

Labour migration is a trend that creates immense challenges as well as opportunities for all countries in Asia and the Pacific.

Migrant labour has become closely associated with economic growth and development in Asia. As well as giving new opportunities to the migrants themselves, it can ease skill imbalances in labour markets and provide cultural and economic benefits for both sending and receiving countries. Migrant worker remittances now amount to more than US\$40 billion in the region as a whole and for some countries of origin have become the single most important source of foreign exchange income.

In the last 20 years gross emigration of labour has risen at an annual rate of 6 per cent in the Asian region as a whole, meaning that average migration growth in migrant-sending countries is more than double their labour force growth rate. Equally important is that Asian migrant workers are increasingly moving to other economies within the region to find work, rather than going further afield, an indication of the growing integration of the Asian economies as well as of demographic trends.

One reason for this rapid increase is that Asian labour migration is largely organized by private intermediaries rather than state-run recruitment agencies, a degree of commercialization not found in other regions. This explains the rapid expansion and relative efficiency of the migration flows but has also led to serious problems relating to fraud and abuse.

There are risks associated with labour migration, including trafficking and forced labour, recruitment malpractices (such as fraudulent job offers and exorbitant placement fees), debt bondage, sexual and physical harassment, employment in hazardous jobs, under- or non-payment of wages, and discrimination. Female migrant workers, who on average make up about 47 per cent (2001 figure) of all migrant workers in Asia, often experience double discrimination, both as women and as migrants.

The majority of Asian migrant workers are at the bottom of the employment ladder, doing the dirty, dangerous and difficult – “3 D” – jobs that are shunned by locals and that, once they become “migrant jobs”, tend to remain migrant jobs. These include commercial agriculture, construction, labour-intensive manufacturing, domestic work, cleaning and catering services. At the other end of the scale, Asia has also become the world’s largest supplier of professional and skilled migrant workers – Filipino nurses and teachers moving to West Asia and the industrialized countries, Bangladeshi doctors moving to Malaysia, Indian software engineers and designers moving to the United States – creating a “brain drain” from their countries of origin.

Key Statistics

◆ Asia absorbs an increasing proportion of its own migrant workers. Between 1995 and 2000, 40 per cent of the 2.6 to 2.9 million Asian migrant workers (registered and undocumented) went to other Asian countries. The most important Asian receiving countries (the destinations for 1.4 million workers every year) include Japan, Taiwan (China), the Republic of Korea, Hong Kong (China), Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. By contrast during 1970’s and 1980’s more than 90 per cent of Asian migrant workers moved to other regions.

◆ In 2000 Asian migrant workers made up 40 to 70 per cent of the labour force in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). In the major receiving countries in East Asia they represented just over 4.2 per cent of the combined labour force. The exceptions are Singapore, where migrants make up 28 per cent of the labour force, and Malaysia, where the figure is 12 per cent.

◆ The Philippines remains the largest supplier of labour – the annual outflow represents about 1 per cent of the labour force – but new countries, like Mongolia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, are becoming labour exporters. Iran now sees an annual outflow of 285,000 workers and has a total of 3 million nationals working abroad.

◆ In 2003 combined remittances from migrants to Asian sending countries were estimated at more than US\$40 billion. In 2004 India alone received some US\$23 billion and the Philippines US\$8 billion. These remittances made up a significant share of GNP; 8.6 per cent in the Philippines, 7 per cent in Pakistan, 6.5 per cent in Sri Lanka, 6 per cent in Bangladesh, 4.7 per cent in Indonesia, 3.1 per cent in India and 1.8 per cent in Thailand (2002-2003 figs.).

◆ The global trend towards the feminization of labour migration is clearest in Asia. In the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, women account for 60 to 80 per cent of those seeking work abroad. Most female labour migration is still focused on a limited number of occupations, notably domestic work and the entertainment industry.

The biggest challenge for policy-makers has been the growth of clandestine migration, trafficking and the consequent large populations of irregular migrants. In the region as a whole, as many as one in four migrant workers may lack official status. Such migrants are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Most responses to unofficial migration have focused on a range of preventative measures (such as controlling entry, limiting length of stay, deportations and sanctions against the employers of undocumented workers), but countries are now recognizing that irregular migration needs to be tackled on a broader front since it has many dimensions – including national security, neighbour-state relations and human rights.

It is clear that migration controls alone cannot deal with these problems. The formulation of employment policies, the reform of labour markets, the establishment of regular, legal channels for migrant workers with required skills, the development of strong labour institutions, the involvement of employers' and workers' organizations, and cooperation between sending and receiving countries will help to maximize the potential benefits from migration for all those involved.

Trade unions in both sending and receiving countries can monitor abuses, raise public awareness of migrant worker issues, provide migrant workers with a voice and offer training and legal services. Employers' organizations can promote codes of conduct. Both have a role to play in promoting the non-discriminatory treatment of migrant workers in their countries of employment.

Demographic trends and uneven development patterns in Asia suggest that labour migration will continue to grow. If efficiently managed, it can contribute to skills development and poverty reduction, and give both individuals and economies a competitive advantage in an increasingly global economic environment.

International Labour Office
4 route des Morillons
CH-1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland
Tel. +4122/799-7912
Fax +4122/799-8577
www.ilo.org/communication

ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific
11th floor, United Nations Building
Rajdamnern Nok Avenue
Bangkok 10200
Thailand
Tel. +662 288 1234
Fax. +662 288 1076
www.ilo.org/asia

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The Role of the ILO

Although migrant workers contribute greatly to the prosperity of their host and sending countries, they do not always get a fair deal in the global economy. This is why since the 1930s the ILO has pioneered the development of international instruments for the governance of labour migration and protection of migrant workers.

The 92nd session of the International Labour Conference (ILC) in June 2004 adopted by consensus a "Resolution and Conclusions concerning a fair deal for migrant workers in a global economy". This noted that: "The ILO's mandate in the world of work as well as its competencies and unique tripartite structure entrust it with special responsibilities regarding migrant workers. Decent work is at the heart of this. The ILO can play a central role in promoting policies to maximize the benefits and minimize the risks of work-based migration".

The ILC called on the ILO and its constituents to implement a Plan of Action on migrant workers. Its centrepiece is the "ILO Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration", a comprehensive collection of principles, guidelines and best practices on labour migration policy that gives practical guidance to governments, employers' and workers' organizations on the development and improvement of labour migration policies.

The Framework focuses on decent work for all, governance of migration, migrant rights, development linkages and international cooperation. It recognizes the crucial role of the social partners and social dialogue in effective migration policy and addresses the special problems faced by women migrant workers.

The Fourteenth Asian Regional Meeting presents a unique opportunity for countries of the region to consult each other at a tripartite level on how to apply the elements of this non-binding, rights-based framework to benefit both sending and receiving countries and promote decent work for all migrant workers.

For more information: www.ilo.org/migrant

Relevant Conventions

- ILO Convention No. 97 on Migration for Employment, 1949
- ILO Convention No. 143 on Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions), 1975
- 1990 International Convention for the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families

All International Labour Standards apply to all migrant workers regardless of status, except where explicitly exempted in a few ILO Conventions.