



Photo: HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation Sri Lanka

## SAFE AND BENEFICIAL LABOUR MIGRATION

## FOR SRI LANKAN MIGRANT WORKERS

### Lessons learned from a pioneering project on labour migration

Labour migration is an ever-increasing phenomenon worldwide, with an estimated 232 million migrants around the world. Regional migration has specific relevance, especially in the South Asian – Middle Eastern migration corridor. Thousands of workers depart from South Asian countries every year to take up temporary contractual employment in the Middle East or in South-East Asian countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong. Sri Lanka is no different: every day, hundreds of workers leave the country seeking employment abroad. In order to mitigate the negative impacts of migration and maximise its benefits, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation is implementing a project on safe labour migration in Sri Lanka on behalf of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). The project supports the Sri Lankan government in implementing its National Labour Migration Policy at grassroots level.

## BACKGROUND

Sri Lanka's migrant population amounts to around two million people. Many rural and urban families chose labour migration as a livelihood strategy. The estimated number of skilled and low-skilled migrants leaving the country each year amounts to around 293,000 migrants, the vast majority of them bound for countries in the Middle East, Malaysia and Singapore. Around 50% of these migrants are female and they work in the domestic sector as housemaids. Low- and semi-skilled men migrant workers find work in the construction sector or the cleaning industry or as drivers or gardeners in the domestic sector.

Despite the positive impact on the economy of the countries of origin and destination, migrant workers enjoy a limited range of rights. In many Middle Eastern countries for example, the labour market is governed by the Kafala system, which binds the migrant workers to their visa sponsors or employers. This system favours employers and at the same time limits the rights and protection of the workers. This imbalance often leads to abusive situations. On the other hand, aspirant migrant workers, returnees or their family members who have remained behind face difficult and sometimes exploitative situations.



Photo: Katrin Rosenbrg

Precarious living conditions: a market in the Industrial area in Doha, Qatar

Against this background, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation is working with partner organisations to implement the Safe Labour Migration project in Sri Lanka (LMPSL), which was mandated by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC. After a two-year pilot phase, the project entered its second phase in March 2013. The project neither promotes nor hinders migration, but accepts it as a viable livelihood strategy and seeks to maximise the benefits and reduce the risks and challenges. The project is aligned with the National Labour Migration Policy of Sri Lanka and complements the efforts of the Sri Lankan government to afford better protection to the labour migrants. LMPSL is implemented as part of the Governance and Peace Working Area of HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation and is aligned with the Position Paper on Migration and Development.

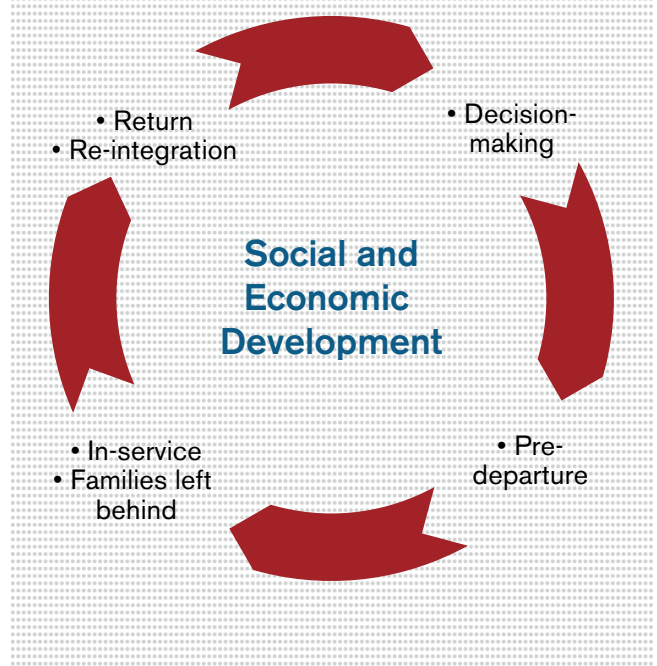
This issue sheet gives an overview of the Safe Labour Migration Project in Sri Lanka, including its goals and approaches. After finetuning these approaches during the pilot phase, a self-assessment was carried out to determine the project's strengths and weaknesses and learn for future implementation.

## GOALS OF THE PROJECT

The goal of the project is to improve the protection and well-being of low-skilled labour migrants and their families in particular and thereby help to promote decent work. In order to achieve this goal, the project places the migrants' rights at the centre of its efforts. Embedded in a rights-based approach, LMPSL aims to enable migrant families to claim their rights and access services. At the same time, it supports duty-bearers (government, private sector and civil society stakeholders) to provide improved services to the migrant community.

LMPSL works with migrants and their family throughout the migration cycle and focuses on rights, psycho-social issues and sustainable remittance management. For the decision-making stage, these families require access to relevant information that allows them to make a cost-benefit analysis. Pre-departure preparation is crucial for the migrants and their families to minimise risks during the in-service stage – where support can only be extended limitedly in the destination countries. Reintegration into the family and home community is often a challenge for all parties, but it nevertheless needs special attention in order to minimise the necessity for re-migration.

## THE MIGRATION CYCLE





Designing a safe migration information poster

## ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Having access to reliable and accurate information is the key to safe migration. Aspirant migrants and their families receive training about safe migration and are increasingly able to avoid the fraudulent practices of subagents. Orientation sessions, poster campaigns and street dramas raise awareness about the potential risks, and provide advice and guidance for potential migrants so they can take an informed decision. As a result, they are better prepared for migration by following the legal requirements and can discuss the issues with their families. Over 80% of people in the project areas are familiar with basic safe migration information, take an informed decision and feel empowered to share their knowledge with the community. Aspirant migrants are less vulnerable to fraudulent practices by recruiting agents.

At the same time, LMPSL builds the capacity of local government officials to provide safe migration messages to the community and thereby enhance the protection of migrants. Workshops and practical guidelines raise awareness among relevant officials – such as the specific Development Officers who have been deployed to support the migrants – about safe migration messages and how to make them accessible to people.

## A MULTI-STAKEHOLDER APPROACH

LMPSL works in close collaboration with relevant government authorities such as the Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare and its executive arm, the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE). The project contributes to the implementation of the National Labour Migration Policy. As LMPSL works mostly at district level (Galle District), it supports decentralised service provision, by facilitating contacts between migrant communities and the decentralised SLBFE offices, as well as the Migration Development Officers attached to the government’s administrative structure.

At the same time, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation establishes partnerships with local civil society organisations to implement projects and support capacity building initiatives related to advocacy for migrant rights.

Increased collaboration will be sought with the private sector and its recruiting agencies in the future, as it plays a vital role in foreign employment.

## MITIGATION OF PSYCHO-SOCIAL ISSUES

Migrants and their families often find themselves in psycho-socially challenging contexts. The dynamics of family life change after the departure of the mother/father and wife/husband. Childcare becomes a burden that must be shared with grandparents and other caregivers. Child abuse has increased substantially due to family separation. There is also a risk that women migrants in particular may fall victim to severe abuse and exploitation in the destination countries. To mitigate these issues, the project works among other with a clinical psychologist who provides counselling on childcare and how to deal with traumas and other stress symptoms. Aspirant migrants receive advice about how to discuss with and prepare their families for the separation and to mitigate these anxieties, for example through regular contact from abroad.

Basic but relatively good-quality health and mental health services are available locally. The project aims to raise awareness among relevant officials such as public health inspectors, midwives, psychologists and so on to migration-related psycho-social issues. A functioning referral and support network has been established among the relevant authorities.



Photo: Katrin Rosenberg

Counseling roleplay during a psycho-social training for government officers and civil society

## REMITTANCES MANAGEMENT

The challenges people face to sustain their livelihoods and a lack of employment opportunities in the home country are the main factors driving labour migration. It is therefore imperative to help labour migrants and their families to achieve their financial goals. Project experience has demonstrated that the single most important factor is financial education, starting at the pre-departure stage by raising awareness about official loan facilities,

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« My wife is abroad. I wanted to send my two daughters to the children's home, as I found it extremely difficult to bring them up, manage the household chores and at the same time continue my daily labour activities. I sought counselling with the clinical psychologist who discussed different options with me. I realised that a children's home is not preferable if it is not absolutely necessary. I still find it challenging to manage the household, but I have been introduced to support mechanisms. »

Mr Janaka, Ambalangoda, Galle District, Sri Lanka



Photo: Katrin Rosenberg

Financial education for sustainable remittances management

saving habits or remittance channels. This enables aspirant migrants and their families to set joint goals and work towards achieving them.

In addition, the project facilitates linkages to existing SLBFE migrant programmes (such as self-employment loans) and other service providers (various government agencies, micro-credit institutions and commercial banks, business development services), who are increasingly targeting migrant families as customers.



International Migrants Day 2013: Civil society and government officials discussing on how to jointly implement the 8 points agenda, approved at the UN High Level Dialogue on Migration and Development

## ACCESS TO JUSTICE THROUGH FREE

### LEGAL AID

Cases of fraud and exploitation are widespread in foreign employment and are often committed by sub-agents, recruitment agents and employers in the destination countries. Migrant workers and their families are often unaware of the available services and mechanisms for legal redress. Furthermore, they are often poor and cannot afford to pay for legal services. Therefore the project helps victimised migrants to seek justice through its partner organisation, the Centre for Human Rights and Development (CHRD). CHRD supports the migrants to lodge complaints with the Sri Lankan Bureau of Foreign Employment or the police for cases that can be considered trafficking. It works through international networks to support the tracking of missing migrants, advice to migrants in safe houses and detention centres and the repatriation of human remains.

Community leaders and selected local government officials are trained as paralegals so that they are in a position to extend preliminary advice to the victim's family regarding how to react should the contract be violated. These interventions have enabled victims to claim justice and their wages.

## ADVOCACY AND POLICY INFLUENCING

Grassroots project experiences feed into the local and international policymaking processes in different ways. Increased protection of migrants' rights requires major advocacy efforts at both national and international levels. During the first phase of LMP SL, a round-table was initiated to bring together local organisations working on migration. The project provides capacity building to organisations so that they can strengthen their evidence-based advocacy work and constructive policy dialogue. Improved documentation of evidence and more strategic advocacy interventions empower them to engage increasingly in national and international policy dialogue.

At the same time, HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation uses many diverse opportunities to campaign for better policy implementation. SLBFE and MFEPW have requested LMP SL to extend support to the government-run shelter for victimised female returnee migrants. Furthermore, International Migrants Day on 18th December offered a good opportunity to raise awareness and facilitate linkages between government and civil society so that they might work together to provide better protection to migrant workers.



Streetdrama to raise awareness on safe labour migration

## ACHIEVEMENTS

December 2010 – August 2014

- **11,800 households** have received safe migration information.
- **180 victims** have received individual psychosocial counselling.
- **440 victims of fraud and exploitation** have been provided with free legal aid.
- **1,300 families** have received psychological training in childcare, pre-departure preparation and reintegration.
- **1,600 families** have been capacitated to manage their remittances more sustainably through financial education.
- **600 officials of various government institutions** have been trained in safe migration, psycho-social issues, legal redress avenues and financial literacy.

### THE PROJECT IS EMBEDDED IN A COMPREHENSIVE LABOUR MIGRATION PROGRAMME OF THE SWISS AGENCY FOR DEVELOPMENT AND COOPERATION

In partnership with the Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare, Switzerland contributes towards the empowerment of labour migrants and their families by strengthening their awareness about the mechanisms of the migration process and about their rights as well by providing legal services, psychosocial support and economic capacity building. In addition, together with the International Labour Organization (ILO), SDC also supports the government to strengthen national policy and works towards ensuring decent and productive employment opportunities for migrant workers.



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