

112 IOM Council Meeting - 29 November to 1 December 2021

Statement by the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

Impact of Covid-19 on borders, migration and mobility Learning lessons and preparing for the future

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The loss of livelihoods, closure of borders and restrictions on mobility due to the Covid-19 pandemic, has exacerbated inequalities and impacted all segments of society for nearly two years. However, its effect on migrants, one of the most vulnerable segments of the world population, has been disproportionate, causing significant hardship and suffering. In particular, migrant workers have been affected by loss of employment or reduced wages, eviction from their country of employment, stigmatization as a health risk, limited or inequitable access to medical assistance and inability to return due to border closures and travel restrictions, leaving them in a struggle to survive far away from their homes.

Migrant workers comprise approximately 3.5% of the world's population and contribute significantly to economic growth and development of the host country and their own, in addition to serving as a catalyst for regional and international growth. Their remittances to their families provide access to health services, nutrition, education, housing and other essential services, thereby helping to raise standards of living. The shrinking employment market and the significant reduction in worker remittances as a consequence of the pandemic, has placed families of migrants in poverty, without access to basic necessities.

This is in a context where, perhaps ironically, in many countries, migrant workers have been at the forefront of the Covid-19 response, working throughout the pandemic as care givers for the sick and the elderly and as providers of food and other essential services.

Nearly two years later, the much awaited return to normalcy has been slowed with the emergence of variants, the introduction of digital health certificates and other health imperatives, border management, and other restrictions which continue to impact on mobility and migrants.

Our efforts to move beyond this pandemic and build resilient and sustainable economies capable of withstanding global shocks, must take into account the experiences and lessons of the past two years. In this respect, an integrated approach with development oriented migration policies and which recognize the contribution of migrants to socio-economic regeneration and growth is essential. A migrant-inclusive public health systems and Covid-19 health programs with equitable access to health care, including to vaccines to all migrants regardless of their status, is also an imperative. Further, in order to avoid a global mobility

divide and minimize the effect of the pandemic on borders, migration and mobility, mutual access and recognition of COVID-19 health certificates are also necessary.

In addition, entrepreneurship and the inclusion of the private sector is also vital in post pandemic recovery processes to support the livelihoods of migrants, especially women and youth. Through the development of additional skills including on the use of technology, vocational training and online education, women migrants can harness their full potential and contribute meaningfully to the development of the host communities as well as their own. It is important that migrant youth are assisted with access to education and labour opportunities as well as to develop digital skills to build resilience in the labour market in the future.

It is also essential to harness the support of private and national actors to address the challenges associated with migrant remittances as highlighted the Global Compact for Safe Orderly and Regular Migration.

As a country of origin for over one million migrant workers, and founding Chair of the Colombo Process established in 2003, as well as Chair from 2013 to 2017, Sri Lanka accords high priority to the welfare of migrants and migrant workers and has taken tangible action towards their welfare. Sri Lanka has provided healthcare facilities to all migrants regardless of their status, keeping in view that cooperation between States, as per the International Health Regulations (IHRs) on health checks and screening of migrants prior to repatriation, can contribute significantly in controlling outbreaks of disease. We will continue our commitment in this regard.

With the assistance of the IOM and the ILO, a national Covid-19 Response Plan was developed for migrant workers. This plan incorporated measures to be taken at various stages at the country of destination, at the point of entry and immediate post arrival, for re-integration into the country, and for re-migration. Information was collected from returnees on their future aspirations including self-employment, local employment or re-migration.

In line with the COVID-19 Response Plan and the National Action Plan on Return and Re-integration, [Government of Sri Lanka has taken several measures with various stakeholders including private sector in order to provide support for livelihood activities, self-employment and local employment opportunities for returnee migrant workers and also](#) a project was initiated with IOM and ILO to support the socio-economic re-integration of migrant workers repatriated due to the pandemic, in order to assist them to engage in sustainable income generating activities in the country.

Identifying the requirement for fortified skills recognition system to enhance the employment prospects of returnees, the Government of Sri Lanka together with key partners, including the ILO launched a project to recognize their skills, facilitate upskilling, and reskilling processes as well as issuing Skills Passports.

Further, utilizing a whole of government and whole of society approach with national, local authority and interagency cooperation, action has been taken to implement the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) skills assessment method to migrant workers through an institutionalized

mechanism. In this respect, Model RPL Coordination Committees were established in pilot districts to disseminate information and provide facilitation of the RPL application process. The Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission has initiated the RPL Coordination Committee model nationally.

To assist returnees who wish to re-migrate, Sri Lanka is carrying out a mass scale vaccination campaign to ensure that all prospective migrant workers are fully vaccinated prior to their departure. Further, in line with emerging markets, a framework has been established to conduct training and skills development programmes and explore collaborative opportunities to create a skills pool.

Our discussions at this meeting of the 112 IOM Council on the effect of the pandemic on borders, mobility and migrants, and in particular on migrant workers, is timely, and will lead to a better understanding of the present issues and challenges surrounding migration. It is our hope that the next IDM in February 2022 as well as the forthcoming International Migration Review Forum in May 2022 and will provide the opportunity for further discussion of these issues and result in stronger cooperation between Governments and other stakeholders in order to advance global consensus on the need to prioritize the needs of migrants.

We encourage the strengthening of interagency cooperation between the IOM, WHO and ILO at national, regional and international levels including with regional consultation process such as the Colombo Process, the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, the Bali Process, to address the immediate and future migration challenges with a view to guaranteeing a better future for migrants.