

CARAM ASIA - REPORT SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Remittances: Impact on Migrant Workers' Quality of Life October 2010



The findings of CARAM Asia research undertaken from 2008 to 2010 show that the much applauded remittance-led development in the Asia region over the last decade is built on the backs of migrant workers and their families, who continue to experience severe and ongoing labour and human rights violations at all levels of the migration process – with limited long term benefits from remittances for their families and communities. The study includes analysis of migration policy and practice within three destination countries: the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia and Thailand. Families and migrants workers from nine source countries were interviewed along with policy analysis of labour export policies from Pakistan, India, Philippines, Sri-Lanka, Cambodia, Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Burma.

Research Objectives

The aim of the research was to ascertain whether the improvement in the material aspects of the lives of migrants and their families that purportedly comes from remittances, compensated for the deterioration of other aspects in their quality of life, including the social and human costs of migration that is often hidden or ignored within the larger migration debate. The four research objectives include:

1. To challenge the current migration discourse which promotes remittances as a tool for development within the context of neo-liberal globalisation policies and structures
2. To define and highlight non-monetary indicators and dimensions of the quality of life of migrants and their families.
3. To provide migrant community perspectives on remittances as a tool for development and identify the reality of conditions of work and burden of debt incurred by migrants and the social costs of the unwavering reliance on remittances as a tool for development.
4. To address dependencies on remittances and its role in inducing forced remigration and neglecting genuine sustainable economic development.

The scope of the research included a three pronged strategy looking at migration and remittances from the source country, the destination country, and identifying gender issues in the process. The research aimed to look beyond locality and explore trends and issues in the regional context. The research was undertaken by research partners who were members of the CARAM Asia network and had significant links, contacts, and experience working in the area of advocacy for migrant worker rights in the Asia region. A steering committee was formed under the CARAM Asia Migration, Health, and Globalisation Taskforce with representatives from ten organisations, to oversee the research. Members on the taskforce who were research partners included the following organisations:

- AMI (Arunodhaya Migrant Initiatives), India
- CARAM-CAMBODIA
- DAWN (Development Action for Women Network), Philippines
- HDO – Human Development Organization, Sri Lanka
- LHRLA (Lawyers for Human Rights & Legal Aid), Pakistan
- MAP (Migrant Assistance Program), Thailand
- NIDS (Nepal Institute of Development Studies), Nepal
- OKUP – Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program, Bangladesh
- Solidaritas Perempuan, Indonesia
- Tenaganita, Malaysia

KEY FINDINGS

One of the key themes found within contemporary migration discourse is the preconception that remittances from migrant workers can be used by developing countries of origin as a policy of sustainable development. This theme has been heavily promoted by global financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and other representatives from the private sector that seek to push for corporate globalisation and deregulation of state government controls on migration policies. Advocates of the remittances and development approach highlight the ever-increasing remittance inflows to source country economies and their potential to sustain developing nation's economies through increasing the Gross Development Product (GDP), reducing deficits and by extension reducing the dependence on borrowing from foreign states. Such a mentality has inevitably resulted in the commoditisation of migrant workers where developing countries are placed in a situation where they are forced to compete with one another in order to maximise their citizen's potential for overseas employment. In the subsequent drive for a bigger stake in the market of remittances, countries of origin find themselves undercutting their own citizens' standard of employment and labour rights in order to increase their own viability overseas. As such, this approach continues to produce cheap labour for developed countries while simultaneously trapping developing countries in a state of interdependence instead of improving the rights and well being of migrant workers. Within this paradigm there is limited analysis of exactly how these remittances are being used to further develop infrastructure and economic stability within source country economies or in fact lead to improvements in the quality of life of migrants and their families.

POLICY FINDINGS

Analysis of national government migration policy shows a strong reliance on labour export policies in sending countries in Asia, aimed at capitalising on the growing international demand for cheap unskilled foreign labour. These policies however fail to protect migrant workers and despite a comprehensive framework of regional MOU and international labour and human rights conventions signed by governments in the study, there are high levels of exploitation of the migrant workforce within the region. In all countries in the study there is inadequate commitment to the effective development, implementation and monitoring of migration policy aimed at protecting migrant worker rights and a lack of resources available for effective protection of

migrants and their families both at home and abroad.

Sending countries commonly fail to monitor and regulate migration pre-departure processes, leading to high levels of corruption and over-charging from both state and private sector recruitment agencies. Gender based discrimination is also common to many sending country governments in the study who restrict the migration of women whilst failing to protect their labour and human rights in destination countries and failing to challenge the overall feminisation of migration within the region. Another common failure for all sending country governments is the lack of effective repatriation, compensation and reintegration services for returning migrant workers

and their families. Destination country governments have failed to ensure basic labour protections for migrant workers - including minimum wages, occupational health and safety protections and the right to organise. They commonly fail to implement existing protections outlined in MOU with sending countries which leads to rampant contract violations by employers in destination countries, who exploit, abuse and violate both the human and labour rights of migrant workers with impunity. Access to the justice system for migrant workers in destination countries is minimal with multiple barriers and minimal resourcing of emergency repatriation and support programmes from sending country governments.

QUALITY OF LIFE FOR MIGRANTS IN DESTINATION COUNTRIES

Migrant workers in destination countries are routinely trapped by this oppressive migration system which limits their rights and basic freedom at every step. The migrant workers interviewed, commonly experienced widespread contract violation, exploitation and for many - debt bondage to employers or recruitment agents. They face high levels of abuse, maltreatment and violence perpetrated by employers, police, migration officials and recruiting agents, including documented cases of rape, assault and deaths of migrant workers. They live and work in a general climate of racism, discrimination and xenophobia, in over-crowded and substandard housing, and sometimes with inadequate food and sanitation. Restriction of movement is common with employers withholding documentation and there is limited access to health care, emergency or otherwise for most workers. Gender based violence at the hands of authorities,

agents and employers, is common for female migrant workers. Female domestic workers commonly live and work in slave like conditions, are confined to their place of work with limited external communication and face high levels of violence with limited opportunity for redress. Domestic workers along with workers in the sex industry are excluded from national labour law protection. Both male and female migrant workers have poor access to reproductive or sexual health services both prior and during migration. Issues specific to male migrant workers include substandard living and working conditions in male labour camps in the Middle East as well as a lack of emergency shelter support for male migrants escaping exploitation and abuse. Both male and female workers experience high levels of distress and anxiety as well as sometimes debilitating levels of homesickness and concern for their spouses, parents and children at home.

REMITTANCES AND FAMILY SURVIVAL

Migrant workers in the study showed variable capacity for sending remittances home – with some able to send regular monthly amounts, others bringing home a lump sum amount at the end of migration, whilst many were unable to earn any remittance money at all. The research shows strong patterns of short-term remittance use by families at home – mainly being used for daily household survival, with minimal longer term benefits in terms of household savings, community level investment or long term improvements to family economic survival. High levels of debt burden was a common experience for migrants and their families, incurred through the corruption, abuse and exploitation of workers by recruitment agents, migration officials, and employers in both source and destination countries. Very few families from sending countries in the study had any significant level of savings as a result of the migration experience. Additionally there was no evidence that remittances were being used to develop communities, improve the status of women or were in anyway sustainable despite the fact that countries are increasingly receiving billions of dollars in foreign exchange through this process.

There was an overwhelmingly negative response from participants regarding the capacity of remittances to promote long term improvements in their family's

economic security and quality of life. The burden of debt incurred in the departure process severely affects the benefits of remittances for many families and commonly leads to the need for further migration. The high costs of pre-departure processes force migrant workers and other family members including spouses, parents and grandparents to incur heavy debts. Families often invest their hard earned savings and limited household assets to cover the initial migration costs, which can take between 6 months to 5 years to repay, with many families being unable to pay off the debt at all. This situation leads to increased economic stress on the families of migrants who were not only depending on the remittance income for daily survival but also had commonly mortgaged significant family assets, such as land and housing in order to finance the migration costs. These outcomes are directly related to the experience of contract violation and recruitment agency corruption which result in higher than expected debts incurred through the departure and recruitment process and corresponding lower than expected wages in the destination countries. These issues related to the burden of debt are central to the question of remittance-sponsored development due to the impact on both migrants and their families.

CONCLUSIONS

Clearly there are significant concerns regarding the quality of life for this research. The severe exploitation, violence and abuse, the daily loneliness for migrants working overseas, coupled with severe, continue with impunity – begs the question – is it worth it?

Families in home countries, have scraped, saved and sold their lands and livestock to send their family member abroad in the hope of increased income to feed their children, to fix their houses, and pay for school-books. Parents, children and spouses also suffer the deep loneliness, increased poverty and insecurity of struggling to survive whilst awaiting the promised remittances – often to find that the remittances are in fact inadequate. The added burden of debt, the shame and the increased poverty as a result of migration leaves one to wonder – is it worth it?

Migrant workers and their families had different opinions on the risks and gamble of migration. Whilst many of the workers in the research noted that they would not again choose migration as a way to support their families, others noted that they had no choice but to re-migrate to cover their living costs and debts, whilst still others noted they would be pleased to migrate should they have the chance again. Whilst for many the outcomes for migration are clearly not worth their while – however each day thousands of workers in the region will continue to leave with the promise of a dream – the chance for employment, the chance to improve their lives, travel and support their families. For these workers there needs to be something better.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- Both sending and receiving countries must immediately sign and ratify the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (1990)
- States that host female migrant workers must adhere to existing rights as laid out in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979). All governments in the region should implement the immediate recognition of domestic work as work with protection in domestic legislation.
- Migrant workers must be protected by core Labour Rights and Decent Work Standards set out in the ILO conventions and related human rights instruments

All states should consult with trade unions and other stakeholders to ensure that all workers are entitled to and receive living wages that are structured around skills, not based on nationality or legal status.

Source and destination countries must honour their obligation to ensure social security for migrants and their families and work towards developing portable social security systems within the context of international migration.

ASEAN governments must amend the ASEAN Declaration for the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers and their Families, to ensure all documented or undocumented migrants are entitled to fundamental human rights including the right to health, equal access to justice, freedom of movement, freedom of association and to freedom from abuse and exploitation including torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

Governments should ensure that adequate and informed pre-departure orientation is given to all migrant workers including health and rights awareness.

States must implement regulating and monitoring processes for recruitment industry to ensure labour and human rights of migrant workers and ensure that migrant workers are not charged exorbitant fees.

States must stop the propaganda the myth of remittances as tool for development and start to work on fundamental , lasting political, economic and social reforms needed in countries including infrastructure for sustainable development by creating employment opportunities , universal healthcare, education and security of life at home while protecting and promoting the rights and well being of migrant workers.

Human rights and social justice should be core standards for development with comprehensive - work for balance of social, cultural, political and economic progress and in line with the definition and framework as stated in the UN Declaration on the Right to Development (1986). Alternative development should place the human person at the centre of development and be aimed at improving the quality of life and dignity of all people and their environment.



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