

Migrant workers' role in building systemic resilience: Opportunities and risks from an ILO perspective

Commentary No. 8 of the [MigResHub](#) at the Migration Policy Centre, RSCAS, European University Institute

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the important role migrant workers play in the provision of essential goods and services around the world. The new MigResHub encourages us to think about how labour migration policies and the employment of migrants can shape systemic resilience to external shocks (Anderson et al, 2020). In this commentary, I briefly reflect on potential opportunities and risks associated with linking migrants to systemic resilience as a way of rethinking labour migration and the effects of migrant workers. I write from the perspective of the International Labour Organization (ILO) whose activities on migration aim to protect the rights of migrant workers and promote fair and effective labour migration policies around the world.

The systems approach

The ILO's Decent Work Agenda seeks to reconcile economic and social policies and create coherence in promoting simultaneous work on its four pillars of rights, employment, social protection and social dialogue. Policy integration is an important strategy for the ILO as 'working in silos' should be avoided as much as possible. The ILO recognizes that what is done in one area may have unintended consequences in another. The integration of different perspectives in policy-making is more than a programmatic approach; it is made necessary by the very structure of the ILO as a tripartite organization where Employers and Workers have decisional power alongside Governments (www.ilo.org).

In line with the Decent Work Agenda, the ILO's Fair Migration Agenda calls for the embeddedness of migration policy. In recent years, the ILO has constantly highlighted the disconnect that exists between labour

migration and labour markets when migration policy is linked to the "high politics" of security and sovereignty, and it has promoted forging stronger linkages between migration policies and all sorts of social and economic policies (ILO, 2014).

In this context, a "systems approach" to the study of the role and effects of labour migration and migrant workers around the world is very much in line with the ILO approach. As William Hynes observes in his opening contribution to MigResHub, "The systems approach can promote cross-sectoral, multidisciplinary collaboration in the process of policy formulation" (Hynes, 2020, p.1).

The unit of analysis

When discussing a research agenda on systemic resilience and the role for migrant workers, an important question arises with regard to the unit of analysis. One aspect of this question is whether and under what circumstances one should make a distinction between migrant workers and local workers or, in other words, whether the analysis should focus on a resilient system's workforce as a whole or, more specifically and narrowly, on migrants as part of this workforce. As suggested by Janine Dahinden (2016) who pleads to "de-migrantize" research on migration and integration, one should concentrate on empirically relevant parts of the population instead of automatically considering migrants in contrast to non-migrants and portraying migration-related difference as naturally given.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put into the spotlight entire professions and sectors where jobs were labelled as "essential". This public attention has led to a certain social valorisation of particular jobs: health and care work but

¹ The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect official ILO positions.

also transport and retailing are cases in point. It has also brought to light exploitation and harsh working conditions in “essential” jobs, such as seasonal agriculture and meat processing. Often, the segments of the labour market now considered as “essential” have a high prevalence of migrant workers. Systemic resilience may be fostered by improving conditions for *all* workers in particular branches of the economy instead of just focusing on the question of whether more or fewer migrants should be hired.

Bridget Anderson, Friedrich Poeschel and Martin Ruhs (2020) point out how migrants’ impacts and migration policies are mostly analysed from the perspective of states and, in particular, destination countries. They call for a shift in focus from national contexts to transnational systems, which, at the same time, implies a shift in attention from destination country interests only to include impacts on origin countries and to take an interest in multilateral approaches. The latter is a point also made by William Hynes (2020). Moving away from a state perspective is an important consideration and in the light of existing global supply chains certainly the right thing to do for all the reasons the cited authors set out in their papers.

There is also the suggestion to move from protecting the employment of citizens to protecting the provision of essential services. This, however, takes us back to the state as unit of analysis. The underlying question here appears to be: how can a state “use” migrant workers to arrive at resilient systems? Anderson, Poeschel and Ruhs (2020) rightly warn that prioritising systemic resilience could lead to deteriorating working conditions and greater exploitation of migrant workers, justified by the need to preserve the functioning of essential services (p.7).

Limits to prioritizing systemic resilience

Can these undesired “side-effects” be avoided? Perhaps yes, if one accepts that building systemic resilience has its limits. In line with Immanuel Kant’s idea that the freedom of one person ends where another person’s freedom begins, we should be aware that not “anything goes” in

contexts where systemic resilience becomes the overarching objective.

From an ILO perspective, migrant workers’ rights and principles of equal treatment among workers clearly set limits.²

Anderson, Poeschel and Ruhs (2020) also hint at migrants’ limited tolerance of exploitation when they say that “people may temporarily tolerate harsh working conditions for the promise of a better future” (p.8). But only X amount of endurance is possible for X amount of time. Where system resilience is to be achieved on the back of migrant workers, this raises the question of how resilient migrants will be.

And this question, in turn, is linked to issues of temporariness. A temporary migrant having entered a country under a foreign worker scheme is likely, by definition, to be working within specific parameters that can lead to unequal treatment with national workers, and, as Anderson, Poeschel and Ruhs (2020) point out, certain approaches to systemic resilience may rely on this. Clearly, the longer term view that is required by systemic resilience raises questions about the design of temporary foreign worker schemes (Mieres and Kuptsch, 2020).

The importance of a human-centred approach

In developing a new research agenda, it is critical to respect migrant workers. We want to look at ‘migrants’ as workers, as humans, as agents of change and not solely as factors of production. There is a difference between showing that migrant workers currently have an important role in making food supply, health and other systems work and analysing how migrant workers can best serve as “economic buffers”.

Collectively, we will have to keep in mind that the framing of our questions bears risks. In the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, the ILO constituents have underlined that there should be a “human-centred approach to the future of work, which puts workers’ rights and the needs, aspirations and rights of all people at the

others worldwide. They continue to provide relevant normative guidance as was underlined by the Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations in its last General Survey concerning the migrant workers instruments (ILO, 2016).

² These rights and principles are expressed in International Labour Standards, in particular in ILO’s migrant-specific Conventions and accompanying Recommendations. Although C97 and C143 are far from being universally ratified, they remain a yardstick for behaviour by ILO constituents and

heart of economic, social and environmental policies” (ILO, 2019, Article I D., emphasis added).

Diversity and equality under systems approaches

Linking ‘systemic resilience’ and labour migration may represent an opportunity for more equal outcomes in labour markets. We all know that where certain jobs become “migrant jobs” shunned by local populations, there is no more way to ensure that migrants receive equal treatment because the question arises: “Equal with whom?” Migrants risk to become the “underclass” everywhere.

Systemic resilience approaches should certainly counter this trend with their insistence on diversity as flexibility. A system is not “safe”, if it relies on only one group of workers (Kuptsch and Charest, 2021).

Greater resilience does not necessarily require greater flexibility via the “use” of migrant workers with adverse consequences for the latter. Instead, a diverse workforce where both locals and migrants are present, respected, and treated equally may be the key to resilience in the provision of essential goods and services.

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The Migrants and Systemic Resilience Hub ([MigResHub](#)) facilitates research and debates on how migrant workers affect the resilience of essential services during the Covid-19 pandemic and similar shocks in the future. MigResHub is a joint initiative of the EUI’s Migration Policy Centre (MPC) and Migration Mobilities Bristol (MMB) at the University of Bristol.

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