



International  
Labour  
Organization

# SKILLS RECOGNITION OF SRI LANKAN MIGRANT WORKERS



## Importance of Skills Development for Sri Lankan Migrant Workers

National skills development policies and systems strive to meet present and future labour market needs. In particular they seek to enhance skills, improve productivity and competitiveness in sectors critical for the achievement of national employment and overall development goals.

There are multiple perceived benefits of skills training, certification and recognition for migrants:

- Skills training and recognition systems can positively impact the functioning of labour markets for the benefit of employers and workers. Employers can get the workers with the skills they need, reducing training time and increasing productivity. For workers, certification can lead to enhanced employability and labour market mobility, in jobs appropriate to their skills levels, both while abroad and when looking to re-enter the labour market in their countries of origin. Skills can increase opportunities for better wages and working conditions, including occupational safety and health.
- At the national level, an investment in skills enhances the reputation of the country as a source of quality workers - and this could lead to enhanced economic dynamism, diversification of the economy and expanded 'markets'. For countries of destination, this investment is a necessary part of the transition towards innovation and knowledge economies.

However, converting these potential gains into reality is a considerable challenge. The ILO is supporting national, bilateral, regional and global efforts to enhance skills development for migrant workers. A number of initiatives have already been carried out with the Government and social partners in Sri Lanka.

**The following highlights progress and lessons learned, based on recommendations from various research studies and national and regional level meetings<sup>1</sup>:**

**1. Strengthen inter-ministerial cooperation on skills and migration to provide inputs to national and bilateral programmes, including training and recognition initiatives, commissioning joint research, awareness raising campaigns, etc.**

Since 2016, the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) and the Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission (TVEC) have been collaborating on the harmonization of occupational classifications and data systems. In addition to minimizing the differences among skills standards among agencies, a classification system would allow for standardized data collection within and among data collecting organizations and even across countries. This will improve data and analysis to support decision making across organizations.

A Memorandum of Cooperation (MOC) was signed in June 2018 to formalize this coordination. The MOC focuses on three main areas:

- Achieving in-country harmonization of the SLBFE Job Classification System with the National Vocational Qualifications System in Sri Lanka (NVQ-SL) of TVEC; and in turn,
- Align the two systems, with the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) to facilitate International harmonization and correspondence with "other country systems" where Sri Lanka migrants are employed; and
- Formulating and implementing joint strategies and policies based on shared information and predictive analysis of employment demand overseas.

<sup>1</sup> The selected recommendations are from research reports and consultations, including the ILO Inter-Regional Expert Forum on Skills and Migration in the South Asia- Middle East Corridor, July 2017 in New Delhi; and the Colombo Process meeting of the thematic working group on skills in January 2018 in Colombo.



- The MOC calls on ILO to continue in providing technical support to both parties.



## 2. Enhance efforts to share labour market information, monitor the utilization of skills in the current labour market, and identify occupations where skills are in demand.

In 2016, a study was carried out on the **skills profile of Sri Lankan migrant workers and labour market trends in the Gulf region**, with a focus on the construction sector.

The research revealed a disconnect between the skills provided by Sri Lankan workers and those demanded in the construction sector in the Gulf, as well as a generalized lack of information on labour market trends and needs. Moreover, there is an extensive shortage in the supply of Sri Lankan workers to meet job orders across various professions in the construction sector. This can be partially explained by an unwillingness among young Sri Lankans, especially graduates, to take up labour-intensive, blue collar jobs.

The analysis also revealed the extent to which women and men are segregated not only in different occupational classes, but also in

different sectors, with men over-represented in construction. That said, women are already recruited for high skilled jobs such as engineers and technicians, and in clerical jobs in construction. This represents one of the next frontiers in the feminization of labour migration from Sri Lanka to the Gulf.

In order to assess the present and future demand for migrant workers in different countries, the ILO has conducted research studies and published working papers. A major limitation of these studies has been the lack of labour market information and in-depth discourse with employers on sector-specific human resource development strategies. Labour Migration, Skills Development and the Future of Work in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries sought to map in broad terms the key economic, demographic and labour market trends and the complex set of challenges faced by governments of countries of origin and destination. In particular, It anticipates the introduction of high skills requirements (i.e. imposed training/certification) for migrant workers and a consequences of such a change eg: shifting the high skills requirement costs to migrant workers.

## 3. Better institutionalized Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for migrant workers, both outbound and returning.

The Ministry of Skills Development and Vocational Training in principle agree that RPL is an important process for assessing a person's competencies acquired through informal or non-institutional learning against what is set out in the relevant National Skills Standard in the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) framework.

To formally recognize the skills obtained by migrants while working abroad, a new mechanism for RPL for returning migrant workers was adopted following broad-based consultation in 2017. This mechanism aligns with the aims of the Government's Sub-Policy on Return and Reintegration of Migrant Workers.

## Process of establishing a skill assessment mechanism through RPL, for Sri Lankan Migrant workers

### STEP 1

Identify key stakeholders of the mechanism

- Ministry of Skills Development and Vocational Training
- Ministry Foreign Employment
- Ministry of Home Affairs
- Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission
- Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment
- Vocational Training Authority
- National Apprenticeship and Industrial Training Authority
- University of Vocational Technology
- Department of Technical Education and Training

### STEP 2

Preliminary consultation with key stakeholders and base line study to review the skills of current migrant workers

### STEP 3

National consultation to share the findings of preliminary study and generate recommendations required for establishing the mechanism

### STEP 4

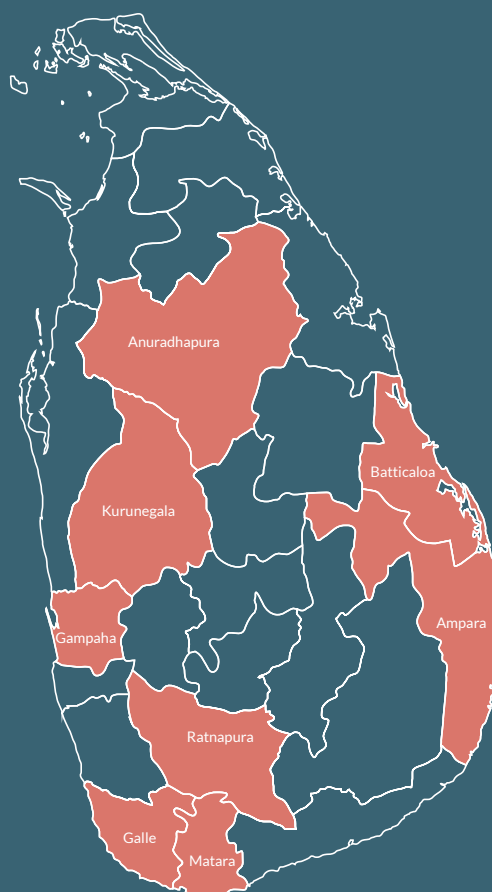
**Draft Mechanism, based on the recommendations:**

-A committee on RPL/NVQ certification and skill upgrading and orientation on the RPL-NVQ system at Divisional & Grama Niladhari level of the public administrative structure in Sri Lanka to be formulated. The prime objective of the committee would be to disseminate, raise awareness and facilitate the RPL process for migrant workers and to re-integrate them to the national labour market or re-migrate into foreign employment.

### STEP 5

ILO is currently carrying out a pilot on the coordinating committees (details given in the next section).

To test the mechanism, a pilot was carried out among 200 returned construction workers in eight districts: Kurunegala, Galle, Batticaloa, Anuradhapura, Ratnapura, Gampaha, Matara, Ampara. This is organized with the Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Employment and the Ministry of Skills Development and Vocational Training.



The pilot highlighted the importance of

- (a) providing adequate information on skilling options/RPL process at the pre-departure stage;
- (b) linking vocational training institutions with divisional and village level officers (for referral); and
- (c) providing returnees with information on skilling and re-employment opportunities.

## Voices of Migrant Workers:

*"I have worked in Dubai for more than 10 years. I have been doing the same job as a machine operator all this time. This is the first time I'm hearing about RPL. If I knew about RPL, I could have got a certificate with my experience," I would have been able to go for a better job.*

- A returnee from Kurunegala

*"I came back to do my RPL assessment. I took leave and spent from my pocket to come. Because I know if I get the NVQ certificate I can apply for a job which will pay me Rs.100,000 (USD 600) more per month."*

- A returnee from Qatar in Batticaloa

### Proposed RPL Coordinating Committee



### Proposed sub committee





#### 4. Conducting research on the sectoral context and human resource development strategies of employers in destination countries; and on the connections between skills, productivity and competitiveness, etc.

An ILO study was carried out on Mapping of the Skills Assessment Procedures, Certification Standards and Equivalencies between Sri Lanka, UAE and Kuwait in selected occupations of the construction industry. This study aimed to empirically assess the Sri Lankan workforce based on feedback from foremen, site supervisors and charge-hands working on projects in the UAE and in Kuwait. As a part of this exercise, the TVEC framework of Sri Lanka was compared against several international meta-frameworks accepted in UAE and Kuwait. The comparison was undertaken by adopting widely accepted methods such as benchmarking and referencing between qualification frameworks.

The study found that the new migrant workers need 2 to 6 months of further on-the-job training to come up to the skill level expectations in the country of destination. In terms of outreach and mobilization, over the last few years, there has been a declining interest to take up construction sector craftsmanship jobs when compared to jobs in some other service sectors. This has been attributed to narrowing wage differentials between domestic and overseas opportunities, which could be reducing the motivation to migrate. The inputs collected from the survey were synthesized to develop recommendations which were presented in a stakeholder workshop. Some of them include; improving quality of teachers and teaching aids, focus on selected niche occupations, and setting up a model Overseas Testing Centre (OTC) in Sri Lanka.

*Table1: Illustrative empirical skill gap assessment of Sri Lankan migrant workers at the Country of Destination*

| Occupation                   | Areas for Practical Skill Improvement                                                                                                                                        | Areas for Theoretical Knowledge Improvement                                                                                                                                                       |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Formwork Carpenter           | Pressure of concrete on formwork, Tolerances for bare structures, Safety measures and practices, Collapse of forms, Recommended control measures                             | Tolerance of bare RC structures, components of formwork, house keeping                                                                                                                            |
| Steel Fixer / Bar Bender     | Fixing up of rebars in-situ RCC building components                                                                                                                          | General knowledge on steel rebars and spacers, effect of reheating and re-bending                                                                                                                 |
| Mason                        | Quality of material used, ratio of cement, sand and water, maintaining uniform gap between bricks/blocks, Common types of substrates and their preparation                   | Working on different types of flooring, types of tiles, Grid plaster, Drawing interpretation and estimations                                                                                      |
| Painter                      | Preparation of paints, quality and quantity of materials to be used, Precautions to be taken while painting different surfaces, selection of right tools, cleaning of tools. | Types of paints, mixing of different paints, curing on finished products                                                                                                                          |
| Electrical Wiring Technician | Identification of Conductor and Conduit, Revised cable colour coding, Insulation and Earth Fault Impedance Test                                                              | Being conversant with electrical wiring diagrams, generating and transmitting systems, Earth Fault Protective Devices, knowledge of cables and conduits, measurement instruments and safety tests |

## 5. Enhancing efforts to collaborate on skills development through bilateral cooperation or existing regional mechanisms.

The Sri Lankan Government actively participates in several bilateral and regional initiatives on skills development for migrant workers. In 2016, the Government took upon the Chair of the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, under which skills has emerged as one of the key themes. At the Senior Officials Meeting in Colombo in May 2018, a model for harmonizing skills between countries of origin and destination was presented. Sri Lanka also participated in a pilot project with UAE on skills development, certification and recognition. The pilot aimed to investigate whether the acquisition of new skills through an accredited training and skills certification programme had an impact on various outcomes of migrant workers.

Three Government training centers were accredited by the UAE National Qualification Authority (NQA) in March 2017. The feedback the Sri Lankan authorities received from the NQA regarding what improvements could be made were highly appreciated. It highlighted the importance placed by

countries of destination on technology, language and soft skills within vocational training programmes for migrant workers. It also underscored the important role of TVET authorities within bilateral discussions between countries of origin and destination, given their specialisation.

In addition, the Sri Lankan Government has also chaired the Colombo Process until 2016, and continues to chair the Colombo Process Working Group on Skills. A regional meeting of this Working Group was organized by International Organization of Migration and ILO in Colombo in January 2018. One of the key outcomes of the meeting was that bilateral or corridor approaches may yield gains in the short-term compared to a regional approach. However, a feasibility study could be carried out to explore the adoption of a regional qualifications framework. The Regional Qualifications Reference Framework (RQRF) could initially function as a translation device to enable comparison of qualifications across countries of origin; and later between countries of origin and destination. The ILO will conduct this feasibility study in 2018.





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