



International
Labour
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Impact of COVID-19 on Bangladesh Overseas Migrant Workers

Responses and Recommendations National Online Meeting with Trade Unions and Civil Society

April 30, 2020

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April 30, 2020

Organised by ILO Migration Programme, Dhaka, Bangladesh

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List of Abbreviations

BCSM	Bangladesh Civil Society for Migration
BNSK	Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CBO	Community-Based Organization
CGCM	CSOs for Global Commitments on Migration
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
ILO	International Labour Organization
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
MoEWOE	Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment
MoFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NCCWE	National Coordination Committee on Workers Education
OKUP	Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program
RA	Recruitment Agent
RMMRU	Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit

Introduction

Bangladesh is a major source country for migrant workers in the GCC and South East Asia, and its overseas migrant workers have begun to face multiple challenges since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The annual average of outbound migrant workers is usually 750,000, however, according to Bangladesh's recruitment agencies, over 150,000 aspirant migrant workers (with employment visas to the GCC region) will not be able to travel this year due to flight closures and job cuts/stoppages. In addition, there is growing pressure from the governments of Bahrain, Kuwait, Maldives, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE to immediately evacuate Bangladeshis, especially those with 'irregular' status and serving custodial sentences¹. According to unconfirmed media reports, over 200,000 migrant workers returned to Bangladesh between February-April 2020, and many may not be able return to their jobs in the foreseeable future.

This will have a serious socio-economic impact on millions of Bangladeshis. Remittances from migrants is a major contributor to the foreign currency reserves of the country, which is around 6% of the GDP. According to the World Bank, Bangladesh is one of the largest recipients of remittance, with 16.4 billion USD in fiscal year 2019². This remittance inflow is likely to decline drastically due to a predicted economic recession which is already being felt across the world³.

In all probability, there will now be a high number of unemployed migrant workers stranded in Bangladesh. According to ILO⁴, recent global trends points towards a huge rise in youth unemployment rates since February 2020, particularly for young women. It is also noteworthy that youth under the age of 30, account for around 70% of international migrant flows.

Many young migrants have suffered the impact of workplace and border closures, and have not been able to return either to their workplace or to their country of origin. While the data is not readily available, there is a real possibility of 800,000 to one million migrant workers returning to Bangladesh in the coming fiscal year – a substantial labour force population that will be in need of employment, cash incentives, social protection and mental health support.

It is also unclear as to how many of the returned migrants (and their family members) may have been COVID-19 positive. The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Bangladesh was detected on 8 March 2020. As of early June 2020⁵, the total official count of infected cases crossed 52,000, with about 3000 confirmed new cases per day.

¹ This is already in progress, here is a news link at the time of preparing this report -

<http://unb.com.bd/category/Bangladesh/1200-bangladeshis-return-home-from-maldives/52124>

² <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2019/10/10/world-bank-bangladesh-economy-continues-robust-growth-with-rising-exports-and-remittances>

³ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=BD>
<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/bangladesh/bangladesh-poised-to-see-sharp-fall-in-remittance-inflow-1585668863>

⁴ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_745963.pdf

⁵ Although WHO source reports 49,534 confirmed cases in Bangladesh as of 2:42pm CST on 2 June 2020 (<https://covid19.who.int/region/searo/country/bd>), the official source of the Government of Bangladesh reports 52,445 confirmed cases as of 2:40pm BST on 2 June 2020 (in Bengali -

During the third week of March, Bangladesh declared a national lockdown. The lockdown has since been extended several times, and was finally lifted on 31 May 2020. The impact of the lockdown has particularly affected low-wage and informal sector workers, in both rural and urban areas, many of whom are also domestic internal migrant workers.

The national media have reported many instances of returning overseas migrants facing stigmatization from local communities, who regard returnees as carriers of the virus/disease⁶. Stigmatization of migrants, food insecurity and unemployment can impact social cohesion among returning migrants and their communities. Many returning migrants and their families are also in debt, as they have not migrated for long enough to clear their outstanding debts. Returning female migrants are especially vulnerable as there are limited employment opportunities for women in Bangladesh.

Internally, the Ministry of Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment (MoEWOE) has formed a special committee, and is also a member of an inter-ministerial committee comprising of MoEWOE, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Armed Forces Division, to respond to the repatriation of migrants in the current crisis. The national UN Migration Network is preparing a strategic plan to provide support and assist the government on these urgent issues. The ILO and partners are also responding to returned migrants and their families at the community level.

In this context, ‘*The Application of Migration Policy for Decent Work for Migrant Workers-Phase II*’ project of ILO Bangladesh, in collaboration with the ILO Bangladesh Country Office and with technical support of Regional Migration Specialist, Shabarinath Nair (ILO Decent Work Team for South Asia), organised and hosted an online meeting and dialogue with the Trade Unions and representatives of Civil Society Organisations working on migration. The virtual meeting was held on 30 April 2020. The objective was to understand the current and upcoming challenges in the migration sector, including the efforts being taken and actions required to ensure the rights, decent work and welfare of all Bangladeshi migrant workers. The ILO Country Director of Bangladesh, Tuomo Poutiainen, welcomed the participants and Laetitia Weibel Roberts, Chief Technical Advisor of the Migration Programme, moderated the discussion. The meeting was joined by civil society representatives from BCSM, BNSK, BRAC, representatives of NCCWE, representative from migrants’ organisation OKUP, representatives from migration related think tank RMMRU and representative from the Workers’ Resource Centre. Other ILO colleagues from the migration and Skills 21 programmes also participated.

Brief Summary of the Proceedings

Opening Remarks

The opening remarks were made by Tuomo Poutiainen; Sultan Ahmmed, Workers’ Specialist for South Asia; and Shabarinath Nair.

https://corona.gov.bd/?gclid=CjwKCAjw8df2BRA3EiwAvfZWaAa7CVaa0VckV1sk0VTJ_UhxXEaL-v3YBM4ZFHI7SqXrCbmZWYtIxoCi-YQAvD_BwE

⁶ Call to protect rights of migrants amid coronavirus pandemic. *New Age Bangladesh*, 23 March 2020. <https://www.newagebd.net/article/103357/call-to-protect-rights-of-migrants-amid-coronavirus-pandemic>

In his opening remark, Tuomo Poutiainen reminded all about the ongoing social and economic upheavals facing the world, and the hardships of many Bangladeshi migrant workers. He stated that the purpose of the session was to learn what measures and responses the UN agencies, including ILO and constituents, could advocate for Bangladeshi migrants in need of urgent assistance.

The New Delhi-based ILO Regional Specialist on Workers' Rights, Sultan Ahmed, added his concern about the stigma that returnees are facing as carriers of the virus. Shabarinath Nair also acknowledged how South Asian migrants working in the GCC region are facing similar challenges and that many governments, including Bangladesh's, are gearing up efforts to assist their migrant workforce. The challenges are further compounded because of the spectrum of regular, irregular and undocumented migrant workers who are abroad.

The current situation started with a health crisis, but is now a crisis of access to employment/livelihood, wages and food, he added. He also said that stemming from a health to humanitarian issue, the COVID-19 crisis is now also a development issue. He urged the participants to reflect and suggest ways forward in a 'new normal' from different dimensions.

Representatives of NCCWE (in full)

Dr. Wazedul Islam Khan, Shirin Akhter and Razequzzaman Ratan spoke on behalf of NCCWE.

They mentioned that out of the 12.2 million Bangladeshi overseas migrant workers across 170 countries, 60% are in the Middle East and GCC, 12% in Europe, 11% in US and 11% in the Asia Pacific region. The highest number of Bangladeshi workers are in the KSA, which is about 2 million people. The COVID-19 migration crisis can be characterised by 5 main challenges:

1. New overseas jobs may decrease
2. The continuity of existing jobs is uncertain
3. Uncertain future of the migrant workers who have returned back
4. 200-250,000 aspirant migrants currently holding valid work visas, face uncertainty regarding the tenure of the visa, if they cannot travel due to imposed lockdowns and flight closures
5. Economic uncertainty for the migrant families, and for the country, if remittance flows are reduced

Migrant workers will face an even deeper crisis if the demand and price of oil goes down in the Middle East and the Gulf. The 'push' factor to reduce poverty and the 'pull' factor to have a better standard of living will both increase – compelling migrant workers to be more desperate to go abroad in even larger numbers. The economic conditions of the country will be worse than before, conditions for working abroad might be more stringent and risks for women migrant workers will be greater. There will be a need for greater monitoring of the functions of the recruiting agencies and sub-agents to curb irregular migration. The government ought to ensure 'zero cost for migration', reducing potential involvement in hazardous migration and work.

The global job market will change in a post COVID-19 world. For future overseas work, priority should be given to skills development in the IT and digital technology. To support this skills development, a proper disaggregated database of migrant workers is essential.

There is also a need to find out more about the plight of 600,000 workers that may have come back, mostly from the ME and GCC region. The 500,000 taka to be provided by the GoB to the affected migrants should be accompanied with guidance about entrepreneurship

development. Returned migrant workers can also be provided with soft loans with low-interest rates in order to become self-sufficient in managing the crisis. The TUs stand beside the government in preparing lists for the distribution of aid to workers and in the overall management of aid distribution. UN agencies like ILO, IOM and the government should consider a minimum package of support for these migrant workers, so that they can stand on their feet again. ILO can play an important role in negotiating the clearance of arrears and future job security of migrant workers who had a contract until the pandemic hit the world.

The huge overseas workforce contribute to the country in many ways – healthy balance of payment for the national economy; reducing unemployment rates in the country; taking care of families and the elderly and improvements in total agricultural output through re-investing their remittances. They need to be treated with dignity and respect, not as a charity case. It is also worth pointing out that the challenges for both domestic/internal and overseas migrants, and their families need to be addressed. With the country circling? in and out of lockdown, large-scale internal mobility further increases the spread of the virus.

Representatives of Workers' Resource Centre (WRC)

Shahidullah Badal and Kutubuddin Ahmed spoke on behalf of the WRC.

They urged that migrant workers are treated with dignity and their needs prioritised, considering their contributions to Bangladesh, as well as in the countries' of destination. In this regard, under international humanitarian and human rights laws and norms, any country facing any kind of crisis, has an obligation to provide protection to all the vulnerable people in their country, irrespective of their origin. For instance, migrant workers in Singapore who were already in lockdown due to COVID-19 are living in congested quarters. The local authorities should ensure social distancing and other minimum standards and requirements, according to WHO guidelines.

They highlighted that workers in the informal sector are the worst hit, both at home and abroad. Since some migrant workers will still remain abroad for some time, there is a need to ensure the smooth continuity of remittance channels. A database of returnee migrant workers is required to provide them with necessary assistance, where TUs can also support rehabilitation efforts. They urged all concerned to plan for both the immediate and the future longer term need of migrant workers. They proposed the formation of a '*Combat COVID-19 Committee for Migrant Workers*' with all stakeholders. for a coordinated response to migrants affected by the crisis.

Civil Society Organisation Representatives (CSO)

Marina Sultana and Fazle Zahid spoke on behalf of RMMRU, a research organisation, and BCSM, a platform on migration with 19 civil society actors. Sumaiya Islam (BNSK), Shariful Hasan (BRAC) and Shakirul Islam (OKUP) were the other civil society participants who shared their efforts and recommendations to assist migrant workers.

The CSO representatives reported that 200,000 migrant workers have returned in one month, including 42,000 from KSA, 38,000 from UAE and 20,000 from Malaysia. Their immediate need is for food and psycho-social support, but for such a large number of people, the assistance so far is probably less than 3% of what is required. The financial assistance committed by the government is also not enough.

Based on community assessments and phone contacts in a limited scale, RMMRU shared a situation analysis⁷ with the print and electronic media during April 2020. BCSM has also submitted a memorandum⁸ with recommendations to the Honourable Prime Minister and to the UN Secretary-General, based on these initial assessments.

Some of the key concerns are:

- How to support undocumented and irregular migrant workers
- Ensuring social protection, both at home and abroad
- Clarity about the status of the existing contracts and visas
- Ensuring a regular flow of remittances during the crisis, including special incentives for using legal remittance channels
- Special sensitivity towards gender-related vulnerabilities
- Ensuring to learn from the experiences of the returnee migrant workers on how they dealt with the crisis while they were abroad
- Improving inter-ministerial coordination to combat the possible rise in human trafficking

Many NGOs and CSOs have been providing direct support to migrant workers and their families, by re-adjusting their regular programme on migration. There are numerous learnings already from the assistance provided.

BNSK, which is also part of the CSOs for Global Commitments on Migration (CGCM) civil society network, reported that this platform has also submitted mid- and long-term recommendations to policy makers and the government. One of major success was, for the first time, ensuring the safe repatriation of undocumented women migrant workers from Lebanon and Jordan. Repatriation and reintegration of undocumented workers was not explicitly mentioned in the Wage Earner's Welfare Board Act, 2018 and this landmark will hopefully pave the way for including such provisions within the Act.

BNSK, in full with support from UN Women and in collaboration with CSOs working on gender, have been providing immediate food assistance, counselling to returnee migrant workers and their families in select programme implementation areas. They have observed an increase in gender-based violence (GBV) and have strongly indentified a need to quickly connect women in migrant families to the One Stop Crisis Centre of the government.

Based on information gathered from the hotline counselling service with migrant workers abroad, and their families back home, OKUP reported that about 40% of migrant workers in overseas are currently jobless. About 25% of the migrant families do not have food at home and are facing extreme hunger and food shortages. Many of migrant families also feel stigmatised and depressed, as their houses have been marked with red flags for Corona affected family and they are now being socially excluded.

⁷ <http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-Situation-Report.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/BCSM-Memorandum-to-Secretary-General-of-UN.pdf> and <http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Open-Letter-to-PM-in-English.pdf>

RMMRU field teams are working together with local governments and local administrations to identify and support vulnerable migrant families.

BRAC is also providing immediate assistance to the returnees in coordination with the government. BRAC has prepared a database of 16,000 returned migrant workers and welcomes its use by others in reaching out to the returnees.

OKUP is connecting migrants abroad to the information on services by the Bangladesh Missions and the governments of the destination country, related to the pandemic.

The CSO representatives also pointed out that the government has the primary role in responding to the crisis of migrant workers and appreciated the government for their ongoing efforts. But the process and management of such assistance should be transparent to migrants and other stakeholders. The government needs to include affected migrant families in the ongoing social safety net and social protection mechanism, and classify them as a vulnerable group. At the moment, they do not always receive government aid due to lack of clarity at the policy level. The government must consider a regional consultative process, so migrant workers are not sent back *en masse* from the country of destination to Bangladesh. There should also be a strategic plan on COVID-19 related responses for migrant workers, based on different assessments and recommendations.

Summary of Recommendations

Based on the discussions with the representatives of the TUs and CSOs, below is a summary of their recommendations for ILO, partner UN agencies, the GoB and for the TU-CSO partners:

- Need for **transparency in the process and management of financial assistance by the government** to the affected migrant workers. The CSOs are also providing assistance, albeit on a limited scale. They also have direct contact with the migrants and their own database. TUs are also ready in reaching out to the migrant workers. Coordinated assistance would create greater transparency and efficiency.
- Need for a proper **database and needs assessment** of migrant workers. Existing lists from BRAC and BAIRA should also be utilized. Assessments by CSOs can help inform strategic priorities while planning for scaling up needs assessment across the country, and in the countries of destination.
- Resolve issues around the **tenure of the employment visa** – both for those in the destination country and for those still in Bangladesh. The government has already circulated an information note that the validity of visas and passports would be negotiated for extension and renewal, but such information has not reached the migrant workers who are still abroad or their counterparts in Bangladesh. The government needs a mechanism to follow this up and inform migrant workers to relieve them of their fears.
- Include migrant families under a **social protection** mechanism. The government has already announced special compensation packages, but financial assistance and loans should be considered as a longer-term measure – within the regular GoB social protection schemes and related mechanisms for vulnerable groups
- Initiate a process for **negotiating with employers** about job security, especially for women migrant workers. This should be possible through bilateral discussions,

regional platforms and through UN agencies like ILO and IOM, who are present both in Bangladesh and in some of the countries of destination.

- **Reintegration plans** need to be programmed for **longer-term** support. Immediate food aid and cash support is needed for immediate survival, but proper reintegration locally will take time. Migrant workers who had to return home at the beginning of the pandemic or who could not join or who could not return – are all now facing uncertainty in the overseas job market.
- Guidance on **entrepreneurship development** and support with the funds provided by the government. Many of those who return may not be able to or not wish to look for jobs overseas in the near future. Greater efforts are needed to encourage local self-employment/income generating activities with loans on easy terms and lower-interest rates.
- Increased **skills development in IT and ICT** for the future overseas market. Bangladesh's migrant workers should be encouraged to acquire certified skills in digital technology, which would increase their demand abroad.
- Ensure **continuity in sending remittances** back to Bangladesh, since there is still, and will continue to be, a sizeable number of migrants abroad. For some countries, the remittance channels have not been operational and that has increased hardships for their families in Bangladesh.
- **Learn from the migrant experience** of dealing with Covid-19 themselves, or by the country of destination. Since February, migrants have been returning from China, Italy, Spain, the ME and GCC while many still continue to live in uncertainty in those countries. Nonetheless, these workers have first-hand experience of how those countries are tackling the pandemic. So rather than stigmatising migrant workers and viewing them as a risk or a burden, they should be considered as a valuable resource to help develop the national response to the pandemic in their homeland.
- Increase **inter-ministerial coordination** for addressing the possible rise of human trafficking in the post-COVID 'new normal'. There were also several suggestions to form a *Combat COVID-19 Committee for Migrant Workers* with all the relevant stakeholders. Such coordination is not structured yet among the government and NGOs working with migrants caught in the pandemic crisis. This coordination and networking should also go beyond the migration sector, and to other sectors involved in responding to the pandemic.
- **Scale-up immediate urgent support**; food aid and counselling. So far with hundreds and thousands of returnees, the immediate aid has been too little and ad hoc – that support needs to be extended to a wider group of returnees and for a longer period of time.
- Need for a **multi-stakeholder strategic plan and guidelines** for managing the crisis at home, considering various assessments and recommendations. So far, although the response has been sporadic, they have also been pragmatic – lessons from such ad-hoc measures with mixed results need to be used for more structured response, considering immediate, mid- and long-term needs. Existing laws and policies on migration may also need reviewing and revising in light of new challenges and priorities brought about by the global pandemic.

- Consider **multilateral forums and regional consultative processes for advocacy and negotiation** concerning worker rights, arrears, and job security for migrant workers. For instance, there needs to be a high-level discussion among the member states of the Colombo Process⁹ and the Abu Dhabi Dialogue¹⁰, which includes both home and host countries of migrant workers. These and other platforms need to review and agree on efforts that serve the best interests of migrant workers – clearing their arrears, extending their job tenures, providing special packages for shock recovery, etc.
- **ILO and other UN agencies** can help negotiate the clearance of arrears and to ensure job security of migrant workers who have formal contracts.
- Further **solidarity among employers' and workers' organisations** is needed to best respond to the pressing needs of migrant workers. CSOs and TUs can assist in building bridges among the employers and the migrant workers – especially at the policy making level, and at multilateral and regional level discussions designed to protect and ensure decent work for all migrant workers.

Conclusion and Way Forward

The meeting acknowledged that this was a sudden crisis on a global scale – no one at any level was prepared for it. South Asia is facing similar and sometimes country-specific challenges in the migration sector. It was evident that the different stakeholders and organisations in Bangladesh need to work collectively in addressing the huge challenges, both current and those ahead. Exploring multilateral and regional platforms for negotiating employment and wage-related issues is worth highlighting in policy level discussions, especially since such a crisis also calls for specific policy reform.

ILO is committed to take up the recommendations and follow up with its respective counterparts for moving the recommendations forward.

⁹ <https://colomboprocess.org/>

¹⁰ <http://abudhabialogue.org.ae/>

Annex 1: Key measures by the Government of Bangladesh

As of May 2020

- 5,000 BDT granted to 6,700 migrant returnees as immediate assistance
- An open letter distributed to migrant workers through the Missions abroad. The main contents of the letter –
 - The letter assures migrant workers for KSA and other countries that those whose visa is about to expire during the upcoming weeks, they need not worry – Embassies have assured Bangladesh that visas will be extended
 - All incoming and outgoing migrants and their families are requested to strictly follow the government guidance regarding COVID19
 - All migrants are requested to temporarily stop traveling within the country
 - If you are in a COD, please follow the COVID19 directives of the government of that country and face the challenging times with courage and patience
 - Please follow the quarantine rules for those it is applicable
 - Contact numbers of WEWB call centre and health emergency is provided
- Immediate food assistance to the migrant workers abroad through the missions
- Bilateral discussions and inter-ministerial coordination for the return of undocumented and irregular migrants from selected countries of destination

Annex 2: List of Participants

Trade Unions - NCCWE

Dr Wajedul Islam Khan, Secretary General, NCCWE

Ms. Shirin Akhter MP

Mr. Amirul Haque Amin

Mr. Shah Md. Abu Zafar

Mr. Rajekuzzaman Ratan

Ms. Shamim Ara

Workers Resources Canter

Mr. Shah Md. Abu Zafar

Md. Shahidullah Badal

Mr. Kutubuddin Ahmed

Civil Society

BNSK Ms. Sumaiya Islam, Dr. Syeda Khaleda Muheb Bithi

BRAC Mr. Shariful Hasan

OKUP Mr. Shakirul Islam

RMMRU Ms. Marina Sultana, Mr. Fazley Zaheed Dipu

International Labour Organisation ILO (13)

ILO Mr. Poutiainen, Tuomo

ILO Mr. Islam, Md. Saidul

ILO Mr. Khan, Shahabuddin

ILO Mr. Ahmmed, Syed Sultan Uddin

ILO Mr. Singh, Kishore Kumar

ILO Mr. Nair, Shabarinath

ILO Ms. Weibel Roberts, Laetitia

ILO Ms. Dumaoang, Ligaya Laoeng

ILO Mr. Munir Asif

ILO Ms. Banu, Suraia

ILO Mr. Chowdhury, Najibul Hyder

ILO Mr. Ahsan, A.N.M. Tanjel

ILO Mr. Dasgupta, Joy