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Humanitarian consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic for migrants and refugees

Report[1]
Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons
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Summary

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the Covid-19 outbreak a pandemic. Everyone has been affected, but vulnerable groups, such as migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, are often doubly touched.

Tens of millions of migrants have faced severe travel restrictions. Irregular migrants, refugees and asylum seekers have had to undertake longer and more perilous journeys and to endure prolonged periods of detention in cramped conditions with severe risk of rampant epidemic spread.

The evolving economic crisis will hit countries of origin harder than Europe's comparatively stable economies. All of this will create important additional migratory pressures and migration management issues for countries of origin, transit and destination.

it is important to learn from experience and member States should not succumb to a fortress mentality. They should recognise the special needs of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees and value fully, migrant workers' contributions. Furthermore, they should implement the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' Practical Recommendations and Good Practice to Address Protection Concerns in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

It is also recommended that member States show greater solidarity towards developing countries in the context of the pandemic and consider debts relief, maintain or increase development cooperation, and implement measures to simplify the transfer of remittances by diasporas.

1. Reference to committee: Bureau decision, Reference 4515 of 7 May 2020.

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A. Draft resolution[2]

1. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the Covid-19 outbreak a pandemic, bringing much of the world to a halt, closing national borders and restricting freedom of movement. Everyone has been affected, but vulnerable groups, such as migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, are often the first to suffer and doubly affected in situations of crisis.

2. Tens of millions of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers have been stranded or sorely affected in terms of travel restrictions and their ability to return to their home countries or countries where they reside or work. Many have found themselves in a precarious situation economically, losing their incomes and jobs and using up all the money they had saved. There has also been a resurgence of discrimination and intolerance partly due to unjustified fears that foreigners spread disease and, in economically challenging times, take away jobs from the host population.

3. Migrants, refugees and asylum seekers have faced many additional problems: the closing of borders has led to new irregular migration movements, with even longer and more perilous journeys at a time when search and rescue at sea has been curtailed, the risk of pushbacks has increased and disembarkation has become a bone of political contention. Irregular migrants and asylum seekers have also had to face prolonged periods of detention in cramped conditions with severe risk of rampant epidemic spread. There has been a build-up in the backlog of asylum and other claims to be processed, education for children, already often sub-par, has often been put on hold, and women and children have become even more vulnerable to domestic violence while living in complicated stress situations.

4. It is certain that member States of the Council of Europe, like all other countries, are struggling to meet the burden of health care and the prevailing economic recession; under these circumstances, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers will not necessarily be considered a high priority. Many member States however rely heavily on migrants, including cross border and seasonal workers, to do essential jobs in health care, agriculture, sanitation, transportation, etc.

5. Countries of origin of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, including those on Europe's frontiers, have initially been less affected by the pandemic, but this situation is changing and will have consequences for member States of the Council of Europe. The evolving economic crisis will hit countries of origin harder than Europe's comparatively stable economies which benefit from widely available healthcare and social support. In African countries, the lack of access to health services and social benefits, combined with the economic downturn, will have significant negative consequences. These countries will also face reduced foreign investment and development assistance, and migrant remittances will drop by 23% in 2020 according to the World Bank. All of this will create important additional migratory pressures and migration management issues for countries of origin, transit and destination.

6. On a more positive note, the first six months of the pandemic has illustrated that even during the Covid-19 crisis it has, to a large extent, been possible to provide humanitarian assistance to those in need. Furthermore, many of the refugee camps have been able to avoid the wildfire spread of the virus in often highly cramped conditions, although there are unfortunately an increasing number of new outbreaks being reported. Organisations on the ground have shown that activities such as screening and registration of asylum seekers can continue, provided that appropriate preventative measures are applied. Furthermore, some of the exceptional measures taken by member States during the pandemic, such as regularisation programmes, release from migration detention and broader employment possibilities for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, have shown that migration management can be carried out under less restrictive conditions. This is something that the Parliamentary Assembly has sought to underline for many years.

7. Unfortunately, without a vaccine or a cure for the virus, it is important to learn from the experience so far. It is in this context that the Assembly recommends that member States:

7.1. do not succumb to a fortress mentality and recognise that Covid-19, and migration and asylum, are global phenomena, and responses and solutions need to be found at both national and international levels;

7.2. continue including the special needs of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in national Covid-19 emergency response plans, even if national budgets are stretched;

2. Draft resolution adopted by the Committee on 7 September 2020.

7.3. continue to implement the Global Compact on Refugees, notwithstanding the pandemic, and abide by commitments made at the Global Refugee Forum to support refugees and others of concern to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), along with host countries and communities;

7.4. apply its Resolution 2329 (2020) "Lessons for the future from an effective and rights-based response to the Covid-19 pandemic" to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

8. In relation to migrants in general, the Assembly recommends that member States:

8.1. keep their borders open and lift unnecessary travel restrictions;

8.2. recognise the value of migrant workers, including seasonal and cross-border workers, as an essential part of the work force, ensuring essential services such as health care, agriculture, sanitation, transportation, etc.;

8.3. implement the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration which provides an effective framework for international co-operation on the governance of international migration and its impact on migrants;

8.4. follow the guidance of the International Organization for Migration for employers and business to enhance migrant worker protection during the current health crisis.

9. Concerning refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants where appropriate, the Assembly recommends that member States:

9.1. show solidarity with front line countries currently taking the brunt of arrivals, and support wherever possible relocation efforts;

9.2. take into account and promote UNHCR's Practical Recommendations and Good Practice to Address Protection Concerns in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic, and in particular:

9.2.1. ensure access to territory while protecting public health through medical screening, testing and quarantine. Where entry bans or border closures are implemented, consider an explicit exemption for asylum-seekers, combined with enhanced health measures;

9.2.2. continue providing adequate reception conditions adapting them as necessary to reduce the risk of transmission of Covid-19;

9.2.3. maintain systems of registration and documentation. This is particularly important for identification of those most vulnerable, including women and children, the elderly and victims of violence and trafficking. Also, allow for extended deadlines and flexibility in procedures where necessary;

9.2.4. prevent transmission of Covid-19 during the reception and detention processes by avoiding detention where possible, taking into account that alternatives often exist and evaluating the size and lay out of camps in terms of risk analysis, shifting to independent private accommodation or smaller collective centres, if at all possible;

9.2.5. continue to provide avenues for asylum and adapt asylum procedures where necessary, allowing for remote interviews and flexible deadlines;

9.2.6. include migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in risk education and information efforts relating to Covid-19;

9.2.7. prioritise communication with and between migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, taking into account that information can be lifesaving.

9.3. in relation to irregular migrants, suspend forced returns and returns that are not strictly voluntary in nature, so as to prevent the spread of the virus;

9.4. pay particular attention to the needs of children, in particular education, taking into account the lack of access to on-line learning for many in camps or other settings: unaccompanied minors have to be relocated as soon as possible;

9.5. take measures to preserve family unity and prevent family separation, as long as not in contradiction with health and safety of family members. Furthermore, all possible steps should be taken to protect people from going missing as a result of Covid-19. These steps should include systematic registration in health facilities and facilitating communications between family members that have been separated;

9.6. attention should be paid to preventing domestic and other violence and protecting those who may be vulnerable during lockdowns and restrictive periods.

10. The Assembly recommends that member States show greater solidarity towards developing countries in the global context of the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences for migration management and asylum. They should:

10.1. consider possible cancellation, reduction or restructuration of national debts of developing countries;

10.2. maintain or increase development co-operation, accompanied by mechanisms to improve audits on the use of public finance in beneficiary countries;

10.3. implement measures to simplify the transfer of remittances by diasporas to developing countries as a direct way of assistance.

11. The Assembly recommends that member States show greater solidarity amongst themselves, and refrain from using migrants, asylum seekers and refugees as political pawns. In the context of arrivals by land and sea, they should stop “push backs”, prevent violence at borders, and ensure that “boat people” are promptly disembarked at ports without international haggling and negotiation.

12. The Assembly invites the European Union, in the context of the pandemic, to promote solidarity amongst member States, provide more financial assistance globally, preserve access to the asylum process and expand and improve regular migration pathways.

13. The Assembly invites national parliaments to look not only at the impact of Covid-19 on their own countries, but to have a perspective of the impact on developing countries, including countries of origin of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and respond accordingly for the benefit of everyone’s future.

B. Explanatory memorandum by Mr Fridez, rapporteur,

1. Covid-19 and migration: a life-threatening paralysis

1. For two months and more, most of the world shut down, national borders closed, freedom of movement was suspended, administrations put on hold and policing turned to the enforcement of internal emergency measures. For many, this meant loss of work, reduction in income and challenges to education. Across the globe tens of millions of migrants have been stranded, using up money saved. For migrants and refugees, it often meant the end of hopes for a foreseeable end to life-threatening journeys, the perpetuation of squalid and unsafe living conditions, the prolongation of detention *sine die* and a sudden halt in the processing of asylum and protection claims.[3] However, as this report will show, some countries managed to maintain asylum procedures by implementing measures to ensure distancing and prevent contagion.

2. During the same lapse of time, the wars, hardship and oppression which cause refugees to flee their homes continued: in Libya, the opposing forces of a failed State continued to tear apart the country and its inhabitants, whether indigenous or migrant. In West Africa, locust invasions devoured the livelihood of thousands of people. In Syria and Afghanistan repression continued. Closer to home, fear of contagion and fear of migrants taking up the ever-fewer available jobs, caused increased hostility towards migrants and a greater reluctance to offer the protection set out in international law.

1.1. Context and aim of the report

3. Soon after the Covid -19 outbreak was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on 11 March 2020, the Parliamentary Assembly decided to work on mapping its effects and examining its public health, social, political and legal consequences for member States and partners. In line with its statutory vocation to discuss questions of common concern and to make recommendations upon any matter within the aim and scope of the Council of Europe, the Assembly was evidently well placed to analyse the situation in which Europe found itself, produce guidelines aimed to mitigate its effects and make proposals to member States to find co-ordinated multilateral solutions.

4. In this context, the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons was tasked with preparing a report on the humanitarian consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic for migrants and refugees, as a contribution to a broad debate in the Assembly. Having supported the inclusion of migration matters in the debate and suggested the topic of the report to the Assembly's Bureau, I was appointed by our committee to work on the present report on 29 May 2020.

5. Substantial input to the report was provided by the replies to a questionnaire sent through the European Parliamentary Centre for Research and Documentation (ECPRD) to parliamentary correspondents, on national measures taken in relation to the Covid -19 crisis with respect to migrants and refugees. The questionnaire asked whether exceptional regulatory or practical measures had been taken for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, with respect to awareness-raising on rights and protection in the Covid-19 context, sanitary prevention, access to healthcare and emergency medical treatment, extension of validity of asylum claims or regularisation, extension of residency/employment or other permits, administrative detention and families with children, separated and unaccompanied children and women.

6. No less than 39 countries replied, which allowed for a comprehensive overview of government's regulatory responses.[4] The committee also held a remote exchange of views at its meeting on 23 June with Drahoslav Stefanek, the Council of Europe Secretary General's Special Representative on migration and refugees, Nina Schrepfer, Senior Legal Officer, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Regional Bureau for Europe, and with Tineke Strik, former member of the Parliamentary Assembly, currently member of the European Parliament.

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3. United Nations: "Thousands of Migrants Stranded Worldwide by Pandemic": https://in.news.yahoo.com/thousands-migrants-stranded-worldwide-pandemic-130800499.html?guccounter=1.
4. A summary of the replies to the questionnaire can be consulted in document AS/Mig/Inf(2020)05.

2. A disease which worsened Europe's pre-existing chronic ailments

2.1. Old routes re-open, new passages appear

7. A cursory examination of the evolution of the so-called migration "crisis" which began in 2015 shows clearly that closing borders and building walls, despite dissuading migrants from entering individual countries territories to a certain extent, has not served to stem migratory flows into Europe. Each time tighter restrictions are put on migratory routes, new "breaches" appear, usually forcing people desperately in need of protection to put themselves in even greater danger by attempting new, longer and more perilous circumnavigations.

8. Covid -19 has created "pile-ups" of migrants stranded in atrocious conditions. The pandemic required States to implement exceptional measures to curb the spread of the virus and to protect public health, including in the event of arrivals of asylum seekers at their borders. Such measures are in the interest of all, including asylum seekers themselves. Alternative measures such as medical screening or quarantining upon arrival protect public health while ensuring access to territory for persons seeking international protection and protecting them against the risk of *refoulement*. Border closures may also be detrimental to public health interests, as they may increase irregular movements, further complicating authorities´ efforts to curb and respond to the pandemic".[5]

9. Thus, for instance, a 700% surge in migrants arriving in the Canary Islands was reported (by Reuters and AFP), between January 1 and April 15, and since March, a total of 1 781 migrants had arrived on the Canaries compared to just 181 over the same period last year.[6]Although the route across the Atlantic is more direct than crossing the Sahara and then the Mediterranean to reach Europe, the Atlantic is far more treacherous with higher seas, strong currents and stronger winds.

10. When the Balkans route from Turkey to central Europe was blocked in 2015, asylum applications in Cyprus soared from 2 253 to 13 648 in 2019. The European Union reported that in spring 2019, Cyprus was receiving three times as many asylum applications per month, adjusted for population, as Greece. While many came from countries in conflict, particularly Syria and Cameroon, Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi applicants far outnumbered those fleeing war zones so far this year.[7]

11. An increase in arrivals at the United Kingdom's Kent coast was reported during the Covid-19 lockdown period.[8] The increase began well before the pandemic set in, but in this instance, too, its effects redoubled the risk which migrants run. In an interview the chair of Kent's County Council, Roger Gough, told the BBC that the number of unaccompanied child migrants arriving in Kent had risen significantly in the past 12 months, and that the number of young asylum seekers in the county had doubled in a little more than a year, with 450 child migrants in the Council's care at the end of April, compared with 257 in April 2019.[9]

12. A tragic feature of these cases again illustrates the type of exacerbated danger caused by the pandemic – the drop in lorries crossing the Channel due to coronavirus led to a rise in the numbers of children arriving in dinghies, thus adding more danger to the journey. Also, according to the national Immigration Services Union, the age of children arriving unaccompanied appeared to be dropping, seeming to indicate that the journeys could be organised by human traffickers. Despite the need for protection above other considerations, the United Kingdom Government took the position that the incidents were the result of criminals smuggling people into the country illegally, and that the migrants had "left a safe country". The government was said to be seeking to return "specific cases where appropriate".[10]

2.2. Border closures in Europe, coupled with pushbacks

13. Reports of violent police pushbacks on several European borders were examined by the Assembly in a report prepared by Ms Tineke Strik in 2019.[11]With lockdown and even stricter control of European borders in certain countries, these practices have increased. On 5 June, for instance, a national human rights NGO, the

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5. UNHCR, "Practical Recommendations and Good Practice to Address Protection Concerns in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic", www.refworld.org/docid/5ede06a94.html.
6. www.infomigrants.net/en/post/24816/87-migrants-rescued-off-the-canary-islands.
7. France 24, June 3: www.france24.com/en/20200603-tents-and-razor-wire-cyprus-struggles-with-migrant-influx.
8. For instance: www.kentonline.co.uk/dover/news/up-to-100-migrants-in-seven-boats-arrive-228176/.
9. www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-kent-52680025.
10. www.kentonline.co.uk/dover/news/officials-working-to-deport-migrants-after-crossings-thwarted-227314/.
11. See Doc. 14909, 8 June 2019, "Pushback policies and practice in Council of Europe member States" (Resolution 2299 (2019) and Recommendation 2161 (2019).

Center for Peace Studies filed a criminal complaint to the Croatian State Attorney's Office against "unknown perpetrators" from the police, "based on a reasonable doubt of degrading treatment and torture of 33 people and their violent, illegal expulsion from the territory of the Republic of Croatia to Bosnia and Herzegovina".[12]

14. The British daily newspaper *The Guardian* reported details on the same incident, along with photographs and testimonies, showing more than 30 migrants were allegedly robbed, beaten and spray-painted with red crosses on their heads when attempting to cross the border from Bosnia and Herzegovina by Croatian police officers, who said the treatment was the "cure against coronavirus". The group included minors. European Union parliamentarians have now demanded an independent commission of inquiry to make an investigation.[13]

15. Amnesty International reported a further violent incident involving 16 Pakistani and Afghan asylum seekers apprehended by the Croatian police between 26 and 27 May near Lake Plitvice, as they tried to cross the country to reach Western Europe.[14] Between eight and ten people wearing black uniforms and balaclavas fired their weapons in the air, kicked and repeatedly hit the restrained men with metal sticks, batons and pistol grips. They then rubbed ketchup, mayonnaise and sugar that they found in one of the backpacks on migrants' bleeding heads and hair and their clothes. Amnesty International also spoke to doctors who treated the men. A doctor in the Velika Kladusa (Bosnia and Herzegovina) clinic stated that approximately 60% of migrants and asylum seekers who required medical treatment reported that their injuries were inflicted by the Croatian police. Despite dismissal of the allegations the testimonies of violence and intimidation indicate that unlawful pushbacks continue, not only on the Croatian, but also on other external borders of the European Union.

16. On 12 June, UNHCR published a call to Greece to investigate multiple reports of pushbacks by Greek authorities at the country's sea and land borders, in incidents where migrants and asylum seekers were returned to Turkey after reaching Greek territory or territorial waters. Reports by media and NGOs of such incidents increased from March 2020. Although the numbers of asylum seekers arriving in Greece dropped during the period to 3 000, the number of reported pushbacks rose.

2.3. Search and rescue in the Mediterranean

17. For two year's running, 2018 and 2019, the Assembly held urgent debates on the duty of States to save lives in the Mediterranean, in conformity with international human rights law including the Law of the Sea.[15]The coronavirus pandemic has both increased fear of, and provided a pretext for, certain countries in lockdown to abandon and to further thwart NGOs search and rescue operations, tragically revealing the continued ignorance by European Union member States of their duty to show solidarity in dealing with migration flows and emergencies alike, and the European Union's failure to address human rights violations before concentrating on border security.

2.3.1. Malta: refusal to disembark migrants

18. In 2019, 3 405 migrants disembarked on the island, of whom 2 795 remained in Malta, according to the authorities. In the first 7 months of this year, 2 012 migrants have already arrived. Only 8% were relocated to other EU countries, and in Malta asylum-seekers and irregular migrants make up 1% of the total of the population, according to official figures.

19. For over a month, Malta held 425 people rescued in the Maltese search and rescue zone in tourist vessels chartered by the Maltese government and moored off Maltese territorial waters. The Maltese Government declared it would not let these people disembark until other EU member States pledged to relocate them. The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, urged Malta to grant monitoring bodies and agencies access to the ships off its coast and requested concrete actions to end the situation. The Commissioner was also concerned that the confinement of those rescued on the ships, and the lack of remedies against this measure and its indefinite duration, were not compliant with the right to liberty of those on board, as guaranteed by Article 5 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5).

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12. *Balkan Insight*, 5 June: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/05/ngo-charges-croatian-police-with-inhumane-treatment-of-refugees/#gsc.tab=0.
13. www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/may/28/they-made-crosses-on-our-heads-refugees-report-abuse-by-croatian-police.
14. www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/croatia-shocking-evidence-police-torture-migrants.
15. "Saving lives in the Mediterranean: the need for an urgent response", Doc. 14971 and "International obligations of Council of Europe member States to protect life at sea", Doc 14586.

20. In a further statement on 4 June,[16] the Commissioner recalled that "coastal member States at the forefront of receiving refugees, asylum seekers and migrants should be able to rely on support from other states" and that structural solutions at the European level were essential. Stressing that discussions about responsibility sharing had been continuing for too long, she called on member States "to promptly decide on such a system in a true spirit of solidarity", while expressing regret at Malta's action in keeping survivors at sea.

21. At the end of May, the Jesuit Refugee Service in Malta and the Integra Foundation filed complaints regarding the situation of the people held on the vessels: one with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Migrants, one with the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, and one with the European Commission concerning the breach of fundamental rights, including the right to liberty, the right to asylum and the right to an effective legal remedy. On 6 June the Maltese Government finally allowed them to go ashore, after a statement by the Prime Minister Robert Abela that the crew was in danger of being overpowered by a group of migrants on one of the boats. Offers of relocation of around 40 of the migrants were made by France, Luxembourg and Portugal.[17]

22. In an earlier incident reported by *TheGuardian* and the *EU Observer* on 30 April, the Italian Government confirmed that the Armed Forces of Malta turned away a boat with people fleeing Libya at gunpoint from Maltese waters, after giving them fuel and the GPS coordinates to reach Italy. The evidence was published by the NGO Alarm Phone. Malta's Government also allegedly outsourced a push-back of migrants over the Easter weekend where at least twelve people died.[18]

2.3.2. A "spiral of chaos and death" in the Mediterranean

23. On 3 June, *SOS Méditerranée* echoed the calls of other humanitarian organisations and NGOs to address the situation in the central Mediterranean, which had become a "spiral of chaos and death", calling on European States to immediately set up rescue operations at sea, directed by governments and respecting maritime law to save lives at sea.[19] The absence of search and rescue operations made an evaluation of the situation impossible, according to Sophie Beau, General Director of *SOS Méditerranée* managing the *Ocean Viking* rescue vessel. But since the same period in 2019 departures from the Libyan coast had risen by 290% between January and the end of April, reaching 6 629 attempts, and by 156% from Tunisia, according to *AFP* mid-May.

24. According to the UNHCR, between January and May 2020 sea departures from Tunisia to Europe were multiplied by four since 2019, as the country increasingly became not only a country of origin but also a region of transit for migrants leaving neighbouring Libya. A shipwreck off Tunisia on 9 June 2020 caused 53 deaths, most of them people from sub-Saharan Africa. At least 24 women and the boat's captain, a 48-year-old Tunisian, were among the victims.[20] Although these tragic incidents cannot be linked directly to the health crisis, they are symptomatic of a situation where even less assistance and search and rescue operations than usual have been possible, putting ever more lives at risk.

25. On Monday 8 June the *Sea Watch 3* left the port of Messina in Sicily after three months absence in the Mediterranean, heading towards the rescue zone off the Libyan coast. No other NGO rescue operations had been possible for the previous two months, as other ships such as the *Alan Kurdi* and *Aita Mari* had been immobilised by the Italian coastguard for "technical problems".

2.4. Ever worsening conditions and increased vulnerability

26. In times of crisis, refugees and asylum seekers are among the most vulnerable as their basic human rights, already regularly violated, are further jeopardised, either through simple neglect or through the setting of priorities by hard-stretched authorities. Already sub-standard living conditions (lack of basic sanitary conditions, hygiene and healthcare, accommodation of children and adults without distinction, overcrowding) will become worse as movement is restricted. The most vulnerable among them are children, women and the

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16. https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/immediate-action-needed-to-disembark-migrants-held-on-ships-off-malta-s-coast.
17. https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/we-have-blood-on-our-hands.785993.
18. *EU Observer*, "Malta sea death": https://euobserver.com/migration/148230?utm_source=euobs&utm_medium=email.
19. www.lexpress.fr/actualite/monde/europe/migrants-l-association-sos-mediterranee-denonce-une-crise-humanitaire-sans-precedent_2127352.html.
20. Infomigrants, 12 June 2020: www.infomigrants.net/en/post/25330/more-than-50-migrants-died-in-shipwreck-near-tunisia.

physically and mentally ill, and the tendency to relegate refugee camps and centres to remote, poorly accessible locations with limited power supplies, increases hardship and the risk of contagion.[21] Covid-19 hit refugees and migrants in "official" centres (managed by national authorities assisted by humanitarian organisations such as the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as well as unofficial camps (Calais, Paris suburbs, Bihac at the Bosnia and Herzegovina-Croatia border, Turkey-Greece border, etc.), and homeless migrants in the margins of urban areas who are more at risk of falling victim to traffickers and vulnerable to other forms of abuse. And although smuggling was slowed by the closure of borders, smuggled migrants and victims of human trafficking were particularly at risk through the closure in some countries of asylum registration and the protection which comes with it. NGOs and other humanitarian actors were also less able to provide assistance.[22] As borders were closed, some were trafficked along even more dangerous routes; others, such as those forced into prostitution or modern slavery in farming, were abandoned by traffickers as there was no longer any work, and trafficked victims were sometimes left homeless and without means of support.[23]

27. On March 13, the Greek asylum service announced that it would be temporarily suspending all services until at least April 10, and that "all administrative services to the public are suspended", including registration of asylum claims, interviews and appeal submissions. Although applicants' cards and residence permits due to expire in the period remained valid, this led to an inevitable worsening of conditions for all concerned – services at camps accommodating asylum seekers on the Greek islands were placed in lockdown, school classes for migrant children were suspended and NGO volunteers were no longer allowed into camps.[24]

28. Frontline countries already bearing the brunt of arrivals of asylum seekers, specifically Greece, were faced with both the inhumane situation on the islands and the reactions of rejection by Greek people living near camps through fear of contagion, despite the very low level of infection in the country. On 5 June after two months, Greece's coronavirus lockdown on its camps was again extended for at least 2 weeks,[25] while general conditions eased as the country prepared to open its doors to tourists for the summer.

29. As it stood by the first week in August 2020, more than 30 200 asylum seekers were accommodated on the Aegean islands, for a total capacity of 5 400 people, and in June, around 86 500 migrants were accounted for on the Greek mainland, according to the UNHCR. No known deaths from Covid-19 were recorded in the camps, and virus screening, which began in early May, returned only a few dozen infections. Nevertheless, rights groups and medical experts continued to warn that a virus outbreak in the camps would be impossible to contain and would put thousands of lives in danger and expressed concern that migrants' rights were threatened by the discriminatory anti-virus restrictions. The UNHCR continues to seek to "shield" the older and immune compromised asylum seekers from the dangers of Covid-19 by giving priority to their transfer to flats on the islands and mainland and also hotels on the islands. Unfortunately, there are more and more cases of Covid-19 outbreaks being reported in camps across Europe, including for example in Greece and Italy. There are also serious concerns that an outbreak in the Al-Hol camp for internally displaced persons in the northern part of Syria could spread rapidly.

2.4.1. Increased risks for migrant children

30. The label of "migrant" does not prevent children from suffering from the same abuses as their sedentary pairs, as recalled by George Nikolaidis and Christel De Craim, Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson of the Lanzarote Committee in a statement published on 7 April 2020. The committee monitors compliance of the Council of Europe's Convention on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse (CETS No. 201). "As more and more countries are locked down, it is a tragic fact that many children, notably children in a vulnerable situation because of a mental or physical disability or a situation of dependence, are trapped with their offenders, be it at home, in out-of-home care, in makeshift refugee camps or facilities where they are deprived of liberty." The committee urged State Parties to ensure that all children were confined in safe environments.[26]

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21. In the French weekly magazine *Challenges*: "Du bidonville aux gymnases, les migrants toujours sous la menace du coronavirus" (from shanty towns to gymnasiums, migrants still threatened by coronavirus): www.challenges.fr/societe/du-bidoville-aux-gymnases-les-migrants-toujours-sous-la-menace-du-coronavirus_704495.
22. See Fundamental Rights Agency newsletter, 27 May 2020: "COVID-19 puts asylum seekers at a higher risk as conditions in camps deteriorate and asylum procedures are suspended": https://fra.europa.eu/en/news/2020/covid-19-puts-asylum-seekers-higher-risk-conditions-camps-deteriorate-and-asylum?pk_campaign=FRA-Alerts-Newsletter&pk_source=newsletter.
23. https://pace.coe.int/en/news/7969/-human-trafficking-is-like-a-global-pandemic-.
24. www.infomigrants.net/en/post/23524/which-migrant-services-in-europe-are-suspended-or-reduced-due-to-covid-19.
25. *Infomigrants*, https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/25222/greece-extends-migrant-camp-lockdown.

31. Access to education of migrant children is also a major issue, according to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, in particular as many of the different centres do not have stable wi-fi and there is a lack of online learning tools for children.[27]

32. On 6 March the European Commission stated that eight EU member States had offered to relocate 1 600 unaccompanied migrant minors from Greece. This figure has since climbed to 2 000. These countries were Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Portugal. Later, Belgium, Bulgaria, Switzerland and the United Kingdom joined the number, and despite the delays caused by the coronavirus outbreak in transferring them, the first 12 children, aged between 11 and 15, were moved to Luxembourg on April 15, followed by Germany with 47 refugee children and the United Kingdom, who took 16 underage migrants on May 11 included in 50 asylum seekers qualifying for family reunification.[28] Since then, 23 unaccompanied minor asylum seekers arrived in Switzerland on May 16, and other countries have continued to relocate unaccompanied migrant minors, including Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, Portugal and Slovenia.

33. Voluntary relocation will be the subject of a new report to be prepared by the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons in the coming months, for which the experiences and initiatives taken during this period will be relevant. The European Union's "pact on migration" under negotiation at the time of drafting the present report should also propose new solutions aimed to increase and facilitate this aspect of solidarity between member States and European countries in general.

2.5. Migration detention: the Covid-19 pandemic shows that it can be avoided

34. The EU Returns Directive stipulates that detainees must be released if "a reasonable prospect of removal no longer exists." Due to the near-worldwide shutdown of borders and air travel, returns were not possible during the pandemic, and immigration detention centres could not fulfil their purpose.

35. Above all, detention was a major cause for concern at the beginning of the Covid-19 epidemic, as the overcrowding and promiscuous conditions in the detention facilities of many countries, led to contagion and prompted swift decisions in some member States (France, for instance, with its record of prison overcrowding) to order early release for prisoners serving minor offenses. Some States (Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom) ended the administrative detention of significant numbers of migrants awaiting implementation of return decisions. These initiatives, which show that viable alternatives to detention can be found, must be encouraged and promoted among member States.[29]

36. In the United Kingdom "Immigration detention bail"[30] allowed 700 migrant detainees from removal centres to be released. Migrants were required to report regularly, sometimes to wear identification bracelets, but many were provided with assistance for subsistence and accommodation in local communities, proof that this type of detention is not inevitable. The BBC quoted the "Movement for Justice" charity which underlined the widespread opposition to immigration detention as being costly, ineffective and a source of mental and physical health problems.

37. Within a month of the country's lockdown, most of Spain's immigration detention centres were emptied. The Spanish authorities recognised that health and legal issues made the system untenable, and that the maximum limit of 60 days for a person to be held (pending deportation) could not be respected. Detention centres are for use as temporary holding facilities prior to deportation. As the detention centres were closed, detainees who could stay with friends or family were released first, and those without this option were offered

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26. Lanzarote Committee statement, 7 April 2020: https://search.coe.int/directorate_of_communications/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=09000016809e1d66.
27. FRA, News Item, 27 July 2020 "Migration: Covid-19 continues to cause hardship for migrants and deprives children of access to education" – Migration Bulletin 3.
28. The Chair of the Committee's sub-Committee on Refugee and Migrant Children and Young People, Lord Alexander Dundee (United Kingdom, EC/DA), was instrumental in the organisation of this relocation initiative, and sent a letter to members of the Committee to encourage them to follow the example.
29. See amongst others, the statement by the Council of Europe Commissioner on Human Rights of 26 March 2020: www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/commissioner-calls-for-release-of-immigration-detainees-while-covid-19-crisis-continues. See also the statement by Rósa Björk Brynjólfsdóttir, "Covid-19: Migrant children behind bars face added threats during the pandemic": https://pace.coe.int/en/news/7833/covid-19-les-enfants-migrants-derriere-les-barreaux-confrontes-a-des-menaces-supplementaires-avec-la-pandemie.
30. www.gov.uk/bail-immigration-detainees.

the choice to stay in open reception centres run by NGOs. Closures were carried out in co-operation between local and regional authorities, with civil society organisations, the Ombudsman, detention centre directors, and judges to ensure that the rights and dignity of migrants were respected.[31]

38. Administrative detention for migrants, especially children and families, has long been denounced by international organisations, including the Council of Europe. Our committee organised a three-year parliamentary campaign "End migration Detention of Children", promoting alternatives to closed centres, showcasing good practices in guardianship and open accommodation and better family reunification procedures.[32] The Organisation has worked on guidelines for administrative detention of migrants aimed to limit the circumstances in which detention may be admissible and to prohibit detention of migrant children, although a lack of consensus has not allowed this work to be concluded. It should be resumed as soon as possible.

3. Covid-19 goes global in a vicious circle of extreme poverty bound to increase migratory pressure

3.1. Less cases in developing countries?

39. Several months previous to drafting this report, it seemed that Europe's neighbours in the countries of origin of many migrants were much less affected than our continent by the disease. Expert opinions differed as to whether this was due to the warmer climate, the comparative youth (and thus reduced mortality) of African and Middle eastern populations, or whether in actual fact the figures were simply the result of an inability to fully take into account the number of deaths due to Covid-19.

40. According to figures updated on 14 June, published by Africa News, the number of confirmed cases on the African continent stood at 233 836, with 6 261 deaths. As the weeks have gone by the situation has evolved and as at the 11 August 2020, the number of cases in Africa, according to the WHO, have climbed to 965 432. This indicates that the pandemic is advancing strongly in Africa, even if it is not at the same level as other continents (Europe over 3.5 million cases and the Americas over 10 million). Countries reporting most cases are South Africa (563 598), Nigeria (46 867), Ghana (41 212), Algeria (35 712) and Morocco (34 063). If it continues to advance at this rate, the lack of health services will evidently worsen the situation. According to WHO, 90% of low-income countries suffer from health worker shortages: sub-Saharan African countries, for instance, have 0.2 doctors for 1 000 people, compared with 2.2 in Latin America and 3.4 in the countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

41. There are concerns raised by many that countries in the developing world with the least ability to contain coronavirus could become future reservoirs for the disease. Coronavirus' potentially devastating impact on countries with high poverty, widespread social insecurity or conflict, and heavily dependent on international aid, has prompted strong calls for more international solidarity in giving humanitarian aid and development co-operation.[33]

42. According to the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), "with 80% of all confirmed cases, but only 20% of the world's population, high income countries have been disproportionately affected by the outbreak […]. In the interests of early warning and preparedness, asylum and reception authorities in the EU+1 should consider the risks of the virus taking hold in lower income countries because in recent years, these have been the source of most asylum seekers in the EU+."

43. There are three overlapping explanations for the unequal distribution of cases between high- and low-income countries. Firstly, the infection might be much more equally distributed around the globe than the data suggest, but poor testing and low-quality data are painting a distorted picture. Secondly, lower income countries may be inherently more protected from the virus because of their climate or demographics (younger populations and less obesity). Finally, the less-connected low income countries may be temporarily buffered from the infection which is yet to take hold. There are also other explanations put forward, namely that low and lower-middle income countries may be at inherently lower risk of massive Covid-19 outbreaks because there are fewer international connections and the rural population is higher. While these explanations might be

31. www.euronews.com/2020/04/29/countries-suspending-immigration-detention-due-to-coronavirus-let-s-keep-it-that-way-view.
32. https://pace.coe.int/en/pages/campaign-detention-children.
33. www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/apr/20/un-heads-warn-of-coronavirus-risk-in-weakest-countries?utm_source=IOM+External+Mailing+List&utm_campaign=0a4e827831-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2020_04_20_04_29&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_9968056566-0a4e827831-44760961.

responsible for delaying the outbreak, this would be temporary, especially if lockdowns unintentionally encourage internal travel. In any case, it is not unreasonable to assume that there are more cases than are being reported, but the scale of this disparity is unknown.

44. "In the interests of early warning and preparedness, national asylum and reception authorities should reflect upon the medium to high risk that the outbreak will eventually take hold in the countries of origin and transit. In turn, indirect (namely recrudescence of Daesh) and direct consequences (famine, conflict and security risks) of the virus might affect asylum-related migration to the EU+ and contribute the most to new applications or the reception population."[34]

3.2. Direct as well as indirect negative consequences

45. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), the end of the year 2020 will see acute hunger almost doubling globally, putting the lives and livelihoods of 265 million people in low and middle-income countries under severe threat unless action is taken to tackle the pandemic. The figure is nearly double the 135 million people in 55 countries estimated in the WFP's Global Report on Food Crises 2020 (due to conflict, the effects of climate change and economic crises), drawn up prior to the emergence of Covid-19 as a pandemic. The new figures provide insight into the devastating potential of this virus.[35]

46. A team from the Johns Hopkins University, Maryland, studied how the Covid-19 could affect women and children in low-income countries, such as those in Sub-Saharan Africa, basing themselves on previous epidemics, in particular Ebola. They identified two main ways in which the response to the Covid-19 could increase the number of victims: first through the disruption of health services caused by fear of consulting and lack of medical supplies and care; and secondly through lack of access to enough food (which also increases vulnerability to sickness). The study predicted that in a worst-case scenario, if use of health services was reduced by up to 50% and malnourishment rose by the same percentage, over a million children and 56 700 mothers could die as an indirect result of the pandemic.[36]

47. Fear for survival in sub-standard sanitary conditions combined with the impossible levels of poverty will redouble migratory pressure as soon as national borders re-open. For the World Economic Forum, Africa could lose a third of its employment.[37] As Europe went into lockdown and people were laid off, in particular those with insecure and manual jobs, along with added difficulties in international transfers, payments back to rural families also dried up too, leaving them less able to cope with the drought and removing a vital economic safety net in poorer rural areas.[38]

3.3. Essential financial assistance, debt relief and facilitated remittance: essential tools

48. Poorer countries are also of course less able to compensate workers for lost wages and bail out struggling companies than wealthier countries, leaving millions struggling to cope with the direct impacts of the pandemic, and also forcing them to return to dangerous, climate-vulnerable places. Debt relief to poorer countries must form part of how this crisis is dealt with. Richer countries must not use a crisis at home to slash aid and development funding. Even while developed countries are dealing with their own crises, they must continue to offer support to countries in the global South.

49. As the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) weekly editorial aptly described the situation on 8 May: "If Europe is seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, at least concerning the health crisis, it must still be prepared for impact of Covid-19 on the rest of the world. For geographic and demographic reasons, the crisis may have a very different profile elsewhere but there can be no doubt about the impending impact of the multiple secondary effects in fragile, poor and conflict-affected countries. Where large sectors of the population live hand-to-mouth, surviving in the informal economy, disruption is devastating as is the dramatic fall-off in remittance income. Everything from food insecurity to political unrest to resource-shortage conflicts

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34. www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/easo-special-report-asylum-covid.pdf.
35. https://insight.wfp.org/covid-19-will-almost-double-people-in-acute-hunger-by-end-of-2020-59df0c4a8072.
36. *BBC Future*: "Why most Covid-19 deaths won't be from the virus", 29 May 2020
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37. www.dispatchlive.co.za/news/africa/2020-04-16-coronavirus-could-kill-off-a-third-of-jobs-in-africa-world-economic-forum/?
utm_source=sfmc&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2717243_Agenda_weekly-24April2020&utm_term=&emailType=Newsletter.
38. On the subject of migratory flows in and from Africa during the pandemic, see also a joint IOM/UNHCR discussion paper: "COVID-19 and mixed population movements: emerging dynamics, risks and opportunities", 14 May 2020:
www.refworld.org/docid/5ec4e2c84.html

are predicted and increased displacement is inevitable … Europe's external policies and resources will more than ever be needed for their true objectives: healthcare, food security, livelihoods, decent housing, conflict prevention, governance, etc."

50. The OECD published a report on the need for more support to developing countries on 13 May. According to the organisation, "OECD governments and the broader international community need to unlock ambitious support, to prevent the loss of lives, contain the risk of aftershocks, and invest in sustainable recovery. The international response to the Covid-19 should be unprecedented in terms of resources mobilised, scope and ambition. It should lead to a new development model that is conducive to resilience and sustainability."[39] The report concludes that a supportive multilateral system is crucial and that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its Sustainable Development Goals, provide both "a vision and a framework for a more prosperous, inclusive, resilient and sustainable world."

51. In April, G20 finance ministers reached an agreement on a debt freeze for poor countries, starting from 1 May until the end of the year, with an option to extend it until the end of 2021. But 30 Sub-Saharan African countries spend more on repaying public debt than investment on public health (Angola and the Republic of Congo spend six times more on external debt repayment than their health budgets), so freezing debts will not suffice. Cancelling some debts should be seriously considered by European countries, whose economies do not rely on repayments.[40]

52. Reduced remittances are another consequence of the pandemic. The amount remitted by migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) grew in 20 years from $4.8 billion in 2000 to $48 billion in 2018, reflecting the increase in the number of people moving from the continent: from 21.6 million in 2000, the number of migrants from Africa grew to 36.3 million in 2017. In 2018 remittances to Nigeria were four times more than foreign direct investment and official development assistance combined.[41]

53. According to the World Bank, international remittances to SSA will drop by 23% in 2020 because of the coronavirus pandemic, with obvious implications for major recipient countries in the region. The International Labour Organization has also estimated that earnings of informal sector workers in Africa may have declined by 81% in the first month of the crisis, with potentially catastrophic impacts on rural livelihoods. Council of Europe member States should take measures to ensure that diasporas settled in their countries are encouraged to maintain their remittances, whether these are from individuals or small businesses and associations.[42]

54. In another context, among positive measures taken to mitigate the effects of the coronavirus outbreak, the European Union announced on 10 June an additional €55 million for refugees from Syria and vulnerable persons in Jordan and Lebanon to fight the pandemic under the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian crisis. The additional support package for the two countries hosting the highest number of refugees per capita in the world, Jordan (€20.1 million) and Lebanon (€34.6 million), should provide support in key areas such as health, water, sanitation and hygiene.

4. Rights-based migration management can be a reality

4.1. Good practices reported by member State and Observer parliaments

55. In March 2020, the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons addressed a questionnaire through the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation (ECPRD) jointly with the Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy on the legislative and oversight role of parliaments in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. By 4 May a total of 39 responses had been received. National

39. OECD: "Developing countries and development co-operation: What is at stake?" https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=132_132637-tfn40fwe1w&title=Developing-coun:tries-and-development-co-operation_What-is-at-stake&utm_source=Adestra&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Read%20more&utm_campaign=OECD%20Development%20News%20%20-%20May%202020&utm_term=demo.

40. https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/20/g20-s-promise-of-a-debt-freeze-is-not-enough-for-africa-to-combat-the-covid-19-crisis-view.

41. World Bank: "COVID-19 is reducing domestic remittances in Africa: What does it mean for poor households?" https://blogs.worldbank.org/africacan/covid-19-reducing-domestic-remittances-africa-what-does-it-mean-poor-households.

42. See the work of the Parliamentary Assembly's Network on Diaspora Policies: https://pace.coe.int/en/pages/network-diaspora.

parliaments reported on exceptional regulatory or practical measures taken to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus, to protect the population, and to face the challenges in the field of public health, economy, public order, and various other sectors.

56. Specific measures taken with regard to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers included awareness raising on protection in the Covid-19 context, sanitary prevention measures, reinforced effective access to healthcare and emergency medical treatment, regularisation or extension of validity of asylum claims, extension of residency coupled with travel restrictions, employment or other permits, and measures to ensure temporary accommodation and housing. Most countries indicated that migration-related exceptional measures were taken as part of co-ordinated actions covering public policies in all areas: justice, economy, education, employment, public order, public health, etc.

57. Many countries took specific measures to raise awareness of asylum seekers and refugees about the Covid-19 pandemic and the need for physical distancing and rigorous hygiene. Some countries gave good examples of awareness-raising materials distributed in the different languages of the migrants, refugees and asylum seekers present (Cyprus provided materials in 14 languages, Belgium in 16, Portugal in 22, Norway in 24 and Greece in 28). Greece reported the use of popular radio stations to raise awareness about the need for social distancing and other protective measures against the spread of the virus.

58. Sanitary prevention measures, as well as emergency medical treatment, were usually described as designed for all the population. The implementation of sanitary prevention measures, however, depended on the availability of adequate housing or accommodation facilities to make sure that social distancing, self-isolation and stricter quarantine measures and curfews were observed. Special facilities were made available to enforce quarantine measures in some countries (for example the Czech Republic). Some respondents reported about regular disinfection of surfaces and objects in centres for asylum seekers. A number of countries provided detailed instructions on measures to be taken if refugees and asylum seekers showed symptoms of infection (the Netherlands, Sweden). Contact with the relevant services was encouraged primarily by e-mail, telephone or through e-services. There were no reports however about distributions of masks amongst refugees and asylum seekers in the temporary accommodation facilities.

59. Access to healthcare being dependent on migrant's health care insurance coverage and levels of protection of asylum seekers, countries were obliged to take measures to adapt their policies to the Covid-19 context, such as extending expired healthcare benefits to ensure access to medical treatment (for example Cyprus). In some countries, telephone medical consultations were made available and information disseminated through the government services addressed to foreigners (Poland). Detailed instructions on access to healthcare were reported to be made available in other countries (the Netherlands).

60. The validity of asylum and other regularisation claims was generally prolonged, together with other relevant administrative documents, such as visas or residence permits. Durations mentioned varied from a few weeks after the end of the state of emergency in some countries (45 days in Hungary) to two months in Belgium and six months in France. New asylum claims, however, were not processed, given that most of the relevant institutions were closed or functioned in a limited capacity. New visa applications were either not processed or rejected as endangering public health (Sweden). In some cases, repatriation was carried out by charter flights at the request of migrants wishing to return to their home countries.

61. Most asylum claimants' interviews and refugee protection document renewals were replaced with online contacts where possible. The period of extension of residence rights varied from country to country and was sometimes automatic (Czech Republic) and sometimes subject to a formal request (Germany). Requests were to be submitted to the relevant authorities before expiration of the documents in Germany, for instance, within 14 days after the lifting of the state of emergency in Bulgaria, or no later than two months after the end of the confinement period decided by the country, for instance in Belgium. Some countries reported extensions of the validity of work permits and other employment-related documents and benefits.

62. Certain countries reported specific measures taken to provide temporary emergency accommodation for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Canada). Travel and visit restrictions were applied to avoid spreading the Covid-19 virus. Local authorities played a major role, given that municipalities are responsible for temporary accommodation of asylum seekers in most countries. Governments also took extraordinary measures to ensure the availability of emergency housing, for instance in Norway where a temporary regulation was applied in case of an urgent need for additional housing. The situation of particularly vulnerable groups required special attention. The questionnaire asked about member States' actions with regard to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in administrative detention, families with children, separated and unaccompanied children and women. Few countries replied on measures taken with

regard to refugees or asylum seekers in administrative detention, although the present report shows that some countries released detainees. In Sweden the visitation limitations were introduced and concerned everyone, not just a legal representative for a person in detention, or a public servant dealing with returns.

63. Measures were taken to support particularly vulnerable groups. Some countries drew attention to risks posed to family reunification procedures by the Covid-19 pandemic. As family reunification is subject to conditions (such as an age requirement) and deadlines, a family member could lose his/her right to family reunification or be required to meet more severe conditions in future (Belgium).

64. Finally, respondents to the questionnaire stressed the importance of effective and efficient coordination of exceptional measures and their enforcement.

4.2. The UNHCR: a force for proposals on managing asylum procedures

65. On 9 April the UNHCR, extremely active during the crisis, published a compilation of good practices and practical recommendations on how entry into territories and asylum procedures should be adapted during the period, some of which will be taken up in the recommendations of this report.[43] These included alternative measures to manage the arrival of asylum seekers in a safe manner, including medical screenings or testing, or non-discriminatory and proportionate quarantine measures.These alternative measures protect public health while ensuring access to territory for persons seeking international protection and protecting them against the risk of *refoulement*. In this regard, the UNHCR recognises the emerging State practice in many European countries of providing for an explicit exemption for persons seeking international protection from border closures and entry bans. Border closures may also be detrimental to public health interests, as they may increase irregular movements, further complicating authorities´ efforts to curb and respond to the pandemic.

66. Proposals also advised the simplification of registration processes, increased hygiene measures for in-person registration and written or electronic registration systems, plus automatisation of issuance or extension of documentation. Independent private accommodation or smaller collective centres should be privileged, additional space provided, with separated facilities for persons confirmed or suspected of infection and reporting the confirmed cases to WHO. The Covid-19 situation resulted in the suspension of asylum and statelessness determination procedures in many EU and other European countries. At the same time, national asylum authorities expressed concerns over the creation of backlogs and in some instances pursued asylum procedures to prevent backlogs.Therefore, backlog management is both an immediate need in the prevailing situation, as well as in the medium-term when suspended procedures resume. The UNHCR put forward recommendations for both scenarios, where procedures are suspended and where measures are put in place to maintain them.

67. Finally, UNHCR recommended the inclusion of refugees, asylum seekers, stateless and internally displaced people in risk education and awareness-raising related to Covid-19, with particular attention to their language and cultural preferences, advising the use of various information platforms designed to meet the needs of different groups whether staying in reception facilities, informal settlements, homeless or living with host communities. It is worth noting that information and awareness-raising are among some of the good practices reported by member States in their replies to the questionnaire circulated to national parliaments.

4.3. Migrants as key workers

68. During lockdown, facing the reality that most economies depend on temporary reinforcement of national labour forces, many exemptions were made for migrants to cross borders for work, notably in health, agriculture and transport. The European Commission issued guidelines concerning the exercise of the free movement of workers during the Covid-19 outbreak, which cover cross-border workers, seasonal workers and short-term postings within the European Union.[44]

4.3.1. Seasonal workers – welcomed but often mistreated

69. Several countries took special measures for seasonal agricultural workers, enabling people with limited work permits to remain in their host country to work (for example Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Norway, Spain). In a few countries, categories of migrants previously forbidden to work could do so, for example asylum seekers in Belgium in the first four months of their application, youth without work rights aged 18 to 21

43. www.refworld.org/docid/5ede06a94.html.
44. https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=89&furtherNews=yes&langId=en&newsId=9630.

in Spain and international students in Ireland. In Greece, an exceptional fast-track procedure, in place until 30 June 2020, allowed employers to hire certain third country citizens in an irregular situation already residing in the country, to help address urgent labour needs in agriculture. In Germany, 80 000 foreign seasonal workers were granted entry in April and May, mostly from Romania and Bulgaria.[45] Entries via charter flights were authorised from non-EU countries for seasonal agricultural workers to Greece and the United Kingdom.[46]

70. These measures show again that some of the restrictions applied to migrants can be lifted without negative consequences for society, and in this case can contribute to sustaining national economies. Unfortunately, they have largely remained "exceptional", but should be considered in the future among the lessons to be learned about the usefulness of foreign workforce and the advantages of integration of migrants through work opportunities, including during sometimes lengthy asylum application procedures. In some regions decent conditions for migrant workers were not ensured and abuses were reported in the media.[47] Thus lifting restrictions must be properly framed by regulations and supervision and coupled with safeguards against exploitation.

4.3.2. Health workers

71. A number of countries relied on the migrant health workforce, benefiting from the fact that this group was in principle exempted from entry bans, and that accelerated work visa delivery was put in place. Several countries therefore facilitated the temporary licensing of doctors with foreign medical degrees (Italy), facilitated recruitment in the national health services (Spain), accelerated current applications for the recognition of foreign qualifications of health professionals (Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Spain), allowed foreign-trained health workers in non-medical occupations in the health sector (France). The United Kingdom decided that doctors, nurses and paramedics with visas due to expire before 1 October 2020 would have them automatically extended for one year.

72. In the medical sector in particular, the Council of Europe's "European Qualifications Passport for Refugees" could be more used by member States to facilitate the recognition of competencies and qualifications of refugees without proof of diplomas or equivalences. The passports, delivered on the basis of extensive expert interviews in the area of competency of the refugee, is a tool for refugees' integration, employment and admission to further studies.[48] Currently 10 countries participate in the programme and 458 passports have been delivered.

5. Lessons for Europe from the Covid-19 pandemic and its effect on migrants and refugees

73. The pandemic has shown that in times of crisis and catastrophe, migrants and especially the most vulnerable among them, women and children, must benefit from the same protection as nationals. This is not just in the interest of migrants but in the interests of all (healthcare, sanitary measures, social assistance and support, etc). Solidarity amongst countries is essential in dealing with the pandemic and no single country can work alone.

74. When looking at the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic for migrants and refugees there are many different concerns that have been highlighted in this report. These range from the impact of closing borders, to negative attitudes towards migrants, including fear of disease and losing jobs, and to deeply worrying examples of violence on borders, pushbacks at sea and refusals to disembark. There are however other dangers around the corner, when one looks at the impact of the pandemic on countries of origin and how they will cope with the emerging health crisis and the economic crisis, including the large-scale fall in remittances. This will, without doubt, create even further migratory pressures in the future. It is therefore essential that member States look beyond their borders to help these countries, even in times when national budgets are stretched to the limit.

75. There are certain positive lessons to be learned from the Covid-19 pandemic. There has been a show of solidarity by certain countries for certain particular problems, for example resettlement of unaccompanied minors, some countries have relaxed immigration detention, opened up the possibility for asylum seekers to

45. www.infomigrants.net/en/post/24276/germany-to-allow-asylum-seekers-to-work-in-agriculture-until-october.
46. www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/mar/28/fruit-and-veg-will-run-out-unless-britain-charters-planes-to-fly-in-farm-workers-from-eastern-europe?CMP=share_btn_link.
47. "Espagne: le traitement des travailleurs migrants et saisonniers fait polémique": www.rfi.fr/fr/europe/20200603-espagne-covid-traitement-travailleurs-migrants-saisonniers-pol%C3%A9mique.
Video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztEUX_8_VWQ&feature=youtu.be.
48. www.coe.int/en/web/education/recognition-of-refugees-qualifications.

work, or examined further regularisation programmes for irregular migrants. Furthermore, there have not, so far, been catastrophic deadly outbreaks in the cramped conditions of many of the camps, but this could change rapidly.

76. With a resurgence of the virus in many European countries after the summer months, now more than ever, countries have to learn from the experience so far. No country can solve the pandemic or the issues of migration and asylum on their own, these are global phenomena, which require countries, governments, parliamentarians and organisations to work together in a spirit of solidarity.