



# COVID-19 RELATED VULNERABILITIES AND PERCEPTIONS OF NON-LAO POPULATIONS IN THE LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION (IOM)  
DISPLACEMENT TRACKING MATRIX (DTM)

July to September 2020



*Burmese workers working on a construction project in Bokeo Province © IOM 2020*



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## BACKGROUND

As the COVID-19 outbreak continues to evolve, early evidence suggests that the pandemic disproportionately impacted poor and vulnerable groups.<sup>1</sup> Migrants often lack access to social protection and healthcare services in destination countries, with reasons including but not limited to language barrier, migration status, and personal finances.

Over the years, the non-Lao population has increased from an estimated 45,438 in 2015 to 48,275 in 2019. This figure includes 41,894 from neighbouring countries in the GMS.<sup>2</sup> It is estimated that migrants currently constitute 1 percent of Lao People's Democratic Republic's total labour force.<sup>3</sup> A growing economy, coupled with demographic trends including an ageing population and declining birth rate, are key factors that drive demand for labour migration. Due to movement restrictions, limited access to information related to COVID-19 and fears about COVID-19 exposure, the vulnerabilities of these migrants are likely to be compounded during the pandemic.

To address the paucity of information, IOM initiated the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) techniques<sup>4</sup> to interview Lao Key Informants (KIs) who are known to be working or interacting closely with different non-Lao population groups within the Lao People's Democratic Republic.

## DEFINITION

**Non-Lao nationals:** All resident in Lao People's Democratic Republic who do not hold Lao citizenship regardless of country of birth, usual residence, citizenship or legal status. This include migrants, stateless individuals, refugees, and other non-Lao populations.

## LIMITATIONS

1. This report is based on perceptions of KIs on the situations of migrants and is not intended to replace direct insight from the migrants themselves on their situations. However, these perceptions will be useful in developing an understanding of vulnerabilities of the migrants and can serve as a basis to guide more comprehensive data collection efforts.
2. The study employed non-probability sampling techniques. As such, findings of this study should be taken as anecdotal.
3. The social status of the KIs as representatives of organizations and/or individuals working or living with foreign migrants, may have influenced their responses, in addition to fears of being judged for choices not deemed socially acceptable by the enumerators who are representatives from a United Nations Agency.
4. When the label "multiple answers" is found next to a graph or a question it indicates that a single respondent could provide more than one answer. For this reason, totals will not add up to 100 per cent.

## METHODOLOGY

This assessment of perceived vulnerabilities of the non-Lao population groups is important to support relevant actors in designing appropriate risk communication campaigns and informing possible responses. Such information is most appropriately collected at the individual level. However, migrants are often hard-to-reach due to language barriers and movement restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Hence, data collection was not conducted via face-to-face interviews with migrants.

Respondents for this survey, known as Key Informants (KIs), were selected through a non-probability sampling approach (purposive and convenience sampling).<sup>5</sup> First, IOM collated an extensive list of 140 KIs based on their network within the Lao People's Democratic Republic. They are representatives from local administration, migrant community leaders, education institutes, humanitarian/social organizations and recruitment agents who work or live with non-Lao populations. Second, KIs were contacted by email and/or phone, based on their availability and willingness, to assess their perception of the foreign migrants' vulnerabilities during COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the period of July to September 2020, ten (10) enumerators (four women and six men) reached out to these KIs through emails and phone calls. Of the 140 KIs that were identified in the initial process, 56 KIs (40%) responded and participated in the survey.

<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 to Impact Lao PDR Growth, Debt in 2020: New World Bank Report [Internet]. [cited 2020 Sep 23]. Available from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lao/publication/covid-19-to-impact-lao-pdr-growth-debt-in-2020-new-world-bank-report>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Population Division (2019). International Migrant Stock 2019 (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2019).

<sup>3</sup> International Labour Organization. (2015). Employment by sex, economic activity and citizenship. Accessed online: <https://www.ilo.org/shinyapps/bulkexplorer2/>.

<sup>4</sup> Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) is a set of tools and methodologies which enable systematic and regular primary data collection, analysis and dissemination of population movements, human mobility and forced migration (both internal and cross-border). Originally designed to serve the humanitarian community during crises, DTM has been implemented to respond to the COVID-19 crisis.

<sup>5</sup> When all the individuals are not given an equal opportunity of becoming a part of the sample, the method is *non-probability sampling*. In this assessment, *convenience sampling technique* refers that members of the target population meet certain practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate are included. *Purposive sampling technique* refers that the researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by knowledge or experience

## Target populations covered by KIs

(multiple answers are allowed)

### KEY INFORMANTS



KIs SURVEYED

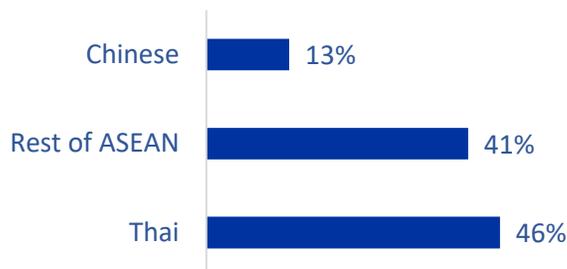


26 WOMEN



30 MEN

## Nationality of migrant groups

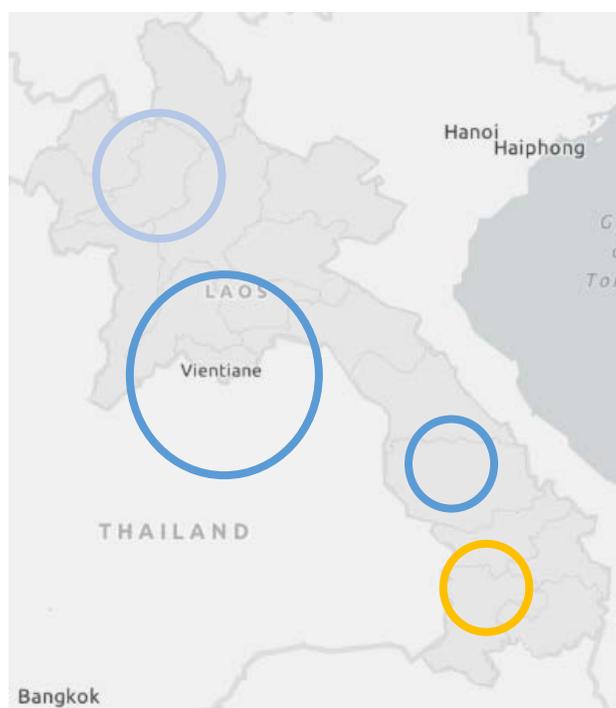


In total, 56 KIs were interviewed, of which 54 per cent are men. All KIs were working with non-Lao population groups across Lao People's Democratic Republic at the time of data collection. Representatives from humanitarian/ social organizations are well-represented at 46 per cent. The three geographical areas best covered by the KIs were Vientiane Capital (n=33), Savannakhet (n=9), and Champasak (n=7).

Around 46 per cent of the KIs highlighted their familiarity with Thai migrants, 13 per cent with Chinese migrants, and the rest mentioned various groups of migrants from ASEAN countries specifically Cambodia, the Philippines, Myanmar, and Viet Nam among others. It is noteworthy that most KIs work and/or live with multiple groups of migrants and this report documents the overall perception of foreign migrants and will not focus on any specific migrant group.

## Geographical coverage in the Lao People's Democratic Republic where KIs are working

(multiple answers are allowed)



- Northern Lao
  - Bokeo: 1
  - Luang Prabang: 3
  - Houa Phan: 1
  - Xayaboury: 1
  - Xieng Khouang: 1
- Central Lao
  - Vientiane Capital: 33
  - Savannakhet: 9
- Southern Lao
  - Champasak: 7
  - Salavan: 1

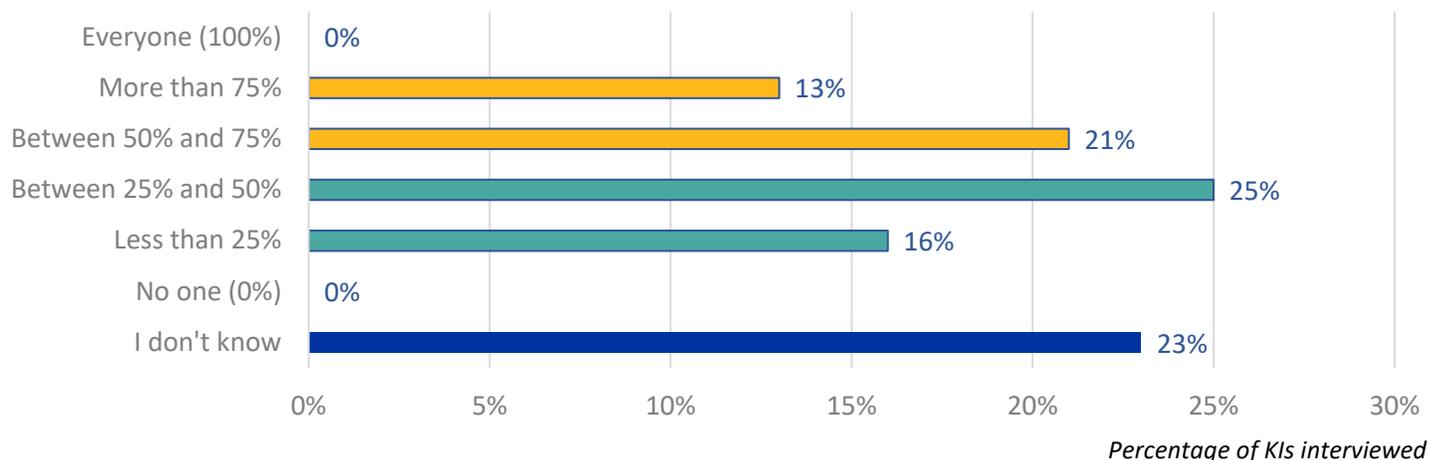
The boundaries and names shown, and the designation used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM. Data Source: Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX) and IOM

## NON-LAO POPULATIONS IN LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

### Women migrants

Up to 41 per cent of KIs perceived that less than half of foreign migrants are women and another 34 per cent perceived that more than half of them are men. Given that the difference between KIs' perception of gender representation is small, it is assumed that disaggregation between women and men is proportionate in this study.

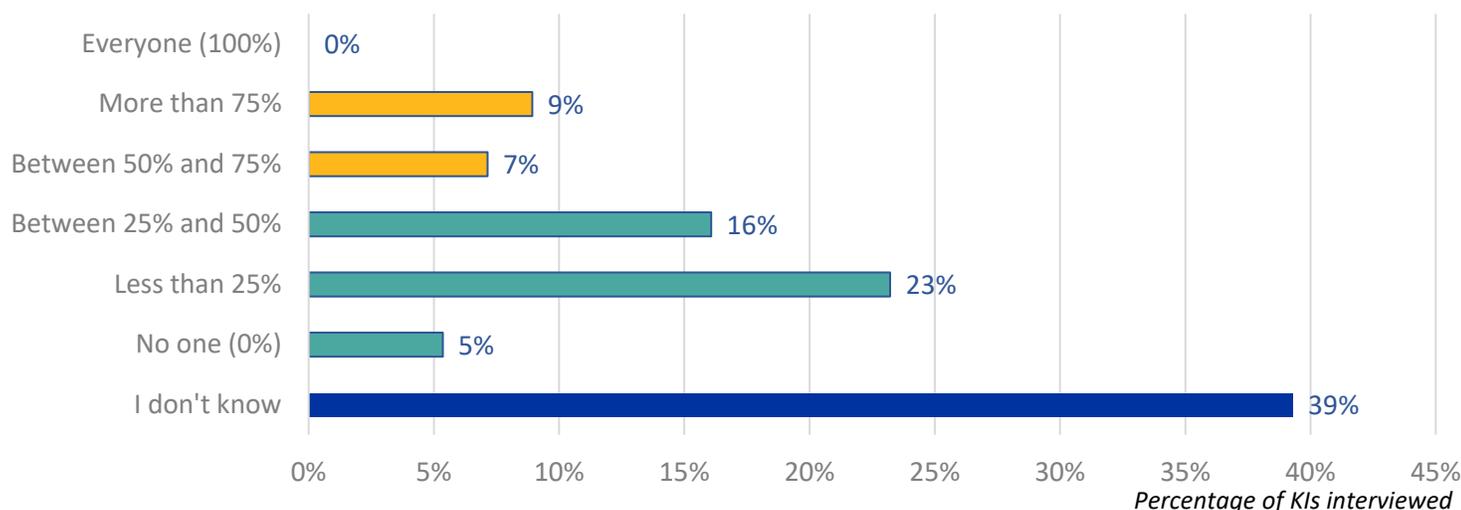
**Proportion of the current migrant population perceived by KIs to be women**



### Migrants who are stranded

To better understand the travel intentions of migrants and learn about the situation of those who are stranded in Lao People's Democratic Republic, KIs were also asked about their perception on the proportion of migrants who wish to return to their home countries. Up to 39 per cent of KIs indicated that less than 50 per cent of migrants would want to return to their home countries, whereas 16 per cent of KIs perceived that more than 50 per cent of them want to leave. About 5 per cent of KIs perceived that none of the migrants they know want to leave and slightly less than 40 per cent of KIs indicated that they are not aware of such intentions of the migrants.

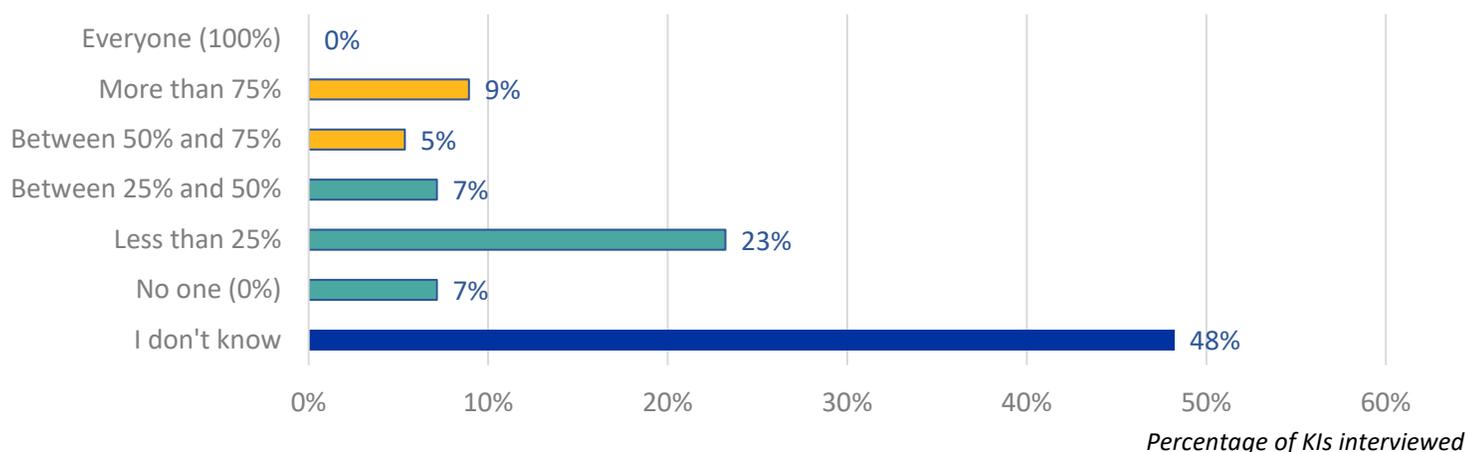
**Proportion of Migrants who are still in Lao People's Democratic Republic but perceived by KIs to want to return to their home countries**



### Migrants who are in the agricultural sector or food preparation services

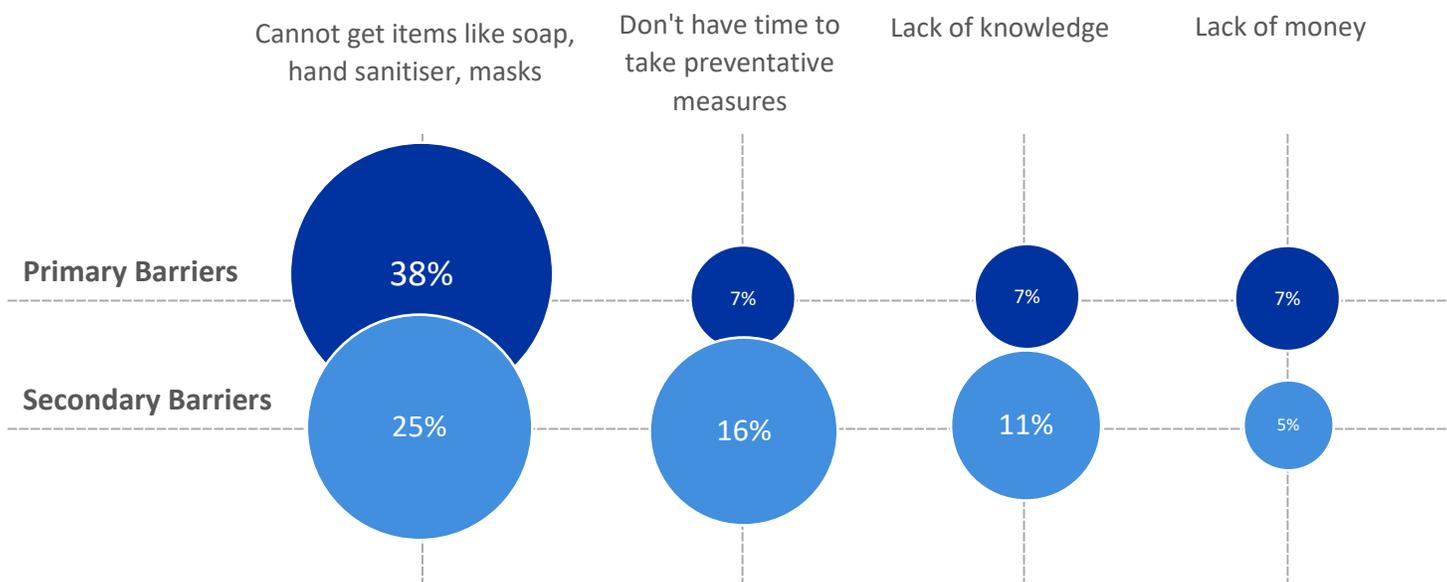
When asked about the proportion of migrants whom KIs know to be working in the agricultural sector or food preparation services, up to 44 per cent of them perceived that some proportion of the migrants are working within these sectors of employment. Close to half of KIs are not familiar with these sectors.

**Proportion of Migrants perceived by KIs to work in the agricultural sector/food preparation services**



## NON-LAO POPULATIONS' VULNERABILITIES DUE TO COVID-19

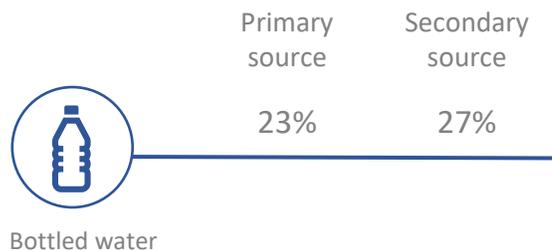
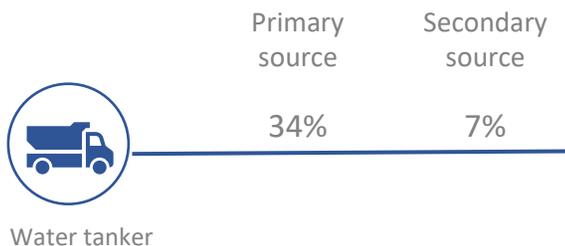
### Main barriers to COVID-19 specific hygiene and sanitation for migrants



When KIs were asked to rank, in order of importance, the perceived barriers of migrants to COVID-19 hygiene and sanitation, 38 per cent of KIs responded that lack of access to items like soap, hand sanitizer, and masks was a primary barrier while 25 per cent considered it as a secondary barrier. Only 7 per cent considered limited time to take prevention measures as a primary barrier, while 16 percent perceived it to be a secondary barrier. Lack of knowledge and money were mentioned, although it was not perceived by KIs to be the most relevant reason for migrants not to adopt hygiene and sanitation practices.

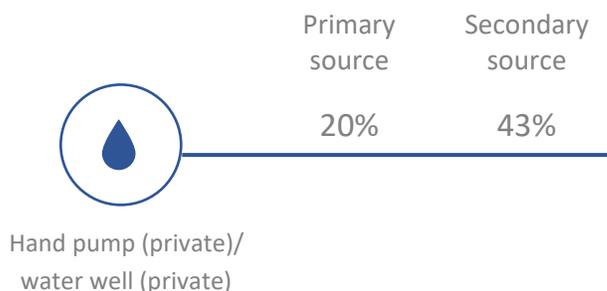
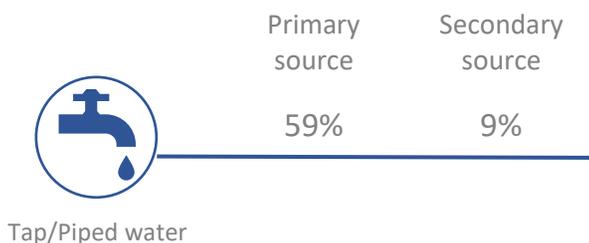
### Two main sources of drinking water (multiple answers are allowed)

KIs perceived that the primary source of drinking water accessed by migrants was water tanker (provided by province) (34%) and the secondary source of drinking water was bottled water (27%). Other sources of drinking water included tap/piped water, handpump/water well (private) and hand pump/water well (public).



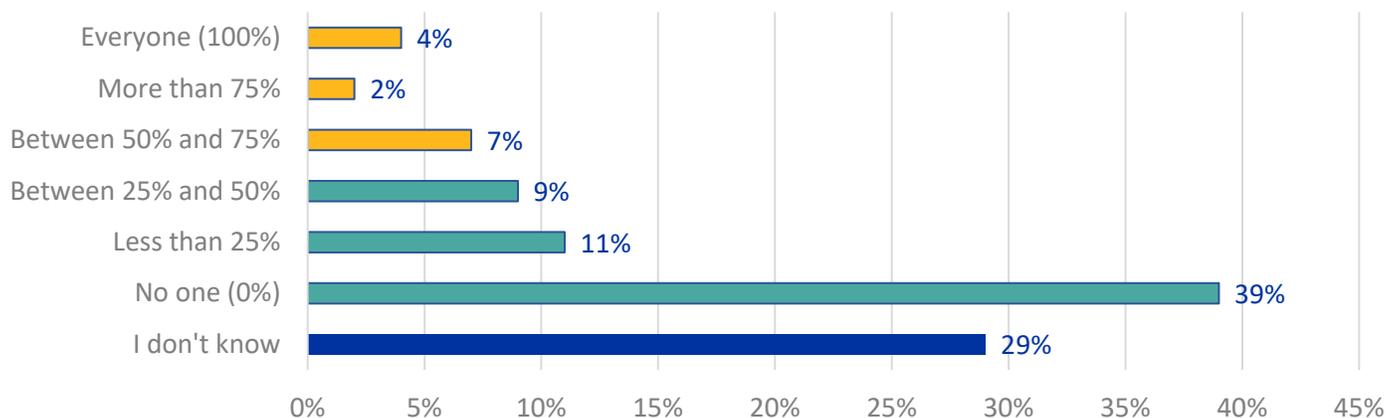
### Two main sources of water for domestic use (multiple answers are allowed)

KIs perceived that the primary source of water for bathing, washing clothes and other domestic use accessed by migrants was tap/piped water (59%) and the secondary source was hand pump (private)/water well (private) (43%).



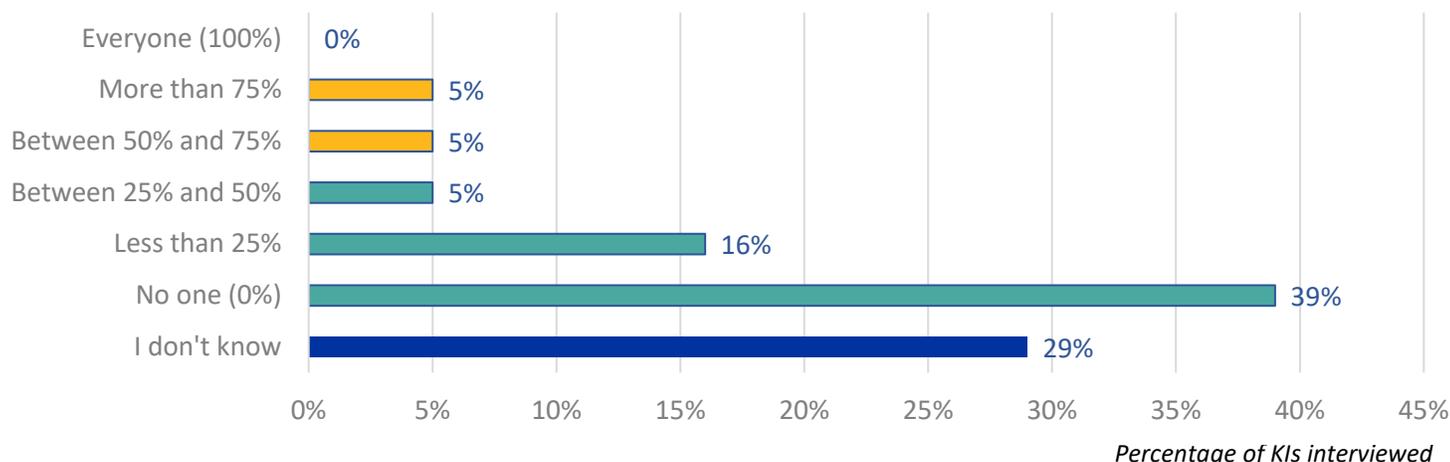
### Daily access of water and sanitation materials

#### Proportion of migrants perceived by KIs to have no daily access to drinking water



Percentage of KIs interviewed

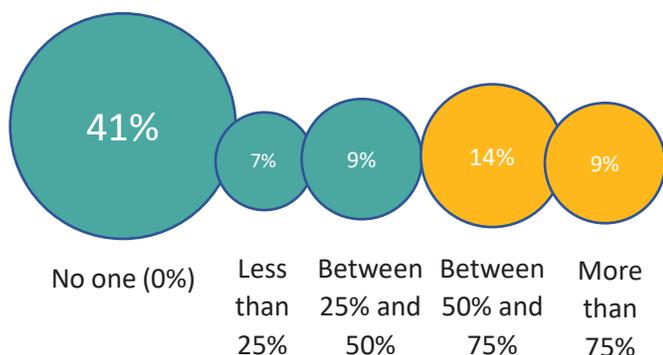
**Proportion of migrants perceived by KIs to have no daily access to bathing, washing clothes and other domestic use**



Less than 40 per cent of KIs do not perceive that there are any migrants with no daily access to drinking water. However, 29 per cent perceived that some proportion of migrants have no daily access to drinking water with 4 per cent perceived that all migrants have no access to drinking water. Close to 30 per cent of KIs are not familiar with migrants' situation in terms of access to water.

When asked about the share of migrant workers with no daily access to water for bathing, washing clothes and other domestic uses, 39 per cent of KIs perceived that there are no migrants who do not have daily access to water for general use. However, 31 per cent perceived that there were at least some proportion of migrants with no daily access to water for bathing, washing clothes and other domestic uses. Close to 30 per cent of KIs are not familiar with migrants' situation in terms of access to water.

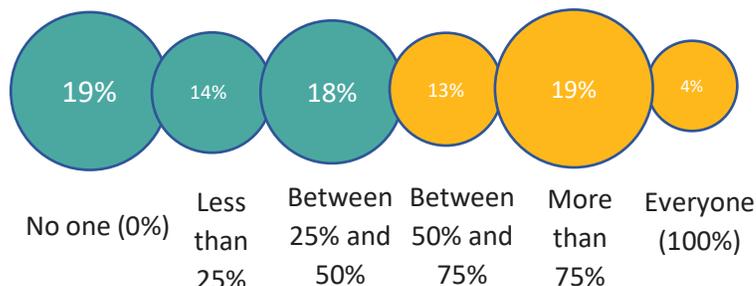
**Proportion of non-Lao nationals perceived to have no daily access to soap**



of KIs reported that more than half of migrants do not have daily access to soap.

Note: 20% of the KIs answered "I do not know"

**Proportion of non-Lao nationals perceived to have no daily access to hand sanitizers**

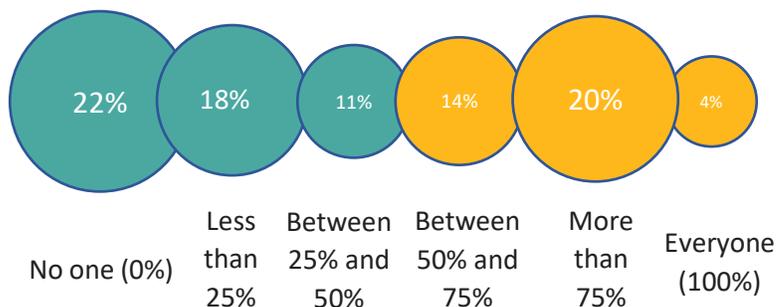


**36%**

of KIs reported that more than half of migrants do not have daily access to sanitizers.

Note: 13% of the KIs answered "I do not know"

**Proportion of non-Lao nationals perceived to have no daily access to face masks**



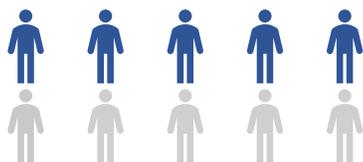
**38%**

of KIs reported that more than half of the migrants do not have daily access to face masks.

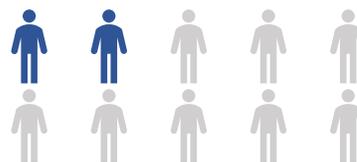
Note: 11% of the KIs answered "I do not know"

**IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON NON-LAO NATIONALS**

**Impact of COVID-19 on Food Consumption**



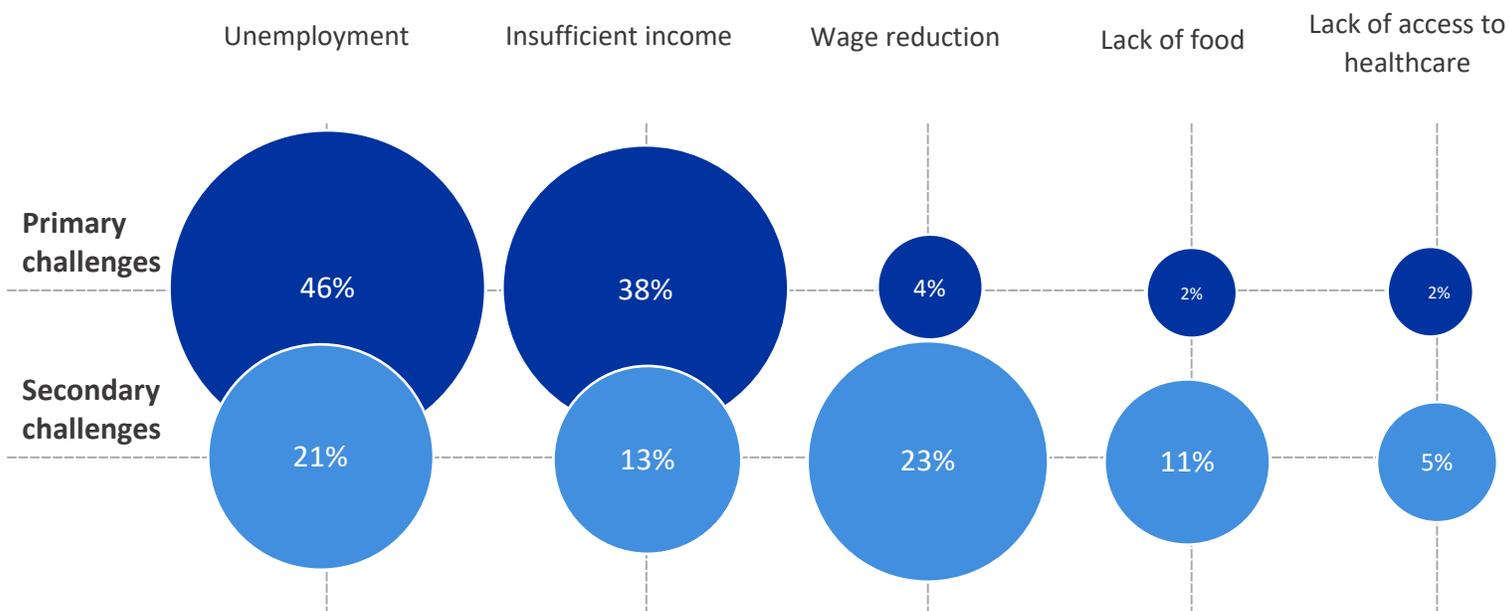
**54%** of the KIs reported that over the last month, they have heard of concerns about not having enough food to eat among their beneficiaries due to the consequences of COVID-19



**18%** of the KIs reported that over the last month, they have heard of families going without eating for a whole day among their beneficiaries due to the consequences COVID-19.

### Main Challenges faced by non-Lao nationals since the outbreak of COVID-19

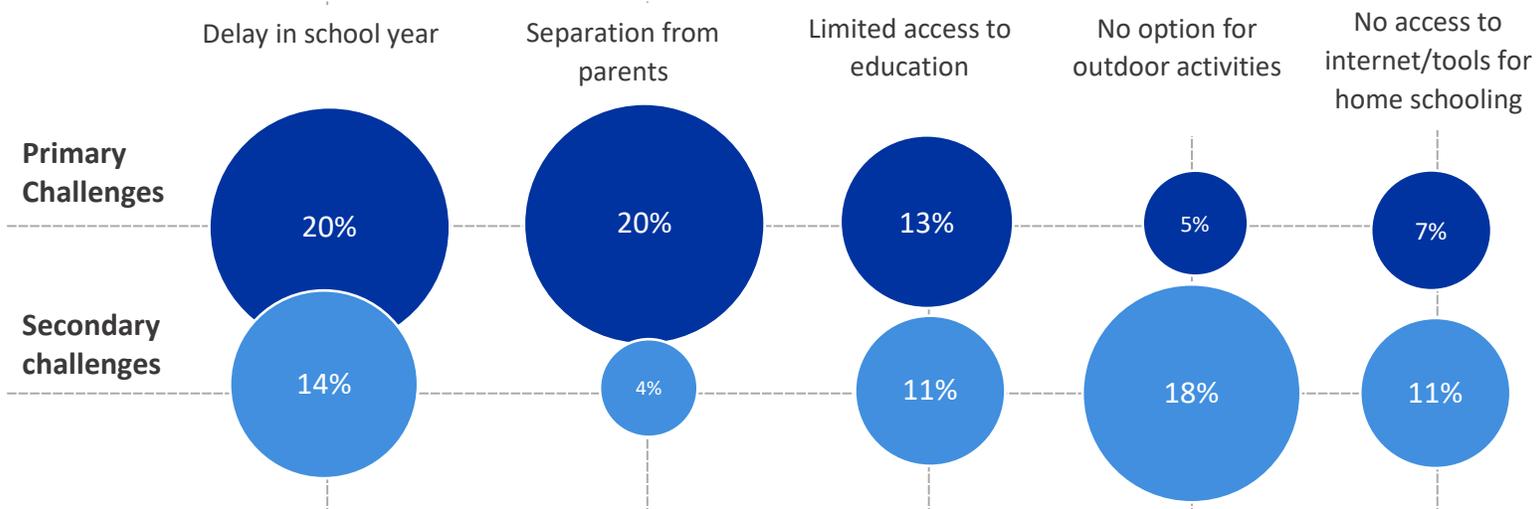
(multiple answers are allowed)



KIs were asked to rank, in order of importance, the two main challenges faced by migrants since the outbreak of COVID-19. Unemployment (46% and 21%) and insufficient income (38% and 23%) were the primary and secondary challenges identified by KIs. The other challenges mentioned were wage reduction, lack of food and lack of access to healthcare.

### Main Challenges faced by children of non-Lao nationals since the outbreak of COVID-19

(multiple answers are allowed)



KIs were also asked regarding the main challenges faced by children accompanying migrants in Lao People's Democratic Republic during the COVID-19 pandemic. Separation from parents (20%) and delay in school year (20%) were the most frequently cited primary challenges. Whereas no options for outdoor/recreational activities (18%) and delay in school year (14%) were cited as secondary challenges.

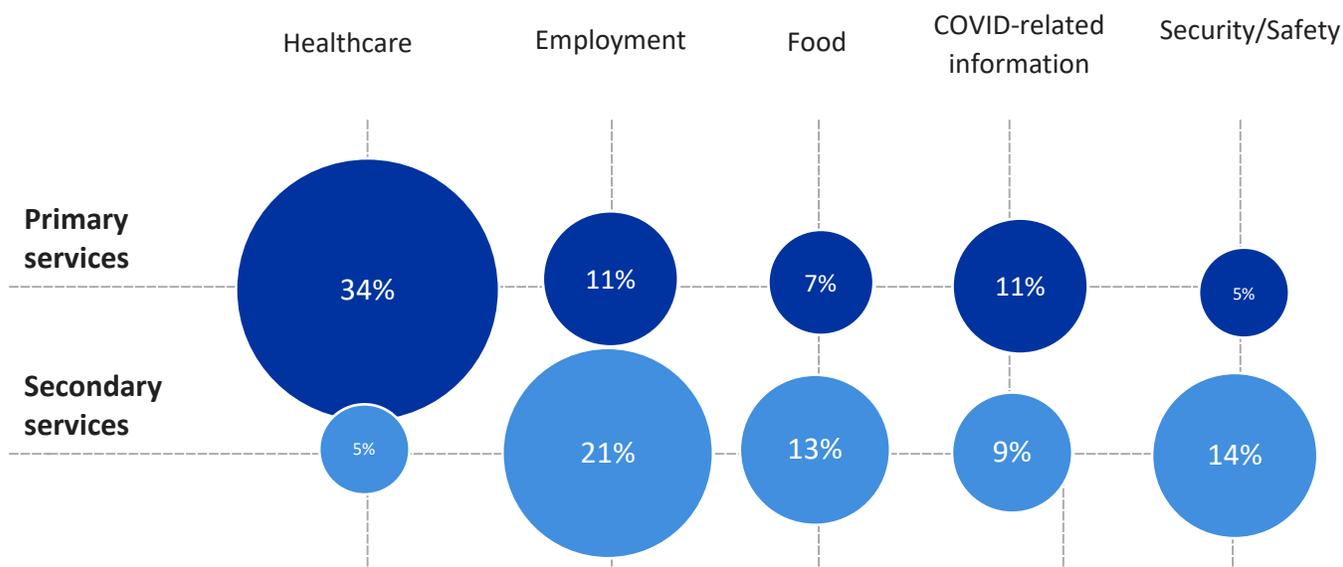
## COVID-19 Effects on Income and Gender (multiple answers are allowed)



When KIs were asked further if a loss or reduction in income was more commonly seen amongst men or women migrants, more than 50 per cent KIs mentioned that there is no difference between the genders in terms of “reduction in income” (55%) and “loss of all income” (59%).

However, among the KIs who perceived that the COVID-19 effects are different for men and women, most of them perceived that men are more likely to be affected in terms of “reduced income” (20%) and “loss of income” (18%).

## Services which are hard to access by non-Lao nationals since the outbreak of COVID-19 (multiple answers are allowed)



The most mentioned services which were perceived to be difficult for migrants to access during COVID-19 pandemic were healthcare (34%), employment/job opportunities (11%) and COVID-19 related information (11%). The second most mentioned services were employment/job opportunities (21%), food (13%) and safety/security (14%).

### Non-Lao Nationals' Employment Situation Since COVID-19 (multiple answers are allowed)



Up to 74 per cent of KIs perceived that majority of migrants have lost their jobs and only one (1) in five (5) migrants is able to cope financially, whereas the rest are facing financial problems due to the economic impact caused by movement restrictions imposed to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Up to 13 per cent of KIs perceived that a smaller proportion of migrants are still working, with three (3) in every five (5) migrants receiving reduced salary, while the rest continued to receive the same amount of salary.

### NON-LAO NATIONALS' ACCESS TO INFORMATION ON COVID-19

KIs were asked to share their perception of the overall awareness levels of non-Lao nationals in Lao People's Democratic Republic with regards to:

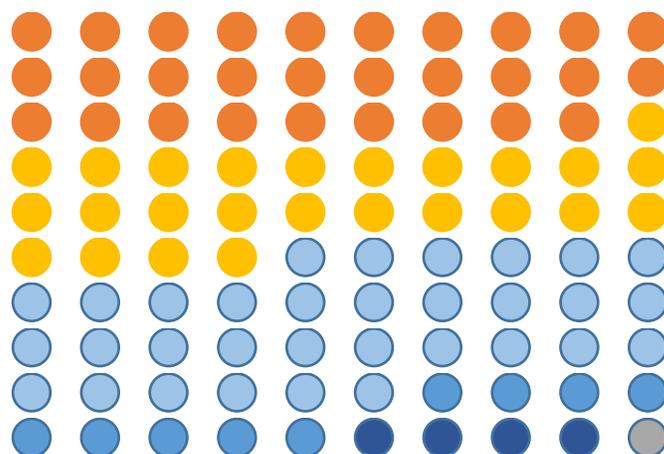
- Overall knowledge and awareness of the COVID-19 pandemic,
- COVID-19 symptoms,
- COVID-19 preventive measures, and
- Handwashing practices.



#### Overall knowledge and awareness of COVID-19



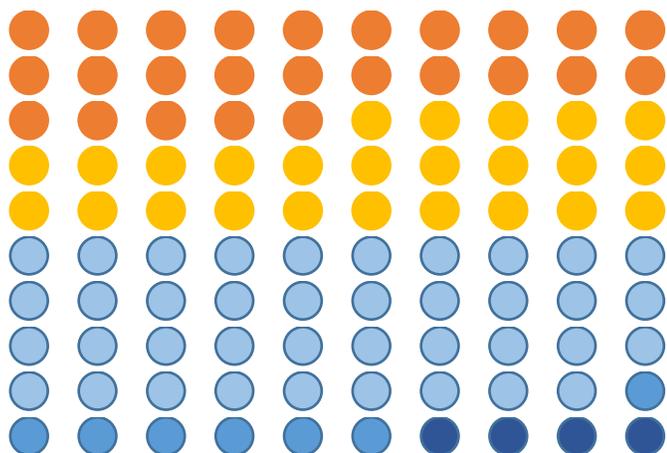
#### Awareness of COVID-19 symptoms (fever, cough, difficulties breathing)



Slightly less than 50 per cent of KIs perceived migrants to have either “very good” (25%) or “good” (23%) knowledge and awareness of the COVID-19 pandemic in general, with more than 50 per cent of KIs mentioning that migrants are either “very aware” (29%) or “aware” (25%) of COVID-19 symptoms, that is fever, cough and breathing difficulties.

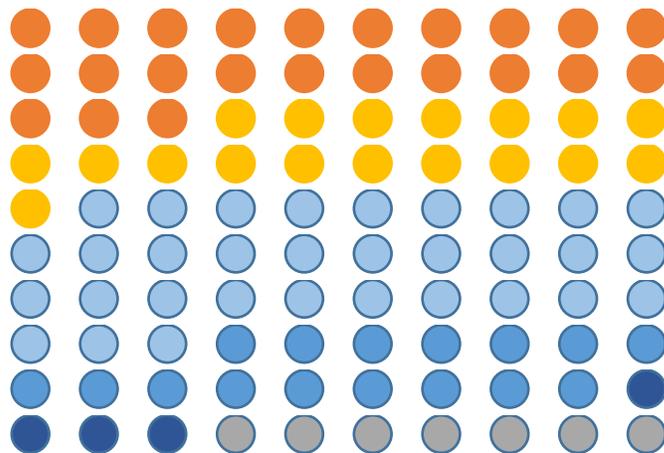
### Awareness of COVID-19 preventive measures

(washing hands, wearing masks, social distancing)



### Awareness of handwashing practices

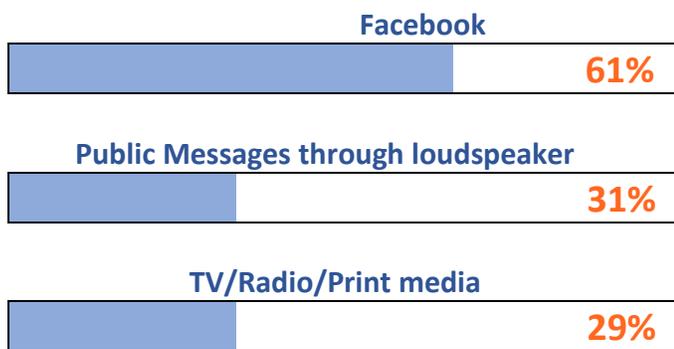
(with soap for 20 second following WHO approach step-by-step hand washing method)



In terms of COVID-19 preventative measures like handwashing, wearing masks and social distancing, KIs perceived that 50 per cent of migrants are either “aware” (25%) and “very aware” (25%), whereas only slightly more than 40 per cent of KIs perceived that migrants are either “aware” (18%) and “very aware” (23%) of handwashing practices. This survey did not investigate into whether this was due to migrants’ lack of access to soap or water or due to knowledge and awareness.

### Main sources of information

(multiple answers are allowed)



### Main sources through word of mouth

(multiple answers are allowed)



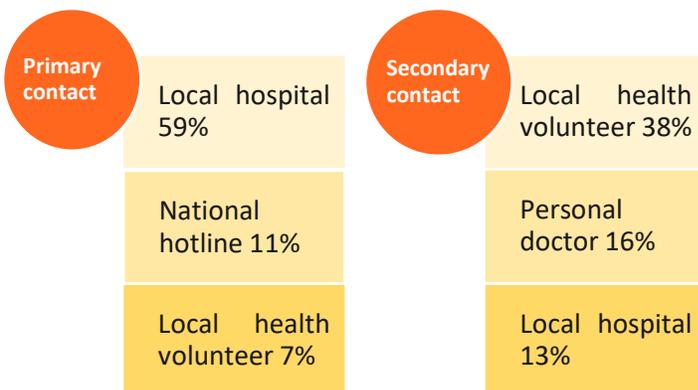
### Awareness of who to contact in case of illness



83%

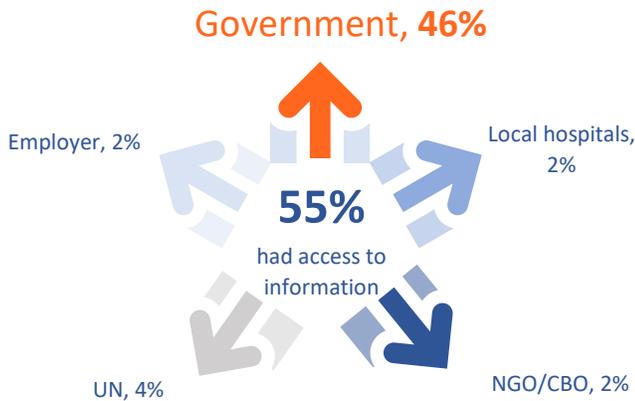
of the KIs perceived that the migrants know (70%) or partially know (13%) who to contact if they fall sick

### Primary and secondary contact persons foreign migrants would reach out to in case of illness



**Main sources of information, education and communication materials on COVID-19**

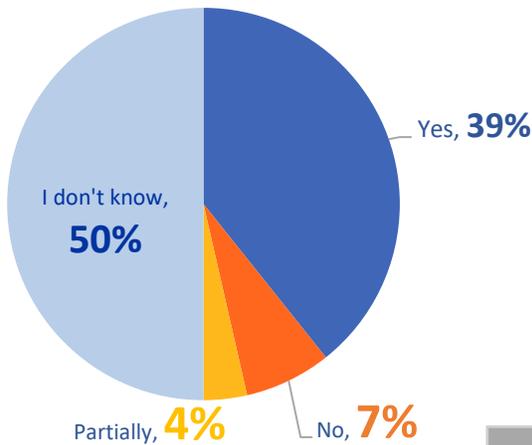
(multiple answers allowed)



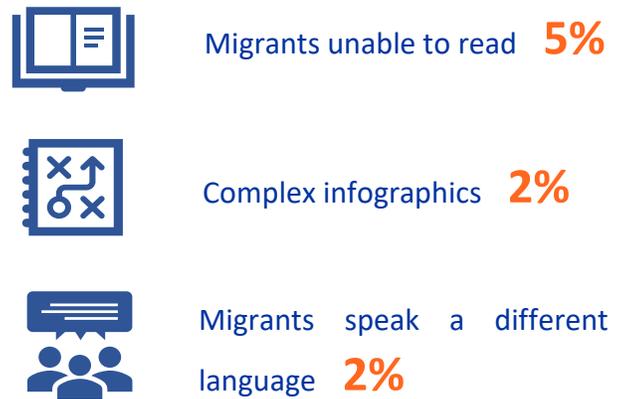
Slightly less than 50 per cent of KIs perceived that the main source of Information Education and Communication (IEC) channels for migrants concerning COVID-19 was from the government in the form of pamphlets, videos, or weblinks.

KIs were also asked if they think the IEC materials on COVID-19 were comprehensive enough for the different migrant groups in Lao People’s Democratic Republic – of which 39 per cent of KIs mentioned that migrants were able to understand the materials, whereas 7 per cent of KIs perceived that some migrants might not be able to understand because they are unable to read written materials (5%), infographics was too complex (2%) and/or migrants speak a different language (2%).

**Migrants’ understanding of COVID-19 IEC materials**



**Reasons why IEC materials were not being understood**



*Due to*

**Misperceptions about COVID-19 (myths, misunderstandings, conspiracies among others)**

**83%**

KIs perceived that migrants do not have misconceptions on COVID-19



**17%**

KIs perceived that migrants have misperceptions about COVID-19



**11%** COVID-19 is not a dangerous virus



**9%** COVID-19 can be cured easily



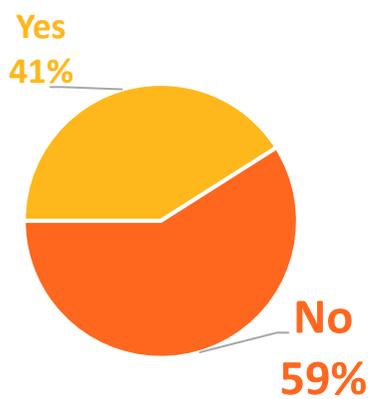
**4%** COVID-19 is like cholera

## QUARANTINE CONDITIONS

There is 35 active government quarantine centres (QCs) across Lao People's Democratic Republic. The QCs at provincial level are often equipped with the most resources and have better infrastructure.

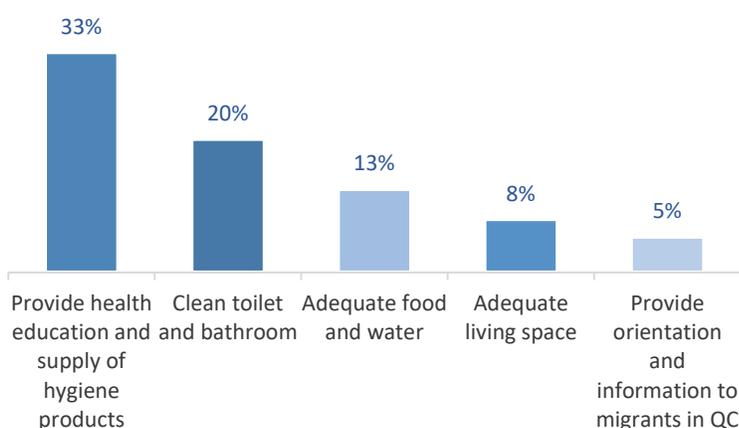
Up to 41 per cent of KIs had visited at least one QC in Lao People's Democratic Republic. They perceived that the services and support within the QCs could be improved specifically in terms of (i) providing health education and supply hygiene products (33%), (ii) cleaning toilets and bathrooms (20%), (iii) ensuring adequate supply of food and water (13%), (iv) ensuring adequate living space (8%) and (v) providing orientation and information to migrants in the QCs (5%).

*Visits to quarantine center*



*Areas of improvement QCs*

(multiple answers allowed)



The perception from KIs is consistent with another survey<sup>5</sup> which was conducted with migrants who were still staying in the QCs. In that survey, less than 50 per cent of migrants brought their own food and water to QCs at both community and provincial level whereas the rest were expecting to be provided with food and water at the QCs. Among all the migrants surveyed – those who brought their own food and water as well as those who did not - migrants staying in community QC, faced more critical food and water shortage compared to migrants staying at provincial QCs.

Those who stayed in community QC reported that they usually have access to water and sanitation facilities, whereas among those living in provincial QCs, 6 per cent did not have access to water and sanitation facilities. The commonly cited reasons were that water and/or electricity was not always available (3%) and that bathrooms are overcrowded, small and/or unclean (3%).

That survey also reported that respondents from community and provincial facilities had a notable difference in the information they had access to. Only 20 per cent of those who stayed in community facilities had access to COVID-19 information. In comparison, 91 per cent of returning migrants who stayed in provincial facilities had access to information.



Migrants at the Southern Bus Station in Vientiane Capital © IOM



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