International migration is a key factor behind the socio-economic development of South and South-West Asia (SSWA), one of the fastest growing subregions in the world. International migration has alleviated population pressures and unemployment while remittances from overseas migrants have helped reduce poverty. In 2011, South and South-West Asian countries received an estimated $90 billion in workers’ remittances, more than five times the $15 billion in official development assistance received over the same period. Remittances kept growing even during the financial crisis and helped soften the impact from loss of export earnings. However, cooperation in management of migration is still minimal and consensus has not yet been reached on the best ways to realize the rights of migrants within and beyond the subregion.

BACKGROUND
The history of international migration in South and South-West Asia is diverse and includes displacement of hundreds of millions of persons due to political instability or country partitions, war and persecution. Despite recent impressive economic growth, poverty remains widespread throughout the subregion with over 40 per cent of the population living on less than $1.25 per day. Migrants tend to be drawn to better life prospects in wealthier countries where better opportunities may exist. Natural disasters, to which the subregion is particularly prone, trigger migratory movements, as well.

Reasons for migration
International migration is driven by economic “push and pull factors” within and beyond the subregion. Underemployment in the countries of origin remains one of the main reasons for out-migration. More than one third of Afghanistan’s labour force and about 15 per cent of Pakistan’s labour force are unemployed, and underemployment in Bangladesh may be as high as 29 per cent. Better employment opportunities serve as a major pull factor for migrants in SSWA. Wage differences have led to a high number of migrants; from Afghanistan to neighbouring Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as to the estimated 1.5 million Nepalese migrants currently living in India. In countries like Bhutan and Maldives, skills mismatch leads to a high volume of skilled migrants, especially from India, as the countries do not have enough skilled labour. In addition, migrants often return with more skills than when they left, and even when they have to return to their home countries due to crisis, they are less likely to be underemployed.
In South and South-West Asia, most migration outflows are South-South in nature, as shown in Figure 1. Moreover, unlike most other South-South migration corridors a sizable portion of the migration out of South and South-West Asia is interregional in nature with a large percentage of migrants heading to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Nonetheless as Asia-Pacific economies continue to grow, a sizable number of South and South West Asia’s migrants are heading east, too.

The majority of labour migrants from the subregion works in the GCC countries which are also the leading destination for semi-skilled and temporary migrants. Europe, North America and Australia are the destinations for mainly skilled, and often permanent, migrants or students. South-East Asian countries like Malaysia and Singapore are also leading destinations for migrants from the South and South-West Asian subregion, especially from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India.

**Within the subregion:** People generally migrate from the geographic east towards the geographic west. Starting from Bangladesh, out-migration takes place towards India and the GCC countries. Out-migration from Nepal occurs into India and further towards the GCC countries. Similarly, out-migration from Afghanistan occurs westwards towards the Islamic Republic of Iran, although out-migration to Pakistan may be an exception. Out-migration from the Islamic Republic of Iran occurs westwards to Turkey and Europe while from Turkey, further westward migration occurs into Europe. Even from India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, out-migration is towards the GCC countries.

**Outside the subregion:** The westward migration implies out-migration to developed countries including Australia and some countries in South and South-East Asia. After the first wave of migration to the GCC countries as labour in the oil fields, the second wave of migration has gathered momentum eastwards. The emergence of East and South-East Asia as provider of employment and better standards of living has resulted in mass migration of people from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Japan, the Republic of Korea, Malaysia and Singapore have also become destinations for migrants.
Migration to the developed countries is characterized by skilled or semi-skilled migrants, relatives of migrants and students. India leads in out-migration of skilled migrants who migrate as employees in formal employment. However, even unskilled out-migration from India remains high with an estimated 850,000 semiskilled or unskilled out migrants in 2008. Migration of students from the region occurs towards Europe, North America and Australia.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF MIGRATION IN SOUTH AND SOUTH-WEST ASIA

International migration is one of the key factors behind socio-economic development of SSWA. In countries of origin, it has helped alleviate population pressures and unemployment and led to poverty reduction and economic stability with the help of remittances. Remittance flows continue to increase into the subregion and generally are more stable than other external flows, acting as a stabilizer during uncertain times. Least developed countries in the subregion in particular have experienced rising remittance inflows, accounting for the largest remittance flows to least developed countries globally.

Despite the positive economic and social impact of migration for the subregion, there remain a number of shared concerns. Migrants who go abroad looking for work face diverse circumstances and a fragmented set of institutions in place to protect and help them. Women who seek opportunities by migrating often face discriminatory practices and run the risk of becoming victims of trafficking. Migrants looking to send their hard-earned pay home face difficulty obtaining secure and legal transfer of their remittances.

Securing labour protection and rights for migrants

Protection of migrants is one of the most important areas which calls for regional co-operation in the subregion. Despite the protection provided to all migrants under international human rights and international labour law, many migrants from SSWA who either live and work in the subregion or elsewhere are at risk of human rights violations. Poor governance and migration dynamics in some destination countries exacerbate the vulnerability of migrants. Labour migration policies especially pertaining to insurance of migrant workers are of major concern. Although the International Convention on the

![Figure 2. Destination regions of migrants from the 10 SSWA countries, 2010](source: ESCAP calculations based on World Bank (2012))
Protection of the Rights of All Migrants Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW) provides a robust tool that addresses the specific vulnerabilities faced by migrant workers, ratification among countries in the subregion remains low, even among significant countries of origin. Ratification and implementation of the ICRMW and other core international human rights instruments would be an important step towards greater protection of the rights of all migrants in SSWA.

Remittances as development finance and formalizing remittance flows

Temporary migrants tend to remit their earnings back to their families while permanent migrants often take their families along to settle and spend or consume in the country of destination. The largest share of remittances thus comes from the GCC countries, which is the destination of most SSWA migrants, including mainly temporary migrants, in particular. SSWA is the largest remittance-receiving subregion in the world in nominal terms, receiving 40 per cent of the officially recorded $206 billion of remittances sent to the subregion in 2010\(^7\). Increasing rates of labour migration have resulted in a huge inflow of remittances to SSWA and their relative importance to the economy of the subregion as a whole has substantially increased in the past decade. In several countries, remittances are the most important source of foreign income. As shown in Figure 3, India has been the largest recipient in the subregion with an estimated $64 billion in remittance receipts in 2011, followed by Pakistan and Bangladesh at around $12 billion each and Sri Lanka and Nepal receiving $5 billion and $4 billion, respectively. However, Nepal tops the list in terms of remittances as a share of total GDP at 22 per cent in 2011, followed by Bangladesh (11 per cent), Sri Lanka (8 per cent), Pakistan (5.8 per cent) and India (3.4 per cent). Over time, the importance of remittances has increased across South and South-West Asian economies, as demonstrated by Figure 4.

The recipients of remittances often use the funds to build a house or upgrade an existing house, and for essential household expenditures which support human and social development, such as payment of school fees and health-care costs. These funds contribute to macroeconomic stability. However, they also have adverse effects, such as enabling policymakers to delay the implementation of structural reforms designed to increase employment opportunities at home. Furthermore a large number of remittances are sent through informal channels and thus remain unrecorded despite efforts
to increase the proportion remitted through official channels.

Formalizing the transaction of remittances is thus a major objective in the subregion. Migrants often have to depend on clandestine sources to send money to their families. This leads to losses of money to both the family and the respective country. Often, the remittances never reach the family as agents, illicit employers and middlemen emblezzle the payments. Although billions are being sent home annually to SSWA families, high fees and a lack of services outside urban areas mean the impact of the money on millions of rural poor is limited.

**Women’s empowerment and female migrants’ rights**

Women have significantly increased their economic role through international migration from the subregion. In some countries of origin, women constitute about half of the overseas migrant workforce, especially in the GCC countries. A large majority of this workforce are domestic workers. Demand for such occupation groups has increased in line with global demographic and labour market developments. Most of the out-migrant women from the subregion migrate as domestic helpers to GCC countries and South-East Asia. Nurses from Kerala in India are another group from the subregion which is migrating in large numbers to the GCC and OECD countries, mostly through formal channels. Similarly, women from Nepal often migrate to India to serve as domestic help. Recently, an increasing number of Nepalese women have also migrated to Lebanon and other GCC countries.

Sociocultural restrictions often limit extensive out-migration of women for economic activities, however. Women migrant workers both in the country of origin and destination are subject to discriminatory practices and human and labour rights violations at every stage of the migration cycle. Moreover, their access to legal or social protection or psychological services in the countries of destination is often very limited. Besides dis-
crimination based on their gender, women are also more at risk of being exploited and victimised by trafficking, as well.

80 per cent of all out-migrating women from the subregion have to hand over their passport and other documents to agents, employers or other facilitators, and are thus continuously at risk of exploitation. In India alone, between 5,000 and 7,000 persons have been prosecuted for trafficking in recent years, and it is estimated that around 15,000 are trafficked out of Nepal every year and many Nepalese women are trafficked through India by private agents. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, a large number of Afghan refugees are often illegally smuggled in and out of the country. Some 90 per cent of all Afghan refugees in the Islamic Republic of Iran have reported to have migrated clandestinely and this has led to a loss of $221 million to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In Pakistan, which is both a destination and transit country for labour and sex work, the problem of trafficking occurs particularly in the Sindh and Punjab provinces. Sri Lanka is also a source country of trafficking and due to its location, Turkey is a destination as well as transit for trafficking and smuggling of persons, particularly women as sex workers, as well.

REGIONAL COOPERATION FOR MANAGING THE MUTUAL BENEFITS OF MIGRATION

Labour migration can be mutually beneficial for employers and migrants as well as for residents of countries of origin and countries of destination. For all groups to benefit, the migration process must be well-managed. This can be coordinated through closer sub-regional cooperation on migration management. However, the subregion has a mixed record on the ratification of key international instruments on international migration. Different countries have ratified different instruments and a lack of regional directive is apparent. India, for instance, has not signed any of the key international conventions related to refugees or migrant workers but has signed the protocols on the trafficking and smuggling of migrants.

Although the majority of the countries of origin in SSWA have enacted legislation and put in place mechanisms to protect migrant workers, exploitative practices in labour recruitment and employment in low-wage occupations remain high. Furthermore, the importance of cooperation among countries of origin and destination countries has been recognized but thus far only a few binding agreements have been signed. Strategic international cooperation within the subregion is required to overcome these challenges. For example, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) adopted the convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution, but the definition used in the convention is narrow and doesn’t cover cases when trafficking may have taken place for other forced labour situations. Similarly, the SAARC Social Charter doesn’t recognize labour as a distinct group, reflecting the reality that SAARC is in fact quite behind other regional groupings like ASEAN on protecting migrant rights. The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) which comprises Afghanistan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan and Turkey as well as Central Asian countries could also take more steps to improving management of migration. ECO has partnered on capacity building for labour migration managament, and has encourage members to sign all relevant international treaties.

International migration is inherently a multilateral concern, and desired outcomes are most likely to be achieved if countries of origin and destination meet on a regular basis to discuss labour migration issues and the best way to resolve them. Strategic international cooperation within the subregion is required to overcome these challenges. Two main initiatives in this regard are the Colombo Process and the Abu Dhabi Dialogue. The Colombo Process, a regional consultative process, involves 10 countries: Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Viet
Those countries have made recommendations for the effective management of overseas employment programmes and agreed to take part in regular follow-up meetings. The Abu Dhabi Dialogue brings together the countries involved in the Colombo Process along with Gulf Cooperation Council States, in addition to Yemen and two Asian destination countries. Particular focus is placed on promoting the welfare and well-being of workers, on the development of both origin and destination countries through labour mobility, and on fostering greater intergovernmental cooperation and collaboration, with the active support of international and regional partners.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVED MIGRATION POLICIES IN THE SUBREGION

Improve labour protection

1. The countries in the subregion as well as the countries of destination for migrants outside SSWA should be encouraged to ratify and effectively implement all core international human rights instruments, including the ICRMW as well as mechanisms that identify people in need of international protection.

2. Governments in partnership with other stakeholders must consider their national migration and health context and take the lead in translating these recommendations into policies and legal frameworks that spur the development of migrant-sensitive health systems.

Empower women

3. Migration policies in the subregion should be gender-sensitive, taking into account the specific needs of women migrants who should be placed at the center of migration policy instead of being mere spectators of the process.

4. Governments should avoid restricting migration of women by making the process burdensome as this approach ultimately encourages irregular forms of migration. Instead, countries of origin and host countries should work together to create a structure that facilitates safe migration and provides skill training to boost the potential of migrant women for upward mobility.

Incentivize formal remittances

5. A large proportion of remittances are transferred through informal channels. To promote the use of formal channels, banking procedures need to be simplified and bank transfers must be made more efficient and costless.

6. In many countries of the subregion, investment opportunities and incentives must be made available to migrant workers. Currently, only a small proportion of remittances are used for investment purposes. This percentage could be increased by offering more investment opportunities catering to migrants.

Strengthen institutional capacities and regional cooperation

7. Existing gaps in knowledge on international migration in SSWA reflect the difficulty in obtaining reliable information, the complexities of migration issues in the subregion, as well as the limited resources available to produce accurate data. To address these gaps, greater efforts should be put into increasing the capacities of national Governments and academic institutions to secure accurate and reliable data to inform policymakers.
8. Broaden the multilateral dialogue on migration between sending and receiving countries by strengthening and empowering intergovernmental processes like the Colombo Process and the Abu Dhabi dialogue. Improving and strengthening international organizations working on migration is also important. Increasingly countries can also take steps towards raising migration issues in negotiations at the World Trade Organization on service trade, since the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) technically covers migration (of skilled labour, at least) under Mode 4 of trade in services, which refers to the movement of natural persons. In fact, South Asian countries themselves have already concluded a framework agreement for liberalising trade in services -- SAARC Agreement on Trade in Services (SATIS), which follows a GATS consistent approach. If management of migration through Mode 4 of the GATS is initially slow at the international level, there may be more scope to discuss it in the context of SATIS at first.

CONCLUSION

As the international migration of labour has gained attention in the global agenda, calls for cooperation to manage it have increased. Migration and remittances have created employment, empowered women, and provided needed finance for the subregion’s households. South and South-West Asia countries are both the countries of origin and destination for millions of migrants and billions of dollars in remittances. More specifically, South and South-West Asia also makes up part of the largest inter-regional South-South migration corridor in the world, sending millions of workers to the GCC countries and receiving billions of dollars of remittances in return.

While international migration has acted as an engine for economic and social growth in SSWA, the full potential of migration cannot be fully achieved until migrants can feel as secure in their livelihoods as they would at home, and can feel as welcome in their country of destination as they are in their country of origin. Further regional and subregional cooperation will be needed if effective international cooperation on migration issues is to be achieved.

Given these sizable amounts and the sizable stake that the subregion has in migration to help achieve its development objectives, the subregion can and should play an instrumental role in fostering improved international cooperation on migration issues. International efforts such as the Colombo Process and the Abu Dhabi Dialogue are a step in the right direction, but migration issues need to take the forefront in further regional cooperation, and should consistently feature on the agenda of intergovernmental meetings of South and South-West Asian countries.

ENDNOTES

1 ESCAP calculations based on World Bank (2012) and OECD (2012).

2 United Nations Asia-Pacific RCM Thematic Working Group on International Migration, including Human Trafficking.

3 Ibid.


6 Ibid.
REFERENCES


The ESCAP-SSWA Policy Brief Series aims to reflect on recent events convened and/or research conducted by the ESCAP and to facilitate the uptake of those findings among policy- and decision makers.

This brief synthesizes some of the key recommendations of the Situation Report on International Migration in South and South-West Asia, published by the Asia-Pacific RCM Thematic Working Group on International Migration including Human Trafficking. It also draws on additional recommendations from the South and South-West Asia Development Report 2012/13 issued by ESCAP South and South-West Asia Office.

This Policy Brief has been issued without formal editing.