



Beyond gratitude

Lessons learned from migrants' contribution to the Covid-19 response

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Key messages

- The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the vital contribution and value of migrant workers to our societies and economies.
- Yet their jobs have often been labelled as 'low-skilled', their work has been undervalued and their rights have been denied. As a result, many have risked their lives on the Covid-19 frontline while lacking the basic social protections enjoyed by other workers.
- Many national and local governments have relaxed migration regulations and created new incentives for migrant workers in essential services, demonstrating that migration policies – regardless of today's increasingly polarised debates – can and do change when necessary.
- This matters for the post-pandemic recovery, given that countries will continue to rely on migrant workers of all skills levels.
- We all must ensure that these changes are lasting. The following policy recommendations emerge from our research:
 - Enhance routes to regularisation, in recognition of migrants' vital contribution to essential services.
 - Expand legal migration pathways, ensuring safe working conditions for all, to support post-Covid-19 global recovery, tackle shortages in essential workforces and fill skills gaps.
 - Ensure that migrants, whatever their status, have access to key basic services and social protection.
 - Detach immigration policies from inflexible 'low' and 'high' skills classifications. Workers of all skills levels will be essential in the long path to recovery.

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Contents

Acknowledgements	3
List of boxes and figures	5
1 Introduction	6
1.1 About the research	7
2 Labour mobility before Covid-19	8
2.1 Migrant workers across the globe	8
2.2 The impact of the pandemic on labour mobility and migrants	13
3 'Key workers': lessons from the Covid-19 response	15
3.1 Introduction	15
3.2 About our research	15
3.3 Migrants' contribution to the Covid-19 response: an overview	17
4 Conclusions and recommendations	25
References	27
Appendix: Methodology	33

List of boxes and figures

Boxes

Box 1	Exploring the impact of travel restrictions on pandemics	14
Box 2	Data and design: the 'Key workers' data visualisation	16
Box 3	The development of a coronavirus vaccine	19
Box 4	Migrants taking a local lead in the Covid-19 response	24

Figures

Figure 1	Distribution of migrant workers across sub-regions and continents (%)	9
Figure 2	Share of migrant workers in the essential workforce (%)	9
Figure 3	Essential workers that are migrants across selected US states (thousands)	10
Figure 4	Share of foreign-born key workers in the EU, by occupation (%)	11
Figure 5	Share of foreign-born doctors working in selected OECD countries (%)	12
Figure 6	Regional origins of migrants working in the health and social care sector in the UK	12
Figure 7	Migrant workers in the food and agriculture sector in the US (%)	13
Figure 8	Overview of stories collected	17
Figure 9	Healthcare entries recorded for each region	18
Figure 10	Initiatives related to food and agriculture	21
Figure 11	Immigration measures, by region	22

1 Introduction

When we die at the front lines, we're called guardian angels. But when we need to be treated on equal footing, we're not guardian angels. We're nobody, we're invisible (Ze Benedicte Carole, an asylum seeker from Cameroon who contracted Covid-19 while working as a volunteer at a long-term care home in Montreal, cited in Lowrie, 2020).

This paper recognises and values the fundamental contribution of migrant workers to our societies and economies throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. That contribution has always been vital, but a year of the devastating Covid-19 pandemic has provided the most compelling insight to date into the essential role they play within our workforces. Yet this role is often overlooked in highly polarised political debates on migration, which are locked into narratives that are either highly positive or deeply negative. The experience of the past year offers an opportunity to reflect, learn and act. It is time to move beyond outmoded debates and ensure that labour and migration policies facilitate, rather than hinder, the contribution of migrant workers to our lives as we start our long journey to recovery.

We have leaned heavily on 'key workers' to keep our economies and societies running throughout this crisis. While the term 'key workers' is not new, it has come to symbolise the frontline workers during the pandemic: the 'heroes' whose jobs are critical to keep us, quite literally, alive. They are the doctors, nurses, cleaners, ambulance staff, delivery drivers, care home workers, supermarket staff,

teachers and others who have fulfilled essential functions. Across the world, they are known as 'key workers', 'essential workers' or 'critical infrastructure workers'. While there are global variations in the terminology, key workers are concentrated largely in health and social care, food supply, transport, utilities and communication, education, law enforcement and public safety and other public services (Cabinet Office and Department for Education, 2020; US Department of Homeland Security, 2020). As well as spanning a broad mix of occupations, essential workers have a wide range of skill levels. However, they often have a disproportionate presence in occupations deemed to be 'low-skilled.' We explore the implications of this later in the paper.

Migrants account for a large share of those who are now classified as essential workers. The pandemic has provided a much-needed reality check on the depth of our dependence on migrant workers for essential functions. For too long, however, their jobs have been labelled as 'low-skilled', their contributions to our lives have been undervalued and hidden, and their rights have been denied. As a result, they lack sufficient protection and are among the most vulnerable groups in society. It is time to correct this, not just out of gratitude or a sense of solidarity, but in recognition of the collective nature of our society and the benefits we all derive from our essential workforce. Migrants have always played a key role in this workforce and will continue to do so in the long and difficult recovery from the Covid-19 crisis. This matters for the future of every single one of us: we all stand to benefit from a fairer and more pragmatic approach to labour migration.

1.1 About the research

A desire to capture the contributions of migrants during the pandemic inspired us to begin the systematic tracking of events across the globe over the past year. We wanted to make their essential work more visible, track the innovations and reforms that have enhanced their contributions during the emergency, and draw lessons from these experiences to inform long-term reforms and policies.

To this end, we created a tracker to monitor media and social media in real time and gather examples of reforms, new initiatives and campaigns that facilitate, recognise and better support migrant essential workers during the pandemic (ODI, 2020). The tracker also includes information on articles and opinion pieces that discuss the contribution of migrant essential workers, as well as key information and statistics as they were published. The information data in the tracker formed the basis upon which to design and develop an innovative and dynamic data visualisation: ‘Key workers: migrants’ contribution to the Covid-19 response’ (Fragapane and Piacentini, 2020). The data visualisation evolves over time as we collect more stories and examples of migrants’ contributions to the Covid-19 response across the globe, in real time. While ‘key workers’ is the term most often used in the UK, and reflected in our data visualisation, we use the term ‘essential workers’ more frequently in this paper as a more commonly understood term internationally.

A year on from when we first started collecting and sharing this information, we have found that there is much to learn and some lessons need to be absorbed more urgently than others. For example, how can the term ‘low-skilled’, be compatible with the occupations

that we now know to be ‘essential’? It is time to move beyond the unhelpful skills-based categorisations that so often shape immigration rules and policies. If there is one lesson that must be learned one year on, it is that we have all benefited from a very broad range of skills, experiences and from the courage of millions of migrant key workers. Labels such as ‘low-skilled workers’ are now as irrelevant as they are offensive, particularly as we rethink, re-set and build back our societies and economies.

Chapter 2 of this paper provides a snapshot of migrant workers across countries and sectors, looking at the scale of their contribution to the global workforce before Covid-19. We look, in particular, at migrants in the healthcare and agriculture sectors and present data for the major migrant destinations, focusing mainly on Europe and North America.

In Chapter 3 we present the analysis of the stories gathered in our media tracking and presented in our ‘Key workers’ data visualisation. This focuses on migration-related reforms and initiatives by national and local governments over the past year in response to the pandemic. It captures the broad headlines on the types of action taken across sectors and regions and delves into more specific aspects, such as the types of reforms related to migrants and healthcare undertaken in different locations and the immigration policy changes or support measures put in place.

Recognising that the contributions of migrants will remain essential to our societies during our collective recovery from the pandemic, Chapter 4 presents conclusions and recommendations for policy-makers. These are based on the lessons we have learned over the past year: lessons that could inform more sustainable solutions for migration reform in the future.

2 Labour mobility before Covid-19

2.1 Migrant workers across the globe

We're not asking for new rights. We're reclaiming the ones we already have under the law and that weren't handed to us on a plate – we fought for them (Oriana Jara, the late President of *Presença da América Latina* – a civil society organisation campaigning for 'Regularisation Now' (*Regularização Já*) for migrants in Brazil, cited in Dias, 2020).

Migrants were carrying out essential work in our societies long before the Covid-19 pandemic. The following figures provide a snapshot of their distribution and importance across regions, countries, sectors and occupations.

In 2018, there were an estimated 164 million migrant workers worldwide (4.7% of the global workforce), with most of them concentrated in Europe, Northern America and the Arab states (ILO, 2018) (Figure 1). The national workforces of the Arab States have the world's highest proportion of migrant workers (40.8%), with most workers originating from South-East and South Asia (ILO, n.d.).

While migrants account for only around 5% of the global workforce, the picture changes dramatically when we look specifically at key workers, with far higher proportions of migrant workers found in what we now label the 'essential workforce'. Foreign-born workers account for 18% of the essential workforce in the UK and the US, (ONS, 2020; Kerwin and Warren, 2020), and for 13% across the European Union (EU) (Fasani and Mazza, 2020a).

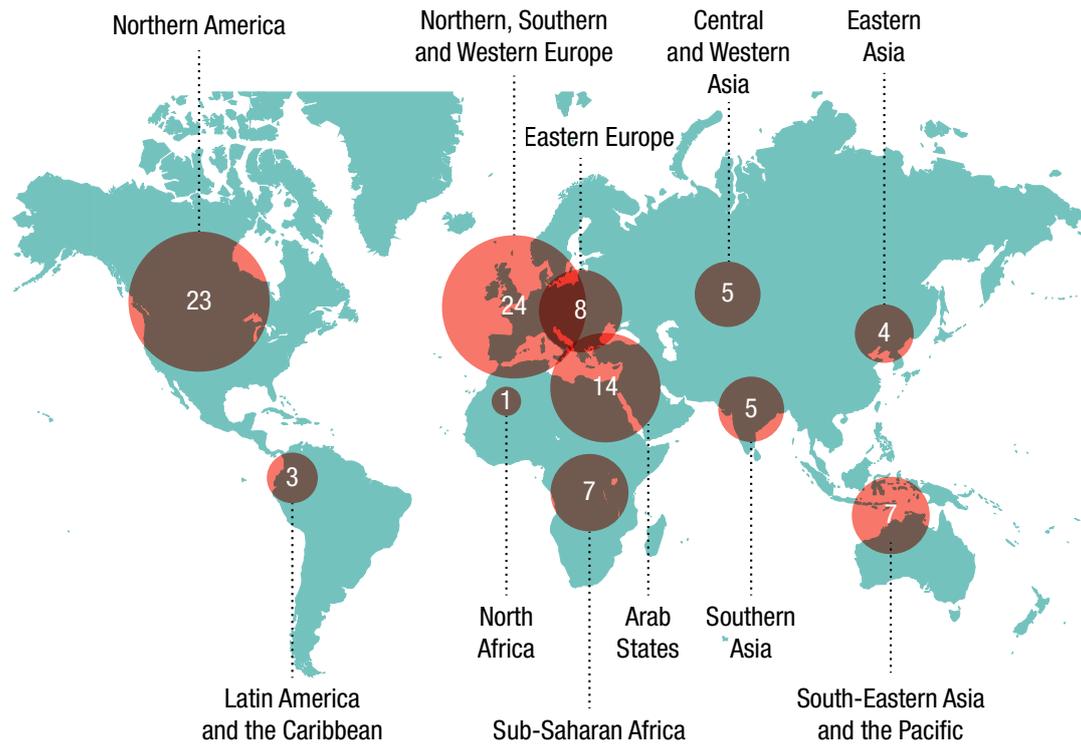
Figure 2, however, reveals great variations between EU countries, with Luxembourg, Cyprus, Ireland and Sweden far more dependent on immigrants than other countries. Across the EU, workers from countries outside the Member States, in particular, are over-represented among essential workers (Fasani and Mazza, 2020a).

The legal status of migrant essential workers also matters, given that a lack of legal status heightens their vulnerabilities. Figure 3 shows the share of the essential workforce made up of foreign-born workers in selected US states, including the share of undocumented workers in each location. Across the country as a whole, 5.5 million of the 19.8 million migrants working in occupations classified as essential during the Covid-19 crisis have been undocumented workers (Kerwin and Warren, 2020). Nearly three-quarters of all undocumented migrants working in the US are employed in sectors officially deemed to be vital for the nation's critical infrastructure, which means that they are both essential and yet at daily risk of detention and deportation (ibid.).

This is not just an issue for the US, with countries in Europe also hosting significant numbers of irregular migrants. In Spain, for example, an estimated 11% to 13% of immigrants from countries outside the EU are undocumented (Fanjul and Gálvez-Iniesta, 2020).

We were dependent on migrant labour – across all skill levels and a vast range of sectors – long before the Covid-19 pandemic, as shown in Figure 4, which looks at data on EU countries. Notably, occupations that are deemed 'low-skilled' have the highest shares of migrant workers overall. These occupations have also seen very significant shares of workers from outside the EU. This over-representation in lower-skilled

Figure 1 Distribution of migrant workers across sub-regions and continents (%)



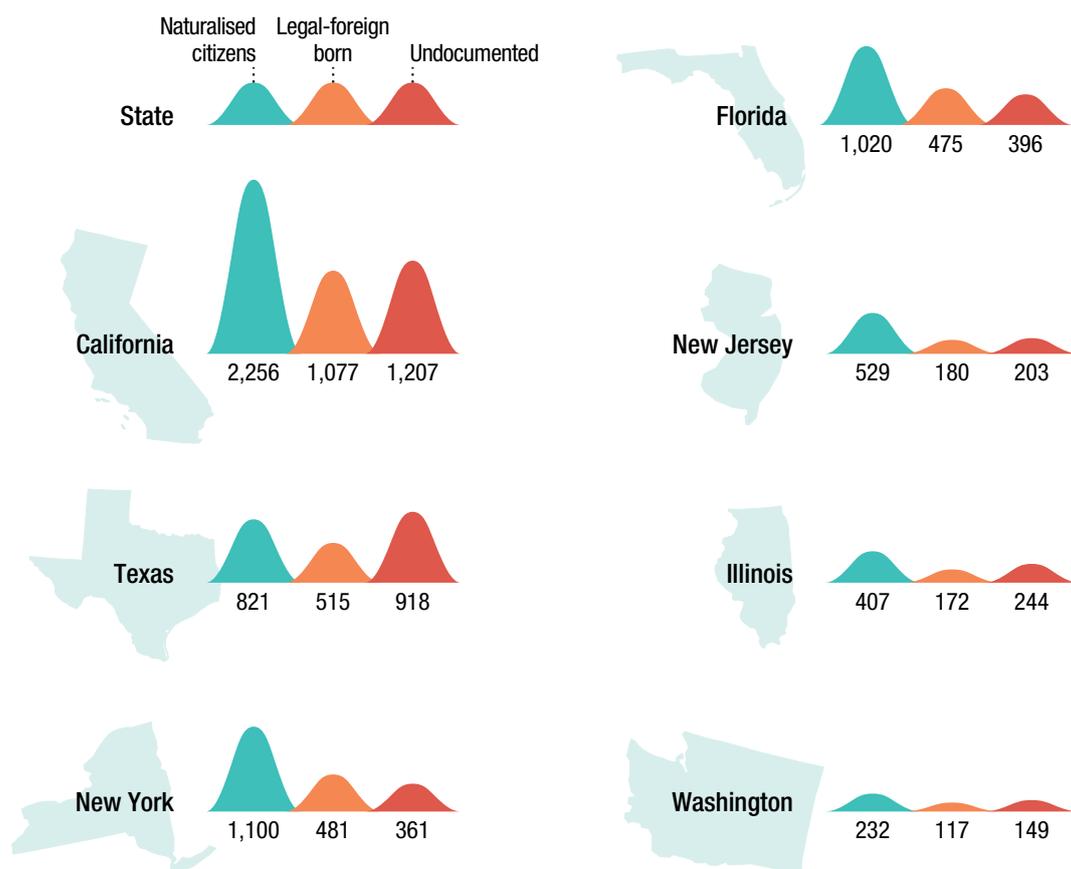
Source: ILO, 2018.

Figure 2 Share of migrant workers in the essential workforce (%)



Sources: Fasani and Mazza, 2020a; Kerwin and Warren, 2020; ONS, 2020.

Figure 3 Essential workers that are migrants across selected US states (thousands)



Source: Kerwin and Warren, 2020.

services has often implied unsocial hours, shift work and low pay for migrant workers. In the Covid-19 pandemic, however, it also implies higher health risks, given that the tasks they perform have exposed them to higher risks of Covid-19 infection (Fasani and Mazza, 2020b).

Despite their over-representation in occupations deemed to be low-skilled, it would be wrong to neglect migrant workers' contributions in high-skilled roles. The health sector is a key example, with migrants heavily represented across every skill level, from senior consultants to doctors and nurses, and from pharmacists to hospital porters and care workers. In particular, the health systems of countries that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have been heavily dependent on highly skilled foreign doctors for years.

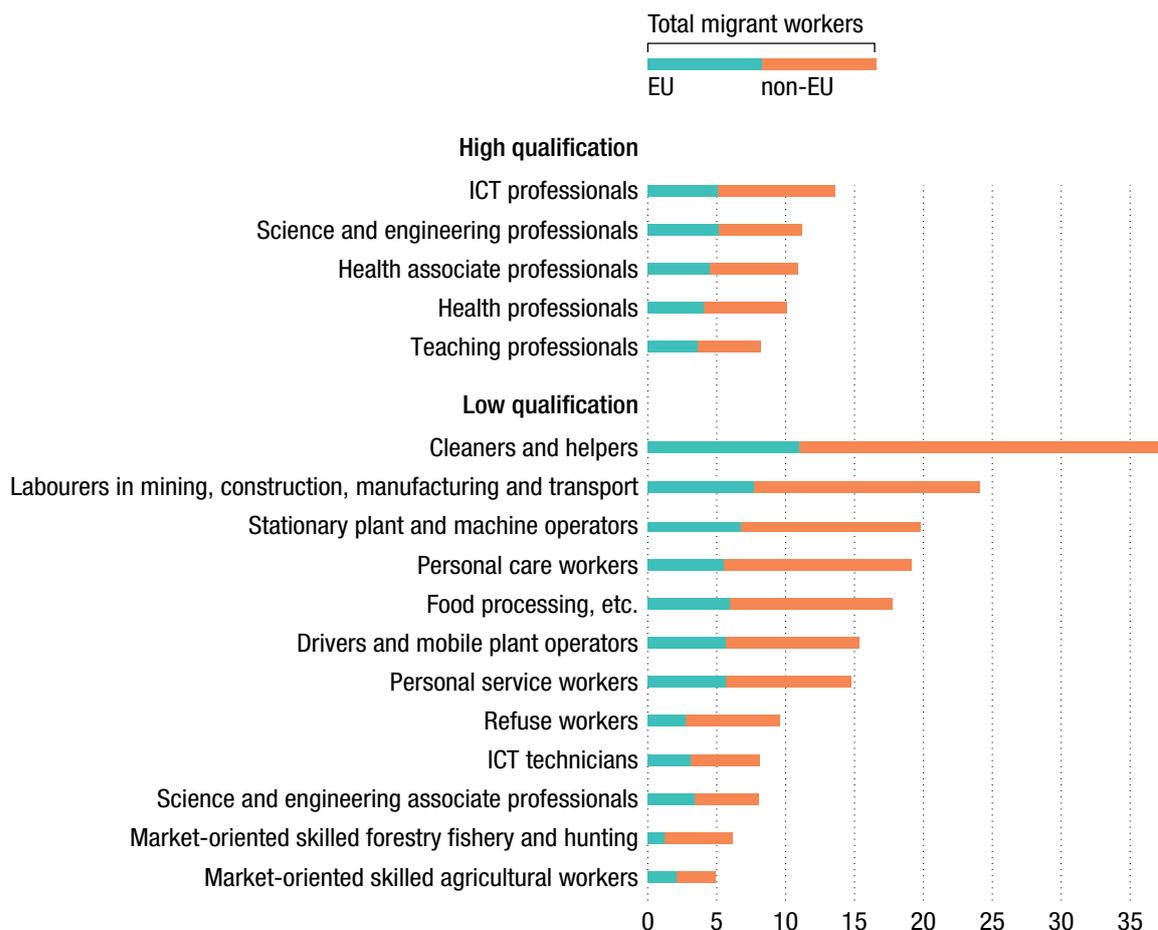
Figure 5 shows the substantial shares (and rate of increase between 2010/2011 and 2015/2016) of foreign-born doctors working in 14 OECD countries. The largest increase in the share of

immigrant doctors was in Luxembourg (+15 percentage points). Switzerland, Germany, Canada, the United States and Spain also show significant increases in the share of foreign-born doctors within their health services. Yet even within a trend of increasing recruitment, the persistent and chronic staff shortages in health sectors of OECD countries was a major concern before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic (OECD, 2019).

The UK provides a good example of this general pattern for OECD countries, given the high dependency of its health system on migrant workers. In all, 22% of essential workers working across the health and social care sector in 2019 are foreign-born (ONS, 2020). Two-thirds of these workers come from outside of the EU, with migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia making substantial contributions (as shown in Figure 6).

While many European cities depend heavily on migrant health workers, London, in particular,

Figure 4 Share of foreign-born key workers in the EU, by occupation (%)



Sources: Fasani and Mazza, 2020a.

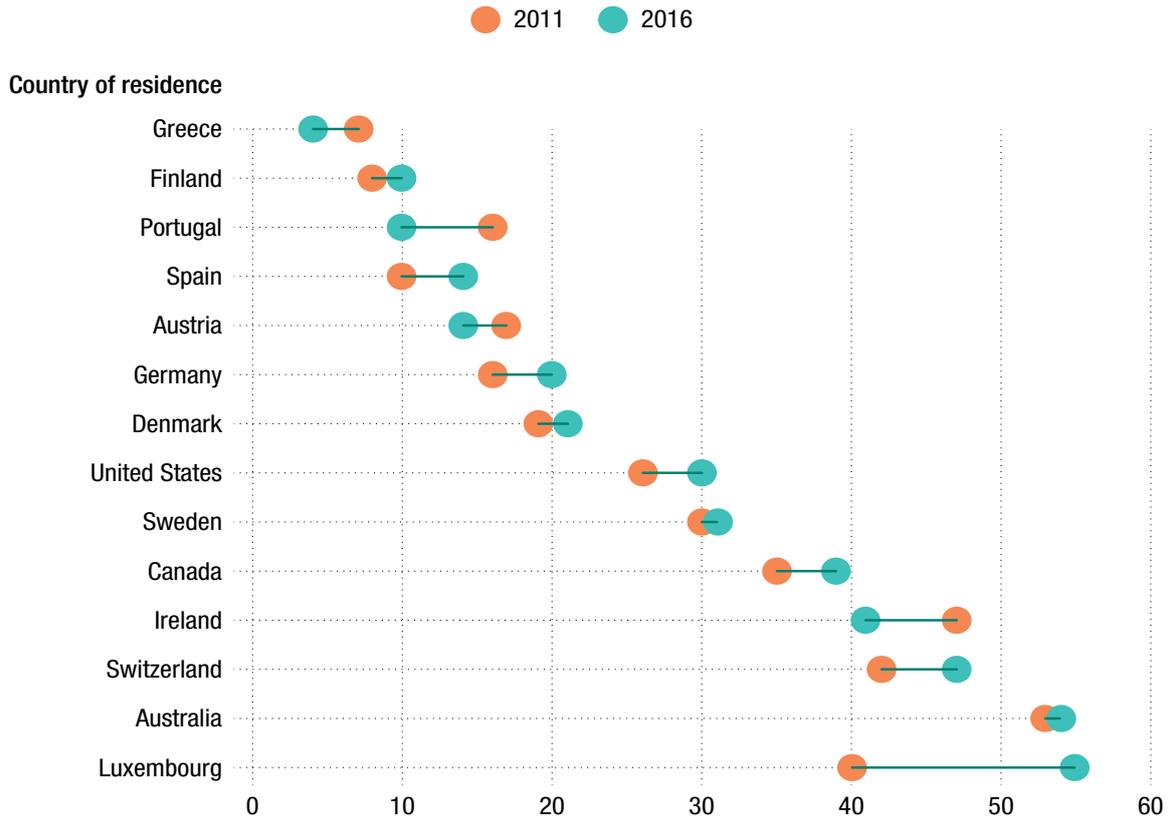
stands out: almost half of its doctors and two thirds of its nurses are foreign born (OECD, 2020c). They are among the workers who have faced some of the most extreme pressures during the pandemic, given the city's very high rates of infection and of hospital admissions for Covid-19 patients at different times over the past year (Gross et al., 2021).

While the health and social care sectors have, quite understandably, been the focus of attention during the pandemic, we have been reminded that many other occupations are fundamental for our daily existence, with the food and agriculture sector being one obvious example. Migrant workers make vital contributions to commercial agriculture, with the share of international migrants in farm workforces rising in most industrial countries (Martin, 2016). Figure 7 illustrates the extremely high dependence on migrant agricultural workers in some US states and the similarly high shares of migrants working within the food industry.

While EU-wide data are fragmented and partial (Kalantaryan et al., 2020), it is not uncommon to find that most seasonal agricultural workers are migrants. For example, migrants account for 90% of such workers in Germany and 50% of workers in Austria (OECD, 2020a).

This rapid survey of the available data illustrates the scale of the contribution of migrants in the context of the global workforce, as captured before the Covid-19 pandemic. It is clear that migrants make a far greater contribution to occupations now deemed essential – across multiple sectors and all skill levels – than their share of the general workforce would suggest. However, there are important differences across countries and a more complex picture emerges when sectors, skills and locations are analysed, with some regions and countries standing out for their particularly high dependence on the migrant workforce.

Figure 5 Share of foreign-born doctors working in selected OECD countries (%)



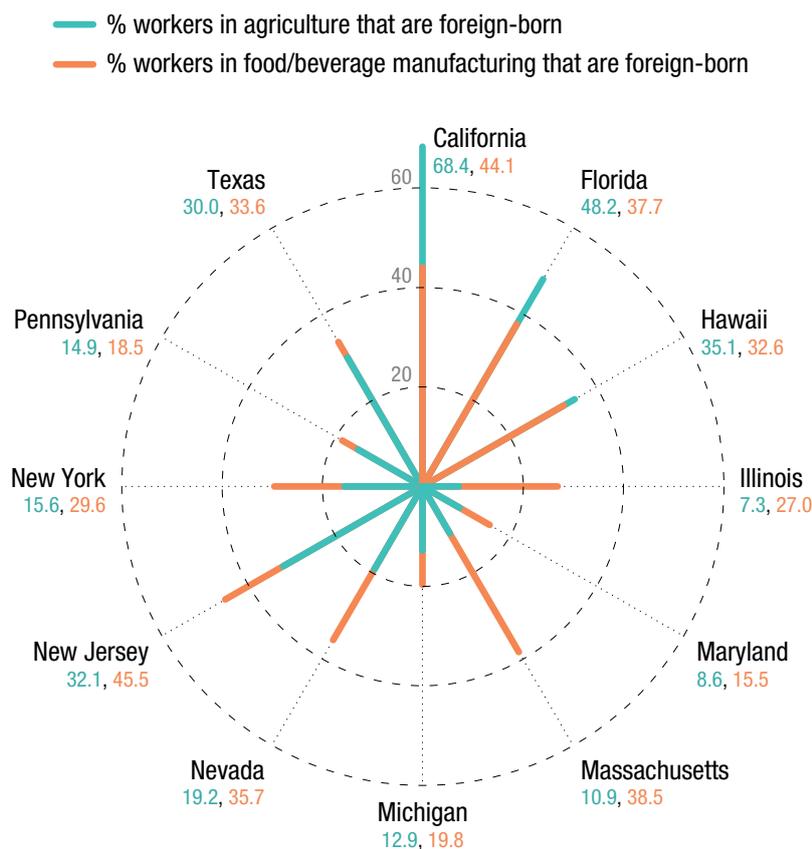
Source: OECD, 2019. This figure includes a selection of OECD countries that had comparable data available for 2011 and 2016.

Figure 6 Regional origins of migrants working in the health and social care sector in the UK



*Countries in Europe that are not within the European Union.
Source: ONS, 2020.

Figure 7 Migrant workers in the food and agriculture sector in the US (%)



Source: Kerwin and Warren, 2020.

2.2 The impact of the pandemic on labour mobility and migrants

To have a comprehensive response to a global pandemic, people need to have health coverage, and they need to be able to access services without fear (Kelly Whitener, a health policy expert at Georgetown University, cited in Barton, 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an enormous impact on human mobility, bringing a halt to travel around the world. Travel restrictions to prevent the spread of the virus across borders have been implemented in 179 countries (Clemens et al., 2020). Across OECD countries the issuance of new visas and permits fell by 46% in the first half of 2020, compared with the same period in 2019, the largest drop ever recorded (OECD, 2020a).

The likelihood of permanent restrictions on mobility remains under-explored (Box 1).

One result is that migrants have been getting ‘stuck’, with reports of them being abandoned by transporters and smugglers on their journeys or being stranded in transit (Maunganidze and Tadesse Abebe, 2020). Travel restrictions have also had major implications for countries with labour shortages, as well as for migrants’ income and the support they provide to their families back home. Latest estimates from the World Bank find that international remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries are projected to have declined by 7.2%, to \$508 billion in 2020, with a further decline of 7.5% to \$470 billion expected in 2021 (World Bank, 2020). This revised forecast points to a decline that is more gradual, but also far more prolonged, than originally anticipated. This has far-reaching consequences, given that migrant remittances are the world’s single largest source of international development finance (Clemens, 2020) and the importance of their direct impact on the reduction of poverty at individual and household level (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2017).

Box 1 Exploring the impact of travel restrictions on pandemics

Given the key role of international travel in the transmission of viruses across borders, widespread travel restrictions to curb the spread of Covid-19 are no surprise. A recent study by Clemens and Ginn (2020) has explored the costs and benefits of permanent restrictions on mobility as a way to respond to the threat of future pandemics. The study applied standard epidemiological and theoretical models to find the association between reductions in international mobility and mortality rates associated with four influenza pandemics (in 1889, 1918, 1957 and 2009). Its findings show that reduced exposure to pre-pandemic international mobility causes a slight slowing in the arrival of the pathogen but no decrease in harm if travel then ceases, and only a slight decrease if travel does not cease. Even with a draconian 50% reduction in pre-pandemic international mobility, implying that the pathogen arrives one to two weeks later, no detectable reduction in final mortality is found. The study concludes that the case for permanent limits on international mobility to reduce the harm of future pandemics is weak.

Source: Clemens and Ginn, 2020.

The vulnerabilities faced by migrants have also been exacerbated by the pandemic. As noted, evidence demonstrates that the particular tasks performed by migrant key workers expose them to a higher risk of Covid-19 infection (Fasani and Mazza, 2020b). This is, in part, because they are often concentrated in essential occupations that cannot be undertaken from home, as well

as other factors, such as the likelihood that they face unsafe working practices and live in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions (OECD, 2020b). This is well illustrated by the reported outbreaks of Covid-19 cases linked to food processing facilities in the US, UK and Ireland (Carswell, 2020; Chander, 2020; Halliday, 2020). This higher risk of infection, combined with the fact that migrants also have less access to healthcare, increases their health risks significantly.

These vulnerabilities are exacerbated by the economic impact of the crisis. Recent research looked specifically at migrants who are not employed in key sectors to assess their vulnerability in the current labour market (Fasani and Mazza, 2020b). It found that foreign-born workers are more often employed in occupations that are not amenable to working remotely or on temporary contracts at low wages, than workers from the native-born population (ibid.). The risk that they will lose their jobs is high and they are less likely to have personal savings to fall back on, given their low incomes (ibid.). In general, migrants' incomes have also been at high risk during the pandemic because of their over-representation in informal jobs, their exclusion from social safety nets and their inability to travel for their regular, seasonal work (Testaverde, 2020). This all adds up to a picture of exceptional vulnerability in the face of this global health and economic crisis.

The Covid-19 pandemic has provided an opportune moment to address these vulnerabilities, particularly as countries are taking action to bolster the contribution of migrants in their essential workforces and to extend support to those lacking protections during this crisis. The next section looks at this aspect in particular, exploring how countries have reacted to the pandemic and the measures taken to support migrant essential workers and create conditions to enhance their ongoing contribution to the pandemic response.

3 ‘Key workers’: lessons from the Covid-19 response

3.1 Introduction

Today we have found a pragmatic and goal-orientated solution which meets two justified requirements. Protection from infection on one side and securing the harvest on the other side (Julia Kloeckner, Agriculture Minister, Germany, cited in Al Jazeera, 2020b).

This section aims to draw out lessons from the Covid-19 response, exploring the measures taken by countries to support migrants and bolster their essential contribution to our societies during this unprecedented crisis. Such lessons emerge from our tracker, which has captured relevant media and social media stories over the past year (ODI, 2020). These are analysed and presented in our data visualisation: ‘Key workers: migrants’ contribution to the Covid-19 response’ (Fragapane and Piacentini, 2020).

While the information data we have gathered covers many initiatives and actions, this analysis focuses specifically on policy reforms by national and local governments. The vast majority of stories collected in the tracker relate to Europe and North America, followed by Asia-Oceania, with far fewer entries collected for Latin America and Africa. This reflects both the importance of countries in Europe and North America as popular migrant destinations and the spread of the pandemic, with the US and Europe quickly becoming Covid-19 hotspots. As a result, our analysis concentrates on Europe, North America and Asia-Oceania because the number of entries for these regions provides a more robust basis for comparative analysis and comment.

We have gathered stories as they emerged, with the data visualisation developed revealing a story in

real time. Most entries on healthcare, for example, are clustered around March and April 2020, with stories from April, May and June reflecting more activity and reforms around the food and agriculture sector. It has, therefore, mirrored the evolution of the pandemic and continues to track events as they happen.

All data referred to in this section are drawn from our own tracking and classification and all calculations are the authors’ own. All of the stories referred to appear in the data visualisation, which also provides information on the sources of each story. See the Appendix for more information on our methodology.

3.2 About our research

Refugees with proven professional competencies are ready to step in and contribute if allowed to, under the supervision of certified health professionals. In this way, they can show their solidarity, and give back to the communities sheltering them (Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, cited in UNHCR, 2020a).

As the pandemic unfolded, a mass of new conversations, actions and reforms began in relation to key workers. In March 2020, Marta Foresti, Director of ODI Europe and leader of ODI’s Human Mobility Initiative, shared her personal reflection: ‘An ode to key workers’ on the sudden recognition of workers who are so often migrants (Foresti, 2020). This inspired us to gather the stories of migrants’ essential contributions during the pandemic as a way to make these contributions more visible, acknowledged and valued.

We began to track the emerging stories of reform and change systematically, whether these were campaigns or initiatives by the private or public sector related to migrant key workers, as well as any changes in immigration rules that would have a direct impact on the lives of essential workers. Our work was enhanced by stories that were crowd-sourced, with ODI staff asking their Twitter followers to track and submit stories, and to amplify the call for inputs across their own networks. This was vital, particularly in the first few months, helping to capture stories from across the globe and support

the development of our system for media and social media tracking.

Gathering information, however, is only one part of the challenge. We also need a strategy to change the narrative. That change goes beyond a recognition of the contribution of migrants to our societies to encompass the reframing of an outmoded and unproductive conversation, where the ‘low-skilled’ label is no longer seen as compatible with the classification of ‘essential’. We decided therefore, to harness the power of design, working closely with the design community to explore visuals that would

Box 2 Data and design: the ‘Key workers’ data visualisation

The tracker collects data and stories on migrant key workers’ contribution to the Covid-19 response as they happen (ODI, 2020). After an initial period of data collection during the spring of 2020, it became clear that we needed a tool and a process that would allow us to bring these stories and data to life. From the outset, we knew that we wanted to reach beyond our existing networks in the policy community and engage with wider audiences who can play a role in shaping future narratives around migration.

Therefore, we worked with information designer Federica Fragapane and developer Alex Piacentini. Both are experienced in interactive data visualisation design, often as part of storytelling initiatives that aim to bring about social change. They developed the innovative data visualisation ‘Key workers: migrants’ contribution to the Covid-19 response’, which went live on the ODI website in May 2020 (Fragapane and Piacentini, 2020), with regular updates as we add stories to the tracker.

The core visual element is represented by the ‘trees’, each representing a geographic region, as a metaphor of the growing awareness of migrants’ essential contribution in response to the Covid-19 crisis. Larger branches represent sectors, including healthcare, hospitality, immigration and food and agriculture. Smaller branches represent levels of action, from the national to the local. Each dot represents a reform, new initiative or campaign.

Giving a shape to these data helps to unearth hidden stories: they are already there, but are often undervalued or taken for granted. Visualising them helps to acknowledge them, making them – hopefully – more visible. The trees are not static, but grow as the tracker is updated. Periodically, users can see new branches and dots appear, to reflect the growing awareness of these stories and contributions.

The data visualisation has enabled these stories to be told in new spaces, appearing in design magazines such as *Wallpaper*¹ and on the ‘Design Emergency’² platform. It was also featured in the V&A Museum in Dundee as part of the *Now Accepting Contactless*³ exhibition about design during a global pandemic.

1 See www.wallpaper.com/technology/information-designer-federica-fragapane-covid-19-community-vulnerability-index.

2 See www.instagram.com/design.emergency/.

3 See www.vam.ac.uk/dundee/exhibitions/now-accepting-contactless.

communicate the stories of migrant essential workers to new audiences (Box 2).

3.3 Migrants' contribution to the Covid-19 response: an overview

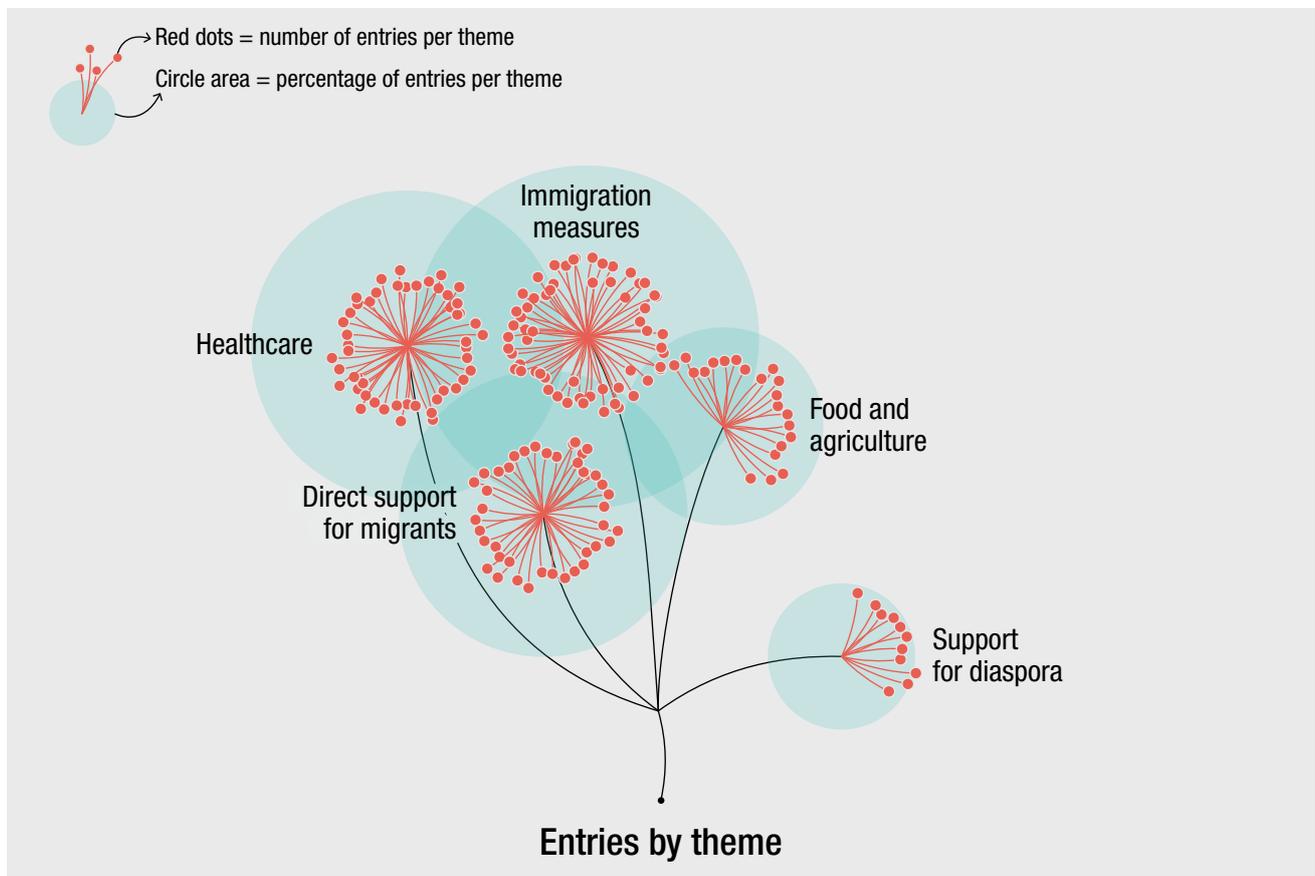
The government must fast-track these highly qualified professionals so they can work in the NHS. They are able and willing to play their part in tackling this pandemic (Sir Ed Davey, Leader of the Liberal Democrats party, UK, cited in Taylor, 2020).

Not surprisingly, many of the stories that have been collected so far relate to two sectors – healthcare and food and agriculture – that rely heavily on migrant workers. In addition, many stories deal with changes to immigration rules, such as rules on visas and work permits (with extensions and substantive changes observed).

The tracker also records cases where migrants are supported, with governments providing financial support to migrants or other initiatives to improve living conditions. These aspects, taken together, account for most of the entries recorded to date. There are also many overlaps, with healthcare or food and agriculture initiatives often entailing changes in visa rules, for example. The prevalence of different themes and their overlaps in the stories collected is illustrated in Figure 8.

The Covid-19 crisis has precipitated national health emergencies, often accompanied by severe economic impacts as a result of lockdown measures to suppress the virus. In this context, it is no surprise that the vast majority (69%) of response measures and initiatives identified in the tracker have been taken at the national level. Regional-level responses have been important in some locations, most notably North America where 39% of the recorded entries refer to action at that level. This reflects the many initiatives taken by US states and Canadian provinces

Figure 8 Overview of stories collected



Source: Fragapane and Piacentini, 2020.

to implement their own emergency responses. Similarly, certain states in Germany have been quick to respond to the crisis, taking measures to enable more flexible employment of migrant workers in both the agriculture and health sectors.

3.3.1 Healthcare

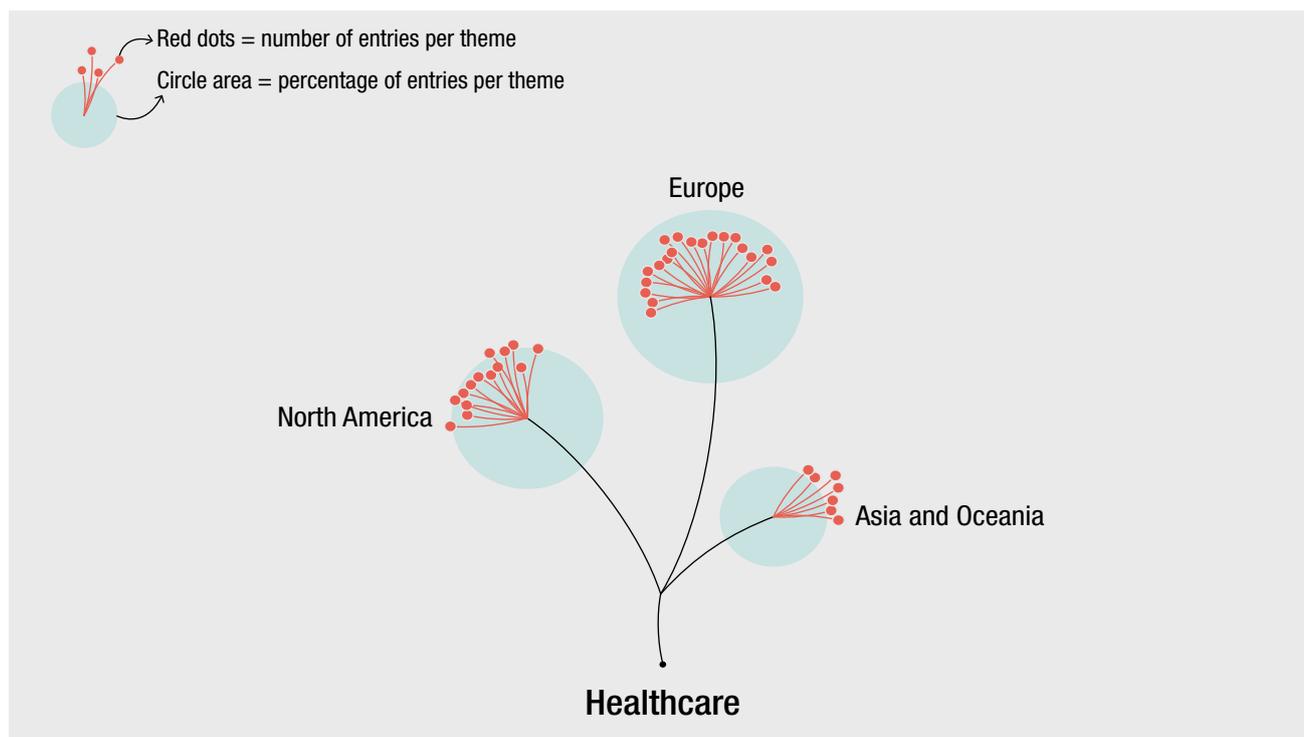
It really is in our interest that we support refugee doctors to enter our workforce. In the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis we are in desperate need of their knowledge and skills (Dr Aula Abbara, Consultant in Infectious Diseases at Imperial College NHS Healthcare Trust and Chair of the Syria Public Health Network, cited in University of Cambridge, 2020).

Our tracking efforts have identified initiatives and reforms in the healthcare sector as being highly important. However, this picture varies greatly from one location to another, with most reforms and initiatives involving migrants and healthcare identified in Europe and North America (Figure 9). It is also clear from the stories gathered and analysed that fast-tracking the employment of

migrant healthcare professionals into domestic healthcare sectors has been a major element of national responses, accounting for 52% of all health-related stories gathered to date. Separate analysis of healthcare responses in Europe and North America find that both regions have reinforced their health workforces by calling upon migrant workers: 62% of health-related responses in European countries relate specifically to accelerating the entry of migrant doctors and nurses into the workforce, with 64% recorded for North America.

Many healthcare-related measures were implemented in the early months of the pandemic, in March and April 2020, when the capacity of public healthcare systems was severely tested by the first wave of the virus. Operational responses were similar in Europe and the US, with foreign doctors awaiting official credentials to practice and refugees with foreign medical qualifications who were already in the country fast-tracked to join health workforces. Countries also extended the work visas of migrant healthcare professionals and, despite the worldwide suspension of routine visa services, the US continued to provide emergency visas to enable medical professionals to enter the country. Such responses were not

Figure 9 Healthcare entries recorded for each region



Source: Fragapane and Piacentini, 2020.

limited to the world's richest nations, however. Similar fast-track measures were used in Mexico, Peru and Argentina, with the contribution of Venezuelan doctors standing out, in particular (Carrasco, 2020; Lucesole, 2020).

While countries have been quick to fast-track migrants into their health workforces, efforts to ensure their access to healthcare seem less prevalent. Only a small number of entries relate to specific measures by countries to extend access to healthcare to migrants. While they appear to be rare, these efforts merit recognition, such as the measures taken by Colombia and Ireland to provide Covid-19 related healthcare for all, including testing and treatment, regardless of immigration status (IOM Ireland, 2020; UNHCR, 2020b); or Portugal's regularisation of all migrants and asylum seekers to ensure access to healthcare for all during the crisis (Henriques, 2020).

Box 3 tells a story of the impressive personal achievements of two scientists from migrant backgrounds. However, their key contribution to the creation of a vaccine that is critical for global public health should come as little surprise, given that such achievements are not unusual. Earlier research has shown that immigrants often drive innovation, both through their own efforts and by adding to the creativity of native-born populations (Henrich, 2021). There is also evidence that they make a disproportionate contribution to scientific innovation (Gaulé and Piacentini, 2013) and play a central role in the global knowledge network (Agarwal et al., 2021). BioNTech is, again, an emblematic example, having amassed a team of talent from over 60 countries around the world, a perfect example of how innovation is a collective exercise (BioNTech, n.d.).

One notable aspect of healthcare responses to the pandemic has been the outpouring of solidarity for Italy following the rapid spread of the virus in Lombardy and across the rest of Italy, which overwhelmed the country's robust health systems. In mid-March, for example, China sent a team of 300 intensive care doctors to Italy with coronavirus test kits and personal protective equipment (Sylvers and Pancevski, 2020).

Box 3 The development of a coronavirus vaccine

Perhaps the best-known example of contributions to protecting and saving lives in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic by those from migrant backgrounds is the work of Dr Ugur Sahin and Dr Ozlem Tureci. This husband and wife team – both children of Turkish immigrants in Germany – built successful scientific careers focused on research and teaching before founding a small biotechnology start-up, BioNTech, in the German city of Mainz. Before Covid-19, their work focused mainly on cancer treatments. In January 2020, however, convinced that the virus spreading in China would become a full-blown pandemic, they moved quickly to work on a coronavirus vaccine. Their company developed the successful 'BioNTech-Pfizer vaccine', which has been shown to be more than 90% effective in preventing Covid-19 disease among clinical trial participants. Over 600,000 people in the UK alone had received their first dose of the BioNTech-Pfizer vaccine before Christmas 2020.

Sources: Department of Health and Social Care, 2020; Gelles, 2020.

Other countries quickly followed suit, with Cuba and Albania sending teams of medical professionals later in March (Al Jazeera, 2020a; Euronews, 2020). Somalia sent a team of doctors from the National University in Mogadishu (Dhaysane, 2020) and Russia organised a large team of military medics and supplies (Reuters, 2020a). In April it was reported that Norway would also send medical and logistical staff to help (Reuters, 2020b). For its part, Germany accepted patients with the virus from Italy, treating them in their hospitals in Saxony and North-Rhine Westphalia (Reuters, 2020c). These are unprecedented examples of humanitarian aid to a high-income country, as well as impressive demonstrations of international solidarity in the face of Italy's extraordinary health crisis.

3.3.2 Food and agriculture

This is a common sense change to support employers, seasonal workers, and our agricultural sector during the many challenges we are facing across the economy due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Senator Michaelia Cash, Minister for Employment, Australia, on the extension of the country's Seasonal Worker Programme and Pacific Labour Scheme, cited in DESE, 2020).

Food and agriculture is also an important sector as reflected in the stories gathered in the tracker. Again this is particularly true for Europe, which accounts for 62% of all of the entries recorded for this sector. Two-thirds of the entries related to food and agriculture include changes in visa and permit rules and approaches to enable migrants to work as a response to agricultural labour shortages. In contrast, just under a quarter of entries relate to support for the living and working conditions of agricultural migrant workers (Figure 10).

As with healthcare, the majority of stories captured by the tracker come from Europe and North America, with countries in both regions putting in place special initiatives to either bring migrants in to the country (sometimes via special charter flights) or to extend the temporary work visas of those already there. Some countries have taken special measures to include those once excluded from work to fill the labour gaps in the agricultural sector. France, for example, began to recruit refugees from local migrant and asylum shelters to pick strawberries and asparagus (Préfet de Seine et Marne, 2020); Germany allowed asylum seekers without a work permit to work in agricultural jobs (InfoMigrants, 2020); Greece fast-tracked procedures for hiring irregular migrants as agricultural workers (OECD, 2020d); and Italy regularised undocumented migrants working in the agriculture sector (Pietromarchi, 2020). These responses are not surprising given the reliance of many high-income countries on migrant agricultural workers (OECD, 2020a) and the concern that quickly emerged about labour shortages in the sector as a result of the

travel restrictions adopted during the pandemic (FAO, 2020).

It is difficult to know, however, whether these experiences will lead to better long-term planning and overall changes in the management of labour mobility in agriculture. Only one country – Canada – has been identified as taking a longer-term, more strategic response to agricultural labour gaps as a result of the pandemic, announcing an Agri-Food Immigration Pilot in May 2020 (Government of Canada, 2020). This three-year pilot initiative will target labour shortages exacerbated by Covid-19 in the meat processing, mushroom, greenhouse crop and livestock raising industries. The reform envisages providing a pathway to permanent residency for temporary foreign workers who are already in Canada.

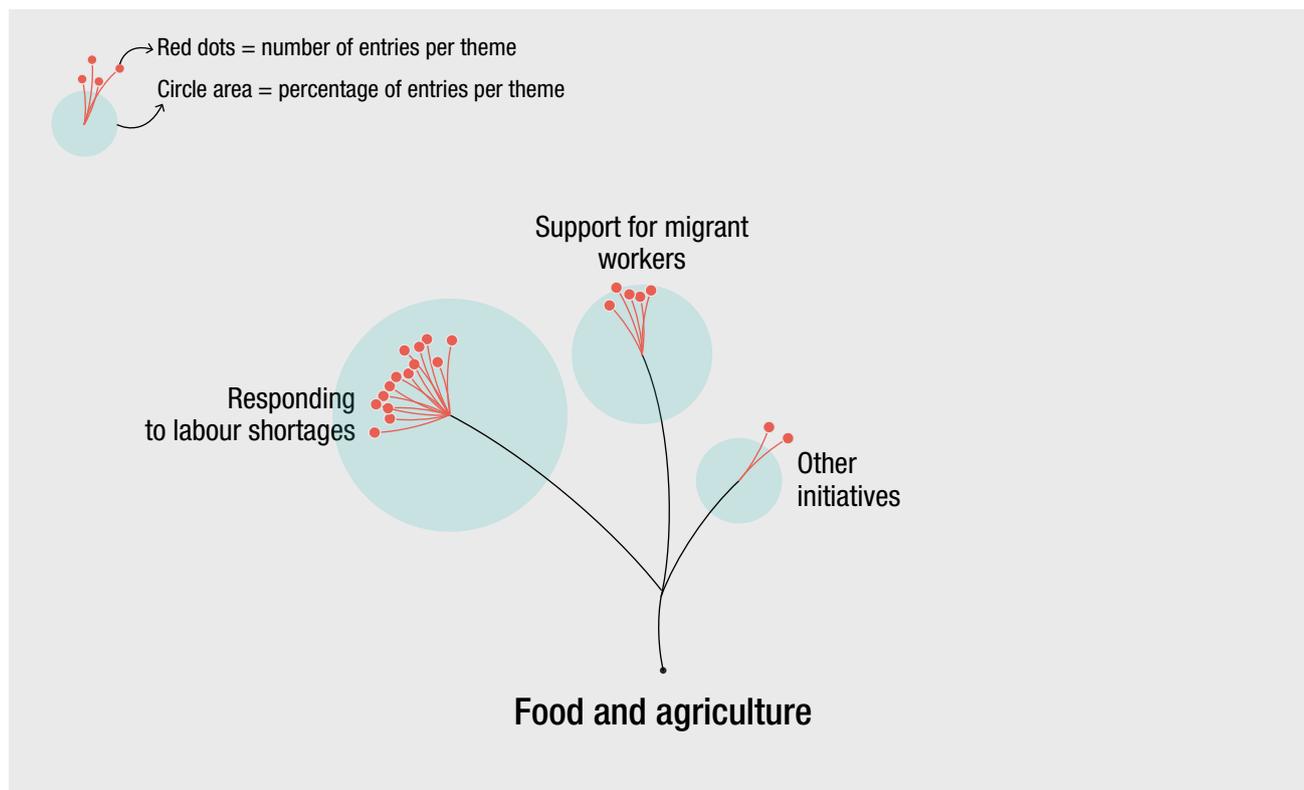
Only a small number of initiatives to support migrant agricultural workers' living and working conditions were recorded. Several countries supported workers' income to enable them to quarantine effectively. In Portugal the municipality of Odemira adapted housing to accommodate workers in better conditions to prevent Covid-19 transmission (European Commission, 2020). Fruit companies in Huelva, Spain provided housing for stranded Moroccan strawberry pickers (Anarte, 2020). However, these initiatives appear to be the exception rather than the rule, with governments and companies focused mainly on addressing labour shortages.

3.3.3 Immigration measures

Health professionals, cleaning ladies, childcare workers, checkout staff: They all proved their commitment to the nation, and it is now the turn of the republic to take a step towards them (Marlene Schiappa, Junior Minister for Citizenship, French Ministry of Interior, cited in BBC News, 2020).

Reforms to visa measures, permits, status and rules related to deportations were seen throughout 2020. Countries have been obliged to reform their measures at speed, whether to address labour shortages, or simply because the departments responsible for visa and asylum administration

Figure 10 Initiatives related to food and agriculture



Source: Fragapane and Piacentini, 2020.

were unable to function in the normal fashion. Many countries took a pragmatic approach, relaxing their visa renewal requirements and extending visas automatically. Such measures were visible in countries across all continents including Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Morocco, Peru, Portugal, South Africa, South Korea and Tunisia.

Some countries took the opportunity to regularise status, with Portugal regularising all migrants and asylum seekers in March to ensure everyone in the country had access to healthcare, social security, jobs and housing during the pandemic (Henriques, 2020). Italy also implemented partial regularisation measures for thousands of undocumented migrant workers in the health and agricultural sectors (Fanjul and Dempster, 2020), while Canada granted permanent residency to around 1,000 asylum seekers who worked in hospitals or long-term care homes during the pandemic (Harris, 2020). Bahrain and Kuwait also enacted temporary amnesties for irregular migrants (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2020; Mahmud, 2020). For its part, France launched an expedited a citizenship initiative to grant

citizenship to frontline immigrants, including healthcare workers, cleaners and shop workers, in recognition of their specific contributions during the pandemic (BBC News, 2020).

Overall, the impact of the pandemic on immigration policies and practices, and on how countries have dealt with immigration status, emerges as a major story. As Figure 11 shows, this has been a particular issue for Europe, which records the largest number of stories on this aspect. Stories on reforms related to visas, permits and status represented 51% of all of those gathered for the Europe region.

While many immigration reforms have been general in nature, some countries have also taken the opportunity to allow some, normally excluded, categories of migrants to work. This shift in policy has already been mentioned in relation to the food and agriculture sector, but has also been applied more generally. Belgium, for example, allowed asylum seekers to work during their applications and appeals processes (RTBF, 2020). This approach was also evident in the US state of New Jersey, where undocumented migrants were allowed to obtain professional licenses to work

as doctors, nurses, electricians, counsellors and in other professions (Johnson, 2020).

While many of these reforms have been temporary in nature, some significant reforms to work visa systems have taken place during the pandemic that will have long-lasting consequences. In Saudi Arabia, for example, the government enacted labour reforms to give foreign workers the right to change jobs by transferring their sponsorship from one employer to another, to leave and re-enter the country, and to secure final exit visas without the consent of their employer. Known as the Labour Relation Initiative, this legislation will come into effect in March 2021, and could affect around a third of Saudi Arabia’s total population, or approximately 10 million foreign workers in the kingdom (Batrawy, 2020). Similarly, in Qatar, the government dismantled the country’s ‘kafala’ employment system – long-criticised by rights activists for being linked to abuses of foreign workers – to allow migrants to change jobs before the end of their contracts without obtaining the permission of their current employers (Independent, 2020). This reform will

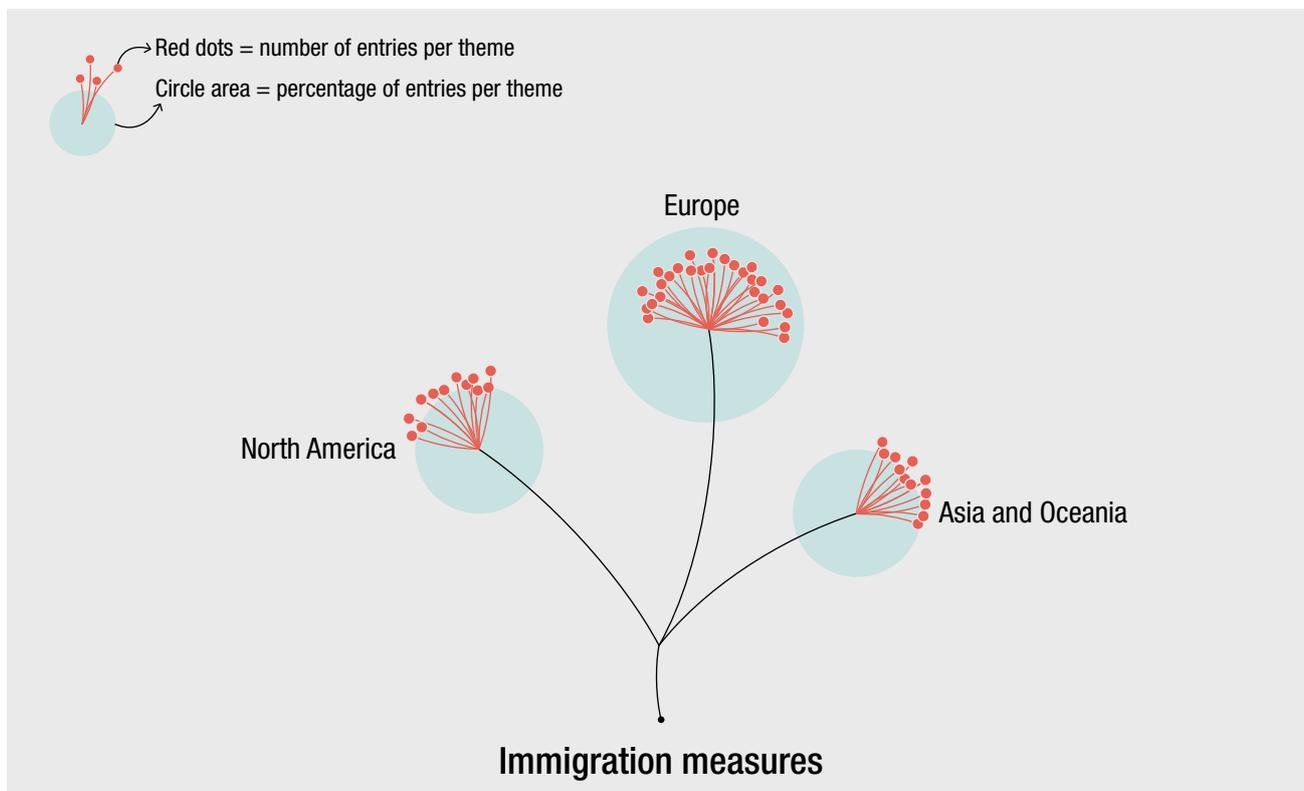
benefit more than one million guest workers, many of them from South Asian nations including India and Nepal, who come to work in the country (ibid.).

These trends noted over the past year show no signs of abating, with Colombia enacting a very significant reform in February 2021. The government announced it would grant Venezuelan migrants temporary protective status, giving them legal status for 10 years, as well as the right to work. This is likely to benefit an estimated 966,000 irregular migrants who are living in the country (Devdiscourse, 2021). It seems that we may be witnessing a little-noted trend towards regularisation that may well be replicated in other countries in the coming months.

3.3.4 Direct support to migrants

Every Californian, including our undocumented neighbours and friends, should know that California is here to support them during this crisis. We are all in this together (Gavin Newsom, California Governor, cited in Jordan, 2020).

Figure 11 Immigration measures, by region



Source: Fragapane and Piacentini, 2020.

One positive feature of national responses to the Covid-19 pandemic has been the move to provide direct support to migrants. At the same time, there are numerous examples of migrants reaching out to support others in their local communities (see Box 4). As already illustrated, the pandemic response has included support to migrant workers to ensure that their critical work can continue in safety. However, it has also included direct financial aid. Costa Rica, for example, included migrant workers in its wage subsidy programme for workers experiencing layoffs, reduced hours or lower incomes as a result of Covid-19 (Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social, 2020). In Tasmania, grant payments were made to temporary visa holders who could demonstrate financial hardship (Cooper, 2020). Chile created a Covid-19 Emergency Stipend for vulnerable migrant families with regular status (Development Asia, 2020). Some countries also created specific funds to support their migrant workers displaced overseas or obliged to return home, such as Thailand and the Philippines (Cabato, 2020; The Nation, 2020).

Some of these responses have been impressive in scale and nature, including Ireland's Pandemic Unemployment Payment, which has provided financial aid for all workers, including migrant workers, and Italy's decision to allow migrant workers with residence permits to apply for income subsidies as part of the Cure Italy stimulus (AGID, 2020; IOM Ireland, 2020). These are prime examples of countries mainstreaming migrants into new programmes to ensure that everyone is protected from the economic impacts of the crisis.

Some countries have also responded by supporting the entry of migrant workers into labour markets. The Norwegian government put in place a package of measures targeted towards immigrants to facilitate faster labour market integration (OECD, 2020b). In Uzbekistan the government has used its Covid-19 anti-crisis fund to finance language and vocational training for migrant workers (Dentons, 2020). In Armenia the government set up public works schemes for migrants unable to travel (Government of the Republic of Armenia, 2020). Germany took the unusual step of providing direct support tailored to migrant entrepreneurs, providing information

online and including dedicated caseworkers to support them in filing applications for state aid (OECD, 2020b). These are all welcome examples of tailored support packages that could have long-term impacts on the successful integration of migrants into labour markets in these countries.

While these examples of direct support for migrants are encouraging and much-needed, there are concerns that even where support has been extended, certain categories of migrants – particularly those with irregular status – remain overlooked (ILO 2020; OHCHR, 2020). Our tracking finds very few references to the inclusion of those with irregular status in emergency aid packages. Some rare examples merit a mention, with Ireland's Pandemic Unemployment Payment providing aid for migrants regardless of status, and both California state and Chicago's city administration providing financial support payments to irregular migrants left out of the US federal government coronavirus relief package (IOM Ireland, 2020; Jordan, 2020; Pratt, 2020). Given the high numbers of undocumented migrant workers in California and Illinois, and their major contribution to essential work (Kerwin and Warren, 2020), these are very welcome interventions. In addition, the Egyptian government set up a targeted cash assistance programme for irregular workers in sectors severely hit by Covid-19, a scheme likely to benefit around 1.6 million migrants in the country (IMF, n.d.).

These significant, progressive measures demonstrate the ability of governments to reach undocumented populations and support everyone, regardless of their status, when it is deemed necessary. However, far more measures along these lines are needed to ensure that the most vulnerable have access to support that enables them to cope with the shock to their livelihoods and make it easier for them to comply with public health restrictions on work and mobility. As we turn our collective attention to vaccine access, coverage for migrants, regardless of their migration status, is now a priority in many countries, including the UK, as it is clear that this matters for population immunity, as well as the protection of all frontline workers.

As we move through the emergency and into the recovery phase, we will continue this tracking

exercise, gathering more stories of migrants' initiatives and contributions and of governments' reforms. We will continue to update the data visualisation with our findings and to share this knowledge in new spaces. We will share the

lessons that emerge and amplify these in pursuit of the changes needed to make migration policies fit for purpose in the Covid-19 recovery phase. Specific recommendations for policy-makers are discussed in the following section.

Box 4 Migrants taking a local lead in the Covid-19 response

It's a beautiful thing that we are helping feed the community in these terrible times (Cheikha, a member of Barikama, a cooperative of young African migrants that supports the local community in Campagnano di Roma, Italy, cited in *The Guardian*, 2020).

There are many examples of migrants taking a hands-on approach to lead local responses during the Covid-19 crisis. In Colombia, Venezuelan migrants running a non-profit organisation have been providing mental health support to those affected by the Covid-19 outbreak. In refugee camps in Bangladesh, Rohingya refugees have been educating people on Covid-19, hygiene and testing, and distributing healthcare packages, given the reduction in the number of humanitarian workers in camps. In Turkey refugees have been making masks for key workers and hospitals. In Montreal, Canada, asylum seekers have volunteered to work at long-term care homes. In Campagno di Roma, Italy, a cooperative of young African migrants called Barikama has been growing, packing and delivering fresh food to the local community. In Ter Apel, a village in the Netherlands, asylum seekers have volunteered to disinfect grocery carts, walkers and keys to protect fellow residents from Covid-19 at a local supermarket.

There are no doubt many more stories of local initiatives led by migrants who are responding to their specific circumstances and challenges. Such initiatives have been part of a broader outpouring of solidarity during the pandemic, as communities have organised to support others in the face of this crisis. They are also, however, a timely reminder that we are all in this together: migrants are ready and willing to contribute fully to their communities and that their inclusion and acceptance generates significant benefits for wider society.

Source: ODI, 2020.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

If someone is prepared to risk their life for this country, they must be allowed to live in it. This is not just a gesture – it is our moral responsibility (Cross party group of UK MPs, in a letter to Home Secretary Priti Patel, requesting indefinite leave to remain for foreign nationals working in the NHS, cited in Siddique, 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic has created the most compelling view yet of the critical contribution made by migrant workers to our economies and societies. Migrant workers were essential before the crisis and have been at the forefront of efforts to address the pandemic. Even when mobility has been highly restricted, some countries have taken extraordinary measures to ensure migrant workers could contribute to the pandemic response, while far less action has been taken to protect them on the frontline, resulting in many lost lives. There is no doubt that migrant workers will be even more essential as countries recover, underlining the need for pragmatic and lasting reforms to migration policies.

Many migrants have been exceptionally vulnerable during the pandemic, facing significant health and economic risks. This is particularly true for irregular migrants who are often excluded from social safety nets and have little access to health services. While we have seen many initiatives aiming to provide direct support to migrants, relatively few have aimed to improve their living and working conditions – particularly for those with irregular status. This

is disappointing, even in the context of the poor performance commonly witnessed in this area.

This has not only put migrant workers' lives at risk, but has posed a risk to the communities in which they live, as reducing the risk of infection among migrant workers is a protective public health measure that would reduce the risk of transmission to the rest of the population. Vulnerable and irregular migrants must be protected to save their lives and those of their communities, protect their livelihoods and enable them to contribute fully to economies and societies. Effective regularisation initiatives, for example, can serve two key ambitions for every country: safeguarding public health and expanding economic inclusion.

Looking ahead to the Covid-19 recovery period, it is clear that countries will continue to depend on migrant workers, and that workers of all skill levels will be required. Now, more than ever, countries need a realistic assessment of areas where they have skills gaps, particularly in the context of their recovery plans. National conversations need to shift from debates on immigration policies and border control alone, and focus instead on what our communities, cities and businesses need to build back and thrive after this crisis.

This is about all of us – not 'us and them'. Attempts to get the migration narrative 'right' tend to revert to unhelpful categorisations; the bad migrant and the deserving refugee, or the native and the foreign born. If there is one thing to learn from the devastating experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is the need for a renewed social contract – one that no longer masks the deep inequalities of the 'old' normal.

The following have emerged as key **recommendations** for policy reforms to help countries transform lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic into action:

- There is an immediate need to implement **regularisation initiatives** to secure the rights of migrant workers and to recognise and value their contribution to our economies and societies. Governments should follow the examples of countries such as France, Colombia and Portugal – and to some extent Italy – which have all announced regularisation programmes. For its part, the EU should encourage its Member States to pursue this policy route.
- During the Covid-19 recovery, governments should expand new **legal migration pathways such as visa programmes and skills partnerships**, ensuring safe working conditions for all workers. This will help respond to shortages in essential workforces and meet skills gaps in key sectors such as health and social care and agriculture. This is imperative given the significant demographic shifts in high-income countries.
- Migrants, whatever their status, need **access to key basic services such as health, education and social protection**. Securing migrants' rights will enhance both public health and economic inclusion. This requires investing in and resourcing local levels of government and leadership, such as local councils and mayors, responsible for implementing these policies on the ground.
- Immigration policies **must go beyond inflexible 'low' and 'high' skills classifications**. The response to the Covid-19 emergency has demonstrated the need for essential workers at all skill levels, who will be even more essential now in the long path to recovery for our health, economies and societies.

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Appendix: Methodology

The tracking exercise gathers stories from five regions: North America, Europe, Asia-Oceania, Latin America and Africa. Stories gathered relate mainly to migration policy and practice changes, initiatives taken with regard to migrant workers and moves to support immigrant communities (or in some cases emigrants returning to their countries of origin as a result of the pandemic). The vast majority of stories collected relate to three regions – Europe, Asia-Oceania, and North America – a clear reflection of the importance of countries in these regions as popular migrant destinations. The predominance of stories from Europe and North America, in particular, also reflects the spread of the pandemic, given that Europe and the US quickly emerged as hotspots and have suffered significant second waves of the virus. The lack of information and stories gathered from Latin America and Africa also reflect challenges with data and local media monitoring to some degree.

Stories in the tracker are classified by level (international, national, regional and local) and by sector. This analysis seeks to capture broad headlines in terms of the types of action taken across sectors and regions. It also delves into more specific aspects, such as what types of reforms related to migrants and healthcare were undertaken in the different geographies and what types of immigration policy changes or direct support measures for migrants have been put in place. Analysis is conducted by geography and by sector, with results presented only for the three regions that have been the subject of most entries.

While the basis of this analysis is the tracker (ODI, 2020), this work includes entries gathered by the team from the tracker's inception up only until December 2020. This analysis also excludes certain entries, which were difficult to classify and fell outside standard categories.

It should be recognised that our monitoring of media and social media – while systematic and designed to track initiatives globally – cannot produce an exhaustive list. This is particularly true for local-level initiatives that are much more difficult to track effectively. Language constraints also limit monitoring efforts. As such, this analysis should be viewed as an important, but partial, input to aid a deeper understanding of the evolving contribution of migrants as key workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. All data referred to here comes from our own tracking and classification efforts and all calculations are the authors' own. All stories referred to here are also taken from the tracker, which contains full information and links to all sources used.



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