

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES RELATING TO THE 2006 HIGH-LEVEL DIALOGUE ON  
INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT

*United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)*

A. INTRODUCTION

As a follow-up to the High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has convened a series of inter-governmental forums where members and associate members engaged in discussions and the exchange of experiences on migration and development.

The third session of the Committee on Emerging Social Issues of ESCAP, held in Bangkok, Thailand, from 12 to 14 December 2006, considered regional challenges in managing migration for development as one of its agenda items and examined key issues of international migration in the Asian and Pacific region. The Committee recognized international migration as an emerging issue and requested ESCAP to coordinate regional follow-up to the High-level Dialogue. It urged ESCAP to provide a forum for regional dialogue and to facilitate discussions on the multidimensional aspects of international migration and its linkages with development.

The ESCAP Commission, at its sixty-third session held in Almaty, Kazakhstan, from 17 to 23 May 2007, considered the challenges and opportunities of international migration and development, with particular emphasis on the situation of least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing states. The Commission adopted resolution 63/7 which provided further mandate for the work of ESCAP in this particular area, and called on the Secretariat to compile and analyse information on international migration, continue to provide a forum for dialogue among members and associate members, and to convene a high-level meeting on international migration and development, preferably in 2008.

In response, ESCAP, in collaboration with the Government of Thailand, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Population Division, organized the Asia-Pacific High-level Meeting on International Migration and Development in Bangkok, Thailand, from 22 to 23 September 2008. The meeting was attended by 22 representatives from ESCAP members and associate member states. While providing a forum for dialogue, the meeting also served as a regional preparatory meeting to the second Global Forum on Migration and Development, which was held in Manila, the Philippines, from 27 to 30 October 2008.

During the Asia-Pacific High-level Meeting, four round tables were held that focused on: (a) remittances for development; (b) social dimensions of international migration; (c) migration in least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small islands developing states, and (d) data and research on migration. Countries participating in the meeting recognized the need to better ensure the rights and welfare of migrants. Some countries of origin also shared their experience in providing protection for migrant workers living abroad. Concern was expressed about the large number of undocumented migrants in the region. It was noted that international migration was an intrinsic part of development, resulting from economic and demographic disparities between countries. It was also stated that international migration was a growing phenomenon in Asia and the Pacific. Participants adopted a summary of the major outcome presented by the Chair of the meeting.<sup>1</sup>

## B. RECENT ACTIVITIES ADDRESSING THE MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT NEXUS

ESCAP has undertaken several activities to advance the understanding of migration and development, including its linkages, in the region.

As a preparatory activity for the *Situation Report on International Migration in East and South-East Asia*, ESCAP organized a policy dialogue on international migration and development in East and South-East Asia in Bangkok, Thailand, from 8 to 9 November 2007. Resource persons delivered lectures on a wide range of migration issues. In addition, government representatives gave country-specific presentations. Attended by government officials from 12 countries in the subregion, the workshop enhanced the understanding of migration issues, promoted constructive dialogue and provided an effective venue for the exchange of good practices.

The social dimension of international migration receives marginal attention in the migration debate. In order to fill this research gap, ESCAP produced a report entitled *Looking into Pandora's Box: The Social Implications of International Migration in Asia* (ESCAP, 2008a). The study highlighted the increasing scale of female migration and migration of highly-skilled professionals in the region. It also addressed the protection of the rights of migrants and the provision of access to basic social services by looking at both countries of origin and destination.

Most recently, ESCAP and the United Nations Population Division jointly organized an Expert Group Meeting on International Migration and Development in Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok, Thailand, from 20 to 21 September 2008. During the meeting, experts from academia and practitioners from non-governmental institutions and organizations of the United Nations system discussed regional migration trends and patterns, migration policies and cooperation mechanisms, labour migration, and the link between international migration and development. Participating experts also examined the availability of migration data and concluded that coverage, comparability and timeliness of migration data needed to be improved in order to better understand international migration flows and their links to development. Participants emphasized that these links were not straightforward. The management of migration flows, in particular of labour migration, was also debated.

Together with other regional commissions of the United Nations and the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), ESCAP will participate in the Development Account project Strengthening National Capacities to Deal with International Migration: Maximizing Development Benefits and Minimizing Negative Impact. The project aims at strengthening national capacities by: (a) improving data quality and availability on international migration; (b) increasing institutional and human capacities to design and implement migration policies, and (c) promoting cooperation through an effective intra- and inter-regional network for the exchange of information, studies, experiences and best practices among countries of destination and origin.

In order to monitor migration flows within the region, ESCAP established a database on labour outflows from a selected group of countries. Depending on data availability, attempts will be made to compile similar data, classified by sex and skill level of migrants and destination country.

## C. COLLABORATION WITH OTHER INTERNATIONAL AND INTERGOVERNMENTAL PARTNERS

ESCAP continues to coordinate its activities on international migration with relevant United Nations agencies and bodies in order to avoid duplication of efforts and promote cooperation of activities at the regional level. Since 2005, ESCAP has been co-chairing, along with the IOM, the Regional Thematic

Working Group on International Migration including Human Trafficking, whose members consist of 16 United Nations agencies and intergovernmental organizations.<sup>2</sup> The group met four times each in 2007 and 2008 and shared information on recent activities undertaken by the various organizations.

Under the leadership of ESCAP, the Regional Thematic Working Group produced the *Situation Report on International Migration in East and South-East Asia*, which identified recent levels and patterns of international migration at national and subregional levels in the region (Regional Thematic Working Group on International Migration including Human Trafficking, 2008). The report, launched in October 2008, provides an overview of the multidimensional aspects of international migration. It provides a regional perspective on migration, including comparative information and statistics and covers cross-cutting topics such as gender, health and regional cooperation.

#### D. EMERGING ISSUES IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

##### *1. Robust flows of migrant workers and remittances*

Key source countries of labour migration in the region have registered sharp increases in the outflows of migrant workers since the turn of the century (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2008b). In 2006 alone, over one million migrant workers left the Philippines. Annual labour migration from Bangladesh, mainly to the countries in Western Asia, some of them members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and Malaysia more than doubled, from 103,000 persons in 1990 to 252,000 persons in 2005, while in 2007 the numbers surged to over 800,000 persons. Indonesia sent over 712,000 workers abroad in 2006. Between 2000 and 2006, an annual average of 204,000 labour migrants left Sri Lanka, the majority of whom for a destination in the GCC countries. It is likely that such robust outflows of migrants are associated with the recent construction boom in the GCC countries, especially in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and the ensuing demand for workers.

In tandem with the increase in the demand for labour migrants, the Asian and Pacific region also experienced notable increases in remittance flows. The region remains one of the largest recipients of recorded remittances. In 2007, remittances sent by migrants to countries in the ESCAP region exceeded US\$121 billion, up from US\$110 billion in 2006, and more than twice the level reached in 2000 (The World Bank, 2008). In 2007, of the top 10 remittances recipient countries in the world, three were from the ESCAP region —China, India and the Philippines. Remittances to these countries accounted for more than half of the remittances received in the entire region. Significant remittance flows were also recorded in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan and Viet Nam. As a share of GDP, remittances were significant in several countries of origin, particularly in smaller economies such as Tajikistan (36 per cent), Tonga (32 per cent), Kyrgyzstan (27 per cent), Armenia (18 per cent) and Nepal (18 per cent). According to the World Bank (2008), after several years of strong economic growth, there has been a slowdown in remittance flows to developing countries, and it is expected that this trend will deepen further in 2009.

##### *2. The global financial crisis and international migration*

The recent global financial crisis is likely to affect cross-border mobility of people living in the region, but the empirical data to study such impact are not yet available. The effects may depend on the length of the crisis and may differ by sectors and sub-region.

Once the financial crisis leads to significant job losses, demand for foreign labour might decrease or governments might facilitate the return of migrants upon the completion of their contract. A slowdown in the economies of the GCC countries may occur with decreasing oil prices and might in turn lead to a decline in the number of construction projects being pursued, hence decreasing the demand for migrant

workers. Furthermore, employers may take advantage of the situation to reduce migrant workers' wages or benefits to alleviate their financial burden.

However, it may be useful to remember that the Asian economic crisis in 1997 did not change the fundamental trend toward greater mobility within the region. The labour recipient countries which were affected by the crisis (for instance, Malaysia, the Republic of Korea and Thailand) continued to rely on unskilled migrant workers in export-oriented industries.

The impact of the financial crisis on the volume of remittances is also not straightforward. It is known that remittance flows tend to be more stable than capital flows and that they tend to be counter-cyclical, i.e. increasing during economic downturns or after a natural disaster in the migrants' countries of origin. The study also shows that the volume of remittances depends more on the stock of migrants than on the flows. Hence, even if the flows would decline due to the financial crisis, the volume of remittances may not be affected.

### *3. Marriage migration on the rise*

Migration for the purpose of marrying a foreign partner, known as "marriage migration", is on the rise in the region. Japan, the Republic of Korea and Taiwan Province of China have all experienced a significant increase in international marriages, often between foreign women and local men. For example, in the Republic of Korea, 14 per cent of marriage ceremonies performed in 2005 took place between a Korean national and a foreign spouse (Kim, 2007). Many foreign brides come to the above countries from neighbouring developing countries —China, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam.

One important factor contributing to this trend is the sustained level of urbanization, coupled with impending depopulation of rural areas owing to low fertility and population ageing. In countries affected by these trends, men living in rural areas and involved in farming are often unable to find brides because local women increasingly prefer urban lifestyles. It is thus becoming more common for rural men to search for foreign brides.

However, the complexities of finding a foreign bride are myriad. The involvement and proliferation of brokers and private agencies fostering marriage migration has raised concerns over fraudulent marriages and the trafficking of women. Facing restrictive policies, aspiring migrants may use marriage to gain residence in another country. Employers may also use marriage as a recruitment strategy. For receiving countries, the existence of spouses and children of internationally married couples often raises questions about settlement, integration and the future of multiculturalism.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> More information on the meeting and a copy of the Chairman's Summary are available at <http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/cache/offonce/pid/1674?entryId=20080> (accessed 22 January 2009).

<sup>2</sup> The Regional Thematic Working Group consists of the following international and intergovernmental organizations: ESCAP (Co-chair), International Organization for Migration (IOM) (Co-chair), International Labour Organization (ILO), Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank.

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