

GIAN MIGRATION

"The stranger who resides with you, you shall look upon as one of your people and love him as yourself" (Lev. 19:34).

Solidarity with Refugees and Migrants in the Era of COVID-19

Statement of the Global Ignatian Advocacy Network on Migration (GIAN Migration)¹

We currently find ourselves in a global crisis, unprecedented in our lifetimes, as result of the COVID-19 pandemic. With numbers rising every day from their current levels of [of nearly 800.000 cases and more than 37,000 deaths in 178 countries as of March 31, 2020](#), the virus has disrupted life in almost every corner of the globe. In response to the rapid spread of the virus, many countries have decided to close their borders, cease all non-essential activities, and impose a lockdown on all residents. Healthcare systems risk becoming even more overwhelmed as the pandemic spreads. Both health and economic consequences are expected to be devastating and will affect – in fact, are already affecting - the most vulnerable individuals and communities, including migrants, refugees, and forcibly displaced persons. These are the populations with whom we as the Global Ignatian Advocacy Network on Migration (GIAN Migration) are especially concerned.²

Situation of migrants, refugees and forcibly displaced persons

Currently, there are around 763 million internal and 271 million international migrants. Globally, more than 1 billion people are on the move. Almost 71 million people are forced to leave their homes due to armed conflicts, generalized violence, or natural disasters. Of these, almost 26 million are refugees, 41.3 million are internally displaced persons, and 3.5 million are asylum seekers (UNHCR 2020, IOM 2020).

¹ This global network on displacement, migration and refugees, promoted by the [Secretariat for Social Justice and Ecology](#) of the Jesuit Curia in Rome, brings together various accompaniment, research, and advocacy organizations and their experiences working with and for displaced populations, migrants, and refugees across five continents. The network is composed of one representative from each of the six Conferences (administrative divisions) of the Society of Jesus, as well as Jesuit Refugee Service, which serves as an international ministry.

² The recommendations included in this statement are based on our own experience accompanying displaced persons, migrants, and refugees across five continents with whom we travel together through life.

#IStayAtHome has surfaced as one of the most popular hashtags as local and international health agencies have recommended that countries increasingly impose lockdowns to stem the tide of the virus. Sadly, many migrants and refugees do not have a home or place to stay. Others live in substandard housing with their entire families or even strangers in very precarious and extremely unhealthy conditions.

Refugee camps

Images of overcrowded, unsanitary, and unhygienic refugee camps in different regions of the world make clear the unsuitability of refugee camps to safely house those who have fled violence in their home countries. It is clearly impossible to practice self-quarantine or social distancing under such conditions, meaning an outbreak of COVID-19 in a refugee camp would surely have tragic consequences.

Forced isolation

Some migrants and refugees live cut off from health institutions or other support networks. This isolation is felt more acutely by those who do not speak the language of the country in which they live. Consequently, they may have difficulty understanding public health information or recommendations. Ongoing enforcement action leaves many immigrants afraid to leave their homes even to seek medical care or buy groceries.

Detention centers and deportations

Today, many types of detention centers exist around the world. Several are overcrowded, which thereby puts detainees at great risk of infection, especially in cases where individuals are expected to stay for a long time.

Ongoing deportations are also potentially spreading the virus from one country to the next as infected individuals go undetected. In some instances, deportations are carried out in violation of migrants' right to due process. Some government officials have even used the occasion of this health crisis to mask restrictive immigration policies that violate migrants' rights as health and safety precautions.

Migrant women working as caregivers

Many migrants, particularly women, work as caregivers to children and the elderly. As essential workers, many are not permitted to self-isolate at home and must instead continue working at great risk to themselves and their families. Sadly, this invaluable contribution to society often goes unacknowledged. They are often not even provided the necessary conditions for dignified labor.

Transnational families

One of the greatest difficulties suffered by migrants and refugees is a sense of alienation or distance from family and friends. This feeling is especially acute in times like these when people are most concerned about elderly family members or those who suffer from chronic illnesses. A lack of clear information also leaves migrants and refugees in the dark about the actual condition of their loved ones and communities back in their home countries.

Trapped at the border

Border closures have left some families trapped at airports and other border crossings, sometimes with barely any means to survive. Overwhelmed embassies and consulates

combined with an unfamiliarity of local languages, customs, or laws leaves migrants and refugees in a severe state of vulnerability.

The economic impact of COVID-19 on immigrants

Many migrants already suffer from job insecurity, a condition that has only worsened as a result of the coronavirus. An economic downturn because of the coronavirus will be felt most severely by vulnerable migrants employed in the low wage labor market.

Prejudices and xenophobia

In the midst of a crisis or other social ill, societies frequently look for scapegoats. Sadly, migrants and refugees are often the focus of prejudices and fear towards those who speak differently, look differently, etc. The current outbreak of COVID-19 is no different. In fact, some people say migrants are to blame for the spread of the virus. For example, Chinese immigrants are accused of bringing the disease to other counties. Other times people speak of sealing off their borders to “contaminated” Spaniards and Italians.

Recommendations: *How can we take care of most vulnerable migrants? What can be done?*

We, the Global Ignatian Advocacy Network (GIAN), believe that as a matter of urgency, the following measures must be implemented according to their country-specific contexts:

- 1. Evacuate overcrowded refugees camps as well as detention centers, thereby offering migrants the opportunity to protect themselves and others from infection.**
- 2. Stop the deportations of migrants** particularly to countries with weak healthcare systems. The principle of non-refoulement (i.e., the right not to be returned to a country in which person’s life or integrity is at risk) does not admit exceptions.
- 3. Prioritize access to medical attention for the homeless, displaced persons, migrants, and refugees in transit** – particularly the most vulnerable within those populations. These groups are in particular need of support because many people live in shadows, afraid to seek medical attention. It is important to protect them and provide them with relevant information to reduce their risk. Many shelters, both public and private, are high-risk environments as they continue to provide services yet lack proper medical supplies.
- 4. Offer humanitarian and financial support to those countries and areas with a high concentration of migrants, refugees, and displaced people.**
- 5. Uphold the right to asylum or other forms of international relief, including the right to due process.** People in need international protection cannot be rejected at the border, even in times of crisis.
- 6. Provide safe emergency resources** for homeless people or those living in overcrowded settings who cannot comply with prevention and “social distancing” measures.

7. **Provide accurate and timely information in different languages** about the current conditions as well as recommended health and safety measures. We ask that government authorities act with the utmost transparency by transmitting the most accurate and up-to-date information. While stay-at-home orders and similarly restrictive measures are scientifically and medically necessary to reduce the spread of the virus, they must never be used as a cover to trample on constitutional or human rights, which must always be preserved and upheld.
8. **Implement a network of care providers** that can quickly mobilize to provide relief for those who may be sick, alone, or stranded by border closures. Such networks already exist in part through civil society, churches, etc.
9. **Raise awareness about the most vulnerable members of our society.** In many cases, those working at the frontlines as “essential workers” to provide much needed services such as childcare, caring for the elderly, agricultural labor, construction, etc. are migrants. They place themselves and their families at great risk to carry out this work so that they may ease the burden on the rest of society. They will also help rejuvenate society once the current health crisis ends. At this time, there is an urgent need to more deeply reflect on and communicate to the broader public the contributions these workers make so that they may be better appreciated and integrated into our societies.
10. **Fight against falsehoods and populist trends** by immediately denouncing all attempts to link the spread of COVID-19 to migration or to otherwise stigmatize or blame migrants. Instead, we must be committed to providing the facts about how the virus is actually transmitted.

In these bleak and uncertain times, we are comforted by the many creative gestures that have made us more aware of our interdependence within a global community. As Pope Francis points out, this is an opportunity to remind ourselves once and for all how indispensable solidarity is and that we live as one human family. In other words, we will only overcome this crisis if we stick together. Solidarity is the best protocol of all.

“We were surprised by an unexpected and angry storm, but we realized we were in the same boat. In this boat we are all like the disciples who speak with one voice and, with anguish, say 'we are lost'. We also realize that we cannot go on our own, but only together.”

Pope Francis, Rome, March 2020

March 31, 2020