



27 APRIL 2020



8,073 cases

230 deaths

+10,000 stranded migrants

+2,500 migrants waiting  
in transit centers

50 returning migrants and community members work together in an attiéké factory in Côte d'Ivoire. IOM/Mohamed Diabaté

## FOCUS ON THE EU-IOM JOINT INITIATIVE: PROTECTING THE MOST VULNERABLE CAUGHT IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS ACROSS WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

### CONTEXT

Migrants and mobile populations across West and Central Africa are heavily affected by the consequences of measures taken by governments to prevent the spread of the COVID-19.

As the number of confirmed cases in the region is dramatically increasing, preventive measures such as border closures and suspension of non-essential activities already have a heavy socio-economic impact on the populations, including

returning migrants, their families and communities.

Since 2017, over [78,000 migrants](#) have been supported with voluntary return to their countries of origin through the EU-IOM Joint Initiative, and many of the 32,000 migrants who received economic support as part of their reintegration assistance have set up microbusinesses.



However, the closure of non-essential shops and markets across a region -where over 50% of the economy is informal- has directly impacted the local economy and returnees' activities.

*"Before the outbreak, I could earn up to 150,000 GNF (USD 15) per day. Lately, I'm working long hours, and don't even reach 100,000 GNF. This is the first time in my life that I'm facing such a long period of low income," Bano, a returning migrant and moto-taxi driver in Conakry, Guinea.*

Moreover, many migrants assisted with their return originate from border areas (e.g. Kayes in Mali bordering Mauritania, Senegal and Guinea; Mamou and Kinda in Guinea bordering Sierra Leone; and Nzerekore in Guinea bordering Sierra Leone, Liberia and Côte D'Ivoire). Lockdowns and mobility restrictions have a heavy impact on border areas' economy, livelihoods and access to food, aggravating an already existing food insecurity in some parts of the region.

Additionally, travel restrictions and bans have left more than 10,000 migrants stranded at borders (mainly in Chad, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger), and almost 3,000 migrants are waiting for their voluntary return in transit centres (mainly in Niger, Mali, Chad and Burkina Faso).

Most of the centres and facilities have already reached maximum capacity and following preventive measures such as physical distancing has become a challenge.

Overpopulation and lengthier stays in transit centres is leading to increased tensions and

psychological stress among migrants and may expose them to a higher level of vulnerability.

Furthermore, migrants are still facing deportations and pushbacks or are abandoned in the desert (Northern Niger, Mali, Chad), adding to the number of people already in dire need of assistance and further stretching IOM's resources and capacity.

Finally, there are indications of growing animosity among local populations, some of whom perceive foreigners or minorities as responsible for spreading the disease. Migrants and displaced communities will experience heightened levels of stigmatization, discrimination and xenophobia, as host communities may fear added strain on limited resources.

#### COVID-19 OVERALL IMPACT ON OPERATIONS – IOM'S PRIORITIES

The Joint Initiative was designed to support the return of West and Central African citizens to their country of origin and provide them and their communities with reintegration support.

However, travel restrictions, physical distancing, limitations on gatherings and other preventive measures are impacting activities organized under the Joint Initiative. IOM is continuously working to minimize the disruption of the Joint Initiative while ensuring appropriate COVID-19 response.

When possible, IOM mainstreams COVID-19 related activities into existing projects. For instance, IOM is adapting awareness raising activities to both inform on prevention measures and distribute Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).



When relevant, IOM is putting in place all the necessary mitigation measures (e.g. social distancing, limitation of participants, sensitization on hygiene measures) to ensure the continuation of its activities.

Despite the restrictions imposed across the region in March, IOM managed to organize over 2,700 individual reintegration counselling sessions and over 800 returnees completed their reintegration assistance.

### THE JOINT INITIATIVE ADAPTABILITY AMID COVID-19 CRISIS

The Joint Initiative was designed with the goal of ensuring that migration is safer, more informed and better governed for both migrants and their communities. The activities initially planned are articulated around six interlinked pillars of action:

- protection and voluntary return assistance
- reintegration support
- migration data collection and analysis
- information and awareness raising
- capacity building
- community stabilization

So far, IOM's COVID-19 response through the Joint Initiative has been implemented as follow:

#### PROTECTION AND VOLUNTARY RETURN ASSISTANCE

In **Burkina Faso**, IOM is providing assistance to over 1,600 stranded Nigeriens stranded outside Ouagadougou with cash assistance for food, registration and rapid vulnerability screening. Meanwhile, IOM in **Niger** is supporting the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs in setting up quarantine facilities and assisting the cohort.

In **Chad**, over 2,000 Chadian students stranded at the border with Cameroon are receiving transportation assistance to return to their communities of origin. IOM has purchased food and NFI kits for the 400 migrants currently being sheltered in its transit centre in N'Djamena. IOM is providing psychosocial support to manage stress and frustration of those hosted in the centres.

In **Côte d'Ivoire**, IOM received a request by the sous-Préfet of Noé, a town located at the border with Ghana, to support 23 stranded migrants from Liberia and Sierra Leone with the accommodation costs.

In **Cameroon**, discussions are ongoing to open a mental health helpline to continue the provision of remote psychological assistance for all those who have already returned. In **Nigeria**, IOM is considering setting up a quarantine centre for returnees (in cooperation with other projects). In **Guinea**, three returnees in need of medical care and three stranded migrants waiting for their assisted voluntary return are being assisted through the Regional Direct Assistance Fund (RDAF). A victim of trafficking in **Senegal** and a victim of gender-based violence in **Côte d'Ivoire** are also currently being assisted under RDAF.

In **Niger**, IOM has rented two additional facilities in Niamey to accommodate the higher caseload of migrants already hosted in centres in order to implement more adequate confinement measures in case a migrant contracts COVID-19. At the **regional** level, IOM is advocating for the opening of humanitarian corridors to assist with the voluntary return of stranded migrants and migrants hosted in transit centres.



#### REINTEGRATION SUPPORT

A **regional** pilot survey to assess the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on reintegration beneficiaries has been launched in four target countries. This rapid needs assessment is being conducted by phone and assesses the effects of the crisis on returnees' livelihoods, access to basic services and psychosocial wellbeing. Results will be used by IOM in real-time to adapt COVID-19 response amid the evolving emergency.

In **Côte d'Ivoire**, IOM will provide a one-off additional cash assistance to support the most vulnerable returnees who were already assisted with reintegration, while in **Senegal**, IOM will provide additional cash grants to all returnees assisted with reintegration for a period of three months. The amount per capita has been agreed with the respective governments, the EU Delegations, in the framework of Governments' efforts to financially support their populations affected by the lockdown measures.

In **The Gambia**, IOM is finalising the provision of cash for work activities for returnees previously trained and/or equipped in tailoring, to produce PPE for government front-liners. In **Burkina Faso**, discussion is ongoing to organize referrals of returnees trained and/or equipped in tailoring to EUTF-funded partners (e.g. ITC) to produce protective masks. In **Mali**, IOM will distribute 1,000 masks to migrants hosted in IOM-supported transit centers. The masks were purchased from returnees previously trained and equipped in tailoring. IOM is handing out start-up

equipment to almost 1,000 returnees who have already completed their vocational training.

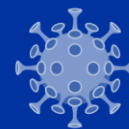
In **Ghana**, messaging on COVID-19 prevention measures is conveyed by IOM staff and implementing partners during reintegration counselling sessions. In **Niger**, discussions are ongoing to involve women currently waiting in the transit centre in Niamey in the production of protective masks as part of sewing activities. IOM is considering the possibility of activating a mental health helpline together with the "Programme National de Santé Mentale."

#### MIGRATION DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Through its Flow Monitoring Points located across the region, IOM noticed a 28% decrease of intra-regional travels from January to March 2020, probably linked to the pandemic. Niger witnessed the largest decrease in flows over the past two months (- 86%), followed by Guinea (- 70%) and Mali (-63%). In **Mali**, the DTM has been updated to include a health surveillance component and capacity building in its activities.

#### INFORMATION AND AWARENESS RAISING

In **Burkina Faso, Chad, The Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Mali, and Niger** the existing awareness raising activities have been revised to include information sessions and sensitisation on COVID-19 prevention measures. At the regional level, an online library for community engagement tools ([www.coronawestafrica.info](http://www.coronawestafrica.info)) was developed in support of the Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) component of the Interagency Response Committee.



*“Since I am currently not working—the construction company I work for is closed at the moment, and I have someone working at my grocery shop—I joined the Kanifing Municipality Red Cross Link in its sensitization campaigns. In these activities, deliver hygiene items to the most vulnerable and help explain the virus, signs and symptoms, transmission methods, how to report suspected cases” said Ebrima, a returning migrant from The Gambia. “As a returnee, this is a very important undertaking for me. It is my belief that the COVID–19 outbreak affects migrants disproportionately. I am really honored that, despite the challenges right now, I am playing my part to fight COVID–19 in my country.”*

In **Burkina Faso**, activities run in the transit centre were adapted to the current situation and include sensitization on hygiene measures. In **Chad**, staff and migrants were sensitized on prevention measures. IOM developed SOPs in case of symptoms among both staff and beneficiaries. Additionally, recreational and educational items are being purchased (TV, boardgames, sewing materials etc.), in view of migrants’ longer stay.

In **Côte d’Ivoire** and **Mauritania**, IOM purchased PPE to be used at several border posts. In **The Gambia**, a sensitization campaign in the Gambian-Senegalese border communities is ongoing. IOM’s weekly radio program was changed into a radio program on COVID-19.

In **Mauritania**, health equipment was purchased for three health centres in Nouakchott and the public hospital in Nouadhibou. IOM distributed stickers, posters in key migration areas, and started digital prevention through WhatsApp. In **Niger**, sensitization activities in transit centres were organized by mental health-psychosocial support (MHPSS) teams on the emotional impact of COVID-19 and how to cope with stress. IOM’s 50 Community Mobilizers are sharing prevention messages and fighting misinformation about the COVID-19 across the country. IOM strengthened its recreational activities to mitigate stress and boredom among migrants in the transit centres. At the **regional** level, a guide for community mobilizers working with religious leaders during Ramadan as well as a series of [posters](#) and an online campaign to counter stigma and discrimination were developed.