

Policies for Mainstreaming Migration into Development in Sri Lanka

Conference organized by the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka

Colombo, Sri Lanka.

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Concept Note

Background

International migration is a cross cutting phenomenon in Sri Lanka. The stock of migrant workers of Sri Lankan origin stands at approximately 1.6 million and in 2013, these migrants remitted USD 6.4 billion, which accounted for nearly 9.5 percent of GDP. International labour migration became popular in Sri Lanka since the late 1970's and the predominant destinations during this period were the Middle Eastern countries and most migrants were unskilled. Over the years Sri Lankan migrants have gained access into other markets and other skills levels; however, still unskilled labour into the Middle East continues to account for a bulk of migrants. In 2013, 94 percent of total migrant labour departures were to the Middle East region, while unskilled labour and housemaids together accounted for nearly 60 percent of total departures.

The migration phenomenon involves three consecutive phases – pre-migration, migration and post-migration. Characteristics and decisions such as destination, occupation and skills level, relevant in the pre-migration stage affect outcomes in the subsequent two phases. Specifically, the departure of females leaving their families behind to pursue overseas employment is associated with significant social costs during the migration and post-migration phases. As such, the government of Sri Lanka is interested in promoting diversification of migration in terms of skills as well as destinations with the intention of reducing the number of females pursuing foreign employment. Such diversification requires a clear understanding of the labour market for temporary migrant workers in potential destinations, which includes the market structure, market mechanism, skills sets in demand and their existing supply of foreign labour, as well as of Sri Lanka's supply of migrant labour.

Unlike the pre and post migration phases, during the migration phase migrants are immersed in a new country and a new culture, which often leads to adverse situations such as vulnerability to harassment. Among all migrant occupations, female domestic workers are most vulnerable to such hardship due to the overlap of their living quarters with working environment. In 2012, nearly 80 percent 10,220 complaints made by migrant workers of Sri Lankan origin were by female domestic workers. Given the

significant proportion of female domestic workers among Sri Lankan migrant workers, their vulnerability to many forms of harassment is an ongoing concern among the migration stakeholders.

In Sri Lanka there is considerable emphasis on the first two phases of migration, with limited focus on the post-migration phase. However, majority of Sri Lankan migrants plan to return as part of an optimal life-cycle residential location sequence, where they migrate for a few years to accumulate savings at the destination and return. This temporary nature of departures is associated with continued ties with Sri Lanka and the related remittances and eventual return of the migrant. Such return marks the beginning of the post-migration phase. Attention to the post-migration phase is critical for migrants to achieve the socio-economic objectives of their life-cycle residential location sequence, as many return not only with new skills and accumulated savings, but also challenged interpersonal relationships with those left behind. As such, returnees need guidance on socio-economic reintegration in par with pre-migration training that a potential migrant receive on foreign employment.

Due to these salient features of migration in Sri Lanka, policy makers are often grappling with the trade-off between promoting international migration and protecting the well-being of migrants and their families. Successful policies on migration can be achieved if related policy packages are drawn in consultation with all relevant stakeholders such as migrants; their families; foreign employment agents; relevant ministries and institutions; and researchers. As such, a dialogue and adequate interaction among stakeholders are important precursors for a successful migration policy formation.

Objectives of the Conference

Against this backdrop, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) is organizing a conference, funded by the Think Tank Initiative (TTI) – a multi-donor program managed by Canada’s International Development Research Center (IDRC), on the theme of *maximizing the benefit Sri Lanka’s international labour migration while protecting the welfare of migrants and their families*. The conference will bring together local stakeholders and international resource persons with the objective of learning from policy initiatives aimed at mainstreaming migration into development. The conference will consist of three sessions covering the following sub-themes:

- Sri Lanka’s potential to penetrate new labour markets with skilled labour.
- Vulnerability of female domestic workers.
- Reintegration of returnee migrants.