



CHALLENGES IN ACCESSING LABOUR MARKETS ABROAD FOR SRI LANKA

INTRODUCTION

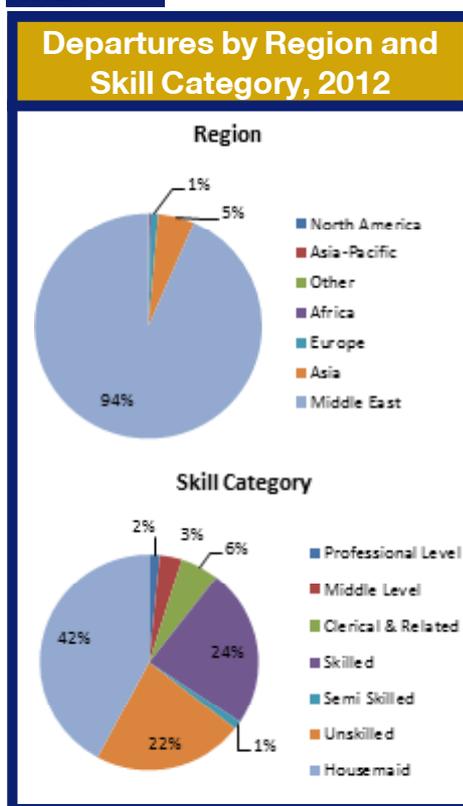
Currently, the Middle East constitutes the largest foreign employment market for Sri Lankan migrants, with over 94 per cent of overseas Sri Lankan workers employed in this region (Chart 1). According to the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), many of these employees are females seeking employment as housemaids (Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, 2012). In fact, approximately 42 per cent of female migrant workers were housemaids while 22 per cent were unskilled (Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, 2012). On the other hand, the proportion of skilled and semi-skilled workers travelling abroad for employment purposes is comparatively small, constituting only 25 per cent of all foreign employment in 2012 (Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, 2012). In the context of Sri Lanka's concentration of labour markets (Middle East) and skilled categories (housemaids and unskilled), the Ministry for Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare (2008) in the National Labour Migration Policy for Sri Lanka stated: *"New overseas markets and opportunities must be explored and promoted. This will ensure the promotion and development of employment opportunities outside Sri Lanka for Sri Lankans."*

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The study employed a qualitative methodology due to the nature of information required to answer the given research question – that is, challenges in accessing labour markets abroad for Sri Lanka - which require both description and explanation. Primary data was gathered through semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 24 relevant stakeholders, which included 22 licensed foreign employment agencies, one private association and one government institution responsible for foreign employment in the country. The latter two were selected to triangulate the data and findings. Agencies were selected because they form an important link between migrant workers and employers abroad, and would have in-depth knowledge and understanding of accessing new markets and job categories. In order to select these respondents, a purposive sampling technique was used. Out of those agencies interviewed, 13 agencies were small in scale (500 or fewer migrants per year), 2 were medium in size (between 500-1000

migrants per year), and 4 were large (over 1000 migrants per year).

Chart 1



Source: Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment, 2012, Annual Statistical Handbook

KEY FINDINGS

In terms of challenges in accessing labour markets abroad, agents highlighted several issues (Table 1). Some of the main challenges confronting Sri Lanka in promoting labour migration included:

- Proficiency in English was said to be lacking amongst Sri Lanka migrants and this was affecting recruitment across all job categories.
- Some of the rules and regulations governing the recruitment of migrant workers in Sri Lanka, were thought to be unnecessary (irrelevant documentation from female workers who go abroad as housemaids) or redundant (mandatory training programmes for higher skilled categories).

- Agents have little or no contacts outside the Middle East and they have difficulty in ensuring that the job orders and employers are genuine/legitimate.
- Salaries abroad were mentioned to be unattractive/low for certain job categories, especially for low-skilled work.
- Sri Lankans are reluctant to go to some markets despite the availability of job vacancies due to negative publicity and restrictions on lifestyles. Instead they prefer to go to markets for which obtaining visas are difficult.
- There is a lack of capacity to supply skilled and professional categories. The skills on offer by Sri Lankan migrants do not match up to the skills demanded by destination countries.

- There is a lack of cooperation amongst licensed agencies because of the intense competition in the market. Although there is an association of foreign employment agencies (ALFEA), many commented that it has become ineffective.
- Sri Lankans have high salary expectations which is not commensurate with their skills and experience. Moreover, with the achieving a middle income status, Sri Lanka is uncompetitive with other developing countries in South Asia, where there is a large pool of people who are willing to work for a lesser salary.
- Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment is currently constrained in terms of promotion – it lacks sufficient personnel, time and resources to carry out promotional activities.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The implications of the findings from the study are that there are supply and demand side constraints to accessing markets abroad. The scope for addressing demand-side challenges is limited as Sri Lanka has little or no power to affect changes in labour receiving countries with regard to rules and regulations, salaries, visas, etc. other than through MoUs and bilateral negotiations. In this context, policy focus should be given to deal with supply-side issues within Sri Lanka by:

- improving training,
- better marketing,
- streamlining recruitment process,
- enhancing cooperation within the industry

In terms of training, much more attention needs to be given in improving spoken English, establishing training institutes in rural areas, improving the relevance of mandatory course, and conducting courses to develop skills, which meet the requirements of destination countries. Marketing needs to be done to alter the negative image and attitude surround migrant workers and the Middle East in Sri Lanka, conduct exhibitions/attend job fairs to promote a more positive image of manpower from Sri Lanka and more assistance extended to the SLBFE from Sri Lankan Embassies. Recruitment for foreign employment could be facilitated through simplification of rules and regulations, removing unnecessary requirements, wider application of IT, appointment of capable officers, etc. There is also a dire need for the stakeholders to come together for the betterment of the industry, which is lacking at the moment. There needs to be more cooperation across the industry which needs the assistance of relevant government institutions.

Table 1

Perceived Challenges in Accessing Markets Abroad

Challenges (no. of respondents =22)	Count
1. Language proficiency	16
2. Rules & Regulations governing recruitment of migrants in Sri Lanka	15
3. Job orders outside traditional markets	11
4. Salaries	10
5. Preferences of Sri Lankan Migrant Workers	9
6. Lack of capacity to supply the required manpower	9
7. Lack of unity amongst agencies	9
8. SL uncompetitive vis-a-vis other labour sending countries in the region	8
9. Lack of Marketing	7
10. Bureaucracy	6
11. High recruitment costs dissuading migrants from seeking employment abroad	6
12. Difficulties in obtaining visas for some countries	5
13. Quotas	5
14. Certain professional jobs are the preserve of certain migrant countries	4
15. Image of Sri Lankan workers	4
16. Rules & Regulations in labor receiving countries	3
17. Outdated Databank	3

Source: Interviews

Sources

Ministry of Foreign Employment Promotion and Welfare (2008), *National Labour Migration Policy of Sri Lanka*, available at: http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-asia/-ro-bangkok/-ilo-colombo/documents/publication/wcms_114003.pdf

Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (2013). *Annual Statistical Report of Foreign Employment*. Colombo: Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment.

This policy brief is based on a recent study on 'Accessing New Employment Markets Abroad' by Janaka Wijayasiri, Chandana Karunaratne and Dharshani Premaratne of the IPS under the *Meeting the Development Challenges of Migration (MED_MIG)* project. The study analyses access to new employment markets and the challenges faced in doing so. This brief will highlight the key challenges in accessing labour markets abroad.



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