

▶ Labour Migration in Asia and the Pacific

▶ **The ILO is a specialised United Nations agency with a constitutional mandate to protect migrant workers, and it does so as part of its overarching goal of advancing social justice and promoting decent work**

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1. Background and frameworks

The governance of labour migration is of core importance to the ILO and its constituents (i.e. governments, employers' and workers' organizations). The preamble to the ILO constitution highlights the need to protect workers employed in countries other than their own. Labour migration has the potential to deliver a triple win. For countries of destination, it contributes to economic growth through the provision of labour, skills and ideas. For countries of origin, the movement of women and men across borders reduces underemployment pressures and increases remittances.

Migrant workers have the opportunity to earn higher incomes and develop new skills, and thus greater independence and agency. However, the envisioned triple win is not equitably distributed. At the International Labour Conference in June 2014, the ILO Director-General called for "constructing an agenda for **fair migration** which not only respects the fundamental rights of migrant workers but also offers them real opportunities for decent work".

Bali Declaration

The **Bali Declaration** adopted by ILO constituents from the Arab States and Asia-Pacific at the 16th Asia and the Pacific Regional Meeting of the ILO in December 2016, calls for enhancing labour migration policies based on relevant international standards that recognize labour market needs; promote fair recruitment; provide adequate

protection to all migrant workers; as well as redress employer-employee relationships that impede workers freedom of movement, and their right to terminate employment or change employers while taking into account contractual obligations.

Sustainable Development Goals

The importance of decent work and well-managed migration is recognized in the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**. SDG 8 calls for promoting sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, as well as full and decent work for all. Target 8.8 aims to protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environment for all workers, including migrant workers and in particular women migrants. SDG 10 calls for reducing inequalities within and among countries. Target 10.7 aims to facilitate the orderly, safe and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies.

Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration

In September 2016, the General Assembly convened a high-level plenary on addressing large movements of refugees and migrants, and adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants. The New York Declaration indicated that States would begin a process of intergovernmental negotiations leading to the adoption of

a **Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM)**. The Compact was formally endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly on 19 December 2018.

2. Trends and statistics

Much of the international migration occurring today is propelled by the search of decent work. The ILO estimated in 2017 that there are 164 million migrant workers worldwide, which accounted for 70% of all migrants of working age. The centrality of work to migration flows, particularly in the context of Asia-Pacific, is clear.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were 10 million international migrants in the ASEAN of whom almost half were women. The Arab States have the highest proportion of migrant workers to all workers (40.8 per cent), and host 13.9 per cent of migrant workers worldwide, most of them from South-East and South Asia.

There are other key migration corridors in the region, including to Korea and Japan. Migrant workers from the Pacific Island Countries find jobs in seasonal worker programmes in Australia and New Zealand.

Labour migration in the region occurs primarily under temporary migration regimes and for elementary occupations and medium skilled work. However, Asia is also an important source region for skilled workers (in particular China, India and the Philippines). In 2015, a third of new immigrants to OECD countries came from Asia.

The issue of distress migration features in certain corridors in the region, notably from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar; and there is climate change induced migration in the Pacific and small island states.

Migration corridors and sectors of employment are highly gendered. Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines have typically had large outflows of women migrants engaged in domestic work. Women have more labour market options in South-East Asia, where they find jobs in manufacturing, agriculture, hospitality and to a lesser extent in construction. Flows to the construction industry in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are dominated by men migrant workers. This is similarly true for the fishing sector in East and South-East Asia; as well as the seasonal worker flows from the Pacific Islands to New Zealand and Australia.

Irregular migration occurs in parallel with regular migration, though the figures vary by countries and sub-regions, and data and sources on estimated irregular flows are scarce.

3. Priorities

The effective governance of labour migration poses challenges and is shaped by powerful socio-economic and political factors. Gaps remain in the implementation of laws and policies in countries of origin and destination. Focus areas for the ILO in 2020-21 include protecting and promoting of the rights of women and men migrant workers including on fair recruitment; contributing to economic development and inclusive growth – in particular labour mobility, skills development and recognition, and increasing development impact; supporting regional and inter-regional dialogues on labour migration; and improving harmonised data collection and statistics.

Much of this needs to be done under the framework of contributing to the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and in particular goals eight and ten, and regional economic integration.

COVID-19

Experiences in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (where many Asian migrants work), and in the Pacific, have demonstrated that migrant workers are among the vulnerable groups during the COVID-19 pandemic for a variety of reasons. ILO's response has included:

- a) Humanitarian support (PPE, care packages, food assistance) in partnership with Migrant Workers Resource Centres (MRCs), trade unions and CSOs
- b) Wage protection via MRCs
- c) Research, tools, policy advocacy and coordination: A series of country notes and briefs were prepared (Thailand, Malaysia, Myanmar, Women Migrant Workers, Research); the 13th AFML had the theme: "Supporting migrant workers during the pandemic for a Cohesive and Responsive ASEAN Community", Nov 2020.

Going forward, fair wages, equal treatment in social protection, and decent living conditions for women and men migrant workers should be key considerations when admitting migrants. Key priorities include strengthening wage protection and support services; supporting return

and reintegration; and developing protocols and guidelines for safe and fair recruitment and deployment during the new normal.

CPOs and Development Cooperation projects

In the current programming cycle of the ILO (2020-21) there are 15 target CPOs (Country Programme Outputs) in Asia and the Pacific under Outcome 7: Adequate and effective protection at work.¹

Towards the achievement of these CPOs, ILO technical support is provided in the form of research; promotion of international labour standards and review of legislation and bilateral agreements; policy advice; capacity building; development of tools and guides; support services to migrant workers; facilitation of sub-regional and inter-country partnerships and sharing of good practices; and inter-regional dialogues based on the Fair Migration Agenda.

Additionally, public campaigns are run to increase awareness on the rights of migrant workers, and to

promote a more positive perception of migrants based on their contribution. The vehicle for ILO support, in addition to the work by ILO specialists on labour migration and related fields, are the 14 development cooperation projects funded by governments of Australia, Canada, the European Union, United Kingdom, the United States, Switzerland, the UN, LIFT (Myanmar) and the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery. These projects provide the main means through which ILO programme objectives are realized in the region. They build on the ILO's comparative advantage in the region as a tripartite and standard setting organization having expertise across the full spectrum of the world of work. In addition to development partners, the ILO collaborates with IOM, World Bank, UN Women, UNDP, OECD, Asian Development Bank Institute and the ASEAN Secretariat.

¹ CPOs are country level targets or priorities identified by ILO constituents. These fall under global policy priorities or Outcomes, of which there are 8 in the current biennium.

4. Labour migration projects in Asia and the Pacific

► Current labour migration projects in Asia and the Pacific

Name	Geographical Coverage, Duration, UN, and Development partners
Southeast Asia	
TRIANGLE in ASEAN	Coverage: ASEAN Duration: 2015-27 Development partners: Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Government of Australia (2015-27) and Global Affairs Canada (2016-21)
Safe & Fair: Realizing women migrant workers' rights and opportunities in the ASEAN region	Coverage: ASEAN Duration: 2018-22 UN partner: UN Women Development partner: European Union (through the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative)
Southeast Asia regional programme on labour migration in the fishing sector	Coverage: Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Indonesia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, Viet Nam Duration: 2020-24 UN partners: IOM, UNDP Development partner: European Union
Protecting the Rights of Migrant Workers through Empowerment and Advocacy (MWEA)	Coverage: Malaysia Duration: 2016-20 Development partner: US Department of Labor, Government of the United States of America
Developing International and Internal Labour Migration Governance (DIILM)	Coverage: Myanmar Duration: 2016-21 Development partner: Livelihoods and Food Security Fund
Activities to Support Legislative Reform on Labour Migration in Viet Nam	Coverage: Viet Nam Duration: March 2020 - December 2020 Development partner: Global Fund to End Modern Slavery
South Asia	
Application of Migration Policy for Decent Work for Migrant Workers (Phase I and Phase II)	Coverage: Bangladesh Duration: 2019-21 Development partner: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
EU-India Cooperation and Dialogue on Migration and Mobility	Coverage: India Duration: 2017-21 Development partner: European Union
Migrant Rights and Decent Work Project (MIRIDEW)	Coverage: Nepal Duration: 2018-21 Development partner: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
Skills for Employment Programme (SEP)	Coverage: Nepal Duration: 2017-21 Development partner: Department for International Development (DFID/UKAid), Government of the United Kingdom
Safe labour migration programme (Phase IV)	Coverage: Sri Lanka Duration: 2020-24 Development partner: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
Governance of Labour Migration in South and South-East Asia (GOALS)	Coverage: South Asia focus Duration: 2020-23 UN partners: IOM and UN Women Development partner: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

The Pacific	
Enhancing protection and empowerment of migrants and communities affected by climate change and disasters in the Pacific region	Coverage: Pacific Island Countries of Kiribati, Tuvalu, Republic of the Marshall Islands, Vanuatu and Fiji Duration: 2019-22 UN partners: IOM, OHCHR, ESCAP Development partner: UN Trust Fund for Human Security
Multi-regional	
Global Action to Improve the Recruitment Framework of Labour Migration (REFRAME)	Coverage: Malaysia, Sri Lanka-Middle East corridor, Pakistan-Middle East corridor (also covers Madagascar-Lebanon corridor, Guatemala-Mexico corridor) Duration: 2017-21 Development partner: European Union
Integrated Programme on Fair Recruitment Phase 2 (FAIR II)	Coverage: Philippines, Hong Kong (China), Nepal (also covers Jordan, Tunisia) Duration: 2018-21 Development partner: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

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