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National Labour Migration Policy Revisions and Governance in Sri Lanka

Labour migration in Sri Lanka directly contributes to the state economy as the largest source of foreign exchange earnings, which constitutes 8.8% of the country's GDP recording an annual outflow of 200,000 migrants. The key drivers to migrate are popularly known as rising inflation, low per capita income, unemployment and/or underemployment, indebtedness and lack of access to resources where the process of securing a job abroad bears multiple risks both at country of origin, transit and in the destination.

Supported by the Embassy of Switzerland to Sri Lanka and the Maldives, with close collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and Foreign Employment, the present national policy level interventions are carried out by the International Labour Organization (ILO) through their Country Office in Sri Lanka within the Safe Labour Migration Programme (SLMP) since 2021.

In line with the wider objectives of the Safe Labour Migration Programme, the goal of this project is to assist the Sri Lankan government to effectively implement the revised National Policy on Migration for Employment and the related Sub-Policy and National Action Plan on Return and Reintegration.

It is expected that the wider interventions assist labour migration in Sri Lanka is well-governed, orderly and regular for all women and men, ensuring decent, safe and productive employment.

Further, it is aimed to foster fair and ethical recruitment, skills recognition and certification, and sustainable reintegration through institutional enhancement and a 'Whole-of-Government' approach where policymakers, public officials, and other stakeholders are provided with an evidence base for their informed participation in policy, dialogue and action on labour migration.

As parts of implementation, the key duty bearers of the government were capacitated to focus on process sustainability and institutionalization of roles and functions in monitoring and reviewing implementation of the proposed actions of the revised national labour migration policy by promoting a 'Whole-Of-Government-Approach'.

In parallel, several multi-stakeholder closed-door discussions were carried out with Licensed Foreign Employment Agencies (LFEAs) to institutionalize fair and ethical recruitment whilst to gather their insights on the wider challenges they face presently.

Recognizing the prime need of enhancing evidence based policy making, several actions were facilitated to enhance systemic standardization of migrant data, information and knowledge by initiating a knowledge hub, forming a digital library system, knowledge transferring through tailor made online courses to duty bearers, offering specialized technical knowledge in computer usage and research skills, and curating safe labour migration evidence to assist policy making.

By focusing on the learnings from previous phases of the project, the ILO team employs synergies to enhance safe migration related knowledge and skills of civil society members and trade unions through active participation in the labour migration governance process and mechanisms through joint actions, which also allows migrant workers to raise their voice and concerns both and national and regional levels.

Figure 1 - ILO Civil Society Consultation on their Labour Migration Governance related knowledge and skills

In future, the digital Recognition of Prior Learning (E-RPL) system established will pave ways to assist migrants not only to access to easy skills certification where all such activities mainstream rights-based approaches and gender responsiveness in the governance of labour migration at the national level.