

SECTOR Note  
*Migrant labour in the construction industry*

The construction industry has a long tradition of employing migrant labour. During the process of economic development, work in construction provides a traditional point of entry to the labour force for migrant workers from the countryside. Construction work is often the only significant alternative to farm labour for those without any particular skill or education and it has special importance for the landless.

When the pool of surplus labour from the countryside has dried up, or there is a shortage of local labour for other reasons, labour may be recruited from overseas. Migrant construction workers are generally from less developed and lower wage economies with labour surpluses. Many European countries rely heavily on migrant workers to fill jobs in the construction sector. Workers are from poorer countries in Europe or further afield (Turkey or Africa). Migrant labour is also important in the countries of the Arabian Gulf, with small populations and large construction programmes financed by oil revenues. And in the past decade, migration for work in construction has become a significant phenomenon in East Asia, where huge differentials in demographic characteristics and wages have led to a 'siphoning' of migrant workers from lower to higher wage economies.

Many countries have recognized their dependence on migrant labour and have attempted to regularize and control the process of migration for work in the construction industry. However there are still many migrants working illegally in the construction industry in a number of countries. These workers are extremely vulnerable to exploitation. Even when legally employed, migrant construction workers are sometimes deprived of trade union and other rights. The recruitment process is also very often highly exploitative.