Health Inequities, Migration and Access

Fact Sheet

DEFINITION
Health inequalities are “unfair and avoidable differences in health status seen within and between countries”. Health inequities are systematic: they usually affect particular groups of people, and they occur across the social gradient. The most vulnerable people have the least access, not only to health services, but also to the resources that contribute to good health.

Why are Health Inequities of particular concern to migrants?

- Migration is increasingly one of the most important determinants of global health and social development.
- People are moving in greater numbers than ever before and over greater distances. Even under ideal conditions the uprooting, displacement and resettlement – be it voluntary or involuntary – can pose complex challenges.
- Migration has implications for those who move, those who are left behind and those who host migrants. Its implications for the health care systems of communities and countries can also be far-reaching.
The Red Cross and Red Crescent Response

The staff and volunteers of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies believe that anyone – man, woman, adolescent or child – who is in need of healthcare, has a right to it, irrespective of who they are, where they are from, or where they live. They should also be able to access affordable health services in a manner that respects their dignity and their human rights. The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement ("The Movement") plays a crucial role around the globe in lessening patients’ feelings of alienation, fighting stigma and discrimination, and relentlessly advocating for health inequities to be addressed. We work to ensure the provision of and access to quality health services for migrants and mobile populations, including migrants in irregular situations such as trafficked persons and stranded migrants, as well as labour migrants and local communities. This is done by building the capacity of partners from health, non-health, public and private sectors, as well as involving migrants and local communities themselves, which ensures sustained delivery of comprehensive, quality health and social services throughout the migration cycle.

The IFRC Policy on Migration

"The degree to which migrants have access to assistance, services and legal support is a key criterion in assessing their vulnerability. Those who lack access are especially susceptible to risks.

National Societies shall undertake sustained efforts to ensure that migrants have access to humanitarian assistance, essential services, and legal support. They shall strive to obtain effective and unconditional access to all migrants, irrespective of their legal status."


In its declaration Together for Humanity, the 30th International Conference of Red Cross and Red Crescent, comprising States and the components of the Movement, explicitly acknowledged “the role of National Societies, based on the principles of humanity and impartiality, and in consultation with the public authorities, in providing humanitarian assistance to vulnerable migrants, irrespective of their legal status”

The Policy on Migration reflects this concern by underlining that National Societies shall undertake sustained efforts to ensure that migrants have access to humanitarian assistance, essential services, and legal support; and they shall strive to obtain effective and unconditional access to all migrants, irrespective of their legal status.

The Policy thus makes clear that the term humanitarian access has a double-meaning: It relates to the access for migrants in need to humanitarian services, and it relates to the access of National Societies to migrants in need.

As humanitarian access is an encompassing issue, it not only concerns the relationship between National Societies and public authorities. Equally important is how National Societies act in relation to migrants. Culture, language and lack of trust are barriers that have to be overcome to ensure effective humanitarian access.

1 Available online at: https://fednet.ifrc.org/PageFiles/89238/Migration%20Policy_EN.pdf
Prejudice and xenophobia are often a major source of access problems for migrants. It is essential for National Societies to take into account, and work to overcome social tensions and fears that prevent or discourage migrants in need from accessing assistance and protection, irrespective of their status.

Pertinent questions

When working to address health inequities affecting migrants, one should be asking these questions:

1. **What entitlement is there to use health services?**
   Do migrants get access to affordable health care – are they entitled to use the same services as everyone else on the same terms?

2. **Are services adequately matched to migrants’ needs?**
   Do the services make an effort to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers and are they relevant and appropriate for migrants? As services are usually designed for the local population, they may be poorly matched to the needs of migrants.

3. **What policies are in place to reduce migrants health risks?**
   Are mechanisms in place to ensure health in all policies in order to protect people from unnecessary risks to health? Industrial safety, for example, or housing standards, or protection from individual discrimination and exploitation fall into this category.

4. **What provisions are there for undocumented migrants and their families?**
   Undocumented migrants and their families’ lack of entitlement to health care is an acute problem. However, there has been a recent wave of campaigns and research in Europe on this topic, largely initiated by NGO’s and health professionals.

The health situation of irregular migrants is especially precarious because they too often experience infringement of their other basic rights. Irregular migrants indeed find themselves in situations where their status prevent them from seeking the protection of public authorities, such as the police when faced with violence or exploitation. They may not seek care, even when entitled to it, for fear of being reported to the authorities. Moreover, they are very often not even aware of the full extent of their rights. Not only irregular migrants, but health workers too, may be inadequately informed about the laws governing entitlement.

**Global level initiatives to address Health of Migrants**

**United Nations**
Numerous Declarations and Conventions supporting human rights, migrants and the right to health, and opposing discrimination.

**World Health Organization**
2008 World Health Assembly, Resolution concerning the Health of Migrants
2010 Global Consultation on Migrant Health, Madrid (in collaboration with IOM)

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1  Manual available online (in Italian) at: http://cri.it/flex/cm/pages/ServizioBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/4983

2  Supplementary Guidance on the Policy on Migration, Humanitarian Access for and to Migrants
International Organization for Migration

2009 EU-Level Consultation on Migration Health, Lisbon: Better Health for All

European Union and Council of Europe initiatives:

European Union

2000 Directive combating discrimination; Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union

2007 Portuguese Presidency Conference, Lisbon: Health and Migration in the European Union

2007 European Commission Note on Health and Migration in the EU

2009 European Commission Communication on Solidarity in Health: Reducing Health Inequalities in the EU

2010 Spanish Presidency Conference, Madrid: Moving Forward Equity in Health

2011 Resolution of European Parliament supporting health rights for all migrants, regardless of their legal status

Council of Europe

1950 European Convention on Human Rights


2001 Recommendation on Health conditions of migrants and refugees in Europe

2006 Recommendation on Health services in a multicultural society

2007 Bratislava Declaration on Health, human rights and migration

2011 Recommendations on Mobility, migration and access to Healthcare

Conclusion

Movements of people within and between countries has become a central and necessary part of our life and the pace of movement is unlikely to diminish in the foreseeable future. Most migrants move because of the push of poverty, and the widening economic gap between regions will continue to prompt people to uproot and move elsewhere. Mass population movements are also being spurred by current political and social conflicts.

Migration can be highly selective, and people who move are often those who are most able to do so from a health point of view. They may also have a broader world view and a better idea of what opportunities exist elsewhere. Over time many of the health indicators characteristic of migrants may approximate national host country norms. Even so, migration is rarely simple or easy and the growing pace of migration will bring with it new health and social challenges.

A CALL TO ACTION

The IFRC advocates on behalf of the world’s most vulnerable, those who have least access to the resources and conditions that will give rise to good health. The IFRC asks policy-makers, governments and donors to align resources with needs, and to work with stakeholders, multi-lateral organizations and civil society organizations towards bridging the health divide so that all people – including the most vulnerable migrants – can achieve their fullest potential.