaccination mechanisms where needed to ensure last-mile distribution. Available at: <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-commends-united-states-inclusion-migrants-covid-19-vaccine-roll-out>

- Ensure that foreign migrants are not excluded from the vaccination campaign, considering that, as countries reopen their borders, additional health requirements may become necessary for travel, including digital vaccine passports, which may further restrict mobility options.

SOCIAL INCLUSION

- Prioritise the provision of psychosocial counselling to vulnerable foreign migrants who have experienced abuse, discrimination or stigma or are unwillingly stranded in the region.
- Promote a migrant-inclusive approach throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and organize public awareness campaigns countering xenophobia and promoting diversity, solidarity and tolerance.
- Reach out to foreign migrant communities to inform individuals about assistance and counselling opportunities available to them and neutralize misconceptions about their legal rights.



Highest number of foreign migrants, who received assistance from IOM in Azerbaijan come from Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Other countries of origin were Bangladesh and India.

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