The COVID-19 Pandemic and International Labor Migration in Asia

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Abstract
This paper focuses on the knowledge we have thus far of the impact COVID-19 has had on international migration. By examining the stock of international migrants, the remittance flows of international migration, and the response Asian countries and immigrants in Asian countries have had to the global pandemic, an international migration issue has been brought to light. The observation of various reports made by international institutions since the beginning of 2020 has revealed that the brunt of the pandemic’s impact on immigrants in Asia has fallen on their remittance flows. Moreover, the reports that focus on the living conditions and livelihoods of migrant workers in Asia during the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that immigrants in Asian countries are currently facing socioeconomic inequality because of their vulnerability in the labor market.

1. Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound global impact and the consequences of this blow will reverberate into the future. Economic crises have been induced by pandemics throughout the 1900s, such as the Spanish Flu (1918–1920), H1N1 (2009–2010), MERS (2012), and Ebola (2014–2016). According to the World Bank (2020a), most of these previous pandemics have affected only a few countries and a small share of the world’s population, except for the Spanish Flu, which infected 500 million people. However, the economic impact of previous pandemics seems insignificant in the face of the devastating impact of COVID-19. The current pandemic’s effect on the global economy has proven to be more severe and extensive than we imagined it would be a year ago; the average decline in GDP growth in the most affected countries, such as France, Germany and United

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States, has been measured at 8.7%; a statistic surpassing that of any previous pandemic. Consequentially, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a particular challenge for immigrant workers, for whom its economic effects have been felt in both their home countries and host countries. They have been left vulnerable to less of employment and decreased wages. UNDESA (2019) estimated the current number of international migrants at about 272 million globally, with nearly two-thirds of these being labor migrants. This estimate already surpasses projections which estimated that there would be 230 million international migrants by 2050.

Examining the data of and forecasts made by the World Bank, IOM, and UNDESA, as well as previous literature has explored this issue, this paper considers the effect of COVID-19 on international migration. The focus is on immigrants in East Asian countries because the flow of international migration in Asia has risen considerably over the past few decades. More populous countries such as India and China are associated with higher levels of emigration to other Asian countries (Abel, 2013; Abel and Sander, 2014; Hiraiwa, 2019). We ask several questions. How have border restrictions affected countries and immigrants during the pandemic? How has COVID-19 impacted remittance flows? To answer these questions, we explored previously acquired knowledge and made new discoveries that could lead to a re-thinking of migrant workers.

2. Changes in the Stock and Share of International Migrants

First, let us examine the basic data on international immigrants. Figure 1 and 2 show a comparison of the share of migrants in relation to the total population in different regions and countries. In more developed regions, the share of immigrants within the total population has been rising. However, in high-income countries the share seems to be decreasing — This could be attributed to global mobility restrictions under COVID-19. According to IOM (2020), 226 countries, territories, or areas have issued 110,320 travel-related measures as of 29th December 2020.

Figure 3 shows the share of international migrant stock in comparison to the total population by continent. In 2020, Africa and Asia saw a slight decrease in international migrant stack, while Oceania, Africa and Europe saw an increasing share of immigrants throughout 2020. On the other hand, Figure 4 shows absolute number of migrant stocks by continent. In 2015, Asia surpassed Europe in its
migrant stock, but in 2020, Europe’s migrant stock again surpassed that of Asia. In the mid-year of 2020, migrant stock had not decreased in many continents from 2019. However, higher income countries did see a decrease in their migrant stock, suggesting that the return migration from host countries to home countries occurred in 2020. As return migration increased, the number of international migrants seemed likely to decline in 2021.

Figure 1 International migrant stock as a percentage of the total population (by region)
Note: More developed regions comprise Europe, Northern America, Australia/New Zealand and Japan. Less developed regions comprise all regions of Africa, Asia (except Japan), Latin America and the Caribbean plus Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia.
Source: UN Population Division, DESA, 2020

Figure 2 International migrant stock as a percentage of the total population (by country)
Note: Low income (less than $1,005), Middle income ($1,006–$12,235), High-income (more than $12,235).
Source: UN Population Division, DESA, 2020
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Figure 3  International migrant stock as a percentage of the total population
Source: UN Population Division, DESA, 2020

Figure 4  International Migrant Stock (by region)
Source: UN Population Division, DESA, 2020
3. COVID-19 Cases and Remittance Flows

The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases has been increasing since November 2020, especially in Europe and North America (Figure 5). The OECD (2020) found that immigrants are at a much higher risk of COVID-19 infection than the native population is. However, despite the fact that the total number of immigrants in Asia is as large as the total number of immigrants in Europe, the number of cases in Asia have remained relatively subdued. ILO (2021) found that Low Development Countries (LDCs) experienced COVID-19 contagion later and less severely than advanced countries. LDCs, with about 13% of the world’s population, had only 1.6% of the global number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 as of January 2021. Reasons for these low numbers include the fact that most LDCs introduced early lockdowns and mobility restrictions aligned with those introduced in advanced countries. Furthermore, the virus is more deadly among older people with comorbidities, more of whom exist in rich countries. However, the steady increase in cases may have resulted in the drop in remittances from advanced countries.

Remittances are one of the most important sources of financing for low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and those remittance-dependent countries

![Figure 5 Daily confirmed COVID-19 death, rolling 7-day average](source: Our World in Data, "Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19)," University of Oxford, accessed January 20, 2021.)
have most likely been affected by the pandemic. According to the World Bank (2020b), remittance flows to LMICs account for 76% of global total of remittances. However, remittance flows to LMICs were projected to decline by 7.2%, to US$508 billion in 2020, followed by a further decline of 7.5% to US$470 billion in 2021 (World Bank, 2020b). In particular, emigrants from Asian countries were projected to play an important role; an estimated 53.4% of all remittance flows from LMICs to countries of origin in 2019 had been sent by Asian emigrants (Figure 6). In 2009 when the financial crisis of 2008 had an effect on the flow of remittances; the amount of remittances fell from previous year by 4.9% and of the world by 5.1%. Compared to the financial crisis of 2008, the economic downturn induced by COVID-19 seems to have had a deeper impact, and its consequences could be even further reaching. As for foreign direct investment (FDI), FDI flows to LMICs are projected to decrease by nearly 32% in 2020 from their 2019 volume of US$534 billion, a decline which is sharper than the inflow of remittances. As such, the global pandemic has affected economic growth, threatening remittance flows, which have been one of the most important sources of external finance for LMICs beyond FDI, have steadily declined since 2013.

According to the Migration Data Portal (2021), the United States, India, the
Russian Federation, France, the United Kingdom, Italy and Germany are the seven countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases. These countries are also among the countries from which the highest amounts of remittances were sent in 2018. This trend parallels the fact that migrant workers accounted for 16.0% and 12.0% of workers in North America and Europe in 2018, respectively (Figure 3). UNDESA (2020) reports that severe economic downturns that have occurred in destination countries due to lockdowns or oil price crashes have reduced job opportunities and lowered wages for migrants. For example, South Asia has been a hand-hit region; remittances to nations in this region are projected to decline by 22% in 2020 (World Bank, 2020b). Among them, the Philippines received 35,167 million US dollars in 2019, ranking fourth in the world, with remittances accounting for 8.8% of its GDP in 2020. Yamada et al. (2020) studied the decline in remittances caused by COVID-19 in the Philippines using a household-level dataset and found that substantial decline in remittances caused by the pandemic may have an adverse effect on financial inclusion1, having more serious effects for women. Murakami et al. (2020) also explored the potential impacts of the pandemic on the welfare of remittance-dependent households in the Philippines utilizing a household-level dataset. They found that remittance inflow was projected to decrease by 23–32% and that household spending per capita is projected to decline by 2.2–3.3% within a year as a result of the pandemic. They also raised an interesting issue that merits future research; They proposed that would-be Filipino emigrants’ decision-making will change in terms of deciding whether to migrate or not, where to migrate to, or how long to stay. This insight could be applied to other countries that heavily depend on remittances, and suggests a trend could change the world map of international migration.

4. Migrants in Asia Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic and Snapshots from ILO Reports

Migrant workers disproportionately work in service sectors. Media coverage has often been given to such migration workers as well as to how sectors with workforces that are heavily reliant on migrant workers have failed to continue

1 Financial inclusion promotes the availability of a variety of financial products such as payment services, savings accounts, loans, and insurance for individuals, and benefits them by mitigating poverty through consumption smoothing, productive investment and financial risk management. (Yamada et al., 2020)
production during the COVID-19 pandemic. One such example is Canada’s agricultural industry; nearly 60,000 farm workers in Canada are from Mexico and the Caribbean, having come to Canada to for under the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program. Their poor conditions have exacerbated their vulnerability to the novel corona virus\(^2\). According to the Ministry of Health, in Singapore, the vast majority of COVID-19 cases have occurred in migrant worker dormitories, and as of November 4, 2020, residents of dormitories in Singapore continued to account for nearly 94% of the cumulative number of cases in Singapore. Suhardiman et al. (2020) conducted interviews with migrants in Laos, Myanmar, China, Singapore, and Thailand during COVID-19 pandemic to explore how migrants’ livelihoods have been ruptured by the pandemic in Southeast Asia. They found that the pandemic has already transformed migrant lives in ways that will produce uneven and long-term impacts, especially for households that previously depended on remittances for survival. Remittance flow has been decreased as COVID-19 related restrictions, unemployment and food insecurity has increased.

As Figure 3 shows, Asia is the regions with the second highest number of migrants, following behind Europe. The flow of international migration within Asian regions has increased considerably over the past few decades and more populous countries such as India and China are associated with higher levels of emigration to other countries in the region (Abel, 2013; Abel and Sander, 2014; Hiraiwa, 2019). The top destination regions for Asian migrants are Asia (35%), followed by the Middle East (27%), Europe, inclusive of the Russian Federation (19%), and North America (18%) (Kikkawa Takenaka, A., et al., 2020).

The impact of the pandemic in Asian regions seems to be relatively negligible, but the real figure is likely to be considerably higher than the reported figure due to the large number of unreported or undiagnosed cases (Djalante et al. 2020). Among Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, Indonesia has reported the highest number of cases: 1.02 million cases as of January 28, 2021. Indonesia is followed by the Philippines which reported 0.51 million (Figure 7). However, Singapore has the highest number of confirmed cases per million people: 10,157 cases, followed by Malaysia, with 5,977 cases.

The emergence of a new strain of the COVID-19 virus has caused new border

\(^2\) "Pick our fruit, get COVID-19". July 7, 2020, Macleans, Canada. The pandemic is further exposing Canada’s exploitative immigration practices (macleans.ca) accessed January 26 2021.
closures and passenger bans globally. Such measures continue to have an immense impact on global mobility and migration. The global pandemic continues to pose myriad epidemiological challenges as the total number of COVID-19 cases reached almost 80 million (79,931,215 cases) as of 29th December 2020 according to statistics released by the World Health Organization (IOM, 2020). Medical measures are the most common condition for authorized entry representing 67 percent of conditions.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) published a series of briefing notes on their research into the impact COVID-19 has had on migrant workers and responses governments in Asia have had to the crisis.

Malaysia implemented a Movement Control Order (MCO) on March 18, 2020. Its measures included the closing of national borders, restrictions on internal and international travel, closure of all businesses and government offices except for those providing essential services, the closure of kindergartens, schools and universities, and a ban on the gatherings (ILO, 2020a). Arrests of undocumented workers have been carried out by the government since the start of May 2020. About 40,000 Thai nationals had been repatriated from Malaysia by May 4, 2020, and 11,566 Indonesians had returned to Indonesia from Malaysia by March 29, 2020. The ILO reported that daily-waged migrant workers, including undocumented
workers, are among the hardest hit. Many of them have run out of money and rely on food aid distributed by the government and civil society organizations.

Thailand also saw a sudden, largely unexpected outflow of tens of thousands of migrant workers from Cambodia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, and Myanmar, who chose to travel back to their home countries and communities in March 2020 (ILO, 2020c). These migrants were motivated to return home by a partial lockdown of Bangkok and the order given by the Thai Interior Ministry for the closure of 18 border points, which was to take effect on March 23, 2020. Other reasons for this exodus included migrant’s fear of the COVID-19 pandemic worsening, migrants having lost their jobs or expecting to lose them, and the fact that they had been issued work permits under the National Verification System, which were due to expire.

While the Thai government has not made official statistics available, reports from Cambodia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Myanmar indicate that at least 310,000 migrant workers have returned to these countries. The vast majority of these returning migrants came from Thailand, between March and June of 2020. Many returnees reportedly crossed through unofficial border points. As of December 2019, there were 2,788,316 registered migrant workers in Thailand and an unknown number of undocumented migrant workers. The available data on returnees indicates that around 10 percent of those documented migrants left the country in 2020. ILO (2020c) also reports that migrant workers in Thailand were among the first to lose their jobs as employers downsized their work forces at the beginning of the pandemic. The Migrant Working Group, a member-based organization that advocates for the rights of migrant workers in Thailand, estimates that as many as 700,000 migrant workers — mostly from the tourism, services, and construction industries — have lost their jobs since the lockdown started in late March 2020.

It is estimated that over four million Myanmar nationals work overseas and that approximately two million of these overseas workers are employed in Thailand. In the week beginning on March 22, 2020, tens of thousands of these workers unexpectedly returned, re-entering Myanmar from Thailand at all possible border crossings. Between March 22 to June 15 of 2020, 99,058 migrants returned to Myanmar from Thailand, while 36,280 migrants returned to China and 131 returned to Lao People’s Democratic Republic. According to a survey conducted by the ILO on the experiences of migrant workers in ASEAN countries during COVID-19,
58% of returning migrants from Thailand expect to re-migrate and many of these expect to return to their previous job. However, due to long quarantine requirements in both Myanmar and Thailand, migrants may not be able to return fast enough to meet the needs of their employers and they may find that their jobs have been taken by unemployed migrants who remained in Thailand (ILO, 2020b).

Despite the low number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Cambodia the virus has had a significant impact on the nation. An estimated 100,000 migrants have returned to Cambodia. This is reflective of the economic impact COVID-19 has had on employment opportunities in neighboring Thailand, which is the top destination for Cambodian migrant workers. As movement control measures were put in place in Thailand and border closures and restrictions on interprovincial travel were enforced, it became difficult for Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand to return home. Many stayed, and even those who could return to Cambodia were unlikely to find jobs in major sectors, including tourism and textiles, which have suffered during the pandemic (ILO, 2020d). For Cambodian migrant workers who have remained in destination countries, the situation is dire. Cambodian migrant workers who have lost their jobs will find it difficult to find new jobs and to retain regular migration status, but are left with limited options should they return home and limited access to government aid, especially in the case of irregular migrant workers.

5. Conclusion

Almost one year has passed since the 11th March 2020, the day World Health Organization (WHO) defined the new coronavirus, COVID-19, as a global pandemic. Migrant workers were among the first to lose their jobs (IOM, 2020) in the wake of the pandemic. Migrant workers in Southeast Asian countries are disproportionately employed in service sectors such as the tourism, textiles, and agricultural industries\(^3\), which are the most vulnerable sectors in the face of an

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\(^3\) On the other hand, among the 20 countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases as of 3 November 2020, the United States, France, Spain, the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Chile, and Belgium depend on foreign-born workers in the critical sector of healthcare services. In the United Kingdom, 33% of doctors and 22% of nurses were noted to be foreign-born in 2015/6 (Migration Data Portal, 2021). This reflects sharp differences and characteristics in behavior between Asian and European countries in terms of how immigrants make decisions
economic crisis. Therefore, migrant workers have been among the first to face hardships in maintaining their livelihoods and the livelihoods of their families and communities in both their host and home countries. The impact the severe decrease in remittance flow to immigrants’ home countries has shed light on the deep connections migrant workers in Asia have with their households in their home countries (Suhardiman et al., 2021). As migrants in Singapore suggest, almost every report and document that focuses on the living conditions and livelihoods of migrant workers in Asia during COVID-19 has revealed socioeconomic inequality these workers face in their dormitories, in their slum settlements, and in their low-income housing areas (Djalante, 2020).

In this paper, we have explored what is thus far known about how the pandemic has affected international migrants by observing changes in migrant stock and remittance flows and how governments in East Asia have responded to the pandemic and dealt with the treatment of migrant workers in their countries. Further research and analysis should be conducted to investigate the inequalities migrant workers face; an issue that has been exposed by the pandemic. Future research might consider how regional intergovernmental organizations like ASEAN might utilize trade regionalization and economic integration to improve conditions for immigrant communities is another important issue that has not been explored in this paper. The demand for migrant workers will continue to rise again as the pandemic subsides and these workers will have to tackle the higher restriction and cost of movement. The Covid-19 pandemic should draw international attention to the importance of cross-border movement of workers for both the home and host countries of immigrants.

References


regarding their jobs and livelihood.


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