

Mobilization of Migrants to Form Self Help Groups in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka contributes to an estimated two million labour migrants working overseas with an annual outflow of 200,000 persons, mostly targeting the Middle East and European regions. Their contributions form the largest source of foreign exchange earnings, which constitutes 8.8% of the country's GDP.

Since, labour migration in Sri Lanka is mainly driven by high inflation, low per capita income, unemployment, underemployment, indebtedness and lack of access to resources, leading the process of securing a job abroad resulting risks and challenges. Many migrants are scattered within their villages, individually driven with lack sufficient information on their rights and duties, not prepared for their reintegration upon returning home. As a result, an average of 5000 annual cases are filed by the migrants to seek their rights where most of them are unsolved for a prolonged period of time.

Since 2010, the SDC through its Safe Labour Migration Programme (SLMP) in Sri Lanka has therefore supported local CSOs at the district level to provide specialized services for departing and returning migrants and their families. One initiative was to develop small groups at the village level to mobilize and organize, empower migrant communities to assist their fellow migrants through peer support, mostly to resolve their routine issue in the migration journey through a collective communities of practice.



Figure 1 . A migrant children led peer support group in Central Province

Presently within the SLMP Phase IV, more than 350 self-help groups formed through the initial facilitation and guidance offered by the grassroots Civil Society

Organizations (CSOs) as a primary programmatic intervention across the targeted districts in Sri Lanka. These groups comprise with potential migrants, returnee migrant workers and family members of migrant workers. To ensure sustainability, the small groups are reinforced through agriculture, integral business incubation methods, funds pooling and micro credit systems, culinary, sports and other leisure activities based on wider community interests.



Figure 2. A Self-help group reinforced through a saving club concept in North Western Province

The routine group meetings are mainly led by women have ensured success in disseminating safe migration information to the migrant communities in need, safeguarding migrant worker rights, helping to solve migrant grievances, connecting to referral systems, providing specialized services such as access to justice, psychosocial supports, skills guidance, remittance management and so on.

Today, these peer support groups are well recognized by the government in the journey of implementing the National Labour Migration Policy in Sri Lanka whilst this positive move encourages the government officials to rely on the primary data drawn from the self-help groups in their migrant assistance services.

The present phase is further expanding such best practices to use cluster income generation methods as a mode of establishing peer group sustainability. It is aimed to further empower and formalize these peer-support networks, making sure that migrant workers and their family members better understand their rights, organize themselves and speak with a united voice advocating for the protection and human rights of labour migrants in Sri Lanka and the region.