

Promoting Decent Work Across Borders: A Project for Migrant Health Professionals and Skilled Workers

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International
Labour
Organization

The Challenge



International migration is an increasingly pressing issue in a globalized world. The movement of health professionals has increased significantly in the past decades. More so, the migration of health care workers between developing and developed countries has drawn a lot of attention mainly due to the economic and social effects it has been raising.

While migrant health care workers from developing countries are contributing to the health care sector of developed countries, the migration of professionals and skilled workers from developing countries is perceived to negatively affect the development potentials of the countries of origin. This phenomenon has been referred to as the “brain drain”.

The international migration of health care professionals directly impacts the achievement of health-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which relies upon strong and sufficiently staffed national health care systems.

The Response

The International Labour Organization (ILO), with funding support from the European Union (EU), is to implement a programme called Promoting Decent Work Across Borders: A Project for Migrant Health Professionals and Skilled Workers.

The Project seeks to better understand schemes in line with circular migration of health professionals. This will be done by engaging governments, trade unions, employers organizations into policy dialogues; establishing networks of experts and trained practitioners; strengthening employment services for healthcare professionals and skilled workers; facilitating skills recognition processes; and enhancing labour market information systems.

Through this Project, the ILO seeks to foster a “win-win-win” approach to migration that benefits the migrant workers, the source and destination countries within a rights-based framework for labour migration management.

The Project focuses its activities on three Asian countries with significant outflows of health professionals and skilled workers for foreign employment, namely: the Philippines, India, and Viet Nam. Whereas the Philippines has been training nurses for employment abroad for many years, India and Viet Nam are now also looking into this strategy. These countries are actively pursuing cooperative agreements on hiring of health care professionals to various destination countries, including the European countries and North America.

Key Statistics

- In 2010, the United Nations estimated that there were 214 million people living outside their country of citizenship.
- In 2006, the World Health Report calculated that there were a shortage of 4.3 million health professionals and identified 51 countries facing a severe shortage of such professionals. The greatest shortage occurred in South-East Asia, dominated by the needs of Bangladesh, India, and Indonesia.

Objectives

The Project aims to:

- foster policy dialogue to better understand circular migration schemes that are aligned with the ILO Decent Work Agenda and mitigate the risks of brain drain in a pro-active manner;
- design and test mechanisms to facilitate online registration, skills testing and certification, preparation and counseling, placement for European employment and upon return, their re-employment in the home country;
- improve data collection and analysis of labour market information on the demand and supply of professionals and skilled personnel in health care in the EU, alternative destination countries and the employment prospects in the participating countries.

Project Sites

The Philippines ranks as the world's third largest source of international migrants, after China and India. In 2009, according to national statistics, 10 per cent of the population was residing abroad. The country is the world supplier of registered nurses, with a total of over 110,000 nurses employed in countries that belong to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). More than 30 per cent of the internationally-trained nurses in the United States are from the Philippines.



Meanwhile, among developing countries, India is the biggest source country of trained physicians with India-trained physicians accounting for about 4.9 per cent of American physicians and 10.9 per cent of British physicians. Similarly, according to the International Organization for Migration, Viet Nam faces health challenges in relation to both international and domestic migration. In 2011, some 500,000 Vietnamese work overseas as part of a larger, four million-strong Vietnamese diaspora in more than 100 countries worldwide.

And yet, in the same breath there are shortages of health care professionals in the Philippines, India, and Viet Nam. This is especially dramatic in the rural areas, where only a small percentage of the trained professionals work. Nonetheless, health workforce migration can also bear positive outcomes. Migrants can avail of new professional opportunities, returned migrants can bring skills and other resources back to their home country and migration generates often much-needed remittances in the home countries.

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