

## Briefing Paper #95

# Protecting the most vulnerable in society: Migration and COVID-19

### Introduction

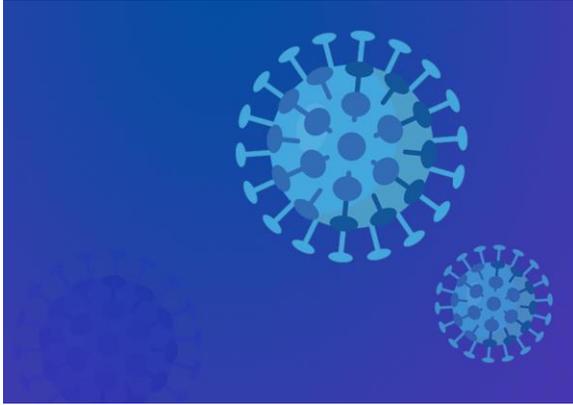
The COVID-19 pandemic has been spreading at an alarming rate, with record numbers of deaths being registered in Italy and Spain over the past few days, as the number of cases in the US points towards a new hotspot for the epidemic. Under these circumstances, it has become a matter of social responsibility to self-isolate and respect all public advice on social distancing.

This can save lives while also help regain control of our societies. Many people have taken to social media to promote #stayathome campaigns, while celebrities and political figures have used telecommunications means to reach people worldwide to urge them to stay at home. These rallying demands, however, have value only when the base point is that all people have a place of their own to isolate in. What about those more vulnerable in society?

Though the virus does not discriminate in the way it targets people, the defences that

people have against the virus are highly dependent on whether or not they are socially excluded. Migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (MRAs) are vulnerable people who, at times, do not have the means to protect themselves and others from the disease and from the disease's aftermath. They lack access to health institutions and, if living in refugee camps and in reception centres, they live in close, confined spaces where social distancing is not possible.

How can they be asked to perform this act of social responsibility when, contrary to any social responsibility, the inequality gaps in society have been deepened and the most vulnerable in society have to withstand any challenge with very limited support?



### Informing about the virus

A first step for MRAs in Europe during this time of crisis is to ensure that they have access to information about the pandemic and especially about the safety measures that they must take. Many of the messages on this topic have not been translated by official sources in the languages of third-country nationals. Given this, international organisations and CSOs have taken charge of universalising access to information in these trying times. For example, [Volunteering Matters](#), in the UK, has been deploying the volunteers of its [EU VOICE project](#) to translate the national safety guidelines in 20 languages for all the UK residents who do not have English as a first language. The [International Organisation for Migration \(IOM\)](#) has also elaborated a [leaflet](#) translated in 26 languages to inform people about how to behave in the circumstances of the pandemic. Access to information in these times should be an essential precondition for all, and especially more so for MRAs in vulnerable situations that need better support in planning for these problematic times.

### Practicalities of self-isolation

However, even with access to information, the most disadvantaged in society do not benefit from adequate living conditions that would allow them to isolate and not get in contact or pass the virus. Conditions for refugees and asylum seekers in Europe are known to be inhumane, with limited or no access to healthcare, with people living in close proximity to each other and with basic hygiene being hard to implement. Amnesty International reports that 37000 refugees and asylum seekers inhabit the camps in Greece, though these camps have been designed only for 6095 people. Access to food, to toilets, to showers is hampered as a result, with insufficient medical personnel to support the needs of these people, and with them living in precarious conditions. As COVID-19's spread accelerates, the camps in Greece are at a serious risk of spreading the infection and hitting hard people that simply have no chance to respect the hygiene rules or to isolate themselves.

The inadequate system for processing asylum applications across Europe has led to many such camps in Europe, endangering the lives of people who already have fled hardship. Italy, another country confronting the migration crisis, is being hit hard by COVID-19, leading to vulnerable MRAs also finding themselves in an even more precarious situation than before.

The most recent situation at the Turkish-Greek border reveals yet again the perils that the MRAs subject themselves to, as they were stuck at the borders in conditions completely unacceptable at any moment, let alone during the current outbreak.

Though this has since been halted, as the Turkish government reverted its initial decision to open its borders, the damage has been done, as people were put significantly at risk with potential catastrophic results given the facile way in which the virus could be transmitted among masses of people. Greek CSOs are on the front line calling for respect of human rights. On the 6<sup>th</sup> March several CSOs including our partner [ARSIS](#) addressed an open letter to the Prime Minister of Greece, the President of the European Parliament, the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission, severely criticising the new legislation on the reception of migrants and asylum seekers, also expressing their concerns and calling for the respect of human rights.

The COVID-19 crisis sheds light yet again on the inhumane conditions in which MRAs operate given the inappropriate European response to the migration crisis. In the planning of the future EU budget, the Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs Committee, within the European Parliament, has [launched a call](#) for an increased budget for Member States to secure better reception conditions and to improve their asylum application procedures to improve the livelihood of people stranded in the camps. The epidemic raises a call to intervene now in helping the most disadvantaged in society, but also to plan on a long-term basis how to improve the reception of MRAs and how to facilitate their integration in society, as for the moment lives of thousands of people are grossly neglected.

SOLIDAR member, [Volkshilfe](#), from Austria, [has urged the EU and the Greek government](#) to fully evacuate the refugee camps given the serious health risk that their lodging conditions pose to them directly, but also to the entire Greek population. Beyond Europe, [AWO International](#) has also been running awareness campaigns in developing countries. They also [provide hygiene kits](#) to Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon but also for the refugee camp Isingiro in Uganda. As the conditions in these refugee camps are deplorable and put people's lives at risk, these minimal kits are much needed to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

In Bangladesh, [SOLIDAR Suisse](#) is working in partnership with local organisations to [assist the Rohingya refugees](#), providing information about preventive behaviours against the virus, but also building up a strategy with the local partners to set up a strategy to help the many of them who are textile workers in these times of social distancing. Similar shows of solidarity come from [La Ligue de l'Enseignement](#), which uses its holiday centres to welcome homeless people and migrants, protecting those who do not have a shelter at a time when everyone is urged to stay in-doors. [President Emmanuel Macron has been visiting such centres around Paris](#) to show appreciation for their important work.

These organisations actively ensure that the most disadvantaged are protected.



### Vulnerable workers and the outbreak

The labour market is affected by the current crisis, and within this, undocumented workers and migrant workers have been hit significantly harder. As the IOM highlights, over 500 billion dollars were sent back by migrants to their home countries only last year. As their income is significantly affected by the current restriction of work, not only their chance to support themselves abroad is endangered, but also the well-being of the families they left behind and simply put the economy of developing countries who relied on these sums of money that were sent back. People who depend on small income earnings to survive on a daily basis will be seriously incapacitated by the crisis, and the vicious cycle reinforces the condition of the most disadvantaged in society, who are affected even more by any isolation effort. However, this does not imply that everything will return to normal once the crisis has passed, as the economy will have shrunk, leading to layoffs in sectors such as tourism, hospitality and other sectors in which migrants predominantly work. As a result, they will be left jobless, impacting their

residence permits and, therefore, their stay in their new country. This uncertainty creates a significant emotional stress on these MRAs, further piling up on their already precarious situation.

### 'Othering' in times of crisis

As argued in SOLIDAR Foundation's [\*Civic Space: the lockdown is no excuse to bypass democracy\*](#) briefing note, emergency measures taken in such crises can have the habit of overstaying their welcome. The closure of borders and the suspension of freedom of movement across Europe might be reasonable in our current circumstances, but this can prove to be a catalyst for xenophobic and far-right nationalistic leaders to extend the measures as part of their agenda of 'othering' MRAs and excluding them. Hungary has greatly limited the numbers of refugees and asylum seekers that can pass from Serbia to its territories, with PM Viktor Orban known for his disapproval of migration in general. As he is currently seeking to rule by decree, Orban might reinforce his policies of rejecting migration. Racist attacks were experienced in Italy at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, and it remains to be seen how emboldened Matteo Salvini and his followers will be in pushing for further closure of borders after the crisis has passed. The violation of civil liberties can insidiously sneak into the current policies of reducing freedom of movement and create a long-term culture of discrimination.



### Civil society's response

As the COVID-19 epidemic reveals the current social inequalities, it also shows how little prepared our society is to assist those most in need, and even more so in extreme circumstances. MRAs have relied frequently on the support of CSOs that provide them with much needed pro-bono legal assistance, administrative support, resources shipped to refugee camps, and simply serve as a space aiding the integration of newcomers in the European societies. SOLIDAR members [Centre for Peace Studies](#) and [Movimiento por la Paz \(MPDL\)](#) have been providing legal assistance to migrants and refugees. [ARCI](#), MPDL and [Initiative for Development and Cooperation \(IDC\)](#) have been providing resources to migration centres, whether staff members, food, clothes or any other needs that the inhabitants had, or they have been involving in the running of reception centres.

ARCI together with UNHCR Italia has developed an interactive platform:

<https://coronavirus.jumamap.com/> containing information material in 14 languages on the behaviour to follow in order to avoid the contraction of the virus.

MPDL and [La Liga](#) have been providing citizenship education to migrants and refugees, easing their integration into the Spanish society by teaching them about the cultural setting that they were in. However, such services will suffer, as CSOs are similarly impacted during the crisis, as their operations and activities are put on hold, with them also being in danger of suffering cuts in funding once the crisis has passed. As the CSOs, and especially SOLIDAR members, continue to be engaged in bridging the gaps that MRAs have, there needs to be a much greater push on the public authorities' side to fund such activities but also to ensure that the practical needs of the MRAs in this crisis will be met.

Now, more than ever, solidarity must not be criminalised! SOLIDAR will continue to monitor the situation and urges national and European public authorities to ensure:

- Better translation and communication of safety guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic
- More funding and support to refugee and migrant camps to ensure that all the health requirements are met and that inhabitants' lives are not put at risk
- More funding and support for CSOs performing activities to support migrants, refugees and asylum seekers

- Ensuring better reception conditions and swifter procedures for processing the arrival of newcomers
- Easing down administrative restrictions as the pandemic is impacting migrant workers:
  - Extended times to apply for work and residence permits
  - Extend work permits for migrants that are in danger of losing jobs due to the virus to ensure that they have the possibility to access social protection and apply for new jobs
  - Allow for flexibility with migrants' asylum applications given the current situation.
- Campaigning for social investment and putting a stop to the privatisation of healthcare services.