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Social protection systems and measures for all? International migrants are left behind

Although international migration is not new, a growing number of people choose or are forced to migrate. In 2017, there were 258 million international migrants worldwide, up from 173 million in 2000 (United Nations, 2017).

Migration is an integral part of the global development process. The lives of millions of people and whole societies have been transformed, mostly for the better, through international migration. Migrants make important contributions to the economies of their host countries as they fill important labour gaps, open businesses and pay taxes. They also contribute to their home countries' economies, namely through the money they remit

Gaps in social protection coverage

Despite their positive contributions, many international migrants lack basic social protection coverage in their countries of destination, as the Report on the World Social Situation 2018 shows (United Nations, 2018). Some migrants are not even eligible for social protection. Migrants in an irregular situation often have access to emergency health care, either by law or de facto, but are by and large excluded from other social protection programmes. People who move using regular channels for short periods of time are excluded from many programmes as well, especially when access requires minimum periods of work or residence.

Many migrants do not have access to social

protection even when they are eligible. Because of their status, migrants face more administrative and social barriers to access than non-migrants. Their high participation in informal jobs also puts them out of the reach of contributory social protection schemes.

Migrants may contribute to social protection schemes in both home and host countries but, if social protection rights and benefits are not portable across countries, they may lose their entitlements when moving internationally. People moving between countries may not be able to preserve or transfer pensions, health insurance or other benefits even after having contributed for a long time.


Many countries have negotiated bilateral and multilateral agreements to ensure the adequate portability of entitlements. Overall, 94 countries out of 120 countries with data have concluded at least one bilateral agreement and 77 have at least one multilateral agreement in place (Panhuys, Kazi-Aoul and Binette, 2017). However, there are still loopholes. Most agreements cover contributory benefits, mainly old-age pensions, but exclude health-care benefits, even when contributory, and social assistance as well as other tax-financed payments. As a result, many agreements fall short of ensuring access to basic social protection floors.

Extending social protection to international migrants

Without effective action to remove the obstacles that migrants face in accessing social protection, the pledge made in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—to implement social protection systems and measures for all—will not be met.

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Improving the social protection coverage of international migrants involves, in the first place, providing better access in host countries. Despite popular perceptions, international migrants generally pay more in taxes and contributions than they take from social protection programmes. Therefore, there is scope for improving coverage and reducing the time gap between migrants' arrival, or their entry into the labour market, and their formal access to social protection programmes. Given that many migrants lack decent jobs, access to tax-financed (non-contributory) social protection schemes is particularly important to guarantee their income security and prevent poverty.

A growing number of countries of origin are engaging with nationals abroad and trying to extend some form of social protection to them. In addition to negotiating agreements with countries of destination, some have assumed direct responsibility for providing some basic protection, namely through migrant welfare funds. The evidence reviewed in the Report on the World Social Situation 2018 indicates that these home-country initiatives are particularly beneficial in countries with large numbers of nationals abroad, especially when migrants live in countries with overall weak social protection systems. In many cases, however, bilateral or multilateral agreements with host countries are necessary to ensure adequate coverage and facilitate the portability of benefits.


In countries with well-established social protection systems, there is scope for expanding bilateral and multilateral agreements—namely to include access to health care—and to improve consistency among the currently fragmented network of bilateral agreements. Countries where access to social protection is limited even for native populations have little capacity to ensure migrants' access or to negotiate and administer agreements with high-income countries. In such cases, the first policy priority should be to set up or strengthen basic social protection floors for all. Guaranteeing that the rights of migrants are respected, including in terms of social protection coverage, also calls for the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies, as agreed to in the 2030 Agenda (Sustainable Development Goal 10, target 10.7).

Ensuring that migrants are not left behind is not only a moral imperative. In the long run, migrants pay more into the social protection systems of receiving countries, both through direct contributions and taxes, than they receive in benefit payments. Lack of access to social protection reinforces migrants' vulnerability and affects their well-being. The impact of migration is certainly more positive when the rights of migrants are respected and their inclusion is promoted.

References

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