



Extending Social Protection to Migrant Workers: Exploratory Research and Policy Dialogue in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries

QUICK FACTS

Countries: Kuwait, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman

Evaluation date: 31 July 2024

Evaluation type: External

Evaluation timing: Final

Administrative Office: Regional Office for the Arab States (ROAS)

Technical Office: DWT Beirut

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Key Words: [Use themes as provided in i-eval Discovery](#)



BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Summary of the project purpose, logic and structure	(This should cover the objectives, brief outline of intervention logic, strategy and main means of action; geographic coverage and management structure of project.)
Present situation of the project	The Regional Office for the Arab States (ROAS) of the ILO has been implementing the project ‘Extending Social Protection to Migrant Workers: Exploratory Research and Policy Dialogue in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries (GCC)’ since 2021.
Purpose, scope and clients of the evaluation	An independent final evaluation was launched by ROAS that assessed the achievement of the project results against its planned outcomes and outputs and the potential impact on the targeted populations. It also identified the main good practices and lessons learned and presents practical recommendations to improve future similar projects. The primary clients of this evaluation are ILO ROAS, ILO Social Protection (SOCPRO) and MIGRANT departments, the SDC, ILO constituents in the countries of studies and the project’s key stakeholders. Secondary users include other project stakeholders and units within the ILO that may indirectly benefit from the knowledge generated by the evaluation.
Methodology of evaluation	<p>The evaluation assessed the project duration covering the period from January 2021 until March 2024. The geographical coverage covered the GCC member states in the Emirate of Kuwait, Kingdom of Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, State of Qatar and Sultanate of Oman. The evaluation integrated ILO’s cross-cutting issues, including norms and social dialogue, gender equality, disability inclusion and other non-discrimination concerns throughout its methodology and deliverables.</p> <p>The project’s logical framework and indicators were used as a basis for addressing key questions. A mixed-method approach was used to</p>



collect data to allow for triangulation and validation of data and enhance the credibility of findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Data collection relied on desk review of secondary sources, interviews and focus groups discussions, as well as observation to gather evidence of achievements. Data analysis was qualitative and quantitative. The evaluation faced and mitigated several constraints, mainly the effect of the holy month of Ramadan and holidays on the time to consult informants and limited reach to a wider group of migrants and migrant worker associations.

MAIN FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS

Relevance and Strategic Fit

The project's three outcomes had a strategic fit within the ILO's Programme and Budget (P&B) 2020-2021 and 2022-2023, bringing together two critical trends within the GCC, namely; fair labour migration and social protection for all. Some of the strategic discussions and evidence generated by the project have enriched the ILO's strategic thinking and contributed to the P&B development. The project has, consequently, contributed to the acceleration of several SDGs, including SDGs 1, 3, 5, 8 and 10. Furthermore, this project came in alignment with the SDC's focus on promoting decent work for refugees and migrant workers.

Overall, the project was designed based on in-depth problem analysis of the migrant workers' situation in the GCC countries. They have limited access to social protection that is not aligned with international social security standards. They mostly have access to healthcare and employer-funded employment injury and sick leaves. Migrant workers face persistent protection challenges, coupled with limited social protection commitments and reluctance from destination countries. The project design was also informed by several discussion forums and external factors and events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Cup in Qatar and the Abu Dhabi



Dialogue on the future of work. At the time of project design, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic caused a significant increase in migrant worker deportations from the GCC countries, often without receiving end-of-service benefits or healthcare access, and many employers struggled to pay wages. The Project Document reflected the general challenges and needs of migrants women but did not clearly articulate how this will be addressed in the detailed description of activities at the outset. Constraints at the project's outset hindered the ability to delve deeper into the circumstances of women migrant workers or allocate specific activities to this group. Nevertheless, the project incorporated a gender lens into its activities thereafter where possible.

The project focused on private sector workers in the formal sector in regular conditions To achieve that, it focused on evidence generation to support policy dialogue for gradual progressive -rather than immediate- policy reform. This approach allowed to garner support and ownership from GCC governments and maintain a positive momentum for further action. At varying extents, governments were willing to explore new protection measures for migrant workers, therefore the project came as a strategic fit to their agendas offering deeper rethinking to reform. For example, Oman was interested to avail funds for the end-of service benefits and extend social protection to migrant workers. Qatari authorities were willing to drive positive change in social protection landscape to address pressing needs of migrant workers and employers. Kuwait had been striving to adopt measures to reduce complaints and legal disputes by workers.

Coherence

The project's design placed emphasis on establishing synergies and complementarities with interventions by other actors and international organizations, however these did not come along as



strong during implementation, with the exception of the synergy with the FAIRWAY programme. Both teams maintained effective coordination on activities and resource utilization at the regional and country levels. With the UN agencies, most predominantly with the International Organization for Migration, (IOM), including on data collection, country missions and the preparation of the regional mapping report 'Social Protection for Migrant Workers in the GCC Countries'.

Effectiveness

The project was comprised of three outcomes and four outputs, which were all fully- or over-achieved in terms of the knowledge products produced, engagement with stakeholders and country coverage, as well as bringing most of the GCC countries together in regional dialogue on social protection. Under Outcome 1, the project carried-out two regional studies and two quantitative and qualitative surveys, exceeding what was originally planned. Under Outcome 2, two research and policy papers were produced and policy dialogue was bolstered through organizing or actively participating in high-level events and facilitating bilateral engagement between countries. Under Outcome 3, the project has over-achieved on the level of technical assistance it provided, with concrete advancements for some GCC countries.

Having effectively contributed towards the achievement of its two key milestones and over-achieving on its expected outcomes and outputs, the project contributed to policy outcomes of the ILO's P&B 2020-2021 and 2022-2023. It has also contributed to the ILO's strategies on gender equality, social dialogue and labour standards. The improvements promoted through the project in migrant worker protection may indirectly benefit women, however, there was limited targeting of gender-specific concerns within the project.



Social dialogue under the project appears to have been limited due to the dominance of government-led institutions in the GCC region, the weak to no existent trade unions and workers' associations, as well as the lack of freedom of association. Addressing social protection for migrant workers in GCC countries is sensitive and nascent protection area that required years for some governments and employers to become open to and to start engaging in dialogue with ILO and the project, others still underway. Genuine social dialogue was hence hindered with the absence of such prerequisites for dialogue at national and regional levels. Interviewees from government stakeholders also confirmed the efforts exerted by the project to promote social dialogue, despite occasional disagreements, they recognized the potential of the social dialogue to improve analysis and decision-making from multiple perspectives.

In views of HQ staff during interviews, the collaboration with the project was robust with technical inputs that enriched outcomes and overall effectiveness, which was also established by the project team at ROAS during interviews. At the same time, regional autonomy in managing administrative and financial tasks ensured timely project execution, resource efficiency and hands-on regional involvement by ROAS resulted in good project management practices and contributed to overall success. ROAS played a crucial role in supporting project activities, including to facilitate stakeholders engagement in regional events, report revision, contract management and logistical arrangement, which contributed to project effectiveness.

Efficiency

The total project budget was US\$ 1,297,289 with contributions of US\$ 1,023,225 (79%) by SDC and US\$ 274,064 (21%) by ILO. This total considers the cost-extension received in March 2024, increasing the budget from an original total of US\$ 1,024,364. The highest budget



portion was allocated to staffing at 44 percent, which includes specialized experts, followed by Outcome 1 at 18 percent, Outcomes 2 and 3 each at 11 percent. The project staff find that spending the project budget was efficient. Except for the cost-sharing with the FAIRWAY programme, there had been no other cost-sharing synergies observed during the evaluation. Two challenges were observed; the requirement by the SDC of a 50 percent co-funding poses a challenge and the insufficient allocations for support staff and administration considering the wide coverage of the project across multiple countries.

The project structure consisted of national and regional technical teams, commissioned think tanks and NGOs, and the MAG. ILO staff at HQ and ROAS find that this decentralized structure was adequate and contributed to the project's success with sufficient in-house technical expertise. They attributed part of the project's success to the effective and transparent communication and smooth working relations between them at the different offices.

Impact Orientation

Overall, the project's achievements are likely to contribute on the longer-term to the inclusion of migrant workers in the social protection systems of the GCC countries, albeit with the conditions of continued capacity strengthening, social dialogue and policy influence. At varying extents, the project engaged with countries and promoted systems reform, the most recognized were in Oman setting a precedent in improving migrant workers' access to comprehensive social protection. ILO, workers associations and government stakeholders find that the regional mapping and country assessments conducted by the project helped to identify gaps in social protection systems and devise solutions for improvement.



Policy dialogue on social protection has advanced considerably with GCC countries, grounded on the evidence generated from the research, policy briefs and surveys produced by the project. They informed advocacy efforts and presented compelling arguments to governments and constituents for reforms, although ultimate implementation is beyond ILO's control due to political and cultural complexities. Reforms in Oman have been signified with revisions to social protection framework addressing health coverage with some improvements in benefits for sickness, maternal and work injury and the establishment of boards endorsing social protection reforms. Bahrain's initiative to extend provident for end-of-service benefits and pensions funds applicable to both Bahraini and non-Bahraini workers, although not yet implemented and not fully aligned with International Labour Standards (ILS). Progress in Kuwait and Qatar on social protection reforms was also noted, particularly in discussions on health benefits and access to public health systems.

A shift has become visible in attitudes towards social protection in GCC countries, which has notably transformed from being a taboo topic to being openly discussed in regional and bilateral events, with the project effectively accompanying this positive momentum. Despite advancement, the introduced reforms are considered only a first step towards addressing disparities between national and non-national workers, with multiple and complex challenges remaining for the GCC countries to align to the international labour standards. The interviewed government stakeholders expressed openness to exploring further innovative approaches for social protection and stressed the need for adopting legislative frameworks and measures based on discussions and recommendations by social protection experts.

The evaluation underscores the sensitivity surrounding domestic workers, which presents unique challenges in promoting universal social protection reforms in the GCC countries. The specifics of how



to integrate domestic workers into social protection reforms remain unclear. Hence, the project has drawn the attention to domestic work, but there has been limited focus on promoting behavioural change.

New entry points identified through this evaluation and others have been and remain crucial. These include:

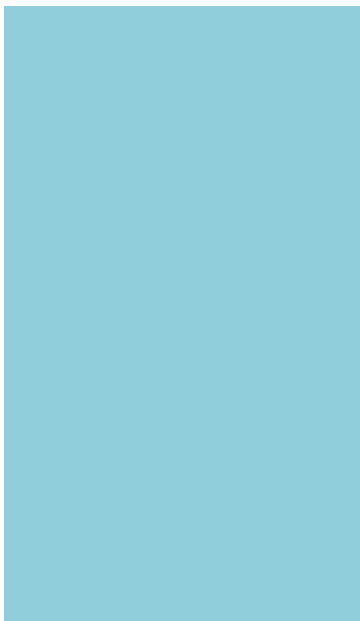
- Considerations of local realities, cultural sensitivities and national experiences emerged as crucial factors that were adopted by the project in identifying entry points for social protection reform.
- Developing robust business cases and reframing social protection as an investment in economic stability of institutions could bolster the potential reform solutions offered to the different GCC governments.
- The corridor approach to social protection reform was specifically identified by ILO and migrant workers' associations as a promising entry point to ensure a shared responsibility for the transfer of benefits between origin and destination GCC countries.
- The complex political landscape in some countries may hinder dialogue on social protection, slowing progress and changing priorities. However, some views from the government stakeholders see that political change may offer an entry point to provide technical support on developing new frameworks that consider social protection aspects.
- Access to health care and end-of-service benefits and provident funds have been and remain crucial entry points for social protection reform by the project, varying in focus and scope from one country to the other, examining the potential governance of social insurance and social funds is further required.



- The success of engagement with GCC countries largely centres on their willingness to align with the international labour standards for a state-led governance of social protection, versus its privatization, as exemplified by Oman's reform efforts.
- Engagement with GCC Bureau and leveraging its convening power has proven valuable, particularly in influencing discussions on end-of-service benefits, which still represents a critical entry point to dialogue and reform solutions with GCC countries.
- Addressing employment injury compensation and protection in case of injury at workplace, particularly in industries like construction, domestic work and agriculture, present another entry point for the project to devise nationally acceptable solutions for reform. In relation is also the promotion of Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) concerns.
- In Oman, working with the government, employers and labour communities on means to operationalize the policy is considered an entry point for the country, as well as mobilising migrants and information sharing about the new policies and their rights.

Sustainability

While immediate impact on migrant workers may not be realized, the project has laid a solid foundation at the mid- to long-term for their access to social protection. Despite this progress, disparities persist in social protection entitlements between nationals and migrant workers across the GCC countries and the emerging solutions that the project had facilitated face administrative and cultural challenges for their application. As such, the achieved project results are likely to be sustainable with further country-specific interventions that may differ in their approach, design and implementation modality



from one country to the other. Prospects of sustainability by the project increased by the effective collaboration with diverse stakeholders. Primarily, the connection with the GCC bureau, that has been a pivotal avenue for comparative analysis between countries, alignment of positions and coordinating efforts across the region in social protection initiatives and influencing governments.

Social dialogue in the GCC region still lags behind, which may hinder sustainability of the efforts made by the project for inclusive social protection. Attributed to contexts within the GCC, limited focus was placed by the project on reaching out, engaging and building capacities of worker unions and associations. ILO staff recognize this gap and believe future projects should strive to invest in unions and their acceptance within the national frameworks moving forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS, LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES

Main Recommendations

Recommendation 1: **Strengthen and promote a genuine social dialogue in the GCC countries where possible, while engaging and strengthening migrant workers’ associations, unions or federations.**

Recommendation 2: **Continue to promote innovative evidence-based research in workers’ rights and social protection, including on business models, financial sustainability and labour market competitiveness.**

Recommendation 3: **Develop a clear strategy for the implementation of the corridor approach in the next phase, considering a mix of country specific as well as regional interventions**

Recommendation 4: **Design tailored interventions specifically targeting women domestic workers to address and ease both legal**



	<p>and practical challenges they face in accessing social protection that leads to their increased vulnerabilities.</p> <p><u>Recommendation 5: Strengthen and maximize the impact of the partnership with the GCC bureau, clearly defining its role and potential contributions at the design phase. Along the same lines, identify and strengthen other emerging regional partnerships.</u></p>
<p>Main lessons learned and good practices</p>	<p>Lessons Learned</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Effective social dialogue is challenging in the GCC region yet remains critical for inclusive social protection efforts. Genuine social dialogue was hence hindered with the absence of prerequisites for dialogue at national and regional levels. Focus on social dialogue could be strengthened in future projects given the current positioning of ILO as a strategic partner to governments on social protection reform. 2. Women migrant workers in GCC countries face protection challenges, including risks of abuse, adverse working conditions, lack of access to any form of social insurance schemes or labour inspection, especially domestic workers who are residing within households and their work is not recognized. Despite legal provisions, end-of-service benefits for domestic workers are often not implemented. The ILO’s gender equality mandate focuses on the rights and experiences of female migrant workers, particularly those engaged in domestic work. The ILO’s mandate on gender equality can back efforts to promote equal opportunities for them in the GCC region. 3. Despite the identification of potential complementarities and synergies in the design phase with other projects, these are not structurally integrated in the description of activities as to how specifically they would be achieved, what would be the roles, inputs, contributions and outputs towards the common expected outcomes. <p>Good Practices</p>



1. Adopting a gradual progressive approach facilitates acceptance by governments and employers for social protection reform recommendations and increases likelihoods of their successful implementation, where political will is at the core.
2. Evidence-based research provides a solid foundation for high-level dialogue and promotes policy influence. Contextualization ensures that reform solutions are well-received and can be successfully implemented, increasing probability of ownership and acceptance by governments.
3. The project's ToC focusing on evidence generation, followed by dialogue and policy recommendations, as well as capitalization on international labour standards, yields concrete results in terms of government buy-in and ownership.
4. Engaging with a strategic regional partner such as the GCC bureau is instrumental in fostering regional dialogue, information sharing, identifying priorities and liaising at higher levels with key government stakeholders and influential decision-makers at the country level.