

KEY POINTS

- The deployment of migrant workers from major origin countries in Asia declined by more than 50% in 2020 accompanied by the mass return of migrant workers.
- In 2021, overseas employment, especially among low-skilled workers, surged but remained below pre-pandemic levels. Deployment to the Gulf region and Europe has resumed, while labor mobility within Asia remains stagnant.
- Remittance inflows in many developing Asian countries remained resilient. In 2021, the aggregate remittance inflows to the region increased by 2.6%, exceeding the 2019 level with prospect for another growth streak in 2022.
- Travel-related health protocols have substantially increased the initial costs of migration paid by migrants. It is important to ensure that the additional costs in times of crisis are not pushed back onto migrants themselves.
- The pandemic has expedited the digitalization of key overseas employment services such as pre-departure orientation. It is important to evaluate whether these services achieve the intended objectives and complement face-to-face services.

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COVID-19 and the Deployment of Labor Migrants from Asia: Lessons Learned and Ways Forward

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INTRODUCTION

For over 2 years, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and the various containment measures implemented across the world have created unprecedented bottlenecks in the movement of goods, services, and people. The impacts of this have been particularly severe on migrant workers hoping to seek better employment opportunities and improve the lives of their families. Cross-border travel became cumbersome, uncertain, and costly due to the associated health and safety protocols, while workplace closures and the overall slowdown of economic activities in many migrant-host economies provided little to no opportunity for overseas work.

The deployment of migrant workers during the height of the pandemic dropped by as much as 50% in 2020 in many large migrant-origin countries in developing Asia. Remittance inflows to the region, however, showed strong resilience during the latter half of 2020 following a sudden yet momentary drop in the second quarter of that year (Kikkawa et al. 2021). Beginning 2022, deployment of migrants in Asia has picked up its pace and is expected to recover to pre-pandemic levels.

The authors would like to thank the participating government representatives of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand to the 12th ADBI-ILO-OECD Roundtable on Labour Migration in Asia held on 24–25 May 2022 in Bangkok, Thailand, for contributing to the key informant survey. The survey questionnaire was developed with the support of Jonathan Chaloff (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and Rebecca Napier-Moore (International Labour Organization). We also thank Rebecca Napier-Moore and Wendy Walker (ADB) for reviewing the brief and Nahreen Farjana for research assistance.

Note: ADB recognizes “Russia” as the Russian Federation.

This brief is an update of the previous *ADB Briefs* (No. 148 and No. 204) that report the impact of COVID-19 on movement of the migrant workforce and remittance inflows to developing Asia. In this brief, we focus on the deployment trends and outlook of the migrant workers from the region based on the responses to the Deployment and Outlook Survey on Labour Migration and additional interviews of key informants from the nine major migrant-origin countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia subregions.¹ We also evaluate the lasting impacts of the pandemic in the overseas employment administration in these countries and recommend potential policy solutions.

DEPLOYMENT OF MIGRANT WORKERS: TRENDS AND OUTLOOK

As the COVID-19 outbreak during the early part of 2020 forced many governments across the globe to close their borders as one of the containment measures, the vibrant flows of labor migrants from and within Asia came to an almost complete halt. The observed surge in migrant deployment in 2019, largely thanks to the strong economic growth of many of the host economies, was disrupted, characterized by a significant drop of no less than 50% in the deployment of workers from the major migrant-origin countries in Asia in 2020. The near-term outlook is quite positive as more signs of recovery in the region's labor migration can be anticipated for 2022, primarily driven by the resumption of economic activities in both origin and host economies as well as better management of the pandemic. Economic sectors, such as travel and hospitality, increasingly allowed to operate in many migrant-host economies will demand more foreign workers.

Pre-COVID-19 Trends

Prior to the pandemic, labor migration from Asia generally showed a fresh upward trend in 2019 following two consecutive years of decline in the outflow of migrant workers particularly to the Gulf and Asian destinations. The Gulf region, especially the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), was already receiving greater numbers of migrant workers in 2019 from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. Meanwhile, the number of Asian migrants heading to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries consistently increased over the years and reached 2.3 million by 2019. During the same year, the Philippines deployed a record high of almost 2.2 million overseas Filipino workers. In Pakistan, workers registered for employment abroad increased by more than 60% due to the spike in recruitment in the KSA buoyed by the strong oil sector (Figure 1).

Cross-border Movement of Labor During the Pandemic

The rapid spread of COVID-19, which evolved into a global health crisis, quickly overturned the seemingly encouraging trends of labor migration in the region. Migrant worker outflows were interrupted, and thus decelerated due to strict border closures and limited commercial flights along with the implementation of health and travel protocols (e.g., COVID-19 test, quarantine, and vaccination requirements) in many migrant origin and destination economies, making such movements uncertain and costly. Deployment of new migrant workers was also challenged by the imposition of temporary suspensions for overseas employment among destination countries as well as some of the large migrant-sending countries in developing Asia, such as Bangladesh, Nepal, and the Philippines. Shortage of local personnel, especially in the health-care sector, was one of the factors cited for such restriction.

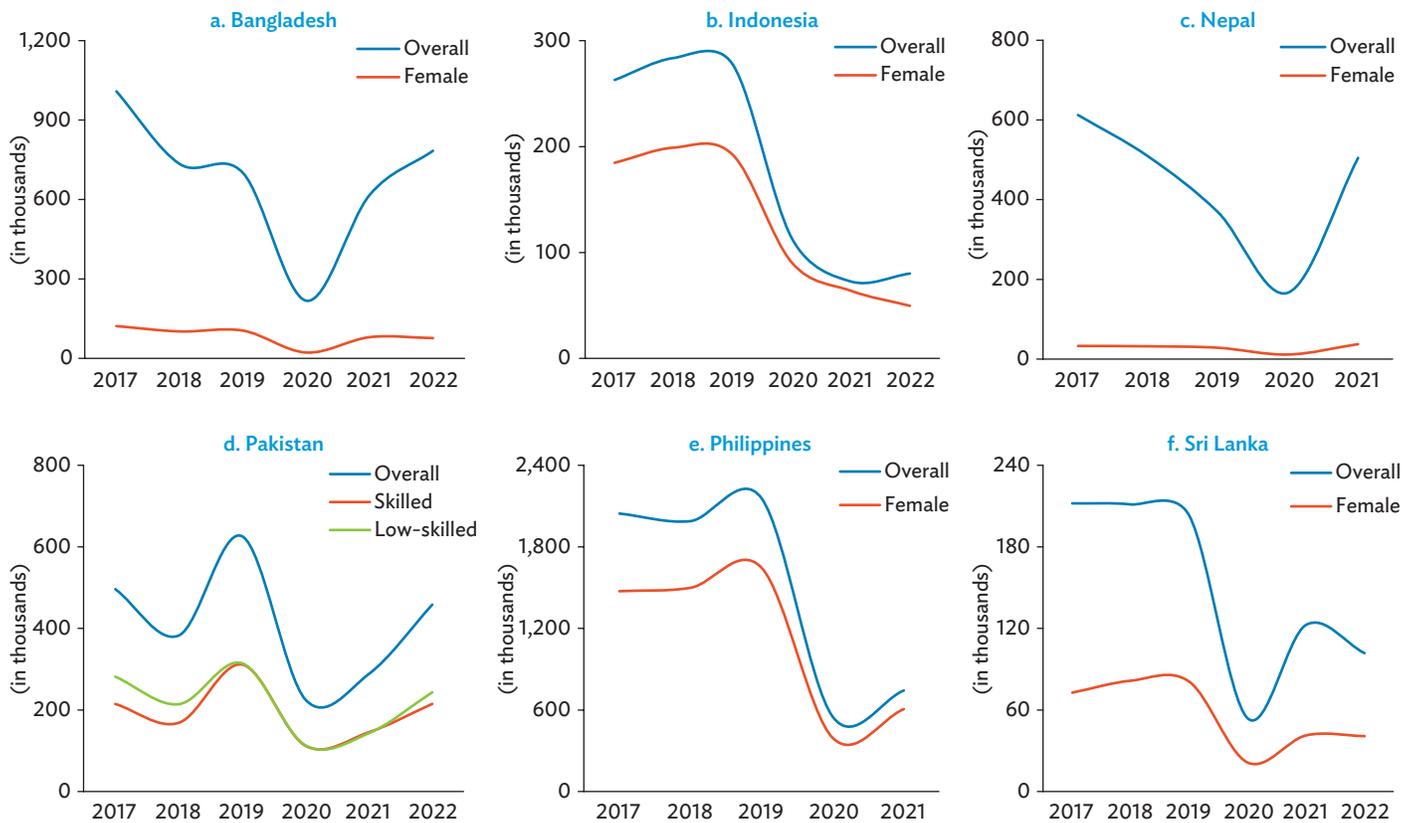
The pandemic also led to the contraction of global economic activity, including the regions hosting many Asian migrant workers. In 2020, the gross domestic product (GDP) across OECD member countries was down 4.5%. The European Union fared worse, with its GDP declining by 5.9% during the same year. Subdued economic activities also dampened the GDP of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member countries by 4.9% in 2020. This situation unfortunately led to job cuts and reduced working hours in these economies, disproportionately affecting migrant workers often in temporary, informal, or unprotected jobs. Many Asian migrant workers returned home amid loss of jobs abroad. For example, in 2020, almost 400,000 overseas Filipinos and 4 million Indian nationals were repatriated with assistance from their governments. Large influxes of returning migrants were also recorded in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (Kikkawa et al. 2021).

Path to Recovery of Labor Mobility in 2022

Positive developments are already underway that could facilitate further deployment of migrant workers. The rapid vaccine rollout and easing of mobility restrictions and border controls have boosted economic activities in many parts of the world. In effect, the OECD GDP increased by 5.5% in 2021, already exceeding its pre-pandemic level. The GCC countries have also exhibited pre-pandemic recovery during the same period. More recently, the New Zealand government announced full reopening of their borders for all work visa categories starting 4 July 2022. Consequently, employment-based visa issuances increased in 2021 in some large migrant-host countries, such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, albeit remaining below pre-pandemic levels.

¹ The Deployment and Outlook Survey on Labour Migration involves an online survey questionnaire completed by participating government representatives to the 12th ADB-ILO-OECD Roundtable on Labour Migration in Asia held on 24–25 May 2022 in Bangkok, Thailand. Some follow-up online interviews were conducted with respondents in June 2022. The participating country governments include Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

Figure 1: Deployment of Migrants Workers from Selected Developing Asian Countries, 2017–2022



Note: Data for Bangladesh is cumulative as of August 2022, while those of Indonesia and Pakistan are cumulative as of July 2022 and that of Sri Lanka is as of May 2022. No 2022 data available for Nepal and the Philippines.

Sources: ADB calculations using data on overseas employment from the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (Bangladesh); Badan Pelindungan Pekerja Migran Indonesia (Indonesia); Department of Foreign Employment (Nepal); Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment (Pakistan); Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (Philippines); and Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (Sri Lanka).

In contrast, slow recovery is being observed in migration within Asia, especially those heading to Japan, Malaysia, the People’s Republic of China, and the Republic of Korea. Malaysia has just lifted its freeze order in the recruitment of foreign workers in February 2022, but the return of Asian migrant workers remained stagnant, complicating the country’s ongoing labor shortage, and affecting operations of palm oil plantations and semiconductor manufacturing companies (Lee et al. 2022). Japan maintains a cap on the daily arrival of workers and the other two popular destinations of Asian migrant workers still impose very strict guidelines on entry alongside caps for fear of cross-border contagion.

Meanwhile, as early as July 2020, Thailand allowed entry of foreign workers from neighboring countries under the memorandum of understanding (MOU) system. Under the system, strict health prevention guidelines and measures were implemented but were gradually reduced by May 2022.

To lure more foreign workers and effectively address the ongoing labor shortage, efforts such as registering undocumented workers and extension of work permits, are being considered and currently put into practice (Sriring et al. 2022).

While there was an uptick in the deployment of Asian migrant workers in 2021, these numbers remain below the pre-pandemic level, except for Bangladesh and Nepal (Figure 1). Based on official data, Bangladeshis heading for work abroad reached almost 784,000 as of August 2022, its highest since 2018. Labor approvals for overseas employment in Nepal, albeit predominantly among male migrants and those heading to the Gulf region increased to more than 500,000 in 2021, exceeding its 2019 figures. Upward trends are also observed in the deployment of migrant workers from Pakistan, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka, while migration of Indonesian workers remains low. In Pakistan, recovery seems relatively faster among the low-skilled workers.

Meanwhile, the arrival of migrant workers from the Pacific countries to New Zealand via the Recognised Seasonal Employers (RSE) scheme saw huge increases during the fiscal year 2021, driven partly by the government’s decision to increase the cap of RSE places by 11% to 16,000. The number of arrivals from Samoa (3,334) and Vanuatu (4,983) already exceeded the 2019 pre-pandemic level. Migrant workers from Central Asia also resumed registering for overseas work by 2021, mainly to the Russian Federation. During that year, the government of the Russian Federation recorded more than 7.8 million registered migrant workers from the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (Najibullah 2022). In the first quarter of 2022, however, around 60,000 Tajik and 133,000 Uzbek migrants returned home from the Russian Federation (Jung and Newson 2022), which may be one of the many unintended consequences of economic sanctions imposed by many Western economies in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Labor Migration Outlook 2022

Our questionnaire-based survey/interview with government representatives from the nine major migrant-origin countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia shows that the deployment of workers abroad for the year 2022 will either be similar or even exceed the pre-COVID-19 situation in 2019 (Figure 2a). Many cite the widespread testing and greater access to vaccines and easing of quarantine protocols as factors driving labor migration as well as the greater interest of prospective migrants in working abroad (Figure 2b).

Surveyed country governments relayed that, over time, vaccination became more easily accessible and free of charge, allowing the coverage of much of their population (Table 1).

Table 1: Vaccination Records of Selected Migrant-Origin Countries in Asia

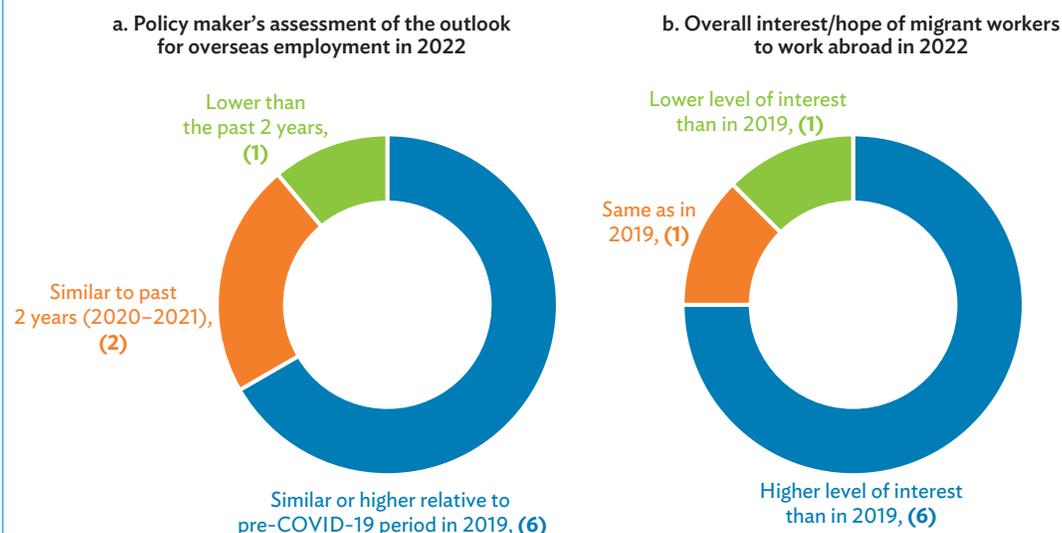
	Total Doses Administered	Total Vaccine Doses Administered per 100 Population
Bangladesh	279,700,761	169.84
Bhutan	1,911,349	247.71
Cambodia	41,343,067	247.28
Lao PDR	11,753,962	161.55
Nepal	50,859,914	174.56
Pakistan	287,170,265	130.00
Sri Lanka	39,656,200	185.19
Thailand	139,631,276	200.04
Viet Nam	234,856,999	241.28

Lao PDR = Lao People’s Democratic Republic.

Source: ADB calculations using data from <https://covid19.who.int/> (accessed 18 July 2022).

To facilitate labor migration, in some instances, governments allowed special provisions for migrant workers. For example, in Bangladesh, migrants bound for deployment and with urgent needs for a brand of vaccine particularly advised by destination countries are given priority vaccination slots. They are registered separately and included in the government vaccination schedule. In Nepal, migrant workers have dedicated hospitals especially for vaccination.

Figure 2: Labor Migration Outlook and Migration Interest in Asia, 2022



COVID-19 = coronavirus disease.

Note: The numbers in the parentheses refer to the number of country respondents.

Source: ADB calculations using data from the Deployment and Outlook Survey on Labour Migration.

The gradual economic recovery of destination countries and, hence, growing demand for labor will further boost the interest of workers in seeking opportunities abroad. This might not hold true, however, among those who have returned from abroad during the pandemic and have already found jobs in their home countries. This largely explains the perceived lower interest for overseas work among Cambodians post-COVID-19, albeit over the short term.

There are specific sectors and destination countries that are expected to prod such an optimistic labor migration outlook in Asia. According to the survey, higher demand for migrant workers can be seen in the services sector in the KSA, Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). There are more agricultural workers, often migrants, needed in the European Union, Japan, and the Republic of Korea. Demand for professionals in the caregiving sector will remain high in Japan and the Republic of Korea. Skilled workers in the industry sector will be demanded in Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Thailand while higher demand for construction workers in the Middle East (e.g., KSA, Kuwait, Lebanon, and the UAE) can be expected. Kuwait will also demand foreign labor in its hospitality sector. Meanwhile, some governments in the survey have projected a decrease in domestic work in the Middle East until such time as several issues are addressed, including poor working conditions and low benefits.

Key survey informants also recognize the huge role private recruitment agencies will play in realizing the positive outlook. During the pandemic, they also faced economic difficulties, with some reporting incidences of business closures (i.e., those operating in Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Lao PDR, and Nepal). Recently, however, many migrant-origin countries in South Asia (e.g., Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) are expecting better market conditions and profitability for private recruitment agencies relative to 2019. Further improvement in the recruitment system is needed despite receiving lower number of reports of malpractice by recruitment agencies, which could only be attributed to having lower number of workers deployed overseas, hence lower cases of complaints. However, with the recent surge in deployment, countries are also reporting spikes in irregular migration, although the number of lodged cases remains small calling governments to remain vigilant to ensure safety of migrants.

REMITTANCE INFLOWS TO ASIA

Interestingly, despite the pandemic and the resulting economic challenges affecting migrants, remittance inflows in many developing Asian countries remained resilient in 2020. On the aggregate, remittance receipts to ADB developing member countries (DMCs) slightly declined by around 1% in 2020 from \$312 billion in 2019. This is a significantly muted drop compared with substantial decline

initially anticipated during the height of the pandemic in 2020 (Takenaka et al. 2020). In 2021, aggregate remittance inflows to the DMCs grew by 2.6%, exceeding the 2019 level.

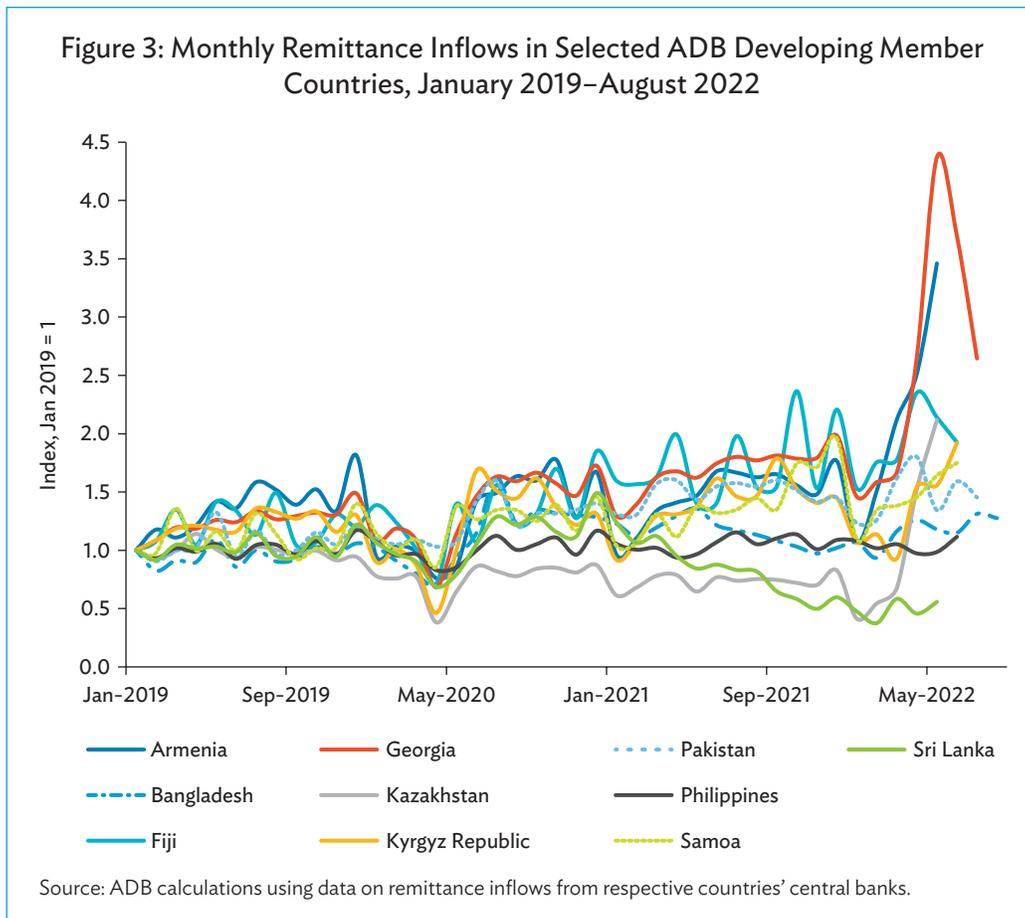
Available 2022 figures in some large migrant-sending ADB DMCs countries reflect the sustained buoyant pre-COVID-19 trend (Figure 3). In the Philippines, the monthly receipt of remittances at the start of the year until June 2022 consistently posted year-on-year growth in the range of 1.2%–4.3%. Pakistan saw a huge increase of 12.5% (year-on-year) in remittance inflows in April 2022 followed by a sudden drop in May 2022 by 6.3%. Although the level of remittance inflows to Bangladesh remained well above pre-pandemic levels, the monthly remittance receipts until June 2022 were all lower year-on-year, which can be attributed to the return to alternative often informal money transfer channels. Strong double-digit year-on-year growth, however, was posted for the months of July and August 2022, only reflecting low base from the previous year.

Meanwhile, remittance inflows to Sri Lanka continue to show dismal figures so far in 2022, extending the 2021 drop in remittance receipts by 22.7%. During the first half of 2022, remittance to the country further declined by 51.6%, which can be attributed to the dive in the official foreign exchange rate triggering the prevalence of informal remittance channels despite the incentives² the government offered to promote formal channels of money transfer. The effects of such incentives were diluted by capital control and changes in foreign exchange policies, widening the gap between official and unofficial foreign exchange rates. The official exchange rate pegged at Sri Lanka rupees (SLRs) 200–203 per \$1 resulted in a huge disparity in the exchange rate offered by the central bank and the black/curb market, estimated to be more than SLRs25 per \$1, from July to November 2021. This prompted migrant workers to use informal channels known as the *hawala* system, which offers more attractive rates.

This situation does not bode well as the country is currently facing its worst ever economic crisis, potentially creating a vicious cycle of challenges in the remittance market. The intensifying economic distress of remittance-receiving families will unnecessarily drive migrant workers to seek higher returns to their foreign exchange in the parallel market. As a result, this will worsen the country's foreign reserves position.

Migrant workers from Central Asian countries are sending record high remittances during the second quarter of 2022 despite expectations of a downward trend following strong economic sanctions imposed against the subregion's largest migrant-host country, the Russian Federation, due to its invasion of Ukraine. The World Bank (2022), however, sees an average of 25% decline in remittance receipts in Central Asia as outflows from the Russian Federation could plummet 40% amid economic sanctions. Meanwhile, remittance inflows to Fiji and Samoa remained stable.

² Since the onset of the pandemic, the government has offered incentives to encourage migrant workers to send remittances through formal channels. The Central Bank of Sri Lanka offered an additional SLRs8 for each US dollar remitted in December 2021, on top of the SLRs2 per US dollar given earlier in December 2020 under the "Incentive Scheme on Inward Workers' Remittances" program. Aside from this, the central bank also bears the transaction costs of migrant remittances, up to a certain limit, starting in February 2022.



IMMEDIATE AND LASTING IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE OVERSEAS EMPLOYMENT ADMINISTRATION AND THE DEPLOYMENT OF MIGRANT WORKERS

Amid movement restrictions and the additional travel and health requirements induced by the pandemic, recruitment agencies and responsible government bodies are prompted to undertake major shifts in the way deployment of migrant workers is carried out. Origin countries of migrants have put in place a set of deployment protocols for migrant workers, which are either implemented by a special agency, department, or ministry. These measures aim to bring transparency in the recruitment process and ultimately protect migrant workers from fraud and potential abuses. Key areas of overseas employment administration include document verification and approval of overseas employment contracts, verification of health protocols, provision of pre-departure orientation, and monitoring the work of recruitment agencies and the fees they charge to migrants.

Implementation of Health Protocols and the Rising Costs of Migration

Strict enforcement of COVID-19-related health and safety guidelines especially with respect to international travel has translated into higher costs of migration. The rising cost of migration has been identified as one of the major concerns of labor migrants during the pandemic. Higher travel cost amid limited commercial flights with additional costs arising from COVID-19 tests and quarantine fees has been borne mostly by migrant workers (Table 2). The Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) test remains a requirement for overseas travel in many migrant-origin countries. Other than Thailand and Bangladesh (especially migrants with BMET Smart Card³), migrant workers in many countries of origin need to pay government approved fees for COVID-19 tests. In cases where the recruitment agencies or employers bear such costs, it is not clear whether they will soon deduct such costs from migrant workers' wages and salaries.

³ BMET Smart Card is given to aspirant migrants in Bangladesh. Migrants are required to complete online registration, record their fingerprint, and collect a digital smart card from selected local offices and head office after completing pre-departure orientation.

Table 2: Who Pays for COVID-19 Tests?

	Origin Country Government	Destination Country Government	Employers	Migrants	Recruitment Agencies
Bangladesh	✓			✓	
Bhutan			✓	✓	
Cambodia				✓	
Lao PDR			✓	✓	
Nepal				✓	
Pakistan				✓	
Philippines	✓				
Sri Lanka				✓	
Thailand			✓		✓

COVID-19 = coronavirus disease, Lao PDR = Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Note: Information as of May/June 2022. Some destination countries have lifted testing requirements since then.

Source: ADB calculations using data from the Deployment and Outlook Survey on Labour Migration.

Administering COVID-19 vaccines has played a huge role in the resumption of labor migration from the region. However, some destination countries did not recognize some specific brands of vaccines, often those which were available and administered in migrant-sending countries. To address the mismatch in vaccine requirements and availability, some origin country governments prioritized migrants for destination country-recognized vaccine brands. For example, Sri Lanka provided booster vaccine of Pfizer and Bangladesh provided country-specific vaccination. In many instances, destination country governments revaccinated migrant workers upon entry.

Migrant workers also encountered different quarantine rules than tourists in some destination countries. In Thailand, for example, vaccinated and unvaccinated migrants are required to undergo a 7-day and 14-day quarantine, respectively, while it was reduced to only a day among tourists and other travelers from low-risk countries (identified by the Thai government as of May 2022).⁴ In most cases, migrant workers pay for quarantine fees in their destination countries, albeit in some cases, employers also pay.

Overall, the migration costs (for example, recruitment fees,⁵ health check-ups, and transport) have increased due to the pandemic. Adding to it is the requirement for COVID-19 insurance in some destination countries, such as Thailand until quite recently.⁶ Although some origin countries had compulsory government-initiated life insurance at a subsidized rate (for example, less than \$8 in the case of Bangladesh, providing a premium of \$4,266 [Bangladeshi taka 400,000] in case of death), these are general life

and disability schemes introduced by the governments before the pandemic. Nepal and Pakistan also have similar insurance schemes; however, COVID-19 is not included in the insurance.

Introduction of Online Pre-departure Orientation and Other Services for Migrants

Amid mobility restrictions implemented in many developing Asian countries during the pandemic, many migration-related services have shifted to digital platforms and channels although some governments in the region were already conducting online programs before the pandemic. For example, Nepal and Thailand have introduced online registration of migrant workers, which was already practiced in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Pakistan, and the Philippines prior to the pandemic. In Pakistan, however, migrants need to be physically present at the centers to provide their biometric information.

The pandemic also prompted the governments of Bhutan, Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Sri Lanka, and Thailand to conduct pre-departure orientations (PDOs) virtually, which is not new in Bangladesh and the Philippines. In Cambodia, virtual PDO was usually carried out via *Zoom*. There were no structured virtual PDOs developed but governments relied on their respective websites and social media pages to impart useful information to migrant workers. Pakistan, however, continued with in-person PDO since lockdowns imposed in response to COVID-19 outbreak were rather short-lived. All country governments interviewed further shared that the health components of their existing PDO programs were updated with COVID-19-related information.

⁴ As of 1 June 2022 quarantine requirement is no longer applied to vaccinated entrants.

⁵ The migrant origin countries have not increased the official fees for recruitment, but it is difficult to monitor, unless a report of malpractice has been submitted against the recruitment agencies for collecting unauthorized charges.

⁶ <https://apmigration.ilo.org/news/thailand-waives-health-insurance-for-cambodian-migrant-workers>.

Further, the applications and processing of work permit for workers were also carried out online in Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Nepal, Pakistan, and Thailand. Other migrant support services that have shifted online during the pandemic include (i) lodging migrant complaints for government investigation (Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) and (ii) the delivery of job and vacancy information for potential migrants (Lao PDR).

Cambodia also introduced alternative consultation platforms using social media apps, *Facebook* and *Telegram*. The Facebook page imparts among migrant workers relevant information related to the pandemic and other issues. Migrant workers were also gathered in a *Telegram* group during the pandemic where they can seek answers to their health-related inquiries and be informed of safety measures implemented. The use of these digital platforms was well received by migrant workers themselves and is expected to continue as an effective channel to deliver online support for migrant workers.

Amid the observed massive return of overseas Filipino workers due to the pandemic, the Philippines' Overseas Workers Welfare Administration launched in June 2020 an online platform called OASIS (Overseas Filipino Workers Assistance Information System) to facilitate an orderly and smooth repatriation as well as assist returning overseas Filipino workers.

There were also instances wherein governments simplified processes or introduced changes to their laws to better accommodate different circumstances. In Nepal, demand attestations⁷ and pre-approval dates were extended by 6 months in order to reduce the workload at diplomatic missions. The Lao PDR revised and endorsed new regulations governing recruitment agencies to adapt to new conditions. Meanwhile, renewal of licenses and new applications for recruitment agencies were also carried out online post-pandemic in Nepal and Thailand.

The recruitment process also adjusted itself to the pandemic. Before the pandemic, the employers from destination countries would often fly in to interview aspirant migrant workers in person; now, many job interviews shifted online. Survey respondents reported that recruitment agencies now exert more effort to better prepare the prospective migrant workers for interviews by providing knowledge about the destination countries and the jobs.

Monitoring Recruitment Agencies and Curbing Irregular Migration

During the pandemic, virtual monitoring of recruitment agencies was adopted by the governments of Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Lao PDR, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia,

the Lao PDR, and Sri Lanka reported difficulty in monitoring and supervising the activities of recruitment agencies during the pandemic. Restriction to movement and ineffectiveness of virtual meetings and discussions as a monitoring tool were cited as causes of the problem.

Some respondent governments observed that recruitment agencies adopted good practices, such as going digital, to better manage their operations during the pandemic. In Bhutan, agencies instituted their own set of Standard Operational Procedures to abide with COVID-19 requirements. Also in Bhutan, to deal with urgent deployment of specific categories of labor migrants, i.e., professional and skilled workers, the government allowed for priority processing or express service among recruitment agencies.

Some of the reported malpractices by recruitment agencies such as the re-routing of air, ground, or sea travel to enter the destination through a third country in order to avoid movement restrictions were not considered an issue by most countries. Only a few cases of irregular migration and recruitment were reported by the Lao PDR, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, including in the form of violation of immigration law, document fraud, and irregular crossing.

Bilateral Cooperation Strengthened

The pandemic also proved to be a catalyst to forge further collaboration between governments of migrant origin and host countries and to establish better and safe migration of Asian workers. Many migrant-sending countries in the region have entered into MOUs with a number of destination countries since 2020, and many other MOUs are in the pipeline and at a final stage of negotiations (Table 3). Some MOUs were signed between local authorities of destination countries, such as MOUs between the Republic of Korea and the Lao PDR and Cambodia.

These bilateral labor agreements are expected to further facilitate labor migration from the region over the long run. Most importantly, as stipulated in some MOUs, these will officially establish a framework that better responds to the needs and welfare of migrants during and after a pandemic. For example, recent MOUs entered by the Philippine government contain a clause allowing for repatriation of migrants in case a pandemic occurs. The ongoing renewal of the Cambodia–Malaysia MOU includes a discussion over the clause stipulating that the expenses relating to COVID-19 testing and quarantine requirements shall be borne by the employers instead of the migrant workers, effectively reducing the cost of migration. Meanwhile, the Bangladesh–Greece deal hopes to curtail illegal migration and trafficking of Bangladeshis to Greece and regularize the current undocumented workers.

⁷ Demand attestation and renewal of labor approval need to be approved by Nepalese diplomatic missions.

Table 3: MOUs Signed by Selected Migrant-Origin Countries in Asia

Country	2020	2021	2022	Expected to Be Signed in 2022
Bangladesh		Maldives and Malaysia	Greece and Republic of Korea	
Cambodia			Republic of Korea and Seychelles	Malaysia (renewal)
Lao PDR			Republic of Korea	
Nepal	Israel	Republic of Korea		KSA (final stage), Maldives, Seychelles, and United Kingdom
Pakistan	Malaysia and Türkiye			Denmark, Germany, Italy, Libya, Poland, Portugal, and Romania
Philippines		Romania and United Kingdom		Canada (Yukon and Ontario)
Sri Lanka	Israel		United Kingdom	Japan
Thailand			Israel, Japan, Republic of Korea, and KSA	Australia (agriculture sector)

KSA = Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Lao PDR = Lao People's Democratic Republic, MOU = memorandum of understanding.

Source: ADB compilation using data from the Deployment and Outlook Survey on Labour Migration.

CONCLUSION AND WAYS FORWARD

The COVID-19 pandemic brought an unprecedented disruption of labor migration flows within and from Asia. Many migrant-sending countries in the region faced a number of challenges sustaining the deployment of workers and coping with the additional layers of health and safety protocols. We also find that a significant share of the additional migration costs is usually borne by migrants including the costs of COVID-19 tests and insurance, quarantine services, and the significant increase in airfare.

While the deployment trend and the positive outlook seemingly indicate a return to “normalcy,” it is important to note that the pandemic has exposed socioeconomic vulnerabilities of migrant workers, including their limited access to health and social services and protection. This experience should not be repeated. In the meantime, many governments of migrant-origin countries strive to innovate digitalizing some of the key migrant services. Such initiatives need to be sustained and enhanced over time to flexibly fit the needs of migrants.

The lessons from the pandemic provide us with some recommendations to facilitate better deployment of migrant workers in the post-COVID-19 era.

First, it is important to ensure that additional migration costs in times of crisis are not pushed back to migrants.⁸ Employment

contracts should indicate that the initial costs of migration be covered by the employers and that they would also include related emergency clauses clearly stipulating that employers and/or the countries of origin and destinations coordinate to cover such costs. The cost of migration is expected to remain on an uptrend due to the rising costs of airfares and frequently changing health requirements. This measure will also help alleviate the burden of debt that many migrants and their families continue to suffer.

Second, the rapid growth of online services in the overseas employment administration warrants thorough monitoring and review. It is important to evaluate such services through surveys and end-user interviews to ensure that digital/online services achieve the intended objective and operate in a way that complements face-to-face services. Key evaluation areas may include the effectiveness of online pre-departure services as well as the diligence of the online licensing and monitoring of the recruitment agencies.

Third, the importance of further strengthening the cooperation and collaboration between origin and destination countries cannot be overemphasized. Pandemic experiences call for the joint assessment and pilot of the safe deployment protocols and protection of workers in time of health and other unconventional emergencies. Bilateral and regional labor agreements are encouraged to include provisions for pandemic and other disasters that define the responsibilities of host/origin countries, intermediaries, employers, and migrant workers.

⁸ This generally aligns with Objective 6 under the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration. Details of the global compact can be accessed at <https://www.iom.int/resources/global-compact-safe-orderly-and-regular-migration/res/73/195>.

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