

Statement by the Migration and Refugee Forum for the Arab World (MARFA): “Call for the Inclusion of Refugees and Migrants in the COVID-19 Protection Mechanisms of Arab Countries”

Every day, in ways small and large, the spread of the Coronavirus is reshaping the lives of millions around the world. Still, as countries around the globe brace against COVID-19, it is important that governments take into consideration the inclusion of the most vulnerable members of society within their prevention and response measures. States must remember that in the face of this crisis, everybody is vulnerable. The virus has shown that it does not discriminate, as it can infect all those residing within a country’s borders whether they are citizens, refugees, forcibly displaced, stateless or migrants.

As a network committed to the protection of migrants and refugees in the Arab world, MARFA, the Migration and Refugee Forum for the Arab World, calls for Arab countries to ensure that everyone, including all migrants and refugees, has equal access to healthcare services. Regardless of their legal status, refugees and migrants should be effectively included in national responses to COVID-19, including prevention, testing and treatment.

Now, more than ever, COVID-19 poses a global threat that can only be addressed if we unite our efforts in an inclusive approach that ensures that healthcare is provided to all those who need it, regardless of status. Throughout the world, migrants and refugees have been vulnerable to exclusion, stigma and discrimination, particularly when undocumented.

When implementing their measures, states should effectively consider the situation of refugees and migrants, as the majority of them find themselves in confined, cramped and unsanitary conditions. Evidently, these groups are expected to face difficulties in applying the two most effective precautionary measures against the Coronavirus: social distancing and hand-washing, as advised by the World Health Organisation.

It is thus imperative that governments expand their efforts to ensure that these areas are properly covered when it comes to the provision of testing services, as well as other affordable supplies of gloves, masks, and essential medicines. They should also undertake robust community engagement and communication efforts to ensure that refugees and migrants are aware of the potential risks of the Coronavirus and make information about how to protect themselves available and accessible in languages that they understand. In light of the curfews that have been imposed by many governments, it is also essential that these communities are provided with adequate and nourishing food supplies, especially to workers and refugees who previously depended on their daily wages as informal and daily workers.

Additionally, it is essential that while countries take measures to close their borders and limit cross-border movements, they ensure that their border-control procedures are implemented in a manner that respects international human rights, including the principle of non-refoulement, particularly in relation to their treatment of refugees and migrants.

These measures should also cover refugees and migrants who are currently in detention centers that can have poor sanitation facilities, limited health services and overcrowded conditions. Due to the nature of the virus and how easily it can spread, MARFA calls for states to release all migrants and asylum seekers who are locked in temporary detention and guarantee that they have access to healthcare services, as well as suitable shelter for this period. Particularly, migrants detained in countries where continued

conflicts have ravaged their health system and medical services should be provided with the socio-medical care that they need.

These efforts should not be undertaken alone. Indeed, public-private partnerships between governments and other actors including civil society stakeholders, international and regional agencies, as well as the embassies of sending countries of migrant workers could prove instrumental in ensuring that these solutions can be feasibly implemented. Given the wide-ranging impacts of COVID-19 on economies and health systems, such partnerships can help ensure that refugees' and migrants' health needs are sufficiently addressed.

Moreover, it is crucial that governments suspend any laws or regulations related to the criminalization of refugees and migrants based on their status. Such a step would ensure that these members of society will not be discouraged to seek necessary help for fear of detention or deportation.

As the economic impact of the crisis also unfolds, and is particularly felt by these extremely vulnerable groups, MARFA calls for both governments and aid agencies to consider the complex needs of these populations within their responses during this pandemic. Economic relief should be provided to all workers, regardless of their nationality or status. In particular, governments must recognise the impact of economic insecurity on those who work in low-paying sectors, and who depend on their daily wages, like daily and informal workers.

In order to avert a catastrophe, a coherent, effective international approach that leaves no-one behind is demanded. Governments must do all they can to protect the rights and the health of everyone, as it is only through protecting everybody that we can stop the spread of this virus.