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Labour migration in Asia and the Pacific

Note by the secretariat

Summary

International labour migration is a significant component of development in many countries in the Asian and Pacific region. While countries have developed policy frameworks for managing labour migration, the rapid expansion of migration has resulted in migration policies that are sometimes reactive rather than being integrated in overall development strategies. As a consequence, there are significant challenges in ensuring safe, orderly and regular migration, notably with regard to the rights of labour migrants. The international community has adopted a comprehensive normative framework for international labour migration, including the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, numerous International Labour Organization conventions and recommendations, non-binding frameworks, and declarations of subregional intergovernmental organizations. Several policy challenges remain, however, including effective protection of the rights of migrant workers, limiting irregular migration and developing regional or subregional instruments and programmes to facilitate the management of labour migration.

In view of these policy challenges, the international community is negotiating a global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration, to be submitted to an international conference in 2018. The effort to develop the global compact has been guided by many processes within and outside the United Nations. The Asian and Pacific region is expected to submit a regional input to the negotiations towards developing the global compact.

The present document is intended to guide the intergovernmental process in Asia and the Pacific to develop the regional input to the negotiations by highlighting issues of relevance and providing recommendations for consideration by participants.

I. Trends, impacts and challenges of labour migration

A. Trends

1. Migration for employment is the dominant form of migration in the Asian and Pacific region. Several countries in the region formally process more than half a million migrant workers a year through regular migration channels. Notably, the Philippines processed 1.8 million workers each year between 2011 and 2015. International labour migration is driven by the substantial differences in wage levels and employment opportunities between countries of origin and countries of destination. Barring a global economic slowdown, it is likely that the current volume of labour migration will hold steady or increase.

2. In Asia and the Pacific, the recruitment and deployment of migrant workers from countries of origin and their placement and employment in countries of destination are generally managed by private sector agencies. Government agencies, sometimes at the ministerial level, have been established in several countries to process and regulate labour migration.

3. The proportion of women among migrants from main countries of origin varies (table 1). The number and percentage of female migrants from Indonesia and Sri Lanka have been declining in recent years, while those from Bangladesh and the Philippines have been increasing.[1] These individual country trends are the result of many factors, including shifts in policy. For example, Bangladesh has reduced restrictions on female migration, while Indonesia and Sri Lanka have introduced restrictions.

[1] Philippine Statistics Authority, "Total number of OFWs estimated at 2.2 million (results from the 2016 survey on overseas filipinos)", *27 April 2017.* Available from www.psa.gov.ph/content/total-number-ofws-estimated-22-million-results-2016-survey-overseas-filipinos.

Table 1
Number of migrant workers deployed, selected countries, 2011-2015

Country	*2011*	*2012*	*2013*	*2014*	*2015*
Bangladesh					
Total	568 062	607 798	409 253	425 684	555 881
Male	537 483	570 494	352 853	349 677	452 163
Female	30 579	37 304	56 400	76 007	103 718
India					
Total	626 565	747 041	816 655	804 878	-
Indonesia					
Total	586 802	494 609	512 168	429 872	-
Male	210 116	214 825	235 170	186 243	-
Female	376 686	279 784	276 998	243 629	-
Nepal					
Total	384 665	450 834	52 878	-	-
Pakistan					
Total	456 893	638 587	622 714	752 466	773 869[a]
Philippines					
Total	2 057 000	2 220 000	2 209 000	2 320 000	2 377 000
Male	1 080 000	1 148 000	1 116 000	1 149 000	1 168 000
Female	978 000	1 072 000	1 092 000	1 170 000	1 209 000
Sri Lanka					
Total	262 961	282 331	293 218	300 413	263 307
Male	136 307	143 784	175 185	189 924	172 630
Female	126 654	138 547	118 033	110 489	90 677
Thailand					
Total	147 623	134 101	130 511	119 529	117 291
Male	121 391	108 892	107 184	-	-
Female	26 232	25 209	23 327	-	-

Sources: Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), *Asia-Pacific Migration Report 2015: Migrant's Contributions to Development* (ST/ESCAP/2738), p. 21; Bangladesh Bureau for Manpower, Employment and Training 2014-2015 database (available from www.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/stattisticalDataAction#); Pakistan 2015: Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, *Labour Migration from Pakistan, 2015 Status Report* (Islamabad, 2015); 2016: Overseas Filipinos, Philippines Statistic Authority database (available from www.psa.gov.ph/tags/overseas-filipinos); Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment 2015 database (available from www.slbfe.lk/file.php?FID=253); Bank of Thailand 2014-2015 database (available from www2.bot.or.th/statistics/ReportPage.aspx?reportID=111&language=eng).

[a] Through October 2015 only.

4. The migrant workers from major countries of origin in South and South-West Asia tend to seek work in countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Ninety-seven percent of overseas workers processed by Pakistan in 2015[2] and about three fourths of migrant workers from Bangladesh in 2014[3] went to Western Asia. In South-East Asia, about two thirds of land-

[2] Pakistan, Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, *Labour Migration from Pakistan: 2015 Status Report* (Islamabad, 2015). Available from www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-kathmandu/documents/publication/wcms_514139.pdf.

[3] Asian Development Bank and International Labour Organization (ILO), "Overseas employment of Bangladeshi workers: trends, prospects and challenges", ADB Briefs,

based migrant workers were from the Philippines in 2015.[4] Migrant workers from other countries in the subregion, such as Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam, tend to remain within East and South-East Asia.

5. While highly skilled and professional workers participate in the international flows of labour migration, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has agreed to the freer movement of several categories of professionals, migration flows are nevertheless still dominated by workers in low- and semi-skilled occupations. Low- and semi-skilled migrant workers comprised the majority of migrant workers in the most recent reports from Bangladesh,[5] Pakistan,[6] and Sri Lanka.[7] They also comprised the largest occupational group among workers from the Philippines.[8]

6. A distinct labour migration system has evolved in North and Central Asia, centred on the Russian Federation and, to a lesser extent, Kazakhstan. The Russian Federation allows visa-free entry to nationals of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Furthermore, nationals of Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as members of the Eurasian Economic Union, do not need work permits to be employed in the Russian Federation.[9] In 2014, 3.69 million foreigners (including 2.5 million from other countries in North and Central Asia) were registered to work in the Russian Federation. At the same time, between 2.8 million and 3 million migrant workers were in an irregular status (with between 1.8 million and 2 million from the subregion).[10]

7. Since 2014, economic factors in the Russian Federation, such as falling oil prices and new policy measures aimed at reducing irregular migration, such as re-entry bans for irregular migrants, have led to reductions in labour migration in the subregion. For instance, the number of registered migrant workers from Uzbekistan in the Russian Federation fell from 2,343,000 in 2014 to 1,756,000 in 2016, while the number from Tajikistan declined from 1,034,000 to 879,000.[11] The large numbers of migrant workers leaving the Russian Federation have an impact on the labour force in the countries of origin and also in Kazakhstan, where some of them seek employment as an alternative destination. There has also been increased interest by countries in Eastern

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No. 63 (August 2016). Available from www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/190600/overseas-employment-ban-workers.pdf.

[4] Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, *Overseas employment statistics, 2016*. Available from www.poea.gov.ph.

[5] See www.bmet.org.bd/BMET/viewStatReport.action?reportnumber=35.

[6] See www.beoe.gov.pk/files/statistics/2017/occupation.pdf.

[7] Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, *Annual Statistical Report of Foreign Employment 2014*, SLBFE, Colombo, 2014.

[8] See www.psa.gov.ph/content/total-number-ofws-estimated-22-million-results-2016-survey-overseas-filipinos-0.

[9] United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, *Labour Migration, Remittances, and Human Development in Central Asia*, 2015.

[10] Sergey V. Ryazantsev, “The role of labour migration in the development of the economy of the Russian Federation”, Working Paper No. 1 (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, Bangkok, 2016, p. 42).

[11] International Organization for Migration (IOM), Nazarbayev Center and United States Agency for International Development, *Migrant Vulnerabilities and Integration Needs in Central Asia. Root Causes, Social and Economic Impact of Return Migration*, 2016.

Europe to recruit workers from some North and Central Asian countries, such as Georgia.

8. Another distinct migration system exists in the Pacific. No developing Pacific island country had a positive net in-migration rate between the two most recent censuses, while several had high average annual rates of net out-migration. Out-migration is for long-term or permanent settlement, as well as for seasonal work through specific schemes in agriculture, horticulture and viticulture in Australia and New Zealand.[12]

B. Impacts

9. The most direct economic impact of labour migration on countries of origin results from remittances sent by migrant workers. In 2016, the amount totalled almost $269 billion for the region as a whole, with China, India, Pakistan and the Philippines being the largest recipients. In some smaller economies, remittances comprise a significant percentage of gross domestic product (GDP). For example, remittances contributed more than one quarter of the 2015 GDP of Nepal, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (table 2). As remittances are sent directly to families, they have an immediate and substantial impact on spending for food, education, health care and housing.

10. While remittances may have the most direct impact on countries of origin, the large volume of overseas employment also affects the national labour market. Overseas employment accounts for more than one fifth of the growth in the labour force in Bangladesh and absorbs more than one half of new manufacturing jobs.[13]

[12] ESCAP, *Asia-Pacific Migration Report 2015: Migrant's Contributions to Development* (ST/ESCAP/2738).

[13] Asian Development Bank and ILO, Overseas employment of Bangladeshi workers, ADB Briefs No. 63. Available from www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/190600/overseas-employment-ban-workers.pdf.

Table 2
Developing countries in Asia and the Pacific ranked by volume of remittances received, 2016, and by percentage contribution of remittances to gross domestic product, 2015 (top ten countries)

Remittances received, million (United States dollars)		*Remittances as percentage of gross domestic product*	
India	62 745	Nepal	32.2
China	61 000	Tajikistan	28.8
Philippines	29 878	Kyrgyzstan	25.7
Pakistan	19 847	Samoa	17.2
Bangladesh	13 680	Armenia	14.1
Viet Nam	13 383	Marshall Islands	13.7
Indonesia	9 234	Kiribati	11
Sri Lanka	7 252	Tuvalu	10.6
Republic of Korea	6 395	Georgia	10.4
Nepal	6 276	Philippines	9.8

Source: World Bank's calculations based on data from the International Monetary Fund Balance of Payments Statistics database and data released from central banks, national statistical agencies and World Bank country desks. Available from www.knomad.org/sites/default/files/2017-06/Updated%20remittancedatainflows%28Apr.2017%29.xls (accessed 1 August 2017).