



Migration Development Officers: bringing services to the local community

Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) decentralized its services to the District level in the mid 1990s and officers have been providing information to prospective migrant workers and their families since. This service was enhanced in 2013 when graduates were recruited by the Ministry of Foreign Employment to provide further outreach to the divisional secretariat (DS) level to underserved and marginalized Grama Niladhari (GN) Divisions, i.e village level. The role of these newly appointed Migration Development Officers (MDOs), 3 to each DS division, was to provide information on all aspects of labour migration, support protection measures, promote skilled and semi-skilled jobs and support reintegration of return migrants. A cadre of over 1100 MDOs were appointed in 2013.

In July 2013, the International Labour Organization (ILO), under the second phase of the project on “Promoting Decent Work through Good Governance, **Protection and Empowerment of Migrant Workers: Ensuring the Effective Implementation of Sri Lanka National Labour Migration Policy**”, supported the development of a safe labour migration information package, through

a multi-stakeholder consultative process. The development of this information package was timely in that it provided an ideal tool for the newly appointed MDOs to carryout the tasks as per their job description.

The safe migration information package fulfilled the need for accurate and up-to-date information regarding various aspects in different stages of the labour migration process (pre-departure, departure, in service and return) and made that information available at local administrative levels for sharing by government officers.



What is the Safe Migration Information Package?

The SM Information Package is a first attempt at combining an information guide, flip book, posters, leaflets and audio visual tools to provide accurate information on all aspects of foreign employment in Sri Lanka. It covers the labour migration cycle.

It is focussed mainly towards low-skilled and under-skilled migrant workers such as those working in the domestic sector (housekeeping assistants, gardeners, drivers etc) and others such as factory workers and labourers. These workers were targeted primarily as they represent the largest proportion of workers registering at the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment and departing the country annually.

They continue to remain the most vulnerable of worker categories. However the information contained in this guide is in general useful for all skill categories of workers embarking on overseas employment.

The main objective of preparing such an information guide is to provide the necessary information to relevant government officials at Divisional and village level, to share correct information among prospective job seekers, in-service migrant workers, returnees and their family members. Therefore it was not developed for dissemination among migrant worker communities.

Sensitization programmes for MDOs with the SM info package were carried out in 5 selected 'high migration districts' of Kurunegala, Gampaha, Anuradhapura, Puttalam and Kandy. The SLBFE together with DS offices nominated MDOs from 20 Divisional Secretariats in these 5 Districts for the sensitisation programmes.

Kurunegala District (5 DS Divns.)	Kandy District (5DS Divns.)	Gampaha District (5DS Divns.)	Anuradhapura District (3 DS Divns.)	Puttalam District (2DS Divns.)
Alawwa	Akurana	Biyagama	Kakirawa	Dankotuwa
Narammala	Nawalapitiya	Meerigama	Nagenahira Nuwaragam Palatha	Wennappuwa
Kurunegala	Kuruduwatta	Dompe	Mahawilachchiya	
Kuliyapitiya	Ganga Wata Korale	Atthanagalla		
Ganewatte	Gampola	Kelaniya		

What is the FBR?

Based on a cabinet paper submitted by the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Empowerment in March 2007, the Ministry of Labour (who was in charge of the subject of foreign employment) was requested to take adequate measures to ensure the protection of children of migrant women. This regulation was imposed in an adhoc manner till 2012. Due to the need to reduce the social cost and recruit the most suitable Sri Lankan employees for overseas employment in 2013, the SLBFE developed a mechanism to ensure the protection of children by introducing a mandatory requirement for a Family Background Report (FBR) for female workers seeking employment in the domestic domain. The cadre of Migration Development Officers recruited in 2013 under the Government's policy of recruiting unemployed graduates, were assigned to enforce the requirement of the FBR at the local Divisional Secretariat level. The FBR was to provide details of the home affairs, such as if the prospective female domestic workers is married, has children, ages of the children, who would look after her children if they were above the age of 5 etc. There was also a ban on allowing women to seek

foreign employment in the domestic sector if they had children below 5 years of age. The MDO was to take a minimum period of 2 weeks to conduct field visits and verify the information provided in the FBR and make a decision to recommend or not recommend foreign employment of the women to the SLBFE via a short message service (SMS). Based on the MDO recommendation, the Divisional Secretary of that particular DS Divisional would give his approval for the FBR. With effect from 1st August 2015, a Ministerial Circular stated that all women seeking foreign employment required to obtain a FBR.

Approving a FBR

Since the introduction of the FBR in 2013, the MDOs assigned to each DS division have been engaging in the process of FBR clearance alone. This includes checking of each FBR report, verifying the details filled in the FBR through visits to the household in question, visits to guardians household if not the same, visits to the Grama Niladari, public health worker etc which is about 4-5 field

visits per FBR. On average each MDO reviews 20 FBRs a month leaving them little time to engage in any other work as assigned in their job descriptions.

The FBR imposes strict compliance requirements, MDOs are tasked with spotting and reporting forged documents, which has now become commonplace. If any given information is purported to be questionable, the MDO will also tap in to other resources such as informal information retrieved from neighbours and other local level officers such as Samurdhi Officers (Government welfare officers). Forged documents are commonly provided to substantiate proof of residence and age. In the event, a falsified FBR is detected throughout the labour migration cycle, the MDO is required to take responsibility for negligence and in some instances dismissal.

All MDOs that ILO had discussions with during safe migration sensitization sessions field visits and review meetings noted that although the MDO is expected to be the first point of contact for any prospective migrant at the local level, in actual fact, it is the sub-agent who has assumed that role.

In most instances the decision to migrate has already been made or the prospective employee has been enticed to take a decision to migrate for employment by the local level unofficial representative (sub-agent) of the licensed recruitment agent.



Impact on the MDOs due to the FBR

The MDOs enjoy a privileged authority of signing off on the FBR. However this authority has its downfalls.

- The MDOs have had to face various pressures and harassment by non-qualifiers of the FBR.
- Pressures to give in to political influence have become sore points of the job.
- Some female MDOs have faced multiple incidences of harassment via telephone, including death threats.

Applicants holding FBRs that were not recommended are referred to other auxiliary service providers such as

alternate livelihood service providers, Social Service officers, Counselling Officers, Child Rights Promotion Officers etc. However, no follow-up is made by the MDO in such instances. The FBR itself is not shared with any other government department, either at the local administrative level or with the SLBFE in order to provide additional support.



Has the FBR changed the ground situation?

On the positive side:

- The field visits have created more interaction with officials of the Ministry of Foreign Employment (MDOs) and the migrant community
- The FBR is forcing families to discuss their decision with the family including children and how they will manage the homestead
- There is a greater sense of awareness and vigilance at the local village level, with some local community members informing MDOs of fraud or deception
- Greater collaboration among key officers at DS such as MDOs, Economic Development Officers, Women Development Officers, Child Rights Promotion Officers, Samurdhi Officers etc

On the negative side:

- The FBR has been a barrier for women's right to employment and freedom of movement
- Restrictions through the FBR has forced many women to sought illegal and unsafe ways of leaving the country; being at risk of human trafficking and smuggling
- Fraudulent migration without any pre-departure preparation or registration with the SLBFE has caused many women to be at risk of abuse and harassment during recruitment and while being employed overseas.



Issues faced by MDOs

- Limited support from Central/Provincial SLBFE offices
- Lack of support and understanding of their work by the Divisional Secretary; this varies according to the DS
- Lack of facilities, office space, insufficient transport allowance, access to computers causing delays in their work and inefficiency
- Delay in transport allowed reimbursement
- In some districts a wide geographic area and difficult terrain to cover
- Limited time to spend in the field for cross-checking family conditions; no choice but to approve/sign FBR without the proper background check
- Lack of clarity in the chain of command for MDOs; appointed by the Ministry of Foreign Employment, based in the Divisional Secretariat Office, multiple reporting requirements i.e. Reports to the Ministry/DS along with regular progress reports to SLBFE; follow-up on complaints etc



Recommendations for future consideration

- Clear mechanism for MDO progress monitoring at the local level
- Information gathered by MDOs to reach a central location at the MFE where it is collated and analysed for decision-making purposes.
- Capacity Building for MDOs on the labour migration cycle
- Capacity building for MDOs on psychosocial support
- Clear mechanism for local and DS and District level referral on various issues
- The motivational money should be deposited in a bank where the women can access same when she requires, however in some cases the reason some job seekers decide to go overseas is purely to obtain this motivational fee. Most have spent it before leaving the country
- Safe migration sensitization sessions should be provided by SLBFE to all newly appointed officers at DS level help change their attitude and to work in a more collaborative manner with the other officers at the DS.
- Pre-departure training is only given to the women who migrate. The spouses or Fathers should receive training or sensitization on responsibilities at home with child care and financial management.



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