

Event Report

Labour Mobility and Global Health Governance in Asia

Date and Times

- 9:00 – 11:30 (CET)
- 13:30 – 16:00 (IST)
- 16:00 – 18:30 (SGT)
- 17:00 – 19:30 (JST)

Contagious viral diseases had affected the Asian continent in the past, yet the COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the region. Disrupted travel and business connections have highlighted the vulnerability of global health governance and international labour migration in the region. The region lacked a clear and effective leadership in the pandemic, as the WHO's role as a global health organisation came under increasing pressure and international public health has become an arena of heavy contestation between global powers. Consequently, countries in the region have dealt with COVID-19 differently, even though personal health security has become a transnational issue in a region that relies heavily on migrant workers. Current policies were not designed with pandemics of this scale in mind, and their defects are showing.

In the conference '**Labour Mobility and Global Health Governance in Asia**', authors and experienced experts discussed these issues by examining how global health governance and international labour migration in Asia have evolved during public health crises- specifically, by looking at how different countries in Asia have tackled COVID-19 through policy adjustments, how legitimacy was affected, and how public perceptions have changed. In doing so, this conference aimed at explaining the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and discussing what needs to be done in the future to avoid similar disasters.

The conference was co-organised by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS), the Leiden Asia Centre (LAC), and the IAFOR Research Centre at Osaka School of International Public Policy (IRC) and held online on 4 November 2021. In conjunction with the conference, KAS, LAC and IRC are publishing an open-access volume that examines how global health governance and international labour migration in Asia have developed during public health crises.

The conference was opened by **Dr Florian Schneider**, Director of the Leiden Asia Centre (University of Leiden) and **Ms Cris Perez**, Senior Programme Manager of the Regional Economic Programme Asia (SOPAS, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung). The speakers emphasised the importance of researching the timely issue and sharing the gained knowledge with the wider public. They also brought attention to the fact that when dealing with the pandemic, countries need to pay attention to migrants, who belong

to the highly vulnerable sector of our societies. The opening remarks were closed with the wish that this conference and the upcoming publication would help us develop a deeper understanding of the current situation and support the move towards a better future.

The keynote speech was given by **Dr Toshiya Hoshino**, Professor of the Osaka School of International Public Policy (Osaka University, Japan) and Former Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative of Japan to the United Nations in New York. Defining human security as ‘protecting all human lives from critical and pervasive threats and situations in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfilment’, he framed the COVID-19 pandemic as a human security crisis. He argued that although solidarity is what is most needed during the crisis, major power rivalries have undermined the UN’s credibility. He also highlighted that equity, which is expressed by the quote, ‘no one is safe until all is safe’, should be the building block for a robust universal health coverage (UHC) system and that this system should involve all parties, including migrant workers. The keynote speech was concluded by the prospect that Asia -a diverse and dynamic region- can be a good starting point to build resilience in the field of health under the notion of UHC and achieve better global health governance.

The first panel, ‘**COVID-19 and the Future of Labour Mobility and Health in Asia**’, looked at how COVID-19 had changed and shaped the future of labour mobility in the region. The panel was composed of the following experts:

- **Dr Pei-Chia Lan**, Distinguished Professor in Department of Sociology and Director of Global Asia Research Center (National Taiwan University, Taiwan)
- **Dr Gabriele Vogt**, Professor for Japanology and Director of Asia Studies Department (Ludwig-Maximilians University Munich, Germany)
- **Mr Shabarinath Nair**, Labour Migration Specialist of ILO Decent Work Technical Support Team (DWT, International Labour Organization)

It was moderated by **Mr Sjoerd den Daas**, Correspondent for China of Nederlandse Omroep Stichting (NOS). The panel mainly presented case studies of the situation of migrant workers in Taiwan, Japan, and South Asia. The following are the highlights of the panel discussion:

- The search for decent work is the main motivation of migrant workers. The notion of decent work for a migrant worker includes the following aspects: (1) social protection, (2) productive employment, (3) labour standards that adequately cover migrant rights, and (4) continuous social dialogue on this topic.
- There were border controls implemented by both sending and receiving countries. The border restrictions heavily disrupted migration, causing a shortage in labour in some destination countries and placing workers in pursuit of decent work overseas at risk.

- Migrant workers are often exposed to higher infection risks and are among the most vulnerable. There were cases where migrant workers living in crowded dormitories were unable to keep their distance from each other and follow the hygiene standard. It was also the case that migrant workers often filled low-wage jobs and had no savings. Many of them had difficulties receiving a relief fund from the government due to the language barrier and their expired visa status, which resulted from the disrupted means of international migration.
- The COVID-19 crisis magnified the pre-existing social problems and revealed the injustice of the guest worker system and the border regime of social exclusion and inequality. It is time to reform the current system of migrant workers' recruitment and employment, and their marginalised working and living conditions.
- These are transnational issues, and therefore should be handled through international cooperation, and no international conversations on these issues can happen without proper bilateral agreements between the country of origin and that of destination.

The second set of discussions, **'Where do we go from here? The Effects of COVID-19 on Global Health Governance in Asia'**, gave perspectives on the developments of global health governance based on both intended changes and unintended consequences of the pandemic. The roundtable was composed of the following experts:

- **Dr Jerome Kim**, Director General (International Vaccine Institute, Republic of Korea)
- **Dr Remco van de Pas**, Senior Research Fellow Global Health Policy (Institute of Tropical Medicine Antwerp, Belgium), Research Associate (Clingendael Institute and Maastricht University), and Lecturer, Global Health (PSIA Sciences Po)
- **Dr Nicholas Thomas**, Associate Professor, Department of Asian and International Studies (City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong)

The roundtable discussion was moderated by **Dr Sara Davies**, Professor of the School of Government and International Relations (Griffith University, Australia). The roundtable discussion had the following highlights:

- The pandemic has brought competing priorities to the fore: health, economic, political and social demands with leaders looking at different directions. The real priorities must be identified and addressed systematically.
- The WHO plays an important role as a rulemaking and setting body. It also contributes significantly to vaccine authorization and regulation. However, its structural problems prevent it from tying all the strings together and formulating a cohesive, comprehensive, and effective response to the global crisis. To some extent, the failure of WHO leadership can be read as a failure of countries to cooperate with each other for a common goal.
- Vaccine equity and access remain a core issue. There is a global mechanism for acquiring and distributing vaccines. The COVAX initiative should be a priority, and individual political

decisions that have motivated vaccine distribution is not the best way to approach the pandemic.

- Vaccine hesitancy is also another issue that is grounded on religious and cultural norms. Effective health communication can counter this phenomenon; science should be allowed to lead this process.
- Vaccines are one of the many tools to improve public health outcomes; they should be used together with other public health instruments to conquer COVID-19.

The closing remarks were given by **Dr Crystal A. Ennis**, University Lecturer in Economies of the Middle East (Leiden University, Netherlands) and Visiting Research Fellow at Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO, Germany). **Dr Ennis** claimed that labour exploitation, especially in temporary labour migration, is expanding and has become a global phenomenon. In combination with the spread of the virus, many migrant workers found themselves in legal, economic, health and social limbo. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the entanglement of global migration and global health and their heightened vulnerability. Migrant workers are made vulnerable not only by the spread of the virus but also by the current health care regime, border regime and the unequal consumption-and-growth-driven world. She also pointed out that the crisis has led to further politicisation and stricter control of migrants' mobility. In countries where migrant communities were seen as infection hot spots, surveillance and control over migrant workers' mobility inside the host society have been considered more justifiable. Lastly, she concluded the conference by emphasising the point that social inequality is a public health matter- as labour markets, welfare provision and public health are mutually dependent upon each other.