



Labor Mobility in the Post-COVID-19 Era: The Case for a Partnerships

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Key Points

- *COVID-19 has not changed long-term demographic trends, which still require significantly more labor mobility to maintain the economic and social structure of high-income countries.*
- *There is also good reason to want a more globally mobile workforce even in the immediate future following COVID-19, as migrants contribute to economic growth which will aid the recovery.*
- *However, factors constraining labor mobility are heightened in the COVID-19 era; operationally, there is the additional challenge of ensuring migrants are COVID-19 free, and politically, high domestic unemployment is stoking nationalist sentiments.*
- *In the near term, this creates two possible worlds: one in which the constraints win out, and one in which we build off innovations implemented during COVID-19 to move towards a well-managed mobile workforce, setting us up well for the much larger demographic need in coming decades.*
- *We propose that the second world can be achieved through a broad coalition to validate the risky innovations undertaken during COVID-19 and to document the positive impacts of the actions they undertook.*
- *We further propose that a good ‘mobility industry’ is core to resuming labor mobility, and will require collective action from a broad coalition to establish and develop a quality industry.*

Introduction

COVID-19 has caused many to question the future of labor mobility. With rising domestic unemployment, increasing anti-immigrant sentiment, and health concerns around spreading of the virus through mobility, politicians, employers, and migration scholars and practitioners alike have wondered whether we are reverting to a less mobile world.

This is certainly one possible outcome; however, none of fundamental demographic drivers towards labor mobility in the long term, as laid out in a recent LaMP note,ⁱ have changed in the wake of COVID-19. High-income countries still face growing elderly populations and shrinking working age populations, meaning that in the coming decades they will need to rely on a mobile workforce to maintain their economies and social contracts.

Therefore, we propose that COVID-19 will lead to a world where labor mobility remains just as important but requires more partnerships. As noted, COVID-19 does not change the long-run dynamics of the need for labor mobility; it does, however, create a new operational and political challenges. These challenges are ones that require cooperation: between receiving and sending countries, employers, and ‘mobility industry’ or the actors which provide services along the mobility cycle. As such, rather than COVID-19 offering

cause for pessimism about the future of labor mobility partnerships, we see it as an opportunity for a necessary invention. In this note, we will first explore how the dynamics around labor mobility change in a post-COVID-19 world. We will then explore how a partnership model, with a good ‘mobility industry’ at the core, can resolve these dynamics while building what has always been needed: a well-managed globally mobile workforce.

The Impacts of COVID-19 on Demand for a Mobile Workforce

As noted above, COVID-19 does not change the long-term demographic drivers of labor mobility, as laid out in depth in LaMP’s previous note.ⁱⁱ In the near-term, the effects on the demand for foreign workers are less clear. Many of the “essential” and migrant-intensive sectors had been predicted to face vast shortages in the coming years already before the pandemic. Nursing shortages ranged from 10,000 per year in the UK to 75,000 per year in Germany and 203,700 per year in the US; care worker shortages were even more dire, ranging from 38,000 per year in Germany to 1.3 million per year in the US.ⁱⁱⁱ US care worker shortages are so dire that the vice president of policy of the US Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute admitted “it is impossible to imagine that the sector would survive without immigrants.” Other sectors such as agriculture, construction, and tourism all similarly face significant labor shortages in the years following COVID-19. As mentioned above, the damaging impact of job shortages during this crisis has been apparent. In the post-COVID era, shortages are likely to become even more impactful as aging populations in OECD countries require increasing support and pandemics are predicted to become increasingly common.^{iv}

At the same time, migrant workers are also overrepresented in sectors which have been the most hurt by the crisis. In the US, 20 percent of workers in vulnerable industries facing layoffs (such as accommodation food services, non-essential retail, personal care services, and building services) are migrant workers, a total of 6 million, relative to their 17 percent share of the total civilian workforce.^v This is directly translating into labor

market outcomes; a recent analysis showed that while employment rate of male migrant workers in the US in 2019 was six percentage points higher than of male native workers, by April 2020 their employment rate was two percentage points lower than that of male native workers.^{vi}

In the EU, migrants have also been found to be more likely to be employed in risky occupations which are more exposed to COVID-19-related job losses (categorized as jobs in which do not allow for telework, are non-essential, and require face-to-face interaction).^{vii} Tourism, which employs a shocking one in ten formally employed people, has lost more than 100 million jobs as a result of COVID-19 restrictions on movement; millions of these jobs were held by migrant workers, who make up a large share of the tourism workforce.^{viii} It is difficult to project when these job losses may be made up, possibly implying a decline in the need for migrant workers in coming years. The OECD reports that “experiences from previous economic crises suggest that there might be disproportionate and long-lasting negative effects on the integration of immigrants...unless appropriate support measures are in place.”^{ix}

Beyond sector specific impacts, migrant workers are vital to overall economic recovery. Migrant workers are well-documented to contribute to economic growth. A 2016 report estimated that because migrant workers move to higher-productivity settings, they boost global GDP; the report estimated that as of 2015, migrant workers contributed roughly \$6.7 trillion, or 9.4 percent, to global GDP - \$3 trillion more than they would have if they stayed in their home countries. We see the direct impacts of this in key receiving countries. In Australia, “real economic growth...over the last couple of years has been around 2 to 2.5 percent. Of that, almost one percent has simply been the effect of migration.”^x “Under current policy settings,” experts in Australia estimate they will not be able to meet migration targets in the next decade,^{xi} cutting off a critical source of growth as Australia struggles to recover economically. Similarly, Canadian GDP growth in recent years and its fiscal balance rely

heavily on migrant workers; new additions of permanent migrants were down 30% in March 2020 relative to the previous year and down 45% for temporary foreign worker entries in the agriculture sector, undermining potential for an economic recovery.^{xii} As António Vitorino, Director General of the International Organization on Migration, succinctly said, “If we are unable to relaunch migration and mobility safely - and universally - the world's ability to recover from economic recession will be limited.”^{xiii}

Ultimately, at the core of the discussion in the immediate term is not levels of labor migration, but labor *mobility*. In all times, but particularly in times of uncertainty and crisis, flexibility and the ability of workers to move where they are needed is critical to economic health. This was evidenced during and after the Great Recession in 2008. Evidence from the US following the 2008 recession shows that migrant workers’ employment rates rebounded more quickly than native workers,^{xiv} possibly because migrant workers are more mobile than native-born workers, moving more fluidly across regions, industries and occupations.^{xv} Evidence from the EU during the Great Recession also suggested that migrant workers responded to changing labor shortages across EU member states, occupations, and sectors more fluidly than natives, and that this flexibility allowed them to contribute to stabilizing labor markets during and after the crisis.^{xvi} So regardless of levels of migration, in order to stabilize and recover post-COVID-19, we will need well-regulated, flexible pathways to connect workers to jobs globally.

COVID-19 Heightens Barriers to Work on Labor Mobility

While even in the immediate future there is still a need for mobile labor, COVID-19 has increased the constraints around labor mobility. Even before COVID-19, each of the actors who stood to benefit from labor mobility

(host countries, sending countries, workers themselves, employing sectors, the mobility industry) also faced significant constraints and risks in creating the collective actions that limit their possibilities for individual action. These constraints can be grouped into three buckets: operational and technical, political and reputational, and financial. Whether implicitly or explicitly, these constraints undermine actors’ ability and willingness to participate in jointly building the conditions for a more mobile workforce that benefits all. These factors are heightened in the COVID-19 era, and it is likely they will remain so for the medium term.

Operational Constraints

Operational constraints relate to factors within an actor’s internal or external operating environment that limit its ability to successfully achieve and implement partnerships. These may relate to an actor’s internal awareness of its own needs, its awareness of or ability to reach partners who might address these needs, or its technical capacity to implement a labor mobility policy or program.

Operationally, mobility has become much more complex in the COVID-19 era. As of the end of April 2020, 217 countries had restricted travel, including 97 countries implementing total or partial border closures, and 65 suspending arriving international flights.^{xvii} These travel restrictions have prevented migrant workers from reaching their jobs, as well as from returning home if they lost employment.^{xviii} While these measures are temporary, resuming normal mobility once the pandemic winds down will be difficult. Countries will have to implement large scale health screenings, re-issue visas for workers who returned home, and ensure the public that allowing mobility will not lead to new outbreaks.

In the same way that travel procedures changed permanently in the wake of 9/11, operational changes on who is allowed to travel where and how are likely to be in place well after the end of COVID-19.^{xix} This is particularly true as “travel bubbles” are allowing mobility to resume within certain regions before it resumes

broadly, potentially shifting mobility patterns. This has significant implications for labor mobility pathways. Operations to facilitate labor mobility will become more complex, requiring robust systems for health checks and significant coordination and delicate data sharing agreements^{xx} between governments on both ends as well as mobility industry service providers delivering the health checks. Of course the extent and duration of these impacts depends on when an effective vaccine is widely available – for example, in the event that the Oxford vaccine proves effective and a significant portion of the global population can be vaccinated within the next 12 months,^{xxi} mobility may rebound much more quickly. However, even in this ‘best case’ scenario, there is likely to be an increased focus on the health risks of mobility over the coming years. The World Economic Forum referred to this as “the rise of a new ‘health securitization’ migration rhetoric.”^{xxii}

Political and Reputational Constraints

Political and reputational constraints relate to the authorizing environment of actors potentially interested in forming a partnership on labor mobility. Political constraints refer to constraints within a governing environment that limit the ability of government partners to authorize a policy or program relating to labor mobility. Reputational risk refers to the potential for negative publicity or public perceptions, which have an adverse impact on an actor’s reputation, thereby weakening its relationship or credibility with its respective constituents. There is significant evidence indicating that these are the most binding constraints, and often relate to concerns around the domestic impact of migration, risks to the migrants, health and security concerns, and trust among all parties.

Operational challenges, while difficult, are more easily solved with technical solutions; the political response to migrants post-COVID creates a bigger worry. COVID-19 has already fueled xenophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments, beginning with xenophobia towards Asian migrants at the start of the outbreak^{xxiii} but quickly spreading to pushes to curtail migration much more

broadly.^{xxiv} Nativist sentiments have been further fueled by the startling economic decline. This is in line with past experience; historical evidence shows us that economic recessions tend to lessen support for immigration.^{xxv} To date, the US is the sole country which has established immigration restrictions in response to COVID-19 which are explicitly based on economic grounds;^{xxvi} on June 22nd, the Trump Administration issued a proclamation expanding on previous restrictions to prevent foreign workers from filling 525,000 jobs (according to the administration’s estimates) in order to prevent these workers from competing with unemployed American workers for jobs. Other countries are actively trying to recruit furloughed native workers into roles traditionally filled by migrant workers, such as the “Pick for Britain” campaign.^{xxvii}

On the other hand, the response to COVID-19 is highlighting the importance of labor mobility and of migrant workers. As borders closed and employers lost access to their migrant workforce, the very tangible impacts of labor shortages became quickly apparent. Fruit rotted in the fields^{xxviii} while food prices increased (rice prices to a seven-year high) due to labor shortages.^{xxix,xxx} Countries that had already faced severe lacks of health care workers saw these shortages get even deeper at the worst possible moment as many doctors and nurses got sick and there was no one to replace them.^{xxxi} Migrants are over-represented as “essential workers” responding to COVID-19 in most high-income countries.^{xxxii}

With certain actors recognizing the contributions of migrants, widespread campaigns of support led to previously unthinkable policy changes. In a dramatic shift from its previous policy stance, Italy gave 600,000 undocumented migrants work permits in recognition of the need for these workers providing care and keeping food on the table during COVID-19.^{xxxiii} Portugal has also temporarily regularized all migrants who had applied for a residence permit before the declaration of the state of emergency on 18 March. Despite border closures, Germany, the UK, Finland and others made special provisions to fly in seasonal agricultural workers.^{xxxiv,xxxv} Local

governments have played a key role; in Canada, Prince Edward's Island has fast-tracked immigration processes for health workers and truckers, while Nova Scotia has done the same for nurses.^{xxxvi} Huge steps have been taken to improve the mobility of health workers, overcoming obstacles of skill recognition and certification that plagued the process for decades. For example, in Germany, some states have allowed foreign doctors with pending accreditation to be immediately deployed under the supervision of licensed physicians.^{xxxvii}

Collective Action could Move Us Towards a More Mobile World

So far we have concluded three things: (1) long-term demographic trends still require significantly more labor mobility; (2) there is good reason to want a more globally mobile workforce even in the immediate future following COVID-19; and (3) the (already significant) factors constraining labor mobility are heightened in the COVID-19 era. In the near term, this creates two possible worlds: one in which the constraints win out, fueled by concerns around health risks and high domestic unemployment, resulting in maintaining or even expanding the restrictions on labor mobility put into place during the COVID-19 outbreak, and one in which we build off innovations implemented during COVID-19 to move towards a well-managed mobile workforce, setting us up well for the much larger demographic need in coming decades.

The question now is: What can we do to make sure we end up in the second world? Ultimately, the world after COVID-19 needs what it has always needed: a mobile labor force which is well regulated to mitigate the risks that come with people moving. However, as was evident well before the pandemic, this does not mean policies will mirror this need. The heightened risks (both politically and operationally) will make it difficult for any individual actor (whether they are a government official, employer or sector association, 'mobility industry' representative, financier, or member of civil society) to make a stand for labor mobility following COVID-19; if an individual actor were to

stand alone post-COVID-19 and advocate to resume labor mobility and carry forward the policy innovations made during the crisis, the predictable political fallout would fall entirely on that actor.

Operational challenges of ensuring workers show up COVID free are also at best costly and at worst unreliable when borne alone. In the absence of partnerships, this need either falls to the already over-tasked public health officials in the receiving country, or requires arriving workers to 'quarantine in country,' which is expensive and inefficient for both employers and workers. Quarantining in country is particularly burdensome for temporary and seasonal workers, for whom it eats up a significant portion of their working season, reducing the returns to work abroad. Both of these models are not viable at scale. At the same time, placing this burden solely on the sending country offers its own problems, as health systems in these countries are also overburdened, and there is little incentive for them to assure quality of the screening process, leading to concerns around whether results can be trusted.^{xxxviii} Already, Bangladeshis in Italy are being stigmatized as a result of thousands of fake negative COVID-19 test results (often without any test being conducted), some of which were used to return to Europe where the return migrants later tested positive.^{xxxix} The stakes of such a failed operation are also higher; migrant workers bringing a renewed outbreak of COVID-19 could lead to a second wave of border shutdowns and retaliation against migrants.

The answer lies in acting as a group, rather than as individuals. Should a diverse coalition of actors speak out collectively, the political risks would be diffused amongst them, protecting individual actors. In acting together rather than separately, government officials and employers can make labor mobility more acceptable politically and work to create more positive perceptions. They can also build a base of research and technical knowledge, strengthening their own capacity and increasing trust in labor mobility systems. They can speak with a common voice and show that mobility is a powerful force for the good of everyone involved. Further, operational challenges would be

much more easily solved by having all needed actors at the table.

We propose to begin by identifying actors who have taken significant steps on labor mobility during COVID-19. These should include a broad cross-section of types of actors: governments (receiving and sending), local officials, employers and sector associations, mobility industry, and civil society. As noted above, several of these actors have taken large risks during COVID-19, to bring in migrant workers as needed labor and to protect their existing migrant populations. A coalition could serve to validate these risky decisions, and to document the positive impacts of the actions they undertook, while mitigating any potentially adverse effects they encounter. The coalition could further use its collective voice and evidence of impacts to take a stand against the decisions of other actors maintaining closed borders, giving in to xenophobia, or in other ways moving us towards the first of the two possible worlds. As noted by Marta Foresti of the Overseas Development Institute, the coalition should be sufficiently broad to allow for trading on interests and non-traditional alliances, as these dynamics have been behind much of the progress that was made during COVID-19.^{xl}

Such a coalition would serve actors in three ways:

1. Identifying other actors taking similar risks or with similar needs. Due to fragmentation and a lack of transparency, actors in this space are often not aware of other actors undertaking similar programs on labor mobility, or who have similar needs and interests to their own. Giving them this information can allow them to learn from each other and their experiences. It also builds a sense of solidarity and comfort from being able to point to other examples and how they played out. Such an approach serves to normalize the risks they take based on other existing examples, and to contrast themselves with actors moving backwards on labor mobility.

- 2. Building evidence and a common narrative on their needs for labor mobility and its benefits.** Having access to this information will allow these actors to build a common story of why labor mobility in the post-COVID-19 era is positive and very much needed. Having a diverse coalition of actors will (1) broaden the audience for this narrative and (2) ensure all their interests and needs are taken into account. Further, this narrative can be bolstered with the evidence from their different experiences and contexts: evidence on the positive impacts, the low risks to domestic employment, and the low risks of disease spread when well managed.
- 3. Using this narrative and a common knowledge base to build support to act.** Based on this evidence and common narrative, coalition members and the external face of the coalition could offer support by undertaking targeted outreach when key decisions are being made on whether and how to resume and extend labor mobility as COVID-19 ends.

Building a Good 'Mobility Industry' through the Coalition

A key focus of this coalition should be to develop solutions to operational challenges posed by the need to ensure workers are COVID-19 free in a way which is reliable and not overly costly for any one actor. This is precisely where the role of an effective partnership of governments, sectors of employment, and a good 'mobility industry' come in. For receiving countries to be confident in robust health screening of migrant workers coming in, they will need to collaborate with sending country governments to ensure screening processes are in place and enforced. This increases the bargaining power of sending countries, as acting unilaterally to determine from where and under which conditions workers enter their country poses new risks to receiving countries.

Given that the public health systems in both countries are already overburdened, this also highlights a role for good 'mobility industry' actors. Mobility industry actors, responsible for

overseeing the mobility process from sourcing and vetting vacancies to placing workers and supporting them in work abroad, could take on as part of the recruitment and compliance functions they take on anyway the additional responsibility of being sure arriving workers are COVID-19 free. This is the cheapest and most efficient approach to screening, as it is then integrated with all other recruitment and placement activities, particularly when done in the sending country where costs are lower.

However, outsourcing this role to the ‘mobility industry’ requires strong assurances for all involved that the actor can be trusted. This is a problem which well pre-dates COVID-19, as bad incentives in the mobility industry have been responsible for worker abuse, excessive fees, and bad job matching.^{xii} This has undermined the legitimacy of labor mobility in the past, and fed political opposition from both anti-immigrant and workers’ rights factions. The stakes are higher now, outbreaks from movement of migrant workers would lead to significant backlash for all involved. This requires building a mobility industry which meets agreed standards of quality, tied to regular quality assurance and vetting that these standards are being met.

In the coming months, we at LaMP will be setting forward proposals for a standard-setting mobility industry association, embedded in a broader coalition of government officials, employers, and migration researchers and advocates. This association would work towards a legitimate mobility industry, which could be trusted with solving operational challenges, improving outcomes for workers, employers, and countries alike. This would be accomplished by setting

standards for industry activities, agreed to by governments, employers, and worker representatives. Meanwhile, the broader structure of the coalition would function as a ‘center of excellence’ for labor mobility, supporting stakeholders in working together to solve both operational and political challenges, and carrying forward innovations which will set us up well for the much larger demographic need in coming decades.

Rather than COVID making us pessimistic about the future of labor mobility partnerships, we see COVID-19 as possible mother of invention. Ultimately, the world after COVID-19 needs what it has always needed: a mobile labor force which is well regulated to mitigate the risks that come with people moving. Now this need is more complex, with new operational challenges requiring significantly more trust in the legitimacy of migration processes. This can be accomplished through a broad coalition of actors, working together to resolve political and operational risks and to build a good ‘mobility industry’.

About LaMP

Labor Mobility Partnerships (LaMP) aims to increase rights-respecting labor mobility, ensuring workers can access employment opportunities abroad. Its overarching goal is to make it easier for its partners to build labor mobility systems at the needed scale, thus unlocking billions in income gains for people filling the needed jobs. It focuses on connecting governments, employers and sectors, the mobility industry, and researchers and advocates to bridge gaps in international labor markets, and creating and curating a repository of knowledge and resources to design and implement mobility partnerships which benefit all involved. LaMP’s functions include brokering relationships between potential partners, providing technical support from design to implementation of partnerships, and research and advocacy around the impacts of successful partnerships.

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