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Foundation



Ethical recruitment is the answer

Ethical recruitment and zero cost migration in the context of the Eighth Five-Year Plan

The Government of Bangladesh's prioritisation of remittances as an important tool to support development and drive Bangladesh's economy further is reflected in their migration-related programmes and planning. Remittances should be prioritised, and as such remitters should be valued and protected. In this respect, the Government of Bangladesh should explore mechanisms to support remittance-sending Bangladeshi migrant workers abroad. This includes ensuring that migrant workers and their families directly benefit from migration through a process that is ethical—labour migration comes at no cost to migrant workers themselves. On March 24, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), in association with the Samakal and The Daily Star, organised a multistakeholder dialogue on "Ethical recruitment and zero cost migration in the context of the Eighth Five-Year Plan" in Dhaka. At the dialogue, esteemed guests shared their observations.

Imran Ahmed MP, Minister, Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment.

Unlock the development potential of remittances by reducing the cost of migration



There is always a risk of focusing too heavily on the development impacts of remittances but not paying equal attention to those who earn and send remittances. We should constantly be striving to support them more.

We must pay the highest attention to the welfare of migrants, and ensure that they can personally benefit from their journey.

The government has been trying our best to address few very important issues of migration management in Bangladesh, including through:

- ensuring an effective insurance scheme for Bangladeshi migrant workers,
- reducing cost of migration and
- increasing skilled migration.

There has been some progress in many of these areas. On insurance, for instance, migrant workers used to get BDT 200,000 (USD 2,320) insurance coverage for a premium of BDT 990 (USD 11.50), and now they are covered for BDT 400,000 (USD 4,650) with the same premium. Now, migrants pay BDT 490 (USD 5.70) of the premium and the rest of the premium is paid from the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund. We will continue to strive to make the insurance system better. It is possible to provide a good insurance scheme if the premium is BDT 2,000 (USD 24) where the migrant worker and the recruiting agency contribute BDT 500 (USD 6) each and the government contributes BDT 1,000 (USD 12). Another critical factor is that our insurance schemes do not cover workers abroad. We have to figure out a mechanism to address this issue.

On addressing the cost of migration, the Probashi Kallyan Bank has already disbursed around BDT 1,200 crore since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there is a ceiling which limits migrant workers from obtaining loans above a certain amount. There also remains a question around who should receive these loans: the migrants overseas or their families. We must address these issues as soon as possible.

When looking at maximizing the development potential of migration and remittances, the question isn't about the sheer number of migrants Bangladesh sends. Even during the COVID 19 pandemic around 275,000 migrants went abroad. The number of Bangladeshi migrants who depart overseas in 2022 is expected to exceed one million. There are two major questions to ask about the types of migrants departing Bangladesh: are we sending skill migrants abroad; and will these migrants remit their earnings through regular channels.

On skilled migrants, there are many training centres established in the country, such as nursing schools. However, many of the nurses who graduate in this country will not get a job abroad because they do not have adequate language skills. We should prioritize language learning for potential skilled migrants. Besides English, we should focus on Chinese (Mandarin), German and Japanese languages. Currently, Germany requires over 400,000 nurses and caregivers, while the UK is looking to recruit over 100,000 nurses. We must put greater emphasis on upskilling and reskilling our potential migrant workers.

On the channels through which migrant workers remit, the majority still send money through the Hundi system (informal channel) despite receiving a 2.5 percent incentive from the government for transferring through official channels. The reason for this is that if remittances are sent through official channels from Dubai the exchange rate used is BDT 23 per UAE Dirham (AED). But in villages the Hundiwalas pay BDT 25 per AED. We have to take strong measures to prevent such illegal methods of remittance transfer. We need to focus on increasing the migration of skilled workforce and encourage the migrants to send their remittance through regular channels.

An important element of maximizing the benefits of migration so making accurate information available to all parties. We are working on creating a comprehensive database of migrants, including aspirant as well as returnee migrants. Recruiting agencies should also be included in the database. They should have the access to the database so that they can make selections from there. They should go through the process of attestation through the same platform. If we can set up a functioning digital platform it will help us in migration management. It will also make the online registration process easier. If needed, we should give incentives to encourage people to register through this digital platform. It will also enable the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment to provide support to the returnees.

On setting an ambitious government agenda in this field, while we may have

included a number of strategic targets in our planning documents such as in the 8th Five-Year Plan, we still face many obstacles in implementing these plans and achieving the targets. A midterm review of the 8th Five-Year Plan is required to better monitor progress and revise this strategic plan accordingly.

There are many stakeholders active in the field of migration. To coordinate stakeholders there should be an apex body on migration management. It should have the authority to make binding decisions so that our plans do not get tied up in red tape indefinitely.

As noted earlier, the most critical issue in the field is the high cost of migration. We need to ensure transparency regarding this cost. If the cost of going abroad for employment is BDT 100,000 on paper, for instance, migrants can end up paying four times that amount. No one is being held responsible for this. Middlemen who make these arrangements leave no evidence of their transactions, which makes it hard to track. Migrants spend most of the time abroad to cover the cost of their migration. While it is important to work with all stakeholders involved in the migration process to reduce cost of migration, this process cannot go on indefinitely.

on for Bangladesh.

In terms of the cost of migration, despite there being a multitude of recruiting agencies in the country, we see a rise in the cost of migration. Competition among these agencies should see a reduction in the cost of migration cost, and this needs to be investigated.

Admittedly, recruiting agencies are profit-seeking businesses. The government should monitor these agencies and make sure they are not making abnormal profits. We must also improve the capacity of law enforcement agencies.

Md. Shahidul Haque, Former Foreign Secretary and Senior Advisor to IOM

Bangladesh should learn from its neighbours about reducing the cost of migration



Migration operates on the basis of the market system. No market system is perfect, as the market will always try to maximise profit. Organisations that work in an ethical manner do not make abnormal profits. However, there

responsibilities. If they do not know the proper process to follow or do not know about the proper agencies, then it is difficult to protect them from unscrupulous agents. In this respect, it is important that migration workers know both their rights and their responsibilities.

Shashan al Habibe, Executive Director, The Jordan Garments, Accessories & Textiles Exporter's Association (JGATE)

Zero cost migration and ethical recruitment will ensure that Bangladesh gains from sending migrants abroad and workers benefit from their journeys



Bangladeshi workers go to Jordan through a transparent migration process with the help of BOESL. They are being treated well there. They get various benefits including joining trade unions. In garment factories, any

inconvenience to the workers is dealt with the greatest sincerity. The Bangladesh-Jordan cost of migration is also much lower compared to other corridors.



forced to pay so much money? A large number of recruiting agencies source workers through brokers, and they also buy visas. These two factors increase the cost of migration. The government has taken steps to regulate brokers

by amending the law. But having laws in place is not enough, they must be enforced.

There should be a database of prospective migrant workers where all information about their skills and qualifications is available. A model should be developed where all recruitment costs are borne by employers.

Syed Saiful Haque, Chairman, WARBE Development Foundation

As long as visas are bought and sold, the cost of migration will not decrease.



As long as visas are bought and sold, the cost of migration will not decrease. Here, we need the cooperation of the destination country to stop sale of visas. We also need to invest to increase efficiency of our migrant workers.

We should properly evaluate recruiting agencies before issuing them operating licenses. Additionally, the government should ensure that once these agencies start working, they do so in a safe, ethical and transparent manner.

Fathima Nusrath Ghazzali, Officer-in-Charge, IOM Bangladesh



Safe, orderly, regular and well-managed migration benefits migrants and their families, as well as sending and receiving countries. The 8th Five-Year Plan serves as a guiding document which will see the country graduate from least developed country status

in 2026 and will guide Bangladesh's effort to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the objectives of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM).

Ethical recruitment, low-cost migration, the Employer Pays Principle and IOM's International Recruitment Integrity System (IRIS) are clearly mentioned in agenda number six, eight and nine of the migration chapter in the 8th Five-Year Plan. The government of Bangladesh made their position clear on adopting an ethical process in migration by including these principles. IOM will continue to work closely with the Government of Bangladesh to achieve these goals and provide necessary technical support. IOM also works with global brands, suppliers and recruiters to support them in upholding migrant workers' rights and to adjust operational models to protect them.

Migrant workers remain particularly vulnerable to exploitation, which often starts at recruitment. Migrants are often subject to unethical recruitment and employment practices, such as excessive fees, retention of personal documents, and not being granted access to legal protections. The high costs of migration in Bangladesh increases the likelihood that migrants will end up with unsustainable levels of debt, or resort to dangerous and irregular migration channel; hence increasing their vulnerability.

Migration is included in the 8th Five-Year Plan's poverty reduction strategy. The plan seeks to ensure justice, equity and equality for all Bangladeshis, including those abroad, aspirant migrants, and returnees. In terms of ethical recruitment, the plan notes the Government's intention to introduce the IRIS for private recruiting agencies. To achieve this broad vision, there needs to be close collaboration between the Government of Bangladesh, governments of receiving countries, recruiters, employers and other key stakeholders.

Abu Sayeed Khan, Advisory Editor, Daily Samakal & Moderator of the session



We hope that the government will take strong steps to eliminate all irregularities and bring more transparency to the migration process. The government should play the role of a strict regulator. If any agency indulges in irregularities the government must punish them irrespective of who they are. The government needs to invest more in protecting the rights of migrants. I take this opportunity to remind all that these migrants have kept the wheels of the economy running by sending billions of dollars to the country even during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Dr. Shamsul Alam, State Minister, Ministry of Planning

Improving skills profiles and regulating private recruitment agencies are the keys to development gains through labour migration



The 6th Five-Year Plan envisioned that Bangladesh would send 600,000 workers abroad, but we actually sent 700,000 a year. Rather than suffering from a current-account deficit, Bangladesh now has a surplus of foreign currency reserves thanks to the earnings from exports and remittances.

Migration is further emphasised in the 8th Five-Year Plan. 'Zero migration cost' implies that employers will bear all migration-related costs for the migrant workers. The government is also proactive in this regard. Probashi Kallyan Bank provides loans when a person gets a job abroad.

While the government's actions so far on reducing the cost of migration are laudable, more action is required.

To reflect the rapidly changing labour market demands, the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training (BMET) has been asked to improve their training modules. Demand for semi-skilled workers is on the decline. Although the number of expatriate workers from the Philippines is less compared to Bangladesh, they send back more remittances. Nepal is also making progress in this regard. We must improve the skills of our migrant workers and reduce the cost of migration.

In terms of training, there are a great number of technical training institutes in Bangladesh, but are they producing appropriately skilled workers? For example, almost all the staff at the Grand Sultan Hotel in Sylhet are from the Philippines. We need to invest in skills development to create a pool of Bangladeshi workers similar to them. We need to focus on creating skilled human resources in different sectors, including information technology, automation and robotics.

Establishing effective linkage between educational institutions and industries will ensure development of a skilled workforce and professionals based on industry needs. India has revolutionised their ICT sector by connecting education to cater to the needs of industry. These are examples that we can build

are many agencies in the market that want to make a quick buck. Therefore, strong monitoring and regulatory mechanisms should be in place to ensure that the market operates ethically.

It is very encouraging to see that the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment is very involved in matters related to migration management. This is attributed to the current leadership and the excellent direction coming from the leadership. At the same time we need to bring systematic changes to continue to make progress and potential improvements.

Why does India not face the same problems compared to Bangladesh in terms of migration? Their policy on migration is very solid. In India, it is mandatory to have proper insurance policy as a migrant worker, the insurance fee charges are shared between the migrant worker, the government and company. Policies such as these ensure that migrant workers are protected from exploitation. We should learn from their experience and introduce a solid insurance scheme for our migrant workers that provide coverage in the destination countries.

Nepal and India have very strict recruitment laws—if an agency makes extra profit, the owner will likely be punished. Such strong policy decisions should be taken in Bangladesh to protect migrant workers.

Bangladesh can and should study and adapt some of the mechanism put in place by neighbouring countries.

Md Billal Hossain, Managing Director, Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Limited (BOESL)

Migrant workers must know their rights and responsibilities



BOESL is the only government agency that facilitates ethical and transparent migration.

The cost is BDT 36,000 per employee, including pre-departure orientation, service charges and tax.

BOESL sent 6,000 workers abroad in the 2020-21 fiscal year, whereas 12,000 migrant workers were sent in the first nine months of 2021-22 fiscal year. Hardship suffered by workers abroad is minimal when going through BOESL channels. No workers have been killed or tortured in the Bangladesh-Jordan labour migration corridor.

Workers going abroad also have some

I think, the reason Bangladeshi migrants enjoy all these rights and benefits in Jordan is due to the fact that the Jordanian employers pay for migration cost of these workers and BOESL facilitates their recruitment process by following the Employer-Pays Principle. This has been possible only because of the commitment of the Jordanian employers and BOESL to follow zero cost migration and the employer-pays principle in this migration corridor. I believe following a policy of zero cost migration and ethical recruitment will ensure that Bangladesh gains from sending migrants abroad and workers will also benefit from their journeys.

Mizanur Rahman, Former Joint Secretary, BAIRA.

The obstacles faced by recruiting agencies should be removed to lower the cost of migration and protect migrant workers



Migrants used to spend around BDT 1,200,000 to go to Saudi Arabia. Now it only costs BDT 120,000. It is possible to send workers at a lower cost if the obstacles faced by recruiting agencies are removed. About 200,000 workers have gone to

Saudi Arabia in the last two months.

It does not cost anything for female worker to migrate. There were many incidents of violence against female migrant workers. With a few small changes the number of cases of violence against them has come down significantly. After trying for several years, female workers in the Middle East now have the right to speak to their relatives in Bangladesh, included in their contract of employment. Consequently, the number of incidents of violence against female workers has decreased.

BAIRA has struggled to reduce migration costs. Migration should be included in the curriculum of secondary education. Those who want to go abroad need to learn about the whole process from a young age. International organisations that have been working on transparency in migration processes should also work in receiving countries. Then we will be able to ensure zero cost migration by 2040 in line with the government's vision.

Shakirul Islam, Chairman, Ovbashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP)

Having laws in place is not enough, they must be enforced.

The question is often asked: why a migrant worker is spending so much money to go abroad? Instead, we should ask why they are