Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)
for Migrant Workers in Asia

Webinar Report
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Context

Bangladesh's migrant workers play a significant role in the economic and social development of the migrant workers - in 165-plus countries - contributing more than 11% in gross domestic product (GDP) and generating 9% employment of the total active force[1].

The country's migrant workforce provides labour and skills to integrate themselves into the labour market, and boost the income of both the Country of Origin (COO) and the country of destination (COD). They perform skilled and semi-skilled jobs in CODs such as masons, plumbers, carpenters, drivers, house helpers, gardeners, cleaners and vendors. Upon returning to their homeland, migrants have the potential to make further contributions to economic development of the COO through financial investments, as well as monetising human and social capital acquired abroad, such as new skills and competencies.

Bangladesh's migrant workers face numerous challenges in the CODs, primarily a lack of recognition of their skills, which often results in lower wages, and a lack of career progression. This lack of skills recognition poses further difficulties for returnee migrants when they try and reintegrate themselves into the job market of their COOs.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated the plight of millions of migrant workers – be they potential, current or returnee workers. The continuous influx of returnees who have been laid off from their jobs, poses a seismic challenge to Bangladesh's strained labour market, which is already contending with millions of local workers who have lost their jobs.

Skills recognition for migrant workers

A formal and widely accepted skills recognition system helps improve the market status and value of migrant workers not only in recipient countries, but also in their home countries upon return. Due to a lack of recognition of skills for millions of overseas workers – even after they have gained several years of good international work experience – no formal qualifications often means lower wages.

According to a recent International Organization for Migration (IOM) study, **60 per cent** of Bangladeshi migrants who have returned during the current Covid-19 crisis expressed a desire to upgrade and certify their skill sets. In addition, **75%** of them said that once overseas working opportunities resumed, they would ideally like to work in a country where their skills would be recognised and justly rewarded. In another recent study by ILO, almost **one-third** of women and men who had returned during the pandemic, described the new skills they had acquired and what existing skills they had been able to improve in COD.

In recent years, Bangladesh has made good progress in successfully establishing and implementing a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) system. There are 411 RPL centres in the country and these facilities have provided certificates to 41,560 workers, including 15,000 migrant workers. However, only a limited number of migrant workers are certified for their existing or newly acquired skills in Bangladesh or in the COD. The Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment (MOEWOE) has shown a keen interest in strengthening and expanding

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[1] Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (2020). Overseas Employment and Remittance from 1976-2020 (February). Available at: http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/stattisticalDataAction, [9 May 2020].

its RPL services for economic reintegration and remigration of skilled workers in the country, as well as in the countries of destination.

RPL Webinar: A Multi-stakeholder Approach

In this context, the ILO and the MOEWOE organized a webinar on 31st August, 2020, to promote **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for Migrant Workers in Asia** and to share regional best practices and strengthen the skills recognition system in Bangladesh and in destination countries.

The five presentations (Bangladesh, Jordan, and The Philippines, Sri Lanka, and the European Union) all agreed that RPL has the capacity to act as a mechanism for the social inclusion of migrant workers who have not had the opportunity to acquire formal training, but who have acquired competencies relevant to qualification outcomes. The five presentations revealed that they follow similar delivery mechanisms but the diversity lies in their emphasis. The five presentations also revealed that they are moving or have moved to technology enabled RPL models.

This report summarizes a range of good RPL 'country practices', analyses their relevance to the Bangladesh context, and then provides suggestions on how to expand RPL services for migrant workers in Bangladesh.

Five Country Best Practices

Bangladesh: RPL for Migrant Workers

The National Skills Development Policy, 2011 (NSDP 2011) of Bangladesh called for an RPL system to recognize skills' of workers that were gained informally. While many non-migrant workers have acquired certifications through RPL, migrant workers and expatriate returnees are still not aware of the system or its benefits.

According to Nazibul Islam, MOEWOE Additional Secretary: "*We have many migrant aspirants, but they are not aware of the importance of skills standards. The RPL will help them and this can be a good strategy for Bangladesh*."

The recognition of skills gained abroad or in the country of origin is a key factor for the smooth transition to decent work for migrant workers. In the context of millions of migrant workers returning with a range of skills, RPL facilitates their economic reintegration through recognition of the skills acquired in the country of destination (COD). The demand for RPL and skills certification is also increasing for migrant workers to acquire their *iqamas*[2] or work permit in the COD.

The RPL process starts with the profiling of migrant workers, the submission of application documents followed by assessment and certification. As of June 2020, approximately 75,000 candidates had received national certificates, out of which 56% of the total number (circa 42,000) obtained one through RPL. There is no available data for migrant workers.

Recognizing skills of Bangladeshi workers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The Embassy of Bangladesh in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has initiated dialogue with the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC) and Takamol[3] - two agencies responsible for the Skills Verification Programme (SVP) in the KSA. The intention is to promote decent employment opportunities for Bangladesh's workers in the KSA and wider GCC region. Since RPL is gaining dominance as a proven skills recognition tool, the lessons learned are important for the continued implementation of RPL:

- Country-wide campaigns on RPL are crucial, clearly highlighting the benefits of obtaining skills certificates;
- Identification of candidates, orientation, guidance and documentation collection can be conducted through online interviews and/or sometimes even via WhatsApp calls;
- Coordination with private sector and employers' federations to spell out the upcoming labour market demands; and
- Piloting of skills recognition in KSA would provide a model for RPL in other CODs

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[2] A residence permit issued to expatriates who arrive in KSA with an employment visa.

[3] Takamol Holding is a state-owned company under the Ministry of Labor and Social Development of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. One of the main roles of Takamol is to act on behalf of the Saudi state and to improve and develop the local labor market. Companies that belong to Takamol provide services that include combining Saudi employers with potential foreign employees and issuing work visas

Jordan: RPL for Refugees and Host Communities

In 2016, the ILO and the National Employment and Training Company (NETC) signed an agreement to implement one-month training for Jordanian and Syrian refugees aimed at achieving skills certification through the use of RPL methodology. The RPL methodology and assessment tools were developed, tested and fully implemented through consultation with key stakeholders, including the Center for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (CAQA). Every six months, the scheme is reviewed and updated to ensure its continued effectiveness and success.

The NETC follows four steps to complete the RPL process:

(a) identification of beneficiaries;

(b) pre-assessment of applicants;

(c) theoretical training of applicants; and

(d) assessment and certification.

The pre-assessment of applicants at the beginning of the training identifies their skills levels, occupation and work readiness. In addition to the four-day theoretical trainings at the NETC centres, each applicant receives practical training through workplace coaching and mentoring.

Through RPL, around 10,000 refugees and host community members from Jordan, Syria and the State of Palestine have received certificates. With RPL certificates in hand, the refugees were able to obtain work permits and thus better equipped to enter the formal economy. Among the skills certificates awarded are in the following trades: (a) construction trades *i.e. carpentry, masonry and plastering, tile setting, painting (house and furniture)*; (b) electrical trades *i.e. plumbing household electricity, solar cell installation, welding;* (c) mechanical trades *i.e. metal forming, industrial trades machinery, air conditioning and cooling, aluminum blacksmithing.*

The main challenges in scaling up RPL is reaching out to beneficiaries, a weak accreditation and licensing system, and the lack of technical capacity in the implementation of the scheme. The outreach challenge was overcome by collaboration with the UNHCR and designing a webpage for registering refugees. In addition, there were a series of intensive capacity building activities for Center for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (CAQA) and government centres for assessment and licensing procedures. The ILO-NET collaboration is now looking to expand RPL to other occupational sectors, and higher-level skills including technicians and professionals.

Sri Lanka: National Skills Passport (NSP)

The NSP is a tripartite project introduced in Sri Lanka by the Tertiary and Vocational Educational Commission (TVEC) of the Ministry of Skills Development, Employment and Labour Relations, together with The Employers' Federation of Ceylon (EFC) and the ILO. The main purpose of the NSP is to assist returnee migrant workers, and workers within Sri Lanka, to obtain formal recognition of the skills acquired through hands-on experiences and informal employment. The NSP is an access point to finding a job and gaining trainings for re-skilling, re-tooling and up-skilling.

The NSP comes in the form of a smart card issued to a skilled worker who is deemed to have the competence in the qualification(s) applied for. The smart card is connected to a dedicated online portal (www.nsp.gov.lk), which connects different stakeholders such as employees, employers, qualification bodies and labour market intermediaries. The NSP smart card carries a QR code for convenient online search and verification.

The NSP is linked with the national RPL platform through which a skilled worker can apply via the system, namely (i) the submission of proof of competence, (ii) verification for their authenticity, (iii) assessment and evaluation by the assessor, and (iv) certification and issuance of the passport. The NSP has a system of documentation, which will ensure that the skills, expertise and experience of a worker is recorded in a methodical manner, both within and across sectors.

Since 2010, more than 350,000 NVQF certificates have been issued; 5% (17,500) of the total number was obtained through the RPL platform

The unavailability of statistics for migrant workers, the gap in the competency standards and programmes, low levels of awareness and tackling traditional mindsets are among the main challenges in the NSP project in Sri Lanka

The Philippines: e-Portfolio and On-Site Assessment

The Philippines introduced an e-portfolio assessment in response to the needs of Filipinos workers, including overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), who had lost their jobs or whose incomes have been affected by the COVID 19 pandemic. The e-portfolio is a collection of authentic evidence demonstrating the knowledge, skills and competencies that a person has acquired over time.

The e-portfolio assessment follows the same procedure as ordinary portfolio assessments[4], however, it is done solely online. The documents submitted by the candidates are uploaded onto a google drive, and evaluated by a panel of assessors. The assessors may ask the candidate to appear in an online interview, if necessary. In addition, five or more years of work experience is a core eligibility requirement for e-portfolio assessment candidates.

As a new, online system, the e-portfolio implementation has its own challenges. These can be categorised as the '4Ps': Portfolio, Platform, People & Process, and Promotion. The test on the portfolio includes its completion, authenticity and the time for verification. In terms of Platform, the challenges include connectivity, need for sustainable and scalable platforms, and readiness of assessors to use digital tools.

Alongside the e-portfolio assessment, the Philippines also uses technology to facilitate onsite assessment of OFWs. The assessment is done by a three-member panel of assessors: one is in the country where the candidate will be assessed and the other two members are accessible via zoom or skype.

Between 2014 to 2019, the Philippines conducted onsite assessment of circa 5,000 OFWs in the Middle East (United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Kuwait), and Asia (Hongkong and Singapore) resulting in an 82% certification rate. The assessed OFWs received skills certificates in the following occupations: (a) construction: *technical drafting*; (b) ICT-related: *visual graphics design, computer systems servicing*; (c) allied health occupations: *massage therapy, wellness massage, caregiving*; (d) beauty-related occupations: *beauty care, nail care, and hairdressing*; and (e) hospitality: *food and beverage services, bread and pastry production, and cookery*.

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[4] Portfolio assessment is an examination of the candidate's samples of work, experiences and documents providing evidence of the competencies that were acquired through experiences. The portfolio allows the applicant to contribute actively to the collection of evidence and contains a combination of tools, which strengthen the overall validity of the process. (Source: The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop)

The European Union (EU): The EUROPASS system

The EU established the EUROPASS system to acknowledge the fact that all learning, irrespective of where and when it takes place, is valuable for the individual and for society. The EUROPASS is a set of online tools and information that helps individuals document, display, and manage their skills, work experiences and qualifications throughout the span of their career. It provides reliable and transparent information on skill needs and validation of prior learning. It also provides a framework for digital certificates, confirming that skills or learning outcomes are achieved, whether through formal, non-formal or informal learning contexts.

The skills and qualifications recognition follows four main steps, namely: identification, documentation, assessment, and certification. Validation, the process of confirmation by an authorized body that an individual has acquired skills measured against a relevant standard, is an indispensable quality assurance process in skills certification. The EUROPASS is one of the tools used to promote validation and to improve comparability and transparency of the outcomes. The 2012 Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNIL) gave political impulse for EU Member States to speed up the building of well-functioning validation systems. By 2018, 15 out of 28 EU member states had national validation systems in place.

The EUROPASS framework has been up and running effectively since its establishment in 2004. The following lessons learned will ensure greater success for the system: (a) free access to EUROPASS for anyone in and beyond the EU makes it more relevant; (b) access to reliable information is necessary to facilitate recognition of skills; and (c) digitalised procedures on skills make the verification authentic and reliable.

Lessons to address challenges in Bangladesh for Implementing RPL

1. RPL is a recent and rapidly evolving concept. Many migrant workers are unaware/uninformed of the opportunities that RPL offers in terms of outcomes, processes and benefits.

   Recommendation: *A well-directed strategy should be developed to help generate awareness about RPL, and to build trust and confidence among migrant workers. The migration resource centres can serve as a one-stop shop information centre; other channels to reach out to migrant workers include the use of employment support services, websites, and other marketing and communications strategies.*

2. There are different, nuanced modalities to implementing RPL and no 'one size fits all' approach.

   Recommendation: *Adapt an RPL modality factoring in culture, its profile, and its resources. The involvement of stakeholders, and the way in which the system is organized varies country-by-country.*

3. The switch to e-RPL is progressive, and based on a comprehensive test and learning approach. It is important for Bangladesh to embark on a digitized form of assessment for returnee migrants to achieve greater outreach and success,

   Recommendation*: Adapt and contextualize the experiences of NSP in Sri Lanka, the e-portfolio in the Philippines, and the EUROPASS in the EU.*

4. The quality of RPL is highly reliant on the capabilities of RPL professionals. This requires competent assessors and certified recognition procedures to ensure the authority and reliability of the results.

   Recommendation: *A capacity building strategy for RPL professionals based on needs assessment to prepare them for their roles and functions should be in place. The momentum for RPL declines because of the dearth of professionals to scale-up the RPL process.*

5. Trust and confidence in the quality of qualifications gained through RPL by stakeholders is key to its long-term success. The Quality Assurance System should define a rigorous assessment methodology to ensure that the qualifications are worth awarding.

   Recommendation: *A quality assurance strategy for RPL should clearly define quality assurance arrangements in terms of policies and procedures, governance and management, assessment mechanisms, monitoring and review of RPL practices, and other support services.*

6. There is a dearth of research in tracking the impacts of RPL over time and on a large scale. There is no research/evidence in Bangladesh to demonstrate that RPL certified workers earned higher wages or income once certified.

   Recommendation: *Research should be undertaken for comparative analysis of change in incomes following RPL certification (including among migrant workers) and the evidence-based positive outcome should be used in awareness raising campaigns to better promote RPL in Bangladesh.*