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Promoting decent work through good governance, protection and empowerment of migrant workers: Contributing towards implementation of Sri Lanka National Labour Migration Policy (NLMP) – Phase IV – Independent Final evaluation

QUICK FACTS

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BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Summary of the project purpose, logic and structure

Since the 1980s, overseas employment has been a key contributor to Sri Lanka's economy mainly in the form of foreign exchange remittances. In 2022, private remittances sent to Sri Lanka amounted to USD 3,789.4 million, with over 90 per cent of Sri Lankan employees working abroad were employed in the Arab States.

The project 'Promoting decent work through good governance, protection and empowerment of migrant workers: Contributing towards effective implementation of the Sri Lanka National Labour Migration Policy' is the International Labour Organisation (ILO) component of the Safe Labour Migration Programme (SLMP) in Sri Lanka, supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) Global Programme for Migration and Development since 2010. The current transfer phase of the Project reflected in its interventions, the regional Governance of Labour Migration in South Asia (GOALS) Programme, also supported by SDC, which partnered with governments and other stakeholders in the South Asia sub-region for cross-country of origin support to national level actions; while these national experiences and best practices were also disseminated in the regional Colombo Process and Abdu Dhabi Dialogue. The design of Phase IV was developed to respond to contextual and current issues whilst also building on the past three phases of interventions on labour migration. The Project was structured around three Outcomes:

Outcome 1: Outward Labour Migration policies and plans are better monitored for implementation, by the Government of Sri Lanka

Outcome 2: Fair and ethical recruitment, skills recognition and certification, and sustainable reintegration is fostered through institutional enhancement and the 'Whole- Of-Government- Approach'

Outcome 3: Improved Evidence Base on Labour Migration to inform knowledge, dialogue, policy and action

Over Phases I-III, the Project has supported the Government of Sri Lanka to formulate an Operational Manual for Labour Sections of Sri Lankan Missions in Countries of Destination (2012 and revised in 2019); to develop the Sub-Policy and National Action Plan on Return and Reintegration of Sri Lankan Migrants (adopted in 2015); and to update and strengthen the National Labour Migration Policy National Policy on Migration for Employment (in 2019-2020), among other activities.

The Sri Lanka National Labour Migration Policy Project – Phase IV has at large met its planned Outcomes and contributed to meet the set out long-term Objective: "All women and men migrant workers in Sri Lanka are ensured safe, orderly and regular employment". The project's startup was extremely challenging as the project was confronted with challenges coming from the COVID-19 pandemic. When the worst consequences of the pandemic were settled Sri Lanka entered a serious economic and political crisis which again had a negative impact on the projects possibilities for implementing its

	activities. During the second half of the implementation period the project managed to speed up the implementation. In Sri Lanka there is now an increased interest in self-regulation within the recruitment industry, as many agencies are keen to differentiate themselves from unethical recruiters and to be identified by migrant workers and employers alike as professional, responsible and trustworthy. This is also a recommendation of the end-of-phase III evaluation. Therefore, the other prong of this strategy was to build the capacity of the Association of Licensed Foreign Employment Agencies (ALFEA) to train its members and others on a fee-paying model, which is self-sustaining. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) became an important part of the project. Resources very successfully invested in strengthening the governments capacity in this field and even there still are challenges in relation to outreach a good basis for further development was created.
Present situation of the project	The objectives of the project have largely been met even though due to delays not all outputs have been delivered, some outputs e.g. the Learning Management System and AI based knowledge management are reported to be ready to be launched. It is expected that in the short- and mid-term (after the closure of the project) the government will ensure that all initiated activities will be running full scale. The evaluation understands that there is a strong political commitment to see this happen, but some resource issues might be a challenge. Throughout the implementation of the current project attention was paid to assess the sustainability of the investments of the project and to recommend for its sustainability as the project ends and no new interventions are planned. ILO has according to the donor well communicated the process of consolidation to all its sub partners and beneficiaries. It has also witnessed outcomes of this awareness among the mid- and senior level government officials. As a result, the government immediately took actions to sustain the readily available structures and systems.
Purpose, scope and clients of the evaluation	The main purposes of the evaluation were to fulfil the accountability to the donor and to the tripartite constituents, to serve internal organizational learning and develop actionable Recommendations. This evaluation reviewed the project design, implementation, effectiveness, efficiency, relevance and sustainability and made recommendations for eventual future interventions. The findings and recommendations are to be used as organizational learning to improve the future relevant projects and programmes. The scope of the evaluation covers the implementation in Sri Lanka. The evaluation collected data and information from implementing partners and beneficiaries of the project, including concerned governmental institutions, social partners and relevant CSOs. The evaluation covers activities, outputs and outcomes of the projects for the period between 15 January 2021 to 30 September 2024. It covers all the planned outputs and outcomes under the project to achieve the program goal of the project which is: Labour migration in Sri Lanka is well- governed, orderly and regular for all women and men, ensuring decent, safe and productive employment. As the project operated at the national level, with a greater emphasis on policy-level engagements rather than service delivery, due consideration was given to national-level deliveries. The evaluation is based on the following OECD/DAC evaluation criteria: Relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability as defined in the ILO Policy Guidelines for results-based evaluation.

Methodology of evaluation

The Evaluator conducted a participatory, theory-based evaluation to answer the questions raised in the Terms of Reference. The evaluation interviewed governmental and local officials (men and women) who have participated in capacity building activities to learn how relevant the training has been and to what extent the new knowledge and skills are used in their daily work. The evaluation further conducted semi-structured interviews with project staff, including the project staff of other ILO projects and ILO staff responsible for financial, administrative and technical backstopping of the project. The evaluation was confronted with certain challenges in meeting the intended outreach to beneficiaries. This was due to Presidential elections taking place two days before the field mission started and the from this unavailability of some senior government officials.

MAIN FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS

The design of Phase IV responded to lessons learned from prior phases of the program by focusing on limited but strategic interventions with clear links between the different Outcomes of the Project. Further, it incorporated collaboration between SDC Safe Labour Migration Programme partners: the International Executive Service Corps (IESC) and with a district-based network of CSOs. The policy development of the National Policy on Migration for Employment and the Sub-Policy and National Action Plan on Return and Reintegration are by all informants seen to have the potential to contribute to the promotion of decent work through good governance, protection and empowerment of migrant workers. The evaluation notes a strong and fruitful cooperation with relevant ministries and an almost daily contact with the Ministry of Labour and Foreign Employment. The evaluation finds that this close cooperation has created a strong felt ownership to the program among governmental officials. The project developed a good cooperation with the Governance of Labour Migration in South and South East Asia (GOALS) project within which a good cooperation and coordination was established with IOM. The current project focused in this cooperation mainly on the activities to be implemented in Sri Lanka. It was however informed that stakeholders saw the agencies working in silos with limited interaction when it came to activities. The project management, with the understanding and flexibility from the donor managed to speed up implementation of planned activities during the last two years of the project – and even secure implementation of more activities than planned. In general, the project has been implemented with a good level of effectiveness especially taking in to account the challenges and delays it was confronted with in the first two years of implementation caused by developments beyond the reach of the project.

Outcome 1: Outward Labour Migration policies and plans are better monitored for implementation, by the Government of Sri Lanka
The evaluation finds that the Government now has stronger capacity for implementation and monitoring of the developed policy – based on the Action Plan developed within the project. There is however still long way to go before the policies and practices will reach all women and men labour migrants. Overall, this Outcome has been met. This even a lacking ownership among social partners.
Outcome 2: Fair and ethical recruitment, skills recognition and certification, and sustainable reintegration is fostered through institutional enhancement and the ‘Whole-Of-Government-Approach’
Through the strengthening of the qualification framework both regionally in South Asia and in Sri Lanka has skills development and reintegration possibilities been improved.

While the RPL system is operational, and complemented by the National Skills Passport, there have been a number of issues impeding its efficiency and effectiveness. There is reported to be scope for improvement in coordination of stakeholders, especially at divisional secretariat level; also, in accessibility to migrant workers who may be on home leave for short periods of time; lower proportion of women to men workers participating in the scheme; also, there is a need for expansion of assessment centres.

Outcome 3: Policy makers, individuals and institutions at national and regional level used evidence base to inform policy dialogues, policy drafting and knowledge exchange

The project has, together with an ILO project for policy dialogue developed eight large scale and Ministry level policy position papers. These have been used both nationally and regionally as basis for evidence-based policy development discussions. The evaluation was informed that that within a short period of time 52 studies, reports and other materials on labour migration have been published by different institutions and agencies creating a huge knowledge base in Sri Lanka.

Even though the planned Knowledge Hub did not take off as planned the evaluation finds that the project has met this Outcome by contributing to building up capacity among Governmental officials. It is expected that the strong commitment shown will secure further achievements in this field. An AI based knowledge management system has been developed towards the end of the project.

The evaluation finds that the ILO in the design phase could have made more efforts to conduct needs assessments of how many trainers and master trainers the partners needed to be able to implement planned activities. Also, the project could have benefitted from stronger needs assessment when developing training materials. There are big numbers of women going abroad for work, these will benefit from the initiatives taken within the current project. There was however no quota for women participants set out for training and other activities. Even this there were often a majority of women among participants at the different levels. The project could have established minimum quota for women participation in the activities and also promoted these standards among partners. For implementing partners, gender balance could have been a requirement.

The project has contributed to lasting changes in norms and policies that strengthen governance, capacity building and skills development related to labour migration. The policies are in place this can have a strong impact on the Sri Lankan labour migration on the mid- and long-term.

The interventions long-term effects can be expected to be seen in skills qualification frameworks, RPL (e-RPL) and also in further professionalism in the work of the Licensed Foreign Employment Agencies (LFEA's) in terms of capacitating duty bearers in protecting rights of migrant workers in areas such as governance of labour migration, monitoring and review of implementation of Code of Conducts.

Women migrant workers should be actively involved in the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of labour migration governance. Research, data collection and analysis should be gender responsive through disaggregation based on sex and gender, to record the status and conditions of migrant workers who are women vis-à-vis those of men, and of labour migration as experienced by women and men respectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS, LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES

Main findings & Conclusions

Recommendations:

- 1) The ILO is recommended to investigate with EOs and trade unions

the need for developing policies on labour migration to meet the challenges and benefit from labour migration both inwards and outwards. These policies could also be developed in relation to the Just Transition agenda.

2) The current project comes to an end and the donor has indicated that no further funding for financing the activities initiated under the project will be available. Governmental officials indicated to the evaluation that no allocations are foreseen in their budgets for these activities. The GoSL is therefore recommended urgently to initiate fundraising with other donors to secure continuation of the many successful activities. Some actions are budgeted with external financial assistance.

3) The ILO and GoSL are recommended to involve future users when developing training and awareness raising materials to ensure that the materials meet the needs of the users.

4) Job orders are normally short-term. GoSL is recommended to include strategic sectors where the employment perspectives are 3-5 years giving the TVET system time to prepare potential migrant workers with needed knowledge and skills.

5) The GoSL is recommended to use social platforms (Tik-Tok, Instagram, X, Facebook and others) to raise awareness about e-RPL and RPL. This is to overcome the challenges with low outreach to target groups.

6) The ILO/IOM and the GoSL are recommended to investigate the reasons for missing outreach of the e-RPL and Skills Passport. This is to mitigate at an early stage if there are any push challenges in the set-up.

7) The GoSL is recommended to give further priority to the work of FEDOs. This would mean capacity building and providing them with the needed material resources so that they can reach out to potential and returning migrants.

8) The GoSL is recommended to give further priority to the whole-of-Government approach to be developed at the provincial, district and divisional level. This is to maximize the benefits of the many efforts made at these levels to ensure fair and safe migration and return. The "Whole-of-Government" approach is appreciated by all stakeholders, but when it comes to funding some parts of the governmental structures have significant funding whereas others are lacking funding. It is therefore recommended to expand the approach also to cover funding.

9) The ILO is recommended to follow up to plans which were in place before the pandemic on capacity building for private employment agencies and their organization(s). Jointly or separate the Government, trade unions and agencies should be made aware of the ILO guidelines for PEAs and C181 with the perspective of using the guidelines when developing regulations for the industry and to prepare for a later ratification of C181.

10) The ILO is strongly recommended to ensure that in own activities and in activities implemented by partners a quota of 40% women and 30% male participation is in place. Also, it must be ensured that these quotas are reflected in project design and reporting. Reporting on project progress MUST have gender disaggregated data throughout.

11) The ILO should consider having a media strategy in place for all projects and also ensure that the needed capacity for realizing such a strategy is in place in the CO.

12) The ILO is recommended to give priority to promotion of social protection (incl. pension schemes) for migrant workers in possible future interventions. With migrant workers staying abroad for several years or return into migration time after time it would be fair to include them in social protection schemes.

Conclusion:

The Sri Lanka National Labour Migration Policy Project – Phase IV has at large met its planned Outcomes and contributed to meet the set out long-term Objective: “All women and men migrant workers in Sri Lanka are ensured safe, orderly and regular employment”. The project’s startup was extremely challenging as the project staff had to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic and when the worst consequences of the pandemic were settled Sri Lanka entered a serious economic and political crisis which again had a negative impact on the project’s possibilities for implementing its activities. The project management together with primarily Governmental officials managed to get the implementation on track and speed up activities. The project even managed to implement more activities than originally planned. The current phase of the project was foreseen to be a policy implementation phase, but due to delays in the approval of the policy papers which were developed under phase III of the project. The project spent a lot of effort on finalizing the policy papers and including amendments. This investment in time has proven to be right as there now is a strong ownership in the Government towards the policies. The ownership was developed through a very close day-to-day cooperation between the project team and the governmental officials directly involved with the project. The project has contributed to capacity development within the Government and to some extent among social partners and CSOs. Governmental officials have with success been trained on national as well as district level. The training of trainers unit in the Ministry has been strengthened. The basis for evidence-based decision making has been improved and the already strong international presence of Sri Lanka in regional and sub-regional frameworks has been further strengthened. The strengthened capacity is also reported when it comes to negotiation of Bilateral Labour Agreements.

The project has taken different initiatives to strengthen the Recognition of Prior Learning and a Skills Passport both supported their capacity on the national level and on influence at the regional level. Qualification frameworks are being developed, but still there is some way to go before a strong outreach among users is in place. It will now be up to the Government and other donors to secure the successful further development of these initiatives.

The new policies have strong gender-responsive elements to protect women when working abroad and the majority of beneficiaries are reported to be women, gender disaggregate data is however missing. Little attention was paid to the inclusion of people living with disabilities. This can be explained by the fact that only a few people with such challenges are going abroad for work. It could have been considered to take initiatives on addressing rights for reintegration of migrant workers returning with disabilities, but reintegration is not within the scope of the current project.

The Association of Foreign Employment Agencies is now associated with the Employers Federation of Ceylon. This together with capacity building received through the project is reported to have strengthened the Association significantly. It is now seen as a respected and professional organization representing the industry in various fora.

The involvement of social partners has not led to them developing their own evidence-based policies and positions on labour migration. Both social partners and CSOs have participated in capacity building, but as the project in its design did not focus on grassroots level, there is no data on the extent to which the capacity has been used at this level.

Main lessons learned and good practices

A lesson learned from the current project would be that the physical set-up for the management of the project(s) can have an important positive influence on the project's approach to "work as one". Another lesson learned would be the importance of not only developing new initiatives in skills recognition and qualification frameworks, but also secure that information about the initiatives reach the potential users.

The project has shown interesting emerging good practices. The direct involvement of social partners in the preparation of Bilateral Labour Agreements is an interesting new approach that should be promoted by the ILO and scaled. Sri Lanka has established a possibility for migrant workers when home for shorter periods to fast-track recognition of their skills/qualifications. This is an interesting approach, and it should be monitored to understand id it can be scaled without degrading the value of certificates.