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INTRA-SOUTH ASIAN MIGRATION AND ITS ROLE IN REGIONAL INTEGRATION AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

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Executive Summary

South Asia hosts nearly 11 million international migrants who move within the region, creating a complex web of human mobility that shapes economies and societies. a phenomenon overshadowed by migration to Western countries. Major corridors connect Bangladesh and India, Nepal and India, Afghanistan and Pakistan and, increasingly, workers from across the region and the Maldives.

Economic opportunity drives much of this movement, with wage differences creating powerful incentives. Historical ties, open borders, climate pressures and established migrant networks further facilitate these flows. For migrants' families, remittances provide crucial support—India-to-Nepal transfers alone reach \$1.5 billion annually, improving education outcomes and building community resilience.

While destination countries benefit from labor in construction, tourism and services, migrants themselves often struggle. Working primarily in informal sectors without contracts or protections, many face exploitation and discrimination, challenges that COVID-19 dramatically worsened.

Migration patterns differ by gender, with men dominating overall flows while women follow distinct paths influenced by cultural expectations and employment opportunities. Despite the significance of these movements, governance remains fragmented, with limited regional coordination.

The future of South Asian migration depends on strengthening regional cooperation, enhancing bilateral agreements, improving data collection and expanding protections for migrants. With thoughtful policies, countries can transform migration from a vulnerability into a driver of sustainable development and regional integration.

1

Introduction

South Asia, a region of immense demographic diversity, rich cultural heritage and complex geopolitical dynamics, has long been characterized by significant human mobility across its national borders. This intra-regional migration has been influenced by historical connections, cultural affinities, economic disparities, political developments and environmental factors. Despite the growing importance of South Asian migration to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Europe and North America, intra-regional movements remain substantial and critically shape the socio-economic and political landscape of the region.

The significance of intra-South Asian migration lies in its multifaceted impact on origin and destination countries. For origin countries, emigration serves as a vital strategy for poverty reduction, contributing to foreign exchange through remittances, possibly influencing social and political dynamics. For destination countries, immigrants fill gaps in the labor market and support economic growth, sometimes presenting integration challenges for policymakers. Beyond these instrumental effects, migration within South Asia also fosters cultural exchange, regional integration and diplomatic relations among countries.

This policy paper offers an analysis of intra-South Asian migration patterns and their implications for regional integration and economic growth. It examines the historical context, current trends and driving factors behind migration flows within the region, with particular attention to the dynamics of migration between Nepal and India, Bangladeshi migrants in the Maldives and India and other significant migration corridors. Furthermore, it explores the economic, humanitarian and social dimensions of these movements, as well as the policy frameworks that regulate them. Through this analysis, the policy paper aims to enhance the understanding of how intra-regional migration impacts development trajectories and integration processes in South Asia.

2 Historical context and patterns of Intra-South Asian migration

Migration in South Asia has deep historical roots that predate the formation of modern nation-states. Ancient trade routes that crisscrossed the subcontinent facilitated not only the exchange of goods but also the movement of people, ideas and cultures. The colonial period significantly altered migration patterns, as the British Empire established systems of indentured labor that transported South Asians to various parts of the world (Clarke, et al., 2010). However, the most profound transformation ensued with the partition of India in 1947, resulting in one of the largest forced migrations in human history, with an estimated 14-16 million people crossing the newly established borders between India and Pakistan (Roberts, 2017).

The post-independence era witnessed the emergence of distinct migration patterns shaped by economic disparities, political conflicts and environmental factors. The Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 triggered another significant wave of cross-border movement, with approximately 10 million refugees fleeing to India (UNHCR, 2000). Similarly, the Sri Lankan civil war (1983-2009) caused considerable displacement, with many Tamils seeking refuge in India (Silvela, 2019). The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and subsequent conflicts have led to millions of Afghans seeking refuge in Pakistan and Iran, creating one of the world's largest and most protracted refugee situations (Naseh, 2025).

2.1. Migration corridors, scale, composition and drivers of Intra-South Asian migration

Several significant migration corridors define the intra-South Asian migration landscape. The Bangladesh–India corridor is among the largest in the region, driven by economic disparities, environmental factors and shared cultural and linguistic ties. While official figures vary, considerable undocumented migration occurs across this porous border. The Nepal–India corridor, facilitated by an open border agreement, features substantial circular and seasonal migration, primarily motivated by economic opportunities in India and educational aspirations (Bashyal, 2019). Decades of conflict in Afghanistan have resulted in large refugee populations in Pakistan, creating intricate migration dynamics that intertwine forced displacement with economic migration in the Afghanistan–Pakistan corridor (Amnesty International, 2019). In recent decades, considerable labor migration from Bangladesh and India to the Maldives has occurred, primarily within the construction, tourism and services sectors, forming what could be termed the India–Bangladesh–Maldives triangle.

As of 2020, approximately 10.9 million international migrants reside within South Asia, representing a significant portion of the 43.4 million individuals of South Asian origin living outside their country of birth globally (Migration Data Portal, 2025). However, official statistics likely underestimate the true extent of intra-regional migration due to the prevalence of undocumented movement, porous borders and circular migration patterns.

The composition of migrant populations varies across different corridors. In the Nepal–India corridor, male migrants have traditionally dominated, often engaging in seasonal agricultural work, security services and low-skilled manufacturing (Neupane, 2023). The Bangladesh–India corridor presents a more gender-balanced migration profile, with families frequently migrating together (Joseph & Naredran, 2013). The Afghanistan–Pakistan corridor is characterized by forced displacement, with entire communities seeking refuge across the border (Doblin & Johnson, 2024).

Table 1: Estimated migrant stock in South Asian countries, 2020

COUNTRY	TOTAL MIG-RANT STOCK	TOP ORIGIN COUNTRIES
INDIA	4.9 MILLION	BANGLADESH, NEPAL, PAKISTAN
PAKISTAN	3.3 MILLION	AFGHANISTAN, INDIA, BANGLADESH
BANGLADESH	2.1 MILLION	INDIA, PAKISTAN, NEPAL
NEPAL	0.5 MILLION	INDIA, BHUTAN, PAKISTAN
SRI LANKA	0.4 MILLION	INDIA, CHINA, MALAYSIA
MALDIVES	0.2 MILLION	BANGLADESH, INDIA, SRI LANKA
BHUTAN	0.05 MILLION	INDIA, NEPAL, CHINA
AFGHANIS-TAN	0.15 MILLION	PAKISTAN, IRAN, TAJIKISTAN

Source: Compiled from Migration Data Portal and UN DESA data, 2020

Several factors drive migration within South Asia. Significant wage differentials between countries act as powerful pull factors. For example, the per capita income in the Maldives is roughly ten times that in Bangladesh, creating strong economic incentives for migration. The relatively open borders between countries like India and Nepal, along with their historical, cultural and linguistic ties, facilitate migration.

Climate change impacts, including sea-level rise, flooding and agricultural disruptions, increasingly contribute to migration, particularly from Bangladesh to India and from rural to urban areas within countries (Duque, 2024). Protracted conflicts in Afghanistan and historical conflicts in Sri Lanka have generated significant forced migration within the region. Established migrant networks reduce the costs and risks of migration for newcomers, creating self-perpetuating migration systems (Sha, 2021). Bilateral agreements, such as the open border policy between India and Nepal, and restrictive immigration policies in some countries also shape migration patterns (Land Ports Authority of India (LPAI), 2023) (Watkins & Nurick, 2002).

3 Economic dimensions of Intra-South Asian migration

3.1.Remittance flows and their impact

Remittances represent a vital economic facet of intra-South Asian migration. While considerable attention is devoted to remittances from the Gulf states and Western countries, intra-regional remittance flows are significant and play an essential role in numerous local economies. For instance, in 2020, remittances from India to Nepal were estimated to be around USD 1.2 billion, i.e., approximately 17% of the total remittances received by Nepal, thereby making a substantial contribution to the country's foreign exchange reserves and GDP (United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), 2022). This number may have fallen during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, but it remains substantial.

Table 2: Remittance inflows to South Asian countries, 2022 (USD billion)

COUNTRY	TOTAL RE-MITTANCES	ESTIMATED INTRA-RE-GIONAL RE-MITTANCES	% OF GDP
INDIA	111.2	3.2	3.3%
PAKISTAN	30.0	2.1	9.1%
BANGLA-DESH	21.3	1.8	5.4%
NEPAL	10.9	1.5	26.1%
SRI LANKA	5.1	0.7	5.7%

Source: Compiled from World Bank Migration and Remittances data, 2022

Remittances significantly impact poverty reduction and human development at the household level. In Nepal, households receiving remittances from India have demonstrated improved nutritional outcomes for children, higher educational attainment and increased investment in housing and small businesses (Sharma, 2024). In Bangladesh, remittances from the Maldives have increased household resilience to economic shocks and natural disasters (Mostafa & Wadud, 2024).

However, remittance dependence also presents challenges. Economic downturns in destination countries can rapidly reduce remittance flows, adversely affecting origin countries. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, remittance flows within South Asia contracted substantially as migrant workers faced job losses and reduced incomes, exposing the vulnerability of remittance-dependent economies (Abbas, et al., 2024).

3.2.Labor market integration and impact

Intra-South Asian migrant workers occupy diverse positions in destination country labor markets, though they are often concentrated in specific sectors. In the Maldives, Bangladeshi workers account for approximately 70% of the construction workforce, while in India, Nepali migrants are prominently represented in manufacturing sectors, particularly in the border regions (Bashyal, 2020). In tourism-dependent economies like the Maldives, migrants from Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka form the backbone of the hospitality industry, occupying roles ranging from housekeeping to food service (Plewa, 2018). Female migrants, particularly from Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, often work as domestic helpers in affluent households across the region (Jones, 2019). Nepali migrants have established a significant presence in security services throughout India, leveraging their reputation for reliability and trustworthiness. Seasonal agricultural migration remains common, especially from Nepal to India during harvest seasons (Timalsina, 2022).

The impact of migrant labor on the economies of destination countries is substantial yet often underappreciated. In the Maldives, for example, the construction and tourism booms

of the past two decades would have been impossible without labor from Bangladesh and India (Plewa, 2018). Likewise, Nepali workers in India's manufacturing sector significantly contribute to industrial output in states such as Uttarakhand and Punjab (Bashyal, 2020) (Mishra, 2022).

For countries of origin, emigration can lead to labor shortages in certain sectors, particularly agriculture and manufacturing. In Nepal, the outmigration of working-age men has resulted in the "feminization of agriculture," with women taking on greater agricultural responsibilities (Lamichhane, et al., 2022). While this has contributed to women's economic empowerment in some contexts, it has also increased the workload for those who remain.

3.3. Migration as a poverty reduction strategy

For many households in South Asia, migration serves as a vital strategy for alleviating poverty and promoting economic advancement. The choice to migrate is frequently a component of a household's risk diversification strategy, with families tactically distributing their labor resources across various geographical regions and economic sectors to optimize income and reduce risk.

In Nepal, households with a member working in India tend to have higher and more stable incomes compared to non-migrant households, particularly in areas susceptible to agricultural shocks (International Monetary Fund, 2020). The income generated from remittances enables these households to invest in education, healthcare, housing improvements and, occasionally, small businesses, thereby creating pathways for long-term economic mobility.

In Bangladesh, migration to the Maldives offers a significant opportunity for economic advancement, allowing migrants to earn three to five times more than they would at home. This income disparity facilitates considerable improvements in living standards for migrant households and fosters investment in education and asset accumulation. The Bangladeshi migrant

worker population in the Maldives in 2024 was estimated at 139,220, according to the Maldives' Ministry of Economic Development and Trade, with a significant number comprising undocumented workers (Haleem, 2024).

However, employing migration as a strategy for poverty alleviation has its limitations. The costs associated with migration, including recruitment fees, travel expenses and income lost during the transition period, can be substantial (Plewa, 2018). In some cases, migrants incur significant debt to finance their migration, which may entrap them in cycles of debt bondage. Moreover, the precarious status of many migrants, particularly those who are undocumented, makes them vulnerable to exploitation and violations of their rights, potentially undermining the economic benefits of migration.

4

Case studies

4.1. The Nepal–India migration corridor

This corridor represents one of South Asia's most significant patterns of human mobility. The 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship facilitated such movement by establishing an open border that allowed citizens to move freely without passports or visas (Ministry of External Affairs, 1950). Nepali migration to India has a centuries-long history. It started with military service and evolved into modern patterns that include seasonal and circular migration and longer-term settlement. Estimates indicate that 3 - 4 million Nepali citizens are employed in India, primarily in sectors such as security services, hospitality, domestic work and manufacturing (Mishra, 2023). Alternatively, there is also a notable, albeit less studied, pattern of Indian migration to Nepal, particularly from the northern states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Enabled by the same open-border provisions of the 1950 Treaty, many Indians have migrated for work and small-scale business opportunities, especially to Nepal's Terai region and urban centers like Birgunj, Biratnagar and Kathmandu. While precise figures are elusive due to the lack of registration requirements, estimates suggest that India accounts for over 85% of Nepal's immigrant population, totaling approximately 487,000 to 600,000 individuals, a significant portion of whom are labor migrants and traders (Integral Human Development, 2022).

On average, remittances from India constitute approximately 14% of Nepal's total remittance inflows (around \$1.5 billion annually), boosting household incomes and investments in originating communities. Nepali workers fill significant gaps in India's labor market, while migrant households exhibit higher and more stable income levels than their non-migrant counterparts. Nevertheless, most Nepali migrants work in the informal sector without contracts or social protections, facing low wages and exploitative conditions.

Historical and cultural connections promote the integration of these workers into Indian society. However, Nepali migrants

frequently encounter discrimination and marginalization. Female migrants are especially susceptible to exploitation and gender-based violence (Regmi, et al., 2019). In Nepal, the outmigration of men has led to the "feminization of agriculture" and shifts in gender roles.

The 1950 Treaty provides the legal foundation for open borders but lacks specific protections for migrant workers. Key challenges include inadequate documentation, informal employment arrangements, exclusion from social protection systems, risks of human trafficking and vulnerabilities during crises, as highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Khatiwada, 2020). Addressing these issues requires improved documentation systems, extended labor protections, access to social services, enhanced anti-trafficking cooperation and better crisis support mechanisms.

4.2. Afghanistan–Pakistan migration corridor

The Afghanistan–Pakistan migration corridor represents one of the most significant and protracted displacement situations globally. Since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, millions of Afghans have sought refuge in Pakistan, resulting in complex and enduring migration dynamics. As of 2023, Pakistan hosts approximately 1.3 million registered Afghan refugees and an estimated 1.5 million undocumented Afghans (UNHCR, 2023) (UNHCR Afghanistan, 2023).

The Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 created new pressures for displacement, with approximately 600,000 Afghans fleeing to Pakistan in its aftermath (Cone & Khan, 2023). However, in late 2023, Pakistan implemented the "Illegal Foreigners Repatriation Plan," demanding that undocumented migrants, primarily Afghans, leave the country. By the end of November 2023, an estimated 428,300 Afghans had returned to Afghanistan, many under duress and facing uncertain futures (UN Women, 2023).

The economic dimensions of this corridor encompass labor market integration. Afghan refugees and migrants in Pakistan primarily find employment in construction, agriculture, retail

and transportation, often in informal arrangements. Significant informal trade transpires across the Afghanistan–Pakistan border, facilitated by migrant networks (Grawert, et al., 2017). Remittances from Pakistan to Afghanistan represent a crucial source of income for many Afghan households, although precise figures remain elusive due to the prevalence of informal transfer mechanisms.

Humanitarian challenges in this corridor encompass protection gaps for numerous Afghans in Pakistan who lack formal refugee status and the corresponding protections. There are limitations on access to education, healthcare and other essential services (Qaisrani, 2023). Many reside in refugee settlements with inadequate facilities or in urban areas with precarious housing arrangements. Undocumented Afghans face the risk of deportation, resulting in significant insecurity.

Between September 2023 and February 2025, Pakistan forcibly deported over 844,499 Afghan nationals to Afghanistan, where they face persecution by the Taliban and severe economic hardship. Those at greatest risk include journalists, women protesters, artists and former government officials who may experience immediate persecution under Taliban rule. In January 2025, Pakistan's government assured the Supreme Court that registered Afghan refugees "in any way" would not be detained or deported. Subsequently, the Islamabad High Court further directed authorities to stop harassment of Proof of Registration (PoR) card holders (Amnesty International, 2025).

4.3. Bangladeshi migrants in the Maldives and India

Bangladeshi migration to the Maldives has increased substantially since the early 2000s, along with tourism and construction growth. An estimated 100,000-120,000 Bangladeshis work there, constituting 20% of the population and forming the largest expatriate community (Haque, 2025). This predominantly male migration focuses on construction, tourism services and domestic work, with most migrants originating from the Chattogram, Cumilla and Noakhali districts (Reza & Kalam, 2016).

The Bangladesh–India corridor has deeper historical roots dating back to the 1947 partition and the 1971 Liberation War. Approximately 1.5 to 2 million Bangladeshis reside in India, motivated by economic opportunities, environmental displacement, family reunification and, at times, religious persecution. This migration encompasses a wider range of demographic groups and has expanded from border states to metropolitan centers.

In the Maldives, Bangladeshi workers form the backbone of the construction industry and tourism services, although they occupy the lowest tiers of the labor market. Their remittances (£400-500 million annually) significantly support communities in Bangladesh. In India, they work across various informal sectors, including construction, domestic services, waste recycling and manufacturing (“Insights into Labor Migration in India and Bangladesh”, 2023).

Bangladeshi migrants encounter significant challenges. In the Maldives, these include exorbitant recruitment fees resulting in debt bondage, overcrowded living conditions, barriers to healthcare, wage disputes and limited social integration. In India, undocumented migrants suffer from exploitation, discrimination, exclusion from public services, housing instability and political vulnerability (ADB, 2016).

Migration management significantly affects bilateral relations. In 2019, the Maldives and Bangladesh signed a Labor Agreement to establish ethical recruitment frameworks, though implementation challenges persist. India–Bangladesh relations are more complex, with migration becoming politically contentious in states like Assam. Responses include border security measures, documentation initiatives like the National Register of Citizens, discussions about repatriation and anti-trafficking cooperation (Bawa & Singh, 2025). Effective management requires balancing security concerns with human rights and acknowledging economic interdependence.

This migration corridor is also a political issue, especially in states

like Assam and West Bengal that share this international boundary. For instance, tensions escalated following the introduction of the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), legislation that creates citizenship pathways specifically for non-Muslim refugees from neighboring countries, including Bangladesh. This legislation has proven particularly contentious in Assam, where immigration concerns have historical roots dating across decades. The state's National Register of Citizens (NRC) initiative, designed to distinguish legal residents from unauthorized immigrants, resulted in millions being excluded from citizenship rolls—with Muslim Bangladeshis disproportionately affected, prompting allegations of religious discrimination.

4.4. Labor migration from South Asia to the Maldives

The Maldives hosts significant migrant populations from South Asian countries—approximately 100,000 to 120,000 Bangladeshis, 25,000 to 30,000 Indians and 15,000 to 20,000 Sri Lankans (“Maldives Islands”, 2023). Although geographically part of South Asia, its tourism-driven economy creates migration dynamics like those between South Asia and Gulf states.

These migrants provide essential labor to the Maldivian economy, where tourism accounts for 28% of the GDP and 60% of foreign exchange earnings (“PPIAF assistance in Maldives (English)”, 2012). Foreign workers occupy approximately 80% of positions within the tourism and hospitality industries. Migration follows gendered patterns, with men predominantly engaged in construction and tourism while women work in hospitality, healthcare and domestic services.

The Maldives is a significant source of remittances for South Asian countries, with outflows to Bangladesh alone estimated at £400-500 million annually. Though smaller, these remittances remain important contributors to Nepal and Sri Lanka's overall inflows.

Despite their economic contributions, migrants face significant

challenges in social integration. Many live in segregated housing with limited interaction beyond their workplaces and encounter restrictions on movement between islands. Their vulnerability became evident during COVID-19, as overcrowded dormitories became hotspots for virus transmission (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

The governance of labor migration has improved thanks to stricter recruitment regulations, better documentation systems and enhanced inspections. However, significant implementation gaps persist, with approximately 65% of migrant workers reporting violations of their labor rights, primarily involving wage theft and excessive working hours.

As the Maldives continues to develop its tourism infrastructure and diversify its economy, the demand for migrant labor is likely to increase, presenting ongoing challenges for policymakers in receiving and sending countries.

5

Gender dimensions of South Asian migration

Migration patterns across South Asia reveal significant gender-specific trends that reflect cultural norms and economic opportunities. While male migration dominates overall, female migration follows distinct patterns that vary by country and destination.

In India, there is a clear gender division in destination preferences. Men predominantly migrate to GCC countries for semi-skilled and unskilled jobs in construction, manufacturing and security—sectors with high male labor demand. In contrast, women are more likely to migrate to Western countries for work in care services, domestic labor or through family reunification and education channels. Further, sociocultural norms play a role—Gulf migration is seen as male-dominated and temporary, while Western migration offers women greater safety, long-term settlement potential and professional mobility. Visa regimes and perceived social respectability further influence these gendered migration patterns (Suresh, 2025). Notably, nearly one-quarter of Indian migrant women resided in the USA in 2024, and the gender distribution is almost equal in destinations like the USA and the UK, contrasting with the male-dominated migration to GCC states (Suresh, 2025).

Bangladesh presents a contrasting picture, serving as the largest global origin of male-dominated migration to the Gulf states. Female migration remains minimal, reflecting the low participation of women in the labor force (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024).

Nepal demonstrates unique trends. Women comprise approximately 8.5% of formal labor migrants but account for 67% of emigrants to India (via informal channels) (United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), 2022). Nepalese women encounter regulatory barriers, such as the prohibition on women

under 30 working as housemaids in Gulf countries, aimed at preventing exploitation (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024).

In Pakistan, female labor migration is relatively small but adheres to the general destination trend, with the UAE and Saudi Arabia being the preferred choices. The UK has become a significant destination for Pakistani female workers ("Migration Trends and Analysis: Pakistan", 2024). Sri Lanka shows substantial female migration to Middle Eastern countries, particularly Kuwait and Saudi Arabia (Gamburg, 2010). Women predominantly work in domestic service sectors. Bhutan is notable for its balanced gender distribution among emigrants, with females comprising 49.3% ("Rural-Urban Migration and Urbanization in Bhutan", 2018). Interestingly, a larger number of Bhutanese women migrate to the Gulf states, the US and Australia, while men are more inclined to move to India.

These gendered migration patterns reflect sector-specific employment opportunities, cultural norms regarding female mobility and destination-specific immigration policies.

6 Regional integration, governance and future prospects

Intra-South Asian migration presents complex implications for regional integration. It promotes economic integration through labor market complementarities, remittance flows and cross-border trade facilitated by migrant networks. However, this integration typically occurs organically rather than through formal frameworks. Migrants act as cultural bridges, transferring ideas, practices and cultural elements across borders, helping build a shared regional identity that transcends national boundaries. The flow of Bollywood films throughout the region, the popularity of Pakistani music in India and the spread of Nepali cuisine exemplify cultural diffusion facilitated by migration (Rana, 2024). However, when securitized or politicized, migration can create political tensions, potentially undermining regional cooperation. Migration management has become contentious in several bilateral relationships, particularly between India and Bangladesh, where migration issues have periodically strained diplomatic ties when framed as security concerns (Lama, 2025).

Although the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has largely failed to establish effective formal mechanisms for managing regional migration, significant informal integration occurs through migrant networks. These networks facilitate the movement of people, goods, services and capital, creating de facto economic integration that often surpasses formal institutional arrangements. This contrast between formal and informal integration suggests that successful regional integration may require recognizing and building upon existing migration networks rather than imposing top-down frameworks disconnected from ground realities.

Migration governance in South Asia is marked by weak regional frameworks and largely bilateral approaches. SAARC has created limited frameworks for addressing migration, with the SAARC Convention on Trafficking being one of the few regional instruments that specifically tackle a migration-related issue ("SAARC CONVENTION...", 2002). This convention, adopted in 2002, focuses mainly on trafficking for sexual exploitation rather than on labor trafficking, which affects a larger number of migrants in the region.

Most governance takes place through bilateral arrangements, such as the India–Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship or labor agreements between Bangladesh and the Maldives. While these bilateral approaches can be customized for specific migration corridors, they create a patchwork of regulations and protections, leading to gaps and inconsistencies.

Significant protection gaps exist for various categories of migrants, including labor migrants, climate migrants and those with irregular status. No South Asian country has ratified the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, reflecting a reluctance to commit to comprehensive protections for migrants. Civil society organizations, migrant associations and international organizations play crucial roles in addressing governance gaps, providing services and advocating for the rights of migrants.

The region's governance approach contrasts with more developed regional frameworks elsewhere, such as the European Union's free movement regime or ASEAN's Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of Migrant Workers' Rights ("Free movement - EU nationals", n.d.) (ILO, 2015). Although these systems have limitations, they embody coordinated regional migration governance strategies.

Several factors will shape future intra-South Asian migration. Varying demographic trajectories will create evolving dynamics, with youth-bulge countries likely continuing as migration sources, while ageing societies like Sri Lanka increasingly become destinations. India, with its more advanced demographic transition, may emerge as a more significant destination as its labor market evolves.

Accelerating climate impacts are likely to raise the impetus of environmental migration, especially from Bangladesh and the coastal regions of India and Pakistan. The World Bank estimates that, by 2050, as many as 40 million people in South Asia could be displaced by climate change, leading to unprecedented regional migration pressures (World Bank Group, 2021). Uneven economic development will maintain migration incentives, although destination patterns may change. India's ongoing economic growth relative to its neighbors could increase its attractiveness for regional migrants, while new economic hubs in previously marginal areas may create new migration corridors. Technological advancements will transform labor markets, potentially diminishing the demand for low-skilled workers in traditional sectors while increasing the demand for service employees and those with technical skills. This will create new opportunities and challenges for various types of migrants.

7

Conclusion

Intra-South Asian migration is a complex phenomenon with profound implications for regional integration and economic development. These population movements reflect deep interconnections between South Asian countries and reveal significant governance challenges.

Economically, remittances within the region significantly contribute to household incomes and national economies in countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh. Migrant labor fills vital gaps in the markets of destination countries, facilitating economic growth. For countries of origin, emigration acts as a strategy for poverty reduction and a source of foreign exchange, although it also creates challenges related to labor shortages and social disruption.

Many migrants face considerable vulnerabilities, including exploitation, discrimination and limited access to services. Forced migration resulting from conflict and environmental displacement presents distinct protection challenges that current governance frameworks address insufficiently.

Regional integration has predominantly taken place through informal channels, with migrant networks forging connections that cross national boundaries. Formal mechanisms have not sufficiently addressed migration, and SAARC has demonstrated ineffectiveness in formulating comprehensive regional strategies. Migration governance remains largely bilateral, leading to inconsistencies and protection gaps.

Demographic transitions, the impacts of climate change and evolving economic opportunities will influence future migration. To address challenges while maximizing benefits, enhanced regional cooperation, comprehensive national policies, improved data collection, expanded social protection, frameworks for climate migration, stronger anti-trafficking measures and the promotion of positive public narratives are required.

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More effective approaches can enhance migration's contributions to economic growth and regional integration while safeguarding migrants' rights and welfare. This necessitates a shift from fragmented methods towards comprehensive governance frameworks that recognize migration as fundamental to the region's development trajectory.

8

Policy recommendations

The analysis of intra-South Asian migration patterns reveals several governance gaps and implementation challenges that require targeted policy interventions. The following recommendations aim to enhance the benefits of migration while addressing vulnerabilities and protection gaps:

8.1. Strengthen regional cooperation mechanisms

- Revitalize regional migration governance by establishing a dedicated Migration Forum that brings together government representatives, civil society and migrant associations to develop regional frameworks for migration management.
- Develop a South Asian Framework on Migration that establishes minimum standards for migrant protection, documentation and social security across the region, drawing inspiration from ASEAN's Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of Migrant Workers' Rights.
- Create regional response mechanisms for climate-induced displacement, including protocols for cross-border movements triggered by sudden-onset disasters and slow-onset environmental changes affecting the region, particularly in Bangladesh and coastal areas.

8.2. Enhance national migration policies

- Implement comprehensive national migration policies that address immigration and emigration dimensions, with particular attention to documentation, labor rights and social protection for migrants.

- Develop bilateral labor agreements between major origin and destination countries that include provisions for skill recognition, social security portability and ethical recruitment practices.
- Reform recruitment systems to reduce costs and eliminate exploitative practices, particularly for low-skilled migrants moving to the Maldives and other regional destinations.

8.3.Improve data collection and evidence-based policymaking

- Strengthen migration data systems through harmonized definitions, improved collection methodologies and greater information sharing between countries to address the significant data gaps that hinder effective policy development.
- Establish a Regional Migration Observatory to collect, analyze and disseminate data on migration patterns, remittance flows and socioeconomic impacts across South Asia.
- Support independent research on emerging migration issues, including climate migration, changing gender dynamics and the implications of demographic transitions for future migration patterns.

8.4.Expand social protection and services for migrants

- Extend social protection coverage to migrant workers through portable benefits schemes, bilateral social security agreements and innovative digital solutions for service delivery across borders.
- Develop targeted health services for migrants that address their specific vulnerabilities and health needs, including mental health support and occupational health interventions.

- Improve access to financial services for migrants and their families, including low-cost remittance channels, savings products and credit facilities that leverage remittance flows.

8.5. Address forced migration and trafficking

- Strengthen anti-trafficking measures through enhanced cooperation between law enforcement agencies, improved victim identification protocols and greater support for survivors of trafficking.
- Develop durable solutions for protracted refugee situations, particularly for Afghan refugees in Pakistan, through comprehensive approaches that include local integration options, voluntary repatriation (when safe) and expanded third-country resettlement opportunities.
- Implement the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees at the regional level, adapting global frameworks to South Asian realities.

8.6. Prepare for emerging migration challenges

- Develop anticipatory governance frameworks for climate-induced migration that integrate migration considerations into climate adaptation plans and disaster risk reduction strategies.
- Invest in skills development programs that prepare potential migrants for evolving labor market demands in destination countries, enhancing their employment prospects and protection.
- Create reintegration programs for returning migrants that leverage their skills, savings and networks for local development, particularly in communities heavily affected by outmigration.

8.7.Foster positive public narratives on migration

- Promote evidence-based public dialogue on migration's contributions to development in origin and destination countries, countering xenophobic narratives that undermine regional cooperation.
- Recognize and celebrate the cultural and social contributions of migrants to regional integration through cultural exchanges, educational initiatives and public diplomacy efforts.

Implementing these recommendations would require political will, institutional capacity development and allocation of adequate resources. However, with strategic investments and coordinated approaches, South Asian countries can transform migration from a source of vulnerability and tension into a driver of sustainable development and regional integration.

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