

**Opening Statement by Dr. Shamshad Akhtar,
Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations & Executive Secretary of
The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific**

**Asia-Pacific Regional Preparatory Meeting for the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly
and Regular Migration
Bangkok, 6 November 2017**

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

This meeting takes place at a crucial time. Asia and the Pacific is a fulcrum for international migration - home to the world's largest and most important countries of origin, and destination. Our region has long welcomed migrants, whether for economic benefits or to accommodate those displaced. At the same time, people have left their homes in search of new opportunities, or in response to difficult circumstances. The region has been responsive to changing circumstances, and its dynamism has driven countries of origin to also become countries of destination. Many of the key policy innovators have proactively pursued enabling and conducive migration policies and implemented practices to mainstream them. A few of these characteristics are noteworthy:

- Levels of migration in the region are high. Over 101 million people from countries of the region – more than the entire population of Viet Nam – live outside their countries of birth.
- Migrants from our region are working all around the world, though primarily they remain within Asia and the Pacific.
- Migrants form a distinct group and exhibit enormous potential, but are also exposed to a range of vulnerabilities.
- Migrants are often poorly paid, concentrated in labour work, employed in low skill jobs and in the informal sector requiring difficult and sometimes dangerous physical labour.
- Female labour migrants are often domestic workers, a largely-unregulated sector , exposing them to risks of exploitation and abuse at the hands of their employers.

Yet despite the challenges many migrants face, they make invaluable contributions to both their countries of origin and destination. Wage disparities between domestic and overseas worker is significant and migrants, given their family compulsion, end up remitting the bulk of their earnings to their countries of origin and hence live in distressful conditions.

The Asia-Pacific region benefits from high level of remittances that have reached close to \$276 billion in 2017. In countries such as Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Nepal this made up the equivalent of over a quarter of GDP in 2015. Besides serving as buffer for balance of payments, households have been able to use these funds to finance housing, education and livelihoods of their families. For instance: remittances to Kyrgyzstan are estimated to have reduced the poverty rate by an estimated 6 to 7 percentage points. Research by ESCAP shows that in the Pacific migrants have contributed to increased resilience and adaptation in the face of climate change.

Beside the positive impact of migration in the countries of origin, countries of destination benefit too in terms of meeting skill shortages, higher productivity and returns on their investment. The Asia-Pacific Migration Report 2015, produced by an ESCAP and IOM-led inter-agency thematic working group on international migration, showed that migrant contributions accounted for anywhere between 3.1 and 6.2 per cent of GDP in Thailand or equivalent to between \$12 to \$24 billion.

Migrants contribution to the economy is impressive particularly in the backdrop of the barriers they face. These include:

- The high costs of migration that can render migrants worse off;
- High costs of sending remittances;
- Lack of effective policies for low-skilled labour migration that can push employers and migrants to resort to irregularity, to the detriment of migrants' rights.
- Limitations on the ability of migrants to access social services or participate in the public sphere, creating a de facto reserve army of exploitable labour, with negative impacts on all workers, non-migrant and migrant alike.
- Laws which prevent migrants from being able to move with their families, thus creating pressures on family members who are left behind, especially children, offsetting the material benefits of migration and placing new burdens of care on families.

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

Migrants serve as agents of sustainable development: factoring in how they boost financing, consumption and investment, and contribute to growth. In addition to reducing the poverty rate, migration creates new connections whose benefits transcend localities and borders. Yet as non-citizens of their countries of residence, and non-residents of their countries of citizenship, they are often bypassed in both home and host countries. As a result, their rights are often not respected; their contributions may go unrecognised; and they can become the scapegoats for the failures of others.

In a world on the move, addressing these challenges directly is all the more critical. As the climate changes, people face new pressures to migrate. Migration must be recognized as a means of building resilience against climate shocks. Given the economic dynamism of the region and the ageing of its population, migrants can play an even bigger role in filling labour force gaps until host countries resolve the fundamental issues. With growing regional connectivity, the region will need its labour force to take fuller advantage of opportunities generated, but beyond the impact on goods and services, this will also spur people-to-people connectivity.

Despite the complexity of this agenda, it is impressive how the United Nations membership are committed to “ensuring orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration” in context of the 2030 Agenda. Your efforts to fleshing out challenges and problems will help resolution and safe migration a reality.

Countries of origin, such as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, have developed extensive infrastructure to protect migrants throughout the migration process – from pre-departure to return. Countries receiving large volumes of migrants, such as Kazakhstan, the Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation have taken pragmatic measures to open regular paths to labour migration with protections for migrants and their populations. Thailand has cooperated with countries of origin; introduced laws to address abuses against migrants; as well as promoted the inclusion of migrants in the national health system. Across the region, under the aegis of the United Nations along with all stakeholders including civil society, there has been dialogue and cooperation to prevent unilateral measures that might aggravate migrants' vulnerabilities.

In conclusion, I hope that we will all continue to transcend old entrenched positions and reach consensus, recognizing the need for action through economic, social and environmental policies to safeguard the rights and interests of migrants. We must explore ways to ensure that migration policies ensure that people are able to move in a safe, orderly and regular fashion in response to real needs. The ESCAP report "*Towards Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in the Asia-Pacific Region,*" launched on this occasion will offer comprehensive analysis of the regional trends of migration, its drivers, impacts and policy measures undertaken by countries to help guide our discussions over the coming days. This platform will further be an opportunity to cross-fertilize policy and practical experiences, lessons learnt, and best practices both from the region and across the world. Your perspectives and the voice of the Asia-Pacific region will form valuable input for the forthcoming global preparatory stocktaking meeting for the global compact for safe, orderly, and regular migration in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico in December – and the negotiations in New York next year.

I thank you.