

Working Paper

Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Early Experience of Migration Challenges under the Covid-19 Pandemic

Alan Nicol, Aigoul Abdoubaetova, Alexander Wolters, Arjun Kharel, Asel Murzakolova, Ataklti Gebreyesus, Eugenia Lucasenco, Fengbo Chen, Fraser Sugden, Harald Sterly, Irina Kuznetsova, Matteo Masotti, Matteo Vittuari, Mengistu Dessalegn, Mohamed Aderghal, Neelambari Phalkey, Patrick Sakdapolrak, Peter Mollinga, Roman Mogilevskii and Sapon Naruchaikusol

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Project



This research study was conducted under the project titled AGRUMIG - *'Leaving something behind' - Migration governance and agricultural & rural change in 'home' communities: Comparative experience from Europe, Asia and Africa.*

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Acronyms

AGRUMIG	<i>'Leaving something behind' - Migration governance and agricultural & rural change in 'home' communities: Comparative experience from Europe, Asia and Africa</i>
CAAT	Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand
Covid-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
EUR	Euro
HDI	Human Development Index
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
JSCCIB	Joint Standing Committee on Commerce, Industry and Banking
KGS	Kyrgyzstani Som
KRW	South Korean Won
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NPR	Nepalese Rupee
PDR	People's Democratic Republic
QR	Quick Response
SMS	State Migration Service
THB	Thai Baht
USD	United States Dollar
VAT	Value-added Tax

Executive Summary

Context

The context of global migration has changed dramatically since the beginning of 2020. Both within and between countries there has been a substantial curtailment of movement. As a result of multiple lockdowns, economic activity has severely declined and labor markets have ground to a halt. In mid-2020, the spectre of mass unemployment in industrialized economies loomed on the horizon. For both migrant hosting and origin countries – some are substantially both – this poses a set of complex development challenges.

Some speak of a ‘new normal’ emerging, perhaps with less movement, more use of technology and, overall, a reduction in the global transport system that we have become accustomed to using. However, this suggests that there is suppressed demand to move for work elsewhere as well as a change in the nature of labor markets, particularly those that seek to make profits from large wage differentials within and between countries. There is no apparent evidence that this is yet the case; and an eagerness to work abroad, or in cities, remains the norm among the burgeoning youth in many low- and middle-income economies.

The wider context of economic shock and changes to social systems, including the widely-reported mass movements of people within – and to some extent between – countries, seem to herald a different global migration order. However, it is worth asking whether this is really going to be the case, as many of the country examples in this short report make plain (note: this report was compiled from information available at an early stage of the pandemic). While the coupling of health risks with migrant movement may establish new levels of control and scrutiny, and to some degree attach new stigmas to migration in some contexts, the economic imperative of labor demand and supply at an international level means challenges will probably be overcome.

Findings

The project titled AGRUMIG - ‘*Leaving something behind*’ - *Migration governance and agricultural & rural change in ‘home’ communities: Comparative experience from Europe, Asia and Africa* works in seven countries (China, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Morocco, Nepal and Thailand). All these countries have been severely affected by the rupture in migration patterns. The impacts are a complex of factors related to movement into, within and from countries. Some countries are both sending and receiving migrants, others are predominantly sending. Although many migrant communities have been stranded abroad, and some have been repatriated, or have returned voluntarily, the experience varies enormously. Overall, there would seem to have been in reality little migrant return, not just because of the significant travel barriers in place, but

because some have opted to remain and continue to seek work. In other words, the rupture is in the logistics of movement, rather than in the economic logic of migration.

Where migrants have been left jobless and marooned in host countries, there has been substantial hardship, but little support provided by their countries of origin. Some have eventually been repatriated, but the challenges of abrupt return without substantial resources to fall back on, and the weight of expectation not fulfilled, can be substantial. In some cases, families had invested heavily and accumulated large debts to send family members abroad. For some who remain in host countries, their situation is tenuous and, if informal and ‘ungoverned’ by an official contract, they may be at constant risk of deportation.

At a wider level, there is perhaps a new ‘health nationalism’ emerging, that is both rooted in class perceptions of risk and the ‘othering’ of foreign communities. Being on the outside coming in implies possible exposure to and transmission of the coronavirus. In a certain sense, moreover, governments may not be keen on too many migrants returning, not so much because of infection risk, but because there are no jobs to return to.

Those living in more crowded communities within countries may be stigmatized by association with ‘breaching’ lockdowns – largely out of necessity due to the informal nature of their working environments and the reality of living in higher-density communities. An emerging ‘moralizing discourse’ can stigmatize the inhabitants of working class neighborhoods, where there is greater spread associated with proximity and the need to go about their (often informal) livelihood activities, the accusation being that they are not respecting the ‘rules of confinement’. The rupture is also, therefore, perhaps at a societal level, with additional implications for internal migration in some countries.

Livelihoods. For communities of origin, there are immediate impacts including loss of remittance income. There are other effects too, including the impact of mass quarantining of returnees, with attendant stress on their well-being. It is apparent that in some countries mechanisms of deprivation and differentiation are present as a result of impacts on migration, leading to more entrenched poverty and possibly slippage into deprivation. The opportunity for successful reintegration of returnees varies according to preexisting wealth, as does the impact on households that have lost remittance income. An example are the successful returnees in Kyrgyzstan who had made earlier agricultural investments at home, and who do not plan to migrate again. It is likely that the current situation will push certain categories of people into poverty again. That gaps may increase and differentiation will increase seems a likely scenario.

'Sitting it out' is both a societal and governmental reaction, not least because of the uncertain futures hindering effective planning and responding. It is possible that as a result the larger impacts on (rural) livelihoods are yet to be felt. The sense that these are very early days in this pandemic's economic impact is widely felt, and premature conclusions are therefore risky. The major effects will be felt more when people (and countries) have run out of reserves and stored assets. The likelihood that a number of people will fall into deprivation is high, as also that income gaps will increase as social differentiation progresses.

Governance. Governments are undertaking a range of measures to provide income support and stimulate employment in home areas, mainly related to business entrepreneurship. It is likely that the larger impact on (rural) livelihoods – both impacts of the pandemic and major response measures – may still be round the corner. The longer-term planning options of governments include a stronger focus on agriculture and agro-enterprises, including in China, Moldova and Nepal.

Individuals. Is there evidence of a change in the individual calculus about whether, where and how to migrate? In this early analysis, there seems to be little suggestion that this is yet the case. Currently, there may be a reassessment of risk – particularly related to the likelihood of getting stranded *en route* or in host countries – but there is a lack of definitive data on which to make a clear argument. Part of any calculus change may relate to relative 'transaction' costs of migration, and how these are felt and responded to by different migration groups – from older men to younger women – and, indeed, by those intermediaries responsible for facilitating movement.

Possible Futures

Despite the 'rupture' in migration, there is every indication that structural conditions (e.g., inequalities in access to assets, low employment, import dependence,

etc.) have yet to change and domestic labor markets in agriculture will resume once transport connections have been reestablished. This is likely to lead to continued migration, particularly in countries such as Ethiopia, Nepal, Moldova, Morocco, Thailand and Kyrgyzstan. Nepal seems to have signalled as such in policy through the reissuance of government labor permits from late June 2020. In contrast with Thailand, there have been no changes in how migrants are recruited or in how permits are issued.

Within governance responses, new notions have emerged of 'foreignness' in economic development. The notion of the migrant as someone from elsewhere, and of those from home areas regarded as being 'foreign', distant, etc., may grow. Issues of 'foreignness' and coming from abroad have left some migrants stigmatized and unwelcome in their own countries due to fears of disease transmission, but also because some have returned without income. At the same time, governments are likely to impose more severe conditions on migration, including closer tracking of who is moving where and how.

The restrictions on, or banning of, free movement are likely to be long-lasting and, when relaxed, will be accompanied by stronger control, including tracking and tracing measures utilizing digital innovations and smartphone use. This may have a significant impact on the future governance of migration, including health 'passporting' and other measures involving stronger accounting for, and scrutiny of, movements.

In conclusion, migration and migrants remain high on the development policy agenda. The logic – and individual calculus – of migration has not changed. Damage to economies may in fact trigger greater future movement. The sense that this is a critical juncture to promote discussion and dialogue on migration and development remains strong, yet, so far, this critical development issue has received relatively little attention from the Covid-19 response.

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Introduction

The project titled AGRUMIG - ‘*Leaving something behind*’ - *Migration governance and agricultural & rural change in ‘home’ communities: Comparative experience from Europe, Asia and Africa* works in seven countries (China, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Morocco, Nepal and Thailand). The initial task of the AGRUMIG project was to assess the nature of migration and rural development relationships in these seven countries, and to consider how stronger governance of systems could enhance development benefits and reduce migration risks and uncertainties. This was premised on migration remaining a major feature of the development landscape. As we are now approaching a situation in which an estimated 50% of the global labor force could be unemployed by the end of the year, contributing to a 20% reduction in international remittances (IOM 2020a), the task of understanding linkages and finding ways of governing migration more effectively is probably more important than ever.

This rapid review of evidence emerging from the seven AGRUMIG project countries suggests a wide variety of impacts due to the global Covid-19 pandemic and a range of responses by governments and people. Many of these responses have been abrupt policy shifts, emerging in near real-time as this report was compiled. The purpose of this report, therefore, is not to establish definitive trends and relationships, but rather to quickly collate some of the observed changes and assess their implications for wider policy environments.

Given the unprecedented nature of the current situation, the environment facing migrants and would-be migrants is one of grave uncertainty. Whether there will be a return to

pre-Covid-19 ‘normality’ is a key question, but one that is probably premature to ask. Some evidence from case study countries points to major change, but underlying structural trends and features remain the same. People migrate for work because of huge wage differentials, structural underdevelopment of their local economies including an absence of reliable year-round employment, and for a variety of other cultural and behavioral reasons. At present there is no sense that these conditions have changed. If anything, the work imperative may have increased and the wider global political economy may seek even lower wage economies in future in order to ‘recover growth’.

This was a brief survey carried out by partners of the AGRUMIG project in China, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Morocco, Nepal and Thailand to provide a snapshot of the situation in mid-2020. With so much uncertainty surrounding infection rates and national and international responses to Covid-19, this report should only be read as light assessment, providing some early indications and ‘directions of travel’. Events and impacts will change significantly in coming months as the global economic fallout is felt and systems realign themselves to economic retrenchment and, quite possibly, increased economic nationalism.

Our analysis focused on a set of core questions: What is actually happening? How are migrants responding and how are governments responding? What, if any, are the key sector intersections in relation to livelihoods and development, and what, if any, are the emerging consequences for migration governance? Broadly speaking, the analysis followed the template given in Table 1.

Table 1. Set of core questions used for the analysis.

	What is actually happening?	How are migrants responding?	How are governments responding?	What are the key sector intersections?	What are the emerging consequences for migration governance?
Data	Data on flow of people and remittances Gender disaggregation	New data trends, e.g., migrant returns, repatriations (forced and voluntary)	New policy measures, investments, subsidies	Impacts on inequalities, Human Development Index (HDI), Gini coefficient, etc.	Formal, informal; is there a change in the ‘migration industry’ (e.g., cost ‘per movement’)
Policy	How have policies changed (or been revived)?	What are the new pressures on policy makers?	Strictures, laws (e.g., curbing of informal migration)	Intersectoral policy changes (agriculture, education, health, etc.)	Are policy changes shifting the nature of power to make decisions in particular directions?
Voices	Who is saying what, and why?	Different types of migrants, what are they saying (seasonal, short-term, gender disaggregated, geographical regions, etc.)	Is the government challenged by oppositional politics at any levels on any key issues?	Who is saying what and where; and how much is this in response to others; how do people articulate their own position; is this in political versus economic terms?	Are there voices that are not being allowed to be heard? Are there new voices emerging in debates?

Emerging Evidence

This section presents a summary of the emerging evidence collected rapidly from the AGRUMIG project countries. While not detailing all of the material provided, it draws together some of the common features.

Livelihood Ruptures and Future Challenges

There have been clear impacts on livelihood systems in both rural and urban areas across countries. The background to these impacts can vary widely. In some cases, impacts have been caused by a sudden drop in internal migration to and from urban areas, and between rural areas. This has directly affected rural production systems. In other areas, a slump in remittances is affecting income streams into rural households.

In Ethiopia, reports suggest that many migrants have been unable to send remittances home, either because

of lockdowns and movement restrictions affecting their working situations, or because of direct job losses. This applies across a range of countries, including migrants in the United States where a substantial number of Ethiopians remit income back home to support their families (Samuel 2020). Ethiopian migrants in other countries, also stranded with no work, are now seeking recourse to social safety nets, including in neighboring countries such as Kenya.

In Morocco, there has been a sharp decline in remittances as a result of the pandemic (World Bank 2020a). These remittances include amounts that would have come from seasonal workers in France and Spain, whose movement the government of Morocco opted to stop on health grounds. Some of the gaps in labor markets in European countries have, in part, been filled by employing local labor. Barriers to the harvesting of agricultural goods in Europe may even provide an opportunity for the export of similar products from Morocco.

In addition to job losses of migrants abroad, Covid-19 has resulted in significant loss of employment in Morocco across a range of sectors: 85% in the leather industry, 78% in the tourism sector and more than 70% in the textiles sector (CGEM 2020). It is possible, and perhaps predictable, that these job losses will cause social pressures that further fuel the propensity for migration – perhaps triggering a new wave of migration when movement is restored.

Migration ‘home countries’, including Morocco, can also be destination countries. In the case of Morocco, this includes people from countries in sub-Saharan Africa who are living in Morocco. Many of them have been left destitute and have resorted to begging. Evidence of food availability in urban markets, which are largely supplied by large-scale farms, suggests that this part of the agricultural sector has not suffered from a shortage of labor. However, this is not the case for family farms, which have to compete for labor with large farms (Box 1). This represents another way in which the pandemic situation can further ‘enable differentiation’ of development pathways, with adverse effects felt most by smallholder farmers.

Economic disruptions due to the coronavirus pandemic in Thailand have affected the tourism, production and export sectors, and supply chains. It is estimated the economy could shrink by 3-5% in 2020 and exports decline by 5-10%, according to the Joint Standing Committee on Commerce, Industry and Banking (JSCCIB) (Siring and Thaichareon 2020). The JSCCIB also estimates that some seven million people could lose their jobs as a result.

While Thailand’s social security system covers formal workers who have lost their jobs, it does not cover the 20.4 million informal workers (just over half of all workers), many of whom are migrant workers (Box 2). In a further sign that Covid-19 impacts could include slippage into social deprivation, Covid-19 has reduced the negotiating power of informal workers in relation to their employers. As a result, they might suffer wage and benefit reductions or be required to work harder or longer hours. New graduates or young laborers, particularly in the tourism and service sectors, may be cut off completely from the labor market (Tancharoenpol 2020).

Box 1. Labor and Fruit Production in Morocco.

In the fruit production areas of the Middle Atlas and Upper Moulouya regions of Morocco, restrictions on the mobility of agricultural workers were initially strict and farmers had difficulty finding farm workers; and buyers of standing crops became scarce. Many farms appealed to family and community solidarity at the village level to get agricultural and harvesting work done. With the approach of deconfinement, controls were relaxed within administrative districts, which made it possible for farmers to call on labor available in their locations.

Source: AGRUMIG project team in Morocco.

Box 2. Thai Workers in South Korea.

South Korea is among the top five migration destinations for Thai workers, due to its higher wages and visa exemption. However, only 57,470 of the 209,909 Thai workers working in South Korea are legal migrants. Many Thai workers travel to South Korea as tourists and overstay, taking up work illegally. During the initial Covid-19 outbreak in South Korea in December 2019, illegal Thai workers were given an opportunity to voluntarily leave, regardless of the length of their illegal stay, without having to pay a fine (KRW 20 million, EUR 14,800) and be blacklisted (a ban of up to 10 years). This amnesty began on December 11, 2019, and continued until June 30, 2020. In early March 2020, the South Korea Immigration Office reported that 5,386 Thai workers had voluntarily gone home. South Korea announced a temporary halt to visa exemptions for Thais from April 13, 2020, as part of measures to stop Covid-19 cases from entering the country. However, there are some concerns regarding the Korean amnesty. Illegal migrants are required to register and fill out information such as recent job, address, number of workers, etc. Some feel this information might be used for searching and banning illegal migrants in future. While Thailand’s Ministry of Labour has initiated a relief package for returnees from South Korea and other countries, it is available only to legal migrants who are members of the Overseas Workers Fund (which gives them THB 15,000 as compensation after a 14-day state or home quarantine). Illegal migrants have no access to this package. The Department of Employment has identified over 81,562 domestic jobs for returnees from overseas. The Department of Skill Development is aiming at upskilling or reskilling 30,000 returnees.

Source: AGRUMIG project team in Thailand.

According to the Thai government, Thai migrants overseas are in Central and East Asia (96,486), the Middle East (25,514), and the remainder in Europe and the United States. On return they are quarantined for 14 days and required to get a medical certificate and entry approval from the Royal Thai Embassy or Consulate. On entering Thailand, another 14 days of state quarantine are required. With the onset of the pandemic, some seasonal labor migrants – including wild berry-pickers travelling to Finland and Sweden – cancelled their trips. Remittances from Thai migrants have significantly decreased due to a number of reasons including loss of jobs, reduced hours, curtailment of overtime and reduced wages.

In China, the number of unemployed workers has increased, and rural laborers have been getting fewer days of work due to the government's Covid-19 prevention and control measures. After the Spring Festival in late January, many migrant workers in Guangdong, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Beijing and Shanghai postponed their return to work by more than two weeks. Overall, the number of returning migrant workers has dropped significantly (Sang 2020). Migrant farm workers have declined by about 3.5 million (Ye et al. 2020). An estimated 60% of migrant workers have not been able to return to work because of the epidemic (Lu et al. 2020). Income loss has varied by province, but in the worst-hit Hubei province, the more than 10 million migrant workers there were unable to work for at least a month. Short-term losses have been significant, with knock-on effects for rural residents dependent on income received from elsewhere.

Depending on the host country, an estimated 10-30% of Nepalese migrant workers are expected to lose their jobs as a result of the Covid-19 impact, according to the Nepal Association of Foreign Employment Agencies. Livelihood insecurity as a result of Covid-19 has already grown, with 10% of households in a recent World Food Programme survey (WFP and MoALD 2020) reporting loss of livelihood and 30% reporting loss of income.

Food insecurity is particularly high for those with marginal holdings or those who are tenant farmers. Normally, migration-related income would cover the food needs of these people for part of the year. Most Covid-19 assistance from the government, it was reported, came in the form of food aid (nearly 70%). In Nepal's far west, agricultural livelihoods are structurally dependent upon seasonal migration to India, which makes up for shortfalls in food once grain stocks are depleted. Any closure of the border with India can therefore have a devastating impact. Many workers have already returned from India due to loss of jobs and the Indian lockdown.

Return migration from the Persian Gulf countries has been lower, partly because of transport restrictions. Those who were about to migrate have had to stay put, and some who lost their jobs or are undocumented are in the process of being repatriated. For some Nepalese women returnees, there is an additional social stigma attached

to having migrated, which can cause difficulties when reintegrating back into Nepali communities. In addition, there are differences in accessing credit or financial services once back, due to gender biases (ILO 2016).

To assist the economy in Nepal, the government has offered a 20% rebate on income tax for the fiscal year 2076/77 (Nepali calendar). In addition, the value-added tax (VAT) return submission period for the Tourism Sector and Freight Service is now also reduced. Other support measures have been put in place for telecommunications and the import of raw materials for the medicines industry.

In Moldova, small agricultural producers have been affected in two main ways: agricultural activity was forbidden in villages under lockdown, and access to markets was limited due to the restrictions imposed. The most-affected were small farmers who could not reach local markets and had no other means to sell their products, including direct delivery to consumers. To help ameliorate this, the Ministry of Agriculture, Regional Development and Environment developed a web-based platform to help small farmers sell their products. While reflecting the pandemic's potential to serve as a deprivation and differentiation mechanism, this indicates that the current economic crisis could also serve as a trigger for innovations in market and producer behavior.

For migrants from Kyrgyzstan, mainly to Russia, the pandemic-triggered reduction in global demand for oil and the resulting fall in oil prices negatively affected Russia's economy and, by extension, the demand for labor. For many migrants this meant either complete loss of employment or reduction in wages (Box 3). As a result, it is estimated that remittance inflows from Russia to Kyrgyzstan fell by 62% in April 2020 compared to the same period in 2019 (ADB and UNDP 2020, p. 61)

Some Kyrgyz migrants have been able to overcome the current challenges as they had previously invested their remittances in productive ventures at home, such as farming and construction. According to one migrant interviewed: "I did not save money while I was migrating. I immediately sent everything home, and built a house here. We used to live in a temporary hut before. Everything that I learned in Russia, I use here in a village, on a construction site. If you work in the village, you can earn." (pers. comm. interview conducted with former migrant in Jashtyk community, Batken, Kyrgyzstan, April 15, 2020).

Some of the livelihood ruptures caused by Covid-19 suggest income differentiation is increasing. Some returnees have displayed resilience, such as the individual above, and can chart a successful livelihood on their return. However, the crisis has pushed many households with fewer assets and less access to alternative livelihoods into deprivation, not least because of the heavy investment and indebtedness that may have been

Box 3. Challenges in the Russian Federation.

According to Abdusattor Esoev, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) chief of mission in the Russian Federation, 60% of migrants in the country were unable to pay their rent in mid-May, and more than 40% could not afford food; “Millions of people are teetering on the brink,” he said. The pandemic situation made 30-50% of labor migrants from Central Asia unemployed (DW 2020). Considering that informal labor is still very common in Russia, people have not received any compensation after redundancies (Novaya Gazeta 2020). Difficulties of paying rent have pushed many of them into debt. Thousands of migrants were stuck at Russian airports.

Source: AGRUMIG project team in Kyrgyzstan.

required to assist migration in the first place – particularly in countries such as Ethiopia and Nepal where households take on loans to pay significant upfront fees to middlemen or recruitment agents. An intensified cycle of poverty may then emerge, impacting both returnees who have no source of income, and households for which foreign remittances were a crucial part of securing food and other essentials.

It is worth noting that the more urban presence of Covid-19 – and the reporting on it – is a feature of the disease in some countries, imparting, perhaps, an urban bias to debates on its economic impact. This is not surprising perhaps given the high rates of infection associated with proximity between individuals in densely populated areas. However, in Morocco this has meant that, by and large, the countryside as a socio-spatial category has become invisible during the pandemic. According to the High Commission for Planning, in May, some 86% of cases had occurred in the most urbanized areas of Morocco’s Atlantic coast, where industrial, service and commercial activities are concentrated. Government responses have largely been tailored to the urban situation, recognizing that in these working class neighborhoods and shanty towns unsanitary conditions and overcrowding can prevail, assisting the spread of the virus (HCP 2020a, 2020b). For some in these low-income areas, the choice is, however, as stark as ‘coronavirus or starvation’. As noted by one author (Gilbert 2020), “Because of the various inequalities which affect them – health, housing, work and transport – households and working class neighborhoods are particularly exposed to the virus and ultimately risk paying a very high price for the pandemic.”

There are important ways in which any urban bias in responding to Covid-19 may be a problem. These include possibly creating policy misfits with rural areas, but also somewhat blindly ignoring the very many rural-urban

linkages that exist, including in terms of seasonal and other migration patterns.

Systems Stalling and Under Stress

Established migration systems are being severely tested by the Covid-19 pandemic. There is a lack of transport, increasingly complex border procedures are evolving (where borders are open at all), and travel costs are rising – quite steeply in many cases. In some destinations, migrants are stranded – both out of work and lacking access to any financial assistance.

In Ethiopia, well-established migration systems – formal and informal – have declined rapidly (Box 4). Early indications suggest a drop of at least 15% in remittances due to Covid-induced job losses in Western and Gulf State labor markets and repatriation of workers from these regions (UN 2020).

According to recent data, there have been a number of returnees to Ethiopia from countries in the Middle East and elsewhere in East Africa. However, the numbers cited – some 16,400 from April to mid-June 2020 (IOM 2020b) – suggest only a small percentage of migrants abroad have returned. Given the large drop in remittances, this suggests many are still in the destination countries, suffering a severe depletion in their income.

Some of the Ethiopian migrants have returned as a result of deportations from countries such as Saudi Arabia (Getachew 2020). In Lebanon, the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated an already catastrophic economic situation in that country, which led to Ethiopian domestic workers being thrown out of households and left with no assistance (Rose 2020; Ethiopian Monitor 2020; El Deeb 2020).

Box 4. Ethiopia’s Eastern Migration Route.

One of the busiest migratory routes is the one connecting the Horn of Africa to the Middle East through the Gulf of Aden. More than 90% of migrants crossing this route to work in Yemen come from the Amhara, Oromia and Tigray regions of Ethiopia. Following border closures related to Covid-19, the number of migrants using this route declined sharply, recording just 1,725 arrivals in Yemen in April 2020, compared to 11,101 in January, 9,634 in February and 7,223 in March (Rodríguez 2020).

The wider systems challenge in relation to migration and Covid-19 contains a key element of the AGRUMIG project: the link between migrant return and their reintegration into economies and societies. In Ethiopia, the experience of previous mass deportations from Saudi Arabia in 2013 and 2014 was particularly difficult (Dessalegn 2019). Reintegration in the current situation is compounded by difficult quarantine processes that migrants have to observe upon returning. In Ethiopia, a mandatory 14-day quarantine was imposed in late March, and reports from quarantine centers suggest that unsanitary conditions in some cases may even contribute to infections (ECC 2020).

After release from quarantine, migrants may face returning to their home areas without any accumulated income. Reports indicate some returnees may feel guilty about returning empty-handed, not least because of the substantial loans households may have taken to finance migration abroad (Wuilbercq 2020). In such situations, the challenge of slippage into deprivation may arise, not just for the migrant, but his or her whole household. The incentive remains, therefore, to 'bounce back' and migrate again, perhaps taking greater risks than before.

In Nepal, an estimated quarter of a million migrants out of some four million working abroad are reported to want to return. Only 3.8% of the recent returnee migrants are women. Most returnees work in construction (28.4%), agriculture, forestry and fishing (20%), and wholesale, retail, repair and motor vehicles (14%) (Government of Nepal 2020). Recent reports suggest that not only have a large number of migrant workers lost their employment status abroad due to Covid-19 impacts, some 115,000 whose labor permits had already been issued by the government could not travel due to pandemic restrictions such as suspension of international flights out of Nepal.

Not only have flows of people stalled, but goods and services too. In Dhanusha in the Terai region of Nepal (Box 5), people have had to take loans to buy food

supplies, or have borrowed rice from landowners. Before the lockdown, cheaper products from India were available, but now people are having to buy more expensive local goods. Local business owners, forced to comply with lockdown regulations, have suffered severely curtailed retail opportunities.

According to a community member in Dhanusha, some migrant workers have been unable to repay the loans they had taken for migration or land purchases; some have had to borrow from moneylenders to meet their daily expenses. The chairman of a municipal ward committee said, "Families without migrant members are only worried about their livelihoods. However, those with a family member abroad are worried about their livelihoods as well as about the migrant member, and keep worrying about their return." In other parts of Nepal, feminization of agricultural production as a consequence of male migration has left women especially vulnerable, including by impacting non-farm rural livelihoods, with local market closures preventing the sale of goods. The concern of some people was less the immediate-term impact, but rather the long-term implications of the crisis continuing.

Kyrgyz migrants were both locked into their home country after returning over the winter, and stranded in Russia. At the end of April, figures suggested that 6,000 had returned from Russia while 10,000 were still seeking to return. This situation also posed the related challenge of migrants returning with Covid-19 to health systems that were already overstretched. Hundreds of migrants from Kyrgyzstan were stuck at the borders. The government responded by providing food and shelter for those in extreme need and those stranded at Russian airports, including working with international organizations such as IOM, which launched their own international appeals to support migrants from across Central Asia and the Russian Federation. The government also set up a migrant support fund of KGS 15 million¹ to support Kyrgyz migrants abroad.

Box 5. Quarantine Uncertainties in Nepal.

In one ward of Bideha Municipality in Dhanusha, 29 people have returned – 28 from India and one from Qatar. The returnees from different parts of India, including Maharashtra (Mumbai), Punjab and Gujarat (Surat) were sent, straight from the border, to a quarantine facility in Janakpur. The chairman of the municipal ward said there was fear that the returning migrants would go directly to their villages without undergoing any test for the coronavirus. He said 40 people were mobilized to ensure that migrants were taken to quarantine first. Four out of the 29 returnees tested positive for the coronavirus and were undergoing hospital treatment. He said some internal migrants too returned from Pokhara and Kathmandu, but since it was before the virus had started to spread, they were not sent to quarantine. Some migrants who had returned from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Malaysia one or two months earlier too did not have to stay in quarantine. These workers came for their holidays and have not been able to return due to lockdown in those countries. In some communities, there were concerns about the lack of testing of people in quarantine before allowing them to return home.

Source: AGRUMIG project team in Nepal.

¹ USD 1 was equivalent to about KGS 10 in November 2020.

In many cases, travel bans have affected the physical capacity of migrants to return. Ethiopian Airlines suspended flights to some 30 destinations as part of the government's Covid-19 response, including to key worker destinations in the Persian Gulf countries. This accompanied bans by countries on immigration from Ethiopia, including into Saudi Arabia, a key destination (Zelalem 2020). This has had a direct impact on the migration system, only two years after a ban on overseas labor migration had been lifted (Dessalegn et al. 2020).

In Thailand, according to lockdown and social distancing measures, the government has a limited quota for entry into the country over the land border. Migrants confront other risks of infection at the border and bear additional costs for food and accommodation. This has resulted in a significant number of illegal entries across the land borders, especially between Thailand and Malaysia. In Moldova, all regular flights were cancelled in late March, and only charter flights were allowed, including those arranged to bring people based abroad back home.

The sense of migration systems stalling and under stress is evident across all seven AGRUMIG project countries, but to varying degrees, not least because they are so different geographically, socially and economically. The challenge for longer-term development is that these system stresses are triggering possibly longer-term structural changes in societies and rural economies. This includes deepening deprivation and increasing vulnerability.

Governance Responses and Future Uncertainties

Given the impact on migration systems and the resulting livelihoods insecurity, there are new governance uncertainties affecting migration. These uncertainties are a result of both the (probably temporary) rupture in migration systems and possible changes in the calculus people apply toward migration decision-making – such as ‘what is the net benefit versus risk for me’; ‘how far and for how long should I move’; and whether people will move at all beyond their home country, or rather choose internal migration now that the stakes have changed in terms of international movement.

In common with other governments, Ethiopia's initial response was to ban overcrowded public transport (halving the numbers of passengers that could be carried locally and nationally), as well as halting the movement of people across the country's borders (Ethiopian Health Data 2020), and imposing a mandatory quarantine. The border closures immediately restricted the movement of migrants, leaving some stranded en route to and from their destinations (Rodríguez 2020).

To prevent return may not be a governance strategy in many countries, but in the present circumstances, amidst the complicated and potentially serious economic circumstances in which countries find themselves, a massive return of migrants from abroad is potentially problematic. This sheds further light on the reality that migration is an essential part of national economic ‘strategies’, though it may not be formally stated as such.

In some cases, the immediate effect of resource diversion to tackle Covid-19 has been a reduction in support for migration agencies. In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, the State Migration Service budget was reduced by over 18% between 2019 and 2020 as a result of Covid-19. It is possible, though no evidence has been presented, that similar situations may exist in other countries, where migration assistance programs and budgets are squeezed as a result of new development priorities – just at a time when demand for them is likely to be greatest.

In the case of Moldova, the number of migrants returning as a consequence of the pandemic is estimated not to have been high. Destination countries provided (or extended) residence and working permits to migrants who decided not to return to their home countries. Sometimes, when migrants decided to return, in particular women in the care sector, they then migrated again to another country in the European Union or Russia.

The Kyrgyzstan ambassador to the Russian Federation stated, “More than 60% of Kyrgyzstani citizens in Russia were unemployed during Covid-19. At the same time there are jobs in construction. There are offers of employment in the Moscow region and in other regions. The Russian economy is stronger and more stable than ours. After quarantine, the economic crisis will continue around the world. I advised our countrymen to wait for the crisis here [to be over] and not to go anywhere.”² This admission that home economies can still not (and are even less likely now to be able to) provide employment for large segments of the population was stark, and probably reflects opinion in other countries with substantial outmigration populations.

The institutional crisis management involved in responding at national levels to the Covid-19 migration challenge includes examples of cross-institutional working, as in the case of the rapid-response group set up under the MFA in Kyrgyzstan, bringing together the State Migration Service (SMS), IOM, Ministry of Internal Affairs and leaders of the Kyrgyz diaspora in Russia (pers. comm. interviews conducted with a representative from IOM Bishkek, June 17, 2020 [online]). This tighter networking around migration in response to Covid-19 could be one important avenue for strengthening the overall national

² Interview with Azattyk, April 23, 2020 (<https://rus.azattyk.org/a/30571881.html>).

governance of migration systems, and could form a focus for AGRUMIG project working groups in respective countries, namely how to transition from crisis-response networking to longer-term cross-sector and cross-institutional work on migration.

In China, the government's strategy in response to the virus was termed 'foreign defence importation and internal defence rebound'. This focused on prevention and control of the disease spread in China, including tackling epidemic 'hot spot' clusters, as well as promoting the resumption of production by sector and caring for overseas Chinese citizens.

From the end of April there was resumption in economic activity, accompanied by widespread support measures by the government to stimulate economic activity (e.g., consumption vouchers). The Covid-19 impact on agriculture was substantial, not least because of its occurrence during the planting and breeding season, its impact on the mobility of migrant workers and the poor protection conditions prevalent in rural areas (Ye et al. 2020). Its impact on the grain industry, for example early season rice in parts of southwestern China, was considerable (Zhong et al. 2020) because spring cultivation requires substantial labor for planting, fertilizer and pesticide application, and operation of farm machinery. It was reported that more than half of the service providers could not function normally during this period (Lu et al. 2020). The result included shortages of fertilizer leading to price rises from late February onward (Song et al. 2020). In addition, wholesale food prices of different products rose; for example, pork product prices increased by 7.8%, japonica rice by 9.6% and soybean by 8.5%.

The impact on transportation fuelled a price rise in some places, but a decline in others, including for pork. There was a shortage in the south and a glut in the north of the country. Prices have also been severely affected by low demand for fresh products due to the closure of roads, businesses and markets which have affected supply and demand during what is normally the peak consumption season (Wei and Lu 2020).

China's measures in response to Covid-19 have included speeding up economic reconstruction, including guaranteeing food supplies for essential products. Other measures include streamlining and simplifying government approval processes and promoting online tools to help stimulate economic activity (Box 6). Many of the measures are aimed at maintaining food supplies to urban areas, and securing the sustainability of rural production mechanisms.

In Nepal, the response has been two-pronged: first, diplomatic channels were used to secure current migrant jobs in destination countries; and second, efforts have been made to create a conducive environment for generating self-employment in commercial agriculture and the restaurant sector, take up infrastructure projects and implement the Prime Minister's Employment Programme, a 100-day informal employment scheme (Box 7).

In Thailand, authorities imposed a lockdown in Bangkok and adjacent provinces in late March, resulting in an outflow of migrant workers from Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR) and Myanmar. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that at least 260,000 legal migrant workers have returned to their home country, but may not include those who have returned unofficially (ILO 2020). By the end of May only around 14,728 Thais had been repatriated from abroad. For the informal migrant workers who remain, one challenge is that they cannot afford Covid-19 testing and treatment, due to the costs involved and the fear of arrest by authorities (Box 8). The Ministry of Finance offered a special scheme of financial relief for informal workers (counting about 14 million people) of some THB 5,000 a month for three months, aiming to relieve the financial burden caused by Covid-19. The Ministry of Labour introduced a raft of other measures to help boost the skills of unemployed informal workers, and to boost their liquidity. For official migrant workers in Thailand from Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar, in order to reduce their movement back home, the Thai government approved the extension of work permits up to the end of November, and provided exemptions from overstay penalties (World Bank 2020b).

Box 6. The Quick Response (QR) Health Code in China.

In February, Hangzhou City in Zhejiang Province took the lead in launching the health code model to manage the entry of people into Hangzhou. People planning to enter the city apply online, and after a review of their health information, are given a color code (green, yellow or red). Only someone with a green code can pass into the city, whereas those with yellow or red codes need to follow rules for isolation, and are converted to a green code only when certain conditions are met. The idea of the health code is to achieve an efficient flow of people, enabling resumption of production and other activities, as well as avoiding excessive contact and gatherings. Those who have to home isolate are quarantined in their place of residence and their temperature is measured daily. During isolation they cannot participate in gatherings or group activities. After two weeks of isolation, if there are no symptoms, they are then allowed to continue.

Source: AGRUMIG project team in China.

Box 7. Nepal's Diverse Policy Responses.

Nepal's government has a number of initiatives that support migrant returnees. These include:

Recognizing skills and providing soft loans: Loans of a million Nepalese rupees (USD 8,908) are given for business development to people who returned in the past three years. A skill verification test is required.

Youth and Small Enterprise Self-Employment Scheme: Aimed at unemployed youth, this scheme offers collateral-free loans of up to NPR 200,000 (USD 1,745) for enterprise establishment (e.g., rickshaw).

Returnee Migrants Entrepreneurship Award Program: This provides certificates of recognition and monetary incentives. Sector engagement in 2019 was with poultry farming, metal industries, animal husbandry, garment manufacturing and vegetable farming.

Migrants, agriculture and land management: Under this program, migrants can engage in agriculture via a 'land bank' with investment capital of USD 4.13 million. One challenge, however, is the often large gap between the skills acquired in the more advanced economies and the opportunities to adapt them to Nepal, where mechanization and industrialization is far more limited. Other challenges include difficulties in obtaining loans without collateral. Some note that many migrants will not necessarily wish to return to agriculture, having changed their lifestyles while abroad.

Source: AGRUMIG project team in Nepal.

Box 8. Stringent Controls for Thai Returnees.

The Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand (CAAT) announced that Thais wishing to return to their country must present two documents to the airline: a medical certificate and a travel certificate issued by the Embassy or Consulate General of Thailand within 72 hours of departure, a so-called 'fit to fly' certificate. To get such a certificate, migrants have to show proof of their 14-day quarantine including location of hotel, their reservation, or house registration to the airline. Requesting such a certificate in many foreign countries is not easy. In addition, the cost of an additional 14-day quarantine prior to travel and medical certification have created additional burdens and costs, particularly for migrants who have just finished their working contracts. They receive no support or extra compensation from either employer or government, and they must cover all extra costs on their own.

Source: AGRUMIG project team in Thailand.

Reacting to the large number of returnees due to Covid-19, the Ministry of Labour in Thailand intends to improve its database on overseas Thai migrants and informal workers, to improve monitoring and management during a crisis. The ministry also plans to expand the labor migrant quota under bilateral agreements with major destination countries such as Taiwan and South Korea and to reduce the amount of irregular or illegal migration, with a view to increasing the numbers of Thai migrants who can access social security and other benefits from Thailand and destination countries.

Overall, the Thai government has devolved responsibility for screening and regulating the home quarantine of returnees. Health volunteers monitor the health of returnees from countries such as South Korea, China, Malaysia and Indonesia and from areas at high risk of infection within Thailand. Returnees must report to the

village head of health volunteers for a 14-day quarantine at home or in community facilities.

Back to Normality or Something Different?

At a global level, the desire to 'act together' has always existed but did not translate into the Global Compact for Migration until September 2016. The Pact is supposed to offer "an opportunity to improve governance in the area of migration and to face the challenges associated with today's migration, and to strengthen the contribution of migrants and migration to sustainable development". The agenda for its implementation has now been 'disturbed' by the Covid-19 crisis. However, perhaps it is more relevant than ever. Arguably now is the time for the Pact to show its mettle (Box 9).

Box 9. Future of the Global Compact for Migration.

“This year is supposed to be about bringing the compact from paper to reality. For the first time, states will come together for a regional review in the second half of 2020 to present and share progress on the national action plan. These meetings offer a change to demonstrate the relevance of the compact at a time when the pandemic presents a common challenge to states across the migration continuum. However, governments may have a difficult time bringing attention to the meetings or moving to implementation of tangible compact deliverables at a time they face more pressing domestic concerns. Overhanging all this is the knowledge that the political price to enact the compact was extremely steep for some states and may now have been for naught if the agreement fails to deliver on its ambitions.”

Source: Kainz 2020.

Perhaps the biggest question is whether the pre-existing migration system can or should return to ‘normality’? The Global Compact was an attempt to do things differently, but was non-binding on countries. Indications are that the wider systemic drivers of migration remain intact, and may even be stronger than before.

Poverty-induced migration may increase even as the economic capacity to absorb migrants is likely to be challenged. Interviews with migrants in Kyrgyzstan revealed that many perceive the current crisis as temporary and expect removal of restrictions on movement this autumn. This may be a feeling shared widely among prospective migrants across the AGRUMIG project countries.

Concerns about the situation clearly vary with household type – no migrant household is the same – as do coping strategies. In Kyrgyzstan, households with more diversified income sources are less concerned, while households more heavily dependent on remittances have begun to reduce their expenditure. “Those who could not leave, because of closed borders, joined the sowing works, but as soon as it is completed, and the borders will open again, they all will leave.” (pers. comm. Interview conducted with householder, Jany-Jer Ayil Aimak community, Batken, March 18, 2020).

In some areas of Nepal, particularly where there is high outmigration to India, people will ‘re-migrate’ sooner or later, some argue. One informant stated: “This situation has definitely compelled people to think. They might not migrate with the whole family now, and some might stay behind to cultivate fallow land.” Another key informant who had returned from India said, “The menial jobs do not pay well here and the government has not made any effort to make the environment favorable for business and investment. So, the last alternative is always India... [some of his friends] have said they will do something in their own village. They have said that they will do livestock farming with new techniques. However, they will go back to India after the situation improves.” Another suggested that after the lockdown is eased, it depends on how the government negotiates with labor-importing

countries. “They can earn at least NPR 30,000-40,000 a month if they migrate. Doing agricultural work [in Nepal] will only earn them NPR 5,000-10,000 a month.” This implies that the compelling economic logic for migration has not dissipated. But the assumption of better earning opportunities abroad may be affected by the upcoming global slump. Importantly, for those with marginal holdings, migration to India is the only way to meet shortfalls, and therefore a migrant’s position within the agrarian structure is likely to be significant in shaping future migration decisions.

As migration is so entrenched and embedded in existing inequalities, it is doubtful that the Covid-19 crisis will stop migration. Perhaps some who are better off may be able to stay on the land and identify opportunities. However, a large-scale change in migration flows is not anticipated. For instance, in early July, the Nepali government restarted the issuance of labor permits, in anticipation of a resumption in travel to key countries.

In Thailand, many unemployed (internal) workers who returned home as a result of Covid-19 are looking for an opportunity to work abroad, particularly in South Korea, after the pandemic situation improves. They will try to go to the chosen destination either through an official channel or via irregular migration. In Moldova, the government has instituted new controls over the compulsory purchase of health insurance by returnee migrants. Previously, although this was a requirement, it was not enforced. The links between migration and health may become stronger and feature more fully in future migration governance decision-making. Countries may have to establish systems that can prove their citizens travelling for work are ‘virus free’.

One of the apparent challenges is the effect of the pandemic on stigmatizing migrants. This can be through negative association-building between movement and the epidemiology of Covid-19. As described in the context of Morocco, there is a new discourse on ‘us’ (people living in the country, including foreigners) and ‘others’ (living abroad, including Moroccans) – the political border becoming a new ‘line in the sand’ for health identity.

Implications for Future Research

The observed policy responses to Covid-19 seem to fall into three categories: (i) emergency measures to tackle disease transmission that affect capacity for movement (from, within and between home and destination areas); (ii) emergency financial and economic measures to tackle home and destination economic problems that result from the rapid decline in economic activity; and (iii) longer-term structural readjustments in economic and social/health policy.

A secondary set of important changes relate to the control side of migration, including the use of digital tracking and greater combining of individual health data with movement, including via health tracking apps. Presaging perhaps a greater role for the state in tracking individuals – including those who migrate – this has implications for both the use of data by states and, potentially, the safety of migrants themselves. In future, this may have potential influence over wider systems of migration governance.

From this rapid study, preliminary analysis suggests there is no simple narrative on what is happening, but that amidst the confusion and range of responses, some new, potentially complex phenomena are emerging. These may include changes to perceptions of migrants in relation to health which, though not known, has become a more mainstream concern of populations. In addition, how migrants (and those surrounding them who may be investing in their movement) perceive ‘risk and reward’ in making migration decisions. This may shape where and how people choose to migrate with knock-on effects on systems and, to some extent, the wider ‘migration industry’.

Migration is associated with remittance income. The rupture in repatriation of remittances, and of future remittance flow potential, has had a deeper impact on households heavily reliant on remittances for capacity to access food markets. These market relationships will be heavily affected in the near-term and, depending on future migration ‘normalization’, may have longer-lasting consequences.

While analysis suggests that migration is a necessity more than a choice, the post-pandemic situation (assuming one arises) will present a different set of economic opportunities where the demand for and type of labor required may change. This suggests the need to shape future research questions in new ways as the AGRUMIG project tackles the new situation. A key part of the narrative will be the intersection of health and migration in new ways, how states control and manage data on migration and assess risk, and lastly, how the ‘migration calculus’ by individuals in particular circumstances may change.

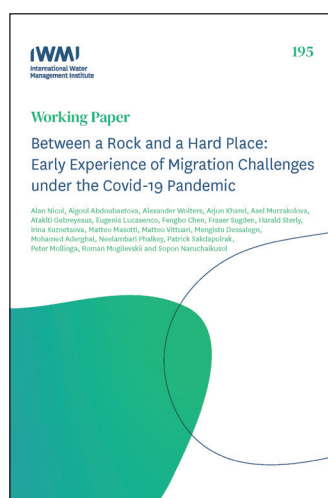
Some of this suggests a future with the potential for greater risk and exploitation, and a stronger gap between formal and informal migration, in particular risk where ‘ungoverned’ routes and processes may be associated with crowded spaces and unsanitary conditions. Furthermore, a greater polarization in migration processes may emerge before international deliberation and rule-making catches up, within an international environment that has possibly become more rather than less fragmented as nationalism(s) overtake collective action in tackling the pandemic.

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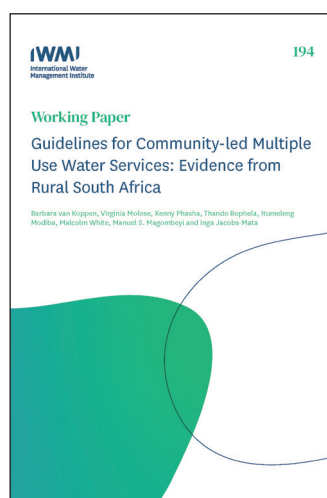
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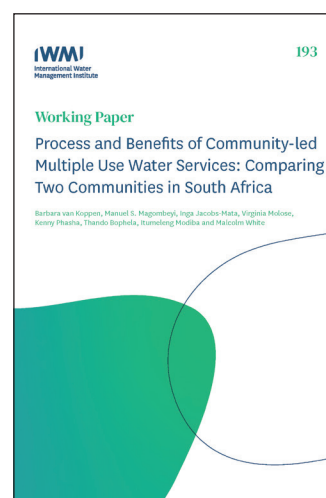
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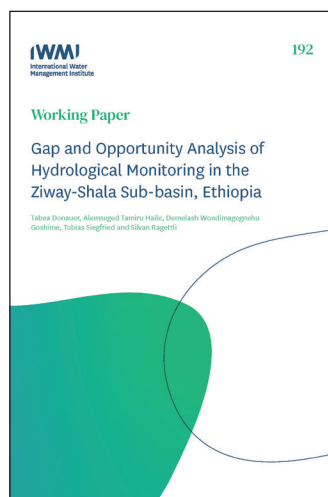
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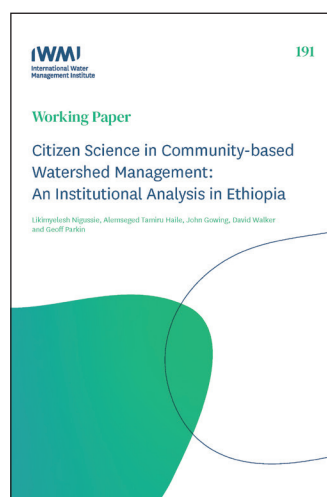
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