

Policy Briefing

The Impact of Myanmar's Response to Covid-19 on the Most Vulnerable

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused significant disruption globally. Measures to stop the spread of the virus have been necessary, but their knock-on effects have disproportionately affected the most vulnerable. This briefing examines how this dynamic has played out in Myanmar and suggests how to better support these people. The coup in February 2021 caused discontinuity in Covid-19 policy, with disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable. As well as working towards a peaceful settlement, national and international stakeholders should prioritise supporting migrant workers and victims of trafficking.

Key messages

- This briefing gives an overview of the limitations of Myanmar's policies to address Covid-19, particularly the ways they impacted Burmese migrant workers and survivors of human trafficking.
- Our research finds that although Covid-19 measures aimed to protect people's wellbeing, unintended adverse impacts have worsened the socioeconomic situation of those facing compounded vulnerabilities.
- Disadvantaged groups often bear the greatest burden during national crises.
- In Myanmar, the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the country's policy response to it, have greatly affected vulnerable groups, including internal and international migrant workers and victims of human trafficking.

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As elsewhere, the Covid-19 pandemic has affected Myanmar in three key ways. First, a policy urging citizens to stay at home led to massive unemployment and pay cuts, especially for those working in manufacturing or the retail sector. Second, suspending the issuing of visas to foreign nationals impacted pre-existing economic instability. Increased prices at each stage of supply chains, shortages of raw materials, and intense inflation made the survival of underprivileged groups even harder. Third, policies related to quarantine and vaccine distribution have highlighted inequality in the country. There are shortages in health-care and hygiene supplies, and the government vaccination programme is far from just.

Impact on Burmese migrant workers in neighbouring countries and borderlands

Migrant workers already experienced unequal conditions in host countries, with fewer rights than workers who were citizens, and dependent on their employers for the right to live and work there. This was true for legal, formal migrants; and worse for those with informal status. Local Covid-19 response policies exacerbated the imbalance, putting Burmese migrant workers in situations of greater precarity and weaker bargaining positions with employers. Migrant workers said they could not access vaccines and economic support in countries such as Thailand where relatively generous support policies were in place. They could not get vaccinated, so



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were unable to work. Employers unilaterally fired staff – often making them homeless as well as undocumented if they could not pay for expensive repatriation flights – or renegotiated working conditions for lower pay and less mobility. Migrants became completely dependent on their employers, including needing their permission to travel or purchase food, putting them at much greater risk of exploitation and abuse.

We found that Burmese people living in borderlands were informally navigating border crossings (for migration and trade), as is typical of such areas. Covid-19 response policies were not effective in closing borders. Pre-existing informal channels, which depended on a system of brokers and collusion of officials at various levels, as well as general governance challenges in contested border provinces, continued to operate, but at higher cost and less frequently. Migrant workers told us that they did not have formal means of migrating during the pandemic and had to migrate illegally. One migrant said that before the pandemic, they paid 30,000 Thai baht (£690) to a broker to illegally enter Thailand to get a job; then, after being sent home, had to pay the same broker 40,000 Thai baht (£921) to return to Thailand for a new job.

Impact on internal migrant workers

Many people have migrated within Myanmar from rural to urban areas for low-skilled and largely informal work in sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade, and food and recreation services. This made them vulnerable to poverty when businesses closed and demand fell in response to Covid-19.

The dynamics were like those international migrants faced elsewhere: social support measures were insufficient and not easily accessed. Many migrants had to return to their villages or take desperate measures to survive in cities.

Closures of businesses and shops in Myanmar were widespread. Demand for

agricultural products and manufactured goods slumped. Intensive border controls between key trading partners hampered global supply chains, resulting in a drastic decline in Myanmar's exports. Also, travel restrictions reduced international tourist arrivals, particularly from China, affecting jobs and incomes in Myanmar's tourism industry. Many internal migrant workers, especially female workers in the hospitality and garment industries, therefore suffered from insufficient income and job insecurity.

The Government of Myanmar did not implement as robust support measures as countries such as Thailand and Vietnam for workers who were put out of jobs or displaced by lockdowns. Measures to prevent the spread of the virus, such as stay-at-home orders and closing businesses, were implemented in disorganised and disruptive ways. For example, in April 2020 the government declared a curfew that went into effect the same day. Workers faced housing and travel problems as they were neither allowed to return home nor to stay in workplace dormitories.

The coup introduced further confusion as it was unclear which Covid-19 response policies were still in place and how they would be enforced. Many health workers organised resistance to the military regime; information about the virus and the policy response to it have become highly politicised. It has been harder to gather reliable data on issues such as unemployment, poverty, and the incidence of abuse.

Pre-existing social structures in Myanmar and surrounding countries that have traditionally functioned as informal social protection mechanisms are particularly fragile during crises. Those most in need of accessing social safety net resources – namely, informal workers – are least able to access them, forcing them to take ever riskier chances in increasingly invisible and unregulated informal sectors. Young people told us that they felt under great pressure to make risky migration journeys, hoping to earn money after their parents had lost jobs or got sick from Covid-19. We heard observations that

when parents could no longer get work, children were forced into the worst forms of child labour or had to subsist by collecting waste. These pre-existing social obligations meant that when the shock of Covid-19 hit, it fell hardest on the most vulnerable.

Impact on combating human trafficking

Mobility restrictions prevented service providers from meeting directly with trafficking victims as they normally would during repatriation journeys or providing care and support subsequently. Providers we spoke to said it was nearly impossible to have meaningful interactions by phone or video, especially when victims were in remote areas with weak connectivity. There were many reports of internet and phone networks being blocked after the coup, leaving vulnerable people without access to key information or online resources. Also, quarantine protocols on entering the country and returning to home villages often meant traumatised victims had to spend weeks living in close quarters with other travellers. This is a significant breach of normal standards of victim care and can retraumatise victims.

Service providers also observed that when the border closed between Myanmar and Thailand, many people were arrested for crossing in the areas of Mae Sot and Mae Hong Sang in Karen state and processed under the Immigration Act rather than being screened for cases of human trafficking under the Natural Disaster Law and Human Trafficking Law.

At the same time as workers and migrants were being detained for attempting to cross the border, others used brokers to go through well-known crossing points. We heard how many workers who had migrated abroad legally were forced into informality and opted to remigrate illegally using brokers, since government offices were closed, there was no way to get passports or visas, and they could not earn without remigrating. Increased desperation caused by poverty and debt, along with fewer options, left many more people vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers.

Policy recommendations

Government and international actors should:

- Engage with the concerned government to advocate that humanitarian assistance and government resources go to meeting the basic needs of the most vulnerable members of society, including low-skilled informal workers, those in extreme poverty, and children working in the worst forms of child labour.
- Urgently support effective public health responses to Covid-19, including providing access to vaccines and functioning health systems, and avoiding polarising and politicising basic health issues. However, it is also urgent to recognise that, without mitigation, efforts to stop the spread of the virus will harm those already most vulnerable, making it more likely that they will be abused and exploited.
- Update and strengthen bilateral or multilateral agreements between the Myanmar government and governments of the destination countries of Burmese migrant workers.
- Ensure embassies have the resources and mandates to support migrant workers abroad to minimise the role of exploitive brokers who benefit during crises.
- Provide training for immigration agencies and police forces to increase awareness of human trafficking and how to respond during crises.
- Establish a functioning victim identification system to ensure survivors of exploitation are not misidentified and punished as illegal migrant workers. ■

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Further reading

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This *IDS Policy Briefing* was written by **Mina Chiang, Sharlene Chen, Su Yin Htun**, and **Eric Kasper** based on research conducted by the Humanity Research Consultancy via the Covid Collective Research Platform. The Covid Collective is supported by the UK government's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). The Covid Collective cannot be held responsible for errors, omissions, or any consequences arising from the use of information contained. Any views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of FCDO, the Covid Collective, IDS, or any other contributing organisation.

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ISSN 1479-974X

DOI: [10.19088/IDS.2022.014](https://doi.org/10.19088/IDS.2022.014)