



COVID-19 pandemic: Labour migration and remittances in South Asia

South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE), in association with Biruni Institute, Afghanistan; Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Bangladesh; Research and Information System for Developing Countries (RIS), India; Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Pakistan; and Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS), organized the fifth webinar of its COVID-19 webinar series on October 6. This virtual meeting titled “**Lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic: Labour migration and remittances in South Asia**” focused on jobless among returnee migrants and possible ways that South Asian countries can deal with the predicament, among other issues.

The crux of the discussion was that the South Asian migrant workers, both internal migrants and those abroad, have been disproportionately hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, the remittances might witness a sharp fall, and without a proper policy response the consequences on the migrant workers’ livelihoods as well as on the local economy will be detrimental

Referring to the possibility of large scale return migration and the statistics of about 60 percent of returnee migrants being outside the job market in Nepal even during the normal times, **Dr. Paras Kharel**, Research Director at SAWTEE, mentioned that despite momentous political transformations in the last 30 years in Nepal, the governments have largely ignored the agenda of creating adequate jobs in the country. Hence, the current crisis which can result in a large number of returnees coming back to the country can pose a daunting challenge to the government in terms of their smooth reintegration, he said. “While the return migration can also be an opportunity if the subsequent pressure galvanizes the government into action, this could very well constitute a veritable tinderbox that can explode with even a small spark, if the government fails to create jobs and properly integrate the large number of returnees,” said Dr. Kharel, highlighting the precarious situation. The crisis will also be a test of the nascent federalism in Nepal, said Dr. Kharel, emphasizing the potential role of local bodies in recording the profile, including skills, of returnees and the need for all three tiers of government to collectively ensure the provision of basic inputs and services for farmers.

Prof. Ravi S. Srivastava, Professor and Director, Centre for Employment Studies, Institute for Human Development, New Delhi, lamented the current plight of migrant workers abroad. “Many have been left without a job and many lack proper accommodation and response in many of the destination countries have been in contradistinction to humanitarian responses that we would expect,” said Prof. Srivastava. Prof. Srivastava also warned that the increase in remittance currently observed could only be a short-term phenomenon driven by the migrant workers’ urgency to remit payments at the time of crisis and hence one should brace for a situation where

remittance inflows take a sharp dive. To deal with the predicament, Prof. Srivastava argued: “we need concerted policies to regenerate agriculture and rural employment and countries need to have more extensive social security policies across the region.”

Dr. Abid Suleri, Executive Director, Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Islamabad spoke against the tendency of South Asian countries to take the migrant workers for granted and emphasized the need to implement appropriate policy measures to support the migrant workers and to create a collective voice for their welfare in the host countries. He also highlighted some special initiatives that Pakistan is implementing to assist the migrant workers.

“For migrant workers, there is devastation on both sides—be it the host country or the home country,” mentioned **Dr. Radhicka Kapoor**, Fellow, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), New Delhi. She also highlighted the plight of internal migrants in India after they were compelled to return to rural areas after India imposed one of the most stringent nation-wide lockdowns in the world. The impact of declining remittances—both from internal and external migration—on the local economy will be substantial and enabling policy frameworks are required for accelerated job creation, especially in rural areas, where most of the migrant workers have been pushed back into, stressed Dr. Kapoor.

Dr. Bilesha Weeraratne, Research Fellow and Head of Migration and Urbanization Research, Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS), Colombo argued that the combination of Middle East as the primary destination for South Asian migrant workers, where employment protection schemes are non-existent for the non-native workers, and the low-skill level of migrant workers have always made the labour migration a precarious event and COVID-19 has merely exacerbated that unfortunate combination. To turn this crisis into an opportunity, Dr. Weeraratne emphasized the need for South Asia region to come up with a common voice and fight for better conditions for the migrant workers in the destination countries through the use of existing international frameworks, primarily the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Global Compact for Migration.

We encourage you to visit SAWTEE’s work on the COVID-19 crisis [by clicking on this link](#). Likewise, please [visit the website](#) for more details about the COVID-19 webinar series hosted by SAWTEE and for the full video recordings of the meetings.