

## International Labour Migration Statistics (ILMS) Database for South Asia (Version 1, 2018)

## i. Overview of the South Asian ILMS Database

The International Labour Organization (ILO) Decent Work Technical Team for South Asia began the process of producing an ILMS Database for the South Asian subregion in October 2017. The database, encompassing a reference period of 20 years beginning with 1997, was designed through a process of national and subregional consultations to provide a comprehensive and tractable source of statistical information for policy-makers and researchers, in order to profile South Asian international migrants and international migrant workers. The South Asian subregion referred to in this database encompasses: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. To mirror national and subregional policy agendas, including of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the database focuses on South Asian nationals seeking employment extraregionally (outside of the subregion).

Version 1 of the database contains 11 standard tables agreed upon at an ILO Technical Meeting on Labour Migration Statistics in South Asia in November of 2017, which included participation from representatives of national statistics offices, foreign employment ministries, research institutions and international organizations. The number of tables are likely to increase over time in line with new priorities and improvements in data availability (some proposed future tables may include, for example, repeat vs. first-time labour migration, direct and indirect recruitment costs, return migration, educational attainment and cause of fatality of deceased migrant workers):

Table	Disaggregation
1 Stock of South Asian nationals abroad	By sex and country of destination
2 Permanent immigrant inflows of South Asian nationals to OECD countries	By country of destination
3 Outflows of nationals for employment abroad	By sex and country of destination
4 Outflows of nationals for employment abroad	By skill level
5 Outflows of nationals for employment abroad	By occupation
6 Outflows of nationals for employment abroad	By method of recruitment (individual/agency)
7 Outflows of nationals for employment abroad	By province/state of origin
8 Inflows of external financial inflows	Remittances/Net ODA/FDI
9 Remittance transaction costs	For US\$200/US\$500 transfers from select migrant labour destination countries to origin countries
10 Reported fatalities of nationals employed abroad	By year
11 Total welfare fund payments paid out for deceased nationals employed abroad	By year

The data presented in the ILMS Database have been gathered from a variety of different and often incompatible sources, both within and between countries. These sources rely on different sampling and data collection methods, and often employ widely different definitions of concepts such as ‘migrant worker’, ‘work’ and ‘skill level’, among others. Many countries also use different classifications for variables such as ‘economic activity’ and ‘occupation’ that do not align with, or only somewhat align with the latest international standard classifications (including the International Standard Classification of Occupations, or the International Standard Industrial Classification). As a result, the data in these tables are not directly comparable or combinable (with the exception of tables 1, 2, 8 and 9, which contain data from international sources that have undergone a process of standardization).

## INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION

Although Version 1 of the South Asian ILMS is an important and rather comprehensive first step, there are some limitations, including: (1) lack of response from the necessary data custodians at a country-level; (2) lack of availability of data for a proposed table; (3) hesitation by data custodians to share particular data given various concerns of confidentiality; (4) lack of compatibility between country and ILO/international formats; and (5) lack of timely and relevant data in accessible and manipulable formats. It is important to take these into account when analysing the scope and results of this project (ILO, 2018).

### ii. International and regional-level ILO efforts to improve ILMS

To support ongoing national, regional and international efforts, the ILO is involved in numerous capacity-building projects, in addition to this one, that are aimed towards improving the collection, analysis and dissemination of labour migration statistics, as well as data standardization and the alignment of national-level data with international classifications, in order to inform better evidence-based policy-making on migrant workers within and between countries. Some of these efforts include, but are not limited to:

- The International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) has issued specific resolutions and recommendations on the alignment of LMS with international statistical standards, and has formed a working group aimed towards sharing good practices and “discussing and developing a work plan for defining international standards on labour migration statistics that can inform labour market and migration policy”, with a progress report to be shared at the next (20<sup>th</sup>) ICLS in October 2018;
- The ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific launched the ILMS database for the ASEAN region (which served as a model for the South Asian ILMS) in December 2014 and has since been actively engaged in efforts to improve the collection of labour migration data in Southeast Asia. The ILO, through cooperation with other national entities such as KOSTAT of the Republic of Korea, has expanded ILMS collection efforts beyond ASEAN to various countries in Asia and the Pacific region, including a number of ILO member States in South Asia.
- In 2018, the ILO Department of Statistics sent a standard set of more than 20 tables on labour migration to a number of member States in Asia and the Pacific, with the aim to increase engagement through accessible online questionnaires that may then be uploaded to the ILO website and inputted in the ILO database on labour migration available in ILOSTAT (the ILO’s online data sharing platform available for public use) (ILO, 2018).

### iii. Data and trends in the subregion in 2016 and 2017

The following are some key facts on South Asian labour migration based on the data made available in the South Asian ILMS. For information and sources, and notes on methodologies, caveats and limitations of the above data, please reference the subregional report, *International labour migration statistics in South Asia: Establishing a subregional database and improving data collection for evidence-based policy-making* (ILO, 2018).

In South Asia, the stock of international migrants living within the subregion has decreased substantially over the past six decades, from 17.82 million in 1960 (UNDESA, 2008) to 10.88 million in 2017 (UNDESA, 2017). In 2017, international migrants in South Asia constituted 0.61 per cent of the subregion’s total population (UNDESA, 2017). The stock of South Asian nationals living abroad both within and outside of the subregion was 38 million as of 2017, and over 29 million of these migrants (over three-fourths) resided outside of the subregion (UNDESA, 2017). Four South Asian countries featured in the top 20 countries of

## INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION

origin in the world in 2017, including India (first), Bangladesh (fifth), Pakistan (seventh) and Afghanistan (eleventh) (UNDESA, 2017).

While large **stocks of South Asian migrants** were residing in North America, Western Europe and Oceania (primarily United States, Canada, United Kingdom and Australia), as well as a significant number in the Islamic Republic of Iran (primarily Afghans) and Malaysia, the largest proportion (44.3 per cent) outside of the subregion were residing in Western Asia, particularly in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (UNDESA, 2017). Four of six GCC countries – Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Oman – featured in the top ten destination countries of South Asian nationals in 2017 (UNDESA, 2017) (Although not in the top ten, the other GCC countries, Qatar and Bahrain, were also prominent destination countries).

Large stocks of South Asian migrants in Gulf countries represent significant **migration corridors of predominately low- and semi-skilled temporary contract workers** in construction, services and domestic care sectors. While population censuses, Labour Force Surveys (LFS) and other population surveys collect valuable information on these nationals employed abroad, often the most recent and comprehensive information on nationals working abroad available in South Asian origin countries used to inform the trends discussed below is available from government and/or official administrative records derived primarily from data on: individuals registering with their respective government prior to departure; gaining clearance for emigration; applying for exit visas; or obtaining labour permits for foreign employment (For an analysis of international migration and migrant worker-related questions in population censuses and Labour Force Survey questionnaires in South Asia, please reference ILO, 2018).

The top **country of destination of migrant workers registering for employment abroad** from Bangladesh in 2017 was Saudi Arabia at over 550,000. In India, the most prominent destination country of migrant workers was United Arab Emirates at nearly 150,000. The top destination country of Nepali nationals registering for employment abroad in 2016/17 was Qatar at over 120,000. United Arab Emirates was the primary destination country of Pakistani nationals registering for employment abroad in 2017 at over 275,000, while Qatar was the most significant destination country of Sri Lankan nationals registering for employment, reaching nearly 57,000 (ILO, 2018). GCC countries featured as the top five destination countries of migrant workers for Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, with the notable exception being Nepali and Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia (ILO, 2018). These five aforementioned countries are the primary origin countries of migrant workers in South Asia. Notably, official administrative data on nationals employed abroad are not collected and/or not publicly released in Afghanistan, Maldives and Bhutan.

The **majority of South Asian nationals registering for employment in these five countries are males**. In Bangladesh, males represented nearly 88 per cent of registered migrant workers departing for foreign employment in 2017, 66 per cent in Sri Lanka and nearly 95 per cent in Nepal (in 2016/17). Government reports in Pakistan specify that 99 per cent of migrant workers registering for employment abroad are males (Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, 2016). The annual number of females registering for employment abroad in Bangladesh has increased in the past decade, while it has remained relatively steady in Nepal and actually declined in Sri Lanka rather significantly since 2012, as has the number of males (ILO, 2018).

**Data on skill level of South Asian migrant workers** in 2017 indicate that the majority of Nepali migrant workers (58 per cent) are 'unskilled'. In Pakistan 'unskilled' migrant workers represented nearly 40 per cent of all nationals registering for employment abroad that year, while 'less-skilled' migrants represented nearly 40 per cent of registered migrant workers in Bangladesh. In Sri Lanka, migrant workers classified as

## INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION

'housemaid' and 'unskilled' combined represented 55 per cent of all nationals registering for employment abroad (ILO, 2018).

A number of countries also maintain administrative data records on **method of recruitment** of their nationals registering for employment abroad. The overwhelming majority of Indians required to register for employment abroad in 2017 secured jobs abroad through a recruitment agency (95 per cent). In Nepal, similar to India, 93 per cent of registered migrant workers secured jobs abroad through a recruitment agency in 2016/17. However, recent trends in Sri Lanka show that, by 2015, more registered migrant workers secured jobs abroad by individual means (for example, directly with the employer, or through friends and family) than through a recruitment agency. In 2016 (the most recent year for which data on method of recruitment are available), 64 per cent of migrant workers secured employment abroad on an individual basis (ILO, 2018).

In 2017, Uttar Pradesh was the **largest state of origin** of registered migrant workers departing India. In Pakistan, an overwhelming majority of registered migrant workers originated from Punjab province, while in Sri Lanka, Western Province (where the capital, Colombo, is located) was where the largest number of nationals registered for employment abroad. In Nepal, Province No. 2 (located in the southeastern region of the country, interim capital Janakpur) was the most significant origin province of Nepali migrant workers registering for employment abroad in 2017 (ILO, 2018).

South Asian migrant workers often send cash and non-cash items through formal and informal channels to families or communities in countries of origin, known as **remittances** (IMF, 2009; IOM, 2017). Remittances can have a large impact on South Asian economies, helping to reduce poverty rates, while also providing a valuable source of foreign currency. In 2016, the South Asian subregion received over US\$110 billion in remittances. India was the top remittance-receiving country in the world in 2016 (US\$62.74 billion), while Pakistan ranked as seventh (US\$19.76 billion) and Bangladesh as tenth (US\$13.54 billion) (World Bank, n.d.a). Altogether, South Asia is the second-highest remittance-receiving region in the world after East Asia and the Pacific, with recorded remittances consistently far out-numbering other external financial inflows, including of official development assistance (ODA) and foreign direct investment (FDI) (ILO, 2018; Ozaki, 2012). When measured as a percentage of total GDP, Nepal ranks first in the subregion, with personal remittances received equal to roughly 31 per cent of GDP in 2016. Sri Lanka ranked second at 8.9 per cent, followed by Pakistan at 7.1 per cent (World Bank, n.d.a.).

Unfortunately, high transfer costs and exchange rate restrictions, among other barriers, may hinder migrants from sending remittances home or may influence them to send cash and non-cash items through informal channels (Freund and Spatafora, 2008). South Asia remains the region with the lowest **transaction costs** in the world, with an average cost of just 5.4 per cent of transfer as of Quarter 1 2017 (World Bank, 2017). However, a number of remittance corridors between extraregional destination countries and South Asian origin countries still exceed the goal of 5 per cent outlined by the G20, in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda on Financing for Development (4A) and Target 10.c of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (ILO, 2018).

**Migrant fatalities** abroad due to natural causes and work-related factors are widely reported in the media. Due to methodological and reporting issues, analysing trends in reported migrant worker fatalities is problematic. That said, in 2017 there were a total of 296 reported fatalities of Sri Lankan nationals employed abroad, 3,387 repatriated bodies of deceased migrant workers received in Bangladesh and 755 reported fatalities of Nepali migrant workers abroad. In Pakistan, there were a reported 475 fatalities for

## INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION

the first half of the year through June (ILO, 2018). Due to significant data constraints, the number of reported fatalities is likely an underestimate of the actual total in each country.

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*Notes: Due to different definitions and methodologies between countries, data are not comparable. Data on outflows of migrant workers typically count registrations and not individuals, so they would likely count any individual who registered more than once in a given reference year. A number of migrant workers may likely depart for employment abroad without registering and would not be recorded in official data. In certain South Asian countries, certain migrant workers are not required to gain emigration clearance, while in other South Asian countries only migrant workers departing to certain countries register and are recorded. Data for Sri Lanka for 2017 are provisional. Data for Nepal are reported on a fiscal year basis beginning 17 July and ending 16 July the following year. For data on fatalities, an increase in the reported number of fatalities of migrants employed abroad in any country may not reflect an actual increase, particularly if reporting was improved or data collection processes were changed between reference years.*

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### iv. References

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