

Reintegration of Returnee Migrants affected by COVID-19 Pandemic

Key Messages

- A comprehensive reintegration strategy should be an integral part of labour migration planning.
- Returnees requirements may differ and hence needs of various categories of returnees should be addressed
- The needs of female returnees and households with special needs should be taken into consideration in reintegration planning.
- Returnee migrants should be duly informed of any available reintegration service as and when they arrive at the airport.
- Failure to effectively reintegrate may lead to returnee migrants becoming susceptible to violent extremism and irregular migration, including trafficking and human smuggling.
- A comprehensive mapping exercise needs to be conducted on the services that are currently offered to returnee migrants by various government agencies and non-governmental organisations.



Photo Courtesy: REUTERS

Background

Outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has taken a huge toll on migrants and members of their families. More than 400,000 workers had returned to Bangladesh since April 2020¹. Almost 70% of those returning to Bangladesh had to face unemployment and struggled to find decent jobs².

Reintegration of returnee migrants has become a major challenge. Any reintegration planning should address specific needs of various categories of migrants including those (a) who have been reasonably successful in their migration effort and have gained skills and savings, (b) who were forced to return empty handed, and (c) who were in detention, or were subject to physical, sexual or mental harm before they were repatriated.

Returnee migrants' reintegration plan varies

- Some may be interested in setting up new enterprises with their savings and may require access to loan, financial literacy, and markets.
- Others may have savings and may be keen to invest in financial instruments that would yield regular returns.
- Those with skills and may require assistance in finding employment.
- Those who come back empty handed and without any resource may need employment or access to loans to set up small income generating venture.
- Those who have endured hardship and have suffered physically, sexually and mentally would first require access to health and mental care before their economic rehabilitation.

Economic Reintegration

Economic reintegration is the most important element for sustainable reintegration. Reintegration can be the engine for creating opportunities at home for each returning migrant. In the pre-departure phase there is no concerted effort to prepare the migrant for their reintegration upon return. Therefore, return has to be planned when migrants get deployed.

If people return voluntarily on completion of their migration cycle in all likelihood their reintegration will be sustainable and dignified.

¹Snapshot Report: Bangladeshi returnees from Libya and Greece, DTM, IOM <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/bangladeshi-returnees-libya-and-greece>

²IOM reports that 70 per cent of returning migrants to Bangladesh struggle to find employment, August 12, 2020 <http://rb.gy/1kp9tb>

Reflections of Key Speakers

Despite having adequate resources we are faced with a number of challenges. There is little interest in the training that we are imparting. Registration of workers upon their return is also proving to be a difficult task due to lack of interest. There has been a lack of interest in reintegration loans among the returnee migrants. The government is deeply committed to address these problems and welcomes the civil society's input in this regard.

-Imran Ahmad, MP
Hon'ble Minister
Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas
Employment, GoB

COVID-19 has given the policymakers a new opportunity to engage with reintegration issue. Any reintegration initiative should be inclusive of economic, social and psychological components and engage government, non-government and private sector actors.

-Barrister Anisul Islam Mahmud, MP
Chair, Parliamentary Standing Committee on
Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas
Employment, GoB

I suggest we take CPSJP approach: C for classification of returnees, P for packages (of support) for returnees, S for social entrepreneurship, J for justice in case of fraudulence, wage theft etc, and P for priority in repatriation, in treatment, in job, in skill development, and in compensation.

- Barrister Shameem Haider Patwary, MP
Chairperson, Bangladesh Parliamentarians'
Caucus on Migration & Development



The reintegration plan can be a sub-policy of the Overseas Employment Policy 2016 of the Government of Bangladesh (GoB). Institution building is important for implementation of any reintegration plan.

Finding employment upon return is a critical need of migrant workers. One of the major problems returnee migrants face is lower wages in the home country compared to the wages they secured in their countries of destination. Not having access to information about availability of jobs is a major problem for returnee migrants. There may be a need for specialized skills in the local market but returnee migrants who acquire specialised skills may not be able to link with the local job market. There is also a need for re-training of returnees who wish to learn new trades. Likewise, returnee migrants with small savings may lack access to microfinance institutions and banks.

Migrants who venture to set up their own enterprises face a range of problems including access to information, loan, access to market, and training on book keeping, etc.

Recommendations:

- A comprehensive reintegration strategy needs to be framed by involving concerned ministries (Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, Ministry of Youth, Ministry of Women and Child Development Affairs, Ministry of Planning, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Ministry of Education etc.), CSOs and international organisations with assigned responsibilities for different stakeholders.
- A gender and skill segregated database of returnee migrant workers needs to be established.
- Returnee migrants maybe provided with a soft loan at the rate of 0% or 1%-2% interest with long repayment period (10 years or more) with additional grace period.
- Counselling services on loans and services for reintegration for both male and female need to be established. There should be a routine counselling session as part of the programme, and the programme schedule should be notified well before due date so that those interested can attend at their own convenience.
- Financial institutions also need to be responsive to the needs of male and female returning migrant workers and design products suiting their needs.
- Employers' associations can play a role through local chambers. They can extend support to both returnee male and female migrants with advice and facilitation.

Detention of workers upon return to the home country in large numbers is a matter of serious concern. If we practice this in our own country then we lose our credibility demand our workers' protection in the destination countries.

-Md. Shahidul Haque
Former Foreign Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Sr. Advisor on Migration and Humanitarian Policy, IOM, Bangladesh, GoB

The state should consider each returning migrant as a powerful seed of development. The pandemic has provided us the opportunity to reflect on how we can come to a fuller realization of migration for development.

-William Gois
Regional Coordinator, MFA

Country Experiences of Reintegration

Philippines

The toughest test of the Philippines' government in managing returnee migrants under COVID-19 is having to attend them from quarantine, to isolating them to even escorting them to their communities of origin, including rural areas. This task is performed by the Overseas Workers' Welfare Administration, which is run by the world's largest migrant welfare fund and is in the front line in terms of assisting these returning migrant workers. The Philippines has a dedicated office for reintegration.

-Jeremiah Opiniano
Executive Director, Institute for Migration and Development Issues (IMDI)-Philippines

Nepal

Nepal government has initiated several reintegration programmes that include employment programme, loan programme and skill certification programme.

-Advocate Shom Luitel,
People Forum for Human Rights
(People Forum)- Nepal



Gender Responsive Social Reintegration

Returnee migrants face immense challenges to reintegrate socially, particularly for those who cannot complete their migration cycle and have to return prematurely. Often they have to clear pending debts that make them and the members of their families socially vulnerable. Unsuccessful returnee migrants tend to lose their social status and this may trigger mental trauma. In many instances even successful returnee migrants are considered as a burden by families as they cease to become a source of remittances.

Migrants upon their return are often seen as competitors in the local job market. The female returnees suffer from disproportionate stigmatisation and this may take toll on their marital relationships. A negative narrative is often created against female migrants and their family members, not only during their time abroad but also throughout the migration process and journey where they have to face insult and defamation. Female migrants are subjected to insensitive behaviour and negative media coverage. Often they become victims of domestic violence.

Failure to effectively reintegrate may give rise to situations of social unrest and violence. It may also lead to returnee migrants becoming susceptible to violent extremism and irregular migration, including trafficking and human smuggling.

Recommendations:

- Gender sensitivity issues need to be included in the education curriculums to address the gap of understanding of this issue.
- Social protection should be a key element in any reintegration effort.
- Coordination between ministries and collaboration of government agencies and the civil society is of great importance.
- There is a need for making the community sensitive about the problems and plights faced by returnee migrant workers who have contributed to the economic and social development of the local community.
- Those who have reintegrated before can help motivate new returnees and thus their expertise and insights may be tapped.
- Any national reintegration strategy should cover gender responsive social reintegration through intensive dialogue with all stakeholders.

India

Under the Bande Bharat Mission India brought back almost 1.5 million nationals from overseas, 60% of migrants were migrant workers and most of them were from the Gulf. India does not have an explicit reintegration framework.

Swadesh is a positive initiative of Indian government that aims to create a database of types and levels of skill of returnee migrant workers for helping government and private companies to redeploy them. Similarly, state governments of Kerala, Andhra and Tamil Nadu also captured data of returnees for the same purpose. As Kerala has a good decentralised mechanism the state government has reached out to the local self-governments to implement the reintegration programmes of returnee migrants.

-Akhil Changail
Research Lead

Centre for Indian Migrant Studies (CIMS)-India

Sri Lanka

Some of the airlines were charging three times as much for one way ticket where transport companies and hotels were taking advantage of the situation to earn profits.

Since mid-March 2020, all returning migrants have undergone mandatory health oriented reintegration protocol subjected to a PCR test upon arrival, held the returnees are directed to a 14 day quarantine either in a state sponsored facility or at own cost in a hotel. Those who test positive are treated at the state's expense in a government hospital after that returnee is cleared for social economic reintegration. The Sri Lanka Bureau Foreign Employment has initiated data collection from returning migrant workers to identify their expectations for employment.

-Sujeewa Lal Dahanayake
Attorney-at-law, National Coordinator, Lawyers
Beyond Borders- Sri Lanka



National Experience

The returnees are not a homogenous group while some may have come with resources others may not have any resource at their disposal, while some may have gained skills others may have come without gaining any particular skill, while some may have social network that will facilitate their reintegration others may not have such network, therefore the reintegration plan needs to be very nuanced addressing the needs of particular category of migrants.

A successful migrant would find it relatively easy to reintegrate and may require support from the state and other agencies. In contrast, an individual who returns under difficult circumstances without savings and skills may require access to employment opportunities, skills training, capital and various services. While migrants should be provided with information, guidance and services in their reintegration efforts they should have the final say in deciding the course of such reintegration.

Actions taken by the Government of Bangladesh:

- Bangladesh embassies in labour sending countries responded to the crisis immediately. The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment set up a monitoring committee and coordinated activities with other ministries including Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Returnee migrants were provided with TK 5000 to each as transport allowance as regular transports were not available at the time.
- The ministry set up counselling service at the airport and provided kits to incoming migrants in collaboration with civil society organisation.
- The government returned 50% of the deposit money to recruitment agencies. "in view of the hardship faced by them."
- The GoB introduced Recognition of Prior learning skills (RPL) Programme to facilitate remigration of workers and reemployment at home. However the scheme did not generate much interest among returnee migrants.
- The GoB allotted Tk 700 crore out of which 200 crore came from Wage Earners' Welfare Board.
- The GoB is offering Tk 3 lac loans without collateral and upto Tk 5 lac with collateral, for creation of income generation activities for returnee migrants. However, there has not been enough interest in securing reintegration loan from banks.
- Wage Earners' Welfare Board has set up a

reintegration project for returnee migrants of Tk 425 crore from the World Bank and GoB sources. Initially the programme will start in 30 districts and will include counselling. Those who would come to secure counselling will get cash incentive of Tk 12,000.

- As pilot scheme the GoB has donated 950 sewing machines to returnee female migrants to help them reintegrate. In addition in Manikganj, Narshingdi and Gazipur districts Tk 1 lac grant have been given to female workers. So far 200 persons have benefitted from this pilot project. The programme will be scaled up if positive response is secured.

Recommendations:

- A comprehensive mapping exercise needs to be conducted on the services that are currently offered to returnee migrants by various government agencies and non-governmental organisations.
- As only about 5% of the returnee migrants need emergency help that includes food, shelter, medical and mental trauma support and financial support for transport, effort should be directed to extend such support to them.
- Returnee migrants should be duly informed of any available reintegration service as and when they arrive at the airport. Otherwise it will be difficult for them to get the information once they arrive in their destinations.
- Registration of returnee migrants that would include their smart card number, address, cell numbers and alternative cell numbers so that they can be contacted for future reintegration plans.
- The government should extend psychosocial counselling, investment counselling, and referral services at the grassroots to facilitate reintegration of returnee migrants.
- Probashi Kallyan Bank (PKB), Krishi Bank, Social Welfare Directorate, Youth Development Directorate and Department of Women Affairs etc organisations should have coordinated programmes at the grassroots for reintegration of returnee migrants.
- DEMOs are to be trained, resourced and engaged with reintegration issue which has not been the case so far.
- There has to be better coordination among government agencies as well as CSOs in rendering services to the migrant workers based on a clear understanding about who is doing what.
- A comprehensive support centre may be set up to coordinate reintegration activities. It would include various government organisations and service providing civil society organisations.



- Returnee migrant workers should be facilitated to make their own decisions with regard to reintegration or remigration.
- There is an urgent need to link up returnee migrants with existing services. The services for returnee migrants are to be extended at the community level rather than individual level.
- Efforts have to be made to provide training on cost benefit analysis, savings, investment and related issues and advisory support on how a returnee migrant worker can become an entrepreneur using his/her skills and/or savings.

Reintegration: Essential Pillar of Labour Migration Programme

The experiences of migrants in their pre-migration stage and in the countries of destination, to a large extent shape their experiences of return and reintegration phase. This covers a range of issues from protection, enjoyment of rights and entitlements, social protection, length of stay abroad, status of visa and employment, type and level of skills acquired and volume of savings etc. Sustainable reintegration entails returnee migrants and members of their families are able to maintain a quality of life at a desirable level in their places of origin and remigration has to be a matter of choice than compulsion.

Empirical studies have established that loss of income opportunities in the countries of destination and inability to transfer remittances has made many migrant families vulnerable during COVID-19. One of the primary tasks of any reintegration programme is to ensure social protection of migrant families and the first step in extending social protection is to register returnee migrants.

While negotiating bilateral agreements for future movement of labour it is important that the authorities of sending countries to ensure that adequate social protection needs of migrants are met in the destination countries. Destination countries should also play a role in preparing the migrants, help them plan their return. Likewise, returnee migrants should also have the right to enjoy social protection benefits like all other citizens of the country and be supported in every form in their reintegration efforts. Failure to sustainably reintegrate may contribute to situations in which returnee migrants or members of their families may fall victim to irregular migration such as human smuggling and trafficking. This necessitates framing of appropriate legal and institutional framework to combat all forms of

irregular migration covering the broad spectrum of four Ps- Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Partnership. Redress should also be provided to the victims of labour trafficking after their return to the country of origin. Measures must be taken so that victims of irregular migration do not suffer from further victimisation in the countries of origin or destination. Policy planners should consider returnee migrants not as liabilities but as important resources for national development.

A critical element for reintegration of returnee migrants is to create opportunities for income generation including that of employment commensurate with the skills that the individual possesses. This entails creation of a database of skill level of returnee migrants, linking them with skills training and setting up a system of recognition of prior learning skills. It would also mean adequate trained staff and equipment of technical training centres, refreshers' course of trainers for updating their training skills and engagement of civil society organisations involved in skills training and the private sector. In view of advancements of information technology in various sectors efforts must be geared so that workers of every sector are digitally trained as much as possible.

Recommendations:

- Return and reintegration should be integral part of national development plan and/or any plan framed for facilitation of labour migration.
- A mapping exercise of existing skills training facilities existing in the country should be conducted.
- Government, civil society organisations and the private sector should collaborate to frame appropriate skills development policy geared both towards national and global labour market.
- Policy coherence and coordination among government organisations involved re-integration efforts of migrants are to be ensured. Also there has to be effective collaboration of state agencies with CSOs, the private sector and development partners in implementing re-integration programmes for returnee migrant workers.
- Local government institutions are to be sensitised, motivated and adequately resourced to facilitate reintegration efforts of returnee migrants.
- Migrants subjected to wage theft in the countries of destination should be provided with necessary support to reclaim their due entitlements from the employers even after they return to the country under emergency repatriation programmes facilitated by the government.



Prominent Participants of the Conference



Imran Ahmad, MP
Hon'ble Minister, MoEWOE,
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