

Labour Migration Management in South Asia Region

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Abstract

Migration management in the South Asia region is an increasingly important issue because of its increasing share in migration stock and remittances inflow. Since the 1970s, the majority of migrants in this region prefer to go to the Gulf countries to deploy the largest workers. Similarly, South Asian countries have received an increasing amount of remittances to benefit at the household level and national level. However, policies in this region in terms of both labour-sending and receiving countries are not leading to reliable and effective implementation and management. Enforcement of nationalization policies has squeezed the labour market destination for the workers in the Gulf region while persistent conflict among the labour-sending countries hinders the effectiveness of advocacy in labour migration issues. This paper concludes to plan for the reintegration of returned migrants into the local economy for the sustainable labour migration management in South Asia.

1. Introduction

The South Asian Region (SAR) is one of the world's largest regions holding about one fourth (22.91%) of the global population (UNDESA, 2017). SAR consists of eight countries, namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (SAARC, 2019). The growing population in the SAR has exacerbated unemployment and poverty in this region and pushed many people, especially surplus unskilled and semiskilled (Wickramasekara, 2015), to migrate for employment and settlement beyond their usual place of residence.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)¹ member states, in particular Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), are major destination countries for labour migrants from SAR countries. India is the largest exporter for labour migrants to the GCC followed by Bangladesh and Pakistan (Ratha, Christian, & Plaza, 2016). In contrast, Bhutan and the Maldives literally send no people for labour migration (Srivastava & Pandey, 2017). GCC countries recruit migrant workers as contract workers who thus have limited residency in the GCC region.

Since the migration to the GCC region is for temporary employment, remittances² are the key feature of it. SAR countries received almost 20% of global remittances (Ratha et al., 2016; World Bank, 2019) with India consistently the largest receiver over the past decade (Afram, 2012; World Bank, 2019). Similarly, Nepal is one of the top-ranked countries to receive remittances in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) at 29.6% in 2016 (MOF, 2017; Ratha et al., 2016).

In this paper, we describe several aspects of migration and remittances management policies linking SAR migrants to GCC countries and investigate how regional advocacies simultaneously foster and hinder the flow of migrants and remittances. We show that the SAR region is an important emerging region of concern because it hosts, exports and shares a significant percentage of the total global migrant market. Migration for employment is unsurprisingly the most important reason migrants in

this region. Moreover, reintegration of the returned migrants to the local economy is an increasing concern for the management of the migration for sustainable local economic growth.

2. Migration in the SAR Region: History and Current Trends

The SAR migrants are regarded as the most mobile people in the world (UNODC, 2007) where the region experiences both intra-regional (within SAR countries) and inter-regional (beyond SAR countries) migration, with the majority (over 70%) in the latter category (Ratha et al., 2016). The share of migrants from SAR to the total global migration stock has risen from 15.3% in 2000 to 16.7% in 2017 (IOM's GMDAC, 2019). Moreover, SAR covers the five of top 15 migration corridors: Bangladesh to India, Afghanistan to Pakistan, Afghanistan to Iran, India to UAE, India to USA and India to Saudi Arabia (Ratha et al., 2016). A study by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported that more than 200 million people in the SAR region migrate annually (internal and overseas) to escape poverty and unemployment in the local economy (UNODC, 2007).

The SAR countries have promoted labour migration since the 1970s to alleviate the problems of unemployment and negative balance of payment (Agunias, Aghazarm, & Battistella, 2011; Gunatilleke, 1998). However, colonial recruitment into the armed forces including Gurkha recruitment from Nepal, Sikh recruitment and Punjabi and Pathan recruitment were prominent during the 18th Century are also part of the early history of migration in the SAR (Adas, 1974; ILO, 2016; Jha, 1998). The recent migration trends have moved beyond armed forces recruitment and now include migrants working in nursing, construction, manufacturing, farming and security sectors who travel mainly to GCC countries. In a study conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in 2012, India and Pakistan had sent almost all the migrants to GCC countries in 2012, 97.3% and 97.2% respectively, while migrants from Sri Lanka (86.7%), Bangladesh (79%) and Nepal (55%) also preferred to migrate to the GCC countries (Agunias et al., 2011).

The oil economy boom coupled with the rise of oil prices in the 1970s in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states led to increased demand for migrants from the foreign countries because of an insufficient number of workers in the domestic labour market. On the other hand, the SAR region was abundant with the surplus labour force who were searching for the labour migration (Wickramasekara, 2015). India and Pakistan were the first countries in Asia to send workers in GCC countries in the 1970s who were deployed in infrastructure development projects to boost the oil economy (Agunias et al., 2011). Other countries in SAR also sent their people for foreign employment in GCC regions, mainly to Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar. The number of workers from SAR continued to increase more prominently after the 1990s (Srivastava & Pandey, 2017) while faced a slight decline in 2018 (Ratha et al., 2018). The number of the migrants from SAR in 1990 was 24.5 million and is today 39.6 million making the SAR region the largest source region for the migration in the world in 2017 (IOM's GMDAC, 2019).

Since GCC countries do not grant permanent residency and citizenship to foreign workers, temporary migration is the basic feature of the migrants from SAR to GCC countries. Unskilled and semi-skilled employment have dominated overall job markets abroad. For instance, as a percentage of the total 75% of Sri Lankans, 74% of Pakistanis, 66% of Bangladeshis (Agunias et al., 2011) and 70% of Indians (Afram, 2012) were unskilled and semi-skilled migrants, while for Nepali workers 99% were unskilled (75% unskilled and 24% semi-skilled) (MOLE, 2015).

Temporary migration has benefits over the permanent migration that covers a relatively larger population in SAR. The Abu Dhabi Dialogue (ADD) explains the benefits of temporary migration as a) enabling receiving countries to manage cyclic migration in response to economic fluctuations; b) assisting the host community to preserve the sense of social cohesion and ownership of social changes; c) permitting migrants to benefit themselves with improved social capital in terms of their skills, knowledge, networks and entrepreneurship so that their income as remittances can promote economic and social development; and d) utilising the remittances sent back home to boost economic and social development (Abu Dhabi Dialogue, 2019).

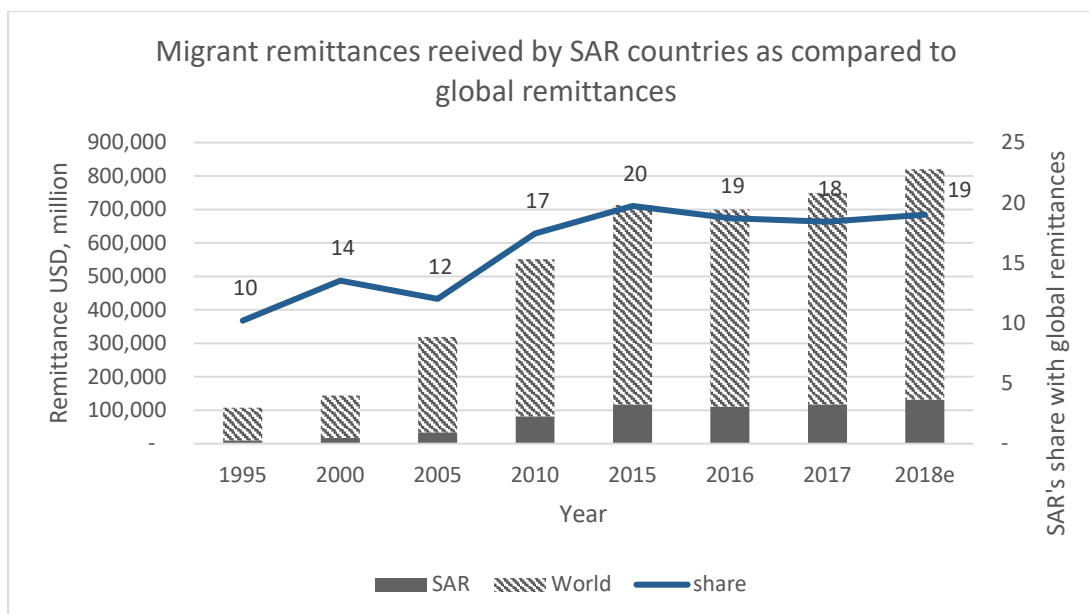
The GCC countries have progressed significantly in economic terms in a relatively short period of time. In contrast, economic progress in SAR countries in the same period is at a slower pace. To foster more rapid economic development in SAR countries, it is thus recommended to plan for the effective and efficient reintegration of these migrants into the domestic economy. The reintegration of the migrants into the local economy proponents for sustainable development in the region.

3. Remittances in SAR

Remittances are an increasingly important source of international financing today and exceed other forms of assistance such as Official Development Aid (ODA) and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in SAR countries and as well as globally (Ratha et al., 2016). For example, Nepal's remittances are more than six times higher than the combined amount of ODA and FDI in 2016 (MOF, 2017). Remittance inflows into SAR have increased significantly in terms of amount and share to global remittances (Figure 1). Despite a fall in a number of migrants in the last couple of years, remittance inflows are projected to rise by 13.5% in 2018 over 2017 which is higher than the estimated 10.3% increase in global remittances (Ratha et al., 2018; World Bank, 2019).

Amount of remittances received would be higher when the cost of transfer remittances is low. SAR region has the lowest average remittance cost (5.6%) and some corridors have less than the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) goal of 3%

Studies indicate that remittances contribute to the recipient countries at two levels. Firstly, at the micro or household level, they improve the socio-economic status and enable families to afford basic needs such as foods, shelter and clothes as well as better health and education facilities (Ratha, Mohapatra, & Plaza, 2008). Secondly, at the macro or state level they offset trade-deficits and buffer countries against occasional economic shocks (Ratha et al., 2016; Sapkota, 2013). However, the inflow of remittances also creates problems due to over-dependence (Ratha et al., 2016; World Bank, 2011).



(Source: World Bank Data Portal)

Figure 1: Remittances inflows into SAR since 1995

Remittances can buffer a country against occasional shocks in the home countries and remittances inflow increases during such incidents. For example, India received 15.2% more in remittances after the state of Kerala was hit by floods in 2018 (Ratha et al., 2018). Similarly, Nepal experienced a 14.3% growth in remittance inflows in 2015 over the previous year after the devastating earthquake hit the Nepalese economy (MOF, 2017). The increase in the remittances inflow into SAR enabled the concerned household to cope with the economic hardship during the occasional shocks.

4. Policies and programs in Labour supply and demand nexus between SAR and GCC member states

SAR governments have recognized the importance of migration in recent years and this is reflected in their institutional arrangements to oversee migration issues as well as several policies to regulate and promote migration. During the colonial period the Emigration Act 1922 was in effect in the Indian sub-continent to regulate skilled and unskilled migration (Adas, 1974). Pakistan was the first country to replace this act in 1979 as per the changing political context in the country and it was followed by Sri Lanka in 1981, Bangladesh in 1982 and India in 1983 (Addleton, 1992). Nepal, which has always a sovereign country, formulated the Foreign Employment Act in 1985 to manage and regulate issues in labour migration (DOFE, 2007). However, in most countries the relevant ministries do not hold much power in the cabinet (Wickramasekara, 2015) and struggle to regulate and facilitate migration outflows.

Policies relating to migration management are implemented not only by labour-sending countries but also in host countries and these need to be coordinated to ensure safe, decent and regular migration. The migrant workers from the SAR countries have contributed significantly with their knowledge, skills and hard work to the prosperity and rapid development of the Gulf region over the past three decades (Agunias et al., 2011). However, the GCC countries offer selective facilities to foreign workers, restricting immigrants from becoming citizens, running and owning their own business, and owning houses or land. Moreover, these workers have no political rights and social welfare benefits. While all immigrants are recruited through open labour market worldwide who need a work permit to work in

GCC countries, these are only available for specific jobs or sectors (Weiner, 1995). Moreover, the GCC countries are reluctant to sign bilateral agreements and instead follow a unilateral policy to control the entry and employment of non-nationals (Abella, 1992; IOM, 2019).

The policies in the GCC countries are not always supportive of higher labour migration and have been more 'restrictive' in recent years. For example, Saudi Arabia has enforced the Nitaqat scheme since 2011 after failure to the 'Saudization' policy in 1992. This policy is designed to create employment opportunities for their own nationals and is implemented by restricting foreign workers (Sadi, 2015) and resulted in more than 50,000 migrants deported annually since 2011 (Ratha et al., 2018). Many prospective migrants are in doubt because of the conflict among member states in GCC (Rai, 2017). In addition, Saudi Arabia launched 'Nation without violators' to curb the people without valid residency or working visa in Saudi Arabia with the Saudi residency Law 1952 (Law Number 17-225-1337)³.

Given that SAR countries have a higher outflow of migrants for foreign employment than many other countries, regional governments provide licenses to private recruiters. Thus, in many cases government agencies are responsible for quality control in the recruitment process (Ruiz, 2008). However, there is evidence that the private, licenced recruitment agencies charge excessive and unauthorized fees from migrants despite governments discouraging such practices (Agunias et al., 2011). Moreover, SAR governments have achieved little success in regulating and controlling the activities of informal brokers, sub-agents and illegal recruiters (Agunias et al., 2011). The International Labour Office–Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (ILO–KNOMAD) recently revealed that some migration corridors have very high recruitment costs in the order of USD5,000 for construction works from Pakistan travelling to Saudi Arabia and which takes more than 20 months to repay (Ratha et al., 2017). Regulation of recruitment agencies can thus improve migrant welfare.

Return migration and reintegration of the returned migrants into their home countries is becoming a critical issue in the recent decades (Agunias et al., 2011; Dumont, 2005; Zwager & Sintov, 2017). The returned migrants have a potential asset for the sending countries and appropriate reintegration of returnees can contribute a lot to boost the local economy. Neglecting the exceptions, returnees bring skills, experience and capital assets back with them with the potential to become self-employed or more competitive in the local job market than before migration (Ratha et al., 2017). However, the slow pace of economic development coupled with a relative lack of employment opportunities often forces returned migrants to return overseas to the same or similar countries for employment. This is often described as 'circular migration'.

5. Regional advocacy for migration

The SAR countries are networking with various non-aligning advocacy forums in different issues. This study is more focused on migration and remittance issues. The following section outlines major advocating organizations and campaigns that are directly and indirectly beneficial to the SAR countries.

6.1 South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC)

During the British colonial era, the term 'Indian Subcontinent' was used to refer to what is now represented by the present-day SAR (Chakma, 2018, p. 191). SAARC was established to represent the SAR as set out in the SAARC Charter which was signed on 8 December 1985. SAARC originally encompassed the seven countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (Chakma, 2018; SAARC, 2019), with Afghanistan becoming the eighth member of SAARC in April 2007 (SAARC, 2019). SAARC represents exclusively to the countries in South Asia.

SAARC has achieved very limited success in developing and implementing regional policies (Chakma, 2018; Wickramasekara, 2011). Explanations for this include SAARC's difficulties in managing countries with diverse economic development plans, security capacities and cultural identities. Member states often have very serious conflicts of interests. For instance, India and Pakistan have an antagonistic relationship (Chakma, 2018). Moreover, India has direct connectivity to almost all the countries through its borders (except two island countries; Sri Lanka and Maldives and Afghanistan). Since no two other countries share borders with each other in SAR, SAARC, as a result is more India-centric (Chakma, 2018; Kodikara, 1979; Thornton, 1991).

6.2 The International Organisation for Migration, International Labour Organisation and the Regional Consultative Process (RCP)

The IOM and International Labour Organization (ILO) are two major Inter-Governmental Organizations that support migration management worldwide. IOM and ILO are working together to advocate for the countries of concerns in labour migration and do not implement or enforce for the policies (ILO, 2019; IOM, 2019). The participating countries gain information regarding several conventions through the training and capacity building opportunities provided by these organizations thereby assisted to ratify the conventions related to migration management (ILO, 2019). Moreover, these organization helped the Regional Consultative Process (RCP) and Dialogues as the observers (Babar & Gardner, 2016; Kneebone, 2010).

6.3 The Colombo Process and Abu Dhabi Dialogue

The Colombo Process (CP) was established in 2003 with the support of IOM as an informal, non-binding membership-based forum for RCP on the overseas labour or employment management for the Asian origin countries that advocate the issues and concerns on labour migration (Babar & Gardner, 2016; Colombo Process, 2019; Kneebone, 2010). The CP is limited to 12 labour-sending countries; China, six of SAR countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) and five of Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam) (Colombo Process, 2019; Kneebone, 2010). More specifically, the role of the CP is to share the experiences and lessons; discuss the issues faced by the migrants, countries of origin and destination; suggest pragmatic solutions, optimise the developmental benefits from the overseas employment and enhance dialogues with the destination countries; and finally review and monitor the policy implementation and explore further actions (Colombo Process, 2019). The CP has been involved in three different thematic areas from its inception as a) Protection and provision of services to migrant workers, b) Optimizing benefits of organized labour migration and c) Capacity building, data collection and inter-state cooperation (Babar & Gardner, 2016; Colombo Process, 2019).

However, increasing issues of migration management in the Gulf region in the 2000s demanded that the concerns of both the labour-sending and receiving countries be addressed and contributed to the emergence of another regional consultative process, the Abu Dhabi Dialogue (ADD) (Babar & Gardner, 2016). The ADD was established in 2008 and is a forum for dialogue and cooperation between labour-sending and receiving countries in Asia and counterparts of the CP to encourage participatory programs for transfer of entrepreneurship skills and knowledge in the local economy (Abu Dhabi Dialogue, 2019). The permanent secretariat of the ADD at the United Arab Emirates and current chair-in-office is Sri Lanka.

The ADD aims to promote safe, orderly and regular labour migration through multilateral dialogue and cooperation amongst the member states and for the joint development. Migrants workers have a significant role in the receiving countries' household and national economic development (Abu Dhabi Dialogue, 2019).

6. Protection, welfare and re-integration

Transborder migration management is now a major concern for most of the countries around the world, with cooperation for international migration recently reaffirmed in the adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) on 10-11 December 2018 at Morocco.⁴ Labour migration abroad has satisfied the immediate employment needs of many people. However, the major host countries have reduced number of new recruitments that created shrank opportunities for prospective migrants. The non-beneficiary people will try for the alternative pathways for migration when usual recruitment is not available to them (Larsen, Renshaw, Gray-Barry, Andreovski, & Corsbie, 2012) and remain as irregular or undocumented migrants. Moreover, these people are vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation in the workplace.

The governments in both the labour-sending and host countries have maintained only limited information about the numbers of migrants and working and living conditions abroad. Similarly, there is only limited information available for undocumented and irregular migrants in this region because a) no travel documents are required to travel between India-Nepal and India-Bhutan (ILO, 2016), b) historical, cultural and ethnic proximity between the people of India-Bangladesh border areas and porous border (Das & Talukdar, 2016; Percot, 2018) and c) political soft treatment or unwillingness towards managing illegal migrants (Deb & Mahato, 2017). Moreover, GCC countries are reluctant to publish data and limited data that is available from the sending countries is not well disaggregated by sex, occupation, and other attributes (UN RCM Working Group, 2012). The limited information on the migrants has affected the protection of refugees and undocumented migrants in both sending and host countries.

7. Conclusion

For more than three decades, GCC has been a major destination for employment from SAR countries. Every year, the number of migrants recruited by GCC countries has increased except for the last couple of years. GCC-SAR corridor is the lowest cost corridor for remittance transfers that encompasses the largest remittance receiver, India. India and other SAR countries have received consistently a huge amount of remittances, despite the decline in recent recruitment.

The decline in a number of recruitments in GCC from SAR is due to their nationalization policies, especially Saudi Arabia and conflict between the member states in GCC countries. Increasing numbers of death tolls and casualty cases are still widespread in this region despite the several initiatives, such as SAARC, Colombo Process and Abu Dhabi Dialogues. The effectiveness of these endeavours is yet to be realized. The conflicting interest among the member states in SAR as well as between labour-sending and receiving countries have hindered the success of these initiatives.

Reintegration of the returned migrants can be beneficial to the local economy that all the labour-sending countries in SAR should initiate or improve programs and policies in re-integration. The returned migrants are always equipped better with improved social, human and financial capitals than they were before migration. The conducive environment to encourage their participation in the local economy can boost a local economy that supports migrant households as well as the national economy thereby exert lesser pressure than before to the several households for foreign employment.

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¹ The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) covers six Middle East Asian countries, namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

² The IOM defines remittances as 'monies earned or acquired by non-nationals that are transferred back to their country of origin'. *International migration law: Glossary on migration*: International Organization for Migration (IOM) 2nd Edition P. 83.

³ <http://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/saudi-arabia-authorities-launch-new-nation-without-violators-campaign-targeting-illegal-foreign-workers/>

⁴ GCM is the resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 19 December 2018 during UN General Assembly, 73rd Session, Agenda items 14 and 119