

Chapter 4

Way Forward

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The COVID-19 pandemic has been a global catastrophe, causing enormous damage to economies and severely affecting the day-to-day life of billions. While the number of infections in the ASEAN region is much lower than in many other parts of the world, the pandemic has significantly disrupted lives and there is no certainty as to when it will end. A severe economic contraction as a result of stringent restrictions on travel and regular social and business activities has left millions without work or sources of income. Those already vulnerable have been especially traumatised and will continue to be unless decisive steps are taken to support them.

Against this background, discussions have identified tardy progress in enforcing several labour laws, treaties, and guidelines critical for improved governance and better institutions. Given the extent of regional labour migration, it is inevitable that discussions on labour governance will include concerns about employment practices, labour safety, occupational health, and welfare systems. The ASEAN region needs to develop a response that helps everyone, especially the many migrant workers in the region, to build back better from the conditions before the crisis. Simply put, the challenge is to make policies and regulations work for society and not the other way around. There are many good examples of innovative, practical means of achieving this. However, this calls for the adoption and implementation of reforms at a certain speed and scale. General improvements in governance and institutions in tandem with the implementation of legal and policy guidelines for sustainable labour management could contribute to labour reforms.

Undoubtedly, this process will require large-scale resource mobilisation across the region. To build a cohesive response, greater attention will also have to be paid to several important initiatives undertaken by governments, international agencies, and civil society groups before the pandemic. This includes complying with various treaties to ensure the rights of migrant workers and enabling policies that allow them to live and improve their lives with dignity, as equals with all members of society.

In addition to its impacts on the economy, the pandemic is expected to strain regional cooperation initiatives. Scholars have thus called for sustained regional policy coordination on all socioeconomic matters to mitigate and isolate the pandemic shock (Kimura et al., 2020). Drawing from past experiences, Kimura et al. (2020) indicated the need for timely and greater coordination in ASEAN to mitigate the pending economic shock in terms of unemployment, corporate bankruptcy, and financial market fragility. In the absence of regional cooperation, the cost of the pandemic and economic shocks will increase significantly.

It is also clear that the resources required for recovering from the COVID-19 shock will take the form not only of funds or materials but also of non-tangible things such as trust, cooperation, and solidarity between governments and people of the region. The current

crisis offers an opportunity to build an ASEAN that is both economically vibrant and a world leader in upholding standards of human welfare and environmental protection.

1. Regional Measures to Soften the Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic

Coordination amongst AMS was slow in the initial stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, but there has since been increased policy convergence and a more united regional response. This is thanks to the functioning of existing mechanisms set up to deal with regionwide crises of any kind, particularly since the 1997 Asian financial crisis. For example, high-level ASEAN officials met as early as January 2020 to prepare a regionwide response, building on existing measures undertaken by individual AMS and regional health forums. The meeting pledged to strengthen coordination of national and regional efforts in ensuring ASEAN's readiness to mitigate and subsequently eliminate the threat of COVID-19 (ASEAN, 2020i).

Similarly, during the 26th ASEAN Economic Ministers' Retreat in Da Nang, Viet Nam on 10 March 2020, the regional group agreed to take collective action to mitigate the impact of the virus by working with external and development partners (ASEAN, 2020a). The ASEAN Economic Ministers issued a joint statement saying that they would continue to facilitate the smooth flow of goods and services in supply chains, and refrain from imposing new and unnecessary non-tariff measures (ASEAN, 2020m). Their statement focused on leveraging technology, digital trade, and trade-facilitation platforms such as the ASEAN Single Window, to foster supply-chain connectivity and allow businesses, especially SMEs, to continue operating during the pandemic.

ASEAN is also collaborating with external partners such as the European Union to mitigate the social and economic impacts of COVID-19, keep supply chains open, and advance relevant scientific research. It has also joined with the US to strengthen cooperation on public health measures. Experiences in tackling the pandemic were shared within the ASEAN+3, which includes China, Korea, and Japan.

In early April 2020, a Special ASEAN Summit and an ASEAN+3 Special Summit on COVID-19 issued a statement (ASEAN, 2020c) calling for a post-pandemic plan for ASEAN to (i) restore connectivity, tourism, normal business, and social activities to prevent potential economic downturns; (ii) ensure that critical infrastructure for trade and trading routes via air, land, and sea ports remain open; and (iii) refrain from imposing unnecessary restrictions on the flow of medical, food, and essential supplies. One result of these summits was the decision to establish the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund.

At its virtual meeting in June 2020, ASEAN leaders underscored the need to strengthen regional economic integration and enhance cooperation based on open markets that promote free trade and encourage investment, and an inclusive and rules-based multilateral trading system (ASEAN, 2020i). They reaffirmed their shared commitment to maintaining resilient supply chains for essential goods and to easing restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The meeting also reaffirmed ASEAN's commitment to sign the RCEP in 2020 (ASEAN, 2016b), sending a clear signal of unwavering support for the multilateral trading system, regional integration, and economic development across the region. The meeting reaffirmed their shared commitment to supporting migrant workers' well-being across ASEAN in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. An effort was made to chart a course towards early economic recovery from COVID-19 by harnessing potential opportunities and boosting community resilience.

2. Association of Southeast Asian Nations Comprehensive Recovery Framework

At the 37th ASEAN Summit, AMS leaders adopted the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF) and Implementation Plan to serve as an exit strategy for the region to recover and build back better from the COVID-19 pandemic (ASEAN, 2020k). The ACRF, which takes a whole-of-community approach, focuses on key sectors and segments of society that are most affected by the pandemic, setting broad strategies and identifying measures for recovery in line with sectoral and regional priorities. Overall, ASEAN's recovery efforts will focus on five broad strategies that are deemed most impactful to take the region through the recovery process and its aftermath.

Broad Strategy 1 (enhancing health systems) prioritises building and sustaining current health gains and measures, maintaining and strengthening essential health services, and strengthening vaccine security. In addition, the quality of human resources for health will be enhanced by ensuring an adequate supply of trained, well-equipped, and healthy workers. The strategy also calls for enhancing the capacity of public health services to enable health emergency responses, including food safety and nutrition in emergencies.

Broad Strategy 2 (strengthening human security) commits ASEAN to develop a recovery framework that puts the welfare of people at its core, by strengthening the protection and empowerment of all people and communities during the COVID-19 recovery period and beyond. To guide these efforts, the immediate priority is to enhance social protection, and strengthen food security, food safety, and nutrition for vulnerable groups. To overcome severe setbacks on human capital accumulation, digital skills and higher education, as well as re-skilling and upskilling for employment, will be promoted. To ensure the well-being of workers and improve the future of work, labour policies for 'the new normal' will be further strengthened, including through social dialogue. Mainstreaming gender equality will also be prioritised throughout the response and recovery process given the gendered impact of the pandemic. Lastly, the strategy calls for safeguarding human rights.

Broad Strategy 3 (maximising the potential of the intra-ASEAN market and broader economic integration) focuses on intensifying intra-ASEAN trade and investment, establishing ASEAN as a competitive market, and further increasing intra-ASEAN trade and investment to strengthen supply-chain resilience and regional value chains. Opportunities to maximise the potential of ASEAN's internal market will be explored while ensuring that the region remains open to opportunities presented by broader regional integration. New initiatives will be promoted, including the setting up of travel bubbles or corridors;

strengthening of transport and regional connectivity; and revival of affected sectors such as tourism and MSMEs. The RCEP is expected to provide a strong anchor for achieving all these goals.

Broad Strategy 4 (accelerating inclusive digital transformation) leverages the momentum and imperative of digital transformation, and seizes the enormous opportunities presented by digital technologies to boost the economy and improve society in a post-COVID-19 world. Amongst other important priorities, promoting e-commerce and digital economy will be key, along with initiatives on e-governments and e-services, digital connectivity, the use of information and communication technology in education, and digital transformation of MSMEs. Data governance, cybersecurity, legal framework, and institutional capacity will also be enhanced.

Broad Strategy 5 (advancing towards a more sustainable and resilient future) concerns ASEAN's commitment to develop a recovery framework that is durable, long-lasting, inclusive, and capable of safeguarding the region's natural resources and social fabric, as well as the prosperity of its people. To support the attainment of this strategy, the priorities will focus on achieving sustainability in ASEAN in all dimensions, particularly in investment, energy, agriculture, green infrastructure, disaster management, and sustainable financing.

Given the comprehensive scope of the ACRF, resources will also be needed to support the implementation of initiatives and programmes. Some of this will be met via the newly set up COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund. Additionally, existing funding programmes in the region will be re-purposed to meet current needs towards COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.

3. Association of Southeast Asian Nations Stimulus Packages

The steep fall in economic growth, accompanied by overall large-scale job losses is, of course, the primary challenge. Unless this is tackled, the region will find it very difficult to solve any of the other problems that have arisen. The good news is that, while 2020 has been a setback, ASEAN economies are projected to rebound sharply in 2021, matching or even outstripping growth in the years prior to the COVID-19 crisis. Much of this regional growth will be driven by the improvement in the global economic outlook, as well as the unprecedented monetary and fiscal stimulus packages announced by various ASEAN governments. Monetary policies adopted by several AMS were meant to ensure adequate liquidity and boost confidence in the economy when initial concerns on broken supply chains and travel cancellations emerged (Zulhibri and Sinay, 2020). Governments in the region eased interest rates and provided government guarantees on (i) select bank lending activities, (ii) market interventions to improve temporary credit lines, and (iii) purchases of corporate bonds; and even temporarily relaxed regulatory measures for financial institutions (Okamura, Nguyen, and Doi, 2020).

Some measures to ensure monetary stability were at the regional level, building on financial cooperation initiatives first adopted in 2000, following the Asian financial crisis. Back then, finance ministries and central banks of ASEAN, together with those from Japan,

Korea, and China (ASEAN+3) had established the Chiang Mai Initiative, a network of bilateral swap agreements designed to protect member countries from future crises. In 2010, this was revamped as the CMIM, and a corpus of \$240 billion was set up to provide dollar liquidity support to reduce vulnerability to short-term external shocks.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, ASEAN+3 finance ministers and central bank governors reached agreements to enhance the CMIM further, making it more effective and operationally ready for countries in need. This included the institutionalisation of the use of local currencies in addition to the dollar for CMIM financing, helping to broaden financing options for members in times of need.

Table 4.1: Summary of Association of Southeast Asian Nations Member States Stimulus Packages to Counter the Impact of the Pandemic

<i>Country</i>	<i>Stimulus package</i>	<i>\$ billion equivalent</i>	<i>Date</i>
<i>Brunei Darussalam</i>	B\$450 million	0.319	30 March
<i>Cambodia</i>	¥420 billion	0.1	13 April
	¥8.1 trillion	2.0	14 April
<i>Indonesia</i>	Rp 10.3 trillion	0.742	25 February
	Rp 120 trillion	8.1	13 March
	Rp 22.9 trillion	1.5	16 March
	Rp 62.3 trillion	3.9	18 March
	Rp 405.1 trillion	24.6	31 March
	Rp 641.2 trillion	43.0	19 May
<i>Lao PDR</i>	₭N30 billion	0.005	2 April
<i>Malaysia</i>	RM20 billion	4.8	27 February
	RM230 billion	55.2	27 March
	RM10 billion	2.4	6 April
<i>Myanmar</i>	MK100 billion	0.101	27 April
<i>Philippines</i>	₱27.1 billion	0.527	16 March
	₱200 billion	3.8	31 March
<i>Singapore</i>	S\$6.4 billion	4.6	18 February
	S\$48 billion	33.7	26 March
	S\$5.1 billion	3.4	6 April
	S\$33 billion	23.3	26 May
<i>Thailand</i>	฿100 billion	3.2	4 March
	฿117 billion	3.6	24 March
	฿1.9 trillion	82.0	7 April
<i>Viet Nam</i>	₫250 trillion	10.8	6 March
	₫62.0 trillion	2.6	10 April

Lao PDR = Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Note: Based on information from various sources, including government websites and online news sites. Source: Zulkhibri, M. and J.B. Sinay (2020), 'Assessing ASEAN Economy Policy Responses in a Pandemic', *ASEAN Policy Brief*, No. 2. 28 May. https://asean.org/storage/2020/06/ASEAN-Policy-Brief-02_31-May-2020.pdf (accessed 28 October 2020).

The size of the stimulus packages has ranged from 10% to 40% of GDP. Collectively, fiscal packages adopted by AMS amount to a combined \$318.2 billion or 10.1% of regional GDP in 2019. Thailand has the largest total stimulus package, with three instalments reaching \$88.8 billion, followed by Indonesia with \$81.8 billion.

While the fiscal stimulus packages adopted by AMS are primarily aimed at helping affected industries, a significant number of the measures are for the health sector and household subsidies, including cash allowances, electricity subsidies, and subsidies for social security contributions and pensions. These subsidies are crucial for workers to meet their daily needs and those of their households, especially those in low-income and vulnerable categories.

In most countries in the region, food packages have been provided to those who need them. The Philippines, for example, announced the reallocation of around \$3.9 billion in subsidies consisting of cash and basic necessities to 18 million low-income households over 2 months. In Singapore, citizens aged 21 and above will be given S\$900 (\$634.90) each, while self-employed persons will be paid S\$3,000 (\$2,116.20) in three tranches to supplement their incomes. Innovative measures such as 'rice ATMs' in Indonesia and Viet Nam and pay-it-forward food coupons in Thailand were also introduced. Beyond support for basic needs, other forms of subsidies, such as for electricity, fuel, pensions, and social security contributions, help lessen the financial burden on households.

Table 4.2: Migration-Related Responses to the Coronavirus Disease within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

Country	Beneficiary	Origin or Destination Country	Intervention
Indonesia	International	Sending	The Indonesian migrant workers' protection agency, the National Board for the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Overseas Workers, facilitated the return of Indonesian migrants, both documented and undocumented, owing to lockdowns in Malaysia.
Malaysia	International	Receiving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Government of Malaysia announced the introduction of an RM150 subsidy to employers for each foreign worker sent for coronavirus disease (COVID-19) screening starting 1 June 2020. To be eligible, foreign workers must be documented and contributing to the Social Security Organization. For workers not in the target group, the cost of COVID-19 screening should be borne by the employer to prevent an

			<p>outbreak amongst workers in the country.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The government announced a 3-month grace period to allow employers to comply with amendments to the Workers' Minimum Standards of Housing and Amenities Act 1990, which addresses living conditions of migrant workers. Enforcement had been scheduled for 1 June 2020, but was delayed to 31 August. The amendment (passed in July 2019) extends the coverage of the act to housing and accommodation for workers in all sectors across Peninsular Malaysia and Labuan. Previously, the act was only empowered to govern such aspects for plantations of more than 20 acres (8.09 hectares) and the mining sector. Act 446, (amendment) 2019, also hopes to enhance the 2018 guidelines regarding accommodation for foreign workers prepared by the Peninsular Malaysia Labor Department. This covers a minimum standard for space required for workers' accommodations, basic facilities for housing and safety, and hygiene elements that employers must emphasise. At the end of August 2020, Malaysia's Human Resources Ministry published new rules covering minimum standards that employers must follow from September 2020 if they provide housing for their employees. Failure to do so will result in a fine of up to RM50,000 (Lai, 2020). • Eligibility of undocumented migrants for COVID-19 tests and treatment has been extended. • The foreign worker levy was cut by 25% for those with a permit ending by 31 December 2020, but the discount is not applicable to domestic helpers. • Foreign workers can apply online to renew temporary employment visit passes that expire during the movement control order.
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Philippines	International	Sending	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Philippines Department of Labor and Employment recently announced that cash assistance amounting to \$200 (over ₱10,000) would be provided to overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) whose work was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The government aims to reach 70,000 OFWs. To access the assistance, OFWs must submit the certificate of employment issued by their agencies. Their applications will be evaluated and processed by the Philippine Overseas Labor Office or Overseas Workers Welfare Administration. • Various government agencies have expressed their collective decision to provide ₱5 billion to support migrant workers from the Gulf and other destinations globally.
Thailand	International	Sending	<p>Thailand has just initiated a multi-pronged package for Thai workers forced to return from the Republic of Korea due to the outbreak.</p> <p>Those who are members of the Overseas Workers Fund will be entitled to B15,000 in compensation; this is also available to member workers who return from other countries that have announced a COVID-19 outbreak.</p> <p>The Thai Ministry of Labor will coordinate with labour offices in the Republic of Korea to make sure that Thai labourers receive pending wages and benefits. The Department of Employment has identified over 81,562 domestic jobs for Thai labourers returning from overseas.</p>

		Receiving	<p>Legal foreign workers registered under Article 33 of the Social Security Act will receive all benefits. If a business closes, they will receive 62% of their pay for a time not exceeding 90 days. Registered workers, including migrants, are also entitled to severance pay if they are terminated. In addition, they will receive medical care, including check-ups and treatment, under this article.</p> <p>The qualifications required to receive the aid, including a Thai bank account and at least 6 months' of contributions to the government fund, have excluded the most vulnerable, including millions of migrants from neighbouring countries.</p> <p>On 15 April 2020, the Government of Thailand announced a blanket extension for the country's migrant workers, who are permitted to stay until 30 November and exempted from overstay penalties.</p> <p>Other visa relief measures were also announced for non-nationals, including automatic stays for border pass holders until borders with Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Myanmar are reopened.</p> <p>The Thai cabinet approved visa extensions until 31 July for about 1 million migrant workers from Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Myanmar to ease potential labour shortages as the country's economy reopens.</p>
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Sources: Lai, T. (2020), 'New Rules for Employees' Minimum Housing Standards from September 1, 2020. Employers to comply or be fined RM 50,000', *HRNEWS.my*. 1 September. <http://hrnews.my/2020/09/01/new-rules-for-employees-minimum-housing-standards-from-sept-1-employers-to-comply-or-be-fined-rm50000/> (accessed 2 October 2020); Moroz, H., M. Shrestha, and M. Testaverde (2020), 'Potential Responses to the COVID-19 Outbreak in Support of Migrant Workers', *World Bank Working Paper*. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33625> (accessed 12 August 2020).

4. Protecting Migrant Workers

The Joint Statement of ASEAN Labor Ministers on ‘Response to the Impact of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) on Labor and Employment’ pledges to support the livelihood and health of all workers, including migrant workers, by facilitating access to essential health care services, without discrimination (ASEAN, 2020h). In solidarity, AMS will support migrant workers affected by the pandemic in each other’s country or in third countries to implement occupational safety and health standards and social protection systems effectively.

Several AMS have implemented policies that factor in the needs of vulnerable populations. Thailand will provide emergency welfare measures to migrant workers during the pandemic, providing them with free food and health services in select locations. Thailand also suspended immigration enforcement for overstaying migrants through the middle of November while international travel restrictions are in place. Some AMS have introduced economic stimulus plans and workplace measures to protect the health and income of workers during the pandemic. However, effective implementation of these measures will be key, and ASEAN often sees a significant gap between agreements and actual implementation.

Migration Governance Framework

In 2015, the IOM developed a Migration Governance Framework to clarify the purpose of SDG 10.7, which calls for ‘well-managed migration policies’. It also developed Migration Governance Indicators (MGIs) to assess national frameworks and help to operationalise the framework. This framework is relevant for monitoring the social protections of migrant workers and tracking progress on certain SDGs.

The MGIs are a tool based on policy inputs that offers insights on policy levers that countries can use to develop their migration governance. Countries with a comprehensive migration governance framework are likely to be better prepared to manage any shock, including COVID-19. The MGI framework also includes information that can help assess countries’ preparedness to ensure that no migrant is left behind, the risk of which is heightened during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

The six dimensions of migration governance included in the Migration Governance Framework and MGIs are outlined in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1: Six Dimensions of Migration Governance



Source: International Organization Migration (2019), *Migration Governance Indicators: A Global Perspective*. Geneva: International Organization Migration. <https://publications.iom.int/books/migration-governance-indicators-global-perspective> (accessed 5 August 2020).

5. Need and Areas for Further Research

Further research and in-depth documentation are needed to come up with long-term solutions to ensure humane policies that help migrant workers work and live with dignity, and to track the progress of relevant SDG targets and indicators in the ASEAN region. Currently, several grey areas exist because of a paucity of data and the lack of a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of migrant worker flows, the true impact of current policies, obstacles to the implementation of treaties, and a method for developing more effective future strategies.

For example, the effect of the COVID-19 crisis is likely to differ amongst the various subcategories of migrant workers and their families, including long-term, short-term, undocumented, returning, and women migrants. Going forward, AMS will have to work with international agencies and civil society to develop interventions targeting each of these subcategories specifically, to address their problems most effectively.

Such a disaggregated approach will help develop new policies or fine-tune existing ones to help anticipate and solve, ahead of time, many of the problems related to migrant workers that have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. For short-term or temporary migrants, who are often very low-skilled and have few social protections, the impact of sudden job losses on their immigration status and income can be drastic. Job loss as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak means loss of income for consumption, to remit home, and to repay the (often large) loans taken out to finance migration (Moroz et al., 2020). Typically, such workers live in shared accommodation or work in environments that are not conducive to social distancing or home-based work, making them more vulnerable to COVID-19. Moreover, loss of employment could also mean loss of legal status and risk of harassment by local authorities.

Undocumented workers, who migrate without legal documents, are another very vulnerable category. Not only are they often employed in jobs without social protection benefits, but their illegal status also makes them ineligible for any benefits that governments may provide. The UN estimates that globally, up to 20% of all migrants could be irregular (UN DESA, 2018). Reliable data on undocumented workers across the ASEAN region are lacking; this is yet another area that needs further research.

Returning migrants are another subcategory about which information is relatively sparse. COVID-19 disrupted economies and livelihoods, forcing many to return home after sustaining losses in terms of unpaid wages and depleted savings, without any great expectation of social support.⁵⁹ Apart from the health challenges posed during a pandemic outbreak by such large and chaotic population movements, such a sudden influx can also exacerbate various social tensions.

⁵⁹ Several ASEAN governments have taken measures to help returning migrants, including Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand. For example, Indonesia's National Agency for Placement and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (BNP2TKI) has facilitated the return of both documented and undocumented migrants from Malaysia. In Myanmar, an emergency COVID-19 cash transfer targeting vulnerable groups, including internal and returning international migrants, will be financed by a consortium of international donors.

Figure 5.2: Areas and Themes for Further Research



ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations, AMS = ASEAN member state, COVID-19 = coronavirus disease, MGI = Migration Governance Index, MiGOF = Migration Governance Framework, SDG = Sustainable Development Goal.

Source: Authors.

6. Looking Ahead

There is growing consensus amongst civil society groups and international organisations working in AMS that the region should adopt and enforce policies and programmes related to migrant workers that ensure respect for all human rights, the rule of law, and international labour standards. Safety and health, employment and decent work, wage protection, social security, and non-discrimination are key principles that must be upheld. Based on several consultations and reports published by concerned groups (MFA, 2020a) and international bodies (UNESCAP, 2020c), a set of recommendations are provided below for ASEAN governments of both origin and destination countries.

General Measures for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

- (i) **Strengthen social protection and welfare systems.** Social safety nets, particularly those targeting regional migrant workers, must be reinforced and strengthened to protect migrants from the consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak, including income loss and health impacts.
- (ii) **Develop and implement an action plan for rejuvenating livelihoods and reducing immediate economic stress.** An action plan must be put in place to restore people's livelihoods and return economic activity to normal levels. Lost income reduces demand and worsens economic conditions, creating social conflict. Special employment-retention policies may be needed to keep all workers, including migrant workers, employed.
- (iii) **Strengthen supply chains.** Sustainable and resilient supply chains are necessary to supplement recovery efforts, both locally and globally. A key immediate step should be to reduce trade tariffs and open borders for goods to restart trade.
- (iv) **Invest in targeted stimulus packages.** As part of building back better, stimulus measures and long-term policy changes must focus on ameliorating deeply entrenched inequality in the region. Policies should be formulated to reduce inequalities in income, wealth, and access to basic services and social protection, with a special focus on vulnerable groups, such as people in the informal economy, women and girls, persons with disabilities, and migrants. Increased investments to strengthen health systems and accelerate progress towards universal health care will also help reduce inequalities significantly.
- (v) **Emphasis on labour-efficient approaches.** In the long run, ASEAN's overall productivity framework, which relies on the use of low-wage workers instead of more efficient technology, must be restructured. Such a change will need to be accompanied by measures to upgrade the skills of migrant workers and ameliorate economic and social conditions in origin countries.
- (vi) **Advocate rights of workers.** Upholding human rights and good governance practices will ensure that recovery in the region benefits all sections of the population and is sustainable. In destination countries, tensions between locals and migrants, exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, must be reduced. The rise of hate speech against migrants in particular needs to be tackled systematically before it results in further conflict.

- (vii) **Reinforce and bolster gender-focused actions.** The return of women to the labour force must be supported. All forms of social protections must be extended to them, including measures to address protection from possible violence at the workplace and from unpaid care work in mid- to longer-term economic recovery plans.

Governments of Destination Countries

- (i) **Advocate the adoption of inclusive labour policies at national and regional levels.** ASEAN governments must be persuaded to include migrant workers' welfare in national policies or economic stimulus packages being implemented to help companies recover and sustain themselves during and post-lockdown. Many industries such as plantation, agriculture, and construction that traditionally depend heavily on migrant workers should therefore have equal access to financial benefits from the government as part of these stimulus packages.
- (ii) **Encourage policies centred on rights.** Adoption and enforcement of a comprehensive legal framework to protect migrant workers will help orderly progress on SDGs. To address the COVID-19 health crisis, governments should be persuaded to adopt and implement policies that are inclusive, equitable, non-discriminatory, and centred on human rights. This will enable migrant workers and their families, regardless of their status, to access free screening and treatment for COVID-19 without the fear of arrest and detention. The health and safety of migrant workers in the workplace must be ensured in keeping with WHO guidelines.
- (iii) **Ensure workers' safety and health standards.** Mechanisms must be developed to ensure that employers who provide dormitory accommodation to migrant workers guarantee the health and safety of workers living in that space in accordance with WHO guidelines.
- (iv) **Ensure access to health services in case of COVID-19-related issues.** Migrant workers who test positive for COVID-19 or are unable to work due to preventive quarantine and forced temporary business closures should continue to receive their full salaries, wages, and benefits. The COVID-19 crisis must not be used as an excuse by unscrupulous employers to lay off workers without just cause and without payment of earned salaries, wages, and benefits.
- (v) **Ensure access to fair financial services.** Procedures must be developed to guarantee that governments uphold a non-discriminatory approach to loan and credit card payment issues during COVID-19, such as deferring payments for both national and migrant workers. This will include recognising COVID-19 as a disease within labour laws and social security legislation, thus entitling migrant workers to claim compensation, medical, and allied care.
- (vi) **Help streamline remittance procedures.** As remittances are important to migrant worker households, governments should be encouraged to develop policies to address the fall in remittances likely to result from the COVID-19 outbreak.
- (vii) **Disseminate information regularly.** Migrant workers must be provided with correct and up-to-date information on government policies and regulations to combat COVID-19 in languages they understand, using various traditional and social media

platforms.

- (viii) **Urge the elimination of unfair practices.** Governments and employers must stop the discriminatory and arbitrary detention and deportation of migrant workers as a means to contain COVID-19. The human and labour rights of migrant workers must be respected at all times, even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- (ix) **Encourage protection of labour rights.** Procedures must be developed to ensure that labour courts protect migrant workers' rights by passing preventive attachment orders against employers' assets. This is to ensure that migrant workers get their service benefits if the company closes or if an employer files a case against migrant workers in court.

Governments of Origin Countries

- (i) **Boost migrant labour-related diplomacy and communication across the region.** All AMS should use the current situation as an opportunity to ensure that diplomatic missions and consulates perform their duties to protect migrant workers from COVID-19 by disseminating correct and timely information to migrant workers in destination countries. In addition, all missions and consulates should reinforce their communication mechanisms to ensure the protection of the rights of migrant workers to communicate with their family and friends.
- (ii) **Develop mechanisms for safe return transport.** Governments should ensure the free, immediate, and humane repatriation of all migrant workers and their families stranded and/or deported from abroad. The remains of deceased migrant workers should also be returned to their families without delay, in accordance with WHO guidelines.
- (iii) **Assure access to facilities and services.** Once workers return home, governments should ensure that they have free and immediate access to health care including testing, quarantine facilities, and treatment for COVID-19. Returned migrant workers should be provided with free transportation, food, temporary housing, and quarantine facilities (if deemed necessary), until their return to their own homes in their origin countries.
- (iv) **Recognise COVID-19 as an eligible disease for medical support.** COVID-19 should be recognised as a disease in labour laws and social security legislation so that migrant workers can claim compensation, medical, and allied care.
- (v) **Develop mechanisms to settle claims and grievances.** A fair, accessible, and speedy mechanism must be set up for rescue, repatriation, settlement, and payment of migrant workers' claims, even after they have been repatriated to their origin countries.
- (vi) **Develop opportunities for employment in migrants' home countries.** Decent work opportunities should be provided to all, including returned migrant workers, in their home countries.