

People on the move and COVID-19

While Covid-19 has no border and does not discriminate based on wealth, status or origin, governments' measures to stop the pandemic tend to leave the most vulnerable behind worldwide. This is also reflected in the call of the UN Migration Network on 20 March¹: "COVID-19 does not discriminate, and nor should our response, if it is to succeed". People on the move are among some of the most vulnerable ones, who Caritas fear are being left to their own luck.

Caritas Internationalis continues to advocate that all migrants, refugees and asylum seekers should have access to basic services, regardless of their legal status. This has become more obvious and urgent during the pandemic, when lack of access to such a basic service as health care creates enormous risk for both migrant and host communities. People on the move are more vulnerable to COVID-19 due to the conditions of their journey, and poor working and living conditions (migrants often share housing and such crowding contradicts the requirement of distancing). **Access to essential, affordable services, and in particular to health care, even in times of quarantine, should be guaranteed by local authorities to all people living in the territory, including migrants and refugees.** It is also important to take into consideration that some refugees and migrants might be reluctant to seek assistance for fear of discrimination / xenophobia that might impede their ability to access services. In particular, it is important to mention the situation in refugee camps, where already before COVID-19, refugees and asylum seekers lived in low standard conditions, crowded places and most importantly, they didn't always have access to crucial components to combat COVID-19's spread, such as running water and soap, as well the possibility for physical distancing.

Caritas Internationalis also highlights that all workers, including migrants should have access to social protection. The current pandemic has revealed the huge vulnerability of irregular migrant workers, including domestic and care workers, who are more often than not employed informally. Many have lost their jobs, as they were irregularly employed and cannot reach their workplace. Thus they have lost the main source of protection and financial support for their whole family (also in the country of origin). Many others, those who live-in with their employers, typically do not receive adequate protection from **contagion nor from exploitative working conditions, on call day and night.**

Therefore, Caritas Internationalis calls to everybody: no worker, including migrants, should be excluded from social protection guarantees. Indecent conditions, such as irregular work, should cease to exist. All of us are responsible for making this happen.

Many Caritas Organisations work with vulnerable children and minor migrants. We are eager to remind that all minor migrants either unaccompanied or with their families should receive the same protection as nationals. In this respect, we should join UNICEF's voice² and stress what they said in their Technical note/Guidance: "Protection of children during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic":

"Schools are closing. Parents are struggling to care for their children and make ends meet. The protection risks for children are mounting. This guidance provides governments and protection authorities with an outline of practical measures that can be taken to keep children safe during these uncertain times..." asking for all migrant children to be included, and pointing out that the children of migrant families are among the most vulnerable ones.

¹ <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/statements/covid-19-does-not-discriminate-nor-should-our-response>

² <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/covid-19-children-heightened-risk-abuse-neglect-exploitation-and-violence-amidst>

We also strongly support the three points below from the same UNICEF document and highlight that they should also apply to all migrant children:

“Provide financial and material assistance to families whose income generating opportunities have been affected; and put in place concrete measures to prevent child-family separation, and ensure support for children left alone without adequate care due to the hospitalization or death of a parent or caregiver; and finally ensure the protection of all children is given the utmost consideration in disease control measures.”

Caritas also reiterates the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Grandi’s call to world leaders to not block the right to access territory in order to seek asylum, and to not force people to return to situations of danger. People continue to flee conflicts, wars and disasters that haven’t stopped. And access to asylum should continue, by taking the necessary health precaution in vigour (e.g. health screening, testing, quarantine, etc.) in a non-discriminatory and proportionate manner.

Caritas calls on authorities worldwide to ensure that their response to COVID-19 takes into account the needs and rights of people on the move, and **urges States to respect the right to asylum and non refoulement** (as it also highlighted in UNHCR legal considerations published on 16 March³).

We would like to draw attention to the situation of homeless people in this time: great variety of people on the move fall within this category. While CI always considers a clean shelter with water, washing facilities and toilets and a personal private space important, it is now vital to avoid the spread of contagion. As we work with migrants who are often homeless or live in occupied buildings and precarious shelters, we consider that providing proper clean shelter with all the facilities and necessary distance and tools to avoid the pandemic spread of COVID-19 is a must.

Finally, in this current struggle, this virus reminds us “once and for all, that humanity is a single community”, as Pope Francis says. Therefore, the situation should be seen as an actual opportunity to test our capability of solidarity with all the people in need in this world. Hopefully, the early experience and subsequent knowledge acquired in some countries will be of guidance to tackle the problem better and quicker in those countries where the virus is just starting to spread.

³ <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5e7132834.html>