

# Workers of Saarc, unite

The fact that Saarc nations have now agreed to collaborate on migration brings hope for the future



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This year, South Asia's migrant workers have a good reason to celebrate International Migrants Day on December 18. In a landmark commitment, the Saarc countries agreed at the recent Kathmandu Summit to work together to improve conditions for their migrants. We wholeheartedly welcome this commitment by the leaders of the eight Saarc nations to strengthen the management of labour migration processes. This is a major step forward for Saarc and one that—if words are put into effective action—could play an important role in protecting the rights of the millions of migrant workers from the region.

## From South Asia

The latest government data place the total annual outflow from five countries in South Asia at close to 2.5 million migrant workers per year. India is the largest migrant sending country (with 747,000 workers), followed by Pakistan (623,000 workers), and Nepal (454,000 workers). While migrant workers from South Asia can be found in almost every region of the world, the main flow is into the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states. Ninety-six percent of all migrant workers from India and 94 percent from Pakistan take jobs in a GCC country. Nepal sends 62 percent of its migrant workers to the GCC.

The GCC countries emerged as the primary destination for South Asian workers in the 1970s and ever since, their economies have relied heavily on foreign labour for their development. There are now around 25 million migrant workers in the GCC and other Middle Eastern countries, most from South and Southeast Asia. This number is likely to increase, because of the extensive



■ Migrant workers at a construction site in Qatar.

PHOTO COURTESY: ILO

## International Migrants Day

infrastructure investments planned for in Saudi Arabia for the 2020 UAE World Expo and the Qatar World Cup in 2022.

### Fair treatment

Temporary labour migration is often touted as a triple-win; a win for destination countries who can support a level of economic activity that would be impossible without foreign workers; a win for countries of origin because it lowers unemployment and brings in remittances and skills; and a win for the migrants who can earn higher incomes and escape poverty. It is, however, generally acknowledged that governments have not yet developed a system that ensures that this triple-win actually delivers benefits equally to all three parties—and it is the migrants who are being short-

changed. There is an urgent need to create a fairer system.

In Asia and the Middle East, admission and employment systems generally offer relatively liberal entry procedures, restricted rights, and limited duration of contracts and visas. This model is increasingly being criticised for inflicting poor living and working conditions on many migrants.

Under the Kafala or sponsorship system in the Middle East, the employer assumes full economic and legal responsibility for the employee and thereby exercises considerable power over the worker. Even in those countries where it is illegal for employers to withhold a worker's passport or visa, this is common practice. The system also limits the ability of migrant workers to change jobs, which restricts labour

market flexibility. Renegotiating and adjusting the control that employers exercise over migrants under the Kalafa system will bring benefits for the workers, employers, and the economy as a whole.

Domestic work, mainly involving women, is perhaps the area with the highest incidence of labour abuses in the Middle East. In many countries, domestic work is not currently covered by national labour laws. Construction is another sector dominated by migrant workers, and one where occupational safety and health is a serious concern.

### Asean approach

In South East Asia, the adoption of the Asean Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers in 2007 was a milestone, even though more still needs to be done towards implementation. Asean has also created a tripartite stakeholders' forum to discuss implementation and share good practices. The Saarc countries share many of the same challenges and opportunities related to the recruitment and employment of their outbound migrant workers as the Asean countries and Saarc might want to look at whether there is anything to learn from the Asean approach.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) believes that Saarc can play a key role in dealing with these issues, helping to develop a common position, sharing expertise and information, and providing mutual assistance. The fact that Saarc nations have now agreed to collaborate on migration brings hope for the future. Decisive action by these states will ensure that millions of migrant workers, and their families and societies, get the fair deal they deserve.

The ILO, with its decent work and social justice mandate, stands ready to provide technical assistance to the Saarc countries in realising a fair migration agenda.

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