



# South Asia's migrants share problems, share solutions

**Regional cooperation needed to support migrants with problems in countries where they work**

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Upasana Khadka

June 19, 2021 (<https://www.nepalitimes.com/opinion/south-asias-migrants-shared-problems-share-solutions/>)

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## India Cannot Forget its Migrant Workers Stranded in the Gulf

While there has been loud appreciation of the government for conducting overseas evacuation operations, Indian migrant workers stranded in the Gulf in deeply abusive conditions seem to be missing from this conversation.



**Nepali Times**

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## Help the stranded migrant workers

Dhaka urges KSA, other countries

Staff Correspondent

The government yesterday requested Saudi Arabia and other major labour-receiving countries to address the problems of Bangladeshi migrant workers desperately waiting to go back to their workplaces.



**DAWN**

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This week, *Nepali Times* along with major media outlets in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India simultaneously carried a comment on a unique South Asian initiative (<https://www.nepalitimes.com/banner/what-can-we-do-till-vaccines-arrive/>) to promote mass mask usage as a strategy to mitigate the pandemic while we wait for universal vaccinations.

The authors called on countries to come together to solve problems that affect us all, and to let the lasting legacy of the pandemic be a new era of partnership in social innovations that can benefit all South Asians.

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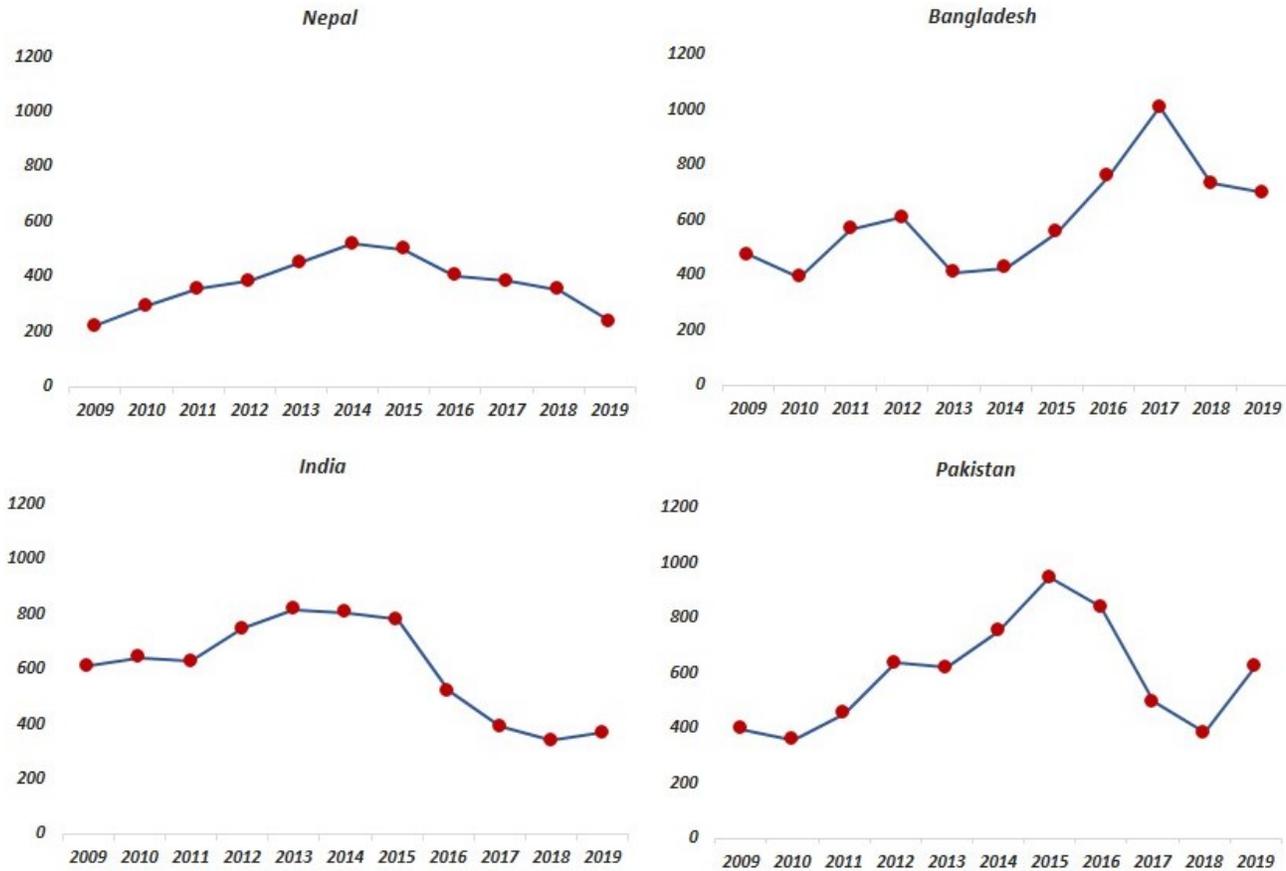
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This struck a chord with those who work on common regional issues – one being international labour migration, which is a key feature of all these four South Asian economies.

Much of the characteristics of migration that we often discuss in Nepal's context also apply to other sending countries in the Subcontinent.

The majority of migrants are predominantly male, headed to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries on temporary employment contracts. Pre-pandemic, for example, annual outflows were highest among Bangladeshis (700,000) and Pakistanis (625,000). (*See below*).

## Annual Outflow of Migrants (in thousands)

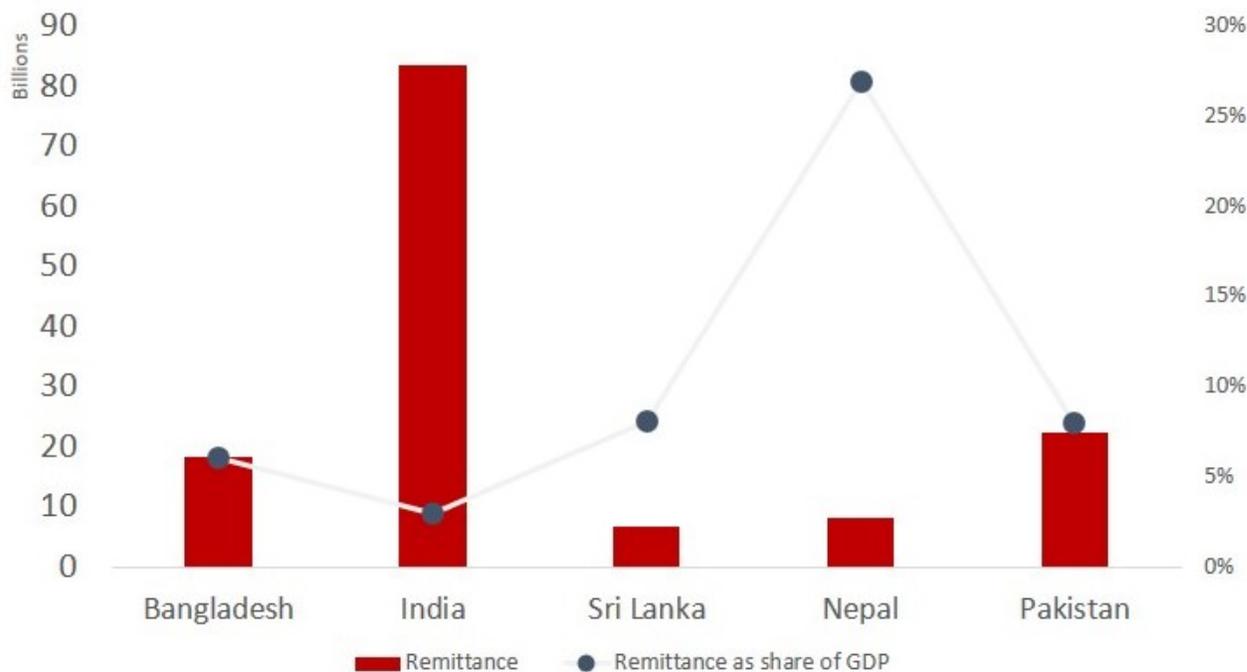


Source: Asian Development Bank Institute, OECD, and ILO, 2021

The resulting remittances have transformed lives of families and communities, while being an important source of foreign exchange earnings.

According to the World Bank, remittance to South Asia was about \$131 billion in 2018, close to a fifth of the global remittances of \$689 billion the same year. Among South Asian countries, India and Pakistan fall in the top ten remittance recipient countries worldwide, whereas Nepal falls in the top ten list in terms of equivalence to GDP (*see below*).

## Remittance and Remittance as Share of GDP (2019)



Source: World Bank

But the gains of labour migration are often dampened by malpractices including high recruitment costs and inadequate rights and protection of migrants in the destination country under arrangements that disproportionately favour employers such as the abusive Kafala system in the Gulf.

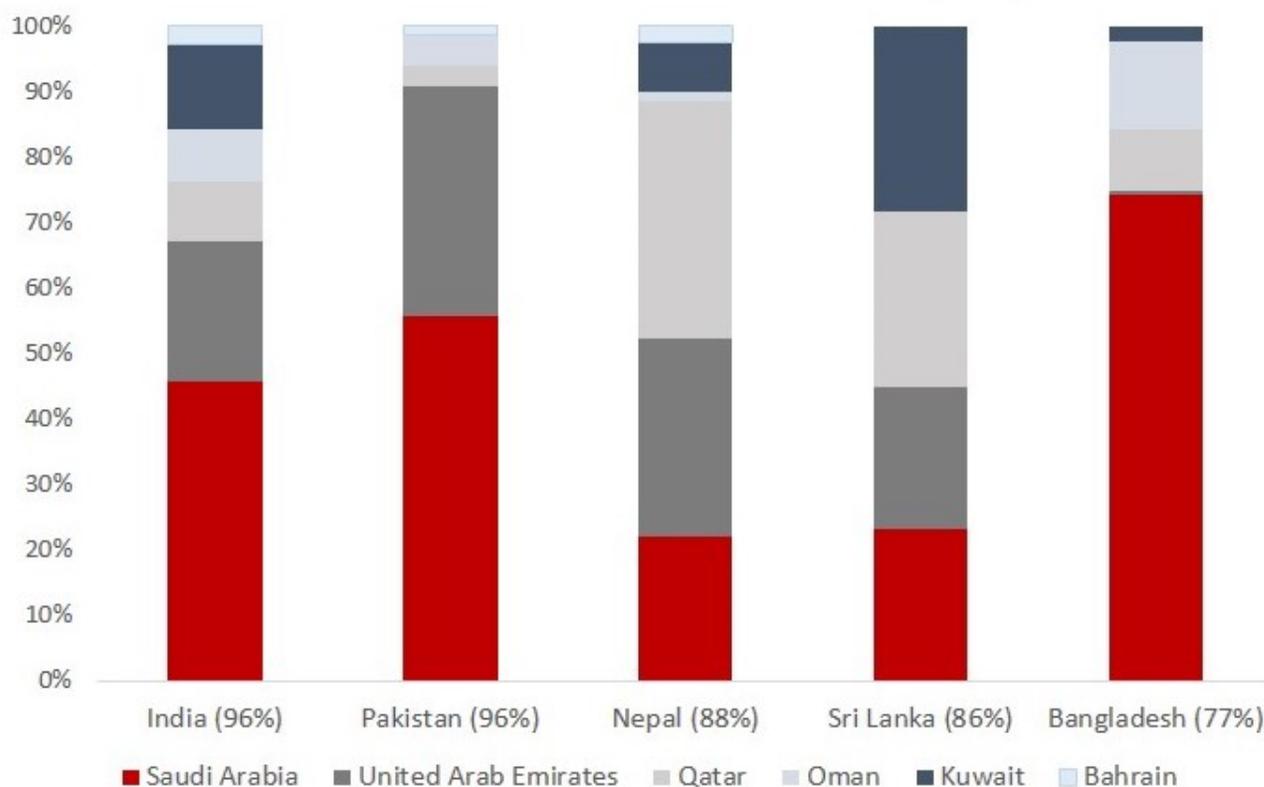
And then came Covid-19, which further revealed the pre-existing fault-lines in the recruitment, employment and living conditions of migrants abroad (<https://blogs.eui.eu/migrationpolicycentre/covid-19-reverse-migration-nepal/>). It put the spotlight on the squalid labour camps that deserve attention not just during a crisis demanding social distancing, but at all times and how minimal efforts to correct this can have wider consequences in the public health of the nation because the virus did not distinguish between nationalities or legal status.

It also challenged the distinction between low/unskilled versus higher skilled work because to keep the societies functioning amid lockdowns (<http://nepalitimes.com/here-now/nepali-workers-overseas-toil-through-the-pandemic/>) required shopkeepers, warehouse workers, cleaners, delivery boys who were now being referred to as 'essential workers'.

Many lost their jobs and were stranded, and each sending country's government had to embark on massive repatriation exercises (<https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/one-way-ticket-home-for-overseas-nepali-workers/>) to bring back hundreds of thousands of workers amid travel restrictions, flight shutdowns and public health risks. Migrants who returned did so to rudimentary reintegration programs, battered economies and strained health systems.

With the Gulf accounting for over 77% (Bangladesh) to over 96% (Pakistan) of annual out-migration in 2019, it has long been recognised that the reliance of many South Asian countries on a handful of destination countries in the GCC has made them vulnerable to macroeconomic and geopolitical shocks in these countries (*see below*).

### Outflow to GCC from Select South Asian Countries (2019)



Source: Asian Development Bank Institute, OECD, and ILO, 2021

Note: % next to country refers to share of annual outflow to the GCC

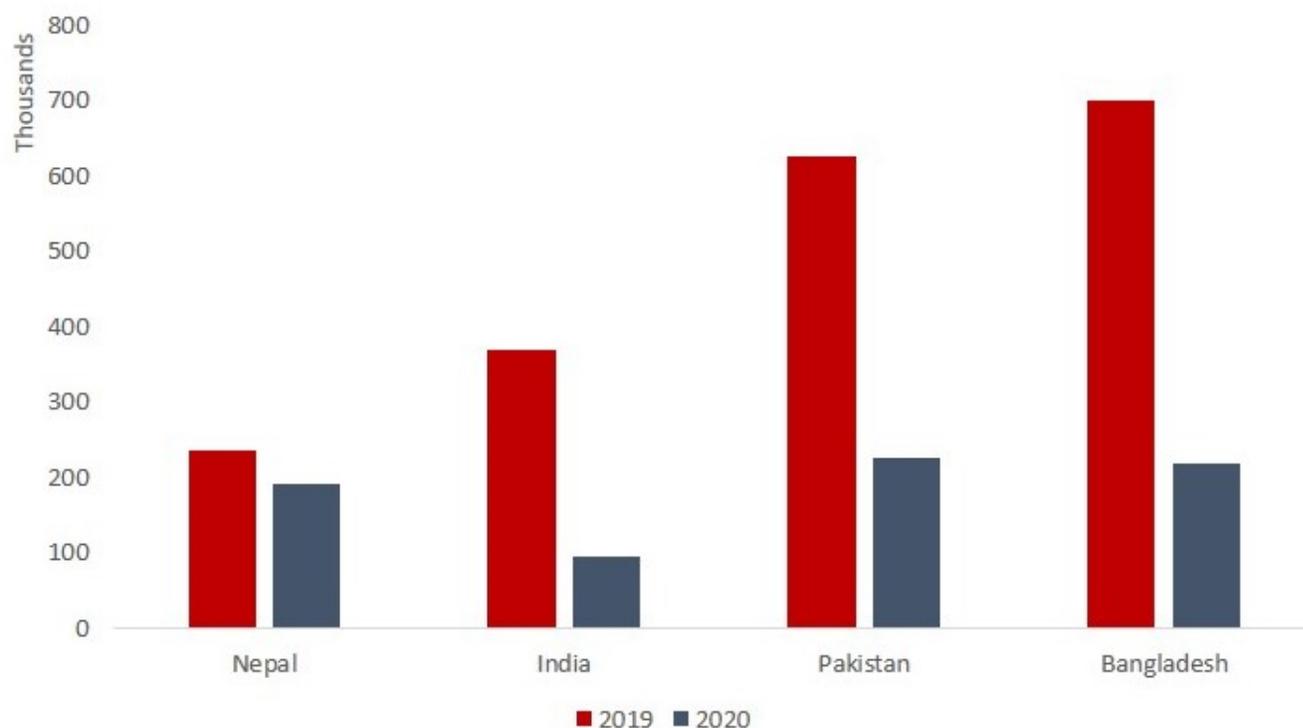
This was seen in the 2014 fall of oil prices, in the blockade of Qatar and recent geopolitical instability in the region. Other policies such as the Gulf's nationalisation policies that prioritise recruitment of locals and has banned entry of foreigners in certain sectors also influence recruitment of workers, pressuring countries to think about diversification strategies.

There were also spikes and falls for bilateral reasons which revealed the interconnectedness of migration corridors. In May 2018, Nepal stopped workers from going to Malaysia owing to high recruitment costs paid by migrant workers. A month later, Malaysia stopped Bangladeshi workers from coming to Malaysia owing to malpractices in the recruitment system.

While the Malaysia-Nepal corridor resumed in September 2019, the draft Bangladesh-Malaysia MOU modeled after the agreement with Nepal was stalled by a number of factors such as Covid-19, change in leadership in Malaysia and its ban on new foreign worker recruitment.

Many interlinked factors shape the outflows and return of workers but the shocks brought by Covid-19 were unprecedented as no country has been shielded from its effects and the impact isn't localized to specific regions to target interventions. Deployment of new workers dropped significantly in 2020: 74% in India, 64% in Pakistan, and 69% in Bangladesh. (See below).

### Annual Outflow Impacted by COVID-19



Source: National Authorities (Nepal data is FY 2018/19)

But remittances defied expectations (<https://www.nepalitimes.com/banner/defying-predictions-nepals-remittances-still-high/>) and even increased in Pakistan by 17% and in

Bangladesh by 18.4%, whereas India and Nepal saw marginal drops. There were many reasons including the shift from informal remittances, incentives by select governments, transfer of the last savings, end-of-service benefits of migrants, the counter-cyclical nature of remittances, and the engagement of migrants in essential sectors that were needed to keep societies functioning through the lockdowns.

Emigration again appeared to overwhelm health systems, leading to lockdowns, travel restrictions and pushing emigration back into the throes of uncertainty. Flights from India to Saudi Arabia were banned, and Indian migrants found their way to Nepal to fly out of Kathmandu airport despite the health risks. When flights from Nepal were then halted due to a surge in cases here, many transit migrants were left in a limbo and needed the authorities to intervene.

The virus knows no borders, and containment and coping mechanisms demanded cooperation across countries given our interdependence. The common elements of the migration story across countries raise an important question: what should cross-border collaboration across sending countries look like to ensure the safety and well-being of our migrant population overseas?

Platforms on regional migration governance do exist that have tried to bring together the collective voice of countries sending migrants. This includes the regional consultative Colombo Process which comprises 12 labour sending countries including in South Asia. The idea is that such collaboration would help optimise the benefits of labour migration while protecting migrants from exploitative practices in recruitment and employment.

Then there is the Abu Dhabi Dialogue that comprises both sending and receiving countries from Asia and the Middle East. These platforms have opened up consultations on migration priorities and brought the spotlight on issues facing migrants.

Many recommendations that come through these platforms have made their way to the global discourse on migration and been incorporated into documents like the Global Compact for Migration to represent the interests of sending countries. While causality is hard to draw, advocacy efforts via these platforms also have a role in destination countries committing to and working towards dismantling the Kafala system (<https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/nepal-welcomes-qatar-labour-reform/>) which benefits all nationalities.

But in terms of tangible interventions beyond scripted briefings and talkshops, there is also significant room for improvement. A few emerging good examples of practical interventions include the Comprehensive Information and Orientation Program piloted between Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Saudi Arabia and the UAE to ensure migrants are equipped with the right set of information throughout the migration cycle, and a joint skills project between Sri Lanka and UAE.

Separately, while the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was established in 1985, it was only in 2014 that labor migration was recognised as a regional policy priority during the 18th Summit. The Kathmandu Declaration adopted during that summit included commitments to collaborate and cooperate on labor migration from South Asia.

But progress has stalled with the 19th SAARC Summit not held as originally scheduled in 2016 due to India-Pakistan tensions. This is a missed opportunity for regional cooperation on migration.

Ray Jureidini, a professor at Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Qatar, says the frequent transfers of both ministers and bureaucratic staff of sending countries pose a challenge to sustained, collaborative dialogue across states.

“Even when Governments are willing to collaborate, it is difficult to achieve anything meaningful with frequent rotations of leadership as momentum is lost, history is forgotten and you have to start from scratch all the time,” he says.

Embassies located in the destination country in each other's proximity are well placed to coordinate on common issues. But conversations with missions show that there is not much contact between labour attaches and counselors of different sending countries.

A few reported never having met fellow embassy staff from other sending countries. One Attache told me: “Somehow, this has not been a priority. With understaffed missions always fire-fighting and buried in paperwork, business that is not usual such as collaboration with other labour attaches and counselors takes a back seat.”

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He says the embassies of other South Asian countries have also not initiated such meetings, perhaps because they are all also bogged down by day to day activities. However, there is more interaction between ambassadors of countries sending migrant workers.

Sharmila Parajuli Dhakal, Ambassador of Nepal to Oman, says that when Nepal was Chair of the Colombo Process, the Nepal Embassy hosted a conference in 2018 on curbing human trafficking in Oman with representatives from both Abu Dhabi Dialogue, Colombo Process and the Oman government.

Non-government actors across countries have also engaged in collaborative initiatives. Organisations like the Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA) have brought together civil society players from multiple countries, Panos South Asia has organised a joint fellowship for journalists from the region reporting on migration issues, and migration features prominently in the work of South Asian Regional Trade Union Council (SARTUC), a regional federation of national level trade unions of South Asia.

After the onset of Covid-19, given the high incidence of migrants who were victims of wage theft, MFA has mobilised its cross-country members on a comprehensive global campaign (<https://justiceforwagetheft.org/en/page/kjolr2n202>) calling for migrants to be adequately compensated for their work.

At the individual level, migrants often coordinate across nationalities even though freedom of association is discouraged and even barred in select destination countries. Just last week, a Malaysian court ruled in favour of 65 migrants that included Nepalis and Indians who had sued US tyre maker Goodyear (<https://www.reuters.com/business/exclusive-us-tyre-maker-goodyear-faces-allegations-labour-abuse-malaysia-2021-05-31/>) for underpayment of wages who has been ordered to pay back the migrants.

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Saran Rai, one of the migrants from Nepal involved in the case, says: “We were not paid on time, unfair deductions were made and we were not compensated for overtime work. After research and talking to people, we realised that we could take action against the employer for discrimination and contract violation.”

While the company has challenged the verdict, Rai, who is now in Nepal, is hopeful that he will soon be adequately compensated.



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*Saran Rai and his friends, who filed a case against Goodyear in Malaysia.*

Examples like these remind us of the power of collective bargaining but also that there is just not enough practical cooperation for common causes.

For example, migrant deaths is a common issue of concern (<https://www.nepalitimes.com/here-now/fifa-a-chance-to-improve-welfare-of-nepali-workers-in-qatar/>), and a recent report by The Guardian on the death of 6,500 South Asian migrants in Qatar in the last decade drew global attention.

This is not the first time that migrant deaths has been covered, nor is the problem of migrant deaths unique to Qatar, but it riled up a global audience. However, what really matters is if the outrage turns into action.

For more tangible outcomes to address the concerns regarding migrant deaths, Prof Jureidini stresses on the need to expand the pre-departure medical tests to also include ECG and ultrasound so that pre-existing heart conditions, if any, are caught on time.

The presence of Qatar Visa Centers in key sending countries have made document processing more efficient and eliminated the need for post-arrival medical examinations by using accredited medical institutions, he says.

“Many deaths registered in Qatar are categorised as unexplained cardiac arrests but the time is now ripe for governments, medical and public health personnel to collaborate to find an explanation,” he adds. “There is a lot of misinformation and accusations surrounding migrant deaths that are not grounded in proper medical investigations and it offers a space for stakeholders to intervene in a collaborative manner.”

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Recruitment costs in Bangladesh and Pakistan are much higher than from Nepal and India (see below). High recruitment costs persist (<https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/the-theory-and-practice-of-zero-cost-migration/>) for multiple reasons despite adoption of employer pays model on paper: workers willing to pay for stints abroad, unhealthy competition among recruitment agencies who outbid each other by buying visas from employers and transferring that cost to workers, difficulties monitoring transactions between workers and recruiters among others.



Source: World Bank (2017)

Just the sheer volume of recruiters competing for limited job offers in a handful of countries is eye-opening: Nepal (853), Bangladesh (1,421), India (1,524) and Pakistan (2,124). Recruiters are engaged in a race to the bottom, competing among their own peers as well those from the region.

Sujit Shrestha, of the Nepal Association of Foreign Employment Agencies says that when regulations regarding job demand approval, allowable recruitment costs, etc are different across sending countries with the common destination market, it is difficult to work.

“There is no doubt there are employers who are ethical, who follow the employer-pays model, but you have to be wary that in the current environment, they fall in the minority,” Shrestha says. “Harmonisation of regulations including on recruitment cost policies across sending countries would be useful to ensure that variation in regulations do not affect demand flows.”

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He adds that recruiter associations across South Asia need to hold a dialogue to collectively understand what the differences in recruitment policies and regulations are and if there are possibilities to converge.

There are other areas that call for more collaboration: domestic worker issues, skills and orientation related partnerships or data sharing systems. A common voice across sending countries has its merits, both to strengthen collective bargaining by elevating certain priorities but to also ensure the effectiveness of unilateral approaches.

The limits of our unilateral policies in making a tangible difference in the transnational space is quite evident as domestic workers continue to bypass restrictive emigration policies, workers continue to pay high recruitment costs and be victims to unpaid wages, poor working and living conditions, to name a few.

And now Covid-19 has added more complications to an already complex recruitment and employment system, and demanded a more collaborative approach. Perhaps a good place to start is to collectively consider details testing, quarantine and vaccines which are uncharted territories, but shared concerns:

Who bears the costs of testing and quarantine of migrants? How will we ensure vaccines reach the most vulnerable workers such those without paperwork who are getting pushed further into the shadows?

Take Malaysia, for example. Last week, immigration authorities in hazmat suits rounded up and detained 156 undocumented migrants (<https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/577908>) and sprayed them with disinfectant. Of them, 62 were Bangladeshis, 20 Nepalis and one Indian and Pakistani each. The action was condemned by the civil society and migrant community.

M. from Bangladesh has lived in Malaysia for the last two decades, runs an electronic repair shop and has become an important source of informal support for Bangladeshis. On the recent raids during lockdown, he told us: “The government of Malaysia needs to realise that raiding undocumented workers will not yield results. There are just too many of them and random spot raids will not cover them all.”

Malaysia's recalibration program (<https://www.nepalitimes.com/latest/nepalis-in-malaysia-to-gain-from-amnesty/>) that was supposed to either allow undocumented workers to legalise their status and remain in Malaysia or to leave as part of an amnesty was

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a flop because there were too many criteria regarding who is eligible for the program and plus the costs were too high.

“Governments of sending countries need to get together and request Malaysia to ease the process of legalisation administratively and financially while letting those who want to return back do so,” says M. “This is in the interest of Malaysia too from a public health standpoint because if a subpopulation feels threatened and goes further into hiding out of fear of repercussion, the vaccination drive will not work.”

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