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MiRAC
MIGRATION RESOURCE ALLOCATION COMMITTEE

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Cover Photo: A migrant received the reintegration assistance from IOM after returning to Bangladesh from Germany. © IOM 2022/ Beyond Borders Media

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HOME, SWEET HOME: REINTEGRATION OF RETURNED MIGRANT WORKERS IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

This brief explores how the COVID-19 pandemic led to loss of job opportunities among migrant workers in Asia and the Pacific and their subsequent return to their home countries. The brief looks at the challenges migrant workers from Asia and the Pacific faced upon the return and how their reintegration into countries of origin was approached. The brief also examines migrants’ attitudes towards labour migration and how the pandemic affected these views.

RUSHED RETURN: REPATRIATION OF MIGRANT WORKERS ACROSS THE REGION

With the start of the global pandemic in 2020, international migration flows were disturbed abruptly. As Asia and the Pacific was the first region affected, Asia’s migrant workers were among the first to lose their jobs. Those in informal sectors and low-skilled occupations were affected the most. Millions of migrants across the region who lost their jobs were forced to return home. Thousands more, besides losing income, found themselves stranded in the countries they were working in due to border closures or lack of affordable tickets back home.

To address the situation and assist migrant workers stuck abroad, governments across Asia and the Pacific initiated full-scale repatriation campaigns. Although the data on return and repatriation are fragmented and not easily available, the existing information shows the substantial efforts countries in the region have invested in assisting their nationals to get home. In South-East Asia, the Philippines handled the largest number of repatriated persons, while India, according to the Asian Development Bank, accounted for the largest repatriation in South Asia. According to IOM, between March and October 2020, more than 600,000 Indians, 500,000 Filipinos and 118,000 Cambodians returned to their countries. By October 2020, over 116,000 Nepalis had been repatriated, and more than 50,000 Sri Lankan migrant workers had applied for assistance for return. As the pandemic progressed and countries of destination implemented new measures to contain the disease, more workers became affected and required assistance in repatriation. According to the available data, by the end of December 2021, the total number of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) who returned had reached 1.5 million.

1. Rimal 2021
2. KNOMAD, 2020
3. Le Coz and Newland, 2021
4. Rimal, 2021
5. ibid
6. IOM, 2020a
7. ibid
8. Le Coz and Newland, 2021
9. ADBI, OECD and ILO, 2022
Due to few flights available and travel restrictions between countries, risks of importing COVID-19 from destination countries, limited financial resources, lack of testing and quarantine facilities in countries of destination and other reasons, many countries in the region approached repatriation on a phased basis.11 During the early stages of the pandemic, India started one of the largest repatriation campaigns globally – the Vande Bharat Mission (VBM). The VBM was launched in May 2020 and targeted all Indian nationals, including their families and children. Although not at the same scale as before, the VBM mission is still active and keeps assisting Indian nationals abroad to return home. By October 30, 2021, the VBM was able to repatriate over 9.5 million Indian citizens.12 As of February 2022, the Vande Bharat Mission was in its 16th phase.

### TABLE 1: DETAILS OF THE VBM IN INDIA AS OF 30 APRIL 2021

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SERVICE</th>
<th>No. of Flights and/or Ships</th>
<th>No. of Repatriated Persons</th>
<th>Share of Total Persons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AIR INDIA AND AIR INDIA EXPRESS</td>
<td>12,076</td>
<td>1,879,968</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEPORTEE</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2,591</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMNESTY</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>7,344</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHARTERED</td>
<td>16,844</td>
<td>3,692,216</td>
<td>60.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTHER FOREIGN CARRIERS</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4,007</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL BY AIR</strong></td>
<td>29,026</td>
<td>5,586,126</td>
<td>91.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAVAL SHIPS</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3,987</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAND BORDER CROSSINGS</td>
<td></td>
<td>502,151</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>29,034</td>
<td>6,092,264</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: It is not possible to get a detailed breakdown for more recent data.

10. IOM, 2021a  
11. ADBI, OECD and ILO, 2022  
12. ibid  
13. ADBI, OECD and ILO, 2022
Millions of migrant workers who lost their jobs and had to return to countries of origin found themselves in a situation where circular migration, a strategy which many of them had employed for years, did not seem feasible in the foreseeable future. For many households, migrant workers were primary breadwinners who, through their remittances, had supported other family members. Hence, the return of migrant workers negatively affected the household incomes of many families in migrant-sending countries and pushed many families to the verge of poverty. In Cambodia 75 per cent of remittance-receiving households surveyed reported a decrease in income, which led to a reduction in everyday consumption during the pandemic. In the Philippines, one of the top sending countries in the region, 83 per cent of the surveyed remittance-receiving households reported a substantial decline in household income, while 34 per cent reported a complete loss of income.

Although some countries made official repatriation assistance available, application guidelines and qualifying criteria were often vague and required extensive paperwork. According to the ILO data, 76 per cent of the surveyed migrant workers from Myanmar and 22 per cent of OFWs paid for the return journey themselves. Only 7 per cent of the surveyed migrant workers from Myanmar and 34 per cent of the surveyed Filipinos said that their governments paid for their journeys back home. The existing IOM data show that in Bangladesh, 83 per cent of the surveyed returnees had to pay for the journey themselves, and only 17 per cent said that the employer paid for them.

In Nepal, 81 per cent of the surveyed returnees self-organized and had to pay for their return out of pocket, and out of 800 respondents, only one mentioned receiving financial support from the government.

Flights back home and expensive mandatory quarantines, which returned migrants had to go through, further drained meager savings migrant workers had or the severance pay that some employers had provided migrants with before sending them home. Although some countries tried to provide financial and logistical support to stranded migrants, due to limited resources, these efforts were not always successful and required certain formal conditions to be met. For instance, India, Pakistan, the Philippines and Sri Lanka conducted repatriation missions through their national airlines. However, as the number of applicants was significantly higher than the operational capacities, certain qualification criteria were established. To qualify for free tickets back to the Philippines, OFWs had to be active members of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, have active employment contracts and provide a letter from the employer stating that their employment contract was terminated due to reasons related to COVID-19. Thus, those OFWs whose contracts expired before the pandemic, or those who were employed informally, without a contract, were ineligible for the assistance. According to IOM, there was over 30 per cent of the surveyed OFWs whose contracts expired prior to the pandemic, as well as many of those who did not qualify for other reasons.

Lockdowns and other measures implemented by countries in Asia and the Pacific had an adverse effect on economies and led to a spike in unemployment rates even among the workers who did not leave their countries. The return of migrant workers added additional pressure to already struggling labour markets in the countries of origin affected by the pandemic. It is important to note that for many countries in Asia and the Pacific, official labour migration programmes were created to alleviate domestic unemployment through giving workers access to foreign labour markets and reducing competition at home. For instance, in Viet Nam, the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs stressed that labour migration helps

14. FAO, 2022
15. ibid
16. ILO, 2021a
17. ibid
18. IOM, 2020b
19. IOM, 2021b
20. ADB, OECD, ILO, 2022
21. Embassy of the Philippines in the Hague, 2020
22. IOM, 2021a
not only to bring money to the country through remittances, and hence mobilize resources for economic development, but to solve the unemployment problem and reduce poverty in the country.\textsuperscript{23}

In 2017-2018, the Asia-Pacific region had lower unemployment rates compared to world average – 4.1 per cent as the average for Asia and the Pacific, and 5.4 per cent as the average unemployment rate worldwide.\textsuperscript{24} However, with the beginning of the pandemic, the unemployment rates in Asia and the Pacific increased dramatically. For example, at its peak, in April 2020, the official unemployment level in the Philippines skyrocketed from 5.3 per cent in January 2020 to an unprecedented 17.7 per cent in April 2020, while some sources go even further and say that the actual rate was as high as 22 per cent.\textsuperscript{25,26} Later during the year, due to governmental efforts to support business and national economies the overall unemployment levels decreased, but they remained significantly high compared to the previous year. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the annual unemployment rate in India rose from 5.2 per cent in 2019 to 7.1 per cent in 2020, from 3.1 per cent in 2019 to 5.2 per cent in 2020 in Singapore, and from 5.2 per cent to 7.2 per cent in Maldives.\textsuperscript{27} The decrease in unemployment levels in the second quarter of 2020 can be largely attributed to informal jobs and self-employment.\textsuperscript{28}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig2.png}
\caption{RISE IN UNEMPLOYMENT LEVELS IN SELECTED COUNTRIES IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC (BASED ON THE ADB DATA\textsuperscript{29})}
\end{figure}

According to the ILO estimates, in 2020, the pandemic led to the overall loss of 81 million jobs across the region.\textsuperscript{30} These statistics include only the workers with official employment contracts and do not account for those employed informally, which makes the total number of people who have lost their jobs even higher. Some sources suggest that in Viet Nam informal workers accounted for 61 per cent of all job losses in 2020.\textsuperscript{31} The pandemic’s higher effect on employment of informal workers is explained by the higher vulnerability of informal workers, which is the direct consequence of limited protection by employment policies. Nevertheless, while skilled workers who were able to work remotely from home, were
less affected by lockdowns and stay-at-home orders, low-skilled workers employed in service industry, or those who couldn’t work remotely, were affected disproportionately more. 32 Agriculture, construction, manufacturing, wholesale and retail, and services sectors were affected the most. 33 It is important to note that these are the exact sectors where most of migrant workers were employed while working abroad. Thus, it was almost impossible for them to find employment in the same sectors upon their return.

Table 2:
JOB LOSSES IN SELECTED SECTORS IN SELECTED COUNTRIES, Q2 2020 VERSUS Q1 2020 (BASED ON THE ADB DATA)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTOR</th>
<th>Philippines</th>
<th>Thailand</th>
<th>Indonesia</th>
<th>Viet Nam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Net Change in the Number of Employed ('000s)</td>
<td>Net Change in the Number of Employed ('000s)</td>
<td>Net Change in the Number of Employed ('000s)</td>
<td>Net Change in the Number of Employed ('000s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGRICULTURE</td>
<td>-864</td>
<td>-710</td>
<td>-178</td>
<td>-1,126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MANUFACTURING</td>
<td>-936</td>
<td>-237</td>
<td>-976</td>
<td>-525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONSTRUCTION</td>
<td>-1,210</td>
<td>-115</td>
<td>-36</td>
<td>-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHOLESALE AND RETAIL</td>
<td>-2,131</td>
<td>-154</td>
<td>-98</td>
<td>-153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRANSPORT AND STORAGE</td>
<td>-805</td>
<td>-32</td>
<td>-289</td>
<td>-97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD SERVICE</td>
<td>-778</td>
<td>-123</td>
<td>-176</td>
<td>-154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REAL ESTATE</td>
<td>-48</td>
<td>-23</td>
<td>-233</td>
<td>-44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROFESSIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL</td>
<td>-37</td>
<td>-22</td>
<td>-28</td>
<td>-24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A FRESH BEGINNING? — REINTEGRATION OF RETURNED MIGRANT WORKERS

Upon their return to their countries and release from mandatory quarantines migrant workers entered the new reality of lockdowns, stay-at-home orders, and unemployment. To curtail the spread of the virus, governments across the region initiated lockdowns, which resulted in closures of businesses and caused massive layoffs. According to the data from the Philippines, during the first weeks of the Enhanced Community Quarantine, which started in March 2020, more than 3 million people lost their jobs, and 5 more million were unemployed by April. 34 The 800,000 OFWs who returned to the Philippines by the end of 2020 added additional pressure to the labour market and increased the competition for a scarce number of jobs created by the government desperate to address the situation.

After a long journey home, many low-wage migrants had little savings left and were still burdened by hefty recruitment fees that had to be paid off. 35 36 Although national governments tried to alleviate financial burdens for migrants and assisted with the repatriation, not all the costs were fully covered by governments and migrants had to pay them out of pocket. For example, while some Vietnamese migrants qualified for free air tickets home and waived quarantine fees, others, who were employed informally, or whose contracts did not explicitly mentioned termination due to the COVID-related reasons, had to buy tickets or cover quarantine themselves. 37 Those migrants who were able to return home during the early stages of the pandemic were relatively lucky, as others remained...

32. Brusveich, Dabla-Norris and Khalid, 2020
33. Asia Pacific Foundation, 2021 a
34. Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020
35. ADBI, OECD and ILO, 2021
36. Guanio, 2022
37. Asia Foundation, 2021
stranded in their countries of destination and had to rely on their savings before they could return home. According to the Asia Foundation, some Nepali workers had to stay abroad for up to 6 months and pay their expenses before finally returning home\textsuperscript{38,39}. Thus, upon returning home, some migrant workers had exhausted all or most of their previously accumulated savings and had very little left to live off. Some migrants were also burdened with the previous debt imposed on them by recruiting agencies which sent them to work abroad. These debts had to be paid off despite the personal circumstances and the pandemic, which put additional pressure on the returnees.

While stakeholders across Asia and the Pacific focused their efforts primarily on the early stages of the migration cycle, such as the development of migration laws and policies, pre-departure training, and protection of migrant workers, far less attention was paid to return and reintegration\textsuperscript{40}. As a result of this unpreparedness, when the global pandemic began, countries of origins were mainly unprepared to accommodate returnees and provide comprehensive reintegration assistance. IOM defines sustainable reintegration as when “returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability within their communities, and psychosocial well-being that allow them to cope with (re)migration drivers. Having achieved sustainable reintegration, returnees are able to make further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than necessity”.\textsuperscript{41} Thus, minding that for a large number of people in countries of origin migration was not a matter of choice but the only way to escape poverty, reintegration of migrant workers was, and remains a serious challenge, especially when migrants return unprepared and the migration cycle is disrupted prematurely.

For many returned migrants’ circular migration was a survival strategy that they used to support their families at home for many years. After the expiry of their contracts abroad, migrants would return home for a short time only to re-migrate again\textsuperscript{42}. For example, as a country of destination, Thailand hosts a large number of Cambodian workers. Some of them had been working in the country on and off for more than 20 years\textsuperscript{43,44}. Such groups, who have been migrating for many years, are usually detached from labour markets at home. When they returned, at the beginning of the pandemic, they were very concerned about how they would make a living without being able to remigrate\textsuperscript{45}. For instance, since 2020, more than 265,000 migrants have returned to Cambodia, a country which did not have a developed reintegration policy and had to be reintegrated and provided with the ways to earn an income without remigrating\textsuperscript{46}. Besides being forced to return home due to loss of employment, many Cambodian migrant workers were heavily burdened by long-term debts and a lack of savings\textsuperscript{47,48}.

REINTEGRATION AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES – THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

To address the growing unemployment and help returnees to reintegrate, national governments across Asia and the Pacific created various reintegration programmes. The Philippines introduced the “Build, Build, Build” and “Development Outreach for Labour, Livelihood and Advancement of Resources” (DOLLAR) programmes\textsuperscript{49}. Malaysia aimed to create 600,000 jobs across different sectors through their Upskill Malaysia and Hiring Incentive programmes\textsuperscript{50}. To expedite reemployment of Indonesian migrant workers, the Government of Indonesia encourage them to take up jobs in construction\textsuperscript{51}. To facilitate the reintegration of more than 180,000 migrant workers, Indonesia implemented a programme that provided returnees with the jobs in projects focused on the development of villages and other less-developed areas in the country\textsuperscript{52}. In India, the
government developed the Skilled Workers Arrival Database for Employment Support (SWADES) scheme which created a database of the returned migrant workers based on their skills and experience to fulfill the demands of Indian and foreign companies. According to the data, by January 25, 2021, almost 25,000 migrant workers, mainly returnees from GCC countries, had registered for the programme.

However, to be effective, reintegration programmes had to account for diverse needs and profiles of returnees and had to be gender-responsive, something which most of the reintegration programmes lacked. As a result, although nominally existent, many reintegration programmes were inefficient as they did not take into account the skills returnees had, and, therefore, were unable to provide an efficient transition to domestic labour markets. For example, the “Build, Build, Build” programme in the Philippines, which aims to develop infrastructure nationwide and thus create jobs in construction, fails to account that traditionally, most low-skilled OFWs are women employed as domestic workers with zero experience in construction, while male OFWs are usually seafarers and rarely have construction experience.

While the “Build, Build, Build” programme did not fully match the skills of the returned OFWs, other reintegration and support initiatives implemented in the Philippines were more successful. The Department of Labour and Employment established a specialized programme which distributed one-time payments of PHP 10,000 (USD 200) to eligible individuals. By August 2021, over PHP 5.2 billion was distributed to more than 520,000 OFWs. Furthermore, to support the transition of the returned OFWs who were affected by the pandemic into the domestic labour market, the Philippines Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) initiated a particular upskilling and reskilling programme. The TESDA Online Programme (TOP) offers interested OFWs an array of online courses on various topics ranging from entrepreneurship to agriculture, construction, food processing, tourism, health care and others. Between March 2020 and August 2021, almost 164,000 OFWs and their dependents registered in the TOP. According to the TESDA data, the top five most popular courses were welding, cookery, food and beverage service, and housekeeping.

Yet, while some countries in the region had, at least to some degree, developed return-and-reintegration programmes, others were completely unprepared to provide support to returnees. For instance, neither Bangladesh nor Pakistan has an official policy for return and reintegration for migrants, despite being among the largest countries of origin in the region. The Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy in Bangladesh mentioned the need for a thorough plan for the reintegration of returnees. Still, the country lacked a comprehensive return and reintegration policy when the pandemic began, and returnees started arriving. Pakistan was equally unprepared to assist repatriated compatriots effectively. Although the section on repatriation and reintegration is included into Pakistan’s National Emigration and Welfare Policy for Migrants, it does not provide details on how repatriation and reintegration during crises should be approached.

Being unable to find jobs at home, many migrants decided to undergo additional training and master new professions, which would allow them to find gainful employment in new circumstances of the global pandemic. According to the study conducted by the ADB, 52 per cent of surveyed returned OFWs said that they were interested in upgrading their skill sets through trainings and educational programmes. To promote the reintegration of returnees the Skills Development...
and Employment Department of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic partnered with other entities to launch skills development trainings on industrial sewing\textsuperscript{66}. After completing the two-weeks course, participants will be ready to take up jobs in the garment and textile sectors and gain soft skills and information about safe migration\textsuperscript{67}. Likewise, in 2021, to address rising unemployment and assist in the reintegration of returnees, the Government of Bangladesh partnered with community-based organizations to provide individuals with skills and entrepreneurship trainings which cover a wide range of topics ranging from accounting to business principles and trade licensing\textsuperscript{68}. To further promote the reintegration, upon completion of the programme, participants are encouraged to present small business plans and are awarded a small seed sum to support their business ventures\textsuperscript{69}. Those migrants who hope to remigrate after the situation becomes conducive, take courses to boost their vocational skills necessary for gainful employment at positions similar to those they had previously\textsuperscript{70}.

Financial assistance and stimulus payments are other measures countries of origin implemented to assist in the reintegration of returnees. Although the efforts governments made to assist repatriated migrants are commendable in principle, these financial assistance schemes were poorly implemented and were often criticized for excluding many potential beneficiaries. For example, to assist vulnerable groups, including returned migrant workers, the Indian government implemented a relief scheme with a total budget of USD 22.8 billion\textsuperscript{71}. However, it was reported that due to sparse coverage, mistakes in spelling of names made by office clerks and other bureaucratic slipups, only half of those who were eligible received cash assistance. No one received food supplies which were supposed to be distributed through the government-initiated schemes. None was able to receive employment assistance and less than 10 per cent of the core stimulus packages was distributed\textsuperscript{72}. In addition, in India, ticket prices skyrocketed during the repatriation mission, and the lack of transparency about repatriation airfares was reported numerous times\textsuperscript{73}. It has been pointed out that the one-way ticket price was unusually high, almost as much as the cost of a round trip. Some even queried whether Air India, the national carrier, was trying to exploit the situation as a fund-raising exercise for the airline\textsuperscript{74}.

Reintegration schemes in the Philippines were equally problematic, as only 51 per cent of repatriated OFWs were eligible, registered, and able to access assistance from the government, while others were either deemed ineligible for the assistance or due to unclear instructions, were unsure if they qualified for the aid\textsuperscript{75}. It was also reported that exorbitant costs of tickets prevented many people from booking flights to the Philippines\textsuperscript{76}.

**TO MIGRATE, OR TO NOT MIGRATE, THAT IS THE QUESTION**

To measure to what extent the global pandemic and forced repatriation affected migrant workers and learn more about how repatriation influenced their views on migration, IOM conducted several studies on returnees’ attitudes towards remigration.\textsuperscript{77,78} A study on migrant workers from Cambodia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Myanmar found that on average, 35 per cent of the surveyed returnees were adamant about remigrating. While 29 per cent of respondents said that they were not certain if they wanted to remigrate, 36 per cent said that they wished to stay in their countries and were
not interested in remigration. Similarly, among the surveyed repatriated OFWs, 48 per cent were planning to remigrate in the future, 15 per cent said that they were undecided, and 35 per cent wanted to remain at home. According to the survey, male OFWs said they wanted to remigrate internationally. In contrast, female OFWs were more interested in internal migration or said they would prefer not to remigrate at all. The difference in attitudes towards migration can be attributed to stringent gender roles in the Philippines, where men are usually seen as breadwinners, as well as to women’s desire to stay at home and participate more in their children’s lives.

FIGURE 3: SHARE OF THOSE INTENDED TO RE-MIGRATE IN SELECTED COUNTRIES IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC (%) BASED ON THE IOM ESTIMATES

The views on remigration are directly opposite in Bangladesh and Pakistan, where, according to a study, conducted by the International Center for Migration and Policy Development, the majority or the returnees are interested in remigrating. However, it is important to note that the gender composition of migration flows from Bangladesh and Pakistan is different from those of Cambodia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, and the Philippines. In Bangladesh and Pakistan, men make up the majority of those venturing abroad for work. Besides the gender composition of migration flows, the difference in attitude towards migration between Bangladesh and Pakistan, on the one hand, and Cambodia, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic and the Philippines, on the other hand, can be attributed to the average age of migrants. Migrant workers from Bangladesh and Pakistan tend to be younger than those from other regions. It is also important to mention that in Bangladesh, women under the age of 25 are prohibited from migrating for work, while men are allowed to migrate as soon as they reach 18 years of age.

79. ibid
80. ibid
81. ibid
82. Philippine Statistics Authority, 2022
83. Mohyuddin, 2017
84. Ang et al., 2015
85. Cruz, 2012
86. IOM, 2021a
87. IOM, 2021d
88. International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2022
89. IOM, 2019
90. ILO, 2021c
91. IOM, 2019
92. ILO, 2021a
93. ibid
CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic affected millions of migrant workers across Asia and the Pacific and put circular migration to a halt. To help their nationals return home, governments across the region launched large-scale repatriation campaigns. The Philippines alone assisted in the repatriation of more than 1.5 million OFWs. These repatriation campaigns were successful to various extents, though not all migrant workers were able to benefit from them fully. To qualify for governmental assistance, migrant workers had to meet certain criteria, which not all migrant workers could meet. While some returnees managed...
to receive free tickets home and the fees for mandatory post-arrival quarantines covered by their governments, others had to cover those costs fully or partially out of their own pockets.

Upon their return, many migrant workers were unable to reintegrate into domestic labour markets affected by the negative effects of the pandemic. Lockdowns and stay-at-home orders implemented by national governments across the region led to waves of lay-offs and business closures, which, in its turn, led to a spike in unemployment rates. The return of migrant workers further increased competition for scarce jobs in countries of origin. To address rising unemployment levels governments introduced various schemes aimed at creating jobs in different sectors. However, these programmes did not always account for the skills and gender profiles of returned migrant workers. The absence of reliable and comprehensive databases on the returned migrants and their skills seriously impeded repatriation and reintegration. Developing such databases with detailed profiles, skillsets and gender disaggregation can help governments address repatriation and reintegration in the future.

Existing studies show that the pandemic made many migrants reassess their desire to migrate for work in the near future. The data show that 35 per cent of surveyed returnees from Cambodia and Lao People’s Democratic Republic wanted to remigrate when the situation allows, 36 per cent did not intend to remigrate, and 29 per cent were not certain if they wanted to migrate or stay home.110 The situation is similar in the Philippines, where 48 per cent of the returned OFWs expressed their desire to remigrate for work in the future, 35 per cent were uninterested in remigration, and 15 per cent were undecided.111 On the contrary, the majority of returned migrant workers from Bangladesh and Pakistan were interested in remigration when the situation allows.112 For those migrants considering remigration, debts accumulated before or during the pandemic are a significant push factor motivating them to re-migrate.

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110. IOM, 2021d
111. IOM, 2021a
112. International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2022
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