

# Migration as a livelihood strategy of the poor: the Bangladesh case

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# Migration as a livelihood strategy of the poor: the Bangladesh case

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## SUMMARY

**This paper examines the experiences of the government, private sector, and civil society in managing international emigration from Bangladesh. The paper outlines complex processes of labour migration. It identifies where policy interventions may act to make international migration an important livelihood strategy for poor people while ensuring that migrant workers receive maximum protection both at home and abroad. It describes the extent, nature and types of both short and long term international migration.**

In the past 25 years, Bangladesh has experienced positive economic and social changes. Nonetheless, it remains among the least developed countries.

Historically, migration has been a common livelihood strategy of Bangladeshi people and since the 18th century, emigration from Bengal has had a direct correlation with colonialism. Today, most long-term or permanent emigration is to the UK or US. Over time, strict immigration policies in western countries have limited further emigration from Bangladesh. During the 1970s, the labour markets in the Middle East offered new scope for Bangladeshi migrant labour. Later, such migration also expanded to the newly industrialised countries of South East Asia.

Short-term contract migration to the Middle East and South East Asia has become the dominant form of migration from Bangladesh. Since 1976 to 2002 more than 3 million Bangladeshis have migrated overseas for employment. Over the past two years, migration has declined. Substantial increases in the cost of migration and stiff competition from new sending countries have recently led to a decline in economic migration.

Determinants of both short and long-term migration are complex. Migration from Bangladesh occurs as a result of many macro and micro level factors representing economic, social, and catalytic realities.

According to official figures short term migrants from Bangladesh are predominantly male; females account for only 1%. The Bangladesh government has banned certain categories of female labour from independent emigration but many choose to do so through unofficial channels. The number of female migrants is therefore likely to be substantially higher than official estimates. Official women migrants work as professionals, skilled and unskilled. Bangladeshi males mostly work as semi and unskilled labourers,

while some work as professionals and skilled workers.

The Bangladesh Bank data on remittance flows to Bangladesh show an annual growth of 10% for the past 25 years. However, the growth rate of remittances is much lower than the total flow of migrants. A significant portion of remittances also reaches Bangladesh through unofficial channels. The most important among the unofficial channels, *Hundi*, accounts for another 40% of the total flow. A cost benefit analysis yields a benefit: cost ratio of 2.88 (migration costs:remittances sent).

The 1982 Immigration Ordinance, the main regulatory instrument of the Government of Bangladesh, does not reflect the dynamics of current world labour market, nor does it reflect the rights-based approach. The Government of Bangladesh has created a welfare fund for migrant workers through the contributions of outgoing migrants. However, to ensure transparency and to avoid misuse of funds, the fund guidelines need revision. Inter-ministerial coordination has begun to improve the management of the complex migration process amongst the many different agencies currently involved. Linking such efforts with the academia and civil society has yet to emerge.

Since the 1980s, private recruiting agencies have played a major role in massive expansion of short-term labour migration from Bangladesh. However, the fraudulent practices committed by unscrupulous recruiting agents and their sub-agents have tarnished the image of the sector as a whole. Today individual workers and their social networks conduct 60% of recruitment and placement.

Civil society organisations have yet to involve themselves in labour migration issues in any major way. None of the large NGOs such as Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Proshika or Grameen have programmes that address the needs of the migrant workers. Various migrant workers' associations have emerged, which are working hard to raise issues concerning migrants rights.

Nor are donors involved in any significant way with economic migration except for the issue of vulnerability of migrant workers to HIV/AIDS. Among the donors and UN agencies International Labour Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) are among the few institutions that have commissioned studies on migration.

## Key recommendations:

- Government, migrant workers, civil society and the private sector collectively need to shape a

comprehensive migration policy reflecting both long and short-term international migration.

- The fundamental principle of any new policy should be to protect human rights and dignity of labour both in Bangladesh as well as in receiving countries.
- The government should prioritise ratification of the 1990 UN Convention on Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families
- The government should rescind restrictions on the migration of unskilled and semiskilled women workers up to a certain age.
- Migration costs must be reduced and recruiting agencies better regulated.
- Access to credit on low interest must be ensured if poor people are to be afforded the chance of engaging in economic migration as a livelihood strategy.
- Awareness campaigns using various media and pre-departure orientation training need to be institutionalised to ensure the protection of migrant workers.
- The government must develop a plan of action to enable potential emigrants from Bangladesh to compete in the labour market of the industrialised countries.

# Migration as a livelihood strategy of the poor: the Bangladesh case

## 1 INTRODUCTION

**Migration has long been an important livelihood strategy for the people of Bangladesh. Whenever the population rose to such an extent that people could no longer secure a livelihood, they migrated elsewhere. Even today, both poor and better off people pursue migration as a livelihood strategy in Bangladesh. Choice of destination and levels of benefits and risks, however, vary significantly, according to the economic and social power of the migrant. This paper explores the extent and nature of international voluntary migration from Bangladesh today. It identifies the areas for policy intervention to increase the opportunities available for poor people to migrate beyond national borders with maximum protection. International migration is defined as movement of people from one country to another to improve their livelihoods. It can be of long-term or short-term duration and may even be seasonal in nature. Ideally, international migration should take place within the legal framework of sending and receiving countries. However, irregular migrants now constitute a substantial proportion of the global migrant population.<sup>1</sup>**

Currently two types of voluntary international migration occur from Bangladesh. One takes place mostly to the industrialised west and the other to Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian countries. Although there are different kinds of voluntary

migration to the industrialised west, they are usually perceived to as long-term or permanent emigration. Migration to the Middle East and Southeast Asia is defined as short-term contract migration.

### *Methodology*

This paper is based on secondary information. It surveyed conference, seminar and workshop proceedings,<sup>2</sup> published books,<sup>3</sup> and reports.<sup>4</sup> Short-term contract labour migration is relatively well researched in Bangladesh and most of the information available is on this type of migration. This paper is also based on interviews of top officials of government ministries and agencies and on the outcomes of a stakeholders' meeting. Government functionaries from different ministries, representatives of NGOs, private recruiting agencies, public and private bank officials and migrant workers' associations participated in the stakeholders' meeting.<sup>5</sup>

The report is divided into four sections. The first described the purpose of the study, the structure and methodology of the report. The second gives a brief background of Bangladesh and its history of international migration. It also highlights the importance of migration to the livelihood of the poor people and to the national economy of Bangladesh. The third section analyses aspects of international migration. It identifies main migratory flows, numbers, nature, labour market conditions, remittance flows, government policies and programmes in respect to migration. The final section summarises key issues, identifies major policy gaps and offers recommendations.

1 The total number of irregular migrants in the early 1990s stood at 30 million. (Stalker, 1994).

2 Over the last few years a number of conferences, seminars and workshops have been organised on international labour migration. These include: workshop on National Responsibility towards the Migrant Workers, organised by RMMRU, December 1997; conference on Temporary Migrant Workers of Bangladesh: Towards Developing a National Plan of Action, organised by RMMRU in collaboration with the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association, April 1999; consultative meeting on the Need for the Ratification of International Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families by RMMRU, February 2000; symposium on Short-term Labour Migration of Women from Bangladesh, by RMMRU, November 2000; workshop on Remittance and Micro-finance in Bangladesh, by ILO, May 2001; three, two-day Awareness Campaign Workshops on Labour Migration Process for Community Leaders and Activists by RMMRU, April, November 2001 and May 2002; National Consultation Workshop organised by IOM, November 2002.

3 Syed Refaat Ahmed, *Forlorn Migrants: An International Legal Regime for Undocumented Migrant Workers*, UPL, 2000; Tasneem Siddiqui, *Transcending Boundaries: Labour Migration of Women from Bangladesh*, UPL, 2001; INSTRAW and IOM, *Temporary Labour Migration of Women: Case Studies of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka*, 2000; Chowdhury R Abrar, edited *On the Margin: Refugees, Migrants and Minorities*, RMMRU, 2000; Tasneem Siddiqui edited *Beyond the Maze: Streamlining Labour Recruitment Process in Bangladesh*, RMMRU, 2002. Occasional Paper 3, State, Migrant Workers and the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund (in Bangla), RMMRU, 2001; Occasional Paper 5, *Bangladeshi Migrants in Saudi Labour Market*, by Mohammad Abdul Mannan, RMMRU 2000. Translation Series 2, *Rights and Dignity of Migrant Workers: A Campaigners' Handbook*, by Nurullah Azad *et al*, RMMRU, 2000.

4 Tasneem Siddiqui and C R Abrar, *Contribution of Returnees: An Analytical Survey of Post Return Experience*, June 2000 UNDP and IOM; Tasneem Siddiqui, *Migrant Workers' Remittances and Micro-finance in Bangladesh*, May 2001 ILO; *Bangladeshi Expatriate Communities Abroad: Case Studies of UK and USA*, 2003 GOB and IOM; Therese Blanchet, *Beyond the boundaries: A critical Look at Women Labour Migration April 2002 USAID*; *Module for Awareness Campaign through Local Representatives for Combating Trafficking in Women and Children*, RMMRU, July 2002; *Module on Labour Migration Process for Awareness Campaign through Community Leaders and Activists*, RMMRU, May 2002.

5 The list of participants of the stakeholders' meeting is attached as Annexure 1.

## 2 BACKGROUND

### *The Country Context*

Bangladesh is a small deltaic country of South Asia with a total land area of 145,035 sq. km. It contains the eighth largest population in the world. In 2001, its total population stood at 130 million (GoB, 2001). Its population density is one of the highest, surpassed only by the city states of Singapore and Hong Kong. Natural disasters such as floods, droughts and cyclones are regular features in the life of Bangladeshis, as is political turmoil. Within a few years of independence, the country experienced authoritarian rule, first civilian in nature and later followed by military control. It is the hard working and politically conscious general masses of the country, which through mass protest re-established democratic order in 1991.<sup>6</sup>

Over the last two decades, Bangladesh has experienced positive economic and social changes. Its average annual GDP growth rate has increased from 2.4% in the 1980s to 4.9% during the 1990s (MHHDC, 2001). In the late 1970s, 68% of the Bangladeshi population lived below the poverty line; the figure dropped to 44.7% in the second half of 1990s (MHHDC, 2001). Literacy has also increased. In 1981, the national literacy rate was 23.8%. In 2001, it rose to 40.8%. The population growth rate has declined from 2.1% in the 1980s to 1.6% in the period 1995–2000 (MHHDC, 2001). Nonetheless, Bangladesh remains one of the least developed countries of the world. 25 million people (19.23% of the total population) live in extreme poverty, and the incidence of poverty is greatest among women. In every respect, ranging from health and education to nutrition and income, women are the poorest of the poor. Bangladesh is one of the two unique countries of the world where the life expectancy of women is lower than that of men. Given the size of its population, the ratio of population to arable land, the overall level of economic development and the increased number of women looking for avenues to earn a livelihood, there are ample reasons why the various forms of migration both forced and voluntary, internal and international, might occur in Bangladesh.

### *Historical Development of International Migration*

Bangladesh has a long history of migration. The ancestors of the Sinhala population of Sri Lanka are believed to have migrated there centuries ago, from the territory that now constitutes Bangladesh. The great Buddhist scholar and saint, Atish Dipankar, who carried the knowledge of earth dam construction to the Chinese Emperor in the 10th century also hailed from Bengal. In the 18th century, when the British developed the tea industry in northeast Bengal, they brought indentured labourers from different parts of India. Again, when colonial policies destroyed Bengal's jute and cotton industries, and the market for fine *maslin* collapsed, there followed large-scale migration of Bengalis to Assam.<sup>7</sup> People from East Bengal also migrated to Burma. Since the emergence of independent

states in South Asia in 1947, the gradual imposition of regulatory mechanisms has restricted the movements of people between states.

Migration to industrialised countries, particularly in the West, was again connected to the country's colonial past. During the 18th and early 19th century, sailors originating from the southeastern part of East Bengal (Chittagong and Noakhali) found jobs in the British merchant navy, which carried goods from Kolkata port to all parts of the world. A section of landless peasants from a district in northern Sylhet, devoid of work opportunities for them, was absorbed in the dockyards of Hooghly, near Kolkata. Some also joined the British merchant navy. Experts conclude that, unlike the seamen of Chittagong and Noakhali, this group did not have much seafaring experience and jumped ship when the opportunity arose. They found themselves in a number of countries including the US and the UK (Alam, 1988; Ali, 1997; Carey and Shukur, 1985). These stowaways are considered pioneer migrants to the West. Migration to the West still continues. In some instances, migration is through work vouchers; in other cases, by changing their visa status from student to work and, in others, through family reunification. Most of these migrants have become long term residents, some adopted citizenship of their countries of destination.

After independence in 1971, new opportunities for international migration emerged. With rising oil prices, the Middle Eastern countries went through a phase of major infrastructure development for which they needed large numbers of expatriate workers. Various categories of Bangladeshi workers joined the Middle Eastern labour market. Gradually, such migration also expanded to the newly industrialised countries of Southeast Asia. The nature of such migration was qualitatively different from migration to the West. These migrants went on short-term employment, with specific job contracts, and had to return home on completion of their contract period. Of the country's migrants, this category was the largest.

### *Importance of migration to the national economy*

International migration plays a vital and indispensable role in the national economy of Bangladesh in two major ways. Firstly, it reduces unemployment. Secondly, migration results in remittance flows to the country, which serve as an important but inexpensive source of much needed foreign exchange.

It is estimated that one-third of the total working age population of Bangladesh is either unemployed or underemployed (GoB, 1998). Migration has kept the unemployment rate virtually unchanged since the 1980s, although the growth rate of the labour force is almost twice that of the population growth.<sup>8</sup> Mahmud (1998) and Afsar (2000) emphasise that the continuous outflow of people of working-age and the accompanying inflow of remittances has played a major role in keeping the unemployment rate stable. Migration, therefore, eased the pressure of alternative employment creation on successive governments.

Migrant remittances account for a significant

<sup>6</sup> Bangladesh became independent through a nine-month liberation war in 1971. Within three years of independence the civilian regime, which gave leadership to the independence war, turned the multi-party parliamentary democracy into a one-party presidential system. In 1975, the military took control of the state. Until 1990 except for a brief period of a few months, the army ruled Bangladesh through a process of civilianisation of military rule. Following a popular upsurge, democracy was reestablished in 1991. Since then political power changed hand thrice through general elections that were held under the Non-party Caretaker Governments.

<sup>7</sup> During this period 1 million Bengalis from different part of East Bengal (Rangpur, Bogra, Pabna and Mymensingh), migrated to Assam and introduced flood-plain agriculture there (Ahmed, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> In the latter half of 1990s the labour force grew at the rate of 4% whereas population growth rate was 1.6%.

portion of the country's foreign exchange earnings. During the period of 1977-78 to 1997-98, the annual average of contribution of remittances was 26.5% (Siddiqui and Abrar, 2001). This has been used to finance the import of capital goods and raw materials for industrial development. In the year 1998-1999, 22% of the official import bill was financed by remittances (Afsar, 2000; Murshid, 2000). The steady flow of remittances has resolved foreign exchange constraints, improved the balance of payments and helped to increase the supply of national savings (Quibria, 1988). Remittances also made up a significant proportion of the country's development budget. In certain years in the 1990s, the contribution of remittances rose to more than half of the national development budget. Remittances recently constituted a larger share of the country's development budget than did foreign aid.

The contribution of remittances to GDP has risen sharply from a meagre 1% in 1977-1978 to 5.2% in 1982-1983. During the 1990s, the ratio hovered around 4%. However, if one takes into account the unofficial flow of remittances, its contribution to GDP would certainly be much higher. Murshid (2000) finds that an increase in remittance by Taka 1<sup>9</sup> would result in an increase of Tk 3.33 in national income. The importance of remittances becomes very clear if one compares it with foreign exchange earnings from the ready-made garment (RMG) sector. Currently, the garment manufacturing sector is treated as the highest foreign exchange earner in Bangladesh. However, if the cost of import of raw material is adjusted, then the net earning from migrant workers' remittances is higher than that of the RMG sector. Mahmud therefore stressed that, since the 1980s, contrary to popular belief, remittances from migrant workers played a much greater role in sustaining the economy of Bangladesh than did the RMG sector.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Importance of migration to livelihoods of poor people***

Migration contributes to the livelihoods of the poor. It is assumed that the extreme poor people are more likely to migrate to other parts of the country. In rural Bangladesh, landlessness and pauperisation are ongoing processes. 70% of rural people are either completely landless or functionally landless (BBS, 1998-1999). Every year, more than one million people lose their homesteads or arable land due to river erosion. In these circumstances, migration is a major coping strategy for poor people to earn a livelihood (Hossain, Khan and Seeley, 2003). Studies have shown that displaced people initially try to relocate themselves within the village, then in neighbouring villages and gradually move to urban areas when no other livelihood option is available in their known rural surroundings (Mamun, 2003). Initially, they try to earn a living from wage labour and other off-farm activities, but once they are in an urban setting they look for jobs in different parts of the informal sector, for example in rickshaw-pulling or vending (Sadi, 2003). Many young women from poor rural backgrounds, also migrate to major cities such as Dhaka, Khulna and Chittagong to

work in garment factories and food processing industries.

Some rural poor people also migrate internationally. Little data are available on the proportion of international migrants that is poor. Some studies suggest that international migration entails huge costs. Those who migrate have some resources at their families' disposal and/or have access to social networks for generating further resources to finance migration. However, bankers and migrants who have dealt with the issue in the Middle East noted that the poor also migrate. They do so by acquiring work visas through relatives, friends and neighbours. In these cases, migrants do not have to purchase the visa and the employer occasionally pays for the air fare. 60% of work visas for employment are procured by migrants already abroad. Under these circumstances, poor people are also likely to have engaged in migration as a livelihood choice. More research is needed on the socio-economic characteristics of migrants.

## **3 INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION**

### ***Main flow and determinants***

Short-term labour migration is the most common form of population movement from Bangladesh. Bangladesh exports contract labour mostly to Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian countries. Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Iraq, Libya, Bahrain, Iran, Malaysia, South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and Brunei are some of the major countries of destination. Saudi Arabia alone accounts for nearly one half of the total number of workers who migrated from Bangladesh. Malaysia used to be the second largest employer of Bangladeshi workers. However, since the financial crisis of 1997, Bangladeshi migrating to Malaysia dropped drastically (see Table 1) and UAE has taken its place. The UK and US are the two main destinations in the West. Australia, Canada, Germany, France, Italy, Switzerland, New Zealand, Belgium, Netherlands, South Africa, Spain and Japan are also preferred countries for migration. Map 1 (Annexure 3) shows two types of destination countries of Bangladeshi migrants.

Migration is a complex process. Colonial ties, lack of opportunities in the country of origin and better employment prospects at destination all influence emigration from Bangladeshis to the West. Since the 1970s, due to structural constraints, skilled and professional Bangladeshis have been able to migrate to the West with relative ease. The majority of this group cite better educational opportunities for their children, access to specialised jobs, wider opportunities for self-actualisation and better healthcare systems in destination countries, in contrast to political turmoil, violence, insecurity and corruption in their countries of origin, as major reasons for their decisions to emigrate (Mahmood 1998, Siddiqui 2003). Studies have identified a combination of factors that influence short-term migration, including: distressed economic conditions, desire for further economic improvement, political considerations, information on job opportunities, operation of recruiting agents and social networks.

<sup>9</sup> In April 2003 the exchange rate was approximately Tk 58 to US\$1.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in *Beyond the Maze* (2002), pp. 53. Speech delivered by Professor Wahiduddin Mahmud, former Advisor to the Interim Government in 1996, at a conference on 'Streamlining Labour Recruitment Process in Bangladesh for Employment Abroad', 24 September 2001.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) (2000) and Siddiqui's (2001) work reveal some gender-specific factors uniquely affecting the short-term migration of women. Factors such as women's need to escape unhappy social situations, including bad marriages, harassment, violence and idle husbands made these women a socially disadvantaged group which saw migration primarily as a quest for independence and a means of realising self worth.

### **Scale of Migration**

The Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET)<sup>11</sup> data show that from 1976 to January 2002, the total number of Bangladeshis working abroad as short-term migrants stood at more than three million (Table 3). They indicate a yearly average flow (1991–2002) of around 226,000. Although there was a steady increase in the flow of migration since 1976, this has recently fallen. In 1999, altogether 268,182 persons migrated; the figure dropped to 222,686 in 2000, and further to 188,965 in 2001. There are a number of possible reasons for this. The costs of formal emigration have increased substantially and there is stiff competition from new labour-sending countries like Nepal, Vietnam and Cambodia, which have recently entered the market and supply cheaper labour. An additional factor may have been the rise in unemployment in some Arab countries, which has spawned policy decisions to indigenise the labour force. A large number of Bangladeshis are also believed to have gone to the Middle East through irregular channels.

The Government of Bangladesh is yet to collate information on the total number of people who have emigrated to industrialised countries. Census estimates in some Western countries record the number of Bangladeshi immigrants. According to the US Bureau of Census, in 2001, the number of Bangladesh-born US nationals was 104,000. In 1996, the figure in Canada was 12,405. The 2001 Census of the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported the number of Bangladesh-born Australians to be 9,078. In OECD countries, there were 84,800 Bangladesh-born persons in 1999. These numbers do not of course capture the total population of Bangladeshi origin in the West, because they exclude figures of foreign-born persons with parents of Bangladeshi origin. Besides, immigration processing takes a long time. Many Bangladeshis remain outside official estimates as they have applied to convert student/work visas to immigrant visas. Considering all three types, there are 300,000 people of Bangladeshi origin in the UK and the same number in the US. In addition, there are undocumented Bangladeshi immigrants in those countries. Estimates put the total number of Bangladeshis living in those countries, both on a regular and irregular status, at 1.1 million (Table 2).

### **Nature of Migrants**

BMET has classified short-term migrants to Middle East and Southeast Asia into four categories: professional,

skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled. Doctors, engineers, teachers and nurses are considered professionals. Manufacturing or garment workers, drivers, computer operators and electricians are considered skilled, while tailors and masons are considered semi-skilled. Housemaids, cleaners and menial labourers are considered unskilled workers. During the early years of short-term labour migration, the proportion of professional and skilled workers was higher than that of semi-skilled and unskilled workers. In recent times, however, semi-skilled and unskilled workers have made up the majority of the migrants (Table 3).

BMET data also show that Bangladeshi workers are predominantly male. From 1991 to 1999 altogether 2,082,270 persons migrated overseas for employment. Among them only 13,544 were women (Table-4). This is less than 1% of the total labour flow from Bangladesh during that period. Data also indicate a downward trend in female emigration. However, IOM INSTRAW, (2000) and Siddiqui (2001), show that the above figures do not give a true picture of female migration from Bangladesh. Many women continue to migrate for employment, but the process remains undocumented. Almost all women of the unskilled and semi-skilled categories migrate unofficially, since the Bangladesh government has banned unskilled female migration.

BMET's database does not categorise migrants according to age and educational status. Various micro studies have shown that most of the migrants were young (15 to 30 years of age) when they first migrated (Siddiqui and Abrar, 2000; Afsar, 2000; Murshid, 2000) and many were either illiterate or had educational backgrounds from class one to Secondary School Certificate (SSC).

Immigration data on Bangladeshis in the UK and US reveal that in both cases male immigrants outnumber the female immigrants. The gender ratio for the total number of Bangladeshis in the US in 1980 was 65% men and 35% women. Among those who came before 1959, the ratio was 83% men and 17% women. For those arriving between 1975–1980, the ratio was 60% men and 40% women. Among the new entrants in 1990s, the ratio is 65 men: 35 women. In the UK it is 109:100 (Wrench and Qureshi, 1996). Bangladeshi immigrants in the UK and the US have a range of educational backgrounds: professional, skilled, semi skilled and unskilled. Migrants to the UK during the early 1920s, and also in the 1950s and 1960s, were mostly uneducated. In the US, those who went during the 1920s were mostly uneducated, but those who migrated during the 1950s and 1960s were educated professionals.

### **Flow of Remittance**

The Bangladesh Bank<sup>12</sup> documents remittance flows to Bangladesh from all over the world. It shows that remittances sent by overseas wage earners have increased from US\$ 23.71m in 1976 to US\$ 2617.92m in 2002 (Table 1). Nonetheless, the annual growth rate of remittances is much less than the growth rate of the total number of migrant workers. In 1991, emigration increased by 41.72% over the previous year, whereas

11 The Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) is the executing agency of the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment, which among other things maintains record of migrants.  
12 It is the central bank of the country.

remittances grew by only 1.56% over the same period. In 1994, overseas emigration grew at a rate of 23.79% whereas remittances increased only 14.31% during that time. For 1997, emigration grew by 79% compared to the figure for 1996 and remittance flow increased 12.52%. And in 1998, emigration grew by 29% while growth in remittances was 4.86%. The initial expenditure needed to settle at the place of destination and, subsistence purchases may delay the process of remittance. However, even a two-year lag does not indicate a significant increase in remittances when compared with the number of migrant workers. Nonetheless, throughout the last 25 years, remittance flows broadly indicate an average annual increase of around 10%. The most important reason for the disparity between migrant and remittance flows is that Bangladesh has recently exported more unskilled and semi-skilled migrants whose wages are rather low compared to those of previous skilled and professional ones. Wage rates have also fallen drastically over the past decade (Siddiqui and Abrar, 2001). One half of total remittances came from one country, i.e., Saudi Arabia. Over the years, the US has become the second largest remittance sending country, Kuwait and the UAE being the third and fourth.

### **Methods of Transfer**

Short-term migrants use various methods of remitting funds, both official and unofficial. Officially, remittance transfers take place through demand drafts issued by bank or exchange houses; travellers' cheques; telegraphic transfers; postal orders; account transfers; automatic teller machine (ATM) facilities; electronic transfers and in kind transfers.

*Hundi* or money courier is the most common of the unofficial channels of transfer. Besides this, remittances are sent with departing friends and relatives; taken personally by the remitters themselves, and in the form of visa/work permits for sale or family use. Siddiqui and Abrar's, study (2001), conducted in two thanas of Chittagong and Tangail found that 46% of the total volumes of remittance to these households have been channeled through official sources. Around 40% came through *hundi*, 4.6% moved through friends and relatives and about 8% of the total were hand-carried by workers themselves when they were on visits home.

The same study identified some macro and micro-level reasons behind *Hundi* operations in Bangladesh. The macro-level reasons are:

- the demand for foreign exchange from racketeers who wish to finance smuggling of various items including gold;
- the demand from importers for foreign exchange from other sources in order to benefit from the existing tax regime by under-invoicing imports;
- an unholy alliance among the officials of financial institutions, business and *hundi* operators;
- financing recruitment charges of the recruiters;
- difference between official and unofficial exchange rates;
- quality and speed of service, and ability to reach clients both in destination countries and in the source countries.

From an individual's perspective, the *hundi* system is the quickest method of sending money, and the cheapest, too, as there are no fees for the transaction. The *hundi* system relies on the pervasive social network of migrants, which is able to offer a door-to-door service. Bank transactions require paperwork, and officials are not always customer friendly. Given the less-educated background of most migrants, many of them opt for the *hundi* channel. Besides, an important social reason for choosing the *hundi* channel is the need to maintain confidentiality. Migrants may like to send money to two or more persons secretly without creating tension among the receivers i.e., wife and father of the sender.

Research on the channels used by immigrants in industrialised countries to remit funds home is not readily available. However the macro data of the Bangladesh Bank on remittance flows from all over the world highlights an interesting feature. Last year, the Bank recorded an abnormally high growth in formal remittances from the UK and US. Over the last seven years, the growth of remittances from the US remained between 4–6%. In 2001 remittance from the US grew by 47.99%. Remittance flows from the UK were erratic during this period. In some years, it registered growth, and in others, it declined. Surprisingly, from January 2002 to November 2001, remittances grew 136% (Table 5). Such an unusual growth is attributed to increased government surveillance in concerned countries and improved services in the banking sector in the last year.<sup>13</sup> One may infer that the additional amount (over and above average increases) used to flow through unofficial channels.

### **Transaction Costs and Time**

A recent study on 'Migrant Workers' Remittances and Micro-finance in Bangladesh' (2001) also calculated remittance transfers through official and *hundi* channels in both sending and receiving countries. Those receiving remittances made through official channels would incur costs, which include service charges, speed money, conveyance and others. The average cost per official transaction was Tk 236.50. The costs associated in receiving funds through *hundi*, included phone charges, conveyance and lost remittances. For the 100 households studied, such costs averaged Tk 75.53 per transaction.

The costs of sending remittances through official channels include a service charge, postal charge and conveyance totalling Tk 166.64. In contrast, the *hundi* channel incurred costs for fax, phone, post and lost money. The average transaction cost for *hundi* at the sending end was Tk 52. If one adds the average costs of sending and receiving money through official and *hundi* methods, those would amount to Tk 403.14 and Tk 127.53 respectively. The common perception that sending money through *hundi* does not involve cost, is not valid. Costs may be a minor factor why people use *hundi* methods; speedy transactions; less paperwork and confidentiality are more important considerations.

Time is an important factor in determining the method chosen for sending remittances. The study calculated that on an average remitting through

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Mr. Sudarshan Banik, BMET, 2 February 2003, and Mr. Abdul Mannan, Senior Vice President of Islami Bank Bangladesh Ltd., 4 March 2003.

official channels took 12 days and through *hundi* it took three days (Table 6). The study showed that, on average, each household received remittances around four times a year.

### **Costs and Returns of Migration to Migrants, their Households and Society**

A few studies have analysed the costs and benefits of short-term contract migration. The study by Afsar *et al* (2000) shows that a typical migrant spends Tk 95,000 to meet all financial obligations to migrate. Her costs include the cost of purchasing a visa and the airfare. The economic benefits of migration constituted the direct remittances that their households received. The migrants remitted up to Tk 267,000 during their period abroad. From these figures, migration appeared to have yielded a benefit:cost ratio of 2.88. The level of household income increased significantly (55%) during migration. Authors also note that the actual benefit ratio will be higher than the estimated ratio as migrants invariably retain a significant portion of their earnings.

Siddiqui's study (2001) looks into both social and economic costs and benefits of female short-term international migration. It found that 56% of families experienced positive economic results, 26.5% negative economic results and for 15.5% families, the economic impact of migration was mixed. Economic impact was assessed on the basis of 10 indicators. These are: (a) reasonable length of stay abroad or returning home before one year of stay; (b) reasonable flow of remittance or inability to generate remittances; (c) repaying loans for migration or inability to repay the loan; (d) buying land or inability to buy any land; (e) constructing a house or inability to construct a house; (f) generating savings or inability to generate enough or any savings; (g) investing in business or inability to invest in business; (h) increase in income as percentage of family income or no increase in income as percentage of family income; (i) substantially bearing the subsistence costs of a family for a prolonged period or inability to bear the subsistence costs of family; (j) improved living standard or general deterioration in living standard. The social impact of migration on women was also mixed in nature. In some instances migration afforded children better educational opportunities, and in others, children's education suffered because of the absence of their mothers. Most women reported greater confidence following migration but, again, some felt guilty for the misfortunes that struck their families in their absence. Migration also changed personal relationships. In some cases, stable marriages broke down; in others, it helped women to leave bad marriages and develop new relationships. Migration strengthened the extended family bonds. The study concluded that abuse and exploitation have been part of the experience of female migration, yet it was also a powerful force for empowerment. Gardener's anthropological study (1995) conducted in a Sylheti village highlighted the impact of migration on society and individuals. She concluded that international

migration has transformed the economic and social fabric of the society, which on many occasions produced contradictory results. It changed marriage patterns and brought society closer to formal Islam; some women have been able to increase their power and status, and some successfully entered male domains. So far no economic analysis has been conducted on costs and returns associated with migration in industrialised countries.

### **Labour Market: Conditions and Entitlements**

Short-term migrants take up jobs under specific contracts. However, over the years, labour market conditions in destination countries have deteriorated, particularly in the Middle East. Recruitment of professional and skilled workers has decreased. More and more unskilled workers are migrating. The costs of emigration have increased, while wage rates have fallen sharply. During the early stages of migration to the Middle East, employers bore the costs of airfares and paid commissions to the recruiting agencies. Workers' working hours, weekly and annual leave were clearly stipulated in job contracts. They also paid return airfares for holidays (BMET, 2002). For unskilled workers, food and lodging were included in the remuneration package. In recent years, employers have stopped paying commission to recruiting agents; rather the latter buy visas from the employers at high prices. Airfares are now borne by the workers, and wage rates have fallen. In Saudi Arabia, during the early 1990s, the wage rate was 600–800 Rials, by 2000 it had fallen to 250–400 Rials (Rahim, 2002). In the case of Kuwait, the average cost of migration varies from KD 500 to KD 700. The monthly salary currently ranges from KD 8 to KD 25. However, employers still bear the responsibility for food, lodging and medical facilities (Salem Reza, 2002).

Gender discrimination exists both in the Middle East and Southeast Asian countries. In the Middle East, domestic workers are not provided for under national labour laws. In some countries, women are subjected to mandatory pregnancy and HIV/AIDS tests each year. If test results are positive for either, employers assume no responsibility and the female workers are deported home.

Migrants are not allowed to form any associations or unions. None of the destination countries of Bangladeshi emigration have ratified the UN International Convention on Protection of Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. Only Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, UAE, Malaysia, Singapore and Korea have ratified the ILO instrument, Migration for Employment Convention (Revised) 1949 (No. 97). Except for Malaysia these countries have also ratified ILO Recommendation no. 86, Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention 1975 (no. 43) and Recommendation No. 151 (Akram, 2002).

### **Key Problem Areas**

Short-term labour migrants increasingly face problems at all three stages of migration. The most important prior to emigration is access to resources

to bear the costs of migration. Aspiring migrants sell their homestead lands and other assets to emigrate. Unscrupulous recruiting agents and sub-agents cheat some while others are sent abroad under false contracts or spurious passports (WARBE, 2002). Once the migrant reaches the destination country, their employers hold their passports and other travel documents with the purported aim of restricting their movements. Contract substitution has also become common practice. Immigrants with poorer education are daunted by the administrative paperwork necessary to send remittances through official channels and fall prey to those engaged in money transfer through informal channels (Siddiqui and Abrar, 2001). Like their male counterparts, women migrants also face problems, but some of them are gender-specific. Some domestic workers are isolated from others, and also lack sufficient communication skill to start with. In some instances, they are subjected to physical and verbal abuse. Sexual harassment is a problem for female migrants, domestic or factory workers (Blanchet, 2002). Upon return, migrants are regularly harassed at the airport, often becoming victims of extortion. Many migrant workers have been robbed on their way home from the airport. Some have even been killed. One major problem that migrants face on their return is the lack of institutional support for reintegration (Siddiqui and Abrar, 2000).

### ***Welfare Programme***

In 1990, on the basis of the Emigration Ordinance of 1982, the Government of Bangladesh created a fund for ensuring the welfare of migrant workers. This fund comprises subscriptions from migrant workers, interest earned from the deposits of recruiting agencies and 10% surcharge fees collected by Bangladesh missions abroad and personal and institutional contributions. The fund is used to provide pre-departure briefings to migrant workers, maintain a welfare desk at the airport and in providing language skill training to nurses, garment and hotel workers. It is also used to repatriate the bodies of migrant workers who have died or been killed overseas and for one-time contributions to the families of deceased workers. The coverage of pre-departure briefings organised by BMET is limited. In the past, part of this resource was misused. In December 2002, the GoB framed rules for managing the fund.

Bangladeshi missions abroad play an important role in ensuring the welfare of migrant workers while in host countries. There are 13 labour attaches in various labour-receiving countries. They provide counselling, advisory and legal services to distressed Bangladeshi workers. The services of labour attaches have often attracted criticism. Their recruitment process has to be made transparent and they should be trained to provide specialised services to migrants.

### ***Government Policy and Instruments***

The 1922 Immigration Act was replaced through the promulgation of a new Emigration Ordinance in 1982. The new Ordinance is the key regulatory instrument in respect to migration. In December 2002, the current

government framed three rules under the 1982 Ordinance. These are: Emigration Rules, Rules for Conduct and Licensing Recruiting Agencies, and Rules for Wage Earners' Welfare Fund. Under the 1982 Ordinance and rules framed in 2002, the government is authorised to grant licences to individuals and companies who wish to be engaged in recruitment for overseas employment (Section 10). The government may cancel and suspend the same if found to be violating the prescribed code of conduct (Section 14/1), may set up special courts in each of the divisions of the country, and may penalise individual migrants who have breached contracts with foreign employers (Section 24). Bangladesh has also signed the 1990 UN International Convention on Protection of Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. It has yet to ratify the instrument.

In the early 1970s, the Bangladesh government had no concrete policy either to encourage or discourage female migration. On individual or agency initiatives, Bangladeshi women began taking up jobs in the Middle East. However, since the early 1980s, successive governments have either put a complete ban on migration of all categories of female workers except the professionals or imposed restrictions on the migration of unskilled or semi-skilled women. Currently, unskilled and semi-skilled women are allowed to migrate only when accompanied by a male partner.

The 1982 Ordinance, and rules framed under it in 2002, has some major limitations. Section 24 of the Ordinance violates all norms and rights to refusal to continue to work. Another important weakness of the present legal system is that migrant workers do not have the right to seek legal redress directly. Only a concerned government functionary can lodge complaints for violation of provisions of the Ordinance. Policies concerning female migration are discriminatory and breach constitutional provisions guaranteeing equal opportunity to men and women.

### ***Government and Recruiting Industry***

#### ***Ministries***

Labour recruitment from Bangladesh has involved various ministries and agencies of government, private recruiting agents, their local and international intermediaries, potential migrants and their families, making it a complex process. Until 2001, the Ministry of Labour and Employment was in charge of international labour migration. The current government, in responding to the demand of expatriate Bangladeshis and migrant workers, formed a new ministry in December 2001. Since its inception, the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment has undertaken various steps for managing labour migration. The power of implementing the rules framed in 2002 under the 1982 Emigration Ordinance and accordingly, promoting, monitoring and regulating the migration sector is vested with the new ministry. The leadership of the ministry has made several visits abroad to expand the labour market for Bangladeshi workers. New agreements have been signed with Italy, Greece, Korea and Malaysia. The ministry is also interested in

encouraging investment by Expatriate Bangladeshis (EBs) in Bangladesh and accordingly has introduced various incentives to attract them. The ministry is also organising inter-ministerial meetings to coordinate welfare programmes for migrant workers.

The three other important ministries are the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism. The functions that Bangladesh missions abroad currently perform regarding labour export are: (a) exploring the potential labour market; (b) attestation of documents pertaining to recruitment; (c) providing consular services for Bangladeshi workers; and (d) ensuring the welfare of migrant workers. The Ministry of Finance and Bangladesh Bank play a major role in respect to managing migrant remittances.

#### *BMET*

The Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) is the executing agency of Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment in respect to processing labour migration. The government established BMET in 1976 to ensure maximum benefit for labour export. Since the promulgation of the Emigration Ordinance of 1982, it has been working as the implementing agency of the Ordinance. BMET is currently involved in the regulation of recruiting agents, collection and analysis of labour market information, registration of job seekers for local and foreign employment, development and implementation of training programmes in the light of specific labour needs both in national and international labour markets, designing apprentice and in-plant programmes in the existing industries, organising pre-departure briefing sessions and resolving legal disputes.

#### *Private Recruiting Agencies*

Since 1980, agencies have recruited people for overseas employment under a government licence. These agencies collected information on labour demands for foreign employment, recruited workers and then processed their cases for deployment. Up to 2002, 45% of the total number of labour migrants went through these agencies. The recruiting agencies eventually organised themselves under the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA) in 1983. In 2002, the association had a membership of around 700 agencies.

#### *BOESL*

In 1984, the government also set up Bangladesh Overseas Employment Services Limited (BOESL) as a limited company to undertake direct recruitment. Since its inception up to February 1999, BOESL has recruited 8,900 workers. This is 0.31% of the total number of those who emigrated through official channels. A thorough evaluation of this institution needs to be done to assess its strengths and weaknesses.

#### *Individual Contract*

Almost 60% of recruitment is conducted through individual initiatives and social networks. Usually persons already deployed in the host countries arrange

visas for their friends and relatives through their own contacts. Sometimes these visas are sold to interested parties. The cost of migration and illicit practices are less when work visas are procured through individual migrants working abroad.

#### **Civil Society Organisations**

Though Bangladesh has been a major source of labour, civil society institutions have done little to provide services and protect the rights of migrant workers. Over the last few years some human rights organisations and research bodies have initiated limited activities concerning labour migration. The Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB) was involved in a collaborative project with the Kuala Lumpur-based Caram Asia on HIV AIDS and mobility. To reach its target group, it funded SHISUK, an NGO, to establish an association of migrant workers. Currently SHISUK provides pre-departure orientation for Bangladeshi migrant workers going to Malaysia. Ain O Shalish Kendra (ASK), Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) and Bangladesh Society for Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR) have on different occasions provided legal aid to migrant workers cheated by recruiting agents. Some returnee migrants have developed their own organisations. Over the last few years, three such organisations have emerged: the Welfare Association of the Bangladeshi Returnee Employees (WARBE) has been organising returnee migrants since 1997. The Association acts as a pressure group for promoting and protecting the rights of migrant workers. The Bangladesh Migrant Centre (BMC) focuses its activities on returnees from Korea. The Bangladeshi Women Migrants Association (BWMA) is campaigning to lift the ban on female economic emigration.

International migration issues have drawn limited attention from the research community in Bangladesh. Researchers of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies have worked on some aspects of labour migration (Mahmood, 1994, 1996, 1998; Afsar *et al* 2000; Murshid 2000). The Bangladesh Unnoyon Parishad (BUP) has studied the utilisation of remittances in Sylhet district (Ahmad and Zohora, 1997). The Dhaka University based Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) has been specialising on migration issues. Along with research, it has conducted two advocacy campaigns pertaining to labour migration: one on lifting the bar imposed on unskilled female migration and the other for ratification of the 1990 UN Convention on Rights of Migrant Workers. In addition, RMMRU has developed two training modules on migration: one for young academics and professionals on 'Social Science Research and Migration', and the other for information dissemination on the 'Labour Migration Process through Community Leaders and Activists'. A few universities and individuals in UK have undertaken thorough research on migration and women (Gardner, 1995; Kabeer, 2000).

A major shortcoming of labour recruitment from Bangladesh is lack of coordination among various government, quasi-government, private sector and civil society organisations. Each ministry mostly operates

independently and interacts with others when problems arise. There is also a lack of space for civil society organisations to participate in policy formulation on migration issues.

### ***Policies and programmes of international agencies***

Few international agencies had any programmes concerning migration until recently. Among UN bodies and affiliates, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and International Organization for Migration (IOM) are the major organisations with mandates concerning migration. Over the years the ILO has commissioned two important studies in Bangladesh regarding migration: 'International Labour Migration from Bangladesh and the Trade Unions' and 'Migrant Workers Remittances and Micro Finance in Bangladesh'. Once the regional office of IOM was established in Dhaka in 1999, it took different initiatives with regard to migration. IOM's head office in Geneva and INSTRAW jointly commissioned a study on temporary labour migration of women from Bangladesh. In collaboration with UNDP, the IOM has commissioned five studies covering different aspects of migration. It supports various migrant workers' associations (e.g. in holding rallies at events such as the International Migrant Workers' Day). Currently, it has also undertaken a capacity building project in the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment. UNDP is also partially involved in migration issues. It supported IOM for the five studies. It also funded the translation of reports into Bangla and published them in both English and Bangla. UNDP also funded a few NGOs under its HIV/AIDS programme to raise awareness among migrants of HIV/AIDS. Recently the Asian Development Bank has done some exploratory work on trafficking issues. So far the World Bank has not undertaken any migration-related initiative. USAID made a major contribution in respect to combating trafficking. However, like many others, it has yet to undertake any programme on labour migration or long-term migration. The Policy Division of the Department for International Development (DFID), UK has recently become interested in migration issues

## **4 KEY POLICY GAPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### ***Policy Gaps***

This study has identified the obstacles, both national and international that hinder poor people benefiting from migration. In the following section gaps in the current migration regime are highlighted and policy recommendations are offered.

The paper shows that successive governments in Bangladesh have underscored the importance of short-term labour migration to the economy of Bangladesh and undertook various measures to manage migration. As early as 1976, it created the BMET to control and regulate migration, and to ensure the welfare of migrant workers. It framed a new Emigration Ordinance in 1982. More recently, the current government has

responded to the long-standing demand of migrant workers and expatriate Bangladeshis by establishing a separate ministry, the Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment. The Ministry has two types of migrant communities in mind: one is long-term emigrants to the industrialised West, and the other is short-term contract migrants. In 2002, the government framed new rules under the 1982 Ordinance. This paper recognises all the efforts of government in this respect. However, it identifies some areas where specific policy changes are needed to pursue the objectives of framing this ministry. These are discussed below.

The 1982 Ordinance is important. However, since the 1980s, the labour migration process has changed globally. The demand for female labour had increased and employers have changed from being migrant friendly to migrant exploitative. In addition, new labour-exporting countries have entered the market. At the same time, a new instrument, the UN International Convention on Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families, 1990, has been framed to protect migrant workers' rights. The 1982 Emigration Ordinance does not reflect the current reality of the labour market, nor does it reflect the rights-based approach.

Successive Bangladeshi governments have pursued a policy that either completely bans or imposes restrictions on female migration for certain types of work. Such government policies have not prevented women workers emigrating abroad. On the contrary, they have contributed to irregular migration and, to a large extent, made potential women migrants vulnerable to poor working conditions and trafficking. An administrative order has removed women's constitutional right to work; it has to be restored by framing a pragmatic policy.

International labour migration is the country's highest earner of foreign exchange. However, the ministry in charge of managing this sector is severely under-resourced. Managing short-term labour migration entails a range of activities from regulation to programme implementation. Meagre resources leaves the government institutions trying to address these various fronts unable to attain the required quality of work. Members of the line ministries and executing agencies realise the need for institutional capacity building. The training institutions are weak. The shortcomings of the state agencies responsible for regulation are apparent from the fact that irregular emigration from Bangladesh is increasing. Instead of going through the official immigration clearance process via BMET, many prospective migrants are taking advantage of corrupt authorities that operate in conjunction with recruiting agencies at the airport.

Mechanisms for effective inter-ministerial and inter-agency co-ordination have yet to emerge. Institutional arrangements have yet to be worked out for incorporating migrant workers' associations and other civil society organisations in policy formulation. Another major concern is the increase in unskilled and semi-skilled emigration in comparison to emigration of professional and skilled workers. The cost of migration has increased manifold. This is mainly the result of the emergence of a system of visa purchase and sale by intermediaries in

both Bangladesh and destination countries. Unable to bear such high costs, the poor find it almost impossible to migrate. They have been further constrained by the non-availability of credit schemes to finance migration.

## **Recommendations**

### *General*

Government, migrant workers, civil society organisations and the private sector collectively need to shape a comprehensive migration policy reflecting all kinds of migration, i.e., short term, long term, and migration within South Asia. Protection of human rights and dignity of labour both in Bangladesh as well as in receiving countries will be the fundamental principle of that policy. The policy has to reflect the rights-based approach of 1990 UN Convention. The long-term goal of the policy should be to create and maintain a condition that is congenial to regular and orderly migration. The policy should also strive to ensure an enabling environment for poor people to choose to migrate. A national plan of action has to be framed, identifying roles and functions of government, non-government and private sector institutions in implementing the policy.

The government of Bangladesh has signed the UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. It has missed the opportunity to be the 20th country to accede to the treaty that has made the Convention come into force. As a labour sending country, it is in Bangladesh's interest to accede to the Convention immediately and frame necessary enabling national legislation.

Restrictions on the emigration of unskilled and semi-skilled women up to a certain age should be rescinded. Domestic work, cleaning and maintenance work should be transformed into skilled professions, by imparting vocational training. Through local awareness campaigns, information on safe migration should be made available to women. Women should also be equipped through training to protect themselves from harassment and abuse of various kinds. Shelter homes, hotlines, counselling and support services have to be developed in labour-importing countries that target the female labour market. These services should be managed under the Migrant Workers' Resource Centre (MWRC) proposed in the study.

Various measures are needed to overcome the structural obstacles that hinder prospective poor migrants. Poor men and women need access to formal credit, and training to enhance their skills to participate effectively in the labour market. Both public and private banks may experiment with ways of providing loans to the poor in this regard. Micro-finance institutions with their wide networks may also be encouraged to provide credit and training to potential poor migrants.

Resources from the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund should be used to establish a bank to provide access to credit on low interest. This bank may then give loans to the poor at a reasonable rate of interest, using mortgages on land or other properties as collateral. In this way migrant workers will not have to borrow from local moneylenders at high interest rates. The

Wage Earners' Welfare Fund is a contributory fund of the migrant workers, therefore, their demands should be appreciated by the government.<sup>14</sup>

If the poor are to have the opportunity to migrate the costs of migration have to be reduced. Moreover, they must be provided with training and credit. Recruiting agents in the receiving countries must be made accountable and those proven to have engaged in fraudulent or unscrupulous practices brought to justice.<sup>15</sup>

Vocational training should be incorporated in mainstream primary and secondary level curricula. Chapters on migration should be incorporated in textbooks. To increase communication skills, English should be introduced as a second language from the nursery level.<sup>16</sup>

In 2001, the then Interim Government prepared a policy and strategy guideline for streamlining the labour recruitment process (Siddiqui, 2002). To coordinate different aspects of migration, the policy document suggested the formation of an advisory committee. The committee is to be constituted with representatives of different ministries, public and private banking sector, business sector, recruiting agencies, migrant groups, researchers, and persons of repute, integrity and experience in the field of migration. The committee may act as inter-ministerial/inter-agency watchdog with legal authority to monitor the progress of implementation of the comprehensive national migration policy.

This conference may try to develop a uniform model of national law on labour migration for the region. Regional experts may work together to develop the legal framework. The law should cover both regular and irregular migration.<sup>17</sup>

### *Short-term Migration*

Of the various forms of migration, short-term labour migration has received the most attention from successive governments. Their commitment was reflected in the creation of a separate bureau, formulation of legal instruments, and in recent creation of a new government ministry. However, the 1982 Emigration Ordinance has become ineffective to accommodate the interests of migrant workers. The Ordinance must be replaced by rights-based legislation to reflect the 1990 UN Convention and other relevant ILO Conventions.

Despite the establishment of a new ministry, and the positioning of BMET within it, the latter's function related to local labour has yet to be discarded. BMET should be relieved of functions pertaining to local employment and concentrate its efforts on international labour migration. Again, training for the international market should be under the Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment Ministry. A separate agency may be created under the Labour Ministry to look after local employment and internal migration. With regard to international labour migration, BMET should concentrate on regulation and monitoring of the labour migration sector, rather than implementing specific programmes.

There is a general consensus among the different

14 Secretary General, Welfare Association of Bangladeshi Repatriated Employees, at the Stakeholders' Meeting, 20 March 2003.

15 Minhaj Uddin Ahmed, Member, BAIRA, at the Stakeholders' Meeting, 20 March 2003.

16 Ghulam Mustafa, Secretary General, BAIRA, at the Stakeholders' Meeting, 20 March 2003.

17 Dr. Syed Refaat Ahmed at the Stakeholders' Meeting, 20 March 2003.

ministries that Bangladesh should concentrate more on exporting skilled human resources. To do so BMET needs to identify future potential markets for skilled and professional Bangladeshi labour, strengthen its existing training institutes through upgrading and procuring necessary equipment, and by increasing the capacity of its trainers. Government should also encourage NGOs and the private sector to take up training programmes targeted to foreign employment. In this respect, BMET needs to disseminate information on the labour market to organisations and NGOs that offer training. To ensure poor people's access to such training, special scholarship programmes must be designed for them. All require major resource allocation.

Preventive measures and legal remedies should be given equal priority to protect migrant workers' rights and ensure efficient management of the sector. Information campaigns to discourage irregular migration should be a key area of intervention.<sup>18</sup> Policy guidelines prepared in 2001 identified various stakeholders such as local-level leaders, grassroots NGO workers, bank officials, human rights activists, journalists, local level BMET functionaries and labour attaches in foreign missions as the target group for this kind of awareness building campaign. RMMRU has prepared a training module incorporating lecture briefings, visual aids, and video drama with inputs from government functionaries, bank officials, migrant workers associations, lawyers, academics, and representatives of recruiting agents and NGOs. The government and other stakeholders have appreciated the training module. Projects may be designed to implement such training at a large scale in sending areas through BMET and NGOs.

Before embarking on short-term contract migration, migrant workers should have general information about the destination country, general job conditions, rights and duties under the legal regime of the country concerned and under international law. Currently, BMET runs a one-day briefing programme for those who have already been recruited for overseas employment. Following the Sri Lankan and Filipino examples, week-long courses have to be organised for potential emigrants. The government may consider not providing these trainings itself, rather encourage selected specialised agencies, NGOs, and migrant support groups to impart residential, pre-departure orientation training in sending areas in a decentralised manner. BMET should prepare a list of selected NGOs where recruiting agents will send potential migrants for training. While issuing clearance, BMET should ensure that the concerned migrants have received the training.

The role of foreign missions in destination countries must be redefined such that protecting the rights of migrant workers is considered a priority concern. Establishment of a migrant workers resource centre (MWRC) in major receiving countries may be considered by the government on the premises of, and under the administrative jurisdiction of, Bangladesh missions. MWRC should provide: counselling services; welfare assistance; information and advisory programmes; orientation on arrival; settlement and community networking services and activities for social interaction; institute a scheme of

registration for undocumented workers; human resource development such as training and skills upgrading; shelter homes for women workers and other services to assist special needs of women migrant workers; orientation programme for returning workers; monitoring on work conditions affecting migrant workers and provide facilities for recreation. The management of Bangladeshi workers abroad should feature significantly in the curriculum of existing courses for newly recruited Foreign Service Academy officers. Labour attaches and concerned officers at Bangladeshi missions who deal with Bangladeshi workers should receive training before they take over their assignments abroad.

In 2001, the Ministry of Finance and the Bangladesh Bank had undertaken substantive measures to reduce the delay in remittance transfer through formal channels. These measures yielded results and increased the flow of remittances. However, there remains major scope for improvement. Bank officials should be regularly trained, updated and motivated about the importance of migrant remittances and the importance of being customer friendly. Some policy changes are necessary at a macro-level. The government must reconsider its policy of reducing the number of branches of nationalised commercial banks in rural areas on grounds of financial sustainability. The Bangladesh Bank's policy prohibiting private banks operating branches abroad, in cities where nationalised banks have branches, must also be reconsidered. Given the constraints of opening new branches of nationalised commercial and private banks, and considering the existence of 1,200 of both Grameen Bank and Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) offices, the latter two may be encouraged to engage in the process of remittance transfers. In this regard, existing legal requirements may be relaxed so that these select MFIs may enter into correspondent relationships with foreign financial institutions and ensure speedy transfer of remittances to beneficiaries.

Studies have shown that most migrants remit small amounts. They need to be informed about the need for them to save to help their reintegration upon return. To encourage small savers, proper incentive programmes need to be undertaken. Bonds, shares and mutual funds at attractive rates may be offered. They also need to be informed about various forms of savings instruments offered by the government, non-government and private agencies. A section of migrant workers are potential investors. Information on various business opportunities and support schemes have to be geared towards this category of remittance receivers.

BMET has taken the initiative to develop a database of returnee migrants. The database should include information on name, address, age, sex, skill, place of employment, years of experience and passport details. Provision should be for returnee migrants to register on the database with ease. Attractive pro-poor incentive packages for returnee migrants could be offered. This may include linkage with formal banking sector, credit agencies for soft loans, land allotment on soft terms, insurance schemes and access to schemes organised under wage earners' welfare fund.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Mr. Shahudul Haq, Director General of BMET, 10 April 2003.

### Long-term International Migration

Industrialised countries are the preferred destinations for Bangladeshi emigration. The Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment along with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs need to develop a pragmatic plan of action to enter into the labour market of industrialised countries. In this respect, concerned authorities need to identify labour needs in those countries, and train human resource accordingly. Again the private sector and NGOs should be encouraged to undertake such training.

The government of Bangladesh along with other labour sending countries may engage in dialogue with industrialised countries to encouraging legal space for orderly migration.

The government has recently shown a keen interest in developing links with the Bangladeshi diaspora. The Ministry of Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment has been working towards achieving that goal. However, appropriate research is necessary to identify avenues for such linkage. With the aim of eradicating poverty and creating employment in Bangladesh, specific incentive structures may be set up to encourage the expatriate Bangladeshi entrepreneurs to invest in Bangladesh.

The Bangladesh government and private sector also need to institutionalise the relationship with the expatriate Bangladeshis who are involved in mainstream politics of their country of migration. Through these EBs the government of Bangladesh and the private sector would be able to effectively influence the public policy of the host country in favour of the industries (such as ready-made garments, shrimp cultivation, food processing etc.) in Bangladesh where internal migrants are employed.

### Conclusion

This report has attempted to capture different aspects of voluntary migration from Bangladesh on the basis of available secondary information. It was seen that three types of international/international migration is taking place from Bangladesh. Although various policy measures concerning short-term contract migration were undertaken by successive governments, different aspects of this type of migration still need major policy intervention, particularly in the light of current changes induced by globalisation. The issue of increasing inaccessibility of the rural poor to choose to migrate has not received attention from policy makers concerned with labour migration. The study emphasises that through timely and appropriate intervention, migration can be turned into a major development enhancing process. It can reduce poverty and be an important sustainable livelihood strategy of the poor.

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**TABLE 1: MIGRATION BY COUNTRY OF EMPLOYMENT AND FLOW OF REMITTANCE (1976–MARCH 2000)**

Country	K.S.A.	Kuwait	U.A.E.	Qatar	Iraq	Libya	Bahrain	Oman	Malaysia	Korea	S.Pore	Others	Total	Remittance	
Year														Million US	(Crore Tk)
1976	217	643	1989	1221	587	173	335	113				809	6087	23.71	35.85
1977	1379	1315	5819	2262	1238	718	870	1492				632	15725	82.79	125.16
1978	3212	2243	7512	1303	1454	2394	762	2877	23			1029	22809	106.9	165.59
1979	6476	2298	5069	1383	2363	1969	827	3777			110	223	24495	172.06	266.95
1980	8695	3687	4847	1455	1927	2976	1351	4745	3		385	2	30073	301.33	492.95
1981	13384	5464	6418	2268	13153	4162	1392	7352			1083	1111	55787	304.88	620.74
1982	16294	7244	6863	6252	12898	2071	2037	8248			331	524	62762	490.77	1176.84
1983	12928	10283	6615	7556	4932	2209	2473	11110	23		178	913	59220	627.51	1568.76
1984	20399	5627	5185	2726	4701	3386	2300	10448			718	1224	56714	500	1265.49
1985	37133	7384	8336	4751	5051	1514	2965	9218			792	550	77694	500	1419.61
1986	27235	10286	8790	4847	4728	3111	2597	6255	53		25	254	68658	576.2	1752.85
1987	39292	9559	9953	5889	3847	2271	2055	440				711	74017	747.6	2313.94
1988	27622	6524	13437	7390	4191	2759	3268	2219	2			709	68121	763.9	2423.59
1989	39949	12404	15184	8462	2573	1609	4830	15429	401		229	654	101724	757.85	2446
1990	57486	5957	8307	7672	2700	471	4563	13980	1385		776	517	103814	781.54	2691.63
1991	75656	28574	8583	3772		1124	3480	23087	1628		62	585	147131	769.3	2818.65
1992	93132	34377	12975	3251		1617	5804	25825	10537		313	293	188124	901.97	3513.26
1993	106387	26407	15810	2441		1800	5396	15866	67938		1739	724	244508	1009.09	3986.97
1994	91385	14912	15051	624		1864	4233	6470	47826	1558	391	2012	186326	1153.54	4629.63
1995	84009	17492	14686	71		1106	3004	20949	35174	3315	3762	3975	187543	1201.52	4838.31
1996	72734	21042	23812	112		1966	3759	8691	66631	2759	5304	4904	211714	1355.34	5685.3
1997	106534	21126	54719	1873		1934	5010	5985	152844	889	27401	2762	381077	1525.03	6709.15
1998	158715	25444	38796	6806		1254	7014	4779	551	578	21728	2602	267667	1599.24	7513.18
1999	26286	3324	3912	864		239	666	713		136	1000	563	268182	1806.63	8882.74
2000	144618	594	34034	1433		1010	4637	5258	17237	990	11095	1780	222686	1954.95	10199.12
2001	137248	5341	16252	223		450	4371	4561	4921	1561	9615	4422	188965	2068.72	11577.63
2002	163258	8272	25459	91		1574	5421	3854	85	28	6856	1127	216025	2617.92	15162.57
Total	1731116	316899	406845	91745	66343	49236	89393	227073	257739	13179	103069	35011	3387648	24700.28	104282.51

Source: Prepared from BMET and Bangladesh Bank data 2000

**TABLE 2: NUMBER OF BANGLADESHI IMMIGRANTS IN INDUSTRIALISED COUNTRIES**

Country	Number of Bangladeshi Immigrants
UK	500,000
USA	500,000
Italy	70,000
Japan	22,000
Australia	15,000
Canada	35,000
Spain	7,000
Germany	5,000
South Africa	4,000
France	3,500
Netherlands	2,500
Belgium	2,000
Switzerland	1,400
New Zealand	1,185
Total	1,167,400

Source: Educated guess made by government officials of Bangladesh who had first hand experience with the migrant community.

**TABLE 3: YEAR-WISE OFFICIAL FLOW OF BANGLADESHI WORKERS BY THEIR SKILL COMPOSITION**

Year	Professional	Skilled	Semi-Skilled	Un-Skilled	Total
1976	568	1,775	543	3,201	6,087
1977	1,766	6,447	490	7,022	15,725
1978	3,455	8,190	1,050	10,114	22,809
1979	3,494	7,005	1,685	12,311	24,495
1980	1,983	12,209	2,343	13,538	30,073
1981	3,892	22,432	2,449	27,014	55,787
1982	3,898	20,611	3,272	34,981	62,762
1983	1,822	18,939	5,098	33,361	59,220
1984	2,642	17,183	5,484	31,405	56,714
1985	2,568	28,225	7,823	39,078	77,694
1986	22,210	26,294	9,265	30,889	68,658
1987	2,223	23,839	9,619	38,336	74,017
1988	2,670	25,286	10,890	29,356	68,121
1989	5,325	38,820	17,659	39,920	101,724
1990	6,004	35,613	20,792	41,405	103,814
1991	9,024	46,887	32,605	58,615	147,131
1992	11,375	50,689	30,977	95,083	188,124
1993	11,112	71,662	66,168	95,566	244,508
1994	8,390	61,040	46,519	70,377	186,326
1995	6,352	59,907	32,055	89,229	187,543
1996	3,188	64,301	34,689	109,536	211,714
1997	3,797	65,211	193,558	118,511	381,077
1998	9,574	74,718	51,590	131,785	267,667
1999	8,045	98,449	44,947	116,741	268,182
2000	10,669	99,606	26,461	85,950	222,686
2001	5,940	42,742	30,702	109,581	188,965
2002	14,450	56,265	36,025	109,285	216,025
Total	146,436	1,084,345	574,677	1,582,190	3,387,648

Note: 150000 Bangladeshi workers legalised in Malaysia during 1997

Source: Prepared from BMET data 2002

**TABLE 4: COMPOSITION OF FEMALE MIGRANTS IN TOTAL LABOUR MIGRATION FLOW**

Year	Female Migrants		Total Number of Migrants
	Number	% of Total	
1991-95	9308	0.98	953,632
1996	1567	0.74	211,714
1997	1389	0.74	381,077
1998	960	0.36	267,667
1999	320	0.12	268,182
Total	13,544	0.65	2,082,272

Source: Siddiqui 2001

**TABLE 5: ANNUAL GROWTH OF REMITTANCE FLOWS FROM THE US AND THE UK  
(IN MILLION DOLLARS), 1997–2002**

Year	US		UK	
	Amount	% increase	Amount	% increase
1997	207.65	–	59.43	–
1998	217.09	4.57	62.95	5.92
1999	229.64	5.78	54.85	-12.86
2000	248.21	8.08	68.87	25.56
2001	264.95	6.74	63.93	-7.17
2002 (Nov.)	392.12	47.99	151.43	136.86
1997–2002	1559.66	14.63	461.46	29.66

Source: prepared on the basis of BMET data of 2003.

**TABLE 6: METHODS USED AND NUMBER OF TIMES REMITTANCES SENT (100 INTERVIEWEES)**

Methods used	Total		Amount Sent	%
	No. of Times	%		
Official Channel	564	52.81	1,01,07,500	46.28
Hundi	442	41.38	86,15,180	39.45
Returning Friends	32	2.99	1,00,800	4.61
Carried by MW	12	1.12	17,41,000	7.97
Others	18	1.70	3,68,000	1.69
Total	1,068	100.00	2,18,39,680	100.00

Source: Siddiqui and Abrar, 2001



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DFID is the UK government department responsible for promoting development and the reduction of poverty. Making globalisation work for poor people is seen as a key contributor to poverty reduction.



Migration from Bangladesh has a long historical matter and has always been a livelihood strategy for many centuries (Siddiqui. 2003). According to Gardner and Ahmed (2006:7), from pre-colonial times, migrants' from the west settled the highly fertile but often waterlogged lands of the east, whilst other historical evidence points to movement in the other direction, a continual flow of people, regardless of national border. It has turned out as an important livelihood strategy irrespective of the poor or well off households. In the case of the industrialized west, migrants often choose permanent migration however, migrants of the Middle-East choose temporary migration for livelihood from Bangladesh. T. Siddiqui, "Migration as a Livelihood Strategy of the Poor: The Bangladesh Case," DFID-RMMRU Conference on Migration, Development and Pro-Poor Development Choices in Asia, Dhaka, 2003. [19]. M. Z. Hossain, "Rural-Urban Migration in Bangladesh: A Micro-Level Study," For Presentation in a Poster Session on Internal Migration at the Brazil IUSSP Conference during 20-24 August 2001. [20]. N. H. Chau, "The Pattern of Migration with Variable Migration Cost," Journal of Regional Science, Vol. 37, No. 4, 1997, pp. 173-176. comments powered by Disqus. — Open Special Issues.