

LAUNCH OF THE FIRST COUNTRY REPORT INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION OUTLOOK SRI LANKA – 2008

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OCTOBER 2009**

Hon. Athauda Seneviratne, Minister of Labour Relations and Manpower; Mr. Sunil Sirisena, Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare; Prof. Buddhadasa Hewavitharana, Chairman, IPS; Ms. Aurella Rincon, Project Development Officer, IOM-Sri Lanka; Shantha Kulasekera, Head, Migration Management, IOM-Sri Lanka; Heads of Foreign Missions, Secretaries to Ministries, other dignitaries, sponsors, ladies and gentlemen.

I welcome all of you to this book launch jointly organized by the IPS and the IOM-Sri Lanka.

We are indeed pleased to have with us the Hon. Minister of Labour Relations and Manpower as our Chief Guest this evening. We are also pleased to have the Secretary to the Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare as the Guest of Honour. I extend a warm welcome to both of you.

The International Migration Outlook Sri Lanka is the first country report to be launched by a South Asian country. It is a result of two years of a capacity building project implemented by the IOM towards the establishment of a coordinated migration data collection system in Sri Lanka. The preparation of the report was undertaken by the IPS for IOM- Sri Lanka.

International labour migration is an important area in Sri Lanka's socio-economic system. Migration from Sri Lanka has grown in importance for the last several decades and the numbers have increased more than tenfold during the same period. The total number of out migrants of Sri Lanka on employment abroad at present is estimated to be 1.8 million while annually the outflow of workers is estimated to be about 250,000 people. In 2007, 23 per cent of the total employment generated and 21 per cent of the labour force in Sri Lanka was represented by foreign employment. Remittances of migrant workers is close to US \$ 3 bn or 7 per cent of GDP or 36 per cent of its export earnings and it is the second largest foreign exchange earner to Sri Lanka. It

has become the leading source of foreign capital to Sri Lanka, overtaking the official development assistance and foreign direct investment.

All this is well and good but there is another side of migration that does not paint such a rosy picture. There are many social problems associated with international migration, particularly the impact on the families left behind by the migrant parents, harassment and exploitation in the working destination, etc. Rights of the migrant workers are not met in some of the destination countries, and as a result they undergo further hardships. So in order to examine the ways and means of minimizing the negative aspects and maximize the positive aspects of international migration we must have effective policies on migration. But good policies can be made only on the basis of a solid and accurate data base on migration.

Although numerous types of international migration data are compiled by both government and non-government organizations in Sri Lanka, there is a need to strengthen the international migration statistics and recording systems for better planning and decision making in international migration management in Sri Lanka. The IOM Sri Lanka recognized that the collection, storing, processing, analysing and dissemination of comprehensive, accurate statistical information is not systematically practised in Sri Lanka. Thus in 2002, the IOM-Sri Lanka took the initiative with the financial support from the EU and Australian government for a Technical Capacity Building Project in Migration Management. This project grew over the years and in 2007, IOM-Sri Lanka assisted the GOSL in establishing the National Centre for Migration Statistics (NCMS) at the Department of Census and Statistics.

This report that we are launching today attempts to provide Sri Lanka's international migration dynamics using the available data from this project and other sources. It was initiated in 2008 with the objective of preparing a comprehensive analysis of the current trends, patterns and changes in migration related sectors such as labour migration, permanent migration, student migration, irregular migration and tourism for the recent years. The report attempts to streamline Sri Lanka's international migration data. It sheds light on the challenges and opportunities ahead of Sri Lanka toward enhancing migration management.

The report shows that in addition to the large number of temporary migrant workers who have traditionally focused on the unskilled labour market in the Middle East and the other skilled categories to East Asia and the West, there were a significant number of people who migrated during the conflict periods in the Northern and Eastern parts of the country under refugee status to Western countries. There is a growing trend in the number of people migrating for permanent settlement, for educational purposes abroad, and tourism purposes, and there are also irregular migrants who are often difficult to monitor.

The migrant statistics reported by different sources give contradictory numbers which are questionable. There is no proper recording and reporting mechanism for other types of migrants as well. It is possible to assume that the actual number of migrant workers is much more than the recorded number due to workers leaving through unauthorized sources and personal contacts and the non-identification of the large number who have secured employment who are not registered with the SLBFE.

The report acknowledges that there are many gaps in the collection of migration data in Sri Lanka despite recent efforts by the Government for a coordinated approach to data collection. The report by no means provides a total migration picture in Sri Lanka, however, it is an attempt for collection and dissemination of migration data for the benefit of policy development and subsequent programme intervention for managing migration for the benefit of Sri Lanka.

Policy areas are also discussed in the report. For instance, Sri Lanka has been traditionally concentrating on the unskilled workers and the housemaids, but present demand is for more skilled and professional categories of workers which require internationally recognized qualifications to enter these markets. Evidence show that low skilled and unskilled categories of migrants are subject to high level of violation of human rights, including labour rights, harassment and abuse at the work place more than skilled professionals, especially due to lack of education, training and awareness of the host country laws and working conditions.

It is evident that Sri Lanka has a huge mis-match between the international demand for jobs and its supply capabilities. The most pressing issue is the skills mis-match of what is demanded by

the foreign countries and what Sri Lankan workers could offer. The present Government has placed special emphasis on the promotion of high skilled workers as against the low skilled categories of labour migrants, but lot more work needs to be done.

The internationalization of higher education raises new challenges for policy makers with respect to education policy, as well as the co-ordination of their economic, social, migration and development policies. Thus another policy area where the report focuses on is Student Migration. The movement of students in large numbers from Sri Lanka remains a concern as the country has invested in free education system for more than 6 decades. How could we aim at 'brain gain' rather than 'brain drain' is the challenge.

The world's population is increasingly mobile. As the level of international migration rises, so does its impact on economic, social, cultural and political policies in most countries of the world. The phenomenon of international migration brings into play many sensitive issues of national security and identity, of social change and cultural adaptation, and of resource allocation. All these questions represent important challenges to migration policy makers. Policy choices made now will help to determine whether migration is managed to maximize its benefits, or whether it will continue to be a source of concern, potential social disruption and friction between States. The key is not to prevent mobility, but to manage it better.

As stated earlier, the preparation of this report was done by the IPS for the IOM. Tilani Jayawardena and Ruwan Jayathilaka from the IPS were the key resource persons from the IPS. Many organizations assisted the IPS in the preparation process. They are: Department of Emigration and Immigration, Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, the CID, the BOI, Sri Lanka Tourist Board, and Foreign Diplomatic Missions in Sri Lanka, IOM, and others. I thank all the organizations and the individuals who supported us in preparing this report. This event would not have been possible without the generous sponsorship of the Sampath bank. I am most grateful to them for their support for this book launch.

I once again welcome all of you and wish you a pleasant evening.