

Migrant vulnerability in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal

COVID-19 and labour migration

Thematic series: Migration – October 2020

Overview

COVID-19 has had a severe impact on economies and livelihoods around the world, as well as on both domestic and international travel. This has taken an enormous toll on migrant workers – particularly low-skilled and casual labour migrants who tend to migrate seasonally or on a temporary contractual basis – as well as the communities and countries they hail from. With large working-age populations and limited domestic employment opportunities, South Asian countries are a significant source of migrant labour. South Asia is the second highest remittance-receiving region in the world (ILO 20/09/2018), and this money sent back home by migrants plays a crucial role in poverty reduction and improving livelihoods of the households they support. In addition to overseas migrants, there is a significant amount of rural to urban migration for work within countries.

Containment measures imposed in response to the pandemic in both destination and home countries have severely disrupted both the ability of migrants to work, and the freedom of movement needed to enable them to return to their homes safely. In Gulf countries, migrants account for a high proportion of COVID-19 infections, an unsurprising consequence of often crowded, camp-like accommodation that does not allow for physical distancing or adequate hygiene (Guardian 19/04/2020).

Secondary impacts of COVID-19 are emerging, including labour shortages within cities that depend on migrant labourers, the stigmatisation of migrant workers who have returned to their home areas, the inability to access any form of social assistance due to lack of formal contracts, and longer-term mental and physical effects of the journey back to their homes. These impacts raise severe humanitarian concerns for a population that is particularly difficult to assess given the scale of displacement and lack of reliable data.

ACAPS has previously identified underlying factors that influence the extent to which containment measures may impact a country (Vulnerability to COVID-19 containment measures 21/04/2020).

This report will expand on the following seven underlying vulnerabilities that are shaping the way that migrant workers in particular are experiencing the COVID-19 crisis:

- **reliance on informal labour**
- **living conditions and access to essential services**
- **lost pay and remittances**
- **debt**
- **food insecurity**
- **stigmatisation**
- **government/humanitarian support.**

Methodology and objective

This report aims to describe key factors affecting vulnerability for both internal and international labour migrants and the communities they are returning to in Bangladesh, India and Nepal, in order to support humanitarian and development actors to proactively identify and respond to emerging critical needs. The analysis in this report is based on a secondary data review of the available literature and datasets to understand the pre-pandemic context, profile of migrant workers, and impact of containment measures. Bangladesh and Nepal were selected for case study due to the large number of unskilled labour migrants abroad and resultant dependence on remittances. India is included as it has a very large internal migrant population as well as the second largest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the world, with potential spillover effects on surrounding countries.

Limitations

This report does not provide the level of detail necessary for in-depth response planning. There is a lack of reliable data on numbers of internal migrants and where they are located.

Context

COVID-19 situation by country as at 11 October

	Bangladesh ¹	India ²	Nepal ³
<i>Confirmed cases</i>	378,266	7,053,806	107,755
<i>Active cases</i>	79,882	867,496	31,315
<i>Deaths</i>	5,524	108,334	636
<i>Positive rate⁴</i>	12.1%	6.5%	16.8%
<i>Containment measures</i>	Nationwide lockdown 26 March to 1 June.	Nationwide lockdown 25 March to 1 June. Continued on and off restrictions in certain states.	Nationwide lockdown 24 March to 21 July, including closure of airport and borders; strict lockdown reimposed in districts at discretion of local governments, including Kathmandu, since 20 August.

Labour migration and COVID-19

A **migrant worker** in the context of this report is defined as anyone who moves from their usual place of residence to another place for the purpose of employment, without the intention to remain in the long term. Given their particular vulnerability, this report focuses on low-skilled and casual labour migrants who tend to migrate seasonally or on a temporary contractual basis. There are three categories of such migrants:

- **internal** – those migrating to another province or state within their own country for work, often from rural to urban areas
- **cross-border** – those migrating to work in bordering countries
- **overseas** – those finding work abroad in countries reached by aeroplane.

¹ coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html

² mohfw.gov.in

³ covid19.mohp.gov.np

Migrant workers are especially vulnerable to both the pandemic and the measures taken by countries to contain it. Workers coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to be low-skilled, and depend heavily on informal labour. Many depend on daily wages for survival. Most internal migrants lack formal contracts, meaning that employers have no contractual obligations to provide payment, benefits, or accommodation, leaving many in precarious situations amidst lockdown. Workers in the informal sector are the most vulnerable to the spread of COVID-19 due to a tendency to live in crowded conditions and to use crowded transport (World Bank 05/2020). For overseas migrants, containment measures have prevented those who have lost their jobs and want to return home from doing so, in some cases forcing them to live off meagre savings in unhygienic conditions.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and UAE) and Malaysia are the most common destination countries for labour migrants from India, Nepal, and Bangladesh (ILO, 20/09/2018), and these migrants are predominantly unskilled labourers. As a response to COVID-19, a number of countries such as Bahrain, Kuwait, Maldives, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE have placed pressure on countries like Bangladesh to repatriate their migrant workers (The Daily Star 09/04/2020). Due to the pandemic, hundreds of thousands of migrants have neither been able to continue work, nor safely return home (World Bank 04/2020).

Due to the rising number of positive cases in Nepal, the government has decided to restrict Nepal-India border crossings from the usual 20 entry points to only 10, and to only allow citizens to enter and Indians to exit (Kathmandu Post 12/08/2020). The rapid increase in cases in India, as well as in hotspots on the Nepal side along the border, will likely continue to prevent cross-border labour migration in the medium term, affecting labour markets dependent on cross-border migrants.

Movement of migrants after containment measures were imposed

Many migrants lost their jobs or were forced to go on unpaid leave when restrictions were imposed. Most migrants send their earnings home and have little in the way of savings, making it hard to survive without an income to cover housing and food expenses.

Bangladesh

- Around 200,000 Bangladeshi migrant workers returned home between mid-February and mid-March.
- Between mid-April and mid-June, another 17,000 migrant workers returned, with more expected to return by the end of the year (Arab News 29/07/2020).

⁴ ourworldindata.org/coronavirus-testing#the-positive-rate-a-crucial-metric-for-understanding-the-pandemic

India

- The lockdown was announced suddenly, giving migrant workers only a few hours' notice that they would no longer be able to access their workplace, earn their daily wages, or possibly be eligible for government support schemes. This was followed by an exodus of over two million labour migrants from cities back to their home states (Chief Labour Commissioner 02/06/2020).
- A rapid assessment of 4,835 households across 11 states from 24 June to 8 July revealed that nearly two-thirds of migrants who returned to their villages during lockdown have either migrated back to cities (29%) or would like to (45%) (Aga Khan Rural Support Programme 08/2020).
- Between May and late June nearly 500,000 overseas citizens returned to India. Kerala received the largest number of any Indian state, with 135,000 people returning – mostly from UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar (Reuters 22/07/2020).

Nepal

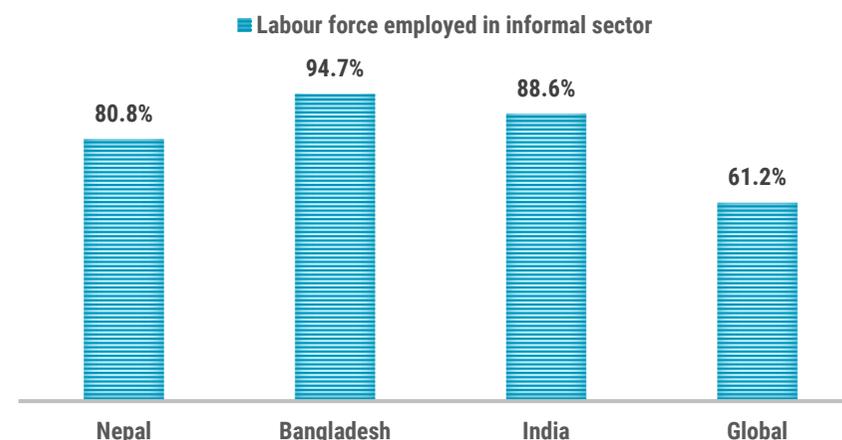
- Between 400,000 and 750,000 Nepalis entered Nepal from India via land borders between 22 March and 8 June (Kantipur 08/06/2020), and many are now choosing to return to India in search of income-generating opportunities due to lack of support at home (Nepali Times 07/09/2020).
- In early June, The Foreign Employment Promotion Board projected over 127,000 migrants to return in the near future, with at least 400,000 more expected in the long term due to the impact of COVID-19 in destination countries (Kathmandu Post 05/06/2020).
- Due to the country's only airport being closed to commercial flights until September, a large number of overseas migrants wishing to return home have been unable to do so. Even after opening, flights remain quite limited with the government capping arrivals to 800 individuals per day (Kathmandu Post 02/09/2020).
- Close to 50,000 stranded migrant workers who were able to pay for their flights were repatriated to Nepal between June and early August (mostly from UAE, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Kuwait, and Qatar) (Accountability Lab 08/08/2020). Nearly 5,000 Nepali migrants have applied for government assistance to return to Nepal due to employers not providing air tickets after laying them off (Kathmandu Post 7/08/2020).

Vulnerability to containment measures

Reliance on informal labour

Internal and cross-border migrants are most often employed in the informal sector, and often on a short-term or seasonal basis. Informal labour is defined as work that provides daily or weekly wages paid in cash, with no formal contract and no protection under labour laws. This means there is no contractual obligation for the employer to provide any benefits such as accommodation, food, or sick leave. The majority of the labour force is employed in the informal sector in Nepal (80.8%), Bangladesh (94.7%) and India (88.6%), leaving many without a safety net, and unable to access social security benefits, including COVID-19 relief packages (ILO 2017; ILO 21/05/2020; Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation 05/2019; The New Humanitarian 28/04/2020).

Lockdowns imposed in response to the pandemic severely restricted the livelihood activities of those dependent on informal labour, leaving vulnerable people more concerned about the impact of the containment measures on their access to food than about the threat of COVID-19 to their own health (Foreign Policy 10/04/2020). The pandemic has had a crippling immediate impact on national labour markets, and the effects are likely to linger into the medium and long term due to the scale of jobs lost, as well as continuing uncertainty around how long COVID-19 will interrupt activity. This has led to the mass exodus of migrant workers from urban centres, often by foot and bicycle, attempting to return to their home villages (The Indian Express 29/04/2020; Asia Foundation 13/05/2020). It is unclear how many have returned to their places of work since the easing of restrictions.



Source ILO 2017

India

- Due to uncertainty around possible future lockdowns and wariness due to challenges experienced in returning home, many migrants may choose to stay closer to home, potentially sacrificing labour opportunities, and leading to labour shortages in cities that depend on migrant labour.
- Some companies are offering incentives to bring migrants back, such as free transport, accommodation, and food but it is unclear how successful this will be and will likely depend on working conditions previously faced by labour migrants (The Economic Times 06/07/2020).

Nepal

- Approximately four million “daily wage workers” have been affected by lockdown, many of whom are internal migrants. An estimated 200,000 such migrants left Kathmandu and other places of employment (largely on foot) to return to their homes, facing police harassment, stigma from communities, and shortages of food and water along the way (Asia Foundation 13/05/2020).
- There are an estimated 587,646 Nepali migrants in India, mostly in informal and seasonal work, meaning they do not have a contractual guarantee of housing, food, or healthcare (NLFS 2017/18). After lockdown was imposed in India, many Nepalis who lost their jobs migrated en masse towards Nepal.

Living conditions and access to essential services

Migrant workers tend to live and work in crowded and unhygienic conditions, with inadequate access to services (Akojam et.al. 01/2017), making them more vulnerable to contagious viruses like COVID-19.

Migrant populations in the GCC tend to live in crowded dormitories and have been heavily affected by coronavirus infections (NPR 05/05/2020). There were reports of crowded migrant labour camps being sealed without adequate hygiene provisions once destination countries went into lockdown (Arab News 20/03/2020), rendering migrant workers particularly vulnerable to the spread of the virus. In Saudi Arabia, which has a high number of Bangladeshi migrants, 76% of new confirmed cases in early May were among foreigners (Migration Policy Institute 09/07/2020). Already mistreated workers face increasing risks of abuse amidst pressures created by the COVID-19 crisis.

As migrants begin returning to their places of work, the vulnerabilities created by their living conditions continue to threaten their health. Furthermore, social welfare measures tend to be linked to place of residence, meaning migrants to urban areas are ineligible for such welfare schemes in their places of work (Nepal Policy Institute and Migration Lab 14/07/2020).

Information on how to access health services may not be available in languages understood by migrants, excluding them from many information campaigns on how to protect themselves from COVID-19 (Aljazeera 04/04/2020). Irregular migrants, in particular, are less likely to seek health services due to fear of detention, deportation or other penalties, and are not eligible for benefits due to lack of documentation.

Another issue has been the living conditions of migrant workers attempting to return to their homes. Migrant workers were left stranded at the border between India and Nepal for weeks as it closed for the first time, and internal migrants were left in difficult situations as they attempted to make their way home amid strict lockdowns.

India

- Due to the sudden announcement of lockdown, migrants had no chance to make alternate plans. Faced with the inability to survive without daily wages, some attempted to walk home but were intercepted and sent to shelters, while others were left stranded without food or water. Others remained trapped in their locations of work with little or nothing in the way of savings.
- Movement of people across states was allowed after several weeks as the humanitarian crisis worsened (Al Jazeera 09/06/2020). According to government reports, by the end of March, more than 21,000 relief camps had been set up across the country, housing close to 670,000 migrants and providing food to over two million people (Union of India 31/03/2020). At the same time, hundreds of thousands suffered hunger, thirst, and heat exhaustion as they walked or cycled up to 900km to reach their homes (Barkha Dutt 02/07/2020; Scroll 03/05/2020; Stranded Workers Action Network 15/04/2020).

Nepal

- Thousands of migrants trying to return home from India shortly after lockdown was imposed were met by closed border crossings and were forced to stay in makeshift quarantine facilities under harsh conditions with inadequate food, water, or sanitation (Kathmandu Post 02/04/2020).
- Upon border reopening, the surge of migrants entering the country proved impossible for local authorities to handle. Quarantine facilities established in a makeshift fashion to accommodate the influx were often set up in empty schools with a lack of sufficient safe water, toilets, or hygiene facilities. The quarantine centres have been criticised as being more likely to increase the risk of COVID-19 transmission than prevent it (Kathmandu Post 12/06/2020).
- Protection concerns remain high, with at least one reported rape in a quarantine centre (The Himalayan Times 15/06/2020). Such incidents are usually underreported.

- In many cases returnees are not staying in quarantine centres and are unmonitored in home quarantine (Kathmandu Post 26/07/2020).

Lost pay and remittances

Many migrants lost their jobs or were forced to go on unpaid leave without warning. Most migrants send their earnings home and have little in the way of savings, making it hard to survive in destination countries without an income to cover housing and food expenses (Amnesty International 6/4/2020). For example, in UAE, many companies have cut wages by up to 75%, while in Kuwait workers have been forced to take unpaid leave, despite the government instructing companies to pay full wages (Nayapatrika 20/03/2020).

Remittances comprise an important share of GDP in South Asian countries and play a crucial role in supporting poverty reduction and sustaining the livelihoods of millions of families. Considering the large volume of Bangladeshi, Indian, and Nepali migrants in the GCC, secondary economic impacts through decreased labour demand and falling oil prices will likely strain the flow of remittances. Due to the economic impacts of COVID-19, remittances in 2020 are expected to fall by 22% in Bangladesh, 23% in India, and 14% in Nepal (World Bank 22/04/2020). Remittances are generally used to meet short-term food, health, and shelter needs and to overcome crisis periods. They play an important role in resilience to disasters. Damages caused by the monsoon will be felt more acutely in the absence of remittances to put towards home repairs and relocations.

Bangladesh

- Bangladesh received USD18.2 billion in remittances in 2019 (Bangladesh Bank 08/2020). Foreign remittances account for over 5% of the national GDP, contributing to household and community economic wellbeing across the country that will be significantly affected as half a million migrant workers return (Bangladesh Bank 2020).
- BRAC data indicates that 87% of returnees from overseas have no alternative sources of livelihood and that more than one-third of them are likely to run out of savings in less than three months (Dhaka Tribune 22/05/2020).

India

- India is the largest receiver of remittances globally, receiving more than USD83.2 billion in 2019 (Migration Data Portal 10/06/2020). However, the pandemic is expected to lead to a decline of USD19 billion (WFP 06/2020).
- A study of 5,000 internal migrants found that 80% had lost their employment, 50% of whom were unable to buy food for the following week (Azim Premji University 05/2020).

Nepal

- Nepal is one of the most remittance-dependent countries, with remittances of USD8.1 billion in 2018 (Kathmandu Post 10/04/2020), accounting for 28% of its GDP (KNOMAD 04/2019). In 2011, one-third of all families in the Terai, and half of all families in the mountains and hills, were receiving remittances – and this may have increased further given the increase in foreign labour over the past decade (NLSS 2011).
- More than half of overall remittance flows come from Malaysia and the GCC (NLSS 2011), meaning that a reduction in jobs in those regions will have a huge impact on remittance flows. The Nepal Association of Foreign Employment estimates that up to 30% of jobs held by Nepali migrants in the GCC and Malaysia have been lost due to COVID-19, mostly due to halted construction works.
- Aside from those abroad losing their jobs or having pay reduced due to the pandemic, an additional 115,000 migrants with permits have not been able to go abroad due to lockdown (Kathmandu Post 21/05/2020). These people may have incurred debt to go through the process of obtaining a permit, and now face an uncertain future in terms of their overseas employment, with no means of repaying the loans.

Debt

The majority of migrants use private intermediary agents to secure their work placements and visas, which are expensive and can lead to debt traps. The exploitative nature of recruitment of Nepalis and Bangladeshis into the GCC countries has been well documented (Amnesty International 26/09/2018). As a result of migrants not having access to loans from formal institutions, they must often take loans from informal channels at extremely high interest rates to finance their migration.

Many migrants who have lost their jobs because of the pandemic will be returning home before their contract is over. They face the double burden of having to provide for their families in addition to paying off high-interest loans taken in order to migrate. Many have to pay for their own repatriation flights and quarantine arrangements. Migrants who were not already in debt may incur it if they have health or travel expenses, have lost their jobs, and have little in the way of savings.

Bangladesh

- A rapid needs assessment conducted through snowball sampling of returnee lists provided by the government found that 55% of 1,486 surveyed international migrant returnees, and 71% of 1,279 surveyed internal migrant returnees were in debt and were concerned about how to pay it off now that they have left their jobs (IOM 07/2020). The survey methodology meant the sample was non-representative, and did not capture many female respondents.
- 65% of remittance-receiving households are headed by women who are likely to be unemployed and without an alternative source of income (IOM 2020). Due to decreases in incomes and remittances, vulnerable households have become more likely to borrow money at high interest rates from microfinance institutions, NGOs, and informal money lenders in order to meet basic needs (The Daily Star 2019; The Institute of Microfinance 2016). They risk losing their already limited assets to loan sharks if unable to pay their debts.

India

- Some inter-state migrants who have been returning home no longer have assets, such as land or property, as they sold them in order to migrate to and live in the city (The Economic Times 05/06/2020).
- Approximately 48% of 1,559 returnees had taken loans of between INR2,000 and INR5,000 by early June to pay for rations since the onset of the lockdown (SWAN 05/06/2020). Migrants returning from overseas are facing increased financial pressure due to having to pay for their quarantine facilities. In Telangana, returning citizens have to pay USD107 per week – a large sum for many workers who are already in debt (Reuters 22/07/2020).

Nepal

- Although the government sets a maximum fee that recruitment agents can charge, there is widespread overcharging of migrant recruits by licensed and unlicensed agents or brokers, which increases the risk of debt bondage (ILO 13/09/2017).
- Average salaries are only USD300 per month, without accounting for living, health, and other costs, and an average migrant would require the better part of a year working abroad to earn enough to pay off their debt (ILO 13/09/2017). This has implications for migrants who have gone abroad within the last year, who may now be jobless and in debt with no prospects of employment.
- Labourers have reported borrowing cash and food from neighbours and shopkeepers due to exhaustion of savings (Kathmandu Post 18/04/2020).

Food insecurity

The economic impacts of lockdowns in all countries have reduced the purchasing power of the most vulnerable. Households that depend on remittances for daily consumption are vulnerable to food insecurity. Those with no land are particularly vulnerable as they are not able to grow their own food and have no food stocks to cope with such a shock. The influx of hundreds of thousands of returning migrants may increase domestic demand for food, translating to increased food expenditure or decreased individual food intake at the household level.

Bangladesh

- There are reports of inability to afford food as families' meagre savings have dwindled during the lockdown period, and government food assistance and rice subsidies have not reached everyone who needs it (The Conversation 16/07/2020). The urban poor, who tend to have two weeks of savings, have reportedly resorted to reducing food consumption (Maintains 07/2020).

India

- A rapid assessment early in the lockdown period found that over 5,000 of 11,000 migrant workers surveyed had less than half a day of food remaining (JAN SAHAS 05/2020).
- A number of harvest and post-harvest activities were affected by the lockdown, including the loss of vegetable and fish stocks, and a reduction in food processing and harvesting capacity due to lack of labour (FAO 22/04/2020). The agricultural sector in Punjab and Haryana was short of 16,000 labourers due to lockdown as peak harvesting season approached (The Print 31/03/2020). This may have consequences for food security in the respective regions.

Nepal

- Migrants to India are primarily from the most chronically food insecure and remote districts in western Nepal (UN 05/2020). People in these poor communities, to which thousands of migrants have recently returned from India, have resorted to bartering as a coping strategy in the face of lack of financial means (Kathmandu Post 09/08/2020).
- A nationally representative WFP assessment conducted in April found access to food had deteriorated for daily wage labourers and overall food insecurity had slightly increased compared with a 2019 assessment, with a quarter of the 4,416 surveyed households reporting inadequate food consumption (MoALD 05/2020). Loss of income was also more common among migrant households.

- COVID-19-related border and transportation restrictions caused a shortage of fertiliser and other agricultural inputs ahead of paddy plantation season, which may have adverse effects on productivity – and by extension food security – in the coming months (Kathmandu Post 22/06/2020).

Stigmatisation

Discrimination based on caste and religion is widespread in South Asia, and a crisis such as the pandemic is likely to exacerbate existing community tensions. For example, the lockdown has pushed Dalits with disabilities even further to the margins, with reports of low-caste people with a disability unable to access relief due to lack of documents or exclusion (Minority Rights International 21/07/2020). Even in normal conditions there is stigmatisation of seasonal migrant workers, due to their affiliation with lower castes or social strata. Seasonal migrants and casual labourers are more likely to be from Scheduled Tribe or Scheduled caste groups, with less land, and lower levels of education (UNICEF 2012).

In the context of the pandemic, social stigma against returning migrants is high, with returnee migrants facing discrimination in their home settlements, being perceived as bringing the virus even if they have not tested positive for COVID-19 (The Himalayan Times 01/04/2020; Mobarak et al. 2020). There are reports of internal and cross-border migrants struggling to get food and water during their journeys home due to communities fearing outsiders.

Bangladesh

- In late 2019, India passed the Citizenship Amendment Bill, which has been widely criticised as anti-Muslim and accused of stoking fears of detention, deportation and statelessness for Muslims, including Bangladeshi migrants (BBC 11/12/2019). Fearing increased discrimination amid the pandemic, migrants in India have been returning to Bangladesh (Mixed Migration Centre 04/2020).

India

- Video footage emerged of migrants being sprayed with chemicals to “disinfect” them (BBC 31/03/2020). Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual assault, adding an extra layer of trauma to the journey.
- Pre-existing stigma against Muslims has increased, with discrimination now veiled as prevention against COVID-19. Reported discrimination includes assaults and being denied access to medical care and water sources (Washington Post 23/04/2020).

Nepal

- Dalit migrants returning from India have faced discrimination while in quarantine, being asked to prepare food separately from other castes (Nepal Monitor 01/06/2020).
- Dalit returnees testing positive for COVID-19 report facing discrimination from their communities, even after recovering. Having a family member testing positive may prevent Dalits from employment opportunities due to social stigma (Nepali Times 11/08/2020). There were 31 cases of physical violence documented against Dalits in Nepal during the lockdown period, raising concerns that COVID-19 may be used to justify pre-existing discriminatory practices (Kathmandu Post 03/06/2020).
- Female migrants and women left behind by male migrants also face stigma due to their connection to migration. Women returnees have been wrongfully accused of involvement in sex work (Safer Migration Project 09/2016). They are often subject to gossip and ridicule, affecting mental health and community cohesion (Safer Migration Project 09/2016).

Gaps in government/humanitarian support

Governments of all three countries have offered some form of assistance to their citizens in order to mitigate the negative impacts of containment measures on livelihoods. However, the extent to which this assistance has reached migrant workers is unclear. Those who have not been able to return home are likely to fall outside the reach of government support. Daily wage labourers unable to find work in the context of recurring shutdowns and community stigma are in need of access to government relief in the form of food rations or subsidies.

All three countries have sent repatriation flights to bring home overseas migrants wishing to return in varying numbers. However, in most cases, migrants are required to pay for their tickets, which is difficult for the majority given the sudden loss of income and depleted (if any) savings.

India

- Most migrants either do not have ration cards, or their cards are tied to their homes, with regulations preventing those not in their registered place of residence from accessing subsidies (The Hindu 17/05/2020).
- State governments were tasked with establishing relief camps to provide food and shelter for internal migrants returning to their homes – but the provision of this relief has been highly inconsistent. For example, it was reported that 69% of all the shelters were established in the state of Kerala alone (The Hindu 17/05/2020).

Nepal

- Immediate measures included a 10% discount on food items from government companies and food rations made available at the discretion of local governments (Kathmandu Post 30/03/2020). However, it is unclear how consistently this type of assistance was available in different areas of the country, and there have been no specific measures put in place targeting support to migrant workers.
- When the surge of cross-border migrants returning from India caught local governments unprepared, a number of civil society initiatives emerged to fill the gap, providing hot meals, information on coronavirus prevention measures, and food supplies to migrants on their journeys home.
- The government acknowledges the need to reintegrate returning migrants into the local economy but measures thus far have a longer-term focus. Migrants returning from India are not eligible for programmes targeting returnees because, unlike other overseas migrants, they do not contribute to the Foreign Employment Welfare Fund (Nepali Times 07/09/2020).

Aggravating factors

Monsoon

Monsoon season started in mid-June and lasted through September. Heavy monsoon rains have triggered flooding and landslides, exacting damage on households already suffering the economic consequences of lockdowns. Any migrants who have recently returned to Nepal after losing their jobs are now also dealing with damage due to flooding and landslides, exacerbating their vulnerability at a time when they do not have income to put towards disaster recovery (Kathmandu Post 06/08/2020).

COVID-19 complicates evacuation and relief efforts due to the difficulty in providing adequate physical distancing in shelters. Cyclone Amphan hit in late May, leading to the evacuation of more than two million people in India and Bangladesh, with many people refusing to go to crowded shelters due to fears of contracting COVID-19 (Maintains 07/2020; BBC 20/05/2020). In addition to vulnerability to COVID-19 due to difficulty in physical distancing in government shelters, the risk of cholera, malaria, dengue and diarrhoea is high.

Heavy monsoon rains have hampered the transport of food, leading to a market shortage in supply and subsequent spike in vegetable prices (Kathmandu Post 06/07/2020).

Regional desert locust outbreak

Swarms of desert locusts entered Pakistan and India in late April, resulting in widespread concerns about crop damage, compounding economic woes caused by the pandemic. In India, 35,000 hectares of wheat, cumin, and mustard crop were affected by locusts, which may have implications for food security (WFP 06/2020). In Nepal hundreds of families lost their maize crops to the locust invasion in June and July (Kathmandu Post 04/08/2020), further adding to the food insecurity of subsistence farmers, who may also have been reliant on income from a migrant family member.

Background information

Internal migrants

According to the 2011 census in India, there were more than 450 million internal migrants (37% of the population), 100 million of whom were short-term or seasonal migrants in larger cities (Ministry of Finance 2017). There is a heavy reliance on informal labour among both internal and cross-border migrants. India has an estimated 1.7 million daily wage workers, with another million on temporary contracts, leaving them most vulnerable to the socioeconomic effects of lockdown due to the lack of contractual obligation of employers to provide healthcare, living, or wage guarantees (ILO 10/06/2020).

Cross-border migrants

Due to the porous borders between India and Nepal, and between India and Bangladesh, movement in search of employment is common. The open border agreement between India and Nepal makes migration relatively convenient and low-cost compared with overseas migration, making it more feasible for poorer Nepalis, but almost entirely undocumented (Kumar 28/11/2020). Places with unequal land ownership may create a push factor for migration due to lack of economic opportunities (Shrestha 04/2016). The typical worker from Nepal pays USD83 for migration to India and spends a median of nine months in India per migration episode (Shrestha 04/2016). Despite this low cost, an estimated 60% of migrants to India take loans from village lenders, friends or family in order to migrate (Shrestha 04/2016). In 2011 nearly 85% of remittances going to households in Nepal from India went towards daily consumption, compared to 50% of those from Malaysia and the GCC countries (NLSS 2011). This illustrates the highly vulnerable economic condition of the majority of cross-border migrants. The lost wages and remittances due to containment measures are likely to affect households that depend heavily on remittances for daily consumption.

Unlike the border relationship between Nepal and India, movement between Bangladesh and India is politically sensitive. Although it is a closed border, its porous nature enables illegal movement. The World Bank estimated that 3.3 million migrants crossed the Bangladesh-India corridor in 2011. Like Nepalis, for Bangladeshis, irregular migration to India is a simpler and lower-cost option compared to going overseas. One study found that the cost of migrating to India was between USD35 and USD60 (Asia Foundation 2013). Intermediaries (*dalals*), are commonly used by Bangladeshis to secure work in India, and they may deduct up to 20% of the pay received by migrants under their control (Asia Foundation 2013). However, due to the illegal nature of the migration, Bangladeshis in India have difficulty accessing services such as healthcare and may have restricted freedom of movement due to fear of being caught by law enforcement (Asia Foundation 2013). Without legal status, it is not possible to open a bank account, leaving migrants vulnerable to theft and making it more practical to send wages home rather than save. In the context of the pandemic, this is yet another factor contributing to trapped migrants being unable to survive without going into debt.

Overseas migrants

The main destinations for South Asian short-term migrant workers are the GCC countries and Malaysia, with these locations hosting the majority of overseas migrants from India (90% of migrant workers) Bangladesh (65%) and Nepal (88%) (ILO 2018; MoLESS 2020). Most of them are young men working as unskilled labourers, often from the poorest regions of their respective countries (Migration Policy Institute 09/07/2020; MoLESS 2020).

In Nepal, only 11% of migrants in 2018/19 obtained their permits individually (MoLESS 2020). Most overseas migration happens through recruitment intermediaries who are paid upwards of USD1,000 per migrant for their services, with over 85% of migrants to GCC and Malaysia financing migration by taking loans from local merchants, friends and family – most often borrowing from local moneylenders against collateral (Shrestha 04/2016). The Department of Foreign Employment logged 2,129 complaints by Nepali migrants against recruitment agencies and individuals in 2017/18, mainly seeking reimbursement or compensation for exploitative practices (IOM 2019). Due to the dependence on intermediary agents for securing jobs abroad, and limited information being shared with the migrants during the process, there is a high risk of exploitation. Migration comes at a high price even in “normal” circumstances. As a result of COVID-19, the Nepali government is facing a dual challenge of safely repatriating workers who have lost their jobs, or otherwise wish to return home, as well as providing employment options for a huge number of returning migrants.

Information gaps

- Undocumented migrants outside their own countries are the most vulnerable due to their inability to access services that require proof of identity. However, it is unclear what proportion of migrant workers fall into this category.
- Due to the informal nature of the majority of labour migration in this region, there is a dearth of reliable data on wages, living conditions, and migration patterns of internal migrants (The New Humanitarian 28/04/2020).
- Due to the undocumented nature of India-Nepal cross-border migrants, there is a lack of information on the wages lost. Extrapolating from the numbers of people crossing the border, however, hundreds of thousands of people have lost their jobs, jeopardising their livelihoods.
- The extent to which returnee migrants have been able to return to their normal livelihood activities since the easing of containment measures is unclear.
- There is a lack of understanding of how vulnerabilities may differ by gender. The majority of overseas migrant workers are male, and there is no data to assess the proportion of female internal and cross-border migrants. Undocumented female migrants are likely to be at increased risk of violence and lack of support in comparison to their male counterparts amidst COVID-19 (The Himalayan Times 28/08/2020).
- Spikes in positive cases are likely to continue in both home and destination countries. It is unclear to what extent this will continue to impact the labour industries that most migrant workers depend on. Even when demand for migrant labour increases, mobility will be hampered by additional health screening requirements and the overall cost of migration is expected to rise (ADB 08/2020). This may push would-be overseas migrants towards cross-border migration as it is lower cost and easier to travel within region.

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