



# **Migration and the achievement of SDGs for Bangladesh**

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### **Introduction**

Bangladesh is increasingly integrated with global economy in terms of trade, investment, flow of remittances. Bangladesh is one of the major labor-sending countries of the world. The one-fourth of the working age population who enters Bangladesh's labor market each year, travel overseas as migrant workers, and hence it eases the workers pressure on the domestic economy. International migration also brings remittances which contribute positively to both micro-level household level well-being by raising income, consumption, saving and investment, and macro-level stability by stimulating rural farm and non-farm economic activities and by helping to maintain healthy external balance. Bangladesh is the 9<sup>th</sup> highest remittance receiving country in the world. Remittance inflows to Bangladesh have reached USD 12.8 bln in FY2016-17 an increase of 20 times over period of two and a half decades with the highest mark of USD 15.3 bln in FY 2014-15. Total remitted amount was equivalent to 5.9% of Bangladesh's GNI in 2016.<sup>1</sup>

### **Migration and SDGs**

Sustainable development Goals does clearly refer to migration, and recognizes its cross cutting development impact and economic value. Migrant workers are specially related to SDG 8 on economic growth and decent work; issues of trafficking noted as part of SDG 16 on peaceful societies; SDG 10 calls for a reduction in the transaction costs of remittances; and migrant status is stated in SDG 17 as a factor for disaggregation during review and follow up. Finally, Target 10.7 – the cornerstone of migration in the 2030 Agenda – calls for the facilitation of 'safe, regular and responsible migration' and the implementation of 'well-managed migration policies.

However, Migration is not a development 'problem' to be solved (as is the focus of SDG 10.7), but a mechanism that can contribute to the achievement of many of the Goals as it is linked to the 13 of the 17 SDGs in different way. Labor migration can reduce poverty for migrants themselves, their families, and their origin and host countries. Migrants and their families benefit from augmented income and knowledge, which allows them to spend more on basic needs, access education and health services, and make investments which clearly impacts SDG 1, SDG 3 and SDG 4. For female migrants, increased economic resources can improve their autonomy and socioeconomic status, impacting SDG 5. Migration can lead to increased wages and greater economic growth in origin countries through higher incomes, spending and investment of migrant households. In host countries, migrants can fill labor gaps and contribute to services and the fiscal balance, impacting on SDG 1, SDG 8 and SDG 9. Therefore, it has been recommended that if countries are to achieve the SDGs, they need to consider the impact of migration at all levels and on all outcomes, beyond the migration-specific Targets.<sup>2</sup>

### **Challenges for Migration in the context of Bangladesh**

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Mustafizur Rahman, *Challenges for Migration in light of the SDGs: Context of Bangladesh*, Keynote presentation in the Dialogue organized by Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh and BRAC on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC, 2017. *Migration and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Developments*, London: Overseas Development Institute,.

Despite the booming prospects of migration in the context of globalization and the importance of it in respect to achieve SDGs goals, Bangladesh is well stricken with different complexities. The Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (MEWOE) and its agencies that is responsible for maintaining safe migration and safeguarding rights and interest of migrants, lack sufficient budget and human resources. Allocation for MEWOE in yearly budget has remained rather insignificant and unchanged as it is observed in the FY18 that total allocation for MEWOE is 0.18% of the total budget only. <sup>3</sup>

The process of migration has become extremely complex over the years. The procurement of a work visa, the recruitment of the worker and receipt of emigration clearance- the key steps in processing migration are full of irregularities and corruption. Due to lack of education and poor access to information, many people are not aware of government migration process, rules and regulations. They are unable to find out real manpower recruiting agency and do not know the exact migration cost. They even do not know that migration may be possible through government and about financing from Probashi Kallan Bank. The desperation to rise out of poverty lead many people to resort to informal even illegal channel to migrate and often create victim to fraudulent middlemen and exploitative employers, leading to loss of their life time savings and assets; harassment; abuse and imprisonment. IOM (2010) found that nearly three times higher than the official maximum fees was charged by informal sources.<sup>4</sup> Average migration cost is the Tk. 219,394 where as the government legal maximum charge for migration to the Middle West is Tk. 84000.<sup>5</sup> Various intermediaries (and other agents) accounted for lion's share - about 76% of the total costs. Low-skilled migrants, in general, pay more in terms of placement fees relative to their expected income and it is undeniable fact that Bangladesh is a major supplier of predominantly low skilled/unskilled workers as 46.2% of total stock were low skilled/ unskilled –mostly concentrated in the gulf countries. Seven out of eight migrants did not receive any training prior to their departure to host countries (87% of the total). Educational attainment of these migrant workers remains fairly low as statistics shows that 86.3% of the Bangladeshi migrants have only secondary or lower levels of formal education.<sup>6</sup> Due to being less educated and semi/low-skilled, most of Bangladeshi migrant workers in gulf countries are been exploited, face severe discrimination in terms of wage, working hour and treatment. In many cases migrants' passports are taken away from them without documenting their employment conditions and compelled them into low wage and less dignified jobs. Many migrants need to work hard even in the scorching heat of 45 to 50 degree Celsius and hence cannot sleep at night due to shabby and poor accommodation. Despite their unbearable work and long working hour, they are paid less than the local counterpart and in many case other migrant workers. In addition, a considerable number of workers do not receive their wages on a regular basis and freedom to move from one job to another is restricted for both skilled and unskilled workers.<sup>7</sup> IOM (2010) shows that per capita remittance is significantly low for Bangladeshi migrants compared to other countries of the region. While per capita remittance of

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<sup>3</sup> Professor Mustafizur Rahman, *Challenges for Migration in light of the SDGs: Context of Bangladesh*, Keynote presentation in the Dialogue organized by Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh and BRAC on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> World Bank, 2012, Bangladesh Development Report, Vol. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Professor Mustafizur Rahman, *Challenges for Migration in light of the SDGs: Context of Bangladesh*, Keynote presentation in the Dialogue organized by Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh and BRAC on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2018

<sup>7</sup> Tasneem Siddiqui, 2005. *International Labor Migration from Bangladesh: A decent work perspective*, Policy Integration Department, National Policy Group, International labor Office, Working paper No. 66, Geneva

a migrant worker from India, china and Philippines is USD 4843, USD 6112 and USD 4982 respectively, a Bangladeshi migrant worker's remittance amounts only USD 1672.<sup>8</sup>

Due to the language problem, migrant workers in abroad suffer in service receiving and transactions and even in work place and court. Situation of female workers in the destination counties is worst than their male countrymen. Although female migration to overseas countries, especially GCC countries has increased and now accounted 3.8% of Bangladeshi's total overseas labor force, the stories of inhuman treatment of many female returnees have shattered the trend. Many of them are returning destitute and despaired along with their experience of working like slaves for unlimited hours without leave, rest, recreation, and even faced sexual harassment and rape. The sufferings of migrant workers aggravate with the risks of work related injuries, poor worker welfare and insufficient legal safeguards. Recently the unnatural or premature death of Bangladeshi migrants baffled many people about the human security condition of migrants. A renowned daily news paper reported that in the last six years 13,827 bodies of deceased migrants were sent to Bangladesh, averaging around 2,300 per year<sup>9</sup>. The migrant workers have no access to court if they are deprived of the legal pay or for any inhuman or illegal activates done by the employers. The migrants worked in Middle Eastern countries are the worst suffers in these cases because no GCC countries have ratified or follow International Human Rights or other global commitments for social protection of migrant workers such as ILO conventions. Successive Bangladesh governments have failed to sign bilateral agreements with the receiving countries relating to its workers safety and security abroad.<sup>10</sup> Bangladesh also does not have any comprehensive policy for social security and protection of migrant workers and there is no dedicated component in NSSS targeting migrants.<sup>11</sup>

Bangladeshi migrants also face remittance sending and investment challenges besides their pre-migration harassment and post migration hardship. Bangladesh is yet create cheapest way of sending remittance from abroad while Banks takes lengthy time and post offices are institutionally incapacitated to handle the remittance transfer. Migrants often resort to informal channel to send their money home. BBS 2016 study shows that about 50% of RRHs only are reported to receive remittances through bank accounts in Bangladesh. Due to the lack of institutional arrangements with diversified host countries of Bangladeshi migrants, it is getting more challenging to send money, through a formal channel, from new host countries.

The propensity to save/invest among Bangladeshi remitters' households is not negligible, but savings is not significant. BBS 2016 data suggest that while about 40% remittance receiving households tend to save, their average amount of savings was only 8% of total remittance income and from there only a small portion of remittance is invested in a production sector. Only 25% of total remittance income went to investment (BBS 2016). Three investment scheme namely WEDB, UPB, UIB are not much popular among the migrants or returnees despite these

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<sup>8</sup> Professor Mustafizur Rahman, *Challenges for Migration in light of the SDGs: Context of Bangladesh*, Keynote presentation in the Dialogue organized by Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh and BRAC on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2018.

<sup>9</sup> *The daily Prothom Alo*, 10 February 2014

<sup>10</sup> Tasneem Siddiqui, 2005. *International Labor Migration from Bangladesh: A decent work perspective*, Policy Integration Department, National Policy Group, International labor Office, Working paper No. 66, Geneva

<sup>11</sup> Professor Mustafizur Rahman, *Challenges for Migration in light of the SDGs: Context of Bangladesh*, Keynote presentation in the Dialogue organized by Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh and BRAC on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2018

schemes are free of income tax. Many do not invest their earnings fearing the political instability, lack of security and safety of their investment in Bangladesh.<sup>12</sup>

## Way Forward

Bangladesh's success in attaining the MDGs has been well appreciated by the global community. Bangladesh has firm commitment to set itself as an example of a leading SDG achiever. If Bangladesh is to record similar success in achieving the SDGs, appropriate actions will need to be taken to address the concerns and the interest related to Pre, during and post migration. In an effort to reduce fraudulent practices experienced by migrants before departure, there is a need to create an employment exchange bureau to regulate the *dalal* system and to put them under punishment for harassing outbound workers. Migration help desk need to be set to provide necessary information to outgoing workers. Arbitration services can be created to settle down conflict and fraudulence. To encourage labor migration and access to employment, costs related to migration processing need to be reduced through various government initiatives such as access to credit on low interest should also be created. However, before embarking on contract migration, migrant workers should receive pre-departure orientation training. This should include the dissemination of information about the destination country, general job conditions, and the rights and duties of migrant workers both under the legal regime of the country concerned and under international law. Moreover, Information regarding safe migration should be disseminated through the mass media as well as through interventions at the grassroots level.

Social protection of migrant workers needs to be enhanced through adoption of appropriate policy measures both at home country and also in host country. There are a number of global good practices, for example- overseas migrants group insurance, pension savings, old-age, disability and death benefits, emergency hospitalization and welfare fund in missions abroad, schemes for domestic and unskilled workers, employment contract violation compensation and maternity benefits. Bangladesh should introduce these initiatives for ensuring social security of migrant workers. Bangladesh embassy/high commission needs to engage more actively in terms of diplomacy to protect rights of Bangladeshi migrants. They often show naked apathy instead of cordial empathy to the concerns of the migrant workers. Therefore, the role of foreign missions in the labor-receiving countries should be redefined. Protection of the rights of migrant workers should be considered a priority concern. The government should consider establishing a migrant workers' resource centre (MWRC) in each of the major receiving countries within the premises of and under the administrative jurisdiction of the Bangladesh missions. The Bangladesh missions should inform the authorities of the receiving countries about the migrant worker's difficulties such as fraudulence, exploitation, harassment, torture, etc by employer so that the later take appropriate measure to ensure security of migrant workers' rights. The government of Bangladesh should also negotiate with the receiving countries to simplify the procedure for receiving benefits that often fall due at the end of the contract period, so that the migrant can collect the amount well before his/her departure. This issue needs to be pursued in liaison with other labour-sending countries.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Tasneem Siddiqui, 2005. *International Labor Migration from Bangladesh: A decent work perspective*, Policy Integration Department, National Policy Group, International labor Office, Working paper No. 66, Geneva

In order to create demand for Bangladeshi migrant workers and to raise average remittance per migrant workers, undertaking skill enhancement programmes is an utmost necessity. Many labour-receiving countries have projections and plans for future development projects and concomitant labour needs. These projections need to be analyzed systematically, so that Bangladeshi workers can be trained to meet future overseas demand and market. Therefore, the existing training institutes of the BMET should be upgraded in order to help increase skilled migration. The BMET also needs to extend its training outreach through joint ventures with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private training institutes. Vocational training should be incorporated into mainstream primary and secondary school curricula and textbooks should include chapters on migration. In order to improve communication skills, training or short course on the language of destination countries is necessary. Moreover, English should be introduced as a second language from the first grade.<sup>14</sup>

Bangladesh also needs to develop smooth and quick remittance return system with the greater availability of financial tools and options so that migrant worker mostly use formal channel to send their money. Number of subsidiary banks overseas need to be increased. Postal service need to be developed and digitalized so that this can work as money transfer mechanism. Moreover, card based or mobile based money transfer tool need to be developed and formalized so that government can have more control and more revenue. In order to better use of remittances, innovative savings and investment opportunities needs to be developed. Global good practiced instruments for financial inclusion and investment such as- host country specific financial education, diverge range of savings instruments i.e Diaspora bond, savings bond, host country based pension scheme, housing loan etc. can be introduced. To encourage investment in production sectors, business friendly environment i.e separate EEZ for migrant worker, along with safety and security of the investment need to be ensured.<sup>15</sup>

In order to address proper reintegration of the returnee migrants, database needs to be set up by BMET where returnee migrants will register and come under special economic programmes which will be offered by different NGOs and private sectors. These offers may include helping returnee migrants to gain access to: the formal banking sector; credit agencies for soft loans; land allotment on moderate terms; insurance schemes; and access to schemes organized under the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund. However, the existing Welfare Fund need to more transparent by ensuring of migrant workers and the civil society representative.<sup>16</sup>

In order to accelerate achievement of SDGs with migration, government should identify the relation between migration and other SDGs targets. The government should commit adequate resources to the migration sector. It needs to partner with civil society organisations to formulate a comprehensive migration policy and to realise the targets set in the 7FYP and Perspective Plans, Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Migrants Act 2013, NSDS, NSSS. Finally, government of Bangladesh must recognize that migrants may be a particularly vulnerable group who should be considered under the general principle of 'leaving no-one behind' in order to achieve SDGs and other targets.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Professor Mustafizur Rahman, *Challenges for Migration in light of the SDGs: Context of Bangladesh*, Keynote presentation in the Dialogue organized by Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh and BRAC on 6<sup>th</sup> May 2018

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.