

## TIME FOR A RESET?

*This paper is part of a series of short “think pieces” by IOM’s Migration Research High Level Advisers on the potential changes, impacts and implications for migration and mobility arising from COVID-19. Designed to spark thinking on policy and programmatic responses to COVID-19 as the impacts continue to emerge globally, the papers draw upon existing and new evidence and offer initial exploratory analysis and recommendations.*

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## COVID-19 and the transformation of migration and mobility globally

# COVID-19 and systemic resilience: What role for migrant workers?

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### Introduction

One of the central policy challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic has been how to protect and maintain essential economic activities and public services such as agriculture and food production, health services and social care, as well as elements of transport, logistics and digital infrastructure. The health emergency and associated bans on movement within and across countries have led to severe labour market shocks, including sharp increases in labour demand (e.g. in the health sector) and/or reductions in labour supply (e.g. in agriculture and the care sector). The outbreak of COVID-19 has thus raised urgent questions for research and policy about the factors that promote and impede the resilience of the provision of essential goods and services during the current pandemic and anticipated health shocks in the future. Resilience can be broadly understood as the ability to withstand, recover from, and adapt to unexpected external shocks.<sup>2</sup>

While governments restricted movement and access to workspaces at the height of the pandemic, many also declared certain jobs “essential”, exempting them from the most severe restrictions. Migrants play an important role in essential sectors in many countries.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, migrants doing essential work – including those typically considered “low-skilled” workers, such as crop pickers, care assistants and cleaners in hospitals – have in many countries been designated “key workers” whose supply needs to be protected and in some cases even expanded during the health emergency. The Italian Government has decided to grant temporary legal status to migrants employed irregularly in agriculture and the care sector. Austria and

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<sup>2</sup> OECD, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> For example Gelatt, 2020; Fernández-Reino et al., 2020; Fasani and Mazza, 2020.



Germany made special exemptions to their international travel bans and admitted new migrants to fill labour shortages on farms and in care homes. In the United States of America, special arrangements were made to ensure that foreign farm workers could still obtain work visas, even as normal consular operations abroad were suspended. The United Kingdom announced that expiring visas of migrant doctors, nurses and paramedics were to be automatically extended.

While these immediate measures have been widely accepted as necessary to deal with the COVID-19 emergency in the short term, they also raise important questions about whether, why and to what extent migrant workers are really “needed” to provide essential services and to help ensure their resilience in the longer term. While migrants often represent a substantial share of the workforce in essential sectors, these shares can vary strongly between countries.<sup>4</sup> We know from existing research that cross-country variations in the reliance on migrant labour are, at least in part, linked to the considerable differences between national systems (i.e. the national institutional and public policy frameworks) for providing essential goods and services, and their particular interlinkages with global supply chains.<sup>5</sup> This existing research has primarily focused on employers’ incentives and has not yet considered the potential effects of *systemic resilience* on the demand for migrant workers. Indeed it appears that the concept of systemic resilience has been notably absent from research on migration and migration policy.<sup>6</sup>

This short paper argues that concern for the resilience of essential services should make us rethink how the impacts of migrant workers are assessed and how labour immigration and related public policies are designed. We integrate key insights from research on the role of migrant workers in addressing labour and skills shortages (section 2) and the essentially disconnected studies of the resilience of systems (section 3) to suggest how considerations of systemic resilience can be built into analyses and policy debates about the effects and regulation of labour immigration. While resilience strategies may vary across countries with different labour markets and other institutions and policies, we emphasize that taking systemic resilience seriously as a policy goal requires us to think globally and consider the role and contributions of migrants not only in essential sectors in particular countries, but also along global supply chains. The paper is intended as a conceptual contribution that begins to build a theoretical basis for new empirical research and policy debates about the role of migrant workers in the provision and resilience of essential services (see the new “Migrants and Systemic Resilience Hub” MigResHub at the EUI’s Migration Policy Centre).

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4 Fasani and Mazza, 2020.

5 For example Ruhs and Anderson, 2010.

6 Bourbeau, 2015.



### Learning from the past: A need for migrant workers?

Many of the key issues relevant to the question of why and to what extent migrant workers are needed as “key workers” in essential sectors are similar to those that have been at the heart of the more general and long-standing debates about the role of migrants in filling labour and skills shortages in specific occupations. The terms of the debate are familiar: employers often claim that migrant workers are “needed to fill labour and skills shortages” and to “do the jobs that local workers cannot or will not do”. Sceptics, including some trade unions, argue that in many cases these claims simply reflect employers’ preferences for recruiting cheap and exploitable migrant workers over improving wages and employment conditions.

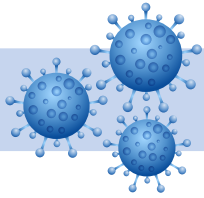
To analyse and debate these issues in a systematic way, it is instructive to turn to some of the key insights of the long-standing economic and sociological research literature on the characteristics and determinants of labour and skills shortages, employer demand for migrant labour and alternative policy responses.<sup>7</sup> First, there is no universally accepted definition of a labour or skills “shortage” and no single obvious “optimal” policy response. The definition of shortage typically underlying employers’ calls for migrants to help fill vacancies is that the demand for labour exceeds supply at the prevailing wages and employment conditions. While raising wages should help reduce shortages, some employers may be reluctant or unable to raise wages, even as they insist on the quality of the migrant labour force. Thus, considerations of wages and conditions need to be at the heart of debates about labour shortages, including in essential services. In particular, the relationship between flexibility (as resilience-enhancing) and precarity (which may have more complex consequences for resilience) merits closer interrogation.

Second, how “skills” are defined and understood in analyses and debates about “skills shortages” is similarly highly contentious, and this has implications for how we think about the skills needed for the provision of essential services. What is recognized and legitimated as “skill” is socially constituted, unavoidably politicized, and often heavily gendered.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, in most immigration systems, skill is treated as an attribute that is usually credentialized and acquired through education, and can be measured through earnings. Outside of the immigration system, the concept of “skills” has come to be used far more flexibly over the past 20 years, and “soft skills” have been enumerated and applied to employee qualities and personal characteristics such as attitude, presentation, enthusiasm, social interaction etc.<sup>9</sup> “Soft skills” can also be used to refer to attributes and characteristics that are related to employer control over the workforce. Soft skills, like experience, are less likely to be reflected in wages,

7 For example Waldinger and Lichter, 2003; Ruhs and Anderson, 2010.

8 Steinberg, 1990; Bryant and Jaworski, 2011; Sawchuk, 2008; Fenwick, 2006; Guo, 2015.

9 Sawchuk, 2008.



but may be highly desired by employers. Employer-defined and constituted skills are likely to vary considerably by company, context and country.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, any discussion of “skills shortages” needs to be aware that, in some occupations, the skills and “work ethic” demanded by employers are partly or largely a reflection of employer preference for a workforce over which they can exercise particular mechanisms of control and/or that is prepared to accept wages and employment conditions that do not attract a sufficient supply of local workers. Furthermore, establishing resilience as a desirable goal might entail different ways of valuing the roles of different workers and rethinking the concept of skills, including whether it is an adequate measure of contribution.

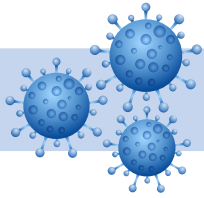
Third, immigration is not necessarily the only available or most desirable response to labour or skills shortages in a particular occupation. In theory, at an individual level, employers may respond to perceived staff shortages in different ways.<sup>11</sup> These include: (i) increasing wages and/or improving working conditions to attract more citizens who are either inactive, unemployed, or employed in other sectors, and/or to increase the working hours of the existing workforce (this may require a change in recruitment processes and greater investment in training and up-skilling); (ii) changing the production process to make it less labour-intensive by, for example, increasing the capital and/or technology intensity; (iii) relocating to countries where labour costs are lower; (iv) switching to production (provision) of less labour-intensive commodities and services; and (v) employing migrant workers. To be sure, not all of these alternatives will be available to employers across different sectors and occupations; however, the fundamental point remains that immigration is not necessarily the only or best response to a shortage, and this applies also to sectors deemed essential for basic societal functioning.

Fourth, reliance on migrant workers in specific sectors and occupations is, at least in part, a reflection of “system effects” that “produce” domestic labour shortages. System effects arise from the institutional and regulatory frameworks of the labour market and from wider public policies including (but not restricted to) immigration policies, many of which are not ostensibly linked with the labour market. Both system effects and social context are often outside the control of individual employers and workers, and may be heavily (but not exclusively) influenced by the State. The analysis of system effects points to the difficulty of constructing and implementing labour immigration policy in isolation from labour market policy and wider economic and social policies and institutions.<sup>12</sup> Cross-country differences in national institutional and regulatory frameworks, and their interlinkages with global systems such as international supply chains, are an important reason behind substantial variation in

<sup>10</sup> Griuglis and Vincent, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Ruhs and Anderson, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



the reliance on migrant labour in the same occupation across different countries. These differences in national institutional and policy contexts, and the associated reliance on migrant labour in essential services, imply further that there is likely to be cross-country variation in resilience strategies for the provision of essential services. Nevertheless, despite these variations, in a globalized economy resilience-building likely requires thinking beyond particular States, and analysing the intermeshing of different system effects and the role of international governance and cooperation.

### Systemic resilience

While research on systemic resilience has been largely disconnected from migration analyses and policies, some of its basic concepts and insights are highly relevant to debates about the resilience of essential services, and how it may be shaped by migrant labour, during and after COVID-19. The notion of a system's resilience originated in natural sciences such as physics and ecology, where it captures the tendency of the system (e.g. an ecosystem) to “bounce back” to roughly the state that prevailed before the shock. When this notion was imported into different fields of social science, however, it was recognized that systems in social science are typically in some process of evolution.<sup>13</sup> In this context, a system is considered resilient when its evolution is not permanently “thrown off course”: after the shock, it eventually “bounces forward”, returning to the evolutionary path that prevailed before the shock.

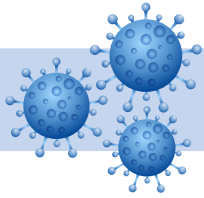
Various social sciences – including geography, management science, economics, development studies and public health – have produced and debated a plethora of more detailed definitions of systemic resilience.<sup>14</sup> While the notion itself has therefore remained rather vague, there are striking similarities that have been identified across the social sciences with regard to the features of a resilient system. Here we consider two of these features, often called “flexibility” and “social capital” or “networks”. In a figurative sense, a system may be hard to break (resilience) if it bends (flexibility) and/or if its fibres are supported by strong connections (social capital and networks).

Flexibility is used in a broad sense, meaning the capacity to adapt. This may entail changing a process, changing the inputs employed in the process, changing the desired outputs, or even replacing a process by an altogether different activity. For example, a business organization can exhibit flexibility at the level of individual employees, who find workarounds and adjust their work schedules, and equally at the levels of organizational structures or corporate strategy.<sup>15</sup> Inputs such as materials and suppliers may be changed, as well as the outputs produced or where outputs are marketed.

<sup>13</sup> Robinson and Carson, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> For an overview, see Brand and Jax, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Woods, 2006; Eichhorst et al., 2010.



This example is also useful to illustrate the trade-off between flexibility and efficiency, i.e. using inputs to maximum effect. A frequently mentioned way to build flexibility and thereby resilience is the maintenance of several options (known as “redundancy”), in order to reduce dependence on a single option.<sup>16</sup> This, however, causes additional costs compared with using only the most efficient option.<sup>17</sup> Another way to build flexibility, similarly mentioned in various social sciences, is “diversity”:<sup>18</sup> a diverse system may be less dependent on any single element and exhibit a greater capacity to adapt, in so far as diversity contributes to innovative solutions and ensures that while some approaches and ideas may fail, others will succeed.

Under the heading of social capital and networks, a range of connections between (groups of) individuals has been described that support or reinforce individual actions. For example, hospital staff with a strong sense of making a common effort and of commitment to each other may be an invaluable factor for the hospital’s resilience during a crisis.<sup>19</sup> This involves very practical aspects such as sharing information, peer learning and stepping in for colleagues. Networks can go beyond any given unit and function as a resource that can be drawn on during crises, be it based on a shared interest or on reciprocity. In many ways, sufficiently large networks can provide insurance: the parts of the network that are currently unaffected by a shock can come to the aid of the parts currently most affected. Social capital and networks also relate to flexibility – a strong sense of community or highly responsive networks can allow for a rapid temporary increase in staff levels, for example.

Finally, the cross-cutting role of structural policies and institutions for resilience has been noted across the social sciences.<sup>20</sup> Through standards and regulations, policies can severely limit the scope for flexibility at the level of individuals, organizations or entire sectors of the economy. Similarly, centralized institutions can undermine the creation and functioning of decentralized networks. However, policies can also enforce a minimum scope for flexibility and risk-sharing: certain preparations and crisis interventions benefit the system as a whole, even though engaging in them is not individually rational for (most) private entities. In an extreme case, private businesses may be mandated to switch production temporarily towards medical equipment, for example. More frequently, however, policies and institutions exert influence by – knowingly or not – encouraging some choices, while discouraging others. This can lead to significant differences in systems across countries, with important consequences for the resilience of these systems.

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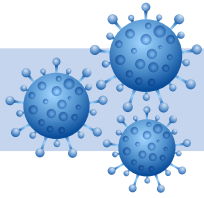
16 For example Martin and Sunley, 2015.

17 Kamalahmadi and Parast, 2016.

18 For example Mitchell and Harris, 2012.

19 Kruk et al., 2015.

20 For example Briguglio et al., 2005; OECD, 2012.



## Migrants and resilience of essential services

If resilience of the provision of essential goods and services is an important policy goal, this will have consequences for research and policy on migration. It implies the need to rethink how the labour market impact of migrant labour is assessed and how labour migration and wider public policies are designed. This final section highlights three areas of change that such a rethink would entail.

### *Shifting the focus to systems*

First, migrants' impact and labour immigration policies are often defined in terms of occupations or skill levels. For example, a key question that is typically asked when deciding on the admission of migrant workers is whether and how migrants can help with addressing skills and labour shortages in specific occupations. When considering resilience, entire systems should be the unit of reference instead. This considerably broadens the perspective: a system for the provision of some good may include domestic production and domestic supply chains, as well as trade in intermediate or final products and associated supply chains abroad. Migrants can be important in numerous roles along supply chains both domestically and abroad. For example, half of the global supply of medical gloves appears to be produced by migrants in Malaysia.<sup>21</sup> By consequence, the resilience of a system may depend on macrolevel developments that affect global supply chains. The isolated assessment of migrants' employment in a particular occupation or skill level and in a single country misses potential effects on the functioning of the systems in which they are embedded, including effects on systemic resilience.

### *From protecting employment of citizens to protecting the provision of essential services*

The protection of the employment opportunities for citizens is typically a key consideration in assessments of the impacts of immigration, both in public debates about migrants and in the design of labour immigration policies. Migration impact assessments usually include analyses of the effects of immigration on the wages and unemployment of citizens.<sup>22</sup> Public debates about immigration are often characterized by an "us versus them" frame that foregrounds the (presumed conflictual) relationship between migrants and citizens.<sup>23</sup> In almost all countries, most labour immigration policies (although not those for the most highly skilled migrants) include a "labour market test" that requires employers to provide evidence that they have made efforts to search for workers domestically to fill vacancies before applying for work permits for migrant workers.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the conventional "status quo" approach to assessing, debating and regulating labour immigration is

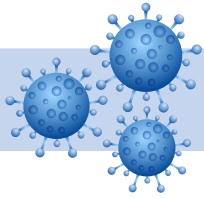
21 Deutsche Welle, 2020.

22 For example Migration Advisory Committee, 2012.

23 For example Anderson, 2013.

24 For example Ruhs, 2013.





based on the perceived need to protect low- and medium-skilled citizens' "right to preferential access to the national labour market".<sup>25</sup> There are obvious political explanations for the perceived necessity of such an approach, based on conventional thinking: when considering how to regulate access to jobs in their countries, national governments need to give at least some priority to the interests of their citizens, which in turn necessitates the existence of at least some rules that are aimed at protecting employment opportunities for citizens.

How to protect and enhance the resilience of the provision of essential services is, by its very nature, an overarching (new) objective that can be expected to reduce (or even eliminate) concerns about protecting employment opportunities for citizens. This is because the primary issues do not relate to efficiency or distribution, but to the protection and stability of the provision of the essential good/service. In other words, given that essential services are necessary for basic social function and people's survival, the "ends" (resilience of provision) become much more important considerations than the "means" – in particular, deciding who provides the service, i.e. what combination of migrants and citizens.

#### *From short run to long run*

Finally, considering systemic resilience requires a change in temporal framing. To value resilience is necessarily to think in the medium to long term, and its attainment may mean trading off short-term gains including profit margins (for employers) and electability (for politicians). Different stakeholders are subject to different pressures to think in the short term. For democratic politicians, incentives are weighted very heavily towards pursuing short-term objectives, but resilience requires a time horizon that extends beyond the electoral cycle. In some circumstances, employers may be more open to longer-term thinking, but they may also have to consider short-term profits and efficiency. These kinds of pressures also feature in debates about sustainability which, like resilience, demands a shift to more long-term thinking. However, resilience also demands an explicit focus on risk, and even unquantifiable uncertainty.

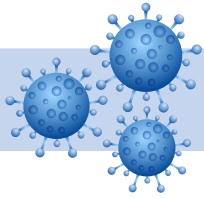
#### *Migrants and resilience*

The contributions of migrant labour and labour immigration policies to systemic resilience have not yet been explored. However, the important and often unacknowledged role that migrants play in many essential sectors has been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic in a number of major destination countries. This suggests that migrant employment can perform particular functions within systems. It is not difficult to imagine that migrants' jobs and their behaviour in these jobs differ from that of citizens in ways that matter for resilience. Recalling the

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<sup>25</sup> Ruhs, 2014.





identified features of resilient systems, migrant workers might be especially flexible, or conversely, immigration requirements might reduce flexibility. Similarly, migrants' social capital may play particular roles for networks.

Once the relation between migrant labour and resilience is better understood, policies can target this lever. While many aspects that affect systemic resilience may be difficult to change, due to long-established institutional and policy settings, migrant labour could be comparatively susceptible to change. In addition, the role that migrants already play in many essential sectors suggests that this lever might lead to relatively large improvements of systemic resilience. For these two reasons, migrant labour could be a key variable for strategic efforts to increase resilience through policies.

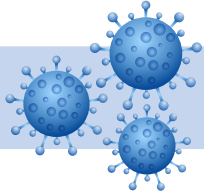


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