



Concept Note

Inter-Regional Expert Forum on Skills and Migration In the South Asia – Middle East Corridor

Background:

'Sound labour market assessments and skills recognition for migrant workers' was identified as a priority at the ILO **tripartite technical meeting on labour migration** in 2013. In recent years, several countries in South Asia have identified the up-skilling of migrant workers as a key strategy to ensure better jobs and working conditions. This approach also aligns with the vision documents of several of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States that set a course away from labour intensive investments and **towards knowledge economies**. Bilateral pilots and regional cooperation have been initiated, including under the auspices of the Abu Dhabi Dialogue and the Colombo Process. Improving the portability of skills is also an express priority and commitment in the **Bali Declaration** of the ILO Asia-Pacific Regional Meeting in December 2016.

Skills composition of the migrant workforce. Each country categorizes skills differently, therefore it is difficult to draw comparisons across countries. Reports of governments at origin show that:

- **Bangladesh:** In 2015, 43.88% were 'less-skilled'; 16.39% were semi-skilled; 38.56% were skilled; and 0.33% were professionals.
- **Nepal:** 73.67% of migrant workers are unskilled, 11.96% are semi-skilled, 14.34% are skilled and 0.02% are professionals.
- **Pakistan:** 3% are highly qualified / skilled; 42% are skilled (e.g. welders, masons and plumbers); 16% are semi-skilled (e.g. cooks and waiters); and 39% are unskilled (e.g. labourers and farmers).
- **Sri Lanka:** Workers are grouped into 7 categories: Less than 2% are professionals (women represent only 7.7% of this group); 29.5% are domestic workers; 26.4% are unskilled; 24.3% are skilled workers.

There are multiple perceived benefits of skills development, certification and recognition:

- Skills development and recognition systems can positively impact the **functioning of labour markets** for the benefit of employers and workers. Employers can get the workers 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.
- From a **rights protection** perspective, skills can help to increase opportunities for better wages and working conditions, including occupational safety and health. Typically, a worker with more skills is less dispensable, and in a better position to negotiate with an employer. Other benefits for the individual could include reduced discrimination or unfair treatment in the selection process, a greater likelihood of longer-term career planning, and enhanced self-esteem.
- 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, more evidence is required to determine the extent to which these positive outcomes are occurring or remain hypothetical. Some of the **key questions and challenges** are as follows:

- For low- and semi-skilled workers, the cost and time required to undertake skills training and certification may be an additional burden, and may not necessarily result in improved wages or working conditions. The outcomes of skills development and recognition will vary according to sector of work, occupation, gender, length of stay, and country of origin and destination.
- Demand is not always driven by employer needs. Recruitment is a burgeoning business, and the model of hiring large numbers of low-skilled workers is a profitable one. At present, workers are too often selected on their willingness to pay intermediaries, rather than whether they have the skills that are in demand. This often results in a mismatch and frustrations among both employers and workers.
- There is an absence of timely information on labour market demands and skills requirements from employers. There is a need for an international occupational classification system to identify any mismatch of skills between demand and supply; and for procedures through which skills can be assessed from the country of origin particularly on the skills acquired informally.
- In many destination countries the skilled and semi-skilled jobs are the only jobs that are coveted by nationals, and at a time when many of these countries are looking to reduce unemployment and the presence of migrants, there is a risk for countries of origin in targeting opportunities in this segment of the labour market.
- The evolving care economy¹ and technological developments in other sectors - amongst others construction² - create new opportunities for skilled work in traditionally low-skilled occupations.
- There is limited evidence of monitoring and evaluation systems being put in place to improve delivery and determine the impact of skilling and recognition.
- Skills eco-systems need to balance both domestic and international skills needs and not only the needs of countries of origin. There is insufficient coherence between employment, skills and migration policies in both countries of origin and destination, and limited participation of different government institutions as well as employers and workers.

The ILO is working on these challenges and opportunities with governments and social partners at the global, regional and national levels. An **inter-regional expert forum** between South Asia and the Middle East will facilitate the sharing of research and practical experiences in the area of skills and migration, and identify interventions that can be carried forward.³ The outcomes of the discussions will also feed into the consultations on the **Global Compact on Migration**.⁴

¹ The care economy is expected to create professional jobs with high skill requirements to cater for instance to early childhood development, elderly care and other specialized care services.

² For instance through pre-fabrication, 3D printing and other remote controlled building options.

³ ILO technical cooperation on skills and migration in the South Asia includes the Skills 21 project in Bangladesh; the Colombo Process project in Sri Lanka; SSN in India and Nepal; SALAM in Afghanistan. There are also ILO activities in Southeast Asia (e.g. under the TRIANGLE projects in ASEAN) and in the Middle East region (e.g. Jordan project).

⁴ One of the thematic clusters of the Global Compact on Migration is "*Irregular migration and regular pathways, including decent work, labour mobility, **recognition of skills and qualifications**, and other relevant measures*". A global consultation on this theme will be organized in Geneva in October 2017, and it will also be one of the roundtables at a regional preparatory meetings organized in the MENA region in September and the Asia-Pacific region in November. National level consultations on the Global Compact are also being planned.

Objectives:

1. To share findings from studies on skills and migration conducted at the global and regional levels;
2. To exchange insights on labour market demand and the future of work for migrants in the Middle East, and discuss how labour market information can be shared more systematically with countries of origin in South Asia;
3. To identify challenges to skills recognition systems, and propose concrete strategies to overcome them;
4. To put forward specific interventions for existing, pipeline and potential programming in countries of origin and destination; and
5. To identify points of convergence that could feed into the deliberations on the Global Compact on Migration.

Dates: 25-26 July, 2017

Venue: Taj Mahal Hotel, 1 Mansingh Road, New Delhi, India

Participants:

The total number of participants is expected to be over 70, from 6 countries of origin in South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) and 5 countries of destination in the Middle East (Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, UAE). Participants will include:

- Government officials with responsibility for skills and for migration
- Representatives of employers' organizations
- Representatives of workers' organizations
- Resource persons from the private sector, civil society, academia, etc.
- ILO staff working on skills and migration at the national and regional level
- Staff from development partners and UN agencies, including IOM, UNDP, SDC, DFID, EU, etc.

Methodology: The expert forum will be a blend of knowledge-sharing based on new research and information available from countries of destination and origin. There will also be substantial opportunity for participants to exchange insights and perspectives on the challenges and opportunities, particularly as they come from different countries and with different backgrounds and mandates. Throughout the forum, discussion will be geared towards generating practical interventions that can be taken forward at the national level and through bilateral and regional cooperation; and can be presented in the consultations around the Global Compact on Migration. These will be consolidated in a Chair's Summary at the end of the Forum.

Language: The forum will be conducted primarily in English with simultaneous Arabic translation. As much as possible, key documents will be translated into Arabic in advance.