



A Bangladeshi migrant worker is reunited with his child.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

Lowering the costs of migration

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For many, migration is a route out of poverty and a pathway to live in dignity. It is an integral part of globalisation. The world community has recognised that migration can contribute in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development acknowledges that good governance of migration will yield positive dividends for migrants and members of their families as well as countries of origin and destination. The SDG target 10.7 calls for well-managed migration policies. Important references are alluded to migration in SDG 8 (economic growth and decent work) and SDG 16 (peaceful societies).

Over the last four decades Bangladesh has become an important source country of short-term migrant workers. During this period the outward movement of workers has steadily increased and so did the inward remittance flow. By now 10.4 million Bangladeshis went abroad for employment. The remittance figure for 2016 stood at USD 13.7 billion.

The social and economic contributions of migrant workers are now well recognised. Acknowledging the importance of labour migration for the national economy successive governments have undertaken various legislative and administrative measures to streamline the sector. Laws and policies were framed, an international treaty was acceded and quite a few institutions, including a separate ministry, were created to better serve the migrants and to positively harness the gains from labour migration.

The above efforts of the government supplemented by the active engagement of the civil society have created, to an extent, a minimum threshold for the Bangladeshi migrant workers to secure some basic services and to have a degree of prior knowledge about the benefits of migration through regular channels and pitfalls of movement through irregular routes. However, Bangladeshi migrant workers continue to be subjected to exorbitantly high migration costs and insecure work



A group of Bangladeshi migrants returns home.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

environment in their countries of destination.

A number of sources have validated the fact that Bangladeshis have to bear the highest cost of migration in the region. The World Bank initiative Knowledge Network on Migration and Development (KNOMAD) reported in 2014 that Bangladeshis had to work for nine months in Kuwait simply to recoup the money they had spent to finance migration. In contrast, Indian workers had to work for two and a half months and Sri Lankans for only a month to recover the migration cost. A

RMMRU survey of recently deployed migrant workers informs that the average migration cost currently stands at USD 4,800. Another recent report of the ILO on the costs incurred by Bangladeshi workers notes that a male migrant needs to spend BDT 6.5 to 7.5 lakh to go to Saudi Arabia, BDT 5.5 to 6 lakh to go to Lebanon and BDT 2.5 to 3 lakh to migrate to Malaysia. It is worthwhile to recall that the officially stipulated ceiling is BDT 84,000 - a little more than USD 1,000. Recently, for Saudi Arabia, the threshold has been doubled. One may therefore argue

that state authorities have failed to implement the provision.

The above figures only reflect financial costs that migrants have to pay upfront including those for obtaining visa, completing exit formalities (passport, medical tests, BMET clearance, etc.) and purchasing air tickets. Those do not include costs that are incurred for (a) general and specific (such as language or skills) training; (b) opportunity costs of wages not earned while preparing and training to go abroad; and (c) social costs associated with separation from family and relatives.

The high cost of migration is a matter of utmost concern for workers, rights activists and policymakers. The problem is further compounded as Bangladeshi workers generally receive lower wages and benefits from their employers than their peers from countries such as India, Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Philippines. This means Bangladeshi workers have to put in many more hours of labour to offset the high migration costs they incur. It also contributes to situations in which

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