

# Labour migration and systemic resilience: A sending state's perspective from Pakistan

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COVID-19 saw migrants and their families around the world, most of whom are from the Global South, badly affected by restricted mobility and the associated lost income, job insecurity, and massive drops in global remittances (World Bank, 2020; ADB, 2020). Concerns also emerged in many receiving states of the Global North about the resilience of the provision of essential services during the pandemic, especially in sectors heavily dependent on migrant labour such as food and agriculture, social care, and health services (see, e.g., Anderson, Poeschel and Ruhs 2020; Palumbo and Corrado 2020).

Emerging debates about how to strengthen systemic resilience in essential sectors that are heavily dependent on migrant labour have, by and large, focused much more on Northern receiving states than on sending countries in the Global South. But COVID-19 has exposed many gaps in the labour emigration systems and policies of sending countries that often do not ensure adequate protection for their migrants working abroad. This was evidenced when thousands of migrants were stranded after lockdowns in various receiving countries around the world, with no one willing to take responsibility to take them back to their home countries<sup>1</sup>.

Pakistan is one such country, whose labour migrants were stranded globally, mostly in the Gulf States when COVID-19 lockdowns occurred. Not only did the lockdowns and other COVID-19 measures bring some of the sectors they were employed in to a standstill in receiving states, but

they also challenged the ability of sending states to assist and help protect their citizens working abroad.

This commentary uses the case of Pakistan to shine a light on the important role of sending countries in the regulation of labour migration and protection of migrant workers abroad. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only raised important questions about the labour immigration policies of receiving countries but also about how sending countries need to invest in strengthening their labour emigration and migrant protection policies to be able to respond more effectively to major external shocks.

## **COVID-19 and Pakistani labour migrants in the Gulf**

There are approximately 11 million Pakistani labour migrants globally, over 90 percent of whom are employed in low-skilled or medium-skilled jobs in the Gulf States (BEOE, 2019). Once Pakistan closed its borders as a response to the pandemic, these migrants were trapped in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia<sup>2</sup>. Pakistan eventually initiated a repatriation effort to bring the stranded workers back in late April 2020<sup>3</sup>. However, upon return, a large number of them tested positive for COVID-19<sup>4</sup>. Relations between Pakistan and the UAE, a major host of Pakistani labour migrants in the Gulf, were also adversely affected by the Pakistan government arguing that many of the returning migrants had been infected with Covid-19 because of unsanitary living conditions in the host country.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52655131>

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.dawn.com/news/1552079>

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistan-labor-coronavirus-migrant-uae/30565170.html>

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/6/pakistan-concerned-at-workers-returning-from-uae-with-coronavirus>

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-pakistan-emirates/pakistan-concerned-at-workers-returning-from-uae-with-coronavirus-idUSKBN22H1R7>

In addition to the extremely slow repatriation of Pakistani migrants, whom neither the Gulf States nor Pakistan financially supported during the pandemic crisis, many returning workers had been forcibly laid off and were left with no other means of support<sup>6</sup>. The Pakistan Government, otherwise obliged under its emigration laws to protect its overseas migrant labour force and provide them with economic opportunities upon return, did not even provide those returning with adequate quarantine facilities, let alone compensation for lost income.<sup>7</sup>

For many families of Pakistani migrant workers, remittances are the only source of income. Remittances to Pakistan dropped by five percent in March 2020 and were estimated to drop even further, in addition to a severe decline in migrant outflows following the pandemic (Iqbal and Javed, 2020). Furthermore, thousands of irregular Pakistani migrant workers<sup>8</sup> with the same plight did not have access to government assistance due to their irregular status<sup>9</sup>.

The vulnerability of migrants was further exacerbated, when the Gulf States used COVID-19 as an additional catalyst to pursue their much-touted ‘workforce nationalization policies’ to reduce their dependence on an overseas workforce in many sectors, including in healthcare, and various ‘low-skilled’ sectors (Alsahi, 2020). The UAE has also threatened migrant-sending countries with new restrictions and quotas on the recruitment of their nationals (ibid).

As a result, Pakistan’s migrant workforce, both in the country and overseas, is currently awaiting either a reopening of the global economy or an economic lifeline from their Government. Neither seems to be in the offing as of now.

### **Strengthening sending countries’ labour migration policies and protections**

The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear yet again how receiving countries have much more power and control over labour migration and the treatment of migrants than sending countries. Pakistan was not the only migrant-sending country whose labour was adversely affected by the pandemic. Similar cases of a decline in lost income/employment and remittances were experienced by others in South Asia including, for example, Nepal, India, and Bangladesh (ACAPS, 2020).

What does this say about the need to strengthen sending countries’ labour migration and protection policies? Firstly, most labour migration from Pakistan is “low-skilled”, meaning workers are more vulnerable due to their low wages, while at the same time, Pakistan’s economy is heavily dependent on the remittances earned by these migrants. COVID-19 therefore, highlights the urgent need for labour emigration and protection policies in migrant-sending states like Pakistan, to be better prepared to protect their most vulnerable (but high remittance earning) migrants in response to major external shocks.

Secondly, most labour migration programmes in Pakistan and other South Asian sending countries, are of a temporary nature, i.e. they always include return to origin. As a result, there has been too little focus on developing a coherent and integrated policy for such migration on behalf of both sending and receiving countries, that looks at providing migrants with adequate rights and services. Migrant workers play a key role in the provision of essential services in many receiving countries and their rights such as housing, health, employment benefits, fair wage practices, visa regulations etc., need to also be better integrated into labour migration policies in both origin and destination countries<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.dawn.com/news/1591542>

<sup>7</sup> The Emigration Ordinance 1979 and its accompanying rules, make up the framework that governs the codes of conduct for overseas labour recruitment in Pakistan. The Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development (MOP&HRD) is the custodian of the Ordinance. Its mandate is to seek employment opportunities abroad for citizens and ensure the welfare of workers and their families (within Pakistan as well as abroad).

<sup>8</sup> Many migrant workers secure employment through private channels or via unauthorized employment agents. They do not

benefit from State protection measures allotted to those who proceed via government-regulated channels.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://dailytimes.com.pk/666680/post-covid-19-plight-of-overseas-workforce/>

<sup>10</sup> The Gulf States, a major receiving region for labour migrants from the South, have also consistently avoided developing any effective protection policies for incoming labour migrants. This is juxtaposed against the fact that this region also happens to be where labour migrants are the most vulnerable and rights abuses are well documented.

Some sending countries have put in place formal policies for labour emigration such as Nigeria, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. But many sending countries still do not include legal and economic protections in their bilateral migration agreements with receiving countries. And even if they do, few do little to honour them, as the slow and reluctant reaction of Pakistan and other sending countries to repatriate their stranded migrants has shown.

This lack of attention by sending states to ensuring that their labour emigration regimes weather global shock and setbacks, creates an adverse impact on systemic resilience in the supply of labour migrants to essential sectors in receiving countries which are heavily dependent on overseas labour. What needs to be underscored, is that while receiving states have access to greater resources to bail out their own industries which suffer due to labour shortages, sending countries like Pakistan have developed no such measures to fall back on. The dependence on remittances creates further pressure on sending countries to ensure that labour emigration continues, or at least is not severely and permanently disrupted, even during major external shocks. This puts intense pressure on the migrants themselves, many of whom are unable to navigate the negative impacts of such shocks, including loss of employment and/or income, and their ripple effect on migrant households.

As a result, sending countries have an important responsibility to help ensure that, even while global migration systems may be compromised, national policies and systems that promote labour emigration, are able to bounce back effectively after the crisis is over. At this point, it is unsure how many of Pakistan's low-skilled migrants will be able to return to working overseas.

COVID-19, and the resulting policy concern with ensuring resilience of the provision of essential services during the current pandemic and similar future shocks, has the potential to change the course of the discussion about the governance of global labour migration, especially the role of migrant-sending countries. The impacts of external shocks on migrants, and the role migrants play in supporting systemic resilience of societies during major shocks, is influenced not only by receiving countries' policies but also by how sending countries manage and respond to external shocks. COVID-19 has thus created a window of opportunity for Pakistan and other sending countries, to strengthen their labour emigration and migrant protection policies, including their ability to deal

more effectively with external shocks. It is to be seen if and how they rise to this opportunity in the future.

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*Views expressed in this publication reflect the opinion of individual authors and not those of the European University Institute.*

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