# MORE THAN THE SUM OF THEIR REMITTANCES

CAN ASIA REALIZE THE POTENTIAL OF RETURNED MIGRANT WORKERS DURING COVID AND BEYOND?

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# GovAsia

Welcome to Issue 1.2 of *GovAsia.* Published four times a year, *GovAsia* provides a platform for The Asia Foundation and its partners to examine the critical social, economic, and political problems facing citizens and governments across Asia, drawing on the Foundation's daily engagement with politically rooted development challenges. *GovAsia* aims to facilitate thoughtful debate and build consensus for solutions to the most pressing governance issues facing the region today.

In this issue, we explore the challenges and opportunities lower-middle income countries in Asia face in the wake of mass reverse migration movements in 2020, brought about by COVID-19. Can governments respond to the unprecedented number of returned migrant workers in ways that benefit migrant workers and their families, contribute to COVID response and recovery, and build stronger policy frameworks for future migration cycles?

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Asking questions of migrant workers and mobility during the COVID-19 pandemic provides a particularly fertile context in which to explore how times of rupture shape mobilities, exposure to sickness and socioeconomic precarity as well as matters of hope, relief and aspiration. It is not that these conditions and feelings were absent prior to the pandemic. What the virus has done, however, is throw the fullness of the migrant experience into sharp relief.[1]

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# INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 uprooted millions of migrant workers in Asia[2] through lost jobs, lockdowns and mobility restrictions, and border closures. Migrant workers, especially those without formal employment contracts, were often the first to lose their jobs, leading many to return home. From late-February through mid-June 2020, by which point most international checkpoints across Asia had closed, the scale of spontaneous and desperate cross-border travel overwhelmed transportation and other systems. Some workers made it home, but others were stranded behind closed borders. The workers who did return home faced unemployment, trauma, lack of support, and rising stigma and prejudice.[3]

Considerable research exists on the multiple impacts of the pandemic on overseas migrant workers.[4] This paper specifically considers how the pandemic impacted those workers once they returned home. These workers are among the worst hit by the pandemic's economic burdens, and their challenges reveal glaring weaknesses in migration policies, systems, and services throughout the region.

National policies often fail to consider both the challenges and the opportunities presented by returning migrant workers. Outdated and narrow-minded ideals often inform policies, which dehumanize migrant workers as merely another export: the so-called 'migrant stock.'[5] Prejudice toward migrant workers is especially common in destination or recipient countries, but it also occurs in migrant workers' home countries. This discrimination has only worsened during the pandemic, which further compounded the difficulties returning workers now face.[6]

Migrant workers frequently return to their home states with a wealth of experience, knowledge, and skills. Additionally, returnees are tenacious, creative, and resilient – all strengths that enabled them to leave low-income countries to find gainful employment abroad. Domestic policy frameworks that leverage the capabilities of returning migrant workers will better equip countries to meet economic and societal needs now and in a post-pandemic world.

This paper draws on research from The Asia Foundation and other partners in countries that experienced an influx of returning migrant workers. The first section explains how migrant workers and policies operated pre-pandemic. The next dissects the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant workers across Asia, including ripple effects of 'sudden shock' repatriation and the economic implications of migrant worker repatriation on Asia's poorest countries. We then look at the challenges returnees face in their home countries' economies and societies, such as discrimination – heightened by the fear of COVID-19 transmission across borders and gendered discrimination unique to women migrant workers; the lack of services in home countries because of limited or overwhelmed support systems; and severely decreased employment opportunities. We go on to explore how governments, international and local civil society organizations, and migrant workers, themselves, have responded to these challenges, largely falling short of the tremendous and unprecedented need brought about by the pandemic. The essay outlines how governments and civil societies can better meet the needs of returning migrant workers through the collection of better data, more accessible services, and inclusionary government policies that utilize migrant workers' skills, ultimately building a stronger support system behind migrant workers and enabling a lucrative economic backbone in both home and destination countries.

# PRE-PANDEMIC LABOR MIGRATION

The growth of globalized economies over the past 20 years, coupled with increased access to international labor markets, resulted in a rising number of migrant workers. For decades, temporary labor migrants dominated outbound migration channels throughout Asia. Temporary labor migrants include formal employees (those with registered movements and contractual employment) and informal (undocumented workers who are subject to fewer safeguards and protections). Until 2020, the number of labor migrants steadily increased from year to year. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated that, in 2017, there were 164 million overseas migrant workers across the world. 77 million of those workers came from Asia, especially from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Nepal, and the Philippines (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**
Outbound migration figures, per year, 2010 - 2019
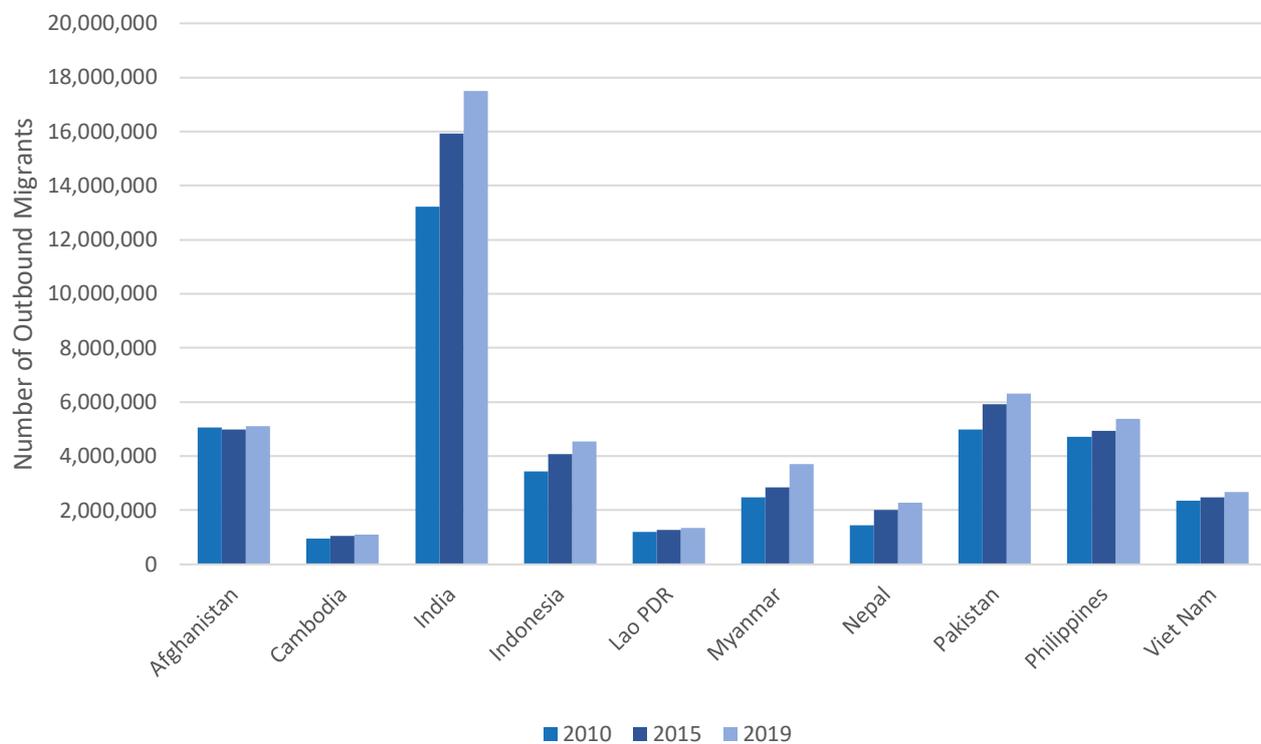


Source: UNDESA, 2020

Source: UNDESA, International Migrant Stock, 2020

A significant number of Asian labor migrants work in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, particularly Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The largest number of migrant workers in GCC countries comes from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and the Philippines.[7] In 2019, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) estimated that India sent 9.4 million workers to GCC countries, Bangladesh 3.4 million, Pakistan 3.3 million, and Nepal just over 800,000.[8] The vast majority of labor migration involves worker movements from poorer to richer countries (Figure 2). Within Asia, this involves a movement out lower-income countries (LICs), such as Afghanistan, and lower-middle-income countries (LMICs),[9] such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam. Indonesia, which became an upper-middle-income country (UMIC) in 2020, also sends out a large number of migrant workers. Within Asia, migrant workers tend to move to wealthier countries, such as Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei Darussalam, Singapore, and South Korea. A large number of South Asian workers (usually informal) also migrate to India and the Maldives.

**Figure 2**
**2019 Migration numbers within Asia**
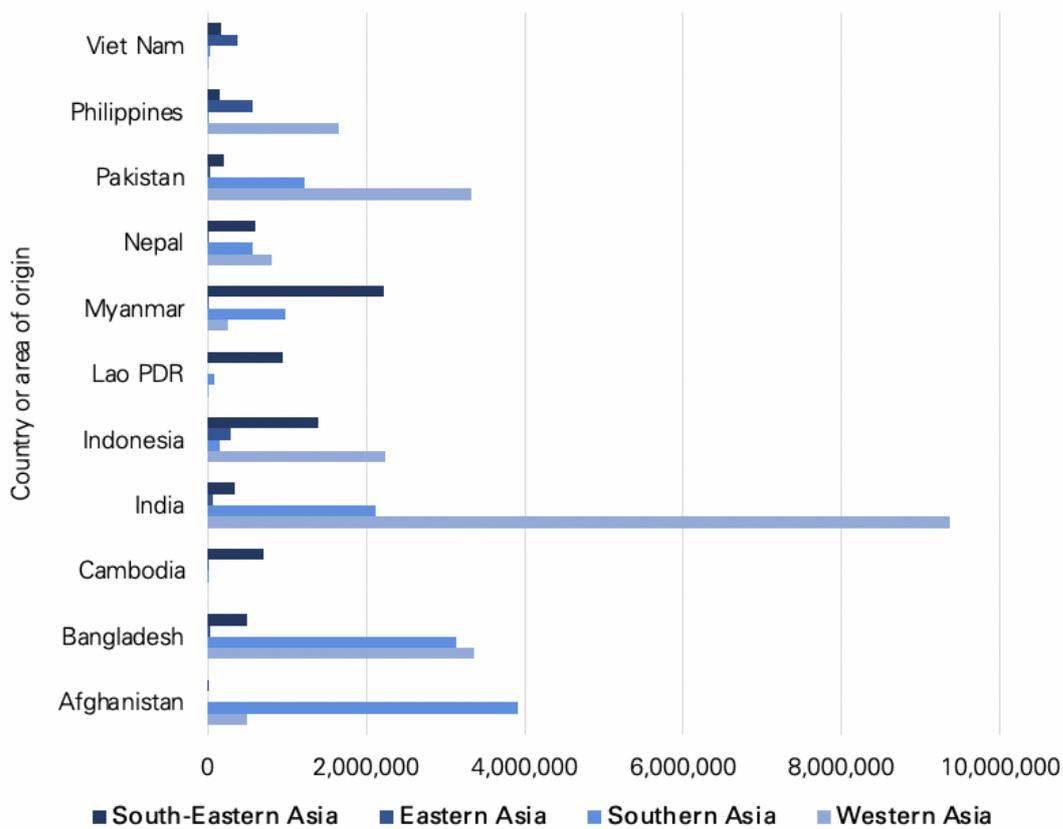


Source: UNDESA, International Migrant Stock, 2020

Within Asia, the majority of labor migrants are low- or semi-skilled. High-skilled migrant workers tend to move further afield to richer countries in the north. In 2018, the ILO estimated that over 68 percent of the working population in the Asia-Pacific region were informal workers, particularly in the agricultural and industrial sectors. The size of an informal economy links to a country's development status. On average, 71.4 percent of employees are informal workers in developing and emerging Asian countries, compared to 21.7 percent in developed Asia.[10] Ninety percent of Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Nepal's labor forces are informal.

Asian economies employ both regular and irregular undocumented migrants. Irregular migration is very difficult to track because it occurs outside of regulatory systems. In March 2019, the World Bank estimated that there were between 1.23 and 1.46 million undocumented migrants in Malaysia[11] and that approximately 1.00 to 1.25 million of the over four million migrant workers in Thailand were undocumented.[12] The United Nations estimated that tens of millions of undocumented migrants work in India and millions in Pakistan.[13]

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

## SUDDEN REPATRIATION

In March 2020, as COVID-19 spread, the fish factory in Hokkaido, Japan, where Thi Lan worked for two years, partially shut down, and Thi Lan lost her job. The 25-year-old from Hai Phong, Vietnam decided to return home. She had already paid off the loan her parents took out to support her journey abroad. With a full month's salary, she purchased a ticket to Hanoi, making it on the last flight out of Japan bound for Vietnam. On arrival, Thi Lan stayed in a government-run quarantine camp for 15 days before returning to her hometown. She was glad to be home and close to her family and, although she remains unemployed, she is optimistic about the future. Thi Lan is multi-skilled and resilient, something her experience in Japan strengthened.

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Thi Lan is among the millions of overseas migrant workers who lost their jobs in the early months of the pandemic. She was lucky enough to return home reasonably easily; however, many migrant workers had strikingly different experiences. Some remain stranded and unemployed in their destination countries, while others faced more difficult journeys home – including Chantin from the Kavre District of Nepal. For two years, Chantin worked as a hospital cleaner in Dubai. In March 2020, she was laid off without notice. There were no flights to Nepal, so the company provided her and other former employees with shelter. In August, with support from the Nepalese Embassy, Chantin flew to Kathmandu, where she received support from a local civil society organization during her quarantine period. Chantin does not plan to resume overseas employment after the pandemic; instead, she hopes to

find start-up capital for her own business.

From February to March 2020, business closures and job losses resulted in millions of 'sudden shock' repatriations, such as those experienced by Thi Lan and Chantin. The pandemic disrupted migration cycles in which workers had invested substantial sums of money. In April, interviews with formerly undocumented migrant workers in Thailand, who had returned to Lao PDR and Myanmar, explained how they had 'lost their jobs overnight with no redundancy pay' but they 'still owed rent, water, and electricity bills, even as they struggled to feed themselves and their families.'[14] Prior to the pandemic, migrant workers could find new jobs relatively quickly, while subsisting on limited savings; COVID-19, however, has severely limited these workers' options, leaving them little choice but to return home. Those who did not have sufficient resources to return home had to negotiate rent postponements or live on the street, relying on food donations and other support.

It is difficult to attain a complete picture of repatriations in 2020, particularly because new waves of the pandemic continue to produce ripple effects that force more migrant workers home. The availability and quality of such data varies substantially by country. In Thailand, for instance, a well-functioning labor migration regime provided the International Organization for Migration (IOM) with excellent data. Countries with more fluid borders, such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, are unable to adequately

report returnees. The open border between Nepal and India means that migrant workers are seldom recorded; however, the need for data on quarantining returnees has provided the impetus for a nationwide database on Nepal-India migrants.

The IOM, other international agencies, and local media created a partial dataset on returning migrant workers. Data from the IOM also provides information on how specific countries have been impacted. Figure 3 illustrates the scale of some of those movements.

**Figure 3**
The 2020 Covid Repatriation Shock
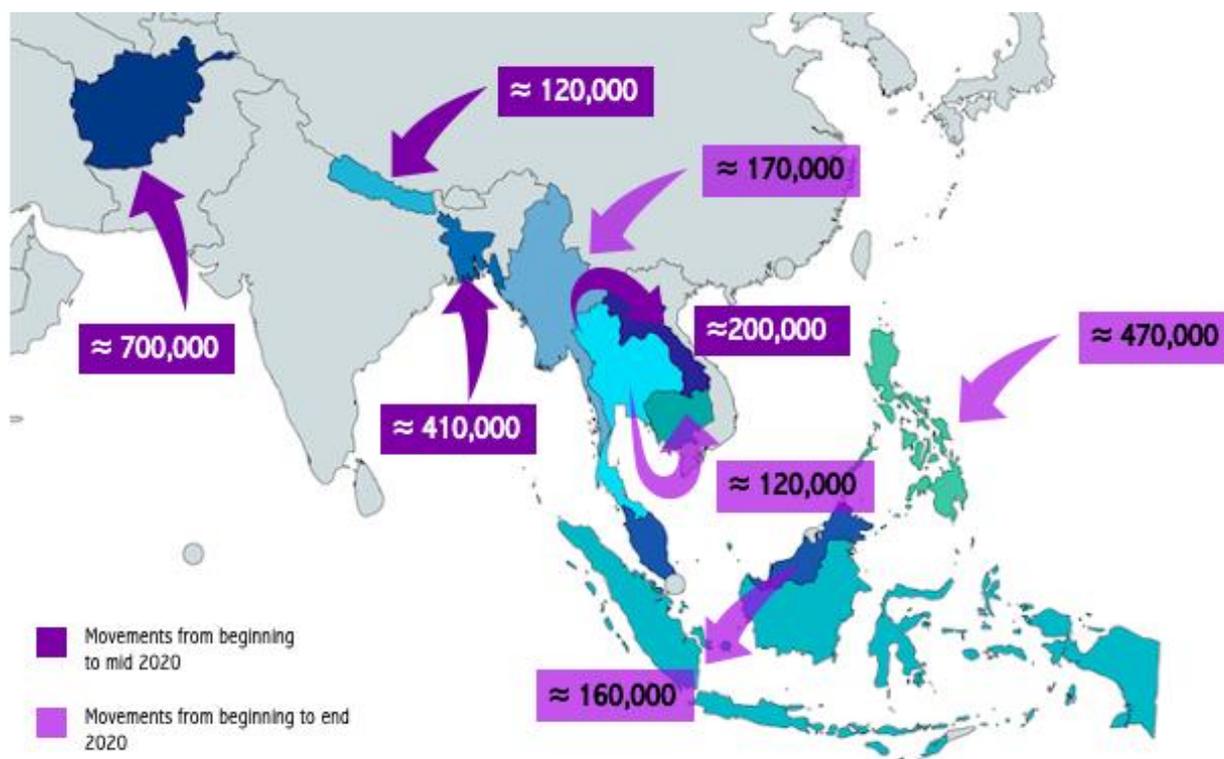


Source: Multiple sources including IOM and local media[15]

## MIGRANT WORKER CHALLENGES

The challenges faced by returning migrant workers during the pandemic resemble the multitude they faced in a pre-pandemic world. The COVID-19 pandemic cast a light on precarious working conditions in destination countries, restricted workers' rights, and limited access to information, legal aid, and basic services. Female migrant workers were especially vulnerable to

abuse and mistreatment from employers, appalling working conditions, and the risk of trafficking and exploitation.[16] The pandemic drew the attention of media and policymakers to the plight of migrant workers. In India, for example, the local media widely covered migrant workers' devastating journeys home by foot, which encouraged new legislation to

register internal migrant workers in a move towards greater protection measures.

There is still an unexplored aspect of migrant worker challenges, which includes the ramifications unique to sudden shock repatriation and the ways in which this return resonates throughout the region's cities, towns, and rural communities. In addition to managing the dramatic impact of the pandemic on health, employment, and the economy, Asia's poorest countries faced the challenge of introducing an enormous number of returning migrant workers into already strained communities. Additionally, the workers themselves experienced reduced employment, exacerbated by inefficient governance systems. These communities also faced the compounding impact of reduced remittance income (Figure 4). Before the pandemic, Asian countries were among the largest remittance receivers in the world, many relying on the contribution of remittances for economic growth trajectories. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) projected that Asia's LMICs would likely experience a drop of 15 to 27 percent in remittance receipts from 2018 to 2020. This amounts to approximately USD 28.6 billion in lost income in South Asia and USD 11.7 billion in Southeast Asia.

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**Figure 4**
% decline in remittance receipts from 2018 to 2020
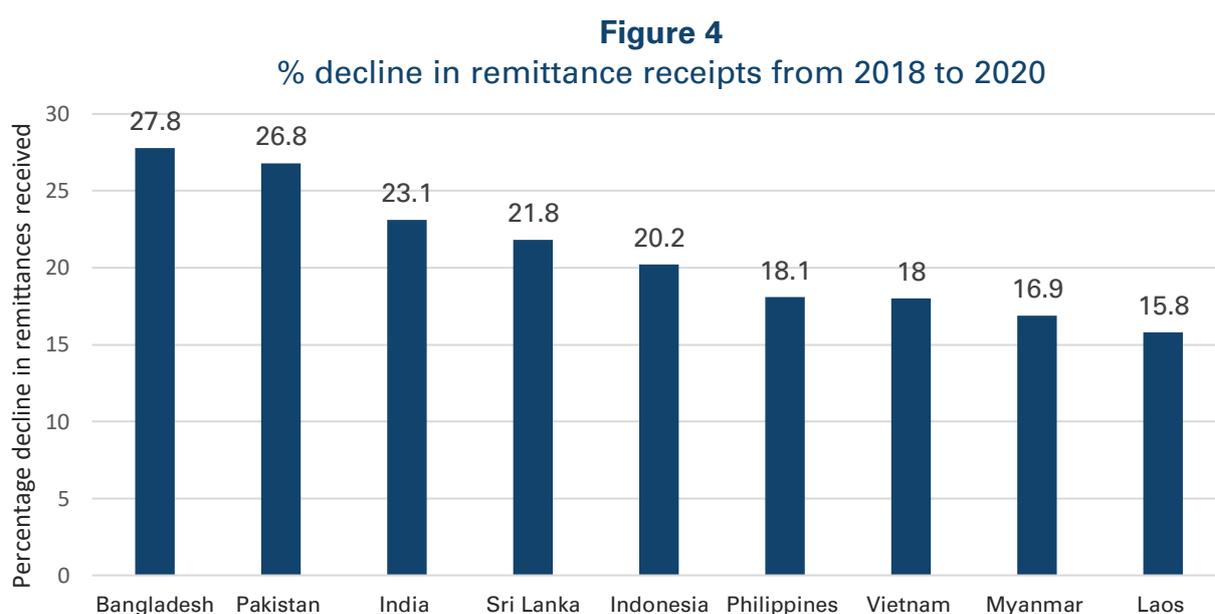


Source: Asian Development Bank, 'Covid-19 Impact on International Migration, Remittances, and Recipient Households in Developing Asia,' 2020

# REPATRIATION CHALLENGES

In September 2020, 25-year-old Bibek[17] eventually returned to Nepal from Malaysia after he lost his three-year job in a shoe factory. Bibek was unable to find a flight back to Nepal when the pandemic hit, and he exhausted his savings to support himself for six months before finally flying to Kathmandu with the support of a local nongovernmental organization (NGO). Bibek's situation was not unusual. Not all governments were in a position to formally initiate repatriation arrangements, which left thousands of workers stranded and prompted frantic efforts to bring workers home. For example, while the Supreme Court of Nepal ordered the government to help repatriate migrant workers, implementation fell short.[18]

When Bibek arrived home, there were no government quarantine facilities available, and he was forced to self-quarantine. Bibek's hometown in the Sarlahi District, however, shunned returnees because of fears of COVID-19 transmission. As a result, Bibek self-isolated in Kathmandu, where he has since settled and is looking for work, although he is not optimistic about finding a job in the current conditions.

Bibek's experience is an example of the heightened discrimination many returnees face as a result of anxiety around the spread of the virus. COVID-19, however, has only increased the stigma and prejudice already felt by many migrant workers in their home and destination countries. In Afghanistan, for example, returnees face social stigma, particularly if they were deported from their destination country. Accounts include people being rejected by their families and communities, sometimes violently, and others fleeing to avoid the wrath of debtors.[19] Over half of respondents in The Asia Foundation's Survey of Afghan Returnees 2019 reported discrimination based on their language or way of speaking. Larger metropolitan areas, such as capital cities, are sometimes more welcoming to returnees because of a more cosmopolitan environment. This was mirrored in The Asia Foundation's Afghanistan report when 37.5 percent of respondents reported discrimination in Kabul compared to the much higher 86.8 percent in Kandahar.

In 2020, returnees in Nepal,[20] Bangladesh, and Afghanistan[21] were stigmatized as potential 'virus bearers,' especially in rural areas. A survey of Nepali returned workers found that 48 percent of respondents had been treated worse by community members, leaders, or even friends and families. The responders cited verbal and physical violence as forms of discrimination they experienced. The research noted that returnees may cite discrimination as a factor for whether they decide to return abroad.[22]

In certain countries, COVID-19 resulted in executive actions that further stigmatized returnees. In Bangladesh, for example, police jailed approximately 370 returning migrant workers between July and September under suspicion of criminal offences committed abroad.[23] Additionally, local authorities stamped returnees' hands upon arrival with the message 'proud to protect Bangladesh' alongside quarantine dates. Authorities also identified houses of returnees with red flags, whether or not they tested positive for COVID-19, which enabled more widespread discrimination.

## GENDER DIMENSIONS

Global international migration numbers include a roughly equal division between men and women. However, regional variations exist. For instance, among South Asian countries, with the exception of Sri Lanka, more men than women travel abroad for work. The IOM, United Nations Women, and other organizations[24] explain that migration movements and trends frequently reinforce gender inequalities because patriarchal values in countries of origin influence decisions to migrate and the opportunities available to do so.[25] Migration channels are also commonly gendered. For example, in Southeast Asia, there are more job opportunities for women in its domestic labor market, as well as in manufacturing, hospitality agriculture, and sometimes construction.

Migration can and does provide opportunities to women to overcome social and economic inequalities; however, migration itself exposes them to new forms of discrimination and gender-based violence in both

home and destination countries, particularly where migration is stigmatized or where patriarchal social norms frown upon women workers.[26] Moreover, there is often less regulation in sectors dominated by women workers, such as domestic service and caregiving sectors. This leaves women vulnerable to exploitation, including trafficking risks, socio-economic isolation, and abuse.[27]

The gender dimensions of reverse migration are also significant. For women returning to highly patriarchal cultures – often even more so in rural areas – reintegrating is often aggravated by values that regulate the 'appropriate' activities of women. Many young women returnees face family or community pressure to 'return to traditional roles of child and parental care that 'left behind' relatives (including males) had to assume in their absence or be pressured to marry as a means of survival.'[28] This becomes even more common as the pandemic continues and the increased burden of unpaid care work has fallen disproportionately to women.[29] As a result, the barriers to women's employment have grown, and it is increasingly difficult for returning women migrant workers to go back to their previous employment.

## ACCESS TO SERVICES IN COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

An increased number of returning migrant workers during COVID-19 put an even greater strain on already limited resources in several countries and highlighted structural and policy weaknesses. In Bangladesh, research on returnees in July 2020 revealed that

86 percent of respondents received no support services since returning, despite the fact that 93 percent of returnees did not have enough income to support themselves.[30] In Cambodia, similar research found that two-thirds of respondents had not received any support since returning, while 35 percent said they did not have enough food to eat, and 57 percent did not have enough income to support themselves.[31]

Even countries well prepared for mobile labor forces, such as the Philippines – which has one of the best overseas migrant worker programs in the region – were unable to cope with the influx of returning migrant workers. Such programs emphasize the front end, rather than the back end of the migration cycle, so they are better prepared for outbound processes but are blindsided by large scale repatriation.

Policies and services for the return and resettlement of migrant workers are often inadequate and poorly communicated to workers during migration cycles.[32] The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) identifies such a weakness in migration policies in Bangladesh where, 'although the Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy (2016) supports returning migrant workers,' it has 'been prioritizing outgoing migrants over returnees.'[33] This results in a lack of information on job opportunities, increased barriers to formal credit, and an absence of advisory services.

In some contexts, these services, and the institutions that should deliver them, are so weak that returnees find it

difficult to even register upon their return in order to access services. According to The Asia Foundation's Survey of the Afghan People (2019), returned migrant workers in Afghanistan had to register with United Nations agencies in order to access food and shelter.[34] Only 20 percent of the survey's respondents approached the government for assistance. These challenges were exacerbated in 2020, when an estimated 1.2 million Afghan citizens were on the move in 2020, of which nearly 860,000 had been forced to leave Iran.[35] These unprepared systems and overwhelmed government agencies severely hampered the quality of life of returnees.[36]

## ACCESS TO DECENT WORK

Many returnees have come back to countries suffering major economic downturns due to the pandemic. As a result, returnees often struggle to find work in cities, towns, and villages in which their families previously relied on migrant workers' remittance earnings. Migrant workers are both entering a domestic economic crisis without employment and coming back with debt burdens from their travel home. Among the most indebted, 35 percent of those interviewed in Cambodia owed a debt on their return[37]; 55 percent faced similar burdens in Bangladesh, with the majority of debt owed to family or friends.[38] The vast majority of Cambodian returnees interviewed by the IOM were concerned about their future employment prospects[39] in the midst of an economic crisis. Similar concerns were voiced by returnees in Lao PDR. Sixty-two percent of returned migrants in Bangladesh cited finding a job was their main concern.

In Laos, The Asia Foundation (TAF) partners with Village Focus International (VFI), a local civil society organisation that supports young people at risk of trafficking or exploitation, a group that includes many recently returned migrant workers. VFI operates shelters and vocational training centres, provides safe accommodation, health care, and job placement services, as well as small grants for income generation activities to victims of trafficking, migrant returnees, and vulnerable young people. As such, VFI has a unique vantage of the pandemic's impacts on local Laos communities. VFI noted heightened challenges of reintegrating into communities, including limited job opportunities. Migrant workers who did not intend to return to their home country, but were forced to because of COVID-19, faced challenges adapting to the culture of their new surroundings, particularly if they had been overseas for some years.

# RESPONSES

## GOVERNMENT

After the pandemic hit, many governments across Asia scrambled to help migrant workers return home. Several governments, such as Nepal and Vietnam, arranged repatriation flights – in Nepal's case, for free.[40] National governments also introduced quarantine measures, with some, such as the Government of Cambodia, securing support from international agencies to do so.[41] Other governments, including the Government of Bangladesh, provided emergency supplies to returnees in need.[42] Cambodia, Myanmar, and Afghanistan provided cash and food assistance to citizens; although Afghanistan's distribution has been plagued by corruption, resulting in the dismissal of some local officials.[43] Some governments also set up funds to support returning migrant workers through low-interest small business loans.[44] The Government of Nepal proposed loans for returned migrant workers in early 2020, for which, according to local media, demand quickly outstripped the funds they had set aside.[45]

Some local governments moved more quickly than their national counterparts, taking response measures into their own hands. In August 2020, the Mekong Migration Network reported that the government of Savannakhet, Lao PDR's southern province, developed a policy to help claim unemployment benefits for Lao migrant workers who had paid social security in Thailand, gather more accurate data on returnees to better tailor employment programs, and run training programs to research what skills returnees were interested in developing.[46]

Many countries have struggled with concurrent health, education, and economic crises, leaving little room for policies and programs for returning migrant workers. In Pakistan, for example, by the third month of the pandemic, 20,000 migrant workers had returned from the Middle East, flooding the system. The chairman of the Overseas Employment Promoters' Association decried the lack of rehabilitation or bailout packages for returnees due, in part, to outdated legislation.[47] In some countries, such as Afghanistan, there are no systems for registering and collecting data from returned migrants. Neither Bangladesh nor Nepal has formal government programs in place to facilitate the repatriation of returnees. Bangladesh also lacks the ability to manage large-scale population movements in times of crisis.[48] Even the Philippines' existing systems, which are arguably the most organized in Southeast Asia, focus too narrowly on the outbound processes. This lack of foresight has immensely strained existing Filipino programs, revealing the need for more

comprehensive policies and contingency plans.

As the pandemic lingers in 2021, and the earlier surge of population movements slows to a trickle, the question of longer-term support for returned migrants still remains, emerging as a pressing issue for policymakers. It is vital that policies reflect the welfare of all workers and address migrant workers in particular, who have long been ignored.

## INTERNATIONAL AND LOCAL CIVIL SOCIETY

In several countries in the region, civil society organizations (CSOs) – both local and international – play an important role in supporting migrant workers in their transition to and from destination countries. Some CSOs have a range of existing migrant resource services that work specifically to support low-income migrant workers, their families, and communities. As the pandemic hit and lockdowns commenced, CSOs were often on the frontlines providing food, information, and other essential services to returned migrant workers and other vulnerable groups.[49]

United Nations' organizations, such as the IOM, ILO, and UNDP, have partnered with international and local NGOs, CSOs, and national and local governments to fill gaps in basic service delivery where possible and where donor funding is available. In lower-middle-income Asia, these gaps are manifold and include insufficient and exclusionary policy frameworks, weak institutions, and frequently corrupt political economies. In

Cambodia, for example, the IOM provided short-term access to feminine hygiene products for female returnees during government-required quarantine because the government did not provide such supplies. Local and international organizations have also provided much needed basic support in countries where access to social protection services for returnees is unavailable, inadequate, or constrained by bureaucratic hurdles. In Pakistan, the Overseas Pakistani Foundation (OPF) supports housing projects, specifically for low-paid returned migrants in Lahore and Islamabad.[50]

Local organizations often provide essential services for vulnerable, low-skilled, or minority populations. The Migrant Resource Centre Bangladesh provides information to returned and prospective migrant workers, acts as a referral platform for the services they need, provides counselling and guidance, carries out research, and develops educational and other materials for migrants and the government. In the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the ILO supports a network of local Migrant Resource Centers that provide similar services across 24 cities and towns in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. These services have immensely supported returned migrant workers throughout 2020. In India, local CSOs help migrant workers access government services by providing information and helping them fill out registration paperwork.

Migrant workers have also advocated for the improvement of their situation. Despite movement restrictions, social media has enabled some instances of regional collective action. In June 2020, on International Domestic Workers Day, the International Migrant Alliance held its first global online rally of migrant domestic workers, in partnership with the International Women's Alliance. Attended by over 500 participants, the rally demanded inclusion, protection, protection, services, and rights for migrant domestic workers. It highlighted the issues and concerns migrant workers have faced during COVID-19. According to Facebook analytics, the video reached 16,303 people, received 5,271 engagements and 9,200 views, and was shared 273 times.

"We are and we should be proud that the COVID-19 pandemic did not stop us from voicing out our concerns and demands. When governments neglect and deny our human rights, we use the power of unity and solidarity to help our ranks and communities. We have learned how to re-organize ourselves and engage in campaigns through various platforms. We have learned how to defend ourselves in time of crisis. It is a positive lesson that we should celebrate." Eni Lestari, Indonesian domestic worker in Hong Kong, chairperson of International Migrants Alliance

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR BETTER GOVERNANCE

Despite a number of important initiatives undertaken by governments, international agencies, and CSOs, the challenges faced by migrant workers, highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic, remain woefully unaddressed. There are, however, opportunities for better

migration governance, especially in Asia's lower- and lower-middle-income countries. Current migration policy frameworks place much greater emphasis on outbound support rather than return, which leaves them sorely unprepared for the scale of reverse migration caused by the pandemic (Figure 5). The COVID migration experience has sharply illustrated the need to rebalance policy frameworks in order to develop evidence-based programs and services for returnees, including health, social protection, education, and employment.

**Figure 5**
The Migration Cycle

*Migration policies in most LMICs place much greater emphasis on outbound facilitation over return support.*
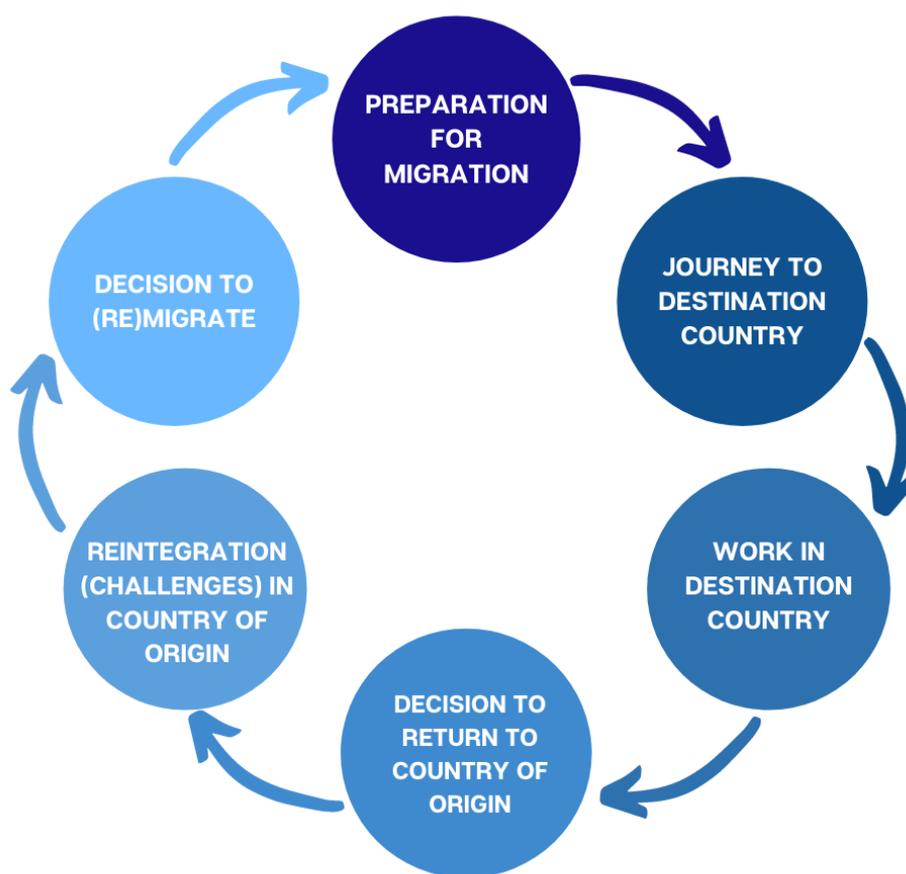


Source: Authors' adaptation of common steps in the migration cycle

## BETTER DATA

If Asian governments are going to implement improved policies that better support the welfare of migrant workers, these improvements require more and better data. The Pakistan Migration Report 2020 highlighted the fact that 'no results-oriented data collection system is in place to capture

return flows in order to provide assistance where needed or to reintegrate migrants productively in the community.'[51] The lack of comprehensive data creates issues with repatriation, especially in large numbers. This became evident when, in Afghanistan, the sudden surge of COVID-19-driven returnees faced challenges with social and economic reintegration, employment, housing, education, and basic human needs. The lack of data about migrant workers inhibited their ability to register for needed support. Such low and varied patterns of registration exposed a wide gulf between official and unofficial statistics.

Collecting better-quality, disaggregated data on return migrants, their destinations, work, education level, experiences, etc. would significantly improve migrant workers' working and living conditions. A considerable amount of qualitative data – both academic and policy-directed – is also needed to complement available statistical data. Better data will enable stronger state regulation and more effective bilateral agreements on migrant social and labor protections and will support evidence-based programs and targeted interventions.

## ENSURE SERVICES ARE ACCESSIBLE

In the immediate term, improvements to humanitarian and social protection systems are essential. In the midst of the economic and public health crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, it can be difficult to find the resources to tackle another challenging aspect of the pandemic, but it is crucial that no

community be left out of necessary support structures.

In February 2021, the Mandaue City government in the Philippines kicked off a novel way to assist its recently returned migrant workers by redeploying its tourism personnel to provide returnees with support on arrival. The tourism staff welcomed returnees from the airport, provided them meals before taking them to quarantine facilities, and supported their transition to homes or hotels once their quarantine finished. This is one example of how governments can still meet the needs of migrant workers, along with benefitting other communities who have been negatively impacted by the pandemic.

## ACTIVELY FOSTER PLURALISM AND INCLUSION

The stigmatization and discrimination migrant workers face in both home and destination countries must be dismantled. Media portrayals of migrants are often negative, portraying migrants, including migrant workers, as threats to 'national' communities, local jobs, and local welfare. Migrant workers are frequently told they should be grateful to destination countries for the opportunities they are afforded, despite the poor way they are treated. Media infrequently covers the multitude of economic, social, and political contributions migrant workers offer to their host countries. Even the common term 'migrant stock' objectifies migrant workers. These media portrayals enable prejudice and discrimination, both toward internal migrant workers in host countries or migrants who return to their countries

of origin. In 2020, the widespread fear that returning migrant workers could transmit COVID-19 to their home countries exacerbated this bias, which, in some places, resulted in ostracization or violence toward returning migrant workers. These prejudices make it all the more difficult for citizens, media, and policymakers to see migrant workers as potential contributors to economies and societies.

Many Asian migrant workers were already socio-economically marginalized in their home countries, and COVID-19 compounded this marginalization, whether because the pandemic stranded migrant workers without access to services, or workers returned to face stigma and prejudice.[52] Both home and destination countries must proactively address discrimination against migrant workers. Such measures could include representing migrant communities in decision-making processes, focusing civil society advocacy toward migrant workers' needs, and providing them with access to necessary support.

Fostering pluralism and inclusion includes systematizing access to basic services during the return to communities, while maintaining continuous consultation with returnees and their communities. Efforts should include the equal involvement of women, as female migrant workers have been disproportionately impacted by discrimination and ostracization. An inclusive and consultative approach will make it easier for migrant workers to find fulfilling work and better enable their valuable contributions to their

communities, both at home and abroad.

## BUILD UP SKILLS AND AGENCY

Returning migrants bring new skills, experiences, and ideas to their home countries that should be leveraged by governments. Integrating returnees into local or national economic recovery – such as efforts made by the Government of Nepal – hold enormous potential. With adequate skills, finance, training, and networking, returning migrants can stimulate economic growth, especially in regional centers and provinces. Providing opportunities to reskill and upskill are common global responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, and this is a viable option for returning migrants, especially during a time of few job opportunities. Some countries offer incentives for those who have lost their jobs to enroll in upskilling or reskilling courses; these opportunities should be offered to migrant workers, as well.

Migrant workers cannot only be useful in their home countries; they are also incredible sources of economic growth in destination countries. The benefits of skills mobility are more nuanced than often portrayed. Skilled migrant workers can boost the economies of destination countries by expanding the workforce in specific industries and contributing to new businesses, acting as a potential catalyst for economic growth.

It is also worth considering how to translate practically acquired skills into formal qualifications. The Philippines offers formal qualifications to workers based on their skill levels through

individualized assessment. Cambodia has also implemented pilot programs in priority industries that do this same thing. In June 2020, the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) in the Philippines launched an online platform that assesses and certifies Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) free of charge. Additionally, TESDA also offers free skills training to OFWs and their immediate family members.[52] Some NGOs in Singapore offer assessment-only pathways to a Singapore-issued qualification. This provides a certificate for migrant workers who continue to work in Singapore and a potentially well-recognized certificate for use in another or home country.[54] Improving and expanding such certificate programs could immensely benefit migrant workers and the communities they work in, because the formalization of skills creates a higher-educated workforce, which boosts economic growth.
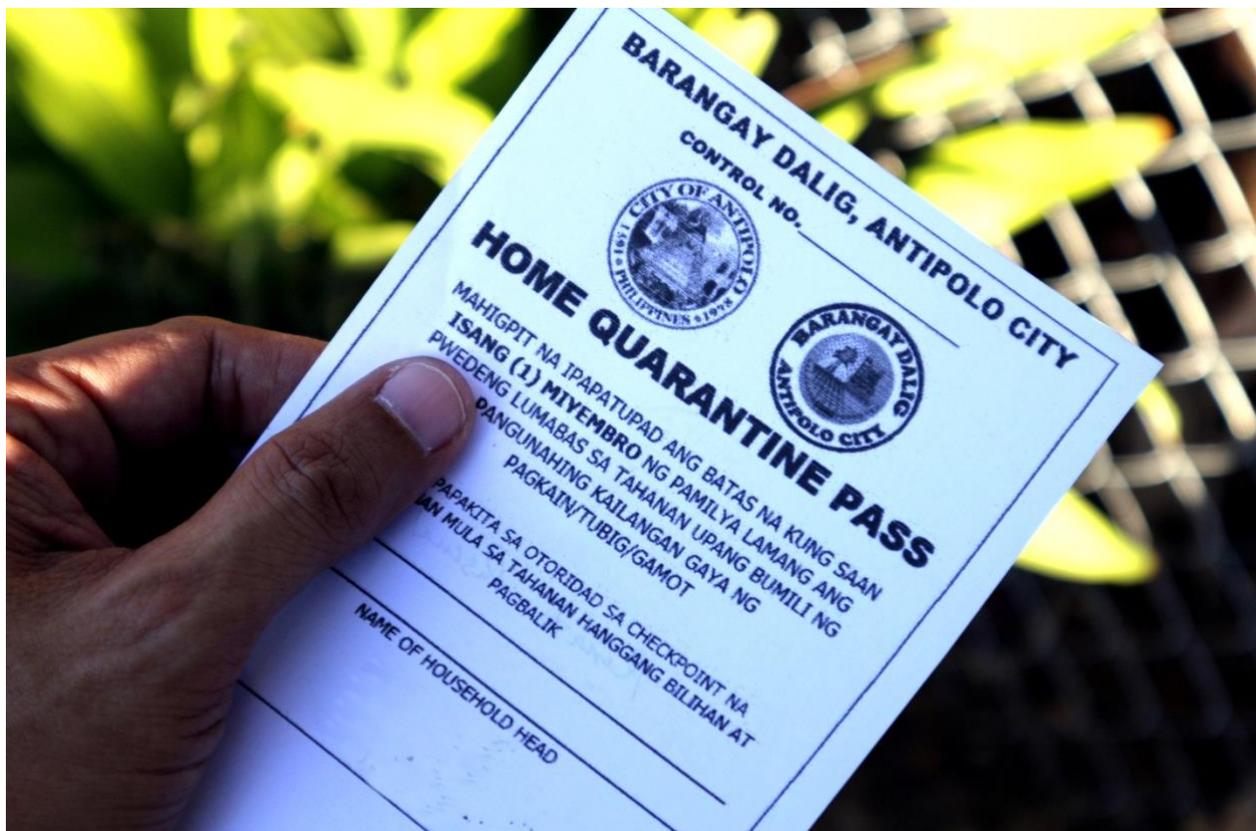
# CONCLUSIONS: BEYOND COVID-19

The mass repatriation of migrant workers in Asia because of the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over. A sudden spike in COVID-19 cases in Thailand in mid-January 2021 forced thousands more migrant Cambodian workers to return home, initiating another round of public discourse about migrant workers' plights, their treatment at home and abroad, and the services their home governments offer. Many returnees in Asian LMICs are faced with unpromising job prospects in their home countries, driving migrant workers abroad again. Since the end of December, hundreds of Nepali workers already cross Indian borders on a daily basis in search of employment; the Nepali government is unable to incentivize them to stay.[55] With no end to the pandemic until a combination of vaccine rates and herd immunity are reached, the trends will likely continue, risking significant increases in poverty, destitution, and brain drain in the poorer parts of Asia. As the current situation stands, workers are frequently returning to jobs with fewer protections and greater demands, or simply unable to find employment at all.

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically demonstrated how migrant workers face a plethora of challenges in the pursuit of their livelihoods, including discrimination, ostracization, debt, movement restrictions, and inefficient support systems. The pandemic also calls into question the sustainability of remittance income in national economies. Nepal, for instance, credits most of its poverty reduction over the past 20 years to remittance income, yet this crisis highlights how quickly that source of income can be wiped away.

Despite these dire circumstances, the migration experience can 'empower migrants, enhance human capital, raise incomes, benefit sending communities, lift people out of poverty, and engender "good change."'[56] There are multiple issues connected to migrant workers' experiences, and better systems of migration governance must be developed in order address these challenges. Low- and lower-middle-income Asian countries have been particularly affected by the loss of migrant works –

both through lower remittances and higher unemployment, and it will take a long time before outbound migration can again deliver strong development and economic outcomes.

A more productive, inclusive, and beneficial environment for migrant workers now and in a post-pandemic world required a policy paradigm shift: one that values diversity, skills, and life experiences that are the core strength of migrant workers. Support structures that proactively help migrant workers, whether they are returning to their home countries or embarking on future enterprises abroad, are vital for the economic and social development of home and destination countries. Migrant-sending Asian countries will benefit from returning migrants beyond the remittances they bring, recognizing the skills, work ethics, and innovation they offer to economies. Migrant workers must receive support from programs that maximize these and other strengths, facilitate re-skilling, provide access to finance, and welcome migrants as investors and contributors.

## END NOTES

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