Rethinking the migration-development nexus in the post-COVID-19 era

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Abstract
This concluding article serves as an epilogue summing up key issues about migration, labor migrants and development amid a crisis of public health. We predict the forging of an age of sanitization in which different kinds of sanitizing policies will still be in place, especially in Asia, to deal with the sporadic changes of the pandemic. Sanitization politics will continue to intersect with different policy sectors and powers, which will extend beyond the medical understanding of a pandemic and blur the division between science and politics. It will have varied impacts on the migration regime and global governance as a whole.

Keywords
migration-development nexus, post-COVID era, essential migrant workers, age of sanitization, sanitized boundaries

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic reminds us that the world is not “borderless” and has created new borders different from those that existed before. The different pathways in governing the pandemic and its mutating “viro-scape” have further led to varied entry measures and migration policies. Globalization is no longer an all-time safe and positive phenomenon; rather, it has been entangled in a “diseasescape” (Chan and Haines, 2021) in which viruses, like cultural flows (Appadurai, 1990), are able to cross borders. The COVID-19 pandemic has fired off a significant alarm. Regardless of whether or not it subsides, its messages and lessons have already cast long, dark shadows on the governance of human mobility and health security. Because labor migration relies on free and safe cross-border flows and relatively open borders, border sanitization poses new questions about such flows. By March 2022, many governments in the West had already announced border reopening policies and had scrapped most of the COVID-19 protocols, seemingly forging a “back to normal” scenario. While there has been much “live with COVID” confidence in the West, the World Health Organization (WHO) has warned against talk of the “end-game” of the pandemic (The Economic Times, 2022). People in many parts of Asia are still facing uncertainty brought by the Omicron outbreaks.

The pandemic is indeed a teacher, forcing us to reflect upon many of the existing issues in global governance, including labor policies, migration regulation and development strategies. The papers in this special issue have discussed the various situations of migrants and health and non-health measures in response to the pandemic in the Asia-Pacific region. Although measures of COVID-19 control are often framed in the language of medicine and policy discourses, the rationales behind them often rest upon pre-existing prejudices and biases. Some of these measures could be manipulated to serve the interests and goals of different players, such as employers, industries and states. The politics of sanitization raised in this special issue thus reminds us of how health securitization may move beyond the medical understanding of a pandemic and meld science and politics in a way that will likely linger beyond the pandemic itself. Below, we will recapture some of the major academic debates in labor migration, issues in the migration-development nexus and impacts of the pandemic. With the coming of age of a sanitization era, both migration and development policies will crosscut with health governance and health security, forging the kind of sanitization politics that intersects with health governance, migration and development.

The pandemic has served as a point of departure for policy-makers to review migration and labor policies. The notion of a “migration-development nexus” encompasses the dimensions of the “3Rs”: recruitment covers the conditions producing emigration; remittances from migrants contribute to family support, debt repayment and foreign exchange; and the return of migrants can
contribute to economic development in their countries of origin through investment and/or skill transfer. Migration can also help achieve broader economic and socio-political goals, such as reducing poverty and stabilizing societies, maintaining peace and easing refugee and migrant outflows (Nyberg-Sorensen et al., 2002). Some have also argued that migration, rather than a development strategy for the South, has become a development subsidy for the North (Bastia, 2013). Receiving counties rely on the recruitment of cheap migrant workers as a solution to labor shortages and a care deficit. In this concluding article, we will situate the debates about the intersection of migration-development within the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the politics of sanitization. When people and states can no longer take migration for granted—because migration has become more time-consuming and costlier due to various health measures in place—both sending and receiving states should reconsider the sustainability of a migration-led development model.

Asian labor migration amid the pandemic crisis

Asia is an important region for migration. Migrations from Asian countries have been increasing tremendously since the 2000s. Asia is the region producing the largest numbers of international migrants, from 68 million in 2000 to 104 million in 2015, which accounted for 40 percent of all international migrants in the world (IOM, 2017). It also hosts a huge number—a total of 86 million, or 30.5 percent of all international migrants (IOM, 2022: 24). Among the 281 million international migrants in the world, over half (around 169 million) are migrant workers (IOM, 2022: 40); many of whom went overseas to work temporarily, whether on short-term contracts or undocumented. One special feature of Asian migration is the prominence of intra-regional migration. A huge number of migrants from less developed Asian countries and territories search for jobs in more developed economies (such as Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and the oil-producing countries), filling the gaps in labor supply in various industrial and low-skilled sectors as well as in household domestic work. Also, a large number of workers are from less developed to middle-income countries. Malaysia, for example, hosted an estimated 5.5 million migrant workers, both documented and undocumented, and the largest group of this workforce are from Indonesia (Wahab, 2020). Other significant labor sources include Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar. In Taiwan, as stressed by Lan’s paper, more than 700,000 workers are migrants from abroad. In Singapore, migrant workers fill up different sectors, comprising 38 percent of its labor force (ILO and UN Women, 2020). In Hong Kong, the biggest category of foreign workers are domestic workers from Indonesia and the Philippines. Millions of workers flow constantly along the India–Saudi Arabia corridor (IOM, 2022). Shortly after the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, Asian countries
implemented the earliest border crossing restrictions and suspended the issuance of work visas for foreign workers, leading to a sharp decline in labor supply and huge disruption of migrant workers’ plans (Cook, 2020).

The pandemic has greatly disrupted labor migration in Asia. Figures show a significant decrease in the number of migrants to various Asian destinations (Baruah et al., 2021). For example, in the second quarter of 2020, the South Korea witnessed a sharp decline (close to 80 percent) in the number of incoming E-category workers (including both professional and non-professional foreign workers). The drop in Japan was even more impressive. From April to August 2020, the number of foreigners entering Japan on work visas, excluding re-entry, decreased to 627 from 123,000 for the same period in 2019 (Baruah et al., 2021). As stressed by Vogt and Qin in their paper, Japan has adopted a closed-door policy ever since the COVID-19 outbreak. Only in March 2022 did Japan allow the re-entry of a limited number of foreign workers who provide a “public benefit” (Nikkei Asia, 2022) and later on opened for tourists, but under strict regulation (Liang 2022). Hong Kong, on the other hand, lost at least 70 percent of new recruits of domestic workers in the first half of 2020. The total number of foreign domestic workers when compared to pre-COVID-19 time declined by 15.6 percent, from around 400,000 in late 2019 to 337,000 in January 2022 (Su, 2022).

The inflows of workers to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries also declined significantly. For example, the number of work visas issued by Saudi Arabia dropped by 33 percent in the first quarter of 2020 (from 943,000 in that period in 2019 to 633,000 in 2020). The figures decreased further in the second half of the same year, recording a 91 percent drop (only 50,000 visas were issued) (Baruah et al., 2021: 5). The United Arab Emirates (UAE) suspended the issuance of entry permits for over 6 months (March to September) in 2020. By June 2020, India saw the repatriation of over 220,000 GCC migrants (UN, 2020).

**Migrants as essential workers and deserving members**

Wealthy countries have depended on labor migration to sustain economic productivity and a certain level of quality of life. Cheap migrant labor has actually become a “cushion” enabling receiving states to lower the pressure of rising internal labor costs (Gahwi and Walton-Roberts, 2021). It also provides a quick fix or remedy for social issues such as an aging population, the need for child care and labor shortage, leading to the privatization of many social care sectors. The prevalent use of migrant domestic workers in countries and territories like Hong Kong and Singapore is seen as a development strategy that can facilitate middle-class women’s labor market participation (Oishi, 2005).

The pandemic has nevertheless exposed receiving countries’ dependence on migrant labor and revealed the unsustainability of labor migration as a
development strategy. Migrant labor shortage becomes substantial because, on the one hand, different border control policies have led to declining supply and, on the other hand, demands for labor in sectors such as agriculture, semiconductor production, nursing and eldercare keep rising. The work of migrant workers should be considered indispensable and essential.

In the adverse environment for migrants and migration, we can nevertheless discern new hope and opportunity. Many receiving governments have tried to relax some previous restrictions on migrants, taking steps such as the extension of work and residence permits and visas. Some migrants (such as those in Taiwan described in this issue) were able to transfer to other job sectors and increase their capacity to bargain with employers. Through the establishment of a virtual labor market, the government of UAE enabled workers to transfer more easily to another employer (UN, 2020). In Hong Kong, migrant domestic workers also found it easier to get a new employer after their current contracts ended. Their average monthly salary increased from HKD 4,630 to around HKD 5,800 (Su, 2022).

The pandemic has also pressured receiving countries to recognize migrant workers as deserving social members. To tackle the labor shortage that is likely to continue in the post-COVID-19 era, several receiving governments are relaxing the rules of permanent residency for migrant workers. For example, in February 2022, the Ministry of Labor in Taiwan announced the establishment of a visa status of “intermediate skilled manpower” without a cap on the duration of residency. Guest workers can shift to this status if certain requirements are met, including having worked in Taiwan for 6 years and earning a monthly salary above the designated amounts. In November 2021, the Ministry of Justice in Japan also announced a plan to expand the scope of permanent residency for blue-collar migrant workers in 2022 (Lan, 2022).

The migration-development model that fails workers

Both in the policy-making field and in academia, there seems to be excessive optimism about the development potential of migration (Piper, 2008: 1300; Brønden, 2012). Migration-induced development may serve the interests of high-income countries well, both because they would be less burdened by aid-sending responsibilities and because they would be supplied with cheap labor from around the (developing) world to help boost productivity and reduce labor costs. In the developing South, overseas remittances serve to buffer the pressures on sending states to improve their own national economic performance (Ebeke 2012). With significant inflows of remittances to origin countries in recent decades, their reliance on various forms of aid programs and the Official Development Assistance (ODA) has declined (Nyberg-Sorensen et al., 2002). The migration-development discourses and policies also reinforce neoliberal capitalism, which endorses market liberalization to facilitate the free flows of material and human resources (Faist et al., 2011). Such liberalization, however,
has not been accompanied by mechanisms that regulate the operations of migration brokers or that strengthen the promotion of migrants’ rights.

Although migration-induced development has been “praised” as ushering in economic development, the social dimensions of development—such as workers’ social security benefits, support for child care and the promotion of human rights—are often neglected. Scholars of labor and migration have also raised the question of whether migration really leads to women’s development (Hennebry et al., 2019). The care paradox, for example, as suggested by Hennebry and Walton-Roberts (2019), notes that while migrant women fill the labor gap in the health systems and home care sectors of their destination countries, they receive disproportionately little care themselves, and their own families in their home countries are also underattended to. This raises a persistent question on gender equality: to what extent does migration really lead to women’s development (Hennebry et al., 2019). The care paradox, for example, as suggested by Hennebry and Walton-Roberts (2019), notes that while migrant women fill the labor gap in the health systems and home care sectors of their destination countries, they receive disproportionately little care themselves, and their own families in their home countries are also underattended to. This raises a persistent question on gender equality: to what extent does migration really lead to women’s development (Hennebry et al., 2019). The care paradox, for example, as suggested by Hennebry and Walton-Roberts (2019), notes that while migrant women fill the labor gap in the health systems and home care sectors of their destination countries, they receive disproportionately little care themselves, and their own families in their home countries are also underattended to. This raises a persistent question on gender equality: to what extent does migration really lead to women’s development (Hennebry et al., 2019).

The injustice in the global care chain has been exacerbated during the pandemic. Due to travel restrictions and border closures, many migrant workers were trapped overseas and constrained from visiting their families back home, even if their family members fell ill and needed their care and company. Those who went home for vacation before or during the outbreak faced difficulties in returning to their posts and had to endure strict quarantine measures if and when they were allowed to reenter their country of employment. Overall, the pandemic shrank the global job market and led to a huge loss of income for migrant workers. It was estimated that global remittances would be found to have dropped by 20 percent in 2021 (World Bank, 2020). Some migrants lost their jobs or were forced to take unpaid leaves. Some suffered from wage loss or were not paid for the work they had done because their employers also experienced a business decline under the impacts of COVID-19. These workers often found themselves stranded in their destination countries but excluded from COVID-19 related aid provided to national workers, such as unemployment benefits, income relief and wage subsidies (Jones et al., 2021).

**Migrants as development agents and labor activism**

In the migration-led development model, origin countries tend to regard migrant workers as development agents and to view migrating for overseas work as a major way for people to improve their economic livelihoods (Lee and Piper, 2017). However, there is a lack of “a way out” from this “development” strategy and millions are made “temporary” workers perennially. How long will migrants stay abroad, and when will development bring an end to the migration cycle? Attaining an increased level of development over the short term does not reduce migration; and cross-generational migration is commonplace (Nyberg-Sorensen et al., 2002). Some argue that there has been a
“moral hazard” in the migration-development policy (Ebeke, 2012). Relying on migrant workers to bring in foreign exchange currency has somehow disincentivized national governments from generating domestic employment and strengthening their national economies.

Countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia dub their migrant workers “national heroes” to boost the migrants’ spirits and their loyalty to the country. After decades of using people as development agents, governments were also pressed by workers’ unions and labor activists to enhance the protection of migrant workers. Despite some progress, the national economies of these countries seemed to have failed to improve the domestic job market to stop outmigration. Thus, workers’ continuous overseas work (either in the same place or moving to different destinations) has been described as “forced transnationalism” (Piper and Withers, 2018). There is a situation of double loss: workers are neither able to settle in the destination countries where they have worked for years (most countries in Asia do not allow foreign low-skilled labor to access citizenship, regardless of the number of years they have been there), nor are they able to bring an end to their “overseas journey” and return home for resettlement.

As many have pointed out, migrant workers suffer from structural vulnerabilities. Their precariousness is manifested through the lack of minimum wage policies, the existence of short-term contracts, their manipulation by brokers, and gender-based biases and abuses (Piper and Withers, 2018; Piper, 2006, 2008). International organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have tried to advance “decent work” and other good practices to enhance workers’ welfare. The rights-based approach suggested by academics and labor activists also urges the governments of both receiving and sending countries to improve labor’s basic protection. To support workers’ agency in times of crises, we urge non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and labor organizations to establish strategic partnerships with the governments of both home and destination countries.

In the face of a global public health crisis, receiving governments have no option but to enhance the care and welfare of migrant workers, regardless of their legal status. For example, governments need to collaborate with NGOs to distribute up-to-date, easy-to-access multilingual information about the pandemic situation and public health measures. Cooperation with migrant communities will also help build migrants’ confidence in vaccines and facilitate their access to health programs and medical treatment. In Hong Kong, NGOs played a critical role in providing emergency care and accommodation for abandoned migrant domestic workers who were found to test positive for COVID-19 but had no place to stay (Chan and Piper, in this issue).

ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies), including smartphones, mobile apps, social media, live broadcasting and access to the Internet, become a critical infrastructure for ensuring that migrants stay connected under conditions of social isolation, especially while experiencing lockdowns,
travel bans, forced quarantines and social distancing (Kikkawa et al., 2021). NGOs can also mobilize digital platforms for the purpose of migrant labor activism. For example, in Singapore, the volunteer-run COVID-19 Migrant Support Coalition provides education (including language learning courses), mental health and wellness support, and recreation services for migrants affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Kikkawa et al., 2021). In sum, host governments, local citizens and migrant communities should work together to build a robust society across ethnic lines and maintain a healthy and proactive migrant population.

Sanitized boundaries, migration and development in the era of “sanitization”

The pandemic has impelled us to reflect on many activities we used to consider normal (such as border crossing). It has also forced us to adapt to a normality that can be quite different from before. We are seeing new “sanitized” boundaries being set against the “unclean,” “unfit,” “unworthy” and “unqualified.” We are also witnessing heightened discrimination based on boundaries that divide classes, races and genders. As stressed by Briggs, in times of crisis, social narratives often naturalize socio-economic, sexual and racial biases “as if bacteria and viruses gravitate toward populations and respect social boundaries” (Briggs 2005: 274). Through the construction of risk groups, social discourses of epidemics help exacerbate the exclusion of non-members and intensify stigmatization and discrimination (Wahlberg et al., 2021). As also suggested by the papers in this special issue, migrants, foreigners and minorities have to endure various disadvantageous positions that are aggravated by the pandemic. New (internal and external) borders, such as those illustrated by Lan (in this issue), will begin to bring new hierarchical restrictions as well as openings for migrants. Chan and Piper (in this issue) illustrate the sanitized boundaries in employers’ home spaces, as well as in the society at large, that clearly divide migrant domestic workers and local Hong Kongers. In Japan, ideological differentiation of the cultural capital possessed by Japanese nationals and by foreigners, combined with the imagined lower abilities of the ethnic others in following health protocols, have struck up the old exclusionary attitudes toward foreigners. By adopting a closed-door policy that resembles its historical sakoku approach (Vogt and Qin in this issue), Japan will continue to play out the intersected politics of health securitization, strict immigration control and varied imageries of national biopolitics.

The pandemic has extensively increased state power—both in authoritarian and democratic countries. Some argue that COVID-19 has cemented authoritarianism (Powers-Riggs, 2020). In the name of pandemic control, some governments imposed excessive rules and regulations that have had tremendous impacts on the social order and on people’s lives. In Asia, contact-tracing through mobile devices and ICT technology has also triggered debate
on infringement of privacy and excessive state surveillance. China’s powerful implementation of COVID-19 contact-tracing and its resource-demanding zero-COVID-19 strategy have drawn both admiration and criticism (Lau, 2022). Vogt and Qin (in this issue) consider Japan’s COVID-19 management a kind of authoritarian populism. China and Japan are the two strongest economic powers in Asia. If both of them turn toward isolationist policies in the post-COVID-19 era, this will certainly have a huge effect on the region’s political economy as well as on migration.

Overall, the need to sanitize space and mobility will remain a concern of many states. There is still much uncertainty about the development of COVID-19. What is certain is that the pandemic has inserted a serious element into the field of governance—namely, health security. In the coming era of sanitization, health securitization will intertwine with other policy sectors. In the long run, we foresee that governments, especially those in Asia, will still be cautious about the health risks posed by cross-border movements, bringing changes to migration patterns and pathways (Murzakulova et al., 2021). The scope of influence depends on the strategies of risk control adopted by governments. Movers, migrants and travelers who need to cross borders (both internal and national) are at the same time burdened with extra responsibilities to “sanitize” themselves and provide proofs of their deservingness (Koh, 2022).

The transnationalization of labor and the policy of using workers as development agents will continue to generate unending migration cycles and perpetuate workers’ precarity, exacerbated by the social and health risks involved in migration and overseas work in a time of pandemic. The politics of sanitization will extensively shape migration governance in the short and long term. To reconnect migration and development in the age of sanitization, we urge governments to seriously consider the problems of the migration-led development models and pay attention to the socio-health dimensions of development—i.e., how to achieve equality and sustainability that are linked to the health, well-being, and societal membership of migrants and migrant workers. Although there is no magic solution to eliminate all the obstacles and difficulties, glimpses of good practices have already been cited. It is essential for governments to learn lessons from the pandemic and to cultivate sustainable goals in policy-making processes. Migrant workers provide essential labor and services to hosting societies. These societies need to recognize their contributions and build into the migration infrastructure mechanisms that reduce “shocks” and workers’ vulnerabilities in times of crisis, enhance safe work and safe migration, and respect migrants’ very status as essential members of the society.

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Authors’ note

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