



► Labour Migration in Asia and the Pacific

October 2025

Key points

- Much of the international migration occurring today is propelled by the search of decent work. By the end of 2023, deployment from the 13 main Asian countries of origin had increased 34 per cent from pre-pandemic (2019) levels.
- Focus areas for the ILO in 2024-25 include protecting and promoting of the rights of women and men migrant workers; economic development and inclusive growth; climate resilience; reintegration and supporting regional cooperation on labour migration.

1. Background and frameworks

The governance of labour migration is of core importance to the ILO and its constituents (such as governments, employers' and workers' organizations). The preamble to the ILO constitution highlights the need to protect workers employed in countries other than their own. Labour migration has the potential to deliver multiple benefits but also poses some risks and negative impacts. For countries of destination, it contributes to economic growth through the provision of labour, skills and ideas. For countries of origin, the movement of women and men across borders reduces underemployment pressures and increases remittances. At the same time the emigration of skilled human resources can result in skill shortages.

Migrant workers have the opportunity to earn higher incomes and develop new skills, and thus greater independence and agency. However, the envisioned benefits are not equitably distributed. At the International Labour Conference in June 2019, the ILO adopted a Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, which included a call for "deepening and scaling up its work on international labour migration in response to constituents' needs and taking a leadership role in decent work in labour migration".

Singapore Statement

The **Singapore Statement** adopted by ILO constituents from the Arab States and Asia-Pacific at the 17th Asia and the Pacific Regional Meeting of the ILO in December 2022, calls for enhancing labour migration policies. Priorities for national action include: strengthening governance frameworks and respect for freedom of association to protect the rights of migrant workers, including improved

accommodation, protection of wages and extension of social protection and, where appropriate, through enhanced bilateral labour migration agreements. Further, recognition of the impact of climate change and development of national plans for a just transition taking into account coordinated labour mobility was also stated as a priority.

Sustainable Development Goals

The importance of decent work and well-managed migration is recognized in the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**. SDG 8 calls for promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, as well as full and decent work for all. Target 8.8 aims to protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environment for all workers, including migrant workers and in particular women migrants. Target 8.7 is to take immediate and effective steps to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking. SDG 10 calls for reducing inequalities within and among countries. Target 10.7 aims to facilitate the orderly, safe and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies. Goal 5 is to achieve gender equality. Target 5.1 is to end all forms of discrimination against women and girls, and Target 5.2 to eliminate all forms violence against women and girls.

Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration

In September 2016, the General Assembly convened a high-level plenary on addressing large movements of refugees and migrants, and adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants. The New York Declaration indicated that States would begin a process of

intergovernmental negotiations leading to the adoption of a **Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM)**. The Compact was formally endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly on 19 December 2018. The GCM has 23 objectives, including Objective 6 which is to facilitate fair and ethical recruitment and safeguard conditions for decent work. The International Migration Review Forum of the GCM concluded in May 2022 with a Progress Declaration. The role of migrants as essential workers as well as the severe and disproportionate impact of the pandemic on migrants was recognized.

2. Trends and statistics

Much of the international migration occurring today is propelled by the search of decent work. The ILO estimated in 2022 that there are 167.7 million migrant workers worldwide, which accounted for 65.6 per cent of all migrants of working age. The centrality of work to migration flows, particularly in the context of Asia-Pacific, is clear.

There are approximately 13.9 million international migrant workers in South-East Asia and the Pacific. The Arab States have the highest proportion of migrant workers to all workers (73.9 8 per cent), and host 13.5 per cent of migrant workers worldwide, most of them from South-East and South Asia.

There are other key migration corridors in the region, including to the Republic of Korea and Japan. Migrant workers from the Pacific Island Countries find jobs in seasonal worker programmes in Australia and New Zealand.

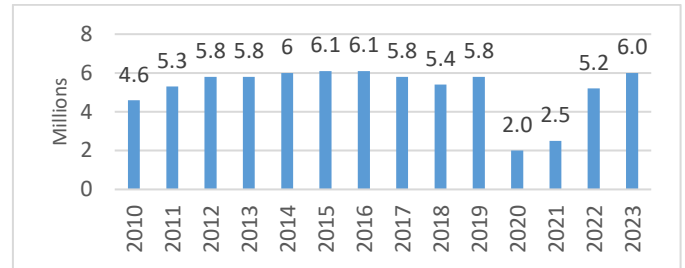
Labour migration in the region occurs primarily under temporary migration regimes and for elementary occupations and medium skilled work. However, Asia is also an important source region for skilled workers (in particular China and India). In 2021, over a quarter of migrant inflows to OECD countries came from Asia and the Pacific.

The issue of distress migration features in certain corridors in the region, notably from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar; and there is climate change induced migration in the Pacific and small island states.

Migration corridors and sectors of employment are highly gendered. Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines have typically had large outflows of women migrants engaged in domestic work. Women have more labour market options in South-East Asia, where they find jobs in manufacturing, agriculture, hospitality and to a lesser extent in construction. Flows to the construction industry in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are dominated by men migrant workers. This is similarly true for the fishing sector in East and South-East Asia; as well as the seasonal worker flows from the Pacific Islands to New Zealand and Australia.

Irregular migration occurs in parallel with regular migration, though the figures vary by countries and sub-regions, and data and sources on estimated irregular flows are scarce.

Total outflows of workers from selected Asian countries, 2010-23



Source: National authorities; ADBI-OECD-ILO (2024).

Note: Data are partially estimated for 2022 and 2023. Total is calculated assuming outflows from countries with missing data follow the trend of those with available data

As a result of border closures and travel restrictions due to COVID-19, deployment from the 13 main Asian countries of origin fell from 5.3 in 2019 to 2 million in 2020. By the end of 2023, overall flows had recovered and reached 34 per cent above pre-pandemic levels (Table 1).

3. Priorities

The effective governance of labour migration poses challenges and is shaped by powerful socio-economic and political factors. Gaps remain in the implementation of laws and policies in countries of origin and destination. Focus areas for the ILO in 2024-25 include protecting and promoting of the rights of women and men migrant workers including on fair recruitment and working conditions; contributing to economic development and inclusive growth – in particular labour mobility, skills development and recognition, and increasing development impact; contributing to climate resilience; reintegration; advocacy (with UNHCR) on labour market access for refugees and forcibly displaced persons; supporting regional dialogues on labour migration; and improving harmonised data collection and statistics.

Much of this needs to be done under the framework of contributing to the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and in particular goals eight and ten, and regional economic integration.

Snapshot of actions in 2023-24

Fair recruitment

Advocacy and promotion of the ILO General principles and operational guidelines, including elimination of worker paid recruitment fees and related costs continued to be undertaken. ILO continued to provide advice in the development of national legislation, such as in Indonesia and Vanuatu. Capacity building for regulators, employers, recruitment agencies and trade unions was undertaken as well as support services for complaints. A survey on recruitment costs was supported in the Philippines and in Nepal. In Myanmar, social media was leveraged to reach over 27 million online users with information on safe migration pathways, bilateral recruitment programmes, and labour laws and working conditions in countries of destination.

Decent working conditions

Advice in the review or development of national legislation in destination countries was provided such as in Thailand. A sector-based approach (e.g., fishing and sea-food processing) was adopted in interventions. ILO supported the adoption of the ASEAN Declaration on the Placement and Protection of Migrant Fishers. There is a continued focus on women migrant workers as well as the extension and portability of social security. The ASEAN Guidelines on Portability of Social Security Benefits for Migrant Workers in ASEAN has been adopted. ILO continues to support employers on decent housing and addressing violence and harassment at work.

Development of tools and training programmes for employers and workers organizations were undertaken along with the use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) tools such as online/ mobile overtime pay calculator by Saver Asia.¹

Organization of domestic workers, and support services for migrant workers, including on claiming due wages, are also prioritized with 67 migrant worker resource centres (MRCs) operating in Southeast Asia. The MRCs are housed in trade unions, civil society organizations and Job Centres.

Skills, remittances and reintegration

ILO supported the adoption of the ASEAN Declaration on Skills Mobility, Recognition and Development of Migrant Workers. Benchmarking of skills standards in selected occupations in construction was completed for Cambodia and Thailand. A South Asian Qualifications Reference Framework has been developed. A website and mobile app on remittance service providers with comparison of fees continued to be in operation (SaverAsia)² and financial literacy trainings were provided to migrant workers and their families in Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Viet Nam. In Bangladesh, a project on sustainable reintegration for returnee migrant workers is being implemented.

Climate resilience

Increasing the benefits of labour migration as a sustainable development and climate resilience strategy is a focus in the Pacific. ILO supported the development and adoption of the Pacific Regional Framework on Climate Mobility by the Pacific Islands Forum (PIFS). Engagement with regional employers and workers' organizations is ongoing.

Regional cooperation and statistics

There has been support to the implementation of ASEAN frameworks on the protection and promotion of the rights of migrant workers. Social partner engagement including via the ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour (AFML) is continued. ILO continues to promote the engagement of regional trade union and regional employers' federations on migrant worker issues. Collaboration was initiated with PIFS on consultations among member States in developing Regional Principles on Labour Mobility. Technical presentations were made at the Pacific Labour Mobility Annual Meetings on good governance in labour mobility and technical areas.

The ILO supports the implementation of the GCM through its engagement in the UN Network for Migration. Data collection and sharing of International Labour Migration Statistics in ASEAN continued on an annual basis.

CPOs and development cooperation projects

In the current programming cycle of the ILO (2024-25) there are 17 target CPOs (Country Programme Outputs) in Asia and the Pacific under Outcome 6: Protection at work for all.³

Towards the achievement of these CPOs, ILO technical support is provided in the form of research; promotion of international labour standards and review of legislation and bilateral agreements; policy advice; training and workshops; development of tools and guides; support services to migrant workers; facilitation of sub-regional and inter-country partnerships and sharing of good practices.

The vehicle for ILO support, in addition to the work by ILO specialists on labour migration and related fields, are the development cooperation projects funded by governments of Australia, Canada, the European Union, Japan, New Zealand, the United States, Switzerland and the UN. These projects provide the main means through which ILO programme objectives are realized in the region. They build on the ILO's comparative advantage in the region as a tripartite and standard setting organization having expertise across the full spectrum of the world of work. In addition to development partners, the ILO collaborates with IOM, World Bank, UN Women, FAO, UNODC, UNICEF, UNHCR, ESCAP, OHCHR, OECD, Asian Development Bank Institute, the ASEAN Secretariat, PIFS and the PACER Plus. It is an Executive Committee member of the UN Network for Migration.

¹ Saver Asia's ICT tool <https://saverasia.com/calculators/overtime-pay-calculator>.

² Saver Asia's remittance fee comparison tool <https://saverasia.com/comparison-results/>.

³ CPOs are country level targets or priorities identified by ILO constituents. These fall under global policy priorities or Outcomes, of which there are 8 in the current biennium.

4. Labour migration projects in Asia and the Pacific

Name	Geographical coverage	Duration	UN partners	Development partners
South-East Asia and South Asia				
Co-Creating Network for Protecting the Human Dignity of Migrant Workers in South-East Asia	Cambodia, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Japan (Mongolia, Uzbekistan)	2025-2027		Japan International Cooperation Agency
South-East Asia				
TRIANGLE in ASEAN	ASEAN	2015-2025		Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Government of Australia (2015-25) And Global Affairs Canada (2016-24)
Ensuring Decent Work and Reducing Vulnerabilities for Women and Children in the Context of Labour Migration in Southeast Asia (PROTECT)	Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand	2024-2026	UNICEF, UNODC, UN Women	European Union
Ship to Shore Rights South-East Asia: Safe Migration for Decent Work in the Blue Economy	Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand	2025–2028	IOM, FAO	European Union
Migrant Advocacy for Rights	Thailand	2023-2026		U.S Government
Promoting fair and ethical recruitment in the Vietnam-Japan Migration Corridor. (VJ-FERI)	Viet Nam	2024-2025		Japan International Cooperation Agency
South Asia				
Extending social protection to migrant workers in the South Asia- Gulf corridor (STREAM)	Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, India (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates)	2024-2028		Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
EU – India Cooperation and Dialogue on Migration and Mobility Phase II	India	2023-2026	Non-UN partner: ICMPD	European Union
Promoting Decent Work for Migrant Care Workers	India	2025-2026		Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)
Promoting Safe Employment Pathways and Fair Recruitment Practices	India	2025-2027		Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada
Reintegration for Migrant Workers	Bangladesh	2022-2027	IOM, UN Women	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
Strengthening Labour Migration Governance in Bangladesh	Bangladesh	2025-2026		Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
Addressing the medium to long-term reintegration needs and strengthening social protection support mechanisms for the social inclusion of Bangladeshi migrants	Bangladesh	2024-2027	IOM, UN Women, UNICEF, UNFPA	Migration Multi-Partner Trust Fund
Supporting a Talent Partnership with Bangladesh	Bangladesh	2024-2027		European Union
Migrant Rights and Decent Work (MIRIDEW) – Phase II	Nepal	2023-2027		Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
Partnership on Protecting and Promoting Rights of Nepali Migrant Workers including Care Migrant Workers	Nepal	2024-2026		Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)

Name	Geographical coverage	Duration	UN partners	Development partners
Enhancing Partners' Capacity on Decent Work and International Labour Standards for Labour Migration from Pakistan to Promote Safe and Legal Migration among Men and Women	Pakistan	2025-2027		Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)
The Pacific				
Pacific Climate Change Migration and Human Security (PCCMHS) Programme - Phase 2	Pacific Island Countries of Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia (Federated States of), Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Palau, Niue, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Australia, French Polynesia (Pacific Island Forum Member States)	2023-2026	IOM, ESCAP, OHCHR. Non-UN partners: PIFS, PDD	New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade
Mwakuri Aika a Raraoi Ibukimi 2 Activity (MARI II) ⁴	Kiribati	2024-2027		Millennium Challenge Corporation

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The ILO is a specialised United Nations agency with a constitutional mandate to protect migrant workers, and it does so as part of its overarching goal of advancing social justice and promoting decent work.

⁴ The project is currently paused.