

# ASPIRATIONS FOR THE NEXT 50 YEARS

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## What is the future of our migrant workers?



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Lisbon's riverfront Praça do Comércio is one of Europe's largest city squares and a major attraction in tiny Portugal. The cobbled streets leading to its stone entrance are lined with typical tourist traps: trendy boutiques, sidewalk cafes, and gift shops, nothing that genuinely defies expectations. The welcome surprise, the real twist, comes when you walk through the quaint doors and the shopkeeper greets you in, of all languages, Bangla.

In the sixteenth century, seafaring Portuguese were the first Europeans to build an enclave in Chattagram, but there is no Portuguese embassy in contemporary Bangladesh. Fortunately, diplomatic relations are on an upswing.

Bangladesh opened a mission in 2012 to serve its migrant population. And in downtown Lisboa, our people are everywhere.

Though the days are long, the work relentless, and the economy permanently sluggish, Lisbon's Bangladeshi community seems to be thriving. Young Bangladeshi men (and occasionally women) staff convenience stores, serve Peri-Peri chicken in black aprons, and assemble on the streets to discuss Bangladeshi politics during breaks.

The migrant workers I met throughout the country told me they find it easier to get residency documents here before moving further inland into Europe. Finding me a clueless tourist on the Praça, they introduced me to pastéis de nata, an eggy, custardy tart. They



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sold me cork and ceramic souvenirs at remarkable non-tourist discount. On my last evening, I stood on the shores of the Tagus River as a young Bangladeshi man rushed to work. I marvelled at how thousands of the world's most under resourced people persevere through sheer will, setting up new lives in alien worlds, steadily turning the tides of history.

We are living, of course, in the age of migration. Barring Covid, millions of people are typically on the move each year to escape war, the effects of climate change, to find jobs. This is a stage where Bangladesh, the world's eighth-most populous country, has a starring role. Of the estimated 164 million migrant workers worldwide today, 10 million come from Bangladesh (spread across 160 countries). That's how many people there are in Portugal altogether.

With every passing decade since Independence, families, communities, and, increasingly, entire districts in our country have become more reliant on the remittance migrants send back through official and unofficial channels. According to the World Bank, for each additional 0.1 percent of a district's population that migrated internationally between 2000 and 2016, poverty in that district fell by 1.7 percent in Bangladesh. Hard-earned dollars and dinars pay school and hospital fees, build pucca homes, and help finance passage for more relatives and friends to move overseas. In addition to RMG, remittance inflow has for years served as a veritable pillar of our economy, pumping in USD 21.9 billion last year amidst the global pandemic.

Close to half a million Bangladeshis

move abroad every year searching for work. They leave by land, sea, and air, with and without papers, on expensive and dangerous journeys. Despite considerable effort from the government and the development sector in recent years to institutionalise and regulate it, migration remains a precarious endeavour, often a desperate jump from poverty into global systems of slavery, human trafficking, and exploitation. Many workers die along the way. Most find work that is low-skilled and physically and mentally gruelling, often at the fringes of their host societies.

In Qatar, where migrant workers are building astonishing stadiums for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, up to 4,000 workers, may die from the work before the first ball is kicked. "I am not myself anymore, mother/come see how I live," writes Bangladeshi migrant worker and poet Md Mukul Hossain, in his evocative poetry collection Me Migrant.

Driving these massive outflows of humanity is a growing, restless, and underserved young population in Bangladesh, where 65 percent of the population today is of working age. Countries like South Korea have strategically invested in education and infrastructure during similar population trends (known as a demographic dividend), building deep foundations for prosperity. Giving a sizeable working population quality education, secure employment, stable healthcare can lead to substantial national transformation within a single generation. In the early 1950s, Korea's national income (GNI)

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