MIGRATION POLICY PRACTICE

Short articles to better connect migration research, policy and practice worldwide

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Combating misinformation about migration

Marie McAuliffe, Richa Arora and Jenna Nassiri[1]

Migration narratives at the global, national and local levels continue to be weaponized for short-term political and commercial gains. Anti-migrant disinformation to advance xenophobic political agendas is a long-standing issue, and one that proliferates in the digital age.[2] The regulation of digital technologies has not kept pace with new advances, creating a highly disruptive context that means even basic information can be undermined by rapidly spread rumours and false claims.[3] A major downside to such technologies is that accurate and balanced accounts of migration have been further threatened by the misuse of generative artificial intelligence (AI).[4] The escalation of disinformation and misinformation has wide-reaching impacts on migrant communities, as the rise in hate speech can incite physical violence and threaten migrant security.[5] The linkages between misinformation, mobility and human security has become central to migration research and analysis.[6]

In the chaos of skewed narratives about migration, the positive contributions of migrants and the critical role migration plays in supporting the Sustainable Development Goals have fallen by the wayside.[7] Bolstering positive claims and showcasing nuanced accounts about the complexity of migration through evidence-based research and robust data analysis can enhance mainstream narratives about migration, as this issue sets out to do. Diverse migration scenarios can also help to reveal how migration policies can be tailored to support impacted communities.

This issue of *Migration Policy Practice* examines how migrant narratives – including the perceptions and portrayals of migrants – impact policy responses, particularly concerning migrants' entry, reception and integration (see Olier and Spadavecchia, as well as Garbers and Lumley-Sapanski). Moreover, this issue details the multidimensional processes of migration, including the need for tailored policies that support individual's pre-departure (see Nagpal on student migration from Punjab), as well as those who return (see Tuzi and Ebenberger on returnees in Iraq). Additionally, articles in this issue challenge negative narratives about migration by highlighting migrants' contributions, specifically regarding the high-skilled migration

[1] Marie McAuliffe, IOM; Richa Arora, GiZ; and Jenna Nassiri, IOM and York University.

[2] Eileen Culloty, Jane Suiter, Itayi Viriri and Sara Creta, "Disinformation about migration: an age-old issue with new tech dimensions" in: *World Migration Report 2022* (M. McAuliffe and A. Triandafyllidou, eds.) (Geneva, IOM, 2021), pp. 217–231.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Open AI, AI and covert influence operations: Latest trends (2024).

[5] Marie McAuliffe, Pablo Rojas Coppari, M.J. Abbasi-Shavazi and Ottilia A. Maunganidze, "Migration and human security: Unpacking myths and examining new realities and responses" in: *World Migration Report 2024* (M. McAuliffe and L. Oucho, eds.) (Geneva, IOM, 2024), pp. 139–162.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Marie McAuliffe, "Migration is a global strategic asset. We must not undermine it", World Economic Forum (29 May 2024); Marie McAuliffe, Adrian Kitimbo and Binod Khadria, "Reflections on migrants' contributions in an era of increasing disruption and disinformation" in: *World Migration Report 2020* (M. McAuliffe and B. Khadria, eds.) (Geneva, IOM, 2019), pp. 161–183.

of medical professionals (Durante and Walton-Roberts in the context of migration in Belize) and the role of remittances as a key driver of development. Articles in this issue emphasize how remittances contribute to a country's overall GDP and welfare as a critical source of support among transnational families (Ahmad and Khor), and also through innovative remittance-sending practices, such as remittances to support renewable energy efforts in countries of origin (Nasrat).

We hope you enjoy this issue.

Marie, Richa and **Jenna**

The danger of biases in the visual portrayal of migrants and the need for inclusive narratives

Juan Sebastian Olier and Camilla Spadavecchia[1]

Abstract

The portrayal of migrants in media often perpetuates biases and reinforces stereotypes, with far-reaching consequences for public opinion, policymaking and migrants' lives. Furthermore, these portrayals may differ per country depending on political context, acceptance of migrants or specific migratory events. Against this backdrop, this article analyses the characteristics of visual representation in ten countries across Europe, the Americas and Oceania, with varying migration acceptance scores and percentages of migrants within the total population. A comprehensive analysis was conducted using artificial intelligence (AI) techniques, a migration studies lens and an intersectional approach, focusing on differences in gender, age, facial features and emotions of people depicted in images associated with three terms: *migrants*, *refugees* and *expatriates* (also referred to as "expats"). The results reveal an under-representation of migrant women in visual media, perpetuation of gender biases and stereotypes around emotions, and substantial crowd depictions of certain groups of migrants, which has been shown to lead to dehumanization. The analysis also explores the "expat versus migrant" dichotomy, uncovering inherent colonial implications. This interdisciplinary study also highlights differences in visual portrayal across the ten studied countries. Finally, recommendations are provided to national media agencies and other stakeholders based on the study's findings.

Introduction

Images have a profound impact on people's perceptions, influencing understanding and shaping the creation of knowledge, and can serve as instrument to maintain existing dynamics of power. Unlike text-based communication, visuals engage different cognitive processes and are often perceived as closer to reality. They have a profound impact on how realities are perceived beyond direct experience and can drive powerful responses.[2] As a result, visuals have the potential to convey implicit messages and perpetuate stereotypes. Visual communication, particularly in media, not only influences opinions but also shapes attitudes, emotions and behaviours, which in turn can affect policymaking or the acceptance of specific political agendas.[3]

The depiction of migrants in the media

The portrayal of migrants in mainstream media and their impact has garnered considerable attention in academic research over the last

[1] Juan Sebastian Olier and Camilla Spadavecchia are both assistant professors at the Tilburg University in the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

[2] Thomas E. Powell, Hajo G. Boomgaarden, Knut de Swert and Claes H. de Vreese, "A clearer picture: The contribution of visuals and text to framing effects", *Journal of Communication*, 65(6):997–1017 (2015).

[3] Stefaan Walgrave and Peter Van Aelst, "Political agenda setting and the mass media" in: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2016).

decades.[4, 5, 6] Several works focused on television shows, news coverage and online press have revealed the potential of such portrayals to shape views, emotional responses, social judgements and subsequent behaviours towards migration. It has been shown that media images can influence political agendas, particularly concerning emotional approaches linked to security issues.[7]

Notably, mainstream media often conflates terms, such as *migrant, refugee* and *asylum-seeker*, which perpetuates misconceptions and reinforces negative associations. It is argued that while the word *migrant* can indeed serve as an umbrella term to describe people who move away from their usual place of residence – whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for various reasons (as defined by IOM) – it is crucial to distinguish this concept from the perception of a monolithic group of individuals. Mainstream media representation has frequently linked the term *migrant* to a specific group of people migrating internationally in search of or who have obtained asylum.

This approach creates a single narrative of migration, which can be problematic because it fails to represent the diversity of migration experiences. Visuals and other forms of narratives are often the primary way for many people to understand phenomena like migration, when they are not directly in touch with it. When migrants are depicted as a collective, it reinforces the notion that they are not seen as individuals, which can lead to dehumanization and perpetuate negative dynamics of otherness. Headlines that portray migration as a wave and use problematic terms further contribute to this issue. This can evoke strong emotions and serve specific political agendas that tend to label migrants as a threat to security.

Media plays a significant role in creating narratives about migration. For instance, in the European coverage of the so-called refugee crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic in 2015, research has shown how the representation of asylum-seekers is shifting between that of a victim and a threat and often involves symbolic strategies of dehumanization, such as massification (showing a multitude of indistinguishable individuals), vilification (visualities of threat), infantilization (distressed, clueless and powerless individuals) and marginalization ("othering").[8] Moreover, it has been shown that in countries, such as France, Greece, Italy and the United Kingdom, there tends to be a specific focus on the legal status and cultural differences of migrants, although the political orientation of the outlet

[4] Banu Akdenizli, E.J. Dionne, Martin Kaplan, T. Rosenstiel and Roberto Suro, *Democracy in the Age of New Media: A Report on the Media and the Immigration Debate* (The Brookings Institute, Washington, D.C., 2008).

[5] Andrea Lawlor and Erin Tolley, "Deciding who's legitimate: News media framing of immigrants and refugees", *International Journal of Communication*, 11:967–991 (2017).

[6] Michal Wenzel and Marta Żerkowska-Balas, "Framing effect of media portrayal of migrants to the European Union: a survey experiment in Poland", *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, 33(1):44–65 (2019).

[7] Jakob-Moritz Eberl, Christine E. Meltzer, Tobias Heidenreich, Beatrice Herrero, Norta Theorin, Fabienne Lind, Rosa Berganza, Hajo Boomgaarden, Christian Schemer and Jesper Strömbäck, "The European media discourse on immigration and its effects: a literature review", *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 42(3):207–223 (2018).

[8] Lilie Chouliaraki and Tijana Stolic, "Rethinking media responsibility in the refugee 'crisis': a visual typology of European news", *Media, Culture and Society*, 39(8):1162–1177 (2017).

strongly influences portrayals.[9] Left-wing media tend to present migrants as victims, while right-wing media often frames them as a public threat. Similarly, the depiction of migrants varies based on their country of origin, with Western migrants often enjoying a more favourable portrayal than those from non-Western regions.

Data analysis methods

To better understand how migration is depicted in different countries, a technique was developed that combines AI with intersectional analysis. This involved analysing the gender, age, facial features and emotions of individuals shown in images related to the terms *migrants, refugees* and *expats*. The goal is to study how these different groups of migrants are portrayed online across various locations.

The study focused on ten countries with varying levels of migrant acceptance and proportions of migrants in their populations. Furthermore, official statistics on immigration were considered to validate this information. The countries included are Australia, Canada, Colombia, Hungary, Italy, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The study focused on variations in portrayals based on the demographics of people depicted and emotional information in images.[10]

The study proposed an approach based on the use of deep learning models to study the portrayal of migration on a large scale, focusing on imagery sought in a search engine and linked with migration. Unconstrained searches of online media images using the Google Cloud Platform were performed. The pictures were associated with keywords specifying three groups, namely migrants, refugees and expatriates (also referred to as *expats*). For each group, an independent search was performed in 10 different countries, and the top 200 results in each country were used. Employing deep learning models, the study analyses the images regarding emotions and demographic variables. Face and people detection algorithms were applied to the images to focus on the people portrayed. Faces were analysed to estimate gender, age, facial features and emotions displayed. Additionally, the study determined when images portrayed large groups (crowds) instead of individuals. To further study the difference between gender perceptions, the study also searched for gender-specific markers, such as *expat man* or *refugee woman.* Therefore, there were nine search terms (three per group, e.g. expat, expat man and expat woman). The study collected a total of 17,898 images and analysed 21,076 faces.

Key findings

Women are underrepresented.

The analysis uncovered a gender imbalance in the portrayal of migrants, as most faces were perceived as male across all groups. This disparity contradicts official statistics, which show a more balanced gender distribution among actual migrant populations. These stereotypes have far-reaching consequences for migrant women, as they can influence public perceptions, policymaking and the integration of migrant women into host communities.

[9] Adriana Valente, Valentina Tudisca, Andrea Pelliccia, Loredana Cerbara and Maria Girolama Caruso, "Comparing liberal and conservative newspapers: Diverging narratives in representing migrants?", *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*, 21(3):411–427 (2021).

[10] Juan Sebastian Olier and Camilla Spadavecchia, "Stereotypes, disproportions, and power asymmetries in the visual portrayal of migrants in ten countries: an interdisciplinary AI-based approach", *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 9:410 (2022).

Furthermore, the study reveals that imbalanced gender representation in media depictions tends to align with the gender equality indices of the selected countries.[11] This correlation indicates a connection between societal gender biases and the portrayal of migrants in the media.

Table 1. Gender distribution in analysed images and population per location

Data	Gender	Australia	Canada	Colombia	Hungary	Italy	Kingdom of the Netherlands	Spain	Sweden	United Kingdom	United States
Estimated from images	Male	58	59	67	68	67	60	52	48	64	60
	Female	42	41	33	32	33	40	48	52	36	40
Migrant population statistics	Male	49	49	–	57	51	52	49	54	–	49
	Female	51	51	–	43	49	48	51	46	–	51
Gender Gap Index 2023*	-	0.778	0.770	0.751	0.689	0.705	0.777	0.791	0.815	0.792	0.748

Source: All figures and tables, unless otherwise indicated, are original elaboration by the authors.
Notes: All numbers are in percentage.
*The Global Gender Gap Index measures scores that reflect a 0 to 1 scale, and scores can be interpreted as the distance covered towards parity (that is, the percentage of the gender gap that has been closed).

Expats are overrepresented as white.

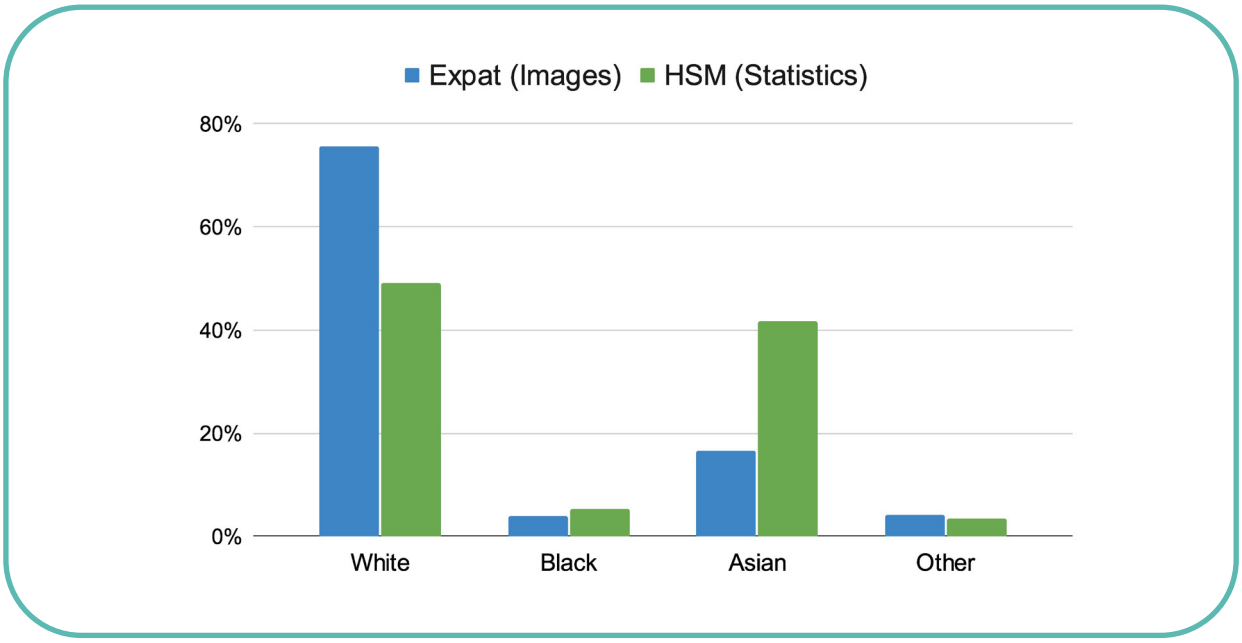
The analysis also investigated the facial characteristics of individuals depicted in images related to the three groups: migrants, refugees and expats. The findings reveal a notable disparity in analysed images; the AI models estimate expats to be predominantly portrayed as "white", whereas migrants and refugees are estimated to be more frequently depicted as having features associated with racialized groups. These discrepancies perpetuate biases and reinforce the concept of "white privilege" among expats, disregarding the diversity and contributions of immigrants from non-Western countries. To further examine this, the results of the image analysis were compared with statistics on highly skilled migrants in the United States (the only country using race as a category in their statistics), which uncovered a significant overrepresentation of whites and an under-representation of Asians. That might pose a conflict between the fact that the expats – often considered the good, privileged and unproblematic migrants[12] – are frequently assumed to be white Westerners, whereas, in reality, many expats, often defined as highly skilled migrants, originate from non-Western countries.

[11] World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report: Insight Report June 2023* (Geneva, World Economic Forum, 2022).

[12] Sarah Kunz, "Privileged mobilities: locating the expatriate in migration scholarship", *Geography Compass*, 10(3):89–101 (2016).

The findings suggest a colonial perspective in media portrayals where migrants are associated with non-Western regions and non-white individuals, highly skilled migrants from non-Western backgrounds are underrepresented, and only individuals with a Western background are conferred the label of expat. This misrepresentation creates a distorted view of migration, perpetuating stereotypes and colonial perspectives, where the professional migrant is understood by several governments as the person adding value to the receiving economy, and, therefore, a welcomed migrant for which specific attractive policies[13] are designed, is a white male; and other migrants entering for other purposes rather than a professional job are over-represented as non-Western individuals. Further, these misrepresentations can also affect a country's attractiveness to highly educated migrants and influence attitudes and policies that, in the long run, can be detrimental to the retention of such a population.

Figure 1. Distribution of facial features from images and statistics in the United States



Age, gender and family portrayals: Productive men versus reproductive (young) women.

The study reveals age-related biases in media representations of migrants. Male migrants tend to be depicted as older individuals, compared to the actual demographics of migrant populations in the countries included in the analysis, while female migrants tend to be portrayed as younger. Additionally, there is an under-representation of children in the images analysed, further perpetuating stereotypes and neglecting the realities of migrant families. Children were found most often in the images associated with female groups; among the images of expats, the number of children's faces was the lowest. This further perpetuates the stereotype of men in productive roles and women in reproductive and caring roles. At the same time, this reinforces the idea

[13] Ernest Berkhout, Arjan Heyma, Maikel Volkerink and Siemen van der Werff, *Attracting and Retaining Highly Skilled Migrants in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam, SEO Economic Research, 2015).

that expats are "brains in motion" and not well-rounded individuals who, in several cases, have families moving with them.

On the other hand, when migrant women are often depicted as merely following partners, their potential contributions are overlooked. This perspective fails to acknowledge that they can also be working professionals. Such portrayals simplify the complexity of the migration process in the media, reducing diverse groups to stereotypical and monolithic categories.

Men are angrier, and expats are happier.

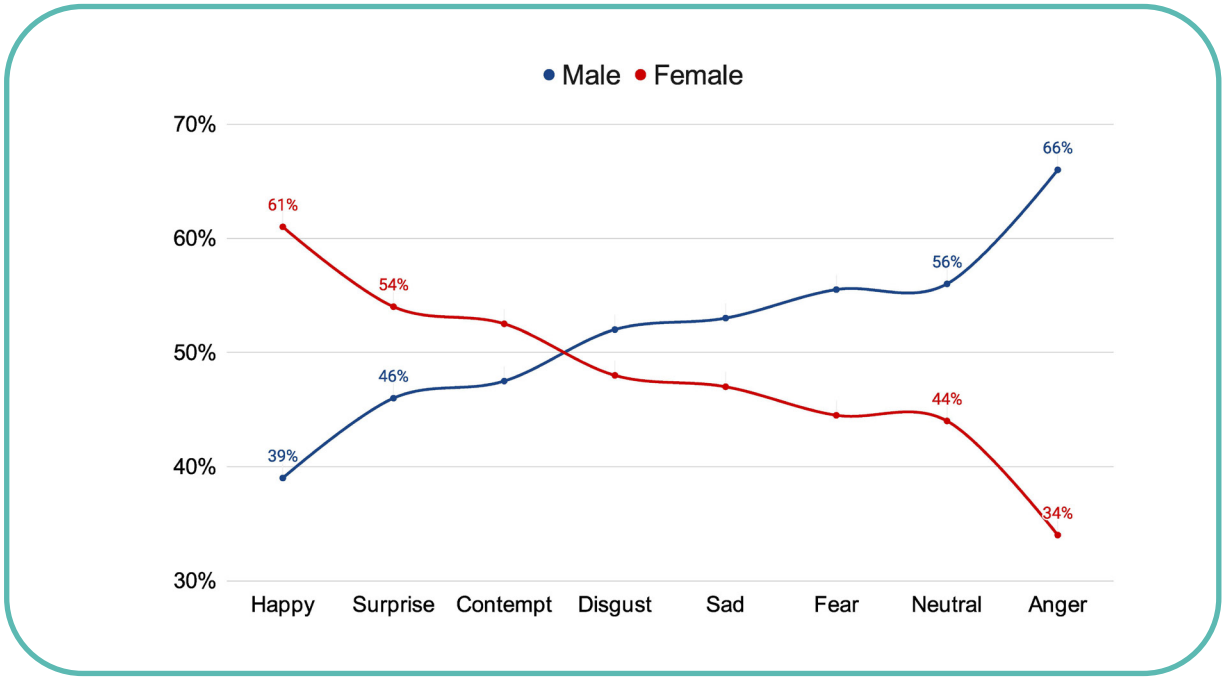
The portrayal of emotions in media images reveals distinct patterns related to the three groups analysed. In general, migrants and refugees are depicted with predominantly negative emotions, while expats tend to be portrayed as positive or neutral.

The results of the study also pointed to known gender-related stereotypes of emotions, which can be observed in Figure 2, where clearly there is a gender difference regarding detected emotions. Studies on emotion stereotypes have shown that women are often believed to experience and express a broader range of emotions, except anger and pride, typically associated with men.[14] In the study, the same stereotypes are found: images of groups perceived as male conveyed more neutral and negative expressions, while images of groups perceived as female showed a broader range of emotions. Social norms can influence emotional expression related to perceived dominance, affiliation and status, for example by associating wealthier individuals with positive emotions and persons under the poverty threshold with negative ones. Considering these stereotypes, the study's results show that migrants and refugees are commonly associated with poverty, while expats are linked to wealth. Portrayal of migrants as a monolith can reinforce the notion that migration is connected to socioeconomic problems, potentially fostering biases, discrimination and limited opportunities for migrants.

Within the expat group images, gender differences in emotional expression indicated that portrayals may reflect prevailing views of masculinity, particularly traits associated with dominance and power, which are more commonly attributed to men. This is discerned from the emotions displayed, with anger being detected more frequently among expat men than women. This further emphasizes the traditional roles of men and women affecting gender equality. Moreover, that kind of perpetuation can also impact the perception of migrants as individuals with agency beyond the predefined labels such as expat or highly skilled migrant.

[14] E. Ashby Plant, Janet Shibley Hyde, Dacher Keltner and Patricia G. Devine, "The gender stereotyping of emotions", *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 24(1):81–92 (2000).

Figure 2. Proportion of male and female faces represented per emotional expression



Source: Original elaboration by the authors.

Individuals versus crowds

Most images of people analysed for the study depict two faces, except for images of migrant and refugee women , who are generally depicted in larger groups. Furthermore, migrants and refugees are more likely to be portrayed as crowds. This aligns with the arguments in previous research that migrants are depicted in a way that dehumanizes them by obscuring their facial features.[15] These portrayals can have a more emotional impact, as they symbolize a potential threat either to the receiving country or the migrants themselves (that is, a group can be perceived as overwhelming compared to an individual). As such, portrayals of migrants and refugees can be more beneficial for specific political agendas to showcase discourses on threats or humanitarian issues.

Finally, the proportion of images containing faces is lowest for expats; this could be explained by the fact that the images related to expats are focused on work-related issues or ways of attracting them to a country, rather than on people or possible impacts they might have on the society.

Conclusions

The analysis of media representation of different groups of migrants in ten countries, across Europe, America and Oceania, reveals the presence of biases and stereotypes that can influence public perceptions and attitudes towards them. By understanding these biases,

[15] Roland Bleiker, David Campbell, Emma Hutchison and Xzarina Nicholson, "The visual dehumanisation of refugees", *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 48(4):398–416 (2013).

work can be done towards more accurate and inclusive portrayals of migration, fostering a more informed and empathetic society. It is essential to challenge these stereotypes and ensure that media narratives align with the realities and diversity of migrant experiences.

Implications and recommendations

This study reveals the perpetuation of interwoven stereotypes in the visual depiction of migrants, fortifying a specific migration visual narrative that can shape policies and attitudes. To address these issues, stakeholders – including photojournalists, media professionals and media agencies – must confront biases and diversify the visual portrayals of migrants. Additionally, academia and policymakers are relevant stakeholders for this topic. Academia plays a crucial role in educating journalists and other media and communication professionals. Policymakers are also relevant stakeholders, as political agendas often intersect with issues emerging in media discourses.

Recommendations for photojournalists and media professionals

(a) Challenge biases: Photojournalists and media professionals should introspect and challenge their own biases, striving for balanced and diverse portrayals of migrants. This involves recognizing the complexity of migration experiences and the contributions migrants make to society.

(b) Balanced representation: Ensure diverse representation across different genders, ages and cultural backgrounds. Avoid disproportionate emphasis on specific groups or aspects of migration and instead provide a comprehensive narrative that reflects the entirety of the migrant experience.

Recommendations for media agencies

(a) Craft intersectional guidelines: Develop and implement guidelines that use an intersectional lens to curb the perpetuation of stereotypes in media content production, especially concerning migrants.

(b) Training and awareness: Provide training for photojournalists and content creators to help them discern and confront implicit biases. Emphasize the importance of avoiding one-sided portrayals and advocate for a holistic perspective on migration.

(c) Collaborative content creation: Encourage co-creation of content by collaborating with individuals who have migration experiences. This allows migrants to directly share their stories, viewpoints and challenges, contributing to more authentic and respectful representations.

(d) Specific focus on online images: Media agencies should pay special attention to the portrayal of migrants in online images. Develop strategies to ensure that online visual content is accurate, diverse and free from stereotypical representations.

Recommendations for academia

(a) Educational programmes: Journalism and media and communication programmes should integrate modules that focus on recognizing and addressing biases through an intersectional and decolonial lens. This education should extend to ongoing training for media professionals to enhance their understanding of migration-related issues, cultural competence and reporting skills.

Recommendations for policymakers

(a) Advocate for accurate representation: Policymakers at national and international levels should advocate for accurate and comprehensive visual representation of migrants. This effort can help dispel biased perspectives and promote a more nuanced understanding of migration.

(b) Regulatory measures: Introduce incentives or regulations that encourage media agencies to present balanced and accurate visual narratives of migrants. Recognize and reward efforts that counteract stereotypes.

(c) Trainings: Implement programmes that educate policymakers on the media's influence, fostering a critical understanding of media representations and encouraging informed decision-making.

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MIGRATION POLICY PRACTICE 13

The Homes for Ukraine Scheme: How the provision of exceptional rights and legal migration routes shaped Ukrainian reception within the United Kingdom

Kate Garbers and Audrey Lumley-Sapanski[1]

Abstract

While hosting is widely acknowledged as a viable alternative to institutional settings for temporary accommodation of humanitarian protection-seekers, refugees or asylum-seekers, in general, hosting schemes in the United Kingdom have struggled to attract hosts. To the contrary, the recent Homes for Ukraine (HfU) scheme experienced massive interest in enrolment, with nearly 250,000 people registering expressions of interest and 74,000 going on to apply to be hosts under the scheme. At the time of writing 148,000 Ukrainians had arrived in the United Kingdom via the HfU scheme.[2] This article explores the differences in the programme structure, host motivations and the contextual factors that contributed to the increased participation rates. It is found that significant existing social–emotional connections to the crisis drove participation, and that these connections are heavily influenced by media portrayals of deserving populations. The accessibility of the scheme and ease of participation solidified involvement. Based on the analysis of interviews and surveys with hosts conducted in the autumn of 2022, transferrable learnings, insights and implications are identified for policy development, future government schemes, local governments, third-sector hosting schemes and hosts themselves that could build on the successes of this programme in enrolment, recruitment and retention. The use of hosting is a particularly pertinent topic given the current proposals and use of hotels, boats, tents and removals of the United Kingdom to other countries to accommodate migrant populations.

Introduction

The HfU sponsorship scheme – the focus of this research – is a humanitarian support pathway enabling Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion to be hosted within a family home in the United Kingdom. The scheme provides Ukrainians – with no connections or ties to the United Kingdom – a route to live, work and access welfare benefits in the United Kingdom for up to three years. The HfU scheme is the first time the Government of the United Kingdom has actively developed a hosting scheme, whereby individual sponsors (members of the British public) were asked to match with guests and to host guests in their own homes. No limit was put on the number of people that could apply, and to date, over 230,000 Ukrainians have applied.[3] As of May 2024, 206,500 Ukrainians had arrived in the United Kingdom, 148,000 of which via the HfU scheme.[4] The total number of Ukrainians

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[2] United Kingdom National Audit Office, *Investigation into the Homes for Ukraine Scheme* (National Audit Office, London, 2023).

[3] United Kingdom Home Office, Ukraine Family Scheme, Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme (Homes for Ukraine) and Ukraine Extension Scheme visa data (accessed 31 May 2024).

[4] Ibid. (accessed 24 May 2024).

entering the United Kingdom represents less than 5 per cent of the total displaced Ukrainian population.[5]

Several factors make the HfU scheme unique from a governance and effectiveness perspective. Ukrainians and British hosts matched with one another, allowing the individuals involved considerable influence over housing options and locations. Ukrainians were given the right to work, access to health care and internal mobility contravening the hostile environment policies dominating the immigration policy of the United Kingdom. No numerical limit was put on the scheme and agency, and autonomy was afforded to those wishing to participate. This research asks why this programme was initially structured as it was and explores the impact of the design on host recruitment and participation. Analysis suggests the differences in programme structure, combined with empathetic positive portrayals of Ukrainians in the media, contributed to high level of participation by British hosts. The accessibility of the scheme and ease of participation solidified hosts willingness to be involved. The study suggests ways that the hosting scheme's positive elements could be adapted for other displaced groups using other admissions pathways.

Overview of the HfU scheme

The Russian Federation invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022. As a result of the invasion and the subsequent ongoing conflict, nearly one third of Ukrainians were displaced. Over 10 million displaced Ukrainians are distributed throughout the world. As of May 2024, nearly 6 million of these individuals are registered for temporary protection or national protection schemes across the European Union States.[6] Of these, over 300,000 Ukrainians applied for visas to come to the United Kingdom, 230,000 of which via the HfU scheme.[7]

To address the needs of the displaced, the United Kingdom initially adopted a set of three measures to offer safe passage for Ukrainians fleeing the invasion. These included the following: (a) temporary visa concessions and extensions for Ukrainians already in the United Kingdom when the war broke out; (b) a family visa route that allows family members to join their family based in the United Kingdom; and (c) Ukraine sponsorship scheme known as the HfU scheme.[8]

The HfU scheme at the focus of this research links entry and admission to pre-identification of host sponsors (members of the British public). Prior to travel and admission to the United Kingdom, Ukrainian applicants were required to identify and match with a British sponsor who was willing to host them for a minimum of six months. Matching was done online, through social media and other public chat forums. Admission was contingent on government screening. The Government provided each sponsor hosting Ukrainians with a monthly thank-you payment

[5] Mihnea Cuibus, *Migrants in the UK: An Overview*, Migration Observatory briefing (Oxford, Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, University of Oxford, 2024).

[6] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). *Global Report 2022* (Geneva, UNHCR, 2022); UNHCR, Ukraine refugee situation, Operational Data Portal (accessed 24 May 2024); UNHCR, Ukraine situation flash update #33, UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe (21 October 2022).

[7] Kate Garbers, Audrey Lumley-Sapanski and Rebecca Brown, *Homes for Ukraine Hosting: Learnings to Inform and Shape Future Hosting Schemes* (University of Nottingham, 2023).

[8] CJ McKinney, Melanie Gower and Joe Tyler-Todd, Special visa schemes for Ukrainians (House of Commons Library, 2022).

initially set at 350 British pounds per month to last up to 12 months.[9]

The scheme also differed from other humanitarian pathways in its provision of access to positive rights. Ukrainians had immediate access to public benefits and the right to work. Fees for the national health supplement and visas were waived for those accepted into the HfU scheme.

This represents a change in approach. The United Kingdom does not typically participate in third-country resettlement and relies on asylum pathways for humanitarian protection-seekers.[10] These pathways are distinct from the HfU scheme in length and geography. Asylum-seekers can only claim asylum from within the United Kingdom and have their claims evaluated after arrival. During this period, asylum-seekers cannot work and are allocated housing, on a no-choice basis, typically living in dispersed communal living situations. Status determination can take several years and during this time they moved repeatedly.[11] Of the current asylum applicants, 68 per cent have been waiting for more than six months (110,000 of 166,300).[12] While exceptional pathways have recently been offered to Syrians, Afghanis and Chinese from Hong Kong, Special Administrative Region of China, they were selective in eligibility. The Syrian programme, for instance, set a limit upon the number of arrivals with the programme actively targeting the most vulnerable, while the Afghani programme required individuals to have assisted the efforts of the United Kingdom in Afghanistan or be from a specified vulnerability group. Across these two programmes (2015–2022), less than 26,000 individuals have been admitted to the United Kingdom in contrast to the 148,000 Ukrainians.[13]

Data and methods

The research employed a mixed-methods approach and utilized both primary (interviews and surveys) and secondary (evidence review) data. Interviews and surveys were conducted with 35 households who had experience of hosting under the HfU scheme. At the time of the study, 31 households were currently hosting a Ukrainian or Ukrainians; 16 households participated in an interview, with the remaining households (19) submitting answers via a survey. Across the 31 hosting placements, 74 people from Ukraine were hosted (72 in placement at the time of the research).

All participating hosts identify as white, the majority are British citizens from birth (91%) and are married (71%). Most hosts own their properties (91%), which on average has at least three bedrooms. Of the hosting households, 13 are retired (37%), while 18 households engage in paid employment (51%). Hosts ages range from 33 to 77, with an average age of 55. There are 11 host households with children in them (31%). Most guests are couples, family units or groups

[9] United Kingdom Home Office, Guidance: Apply for a visa under the Homes for Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme (accessed 1 June 2023).
[10] Refugee Council, Refugee resettlement facts (n.d.).
[11] Linda Bakker, Sin Yi Cheung and Jenny Phillimore, "The Asylum-Integration Paradox: Comparing asylum support systems and refugee integration in the Netherlands and the UK", *International Migration*, 54(4):118–132 (2016).
[12] United Kingdom Home Office, Homes for Ukraine: record your interest, UK Visas and Immigration (accessed 1 June 2023).
[13] UNHCR, The UK's Syria Resettlement Programme: Looking back, and ahead (23 March 2021); United Kingdom Home Office, Ukraine Family Scheme, Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme (Homes for Ukraine) and Ukraine Extension Scheme visa data, UK Visas and Immigration (accessed 24 May 2024).

of friends (77%) as opposed to single individuals. Three homes host multigenerational family units, three homes host a couple, eight homes host a single person, and 12 homes host a mother with their child or children.

Analysis: Factors that influenced participation of British hosts

The analysis indicates that the HfU scheme's unique matching structure, together with the positive provision of rights to Ukrainian migrants, motivated by the empathetic portrayal of Ukrainians in the media and government messaging, drove host participation and match success. The depictions of the Ukrainians in the media created a perception of sociocultural similarities between the British public and the displaced Ukrainian. Subsequently, cohabitation encouraged daily encounters that humanized participants and reinforced a sense of shared commonalities. The right to work encouraged host perception of the Ukrainian capacity for long-term inclusion.

Programme structure

The HfU scheme allowed hosts to individually match and prescreen Ukrainians before they arrived in their homes. This matching component was important to hosts who often had specific requirements for those they wanted to and were willing to host. Further, hosts felt that the gendered composition of the Ukrainian migrant population – most were women and children – indicated that they did not intend to stay long term. Hosts felt this suggested Ukrainians would return home to their families. This gave hosts assurances that the hosting period was temporary, and more generally, that the population did not represent a long-term burden to society. Hosts contrasted these flows to asylum-seekers – universally construed as male – coming from places like Afghanistan and the Syrian Arab Republic. Hosts saw male asylum-seekers as unanchored, seeking permanent status for economic reasons and therefore representing less need.

In addition, the speed and lack of barriers to the scheme were important to achieving host participation. Hosts individually selected and matched with guests. This made them feel safe and in control. Further, there were no lengthy waits and no extensive training processes. Nearly all aspects of the scheme were administered online, except for the home safety check. Together, these factors ensured ease of accessibility, which solidified host willingness to participate.

Contextual factors

> They fit the employment profile very well. They are easy to put into employment … generally educationally and with their own work backgrounds; they are sort of used to the environment we've got here in the United Kingdom. Afghans and Syrian refugees and Africans, you know, Somalis and Ethiopians – less so and they require an awful lot more support.
>
> – Host PP010 P2

In addition to the programme's structure, several contextual factors, including the positive provision of the right to work and the method of entry, encouraged host participation. Ukrainians' form of migration was seen and described by hosts as orderly and legal. Ukrainians entered the United Kingdom on visas acquired prior to admission; Ukrainians largely purchased flights, bus tickets or used their own vehicles to travel to the United Kingdom. Their mode of movement was familiar and did not contravene the law. In

contrast, because asylum-seekers are forced to enter the United Kingdom irregularly and are required to file for protection at the border, hosts viewed asylum-seeking as a form of illegal migration. Hosts challenged their need for asylum, describing them as economic migrants. This was reinforced with the selected images presented in media. For Ukrainians, there were no images of dangerous boat crossings or illegalized entry due to the legal protection route.

Similarly, the right to work upon entry, combined with age demographics, assured the British hosts that Ukrainians would not become a financial burden to either hosts or the United Kingdom more broadly. Across the whole HfU scheme, two thirds of Ukrainians are of working age (18 to 66).[14] Hosts described the Ukrainian work ethic positively and were encouraged that they could, in theory, support themselves quickly after acquiring language capacity and sourcing employment. Again, the structure of the HfU programme and positive provision of rights reduced the threat of financial burden associated to migrants. All HfU participants were eligible for Universal Credit (social welfare provisions), which offers security while seeking work and a financial safety net for those unable to work.[15] However, hosts often had to assist to overcome language barriers within application processes and reported having to support those they were hosting to understand and access employment, in some instances using personal contacts to facilitate this. In some cases, jobs offered in the United Kingdom are inferior to those held in Ukraine, as qualifications did not always translate and the level of English language required was not met. However, the right to enter the workforce allowed Ukrainians to utilize transferrable capital. This in turn better situated Ukrainians for integration and absorption rather than more common sociospatial marginalization typified by the experience of asylum-seekers. The ability to work, combined with the programmatic provision of the right to work, shaped the perception of work ethic. This contrasts to other asylum-seekers whose illegalized entry prevented them from working and in turn their lack of employment seemed to reinforce perceptions of their unwillingness to work.[16]

Host motivations

> Well, this is Europe. People have grandparents who have evacuees during the Second World War. And my mother-in-law is in her 80s and had evacuees staying in Devon. [It] is a similar sort of spirit. It is a blitz spirit, isn't it?
>
> – Host PP001 P2

Perhaps most significantly, the governmental response, together with the media portrayals of the conflict and those it was impacting, elicited a sense of shared Western culture and values that drove the British public response. The threat to that shared Western culture and the perceived sociocultural proximity drove host participation.

[14] Cuibus, 2024.

[15] United Kingdom Home Office, Guidance: Apply for Universal Credit and other benefits: Homes for Ukraine (accessed 21 May 2024).

[16] There are also of course humanitarian protection-seekers who are physically unable to work and nonetheless deserving of protection. These challenges are likely to reinforce a perception of refugee burden that was, in this case, counteracted by demographics, physical proximity and mode of entry (specifically legality).

Hosts also situated their own hosting within a wider British cultural narrative, in this case one of hospitality. Hosts saw the scheme as similar to that of the British public's response in the Second World War. In particular, hosts referenced the role of the British public in housing evacuated children during the Kindertransport programme of the Second World War. Significantly, hosts referred to this as their blitz moment. Hosts viewed hosting Ukrainians in light of the British role in Kindertransport and were proud of their own participation. From this vantage point, the war efforts were needed and positive, and hosts wanted to contribute.

A gendered element to the hosts' willingness to welcome people into their homes was observed. Many hosts expressed a preference to host women and children and if they had space, were happy to host family groups. This preference was impacted by perceptions of safety and hosts feeling that women presented less of a threat. Many hosts identified as women or had children at home, which also impacted this preference. Some hosts recognized they felt that women and children were more deserving and needing of safety and felt that men should be staying in Ukraine to fight and defend the country.

Learnings for future schemes

These learnings have applicability to other potential hosting schemes and admissions corridors for different cohorts of people moving forward. Based on this analysis, the following recommendations are made for policymakers and governments:

- Hosting is broadly a viable alternative to large-scale, no-choice, asylum accommodation. To achieve this, centralized mechanisms for recruitment, matching and agreed training processes to ensure safeguarding protocols must be agreed to and in place.
- A centralized hosting scheme should incorporate the matching and vetting elements of the HfU to promote better matching, acquisition of cultural capital, as well as humanize migrants and refugees from other countries.
- The development of a uniform scheme that could be replicated would be welcomed. In addition, investment in infrastructure to better equip participating hosts and guests with required tools, including at a minimum, centralized provision of language lessons, employment and skills-based training, and support in Universal Credit applications is required, working with stakeholders in the design of future schemes.
- Creation of and access to a wider range of safe and legal routes can be implemented to seek humanitarian protection for a greater range of nationalities.
- Ensure safe transitions out of hosting arrangements. This could be achieved through the following: (a) providing a suite of ongoing, long-term suitable housing options for guests; (b) supporting the right to work for those accessing resettlement and hosting schemes; (c) providing leave to remain for those accessing resettlement and hosting schemes.

Conclusion

Hosting appears to be a viable way to build linkages between hosts and migrant groups, in addition to providing safe accommodation. Findings suggest future schemes that incorporate safeguarding while preserving ease of access and providing both hosts and guests autonomy in the

housing choice process will improve outcomes for displaced groups.

Host participation is, however, contingent on depiction and perception of participants. Most hosts had not previously engaged with hosting schemes but the portrayal of the conflict, the sense of injustice at the invasion, its proximity and the ability to do something tangible to help, drove hosts to participate in the collective effort. The Government and the media played a central role in evoking a sense of proximity, mobilizing that sense of threat, and connecting the role the British public could play to that played during the Second World War.

While the HfU scheme provides a model that could benefit other population groups, it should be noted that in its current format, it is not a panacea for future hosting programmes, and limitations would need to be addressed before any replication. Implemented at speed and as a direct response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it could be argued the HfU scheme was intentionally exclusionary from its outset in terms of who was able to apply and benefit from it. Exclusions included the following:

- The scheme offered a time-limited visa with no pathways to permanent settlement in the United Kingdom (to note this was initially three years but from February 2024, is now only granted for 18 months).
- Visas and sponsorship were required to be in place before travelling to the United Kingdom.
- The scheme was only available to those who could facilitate and finance their own travel to the United Kingdom, excluding those unable to do this from the protection HfU offered.
- The scheme relied on hosts and who they were willing to house; this was often based on host perceptions and life experiences, as well as how various population groups had been framed by wider society and the media.
- The scheme placed an emphasis on work, which is a benefit to the rights of the general population. However, this framing may have excluded those unable to work due to age or ability. These groups – those unfit for work or with disability – may have had more difficulty finding hosts if their hosts exhibited a preference for integration based on economic self-sufficiency (and biases against burden).
- The gendered aspect of the programme meant that hosting may not have been as successful for those identifying as male.

Distinguishing between people who are like them and deserve help, and people who are not like them to justify safe access routes to the United Kingdom, the allocation of resources and the approaches taken to accommodate them has real-life consequences for the displaced. The sympathy elicited by the depiction of displaced Ukrainian people was not the same feeling expressed by hosts when discussing other population groups. The difference in attitude and approach to other nationalities was striking, namely Syrians and Afghanis who are often vilified by the media and politicians. Fuelled by political statements repeated by the mainstream media, the depiction of other groups led hosts to negatively view their need and outright resist hosting said groups in the future. Governmental messaging associated with the lack of positive rights provision for other nationalities seeking refuge influence not only hosts but the

long-term, effective incorporation of people into the United Kingdom society.

Acknowledging that humanitarian protection-seekers may simply need refuge and may not be able to work is an underappreciated reality of this scheme. Incorporation and integration are multifaceted processes evidenced by other outcomes than economic self-sufficiency. Thus, the HfU and hosting schemes generally can offer potential ways to improve admission and accommodation of humanitarian protection-seekers; however, the HfU scheme, in its current form, does not offer unadulterated access to the United Kingdom for all Ukrainians. Analysis of the programme vis-à-vis the insights of hosts suggest the key learnings are in the positive provision of rights and the creation of cultural and social proximity through media and public messaging.

Student migration from Punjab: A call for youth-centred migration policies in India

Sugandha Nagpal[1]

Abstract

Despite being a key source country for youth migration, India does not have a policy framework to respond to the concerns of prospective youth migrants in the pre-migration phase. This paper discusses the case of student migration from Punjab (India) to Canada to argue for the importance of youth-centric migration policy in the source country. The interviews with young Punjabis preparing to migrate as students to Canada reveal that youth – who have social networks in the destination country and are aware of the migration process – are less susceptible to misinformation and exploitation by immigration agents in Punjab. Based on these findings, the author argues that youth-centric migration policy in India can regulate information flows to increase prospective migrants' awareness about post-migration challenges and inculcate in them a long-term view of migration.

Introduction

The domestic conversation on the demographic dividend of India focuses on youth unemployment and the gap between youth education and skill level.[2] Another implication of this demographic dividend is that India, the country with the youngest population in the world, is also a prime migrant-sending country. Since many Western countries face a demographic decline due to an ageing population, their economic sustenance relies on attracting migrants from populous countries, such as China, India and Nigeria. This creates an opportune moment for India to leverage its demographic dividend and establish itself as a reliable source country. This is especially pertinent given the degree of irregular migration from key outmigration states in India such as Punjab. The extent of irregular migration from Punjab came to the fore recently when Canada threatened to deport 700 Indian international students from Punjab due to fraudulent documentation.[3] While the Government of India has expressed concern over the welfare of its international students, especially during the pandemic, they have not evolved a policy response to youth migration. This paper draws on the example of student migration from Punjab to Canada to argue that the Government of India should respond to the needs of its increasingly mobile youth and create a youth-centric international migration policy, which uses the experiences of youth migrants in the pre-migration phase as a point of departure. This will not only enable India to establish itself as a trusted source country, but it will also allow young people to engage in forms of migration that are safe and orderly and contribute to their long-term development goals. As per the Government of India, *youth* are defined as young

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[2] *The Economic Times*, "India becomes the most populated: A dividend or a damper?" (19 April 2023).

[3] Vikas Vasudeva, "Punjab's illegal immigration back in spotlight after Canada's recent deportation threat", *The Hindu* (16 June 2023).

people between the ages of 15 and 29. However, given that the independent migration of young people after high school are being probed, for the purposes of this paper, youth will be defined as belonging to the age group between 18 to 29.

According to the Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2,500,000 students have moved out of the country for studies in the past five years. Out of these students, 750,000 migrated in 2022, the highest outmigration of students in the past five years. Punjab, a state in North India, is a key site of student migration from India. Between 2016 and February 2021, 984,000 people migrated from Punjab and Chandigarh, which includes 379,000 students and 600,000 workers. Based on these numbers, 1 in 33 Punjabis moved abroad in the last five years, and 38 per cent of those who immigrated did so on student visas.[4] The strong culture of migration, especially in the Doaba region of Punjab, is attributed to the region's long history of migration dating back to the independence of India, the decline in its agricultural sector and the concomitant lack of industrialization, which reduces avenues for youth to move from farming to non-farming jobs.[5] In this context, in pursuing student migration, Punjabi youth are not only seeking an education abroad; they are also using education as a route for permanent settlement in a Western country.[6] In conversations with them, Punjabi youth planning to migrate as students reveal that they prioritize migration to countries that offer an accessible pathway to permanent citizenship. In fact, the attraction of Canada as a destination country is linked to its offer of a two-step migration process, wherein the first step of entering Canada as an international student is followed upon graduation by a second step of applying for permanent residency. Historically, the immigration policy of Canada has been centred on retaining international students as permanent residents.[7] But recently, there has been a perceptible shift in the immigration policy of Canada. Various measures have been introduced, such as temporary caps of study permits, stricter eligibility criteria for the Post-graduation Work Permit and spousal open work permit to reduce the number of international students and make it more difficult for international students to remain in Canada after the completion of their study programmes.[8] These policy changes have been met with stark resistance from international students, a large majority from Punjab. Since the last week of August 2024, international students across Manitoba, Ontario and the Prince Edward Island have been protesting the withdrawal of postgraduate work permits. Protesting students assert their right to live and work in Canada.[9] While it is not the purpose of migration policy in a sending country like India to facilitate or motivate permanent migration of Indian students, India needs to be cognizant of and responsive to this reality. The needs and experiences of Punjabi student migrants who plan to transition from temporary to permanent migrants will

[4] Nikhil Rampal and Reeti Agarwal, "Few jobs, bad pay, so why should we stay'? Behind Punjab youngsters' rush for IELTS, migration", *ThePrint* (19 February 2022).

[5] Aswini Kumar Nanda, Jacques Verón and S. Irudaya Rajan, *Passages of Fortune? Exploring Dynamics of International Migration from Punjab* (Routledge India, 2021).

[6] Lilach Marom, "Market mechanisms' distortions of higher education: Punjabi international students in Canada", *Higher Education*, 85:123–140 (2022).

[7] Colin Scott, Saba Safdar, Roopa Desai Trilokekar and Amira El Masri, 2015. "International students as 'ideal immigrants' in Canada: A disconnect between policy makers' assumptions and the lived experiences of international students", *Comparative and International Education*, 43(3).

[8] Immilaw Global, "Canada's new student visa rules 2024" (7 February 2024).

[9] Kusum Arora, "Fearing deportation, international students protest Canada's pullback of work permit extension", The Wire (8 September 2024).

be different from other student migrants who intend to return to their home country after graduation.

Migration policy in India is focused on improving the use of remittances to enhance the development of India, ensuring economic integration of return migrants and reducing irregular migration. The Emigration Bill 2021, currently being discussed in Parliament, introduces measures to facilitate the safe and orderly migration of labour migrants through provisions like pre-departure orientation sessions. While it has introduced measures to regulate immigration agents, the Bill in its current form fails to attend to the specific vulnerabilities experienced by student migrants.[10] Typically, advocacy for international students and their concerns occurs in the post-migration context, and in the case of Canada, it has recently taken the form of protesting new immigration rules that reduce permanent residency routes for international students as previously mentioned. Attending to the experiences of potential student migrants in the pre-migration phase is crucial in developing youth-centric migration policy in the pre-migration phase that can allow for effective migration management. This paper draws on the challenges experienced by prospective international students from Punjab in the pre-migration stage, such as fraudulent practices in the immigration industry, low level of awareness and difficulties selecting an appropriate study programme. Young Punjabis' experiences demonstrate that social networks in the country of destination and the ability to gather independent knowledge of the migration process prevents young people from being misinformed and exploited by immigration agents. Using these findings as a point of departure, the study proposes that youth-centric migration policy in India should target the pre-migration phase and focus on disseminating information to prospective international students on life after migration and inculcating a long-term vision of migration.

This paper draws on qualitative data collected over 11 months in 2020 as part of an exploratory study, "COVID-19 and Punjabi migration", conducted in collaboration with the York University in Canada and funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. In-depth interviews were carried out on the Zoom platform with 27 Punjabi migrants – one set with prospective migrants in Punjab, India, preparing to migrate to Canada and another set with those already residing in the Greater Toronto Area. In Punjab, 13 respondents were interviewed (4 women, 9 men) between the ages of 22 and 31 from different religious backgrounds who were planning to or in the process of migrating as students or skilled migrants. In addition, key informant interviews were conducted with non-governmental organization workers, immigration lawyers and International English Language Testing System (IELTS) centre teachers/ owners. All the Punjabi Indian respondents had completed their undergraduate degrees. Six had finished or were in the process of finishing their postgraduate education. The respondents pursued undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in disciplines, such as information technology, civil engineering, physical education, commerce and science, business administration,

[10] Aayushi Gupta, "Emigration Bill, 2021: Two steps forward, one step back", Impact and Policy Research Institute (24 August 2022).

international relations and marketing. These young people were the first members of their families to pursue postsecondary education. For the purposes of this paper, there are only discussions on the interviews with key informants and seven respondents between the ages of 22 and 29 who are planning to migrate as international students. These respondents are at different stages of migration, varying from thinking about migrating to preparing for their IELTS exam, applying for their visa and waiting for their visa.

Navigating the immigration industry

In planning their migration, young Punjabis cite the pervasive issue of *fraudulent* agents. The use of the term fraudulent is not to point out irregular migration but rather the misinformation peddled by agents and their inability to facilitate promised migration, thereby cheating people off their money. They point out that the nexus between Canadian colleges and agents translates into agents steering clients towards certain colleges and programmes. Respondent 1 is 26 years old and applying to Canada as a college student. He has previously completed his undergraduate degree at a local college in Punjab. He recounts that his agent was trying to convince him to apply to Loyalist College as opposed to Lambton. The agent goes so far as to make a fake document claiming that Lambton rejected him. However, upon receiving the document, the respondent detected something was not right about the rejection letter: "As the font was weird … even the images were not opening". Respondent 1 uncovered that this agent was trying to get him into a college where he stood to make some money rather than the college where Respondent 1 wanted to go to. Respondent 1 dropped him and decided to go with another agent.

Even so, not all respondents are as aware and able to detect and thwart fraudulent practices, such as college suggestions that are not aligned with their own interests, compromising the success of their visa application. Respondent 2 is 25 years old and despite having a good IELTS score, his student visa has been rejected thrice, for reasons such as a mismatch between his previous education and what he is planning to do in Canada and the likelihood of him not returning to India following his education. He has a Bachelor of Science degree in Physical Education from a renowned college in Punjab. In his first attempt, he applied for a diploma course in child psychology in Canada. The second time he applied for a diploma in sports management. He claims he has lost USD 19,000 over two years in trying to migrate. These two respondents express different navigations with the immigration industry based on their information flow, which is shaped by their social networks and the extent of independent research.

Respondent 1 takes pride in conducting extensive research about the immigration process, not just on immigration requirements but also on the workings of the Canadian immigration system. It helps that he has a strong transnational social network, including immediate family who have migrated to Canada and New Zealand, and an older brother who is so well-versed in immigration policy that he filed his visa applications independently. He also has friends in Canada with whom he regularly communicates. This defines his expectations and navigation of the migration process. For instance, in describing the process of selecting his course of study, he talks about how his course in project management is tied to his long-term goal of entering the construction business in Canada

with his friends. He says, "I am doing project management; he has done architecture and the other friend is into estimation like construction estimation … so people of three different trades and what is required in construction, we have that." This type of long-term, vision-based selection of courses and programmes requires both the ability to gather information online and, perhaps more importantly, interactions with friends already settled in Canada.

In contrast, Respondent 2 is not in touch with too many people in Canada. He mentions that he did not have a friend circle in college and is in touch with some friends from school who migrated to Canada after high school. He also relies more heavily on advice from his agent, likely due to the absence of reliable second-hand information. In explaining dependence on his agent, Respondent 2 says, "I think if the person who is advising is an expert, he would know more; what if I say something and it affects me later." Despite the strong culture of migration in Punjab – which motivates young people to pursue migration for many years even after repeated unsuccessful attempts – migration is an uncertain and high-stakes outcome. Thus, despite the possibility of fraud, many young people prefer to go through an agent to reduce personal liability. The propensity to seek immigration consultants or agents to migrate is heightened among those with poor networks and support systems abroad and a lack of family history of migration.[11]

Social networks in the country of destination and the ability to gather independent knowledge about migration better prepares migrants to navigate the migration process. In contrast to older youth migrants that migrate after completing their undergraduate or postgraduate education in India, those migrating after high school are more vulnerable to exploitation by the immigration industry. Respondents who have personal experience of family members migrating right after high school point out that in addition to their propensity to fall into patterns of conspicuous consumption and debt post-migration, young student migrants are ill-prepared to adapt to a new academic system, and many have trouble balancing studies with employment. Respondent 3 is a 26-year-old girl who is a resident of Chandigarh but was completing her master's degree in a reputed private university in Haryana at the time of the interview. In referring to the post-migration experiences of her brother, who migrated to Canada after grade 12, she mentions, "My brother kind of portrayed a life that was very, very amazing in Canada. He got a Mercedes. He was, you know, taking vacations here and there. Looking at him, so many people in my community in Chandigarh and our family, they also left, you know thinking that he's having so much fun, but the reality was usually different. He was in a lot of debt." In speaking about her brother, Respondent 3 is not only highlighting the post-migration challenges faced by younger migrants but also how their selective narratives of aspirational consumption influence and reinforce an ill-informed desire for migration among other young men.

[11] Nanda et al., 2021.

A key informant points out that young student migrants do not know enough about the programmes offered abroad and are likely to follow blindly what the agent suggests. She adds that the message relayed to prospective students by agents is, "You have to go there and take your diploma for two years, you will get your work permit and then you can apply for your Permanent Residence. They were getting people ready for blue-collar jobs." Agents do not guide students on what programmes to pursue to further their career trajectory. However, this is also a problem for older youth migrants such as Respondent 2 who do not conduct independent research and are more dependent on the agent in guiding their study programme choices. This means that many young people migrating as international students from Punjab do not develop a long-term vision of their migration and its linkage with their career development. They remain fixated on the short-term goal of using student migration to attain permanent residency in Canada. Thus, one of the key challenges for migration policy in India is to inculcate in young people the ability to take a long-term view of their education and migration journey.

Conclusion

In conclusion, young people from Punjab migrating to Canada with a student visa are not merely looking to get an education abroad. They use the student visa route to attain permanent status in Canada. While this may not be the goal of all student migration from India, it is increasingly recognized that Indian youth migrating from different regions of India to destination countries such as Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom view student migration as the first step to permanent residency.[12, 13] This is especially true in the case of Punjab. Migration policy in India must recognize this and orient itself to facilitating the long-term settlement of young Punjabis in Canada. At a systemic level, this entails recentring the conversation on youth migration in Punjab on the long-term implications of student migration for young people's career development and life plans. While there is a continued need to regulate the immigration industry and make it incumbent upon agents to be transparent with clients, it is equally important to empower young people to make more informed decisions. Young people with limited social networks in Canada, low levels of awareness about the immigration process and those migrating right after high school are more susceptible to being misled by agents. Migration policy in India can focus on giving young people the tools to navigate their migration journey more effectively.

The Government of India can regulate information flow and use the narratives of migrants in Canada to generate awareness and understanding of the long-term implications of decisions made in the pre-migration stage. Several new immigrants in Canada have set up YouTube channels to help better inform prospective migrants about what life in Canada looks like with the express intention of addressing misinformation.[14] This information flow is beneficial not just for those respondents who do not have access to a social network in Canada but even for those who

[12] Janet B. Ilieva, Manjula Rao and Pat Killingley, *Mapping International Student Mobility from India at the State and City Level* (British Council, 2023).
[13] Michiel Baas, "Students of migration: Indian overseas students and the question of permanent residency", *People and Place*, 14(1):8–23 (2006).
[14] Naimul Karim, "Pierre Poilievre says new immigrants are warning people off Canada – but are they?", Financial Post (18 August 2023).

do. As emerges in the case of Respondent 3's brother when prospective migrants interact with known migrants, these migrants are invested in maintaining their status as successful migrants and selectively reveal only those aspects of their experience that further this imagery. In speaking with people only in their social network, prospective migrants are likely to receive a selective view of Canadian life. However, hearing about the struggles and decision-making processes of unknown migrants will expand the perspective of prospective migrants. While these policy implications stem from an analysis of student migration from Punjab to Canada and other migration pathways for Indian international students will present their own specific challenges, they indicate the need to place how youth navigate migration at the centre of designing youth-centric migration policy. Specifically, it is important to attend to the challenges faced and coping strategies deployed by young people in the pre-migration stage to formulate tools and programmes to better prepare prospective Indian international students for post-migration challenges.

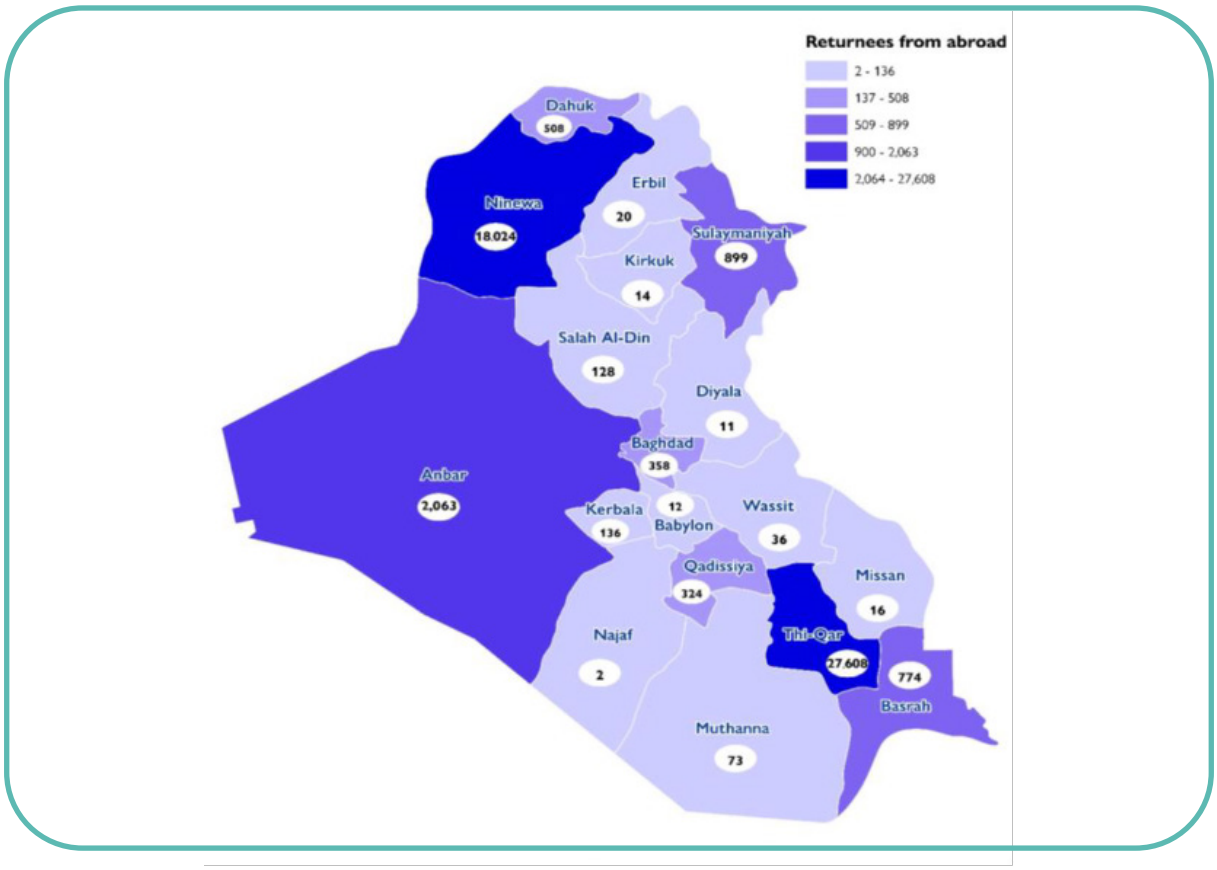
Enhancing reintegration assistance for returnees in Iraq through the National Referral Mechanism: Challenges, lessons learned and ways forward

Irene Tuzi and Agnes Ebenberger[1]

Introduction

Over the past decade, return migration has increasingly become an important dimension of the migration landscape in Iraq. After the end of the sectarian war (2006–2008) and the conflict against the Islamic State (2013–2017), a significant number of Iraqi nationals who migrated abroad are now returning home. The exact number of Iraqi returnees is difficult to establish. Available data, based on the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix, show that as of August 2024, 57,000 Iraqi returnees from abroad were identified overall in 18 Iraq governorates (Figures 1 and 2).[2] Aggregate data on assisted voluntary return and reintegration to Iraq obtained from IOM shows that 4,086 Iraqi migrants have returned through the scheme since 2019, mainly from Belarus, Germany, Greece, the Kingdom of the Netherlands and Switzerland.

Figure 1. Returnees from abroad (May 2018 to August 2024)



Source: IOM, Home page: Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) (accessed 31 December 2023).

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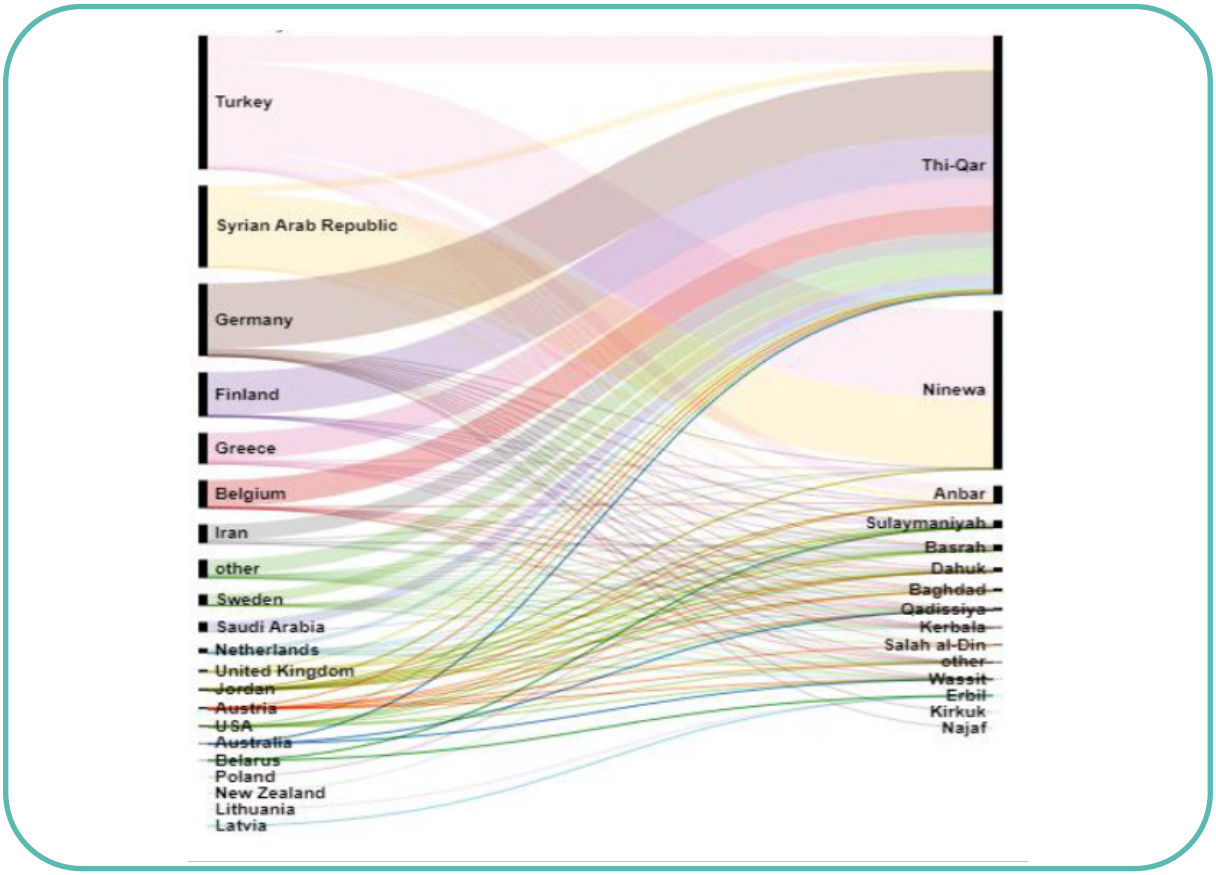
[2] See IOM, Home page – Iraq Displacement Tracking Matrix (accessed 2 December 2024).

Figure 2. Returnees by country of departure and governorate of return



Source: IOM, Home page: DTM (accessed 31 August 2024).

Return migration is a multifaceted phenomenon. Migrants return for various reasons and under different legal frameworks, sometimes voluntarily and other times involuntarily. Assisted voluntary return and reintegration programmes, designed to facilitate sustainable reintegration, can be essential tools for managing return migration. However, reintegration is not always seamless and can pose significant challenges.

Reintegration is widely acknowledged as a crucial phase of return migration. Previous research has shown that for return to be sustainable, returnees should be provided with opportunities to reintegrate in terms of economic, social and psychosocial dimensions.[3] Moreover, reintegration is a multidimensional and complex process that occurs at different levels: individual, community and structural level.[4]

This policy paper discusses the role of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in Iraq, a referral system that links returnees to reintegration services and supports them in their reintegration

[3] Ruerd Ruben, Marieke van Houte and Tine Davids, "What determines the embeddedness of forced return migrants? Rethinking the role of pre- and post-return assistance", *International Migration Review*, 43(4):908–937 (2009); see also: Samuel Hall/IOM, *Setting Standards for an Integrated Approach to Reintegration* (Geneva, IOM, 2017).

[4] IOM, *Reintegration Handbook: Practical Guidance on the Design, Implementation and Monitoring of Reintegration Assistance* (Geneva, IOM, 2019).

process at the individual level. Following an introduction to the methodology, the paper provides an overview of return and reintegration in Iraq, presents the NRM as a tool to enhance the reintegration of returnees, discusses the integrated approach to reintegration and finally presents lessons learned.

Methodology

The analysis offered here is based on an assessment study conducted by one of the authors in Iraq between May and August 2023.[5] The research is based on qualitative data collected through six in-depth interviews with NRM experts, four focus group discussions (FGDs) with 39 returnees and four with 36 caseworkers in Baghdad, Erbil, Mosul and Ramadi. In addition, an FGD was held with 14 service providers in Baghdad, and field observations were conducted in the four Iraqi governorates where the NRM was being implemented at the time of the research: Anbar, Baghdad, Erbil and Ninewa. Secondary quantitative data was provided by the Ministry of Migration and Displaced of the Government of Iraq and the Erbil Joint Crisis Coordination Centre of the Kurdistan Regional Government. This paper draws primarily on qualitative data collected in Erbil and Baghdad, which were the main NRM locations at the time of data collection. Data from the pilot NRM locations of Anbar and Ninewa were also particularly useful in understanding the evolution of the system. The newer NRM locations of Basra and Sulaymaniyah were not included in this research.

Return and reintegration in Iraq

The reasons for return can vary. While some may be in a position to make a conscious and informed choice, for others, the degree of voluntariness may vary due to the rejection of their asylum application, long migration procedures, family reasons,[6] as well as deteriorating financial or health conditions, lack of social ties abroad, language and cultural barriers and others. Due to the recent history of Iraq, tribal sensitivities and political and legal challenges, returnees from abroad are not always supported by their communities. Back home, returnees may experience limited access to existing support programmes, discrimination, stigma, rejection and alienation from their communities and even from their families.[7]

> My parents died, and when I returned, I went to stay with my sister. My brother was not ready to support me. He does not even like my children. My husband is missing. I do not know if my son's father is in Europe. My cousin asked me why I am back if I cannot support myself. I cannot raise my son alone.
>
> – FGD with returnees in Erbil, 31 July 2023

> When you come back voluntarily, you do not have a place to return to. The biggest challenge is the fact that we did not have anyone to talk to upon return. There is no engagement, coffee with other returnees and

[5] The present research was funded by IOM in the framework of the project, Cooperation on Migration and Partnerships to Achieve Sustainable Solutions Initiative (COMPASS).

[6] See: IOM, *Returning from Abroad: Experiences, Needs and Vulnerabilities of Migrants Returning to Iraq. Findings from a Longitudinal Study* (Baghdad, IOM, 2023).

[7] See also: Rochelle Davis, Grace Benton, Dana Al Dairani, Michaela Gallien and Salma Al-Shami, "Home after Isis: A study of return as a durable solution in Iraq", *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*, 13(2) (2018).

> no discussion with colleagues. Nobody said, "Hi, how was your experience?" When I was in the United Kingdom, I managed to find a job in the first month. Here, as soon as you arrive at the airport, you start being worried. The lack of networking here is huge.
>
> – FGD with returnees in Erbil, 31 July 2023

These challenges highlight the complexities and difficulties faced by returnees in Iraq at the social level, underscoring the need for more robust support systems to facilitate their successful reintegration.

Reintegration needs and expectations vary widely. Most participants in this study identified financial support and job placement as their main needs (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3. Main reintegration needs

The main reintegration needs that emerged from the focus group discussions (FGDs) with returnees in Erbil and Baghdad include:

1. Financial support and financial assistance to support the families of returned migrants and cover basic expenses such as rent, bills and daily living costs.

2. Employment and job placement, including job opportunities and job search assistance, job placement programmes, and engagement with the private sector to create quotas for hiring returnees.

3. Housing and affordable accommodation, including the provision of temporary accommodation or financial assistance with rent.

4. Health and medical support, including access to medical care and support for specific health issues, such as ongoing treatment and medication.

5. Social and family support, including the need to reduce lack of community involvement, family conflict and feelings of isolation and failure.

6. Access to services and information, including the need for clear information on referral and follow-up procedures.

7. Legal and administrative support, particularly in relation to property disputes and the need for legal advice on documentation.

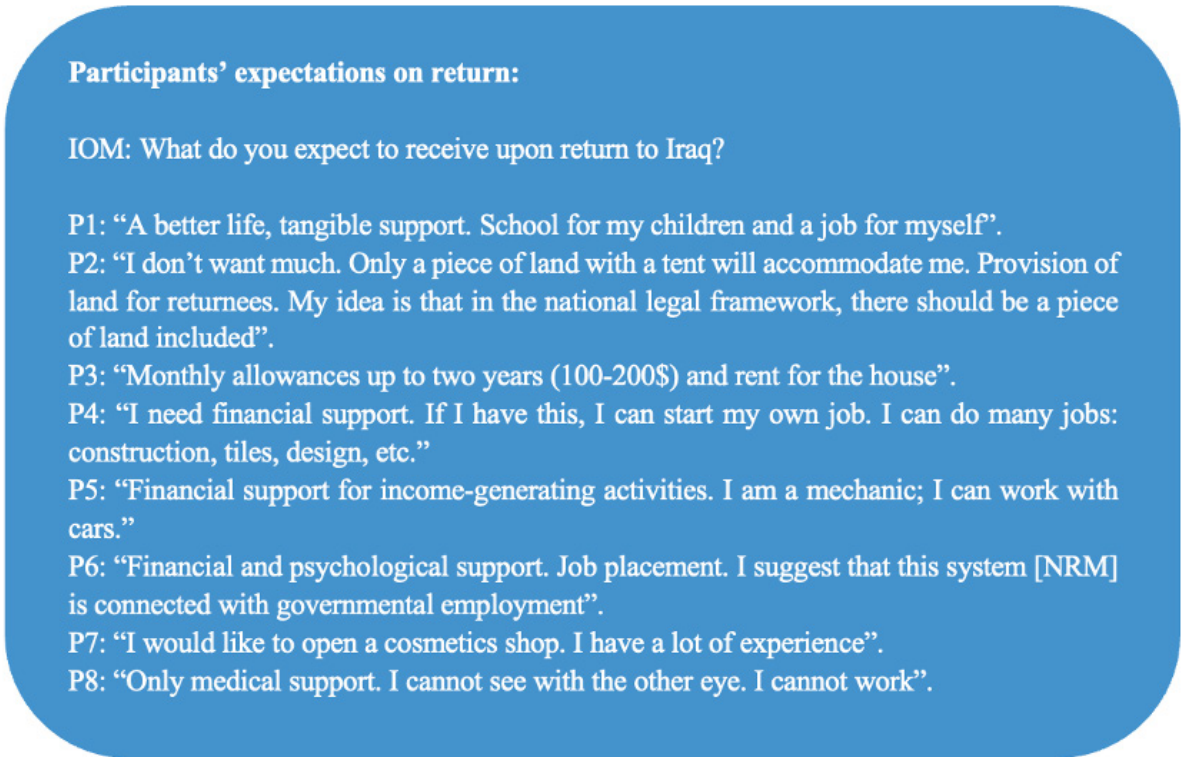
8. Skills development and business support, including the need for support to start or maintain small businesses and training programmes to develop new skills to become more self-reliant.

9. Psycho-social and emotional support to deal with feelings of cultural shock, disappointment and mental health problems, including the need for counselling and psychological support services.

10. Community involvement and networking opportunities to share experiences, support each other and reintegrate more effectively into society.

Source: FGDs in Baghdad, 26 June 2023 and Erbil, 31 July 2023.

Figure 4. Participants' expectations upon return



Source: FGD in Erbil, 31 July 2023.

The National Referral Mechanism in Iraq to enhance sustainable reintegration

Referral mechanisms are systems of cooperation between multiple actors to provide different types of services to a group of individuals in need.[8] Referral mechanisms can be used at the local, national or transnational levels. NRMs are particularly applicable to the reintegration of returnees, as these may have a wide range of needs that cut across different sectors and cannot be addressed by governments alone.[9] For this reason, it is particularly beneficial to work within a system of service providers in which multiple actors work and coordinate.

The NRM in Iraq was established in the governorates of Anbar and Ninewa in 2021, in Baghdad and Erbil in 2022, and in Basra and Sulaymaniyah in 2024. The system was developed within the framework of the Iraq National Migration Management Strategy and under the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. The NRM is the result of government consultations through the Interministerial

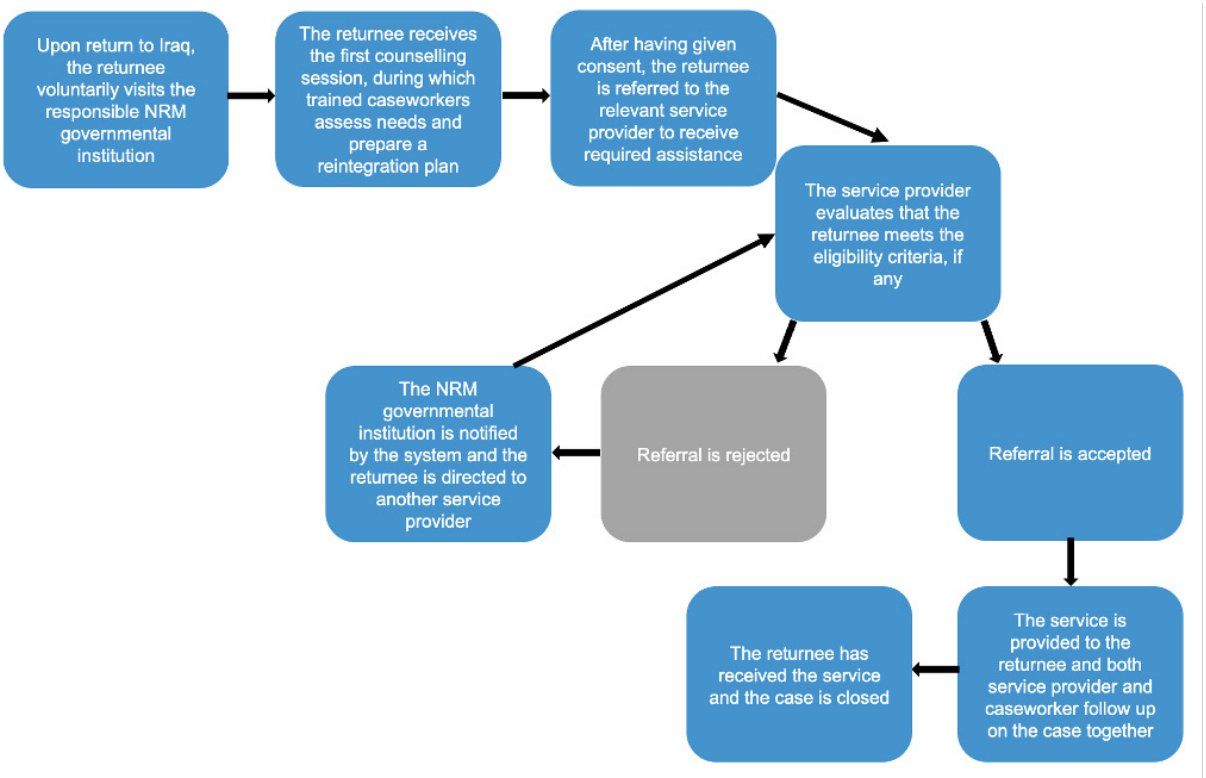
[8] Ravenna Sohst and Camille Le Coz, "Embedding reintegration assistance for returning migrants in the local context: The role of referrals", Policy brief (Brussels, Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2022). See also: IOM, *IOM Guidance on Referral Mechanisms* (Geneva, IOM, 2019).

[9] Ruben et al., 2009.

Technical Working Group on Migration and a key component of the integrated approach to return, readmission and reintegration. The development of the NRM in Iraq was supported by IOM, and it is currently being implemented by the Ministry of Migration and Displaced in Anbar, Baghdad, Basra and Ninewa and the Joint Crisis Coordination Centre, in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, as leading governmental actors. In this sense, the system makes reintegration a national policy for the first time in Iraq.

The NRM is guided by standard operating procedures that are applied throughout the case management cycle. The system operates as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. The National Referral Mechanism cycle



Source: Original elaboration by the authors.

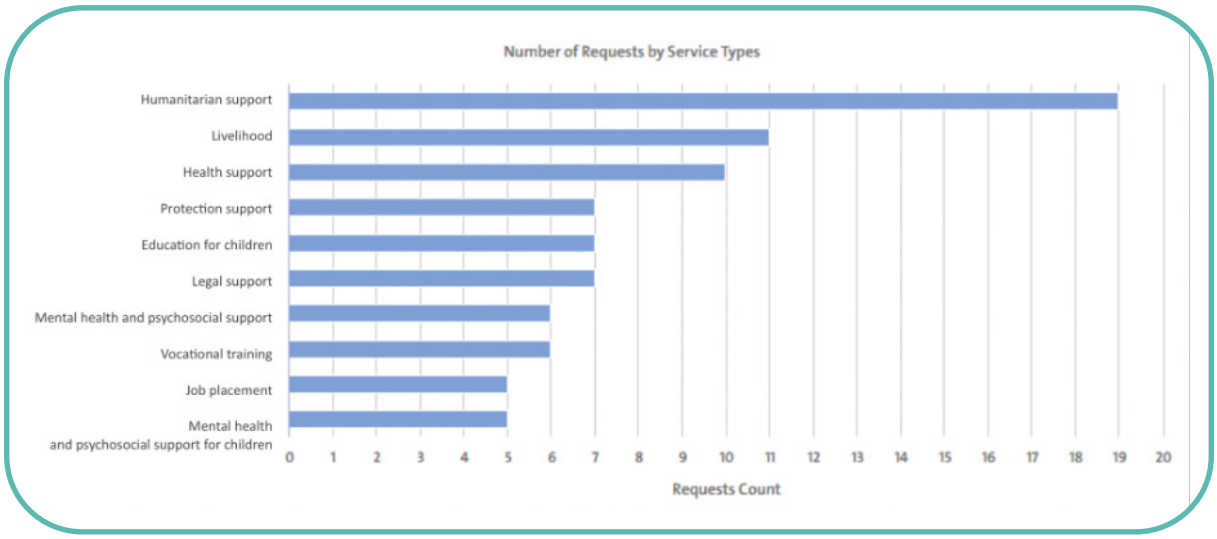
Services provided and eligibility criteria

Within the NRM, eligibility criteria depend mainly on the service provider and may include elements, such as country of return, age and gender of the returnee, year of return and others. The NRM is managed through a digital platform that includes all the eligibility requirements of the service providers, so that the referral decision is made according to clear and transparent criteria.

Services can be provided by public or private actors, including government agencies, local civil society organizations, national and international non-governmental organizations and international organizations. Services include a wide range of essential support mechanisms, including humanitarian aid, livelihood assistance, health care and protection services, including shelter and support for vulnerable groups,

such as children and people with disabilities, educational opportunities for children, legal assistance, mental health and psychosocial support for adults and children, as well as job placement services and vocational training (see Figure 6). Although services highly depend on the geographical area and the service providers present in each governorate, these services aim to address the multiple needs of returnees and help them rebuild their lives and achieve sustainable reintegration.

Figure 6. Types of services provided in Erbil



Source: Erbil Joint Crisis Coordination Centre, 2023.

An integrated approach to reintegration

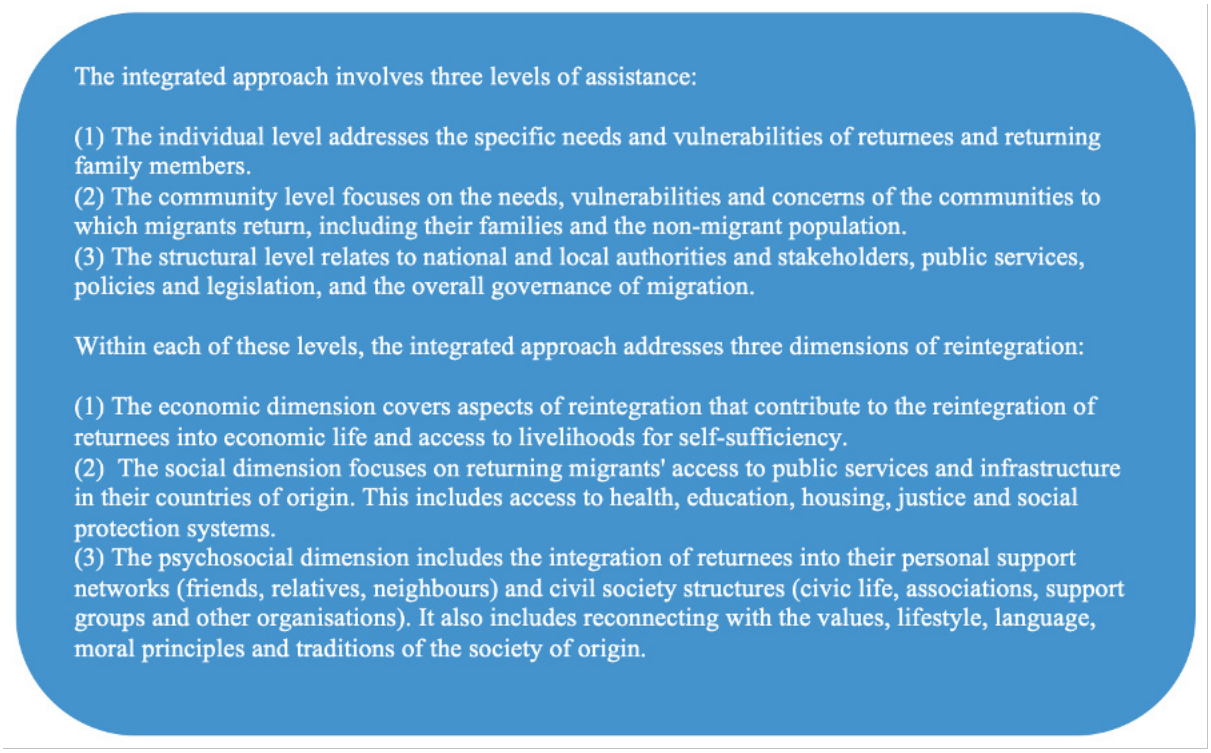
The NRM is based on the integrated approach to reintegration, which aims to achieve sustainable reintegration through a holistic and needs-based approach.[10]

Such an approach takes into account the various factors that can affect reintegration, including economic, social and psychosocial factors. The integrated approach responds to the needs of returnees at the individual and community levels in a mutually beneficial way, while also addressing the structural factors at play.

These levels and dimensions are not mutually exclusive, as they intersect in many ways. For example, exclusion from the community in the home country can affect the psychosocial health of returnees and, as a consequence, their ability to access livelihoods and economic opportunities at an equal level as the non-migrating population (see Figure 7).

[10] IOM, 2019.

Figure 7. The integrated approach to reintegration



Source: Original elaboration by the authors.

The National Referral Mechanism impact on returnees

Although the NRM was at a relatively early stage in the main locations where the research was carried out in 2023, several positive aspects were identified in relation to its impact on returnees. First, access to services and information proved to be easy, as caseworkers responded promptly, and cases were continuously followed up. In very well-served areas, such as Baghdad and Erbil, services were easily accessible. Returnees in Baghdad reported that their enquiries were dealt with efficiently.

> Access to the case managers was feasible, as our phone calls are answered via well-designated phone numbers, and our cases are continuously followed up.
>
> – FGD with returnees in Baghdad, 26 June 2023

Second, financial support and reintegration into the labour market proved successful. One returnee said that he had received a grant from a service provider, which significantly aided his reintegration with his family.

> I received a grant […], and it helped me to reintegrate with my family. I believe that the situation in Iraq is better than in the European Union for me and my family because society here still adheres to the social traditions that I intend to raise my children in.
>
> – FGD with returnees in Baghdad, 26 June 2023

Another returnee described receiving a support letter that was crucial for his Kurdish clothing business, which had been adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon his return, he received a notification of eligibility for financial

assistance. He had been informed of the existence of the NRM by other returnees and sought clarification from the same institution about his eligibility for this service.

> I received my support letter. I was the owner of my own business of Kurdish clothing. My work was very much affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. I received a message that told me: "If you are back from abroad, you will receive financial support." Some returnees from [the Islamic Republic of] Iran were able to receive a piece of land. I went to this same institute, as I wanted to receive an answer on whether I was entitled to receive this service or not.
>
> – FGD with returnees in Erbil, 31 July 2023

Third, many returnees agreed that the warm welcome they received from caseworkers in Baghdad had a positive impact on their psychological state and instilled a sense of hope. The caseworkers' empathy and thorough explanations of the options available reassured returnees that they were not alone in their journey.

> There was a warm reception by the case workers […] in Baghdad, and this positively affected our psychological state and gave us some hope. We feel that we are not alone when we talk to the case worker, who in turn explains to us all possible options.
>
> – FGD with returnees in Baghdad, 26 June 2023

These findings suggest that while the NRM was still developing in Baghdad and Erbil, its implementation had a positive impact on the reintegration process of returnees, providing them with tangible financial and labour-market support and a sense of community. In these cases, NRM referrals were able to effectively address the needs of returnees. It should be noted, however, that the needs of the returnee population in general do not necessarily correspond to the NRM referral data, as referrals are based on the services available in each location. Therefore, returnees registered in the NRM can only access the services available in a specific location. This specific issue will be elaborated in the succeeding section.

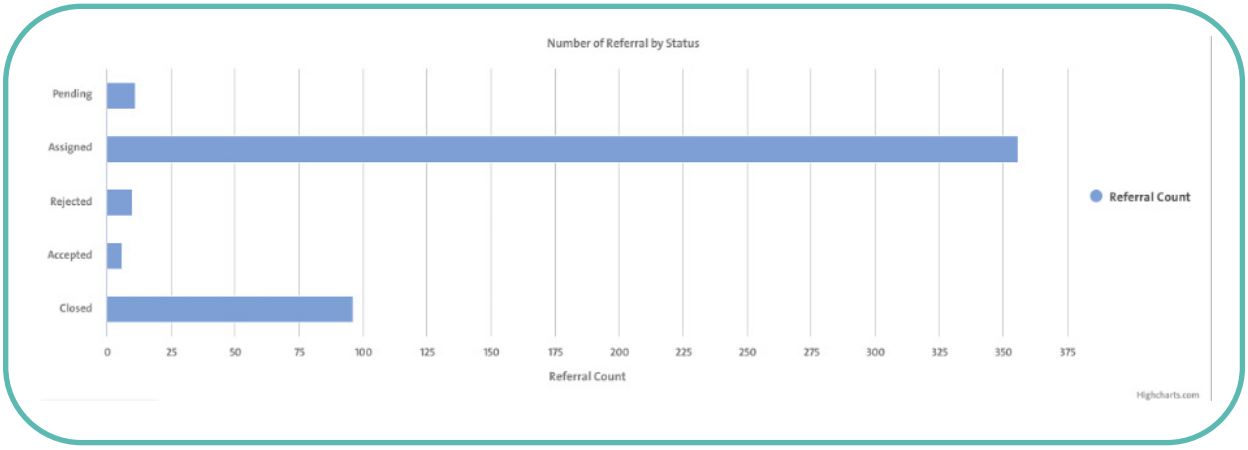
Lessons learned

Good practices

The research conducted for this study showed that the NRM is a useful tool for embedding reintegration assistance in the local environment through a network of actors that work together to address the needs of returnees. In particular, coordination between service providers and government agencies, as well as between different government institutions, has emerged as crucial. Good practices emerged from the FGD with service providers in Baghdad included direct communication between service providers and leading governmental actors.

The NRM system also proved to be exemplary in terms of the potential for digitization and use of administrative data for evidence-based policy and practice. While sensitive personal data remains fully protected, leading agencies can analyse aggregate data and disaggregate them by sex, age group, country of return, time of return, needs, services referred to and referral status (see Figure 8). In addition, the centralized nature of the system, managed by a government agency, allows data-sharing and privacy issues to be overcome.

Figure 8. Referred case status in Baghdad as of August 2023



Source: Ministry of Migration and Displaced, 2023.

Several actors highlighted the importance of awareness-raising and visibility activities, such as organizing social activities and public events, workshops and debates with the support of local stakeholders. In this way, it would be possible to improve the understanding of the different agencies involved in reintegration assistance, which might otherwise not be fully visible to returnees.

Challenges

Based on field observations and the overall findings of the evaluation study, there are currently two main challenges in all locations where the NRM has been implemented in Iraq. The first is related to the modality of engagement of referral partners, their availability in certain areas and the limited capacity and resources of service providers.

A second challenge relates to the coordination of data-sharing between key government actors and service providers, which tended to be a bureaucratic rather than a structural issue. These gaps were created by different data protection standards and regulations, which can make it difficult to find a common ground for coordinating data-sharing.

However, it should be acknowledged that the NRM system is based on high data protection standards. For example, there are five different levels of access to the NRM online platform, and only caseworkers can see personal information about the cases they are working on.

Conclusion

The NRM in Iraq has emerged as a potentially groundbreaking referral system that enhances sustainable reintegration through a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach, creating a network of actors who work together without duplicating efforts and resources, and who take the initiative for their own accountability.

Embedding reintegration assistance in the local environment through an NRM offers several advantages. First, it creates the physical space for returnees to connect with government institutions, to (re)build trust with the country

of origin and express their needs directly. In this way, returnees can overcome social barriers, (re) build networks and actively participate in the social and economic life of their home country. Secondly, the flexibility and multidirectionality of the referral mechanism allows the system to potentially grow as more service providers join in. It also creates a context in which the fragmented assistance framework typical of post-conflict contexts can be better managed at the local level, avoiding duplication of services thanks to the centralization of the system. Third, as the referral system is operationalized through a digital platform, it promotes the digitization of national data systems and provides important information on returned migration, as well as on the services and assistance available in different locations, which can then be used for evidence-based policymaking.

Overall, the potential of the NRM could go beyond its application to specific target groups and geographical contexts and, if applied more widely to the population in need and owned jointly by different government actors, could have the potential to create social cohesion and development opportunities for the whole population, thus laying the foundations for real change. In this sense, the NRM is a useful tool for policymakers in different geographical areas to embed support for (re)integration in local territories.

Foreign-trained medical professionals in Belize: Data gaps, human resources for health initiatives and impacts on sustainability

Ryan Durante and Margaret Walton-Roberts[1]

Abstract

This report analyses the role foreign-trained medical professionals play in the Belizean health-care regime. Through analysis of national health workforce data, as well as academic reports and bilateral treaties, this report concludes that Belize cannot maintain a sufficient and sustainable health-care sector without international medical workers sourced through bilateral trade agreements and international medical students enrolled in the offshore medical programmes of Belize. Limited literature and the lack of comprehensive national data in the World Health Organization's National Health Workforce Accounts prevents a comprehensive analysis of migration patterns for foreign-trained medical doctors compared that of nurses in Belize. The COVID-19 pandemic has also negatively impacted the human resources for health initiatives of Belize. Developing a sustainable health workforce in Belize will require continued contributions from international migration but must also focus on enhancing domestic educational capacity.

Overview of Belize and its health-care regime

With only 444,741 inhabitants, Belize is the least populated and least densely populated country in Central America.[2] A former colony of the British Empire, Belize gained independence in 1973 and is currently a member of the Commonwealth of Nations. Belize is both a migrant-sending and receiving country.[3] English is the official language of Belize, and many Belizean citizens migrate to Canada, the United States of America and other English-speaking Caribbean countries for educational and work opportunities. The migration context in Belize is relevant when it comes to understanding the composition of its health workforce.

Belize has a two-tier health-care sector, comprised of both public and private sectors. The health-care system in Belize is predominately public, with a small private health-care sector that is primarily utilized by expatriates (also referred to as *expats*) and wealthy Belizeans, and a third incredibly small volunteer system.[4] These volunteers (approximately 500) were established to manage the outbreak and mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in addition to providing basic levels of care, especially in rural areas where few health-care professionals are present.[5] Like

[1] Ryan Durante is a Master of International Public Policy candidate at the Balsillie School of International Affairs in Canada. Margaret Walton-Roberts is a professor in the Geography and Environmental Studies Department at Wilfrid Laurier University in Canada and affiliated to the Balsillie School of International Affairs.

[2] Integral Human Development, Migration profile: Belize, Migration and Refugees Section, Vatican City (n.d.).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Michael Graven, Peter Allen, Ian Smith and Noni E. MacDonald, "Decline in mortality with the Belize Integrated-Centred Country Wide Health Information System (BHIS) with embedded program management", *International Journal of Medical Informatics*, 82(10):954–963 (2013): p. 955.

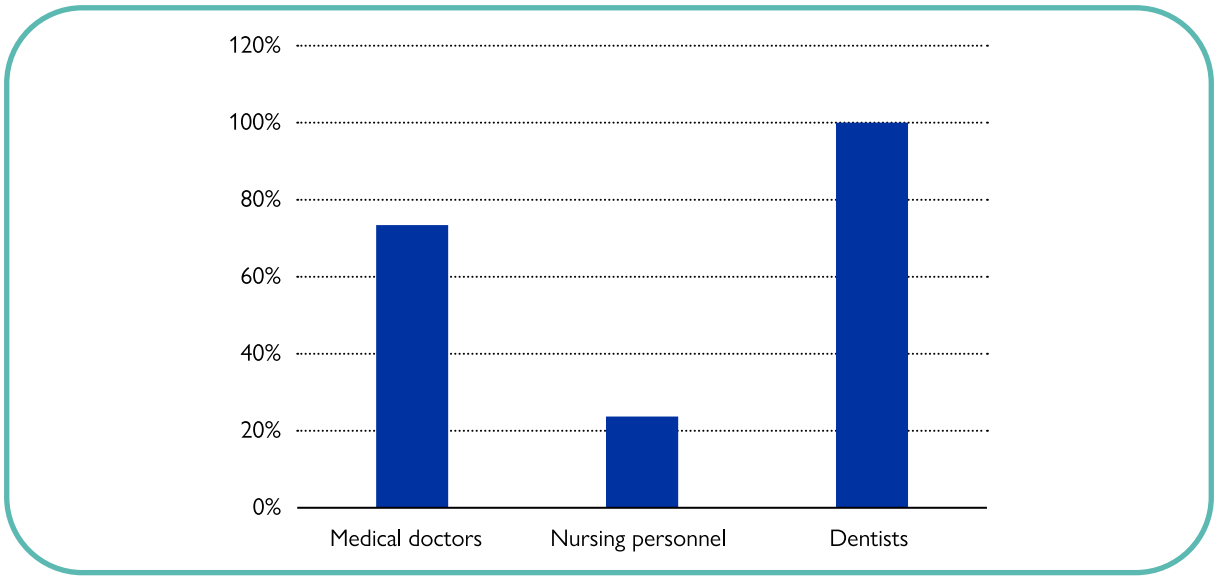
[5] Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), *Impact of COVID-19 on Human Resources for Health and Policy Response: The Case of Belize, Grenada, and Jamaica* (Washington, D.C., PAHO, 2022).

many other countries with a strained health-care system, volunteers comprised of retired nurses and individuals with no health-care training, who were primarily tasked with providing logistical support.[6]

Foreign-trained medical doctors in Belize

According to the National Health Workforce Accounts Data Portal (NHWA) of the World Health Organization (WHO), 73.4 per cent of medical doctors in Belize are foreign trained.[7] Additionally, 100 per cent of the dentists in Belize are foreign trained (shown in Figure 1). There is a significant sustainability crisis for Belize in terms of the health workforce due to the lack of national medical education institutions, which contributes to the need for foreign-trained health professionals. The Government of Belize is aware of this shortfall and is working alongside partners within WHO, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), and using bilateral agreements to rectify this issue.

Figure 1. Percentage of foreign-trained personnel by occupation in Belize, 2017

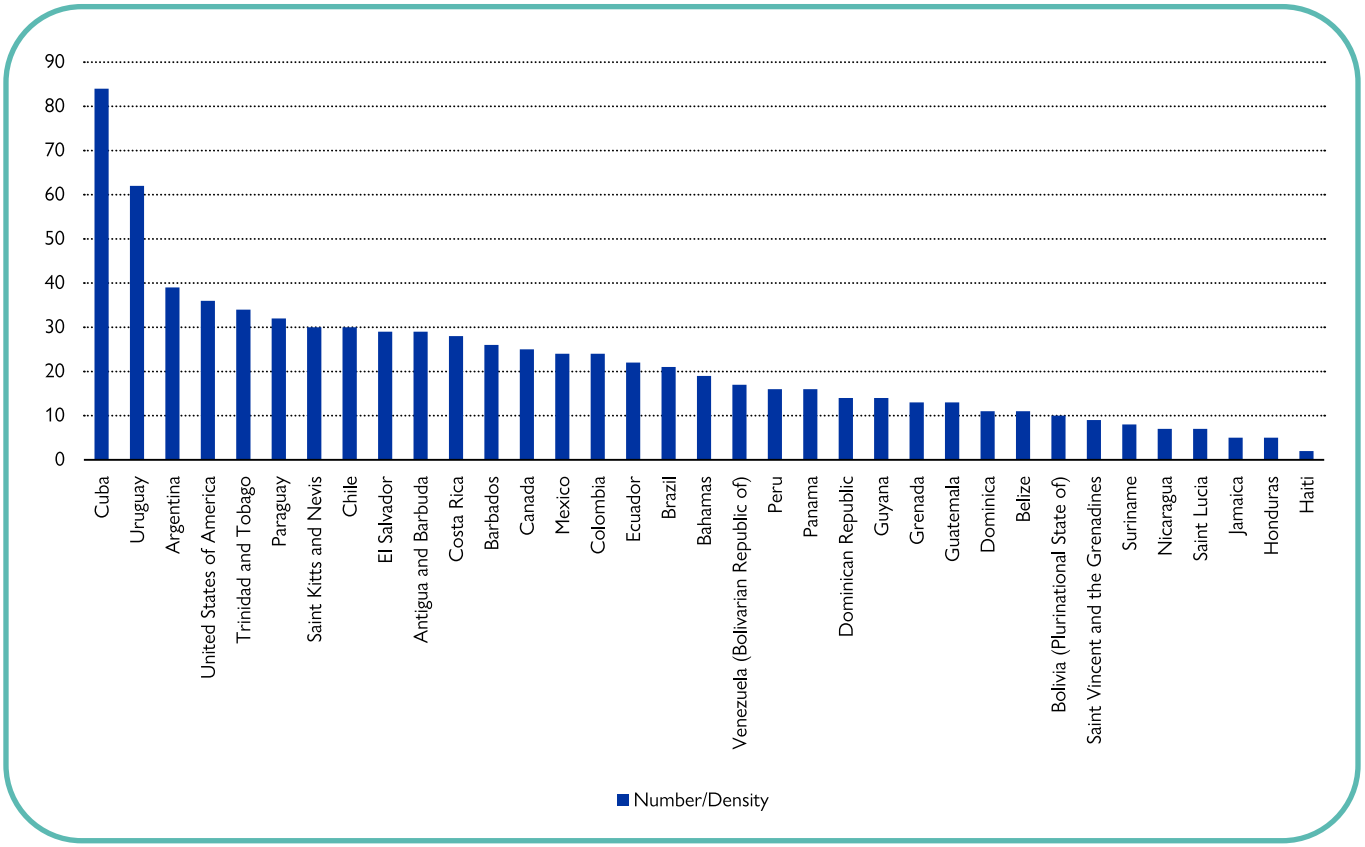


Source: WHO, Occupation profile: Share of foreign-trained, National Health Workforce Accounts Data Portal (accessed 5 April 2023).

Compared to the rest of the Region of the Americas, Belize is the fourth highest in its share of foreign-trained medical doctors (highlighted in Figure 2). Additionally, Belize ranks 29th out of the 35 countries in the Region of the Americas regarding distribution and density of medical doctors per 10,000, with a numerical value of 10.81 (see Figure 2). For a country of almost 450,000, that is approximately one doctor per 1,000 people or 10.81 per 10,000, falling extremely short of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) threshold of 44.5 human resources for health (HRH) professionals per 10,000.[8]

[6] Ibid.
[7] WHO, Country profile: Belize, National Health Workforce Accounts Data Portal (accessed 5 April 2023).
[8] PAHO, 2022.

Figure 2. Distribution of medical doctors by country, Region of the Americas



Source: WHO, Occupation profile: Density, National Health Workforce Accounts Data Portal December 2022 update (accessed 5 April 2023).
Note: Density is per 10,000 population.

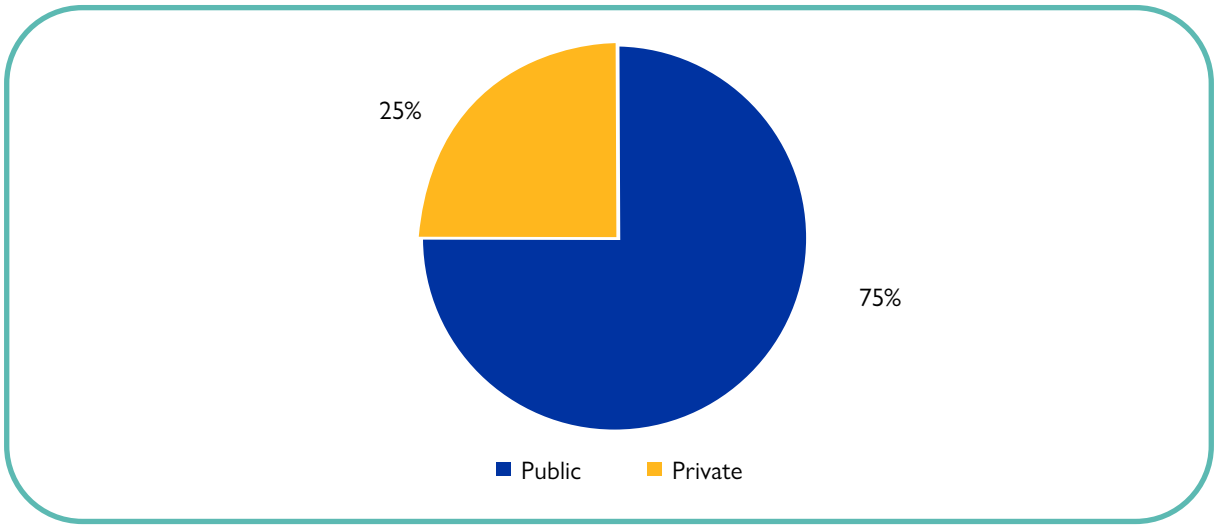
While the distribution of doctors in Belize favours the public sector (as shown in Figure 3), the private, for-profit health-care system in Belize does offer substantially better services and facilities, which cater to wealthy expats and Belizeans.[9] One of the driving forces of the Belizean economy is its tourism sector, and this sector has grown to include a burgeoning medical tourism industry, which will continue to increase due to the Belizean Ministry of Health's (MoH) plan to further develop the country's medical tourism industry.[10] This may place strain on the public health-care sector workforce, as workers will change sectors if pay and working conditions are better.[11] In light of the limited medical training capacity in Belize, any expansion of medical tourism can strain the public health-care sector.

[9] Expat Focus, "An expat guide to healthcare in Belize" (n.d.).

[10] Live and Invest Overseas, "Medical tourism and health care in Belize" (4 December 2020).

[11] Ibid.

Figure 3. Distribution of medical doctors across health-care sectors, 2017 (%)



Source: Original elaboration by the authors based on Expat Focus, n.d.

Problems facing Belize: Access to education – international and domestic

International

Currently, there are only three medical schools in Belize – the Central America Health Sciences University Belize Medical College; the Washington University of Health and Science; and the Columbus Central University School of Medicine.[12] All three medical schools are categorized as "offshore", which are "for-profit, private educational enterprises located in the Caribbean region, purpose-built to provide undergraduate medical education to international students […] students typically spend 2 years studying basic sciences in the Caribbean, followed by 2 years studying clinical sciences in American hospitals".[13] These offshore schools target students from Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, who intend to return home for residence and clinical practice after graduation. Medical education in Belize has several pull factors for prospective Global North students: (a) lower admissions requirements and fees; (b) the opportunity to study in a tropical environment; (c) the potential to practice in their home; and (d) commonality of English language in the Caribbean.[14] The emphasis placed on the potential to practice is significant because several American states, such as California, Florida and New York, have specific licensing requirements that do not include offshore schools, which is not highlighted by Belizean (and many other) offshore institutions.[15] What's more, Canadian and United

[12] Jeffrey Morgan, Valorie A. Crooks, Carla Jackie Sampson and Jeremy Snyder, ""Location is surprisingly a lot more important than you think": A critical thematic analysis of push and pull factor messaging used on Caribbean offshore medical school websites", *BMC Medical Education*, 17:99 (2017).

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

States students who study abroad do not return as domestic graduates but internationally trained medical graduates, and many are not aware of the challenges they will face as they seek recognition.[16]

Domestic

While domestic students can attend these offshore medical schools, Belize is unable to maintain a sustainable health workforce due to financial, regional and retention disparities, especially the lack of quality education targeting the domestic population.[17] In 2020, fewer than 20 nurses graduated from the University of Belize. Looking at the period of 2006–2008 alone, completion rates for nursing students averaged less than 15 per cent.[18] The World Bank reports that the lower secondary completion rate of the population of Belize in 2020 was 52.2 per cent.[19] While data is limited, it can be inferred that currently, it is impossible for Belize to maintain a sustainable domestic supply of health workers without first investing in secondary education and boosting completion rates.

Maintaining a steady supply: Bilateral agreements

Since Belize cannot currently rely on a domestic supply of health workers, it has looked to strategic partnerships with fellow Global South States to help maintain a relatively reliable health-care sector, as well as continue to be a desirable medical tourism destination. The MoH states that Belize relies on international health-care volunteers to help shore up its health workforce, specifically in rural areas where access to one of the State's eight major public hospitals is limited.[20] International volunteers primarily come through the form of bilateral agreements with Nigeria and Cuba. The Cuban Medical Brigades (CMB) and the Nigerian Technical Aids Corps (TAC) are programmes coordinated between the MoH and the Ministry of Labour in Belize and their respective counterparts in partner countries.[21]

Nigeria

The TAC Programme is a biennial agreement that provides Nigerian health-care professionals to Belize. The Nigerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced in the 2023 TAC report that Belize is one of the beneficiary States to be supplied with health-care workers from Nigeria.[22] Under this programme, the Government of Nigeria provides and finances doctors and dentists who stay for a tenure of two years in Belize, with the Government of Belize providing housing and covering all migration expenses.

Cuba

The Cuban Medical Mission partnership with Belize has been in place since 1998. Similar to the TAC agreement with Nigeria, Cuba provides and finances medical doctors and dentists for a two-year tenure in Belize to help support its

[16] Maria Matthews, Dana Ryan and Ivy Bourgeault, ""I wish I had known what I was getting into: A qualitative study exploring the experiences of Canadians who study medicine abroad", *BMC Medical Education*, 23(1):376 (2023).
[17] Philip Castillo, *Human Resources in Health: An Analysis of Costs of Training, Certification Requirements and Migration Issues in Belize* (Belize Ministry of Health and PAHO, 2013).
[18] Ibid.
[19] World Bank, Educational attainment, at least completed lower secondary, population 25+, total (%) (cumulative) – Belize (accessed 5 April 2023).
[20] Castillo, 2013.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Wale Odunsi, "Nigeria deploys 2500 technical aid volunteers to ACP countries", *Daily Post Nigeria* (2 February 2023).

health-care needs.[23] In contrast to the more lenient monitoring of Nigerian health-care volunteers, Cuban health-care workers have their credentials vetted prior to entering Belize, and it is mandatory that after their two-year tenure is up, all Cuban health-care workers must return back to Cuba. If Cuban medical doctors or dentists choose to stay in Belize, they must undergo regulatory exams to become accredited in accordance with Belizean law.[24]

Human resources for health in Belize: Challenges in a post-COVID world

While bilateral agreements shore up the health-care sector of Belize, there still persists a shortage of HRH in Belize.[25] The lack of HRH in Belize reflects the unequal geographical distribution in rural areas, the inability of Belize to train its own dentists (not having any dental school), and until 2017 they did not have their own medical school.[26] Belize was in a health workforce crisis prior to the COVID-19 pandemic; however, the pandemic, as in many other countries, exacerbated problems in the health sector. While Belize, under WHO guidance, initiated strategies to close the HRH gap prior to the pandemic, there has been an unravelling of the Belize Human Resources for Universal Health Strategic Plan 2019–2024 because of pre-existing inequities, poor legislation and the COVID-19 pandemic, which made a return to previous timelines impossible. Table 1 shows that due to hiring freezes implemented by the MoH in 2020, Belize only had 5,000 health workers to serve a population of almost 450,000.[27]

Table 1. Impacts of COVID-19 on the human resources for health of Belize

	Belize
Date data	30 November 2020[b]
COVID-19 confirmed cases in HRH	96[b]
Total HRH	5,000[d]
Infection rate in HRH[g]	1.92%
Deaths among HRH	0[c]
Case fatality rate in HRH[h]	0%
Total confirmed cases in the population	12,709[c]
Percentage of cases in HRH compared with total cases in the population	0.76%

Source: PAHO, 2022.

[23] Castillo, 2013.
[24] Ibid.
[25] PAHO, 2022.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.

During the pandemic, Belize heavily relied on its community health worker programme, which, alongside TACs and CMBs, helped to address the rural disparity gap.[28] The only feasible way for Belize to reorient itself to possibly build up a sustainable health workforce must include developing its educational capacity, especially in rural areas. A change in the education system is fundamentally necessary for the planning and implementing of "undergraduate and graduate-level programmes in the health sciences, their curricula and their teaching teams."[29] WHO has also noted that post-pandemic Belize must invest further to address HRH shortages and improve the distribution of health workers.[30]

Nurses in Belize

While the NHWA data is scarce with respect to dentists and medical doctors, both the NHWA and the broader literature focuses extensively on the availability of nurses in Belize. According to the NHWA data from 2020, nursing professionals in Belize, compared to medical doctors and dentists, are more densely distributed, with nursing personnel per 10,000 at 23.42.[31] Despite the relatively better presence of the nursing workforce in Belize, the density of nursing personnel is still below the critical WHO SDG threshold of 44.5 per 10,000.[32]

Migration of health workers – Gaps in data

WHO has estimated that there will be a shortage of 12.9 million health-care workers worldwide by 2030.[33] This will especially be felt in small countries like Belize. While there is limited data surrounding the migration of health workers coming to and leaving Belize, there are several pull factors that lead prospective Belizean medical doctors to migrate to Global North countries like the United States.[34] The United States, upon the passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010, actively sought recruitment of health professionals, such as physicians, nurses and health researchers from Caribbean countries like Belize.[35] This is a significant consideration for the dwindling supply of domestic Belizeans who have graduated from medical school, either within Belize or externally.

While there is data available for broader migration trends in and out of Belize, there is no data on health professionals involved in those migration trends.[36] Outmigration, according to the MoH, has far-reaching impacts on the capacity of Belize to deliver health care, and understandably so. It "aggravates the already existing workforce shortages, thus further undermining the country's economic and social resilience, represents an economic loss to the health system, and also has a negative psychosocial impact on the remaining professional colleagues due to the impression that there are places out there better than the status quo."[37]

[28] Ibid.
[29] Andrei Costea, "Governmental healthcare performance in Belize", *Performance Magazine* (18 January 2021).
[30] PAHO, 2022.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Costea, 2021.
[34] Castillo, 2013.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

Conclusion

The current situation sees Belize depend on bilateral agreements with other Global South partners to supply medical doctors and dentists to provide health services. The data provided through the NHWA and the broader literature is not only partial, but also outdated. This restricts deeper analysis of the movement of health workers, particularly international students present in offshore medical schools in Belize. However, based on the available data and literature, it is evident that Belize cannot maintain a sufficient and sustainable health workforce without investment in its primary and secondary domestic education sector. The existence of offshore medical educational institutions in Belize providing training to non-nationals reveals a dynamic migration and mobility circuit for health workers centred on, but staying in, Belize. Belize will need to continue to engage in bilateral agreements with other Global South States for the provision of medical doctors and dentists, continue to work with WHO and other partners to enhance its domestic production of health workers – which will include improved educational investment – and provide better data systems to register migration patterns and other forces that influence health workforce density.

Transnational practices of care along the Nepal–Malaysia remittance corridor

Nadiah Ahmad and Yvonne Khor[1]

Introduction

This article discusses remittances aspirations and outcomes along the Nepal–Malaysia corridor. From in-depth interviews with 37 male and 18 female Nepali respondents in Malaysia, findings show that migration decisions are highly influenced by the ability to send money home. Overall, this can be deemed a significant practice of care because findings show that respondents remit at least 50 per cent of their monthly salaries for dependants to purchase food, access quality health care, as well as to service family debts, invest in children's education and productive assets like land and livestock.

Moreover, between 2010 and 2020, remittances in Nepal was equal to 25 per cent or more of the GDP, reflecting its significance in the economic development of Nepal. Remittances by Nepali migrant workers substantially contribute to the nation's gross national product, remittances contributed USD 4.6 million in the last years and continued to grow to reach USD 9.3 billion in 2022.[2] According to KNOMAD–World Bank (2023), Nepali migrant workers' remittances stand at ninth place among South Asian countries.[3]

However, remittance practices have been challenged during the recent COVID-19 pandemic because of difficulties due to salary deductions, non-payments or salary withholding. In Nepal, the Human Rights Watch (2023) reports have revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic has further threatened social protection for children and families that stay behind and reduced the remittance money sent back home by their parents.[4] As a response to the challenges of sending remittances, Nepali policymakers should consider revisiting and remedying gaps in social protection mechanisms across the corridor, including expanding protection mechanisms of the Foreign Employment World Welfare Fund (FEWWF) of Nepal, as well as the social security provision of Malaysia for migrant workers under the Employees' Social Security Act, 1969, for example.

Data sample

Through purposive sampling, a total of 37 male and 18 female Nepali migrant workers were interviewed for this research. The sample was purposely tailored to ensure that Nepali workers

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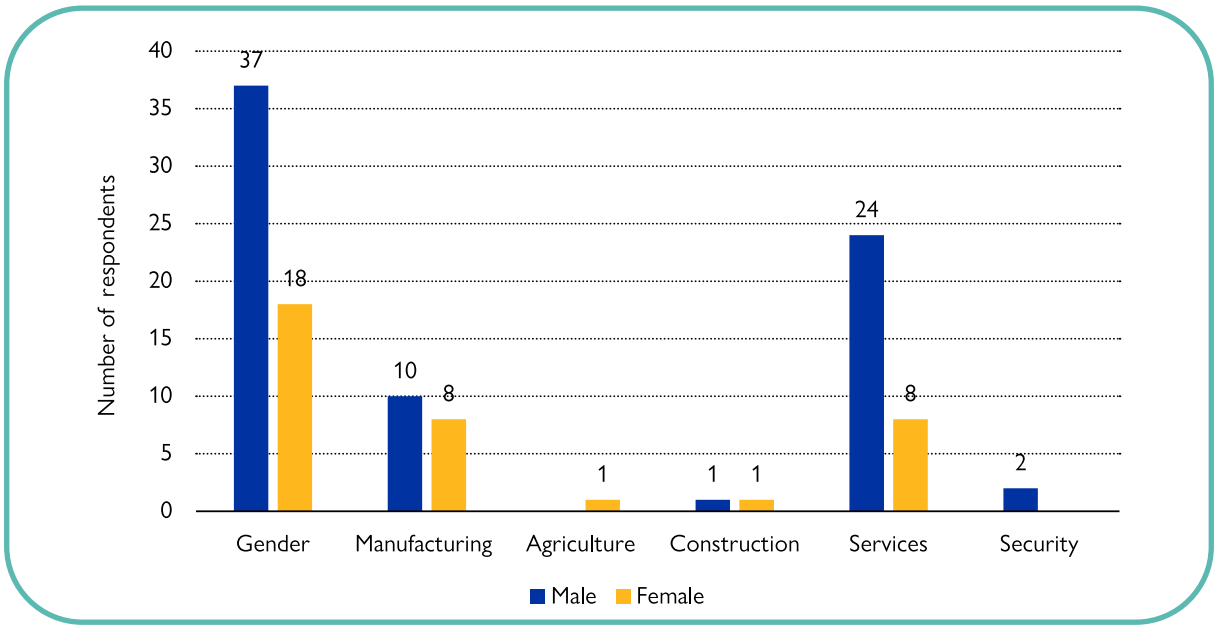
[2] World Bank, GDP (current US$) – Nepal, World Bank Open Data (accessed 1 June 2021); Nepal Rastra Bank, Current macroeconomic and financial situation of Nepal based on annual data of 2010–2020 (August 2021); and Centre for Migration and International Relations (2019), Migration facts: Remittance inflows and GDP, Nepal.

[3] Dilip Ratha, Sonia Plaza, Eung Ju Kim, Vandana Chandra, Nyasha Kurasha and Baran Pradhan, *Remittances Remain Resilient but Are Slowing*, Migration and Development Brief 38 (Washington, D.C., KNOMAD-World Bank, 2023).

[4] Human Rights Watch, "Nepal's social protection system reinforces inequality" (1 February 2023).

from relevant sectors were interviewed, including ensuring gender representation. All respondents were aged between 21 and 50. As seen in Figure 1, 58 per cent of respondents were employed in the services sector related to retail, cleaning, remittances, food and beverages (F&B) businesses like fast-food restaurants or grocery stores, 33 per cent of respondents in the manufacturing sector, 2 per cent in agriculture, 4 per cent in construction, and 4 per cent in security as private security guards. While 44 per cent out of the 18 female respondents currently worked in the glass, textile, food packaging and electronics manufacturing, the balance 56 per cent of female respondents were employed in F&B. Geographically, 90 per cent of sampled respondents were located in the capital, Kuala Lumpur, and the most populous central state of Selangor; 5 per cent respectively were situated in the southern state of Johor and the northern state of Penang.

Figure 1. Respondents' employment sectors



Source: All figures, unless otherwise indicated, are original elaboration by the authors based on the findings of the study.
Note: Number of respondents = 55.

Findings 1: Socioeconomic and political contexts driving Nepali international labour migration

Local socioeconomic and political factors significantly influence Nepalis' migration decisions. Economic challenges in the agrarian economy of Nepal drive rural populations to seek better opportunities abroad. Respondents originating from non-urban villages predominantly highlight the ongoing instability of rural economies. Government policies like the National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) have not adequately addressed the needs of agriculture-dependent communities, resulting in food insecurity for over 2 million people during winter droughts.[5]

[5] Binod Chapagain and Popular Gentle, "Withdrawing from agrarian livelihoods: Environmental migration in Nepal", *Journal of Mountain Science*, 12(1):1–13 (2015).

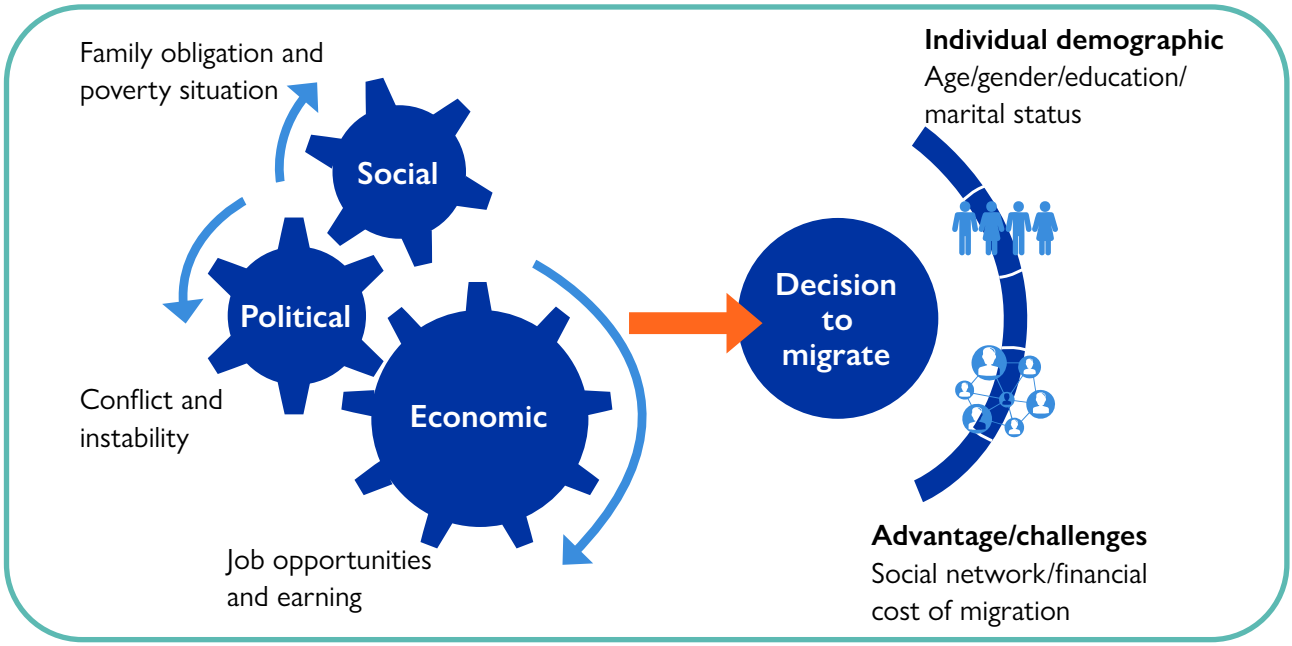
Beyond these broader reasons, individual and familial motivations also contribute to outmigration. Respondents highlight push factors, such as irregular salary payment schedules and inadequate minimum wages. They believe that migrating is essential to fulfilling familial needs. The current minimum wage of 15,000 Nepali rupees (NPR) (approximately USD 114)[6], is deemed insufficient for a decent quality of life.

> There is no work in Nepal, but I joined the British army training before and got sent to Singapore for three years of training, hoping to become part of the British army, a Gurkha soldier. But I failed. Then I could not get any job and not working in Nepal. Our family has a small sundry shop, and my father served in the Indian army, and my father supported the family before I became a migrant worker in Malaysia.
>
> – Male, works in F&B retail at Kuala Lumpur

Additionally, perceptions of migration success are a unique pull factor, which was perpetually shaped and reiterated through social networks of family members, friends, neighbours and village leaders. Such shared stories reinforce migration aspirations and expectations and thus, highly contribute to the enduring culture of migration in Nepal.

> From my friend and people that I knew that were working in Malaysia, they told me that this was a beautiful country that had great weather. And they also mentioned that if I get to work with a good company, with a great company, that's like the best fortune. Because of hearing everything, that's what made me think – OK, Malaysia."
>
> – Male, works in F&B retail at Kuala Lumpur

Figure 2. Drivers for migration



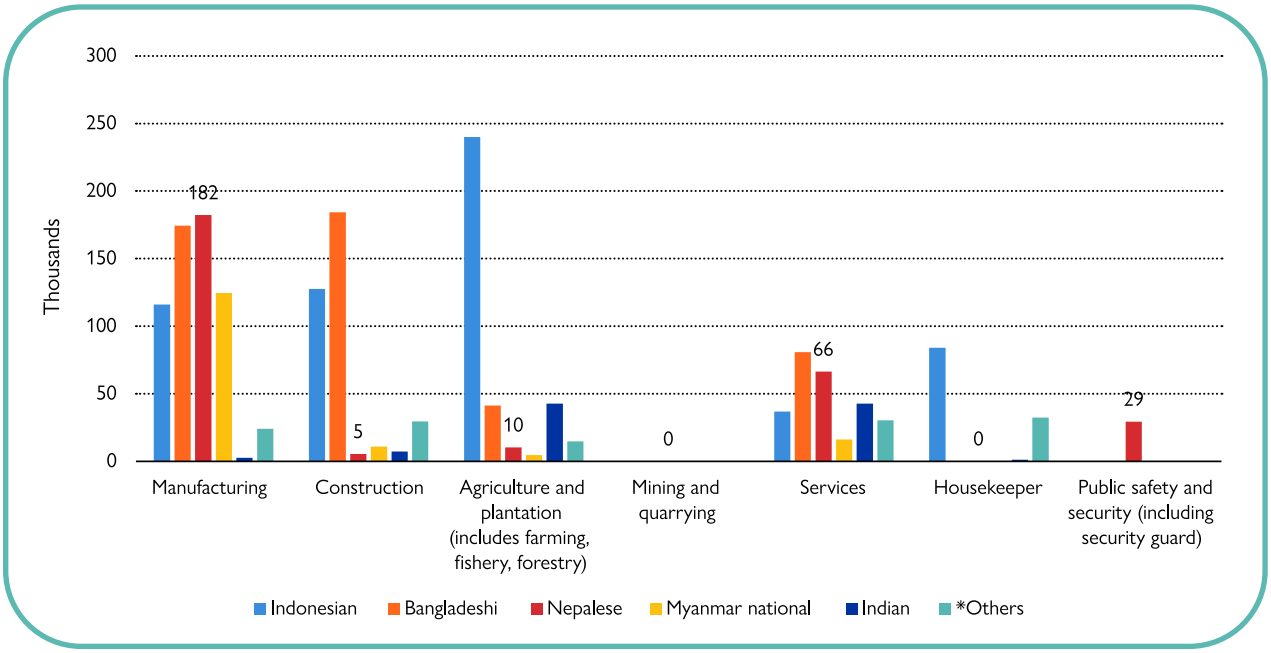
[6] *The Himalayan Times*, "Minimum monthly wage of workers raised 11 per cent to Rs 15,000" (4 May 2021).

Findings 2: Migrant work in Malaysia

A 2022 study by the International Labour Organization (ILO) shows that Malaysia is the number one destination country in South-east Asia for Nepali migrant workers. This is reflected in the data wherein, according to respondents, Malaysia is an attractive host country due to its socioeconomic and political environment, moderate weather, as well as various options for migrant-reliant industries. These pull factors result in Nepali as the third largest migrant population in Malaysia, after Indonesia and Bangladesh. As of June 2020, Nepali migrant workers with valid temporary work permits (PLKS) constitute approximately 15.6 per cent (241,106) of the migrant population.[7]

Nepali migrant workers are predominantly employed in the manufacturing and services sectors, including security in Malaysia. As of April 2020 (Figure 3), a total of 29.2 per cent of Nepali migrant workers are employed in the manufacturing industry, followed by 24.3 per cent of Nepali migrant workers in the services sector and 2.82 per cent of Nepali migrant workers in the agriculture and plantation sectors. In 2019, Nepali migrant workers comprised about 18 per cent (29,390) of 159,213 security guards nationwide.

Figure 3. Total number of migrant workers by sectors and nationalities who own active and valid temporary work permits



Notes: Statistics were collected from the Immigration Department of Malaysia in 2020 during fieldwork. This was then compared with data from 2013 to 2019, which can be found at the Institute of Labour Market Information and Analysis (ILMIA) titled *The Socio-Economic Impact from Employment of Low-skilled Foreign Workers and International Internship Programme in Malaysia* (Selangor, ILMIA, Ministry of Human Resources, 2020).
*Others included Cambodia, China, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Viet Nam, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

[7] Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, *Nepal Labour Migration Report 2022* (Kathmandu, Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, 2022), pp. 58–61; and Mohamad Fauzi Md Isa, Nik Azmi Nik Omar, Arbaiyah Jusop, Rodziana Mohamed Razali, Hendun Abd Rahman Shah, Intan Nadia Ghulam Khan, Nisar Mohammad Ahmad, Muhammad Safwan Ibrahim, Sahubar Ibrahim Ismail Gani and Norailis Ab Wahab, "The security implications of the employment of foreign workers holding visit pass (Temporary Employment) in Peninsular Malaysia", *Journal of Public Security and Safety Special Edition* (2021).

The wage rates in Malaysia are also seen as a significant factor for Nepali migrants. Periodically, migrant workers have been able to benefit from revisions to the minimum wage. The Malaysian minimum wage policy is aligned with the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (no. 100) of ILO, which was ratified by Malaysia in 1997. Furthermore, Malaysia is also a signatory of the Minimum Wage Fixing Convention, 1970 (no. 131) of ILO, signed on 7 June 2016. As a result, all workers, regardless of nationality, are entitled to these changes to minimum wage.

From interviews, findings reveal that Nepali respondents earn different rates according to the industries or sectors they are employed in. Respondents who work in manufacturing could earn between USD 306 to USD 437 (1,400 to 2,000 Malaysian ringgits (MYR)), while those in the services or non-manufacturing sectors (security guard, remittance services, retail or F&B) are offered higher basic salaries of USD 328 to USD 875 (MYR 1,500 to MYR 4,000).

Findings 3: Remittances as a practice of care

As discussed, the predominant motivation for migration among Nepali respondents have been to ensure livelihoods for their families back home, afforded mostly through remittances. In interviews, remittances are perceived as a practice of care for various reasons. For one, it is a solution to ensure survival and better quality of life as it provides access to better food, medicine and health-care services for migrants' families. In part, this access that remittances afford migrant families is seen as a significant gesture of concern, care and love on the part of the migrant. Remittances are also not only used to care for members of the nucleus family, but also extended members, such as siblings, parents and grandparents.

> I send NPR 20,000 to NPR 30,000 (approximately MYR 700 to MYR 1,000) back. Most of the money goes to my children's education and my mom who is in the village, so she gets money separately. My expenses are MYR 400 to MYR 500 (USD 91 to USD 113) per month for food and break time like tea and coffee or breakfast.
>
> – Male construction worker in Shah Alam

As a socioeconomic effect, remittances enable or reinforce aspirations for better quality of life, through investing in productive assets, such as land, houses and livestock or ensuring access to certain capacity-building institutions, such as English medium schools or colleges for their children and siblings.

> My son's study fee is about NPR 15,000. I am paying his school and college fees; he is staying outside in the capital city, and I have to pay for the house rent. I need to go out (of Nepal); I need to find some money for my kids. After two or three years, I will go back because my son still studies.
>
> – Male working in remittances services at Kuala Lumpur

However, embedded in the dependence migrant workers and their families have on remittances is a persistent challenging environment that can disrupt sending money home as a practice of care. In general, the debt burden that migrants incur before migrating is an example of how

remittance expectations can be disrupted. More than half of the respondents mention that they have had to take out loans from local creditors and banks or borrowed from relatives or family friends at an interest. In most circumstances, respondents would require six months to five years to repay their debts, thus impacting their ability to direct these funds towards fulfilling familial needs.

> My initial loan was NPR 150,000 (USD 1,134). I took the loan from the local creditor and spent two and a half years paying the loan. Because I had to travel to Kathmandu to settle my migration papers, I spent lots of money there too. So, from this, I incurred debt on top of the 150.
>
> – Female working in manufacturing at Skudai

Findings 4: COVID-19 and remittances

In Malaysia, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 exposed the level of vulnerability of migrant work, particularly in relation to the remittances. In part, it exacerbated negative impacts on migrant employment. In a report by IOM, it was said that 30 per cent of Nepali workers in Malaysia lost their employment during the first year of the pandemic (2020).[8] During the imposed movement control order of the Government of Malaysia in March 2020 as part of minimizing the spread of COVID-19, most respondents only received their basic salary or a minimum wage of MYR 1,200, while others only received 25 to 50 per cent of their basic salary. A small number of respondents had not received any salary for at least two months; and only respondents who worked in the service sectors, such as restaurants or hotels, received food assistance from their employers during the lockdown. This caused a reduction in remittances and had implications on migrant families' welfare back in Nepal during the pandemic.

> I am not working because of the second lockdown. The company gives me MYR 300 a month for now. Recently, I have been put on hold […] only one outlet is operating, and it is not making money. So currently, I cannot send any money back home.
>
> – Male working in F&B retail at Kuala Lumpur

> They (the hair salon employer) were closed for three months (March to May 2020), so I had no work. They did not give me my full salary. But after talking and negotiating with them, they gave me 25 per cent of each month from my current salary, which is MYR 1,300 (USD 294). So the first month they gave me the full salary; second, the remaining two months, they only gave 25 per cent.
>
> – Female working for cleaning services at Putrajaya

Simultaneously, respondents also had to negotiate anxieties around infections and disparate access to health services, as well as vaccinations. Several respondents were not clear about vaccination requirements, relying on their employers to provide information about the process.

[8] IOM, *Status of Nepali Migrant Workers in Relation to COVID-19* (Kathmandu, IOM, 2020), p. 13.

> I have to deal with customers every day – you know, hundreds of customers daily – so you can never know who is infected. So with the situation we have right now, it is not all about the money. I want to spend time with my family as well. If I survive this, I can always earn money again.
>
> – Male working in the retail sector at Cyberjaya

The Embassy of Nepal in Malaysia provided some information for their citizens via Facebook updates; however, its services did not extend to ensuring their citizens were provided with proper access to vaccines or health-care services if infected. Respondents who contracted the virus had to be quarantined at a separate government facility; during this time, they were not able to work for at least two weeks as mandated by the Government. Respondents also cited discriminatory treatment at these quarantine centres, sharing stories about differences in facilities, comfort and general attitudes by local authorities or health-care professionals.

In the last decade, the Government of Nepal has attempted to provide some level of social protection for its migrant community, most evidently seen in the establishment of the FEWWF under the Foreign Employment Act of 2007, wherein the fund can be utilized to provide welfare and relief for stay-behind family members through grants and monetary support. The most significant portion of the welfare fund has been distributed to stay-behind families to compensate for deaths of migrant family members abroad or health support for returnee migrants who have been either wounded or taken ill while working abroad.

During this time, the Government of Nepal activated its FEWWF funds to assist in the repatriation of recently unemployed workers.[9] This decision followed a directive from the Supreme Court of Nepal in June 2020, instructing the Department of Foreign Employment to utilize the welfare fund for supporting and bringing back Nepali migrant workers who found themselves stranded in host countries due to job loss during the pandemic. However, it should be noteworthy that the Government did not grant any concessions to migrant families who relied on remittances for essential needs, such as food, education or health-care services.

Despite such exacerbated circumstances during the pandemic, demand for outmigration among Nepalis was still high. Some respondents in the research would still consider migrating again despite their bad experiences in reduced or non-payment of wages. Highlighted in a 2022 report by the Nepal Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security, it was also recorded that approximately 100,000 Nepalis with labour permits have not been able to migrate to begin work abroad due to COVID-related restrictions.

Conclusion

From interviews, aspirations, expectations and outcomes of migration are significantly tied to the prospects of remittances. As discussed, remittances not only provide at the individual and familial level but also at the national level by significantly contributing to the GDP of Nepal. This research has shown that despite the

[9] Sangam Prasain and Chandan Kumar Mandal, "Supreme Court orders government to use welfare fund to repatriate Nepali workers stranded abroad", *The Kathmandu Post* (17 June 2020).

precarities related to migrants' ability to remit, outmigration for Nepali would continue in the near future. As such, Nepali policymakers should consider revisiting and remedying gaps in social protection mechanisms across the corridor that can ensure better employment training and information dissemination among prospective migrants, as well as promote better terms of protection in salary distribution and health-care access for their citizens in Malaysia.

Empowering Afghanistan: Afghan diaspora (potential) contributions in renewable energy

Nasrat Sayed[1]

Abstract

This article examines the contributions of the Afghan diaspora to the advancement of renewable energy in Afghanistan, both individually as members of the diaspora and collectively through diaspora organizations and expert return programmes. Investing in renewable energy is vital for lowering household expenses, enhancing access to health and education services, and promoting a cleaner environment, all supporting broader socioeconomic development. The data are drawn from existing studies, including the author's previous research, personal experience as an Afghan diaspora member, and conversations with other members of the Afghan diaspora. The findings show that some individuals from the Afghan diaspora contribute to renewable energy through remittances to their families in Afghanistan. Furthermore, engagement from Afghan diaspora organizations and Afghan diaspora expert return programmes in renewable energy projects is minimal.

Introduction

The decades-long conflict and political instability have driven millions of Afghans to migrate to both Western and non-Western countries, forming diaspora communities that play a crucial role in contributing to the development of Afghanistan. It is common for Afghan diaspora members to send financial remittances back home (see Figure 1) to help their families, relatives and even sometimes friends in need. This form of support often goes towards household needs, such as education, health care, purchasing assets, covering utility bills and daily expenses. Meanwhile, Afghanistan largely depends on imported electricity from neighbouring countries: the Islamic Republic of Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Most Afghans lack access to national grid electricity, particularly in rural areas, while those in urban areas often experience power outages.[2] These issues negatively affect the provision of essential services, such as education, health care and overall socioeconomic development.

Several organizations have initiated renewable energy projects in response to the previously mentioned issues. For instance, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has implemented solarization efforts to enhance local livelihoods and provide sustainable energy access.[3] Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS), the International Finance Corporation, the former Government of Afghanistan and current authorities have also contributed to advancing the renewable energy sector in Afghanistan.

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[2] Abubakar Siddique, *The Azadi Briefing:* Afghanistan plunged into darkness amid massive power outages, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (27 January 2023).

[3] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Harnessing the sun to power Afghanistan's development (26 January 2024).

Despite these efforts, they have not been sufficient to address the energy issues in Afghanistan. Thus, one potential avenue is leveraging Afghan diaspora contributions. While there is increasing recognition of the contributions of the Afghan diaspora and their organizations in health, education and humanitarian assistance efforts, their contributions to supporting renewable energy initiatives – mainly through remittances – have been overlooked.[4] Addressing this gap is crucial for maximizing the impact of diaspora contributions to the renewable energy sector of Afghanistan. Furthermore, investment in the energy sector is crucial for reducing household expenses, improving access to health and education services, and promoting a cleaner environment, thereby fostering broader socioeconomic development. Therefore, this article examines the (potential) contributions of the Afghan diaspora in advancing renewable energy in Afghanistan, both individually as members of the diaspora and collectively through diaspora organizations and expert return programmes.

The data for this article were collected from various sources (as indicated throughout this article). These include available literature, including the author's research reports on the Afghan diaspora, research assistance on the Connecting Diaspora for Development project, and the recent chapter in the South Asia Migration Report.[5] Additionally, this article draws on the author's experience as an active Afghan diaspora member, insights from the author's social network and informal conversations with 14 Afghan diaspora members in Belgium, Germany, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

Remittances and renewable energy

Diaspora members from various countries have transferred remittances to support renewable energy in their home countries.[6] Research has shown a connection between the flow of remittances and the growth of renewable energy at the household level.[7] This is often due to supportive policies in recipient countries and the increased availability of renewable energy tools, such as solar panels, in their markets.

Various examples of remittances are used to provide renewable energy in different countries. For instance, in South America, the EcoBazar programme engaged the Bolivian diaspora in Spain to fund solar water heaters in the Plurinational State of Bolivia.[8] In Haiti, the Remitenergy project, which started in 2012, allowed the Haitian diaspora in the United States of America to allocate part of their remittances to sustainable energy solutions for their communities and families back home.

[4] For example, see Biljana Meshkovska, Nasrat Sayed, Katharina Koch, Iman Rajabzadeh, Carole Wenger and Melissa Siegel, *Afghan Diaspora in Europe: Mapping Engagement in Denmark, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom* (Kingdom of the Netherlands, Maastricht University/United Nations University-MERIT, 2019); Nasrat Sayed, "Diaspora engagement in Afghanistan: A policy agenda for sustainable development", Policy paper (The Hague, Cordaid, 2021).

[5] Nasrat Sayed and Katrin Marchand, "Afghan diaspora remittances: A lifeline for families and (potential) contributions to development" in: *South Asia Migration Report 2024: Remittances, Resilience and Rehabilitation* (S.I. Rajan, ed.) (forthcoming).

[6] Evan Mills, "Green remittances: A novel form of sustainability finance", *Energy Policy*, 176:113501 (2023).

[7] For example, see Anupam Das, Adian McFarlane and Luc Carels, "Empirical exploration of remittances and renewable energy consumption in Bangladesh", *Asia-Pacific Journal of Regional Science*, 5:65–89 (2021).

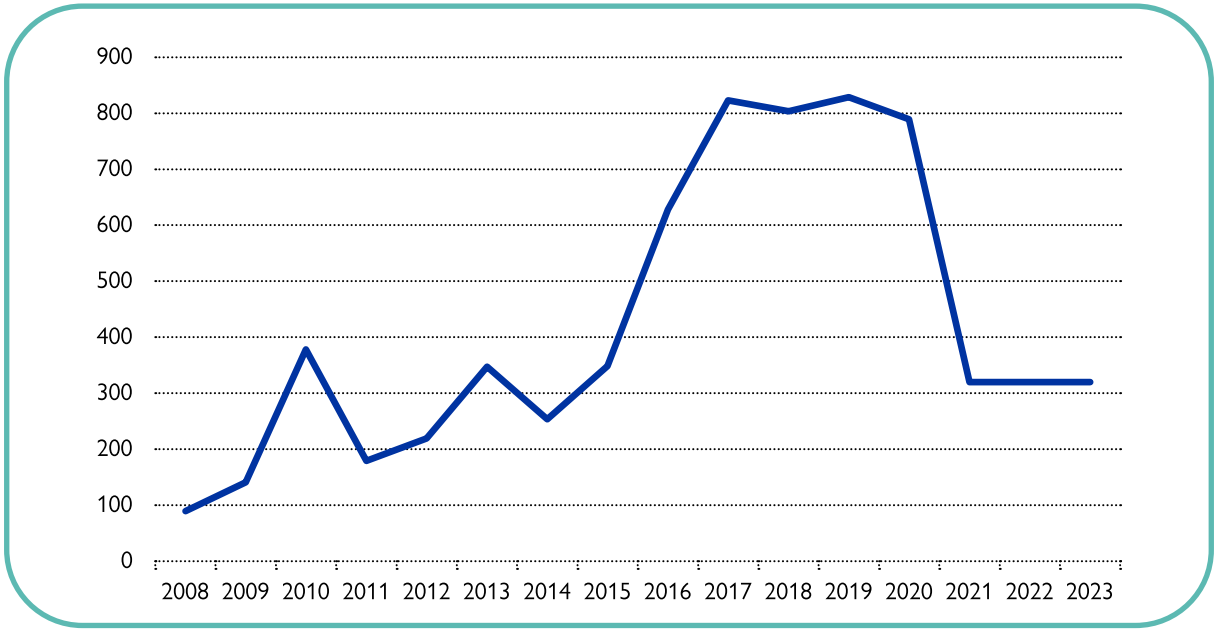
[8] Gazi Hassan, "Clean energy and household remittances in Bangladesh", Slide presentation, Australasian Aid Conference, University of Waikato (19 February 2020).

By 2016, as part of this project, over 82,000 clean energy products were sold, benefiting 410,000 household members with a reduction of 30 per cent in their energy costs.[9] In South Asia, Nepal has also attracted remittances used for renewable energy, particularly solar plants, through Dolma Impact Fund, an international private equity group that aims to provide domestic renewable energy for households that can be purchased with remittances.[10]

Remittances and renewable energy: the Afghan diaspora, Afghan diaspora organizations and international organizations

Afghanistan receives millions of dollars annually from its diaspora from various countries. These financial remittances are sent to Afghanistan through formal channels, such as banks and money transfer companies (such as MoneyGram and Western Union), and via informal methods like the *hawala* system. The *hawala* system is an informal channel used for money transfers between individuals based on trust and a network of brokers (*hawaladars*).[11] Due to the lack of data on the informal *hawala* system, only the figures for formal remittances are available. In 2019, formal remittances to Afghanistan (not including *hawala*) were estimated at 829 million United States dollars (USD), the highest between 2008 and 2022. However, this figure declined to USD 320 million in 2023. This decrease was influenced by several factors, including restrictions on money pickup/withdrawal amounts from banks following the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, which led many Afghan diaspora members to rely more on the *hawala* system.

Figure 1. Estimated formal financial remittances to Afghanistan, 2008–2023 (USD million)



Source: World Bank, Remittance inflows (US$ million), Prosperity Data360 (accessed 15 September 2024).
Note: In the latest June 2024 data set by KNOMAD-World Bank, the figures for 2021–2023 remain unchanged at USD 320 million. However, in the November 2022 data set, the estimated remittances were USD 300 million for 2021 and USD 350 million for 2022.

[9] BASE, Remittances as a source of end-user finance for sustainable energy in Haiti (n.d.).
[10] Simon Clark, "Strong growth in remittances to frontier markets attracts investors", *The Wall Street Journal* (11 April 2014).
[11] For more information on the hawala system, see Mohammed El Qorchi, Samuel Munzele Maimbo and John F. Wilson, *Informal Funds Transfer Systems: An Analysis of the Informal Hawala System* (Washington, D.C., International Monetary Fund, 2003).

Afghan diaspora members

Whether formal or informal, financial remittances are often used to cover household needs, such as education, health care, purchasing assets, construction and expenses related to weddings and funerals; they are also used to pay utility bills for those who have access to and utilize these services.

Some members of the Afghan diaspora transfer money to their families in Afghanistan to invest in renewable energy, especially in rural areas with abundant sunlight and heavy winds. These funds are often used to purchase solar panels or wind turbines to generate electricity and support water irrigation from deep wells, addressing drought conditions caused by climate change. For example, the Afghan diaspora from the Gulf countries have sent money to their families in Afghanistan, which was partly spent on renewable energy, especially solar panels, for electricity and water irrigation purposes.[12]

Similarly, in conversation with Afghan diaspora members on remitting practices, a diaspora member from a Scandinavian country shared their experience of sending money to their family for solar panels to provide electricity due to the very high temperatures during summer, the high or rising cost of fuel for generators and the unreliability of grid electricity.

In addition, an Afghan diaspora member living in the United Kingdom shared an experience that they sent money to a brother in Afghanistan to purchase solar panels. They recognized several advantages to this investment, such as saving on fuel costs for generators and reducing electricity bills. Moreover, they believed that having reliable access to electricity would improve their family's health, as it would help prevent diseases that might otherwise arise from lack of electricity. By ensuring their family has access to clean energy, they hope to avoid future health-care expenses that would otherwise require them to send additional money. This approach is consistent with findings from the study, "Remittance-sending among Pakistani taxi drivers in Barcelona and Oslo".[13]

Based on their remitting practices, several members of the Afghan diaspora in Belgium and the Kingdom of the Netherlands mentioned that they send money to their families living in villages in Afghanistan for renewable energy. Their families have requested this support due to a strong need for electricity and the availability of good-quality solar panels in the Afghan market. They emphasized that solar panels in Afghanistan are now affordable and effective, making them a viable solution for meeting their families' energy needs. This has encouraged their families to request support for such investments. By responding to these requests, the diaspora members aim to improve their families' quality of life in Afghanistan, ensuring they have a reliable energy source that can support various needs, from lighting and cooking to powering essential appliances. Such support addresses immediate energy requirements and contributes to long-

[12] Sabawoon Samim, "Sending money home: The impact of remittances on workers, families and villages", Afghanistan Analysts Network (25 January 2024).

[13] Zain Ul Abdin and Marta Bivand Erdal, "Remittance-sending among Pakistani taxi-drivers in Barcelona and Oslo: Implications of migration-trajectories and the protracted electricity crisis in Pakistan", *Migration and Development*, 5(3):378–393 (2016).

term sustainability and economic benefits for households.

On the other hand, some members of the Afghan diaspora pointed out they have not thought about sending money specifically for renewable energy. They believed that investing in solar panels would require much more money, especially because they have large families in Afghanistan. They also mentioned that their families have not yet asked them for money transfers to invest in renewable energy. Instead, their monthly remittances are mainly used to cover everyday expenses and urgent needs, such as health care for their families.

Afghan diaspora organizations and international organizations

Research on the Afghan diaspora reveals that many Afghan diaspora organizations (ADOs) have actively contributed to the development of Afghanistan, primarily focusing on sectors like health, education and humanitarian assistance.[14] However, despite the growth in the number and size of these organizations, only a few have concentrated specifically on renewable energy initiatives in Afghanistan. One notable example is the Afghan Bedmoschk Solar Center e.V., founded in Germany in 2004. This organization was involved in various renewable energy projects in Afghanistan, including installing solar panels, solar dryers and solar lanterns. They have also provided user training and translated technical books into Afghan languages, offering lectures and training sessions in Afghanistan.

In addition to such dedicated efforts, some ADOs have incorporated renewable energy as a supplementary focus in their broader development projects. For instance, when building clinics or schools in rural Afghanistan where a power grid is unavailable, these organizations have often included installing solar panels to provide lighting and electricity. While renewable energy may not be their primary focus, these initiatives contribute to the sustainable development of the energy infrastructure of Afghanistan. Notably, many engagements from ADOs in Afghanistan has been affected since the return of the Taliban, who are not recognized as a legitimate government internationally. Hence, future involvement of ADOs in the renewable energy sector could have a favourable impact on the development of Afghanistan.

Between 2001 and August 2021, when the Taliban retook control of Afghanistan, several development programmes led by international organizations, such as IOM, UNDP and the World Bank, facilitated the transfer of knowledge and skills through Afghan diaspora experts return from both Western and non-Western countries. However, research indicates that renewable energy was not a primary focus in these diaspora expert return programmes.[15] For instance, under the Return of Qualified Afghans (RQA) programme, an Afghan diaspora member returned from the Islamic Republic of Iran to work as a renewable energy engineer at the Ministry of Energy and Water (MEW)

[14] For example, see Meshkovska et al., 2019.

[15] For instance, see Katie Kuschminder, "The role of the diaspora in knowledge transfer and capacity building in post-conflict settings: The temporary return of qualified nationals to Afghanistan", IS Academy Migration Policy Report no. 1 (2011).

in Afghanistan,[16] highlighting a rare instance of such expertise being utilized. Although these return programmes are not viable now due to the unrecognized government in Afghanistan, the international organizations – by supporting diaspora-based initiatives on renewable energy – could make a difference in the future.

Conclusion

This article examined the (potential) contributions of the Afghan diaspora to the advancement of renewable energy in Afghanistan. The findings indicate that some members of the Afghan diaspora contribute to renewable energy efforts, mainly through financial remittances for solar panels to their families in Afghanistan. The collective engagement by ADOs and diaspora expert return programmes from international organizations in this sector has been minimal.

The findings suggest that ADOs could contribute to renewable energy projects – such as solar, wind and micro hydropower, particularly in Afghanistan – and provide local training on renewable energy. These efforts could be undertaken individually or through collaboration with local vocational institutes and international organizations specializing in this field. Additionally, the minimal focus on renewable energy by international organizations within diaspora return expert programmes from 2001 to 2021 underscores the need for more targeted efforts in this area. Notably, collective engagement could be applicable when there is a recognized government in Afghanistan.

The implications of these findings are twofold. First, there is a critical need for structured support mechanisms and collaborative frameworks between policymakers, international organizations and the Afghan diaspora to maximize the impact of diaspora contributions. Enhanced engagement in renewable energy projects could significantly improve the socioeconomic development of Afghanistan by reducing household expenses and increasing access to essential services like health care and education.

Second, this research highlights the necessity for further systematic research to confirm or update initial findings. Such studies should focus on comprehensive mapping of Afghan diaspora engagement in the renewable energy sector, particularly given the minimal involvement of ADOs. Detailed case studies from countries hosting large Afghan diaspora communities or active ADOs (such as Germany, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States) would provide a deeper understanding of optimizing these contributions. Such research is essential to inform future policies and programmes that aim to better integrate the diaspora's expertise and resources into the renewable energy policy of Afghanistan, with potential collaboration from various actors, ultimately fostering sustainable development.

[16] IOM, "IOM Afghanistan recognizes contributions of Afghan diaspora from Iran", Local news (19 April 2018).

EDITORIAL INFORMATION

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The *Migration Policy Practice* editors welcome submissions from practitioners, policy officials and applied researchers worldwide. Articles should:

» Not exceed 2,500 words and be written in a non-academic and reader-friendly style (with a maximum of 10 footnote references).
» Wherever possible, include statistical information analysis in graphs, tables and/or infographics.
» Provide analysis, findings and responses that can be applied/adapted by relevant public administrations or civil society in other countries.
» Articles on evaluations of specific migration policies and responses, including both findings and innovative methodologies, are particularly welcome.

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