



Christian Conference of Asia – Webinar Series

## **The Plight of Migrant Workers amidst the COVID-19 Crisis**

### **Concept Note**

The rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing loss of life and livelihoods has caused an unprecedented socioeconomic crisis, exposing the structural inefficiencies of the global economy and causing mass displacement of workers around the world- the worst-hit being migrant workers. Whether they are international migrants or internal migrants, such workers are disproportionately affected given their inadequate and crowded living conditions, limited access to health care and basic services, and exploitative labour systems.

Two types of institutional responses to the spread of the pandemic are seen in Asia: the first is a total shutdown (such as the national lockdown in India and the curfew in Sri Lanka); the second is partial shutdown (as seen in Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, Bangladesh, and Thailand), where certain work areas are functional even as there are restrictions on public gatherings. The variability in institutional responses is caused by the nature of the country's industries and legitimate fear that total economic shutdown could result in a collapse of the domestic economy. This distinction in state responses has differential impacts across countries as well as regions, generating country-specific issues when it comes to the plight of workers in supply chains.

In the Arabian Gulf states, foreign migrant workers have been retrenched and several have lost their jobs overnight. The migrant labour workforces who have long suffered precarious living conditions are now pushed to the brink of extreme vulnerability. Many have been put on unpaid leave with only food and accommodation paid for. Even as governments and authorities attempt to limit the damage, workers in some labour camps are forced to live with infected/quarantined people, against the World Health Organisation's (WHO) recommendations of physical distancing and isolation. Those employed in cleaning and construction jobs are at higher risk of contracting the virus, given that they may already suffer underlying respiratory health problems due to their exposure to dust, pollution, and heat stress.

The pandemic has exposed the wider socio-economic divide that documented and undocumented labourers suffer. Staying home is a privilege many cannot afford. India witnessed the journey home on foot of over half a million blue-collar domestic migrant workers to their villages on the eve of the national lockdown. Thailand hosts more than four million migrant workers, of which many instantly became jobless and defied travel and mobility restrictions. In a mass exodus, they rushed to return to their province in Thailand, or their homelands in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. As economic activity grinds to a halt, migrant workers have no means of sustenance.

While the experiences of migrant workers differ contextually, common to all domestic and foreign migrant workers are the following problems: loss of means of livelihood, minimal provisions of food and other basic necessities during the lockdown, exclusion from welfare eligibility, invisibility, the vulnerability of their sectors in the economy, and deepening of social inequality.

## Objectives

The general objectives of this proposed webinar are the following:

1. To obtain first-hand information about the situation of the migrant workers in different Asian countries – sending, receiving, and transit countries; and,
2. To listen to the churches and different faith-based groups and civil society organizations working to address the challenges related to the spread of COVID-19 and the increasing level of insecurity and risks for migrant workers.

The specific objectives of the proposed webinar are:

1. To provide a forum in which representatives of member churches and councils can share and provide an overview of the current situation of internal as well as foreign migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in their communities in Asia and the Gulf states; and,
2. To sensitise churches about the conditions, problems, and needs of Asian migrant workers and express solidarity with them during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Panellists

1. Dr. S. Irudaya Rajan (India)
2. Dolores Balladares (Philippines)
3. Helen Monisha Sarkar (Bangladesh)
4. Soman Baby (Bahrain)
5. Solomon David (UAE)
6. Yusmiati Vistamika Wangka (Indonesia-Hong Kong)
7. Rev. Changweon Jang (Korea)
8. Brahm Press (Thailand)

Moderator: Dr Mathews George Chunakara, CCA General Secretary