



International
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▶ **Rapid assessment**

The impact of COVID-19 on labour migration governance, recruitment practices and migrant workers

Pakistan, March–November 2020



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 Rapid assessment

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Pakistan, March–November 2020

Zishan Ahmad Siddiqi

Disclaimer: The ILO is aware of the names and contact details of the migrant workers interviewed for this assessment. However, their statements and stories are quoted anonymously to maintain confidentiality.

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Above all, thanks are due to the migrant workers who so kindly provided inputs for this assessment, even as they struggled to weather the storm of the COVID-19 pandemic. The friends and professional volunteers who contributed to this assessment must be commended for reaching out to migrant workers and helping to unpick the findings of this important research.

► Acronyms

BE&OE	Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment
CSO	civil society organization
CWA	Community Welfare Attaches
FY	fiscal year
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
ILO	International Labour Organization
MWA	Migrant Workers – Abroad
MWP	Migrant Workers – Prospective
MWR	Migrant Workers – Returnees/Returned
NAVTTTC	National Vocational and Technical Training Commission
NGO	non-governmental organization
OEC	Overseas Employment Corporation
OEPs	overseas employment promoters
OPF	Overseas Pakistanis Foundation
POE	Protectorate of Emigrants Offices
POEPA	Pakistan Overseas Employment Promoters’ Association
PWF	Pakistan Workers Federation
SME	Small and Medium Enterprises
SMEDA	Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority
UN	United Nations



Executive summary

▶ Executive summary

What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on Pakistan's labour migration governance, recruitment practices and migrant workers? This rapid assessment by the International Labour Organization (ILO) seeks to find out. COVID-19 wreaked havoc worldwide in 2020, including on the world of work. While its full impact has yet to be seen, it is clear that the pandemic has curtailed employment prospects, upended businesses, and thrown workers' lives and livelihoods into disarray. As millions of Pakistani migrants work abroad, this rapid assessment was commissioned by the ILO's Global Action to Improve the Recruitment Framework of Labour Migration (REFRAME) project, funded by the European Union.¹

Covering the period from March to November 2020, the assessment examines the pandemic's impact on labour migration from Pakistan, primarily to Gulf Cooperation Council countries.² Its findings are drawn from an in-depth survey, key informant interviews and discussions with migrant workers, regulatory bodies, relevant stakeholders and facilitators of migration processes. It is hoped that the assessment will assist the ILO and its partners in planning and delivering appropriate support to national stakeholders, as well as reorienting their support where necessary. Above all, the assessment provides evidence to support the development of mechanisms – in Pakistan and in destination countries – to address the COVID-19 crisis and the implementation of policy responses that protect the rights and well-being of migrant workers.

The assessment's findings reveal that COVID-19 has had a severe, often devastating, impact on Pakistani migrant workers. It sparked large-scale layoffs, causing the return and repatriation of huge numbers of migrants from destination countries. For many of those working abroad when the pandemic hit, overcrowded living conditions and limited – or no – access to health care posed immense risks. Despite relief efforts by some destination country governments and Pakistan's diplomatic missions abroad, the experience of the pandemic has been traumatic for many migrants. Many witnessed friends, colleagues or housemates die from COVID-19. Others were quarantined by their employers for months on end, had their contracts ended prematurely, and/or suffered immense financial, emotional and psychological hardship. The respondents also shared stories of widespread employment loss, the non-payment of dues/wages and a lack of access to justice.

Early on in the pandemic, travel restrictions and lockdowns brought migration processes to a virtual standstill, restricting operational modalities worldwide. Many Pakistani migrants were stranded abroad, unable to return to Pakistan, or faced with extremely expensive options for returning.

¹ The REFRAME project works in the Guatemala-Mexico corridor and the Madagascar, Sri Lanka and Pakistan-Arab States corridors. See: ILO, "[Global Action to Improve the Recruitment Framework of Labour Migration \(REFRAME\)](#)."

² The Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment's statistics reveal that 96 per cent of registered Pakistani migrants proceed to Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

After the Government of Pakistan suspended all international flights on 21 March 2020, it organized special flights between 3 April and 20 June that helped bring back a large number of migrants. Those who have returned to Pakistan face an uncertain future. Most wish to continue working abroad but have been unable to do so due to COVID-related restrictions or business closures.

All of the migrant workers interviewed for this assessment are desperately worried about their employment prospects. They expect job opportunities to decline dramatically in destination countries, especially in the Gulf and particularly for unskilled and low-skilled workers who represent the bulk of Pakistani migrants. They are not optimistic about securing work in Pakistan. As the economy contracts in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, they feel it will be increasingly difficult for the labour market to absorb an influx of returning migrants.

COVID-19 has also placed severe pressure on the regulators and facilitators of migration processes in Pakistan. It has curtailed the organization and implementation of their activities, prompting significant losses for their businesses. While government institutions have been proactive in facilitating the repatriation of migrants and are committed to resuming migration services, the ability of overseas employers to offer work to Pakistani migrants remains uncertain.

Private recruitment agents are also striving to adjust their businesses concerns in a post-pandemic situation. The private recruitment agents interviewed for this assessment report that a substantial number of service providers have already gone out of business due to COVID-related travel and business restrictions.

The Government appears to be committed to an effective response that facilitates the reintegration of migrant workers in Pakistan. Yet there remains a long road ahead. It is vital to continue and scale up emergency relief services for migrant workers, both to safeguard their immediate well-being and to enhance their access to justice mechanisms to address employment-related infringements.

In the medium-term, the focus must be on reintegration. This assessment's findings reveal the urgent need for a comprehensive national policy to effectively reintegrate returning migrants. The Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, under the auspices of the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, is in the process of finalizing a *National Emigration and Welfare Policy for Overseas Pakistanis*, which will address the issue of reintegration. To ensure its effectiveness, it is imperative that this policy includes a focus on skills enhancement and the recognition of prior learning. In addition to diversifying and strengthening migrants' skill sets, it is necessary to support returning migrants who wish to start small businesses, particularly by expanding their access to finance.

In the long-term, it will be important to broaden decent work opportunities overseas after the COVID-19 pandemic. The Government should explore more destinations, beyond the Middle East, for labour migration from Pakistan. Above all, it is vital to prioritize government-to-government engagement to ensure that the general principles and operational guidelines of fair recruitment are duly followed for the recruitment of migrant workers, and that International Labour Standards are complied with wherever Pakistani migrants go – both for fair recruitment and decent work conditions.

Last but not the least, the need for the unionization of migrant workers cannot be overemphasized. Pakistani migrant workers face restrictions on unionization in destination countries, particularly Gulf Cooperation Council countries where most of Pakistani migrant workers are employed. The situation indicates that migrant workers are denied their right to freedom of association, leaving them without access to essential support mechanisms to which they are entitled. The plight of Pakistani migrant workers, therefore, calls for a pragmatic support that enables the institutionalization of a comprehensive tripartite mechanism. Both Pakistani migrant workers and workers' organizations consider such a mechanism crucial for paving the way towards the enhanced representation of migrant workers, both in Pakistan and abroad.

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Introduction

► Introduction

Labour migration is being profoundly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the threat to public health, the pandemic's economic and social disruption threatens the livelihoods of millions. As economies shrink worldwide, millions of jobs will be lost, making migrant workers increasingly vulnerable. This is particularly worrying for Pakistan, which is among the world's leading 'labour-sending' countries. In 2020, 11.29 million³ Pakistanis worked abroad. It is clearly vital to monitor the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on migrant workers in order to address their specific vulnerabilities and secure their well-being.

This rapid assessment analyses COVID-19's impact on Pakistan's labour migration governance, recruitment practices and migrant workers. The assessment was conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as part of the project, Global Action to Improve the Recruitment Framework of Labour Migration (REFRAME). Funded by the European Union, the project aims to end abusive practices and violation of rights during recruitment processes, while strengthening the protection of migrant workers in the Guatemala-Mexico corridor and the Madagascar, Sri Lanka and Pakistan-Arab States corridors. According to the *Manpower Export Report 2020* by Pakistan's Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BE&OE), 96 per cent of Pakistani migrant workers work in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. As such, this rapid assessment explores COVID-19's impact on labour governance, the crisis response and policy endeavours with a focus on Gulf Cooperation Council countries. It does so by analysing information from secondary data, including national reports on migration, alongside key informant interviews and discussions with diverse stakeholders – regulatory institutions, organizations that facilitate the migration process, and migrant workers.

Chapter 1 outlines the assessment's scope, methodology and limitations. **Chapter 2** provides an overview of labour migration governance and recruitment processes in Pakistan. **Chapter 3** analyses national reports and media reports to provide a snapshot of COVID-19's impact on labour migration and challenges to the reintegration of returning and repatriated workers. **Chapter 4** examines migrant workers' perceptions of the pandemic's impact, the crisis response and their prospects in terms of subsistence and employability. It also summarizes discussions with regulators and facilitators of the migration process. Finally, **Chapter 5** offers recommendations to improve the well-being of Pakistani migrant workers post-COVID-19.

This assessment's findings aim to help countries of origin and destination to develop mechanisms that address the ongoing crisis and implement policy responses that protect the rights of migrant workers and their families. The findings will also assist the ILO and its partners to develop appropriate guidance for national stakeholders and, where necessary, to reorient their support.

³ Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, Statistical Report 2020.

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Chapter 1

▶ Chapter 1. Scope, methodology and limitations

1.1 Scope and objective of this rapid assessment

The objective of this rapid assessment is to gauge the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Pakistan's labour migration governance, recruitment practices and migrant workers. It covers the period from March to November 2020.

1.2 Methodology

Research tools

In line with the assessment's short timeframe and rapid nature, it adopted a straightforward, simple methodology. Secondary data collection involved a thorough review of news bulletins, official government websites and national reports to gain reliable information on how COVID-19 has affected migration trends.

To collect primary data through interviews, the rapid assessment used tools developed and tested by the ILO at the global level. These tools include specific sets of interview questions for a range of stakeholders – government authorities, migration facilitation bodies, workers' and employers' organizations, civil society, and newly returned or prospective migrant workers.

This assessment customized these tools and guidelines to Pakistan's context, translating them into the national language, Urdu, for five types of respondents:

1. government authorities, including the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, the Protectorate of Emigrants Offices, the Overseas Employment Corporation (OEC) and the Overseas Pakistanis Foundation (OPF);
2. overseas employment promoters (OEPs) and the Pakistan Overseas Employment Promoters' Association (POEPA);
3. representatives of the Pakistan Workers' Federation (PWF);
4. civil society organizations (CSOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), United Nations (UN) agencies and Migrant Resource Centres (CNUM); and
5. migrant workers (MWs), including returnees, currently employed workers, workers stranded abroad and prospective migrant workers.

Primary data collection

The assessment carried out 80 key informant interviews (KIIs) and discussions with labour migration stakeholders, including key facilitators, regulatory bodies and workers' organizations. Officials interviewed represented the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, the Overseas Pakistanis Foundation, the Overseas Employment Corporation, the Pakistan Workers' Federation, Democracy Reporting International (DRI), the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), the Justice Project Pakistan (JPP), the Lahore School of Economics (LSE), the NGO Mera Maan, Migrant Resource Centres in Lahore and Islamabad, the CSO Pakistan Rural Workers' Social Welfare Organization and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

As measures to combat the spread of COVID-19 demand social distancing and discourage direct physical contact, the assessment collected information remotely through interviews over the telephone, respondents' completion of survey questionnaires and follow-up via What'sApp or emails. Some face-to-face interviews were also conducted.

The completed questionnaires were coded and fed into a customized spreadsheet. This facilitated the consolidation of data on respondents' perspectives and trend analysis. Care was taken to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the questionnaires. Information gathered through both quantitative and qualitative methods was triangulated with findings from reliable national reports.

As most Pakistani migrant workers abroad are from Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa – according to the Manpower Export Report 2019 of the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment – the assessment identified migrants from these provinces. With the assistance of the author's contacts, including family, friends and professional volunteers, the assessment identified migrant workers in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and overseas. The Protectorate Office of Rawalpindi helped the assessment contact five prospective migrants.

Of the 80 people interviewed for the assessment, 54 were migrant workers living either in Pakistan or in Gulf Cooperation Council countries. These workers belong to three distinct categories:

1. **Migrant workers – returnees (MWRs)**, that is, migrant workers who returned to Pakistan before the country put COVID-19 lockdown measures in place. Most returned on annual or contractual leave but were forced to remain in Pakistan due to global travel restrictions. Others were retrenched, laid off or forced to take leave. They accessed limited windows of opportunity (i.e. special flights) to return to Pakistan.
2. **Migrant workers – abroad (MWAs)** who remain employed in Gulf Cooperation Council countries and were interviewed over the telephone.⁴

⁴ A huge number of migrant workers who have lost their jobs due to COVID-related retrenchment and layoffs are believed to remain stranded overseas. As such, they remain invisible and inaccessible.

3. **Migrant workers – prospective (MWPs)** who were ready to take up jobs in Gulf Cooperation Council countries but remain stuck in Pakistan due to COVID-related travel and business restrictions.

1.3 Limitations

This assessment faced several challenges as it explored immediate needs during the COVID-19 crisis. Lockdowns, travel restrictions and social distancing made it difficult to interview 80 respondents. Alternative work modalities delayed the interviews. As such, the assessment employed a multipronged strategy involving questionnaires, follow-up telephone interviews and direct meetings.

Identifying and interviewing migrant workers was particularly challenging. The assessment reached out to them through agents of change at the community level, Protectorate of Emigrants Offices, local community organizations and friends/family contacts. However, many of these stakeholders also struggled to contact migrant workers due to COVID-related restrictions.

Most Pakistani workers who emigrate abroad are unskilled or semi-skilled, with fairly low levels of literacy, according to the Manpower Export Report 2019. It was challenging to help them understand and respond to the survey questionnaire. Translating the questionnaire into Urdu helped to overcome this limitation to an extent. Moreover, the nature of the assessment called for lengthy, in-depth interviews. Using telephone calls and secondary means of conversation – such as What’sApp, Skype and Facebook Messenger – proved restrictive. Therefore, the assessment arranged multiple interview sessions and used varied approaches⁵ to collect complete, accurate information. Given this limited outreach, broader trends should be extrapolated from the assessment’s findings with caution.

⁵ For instance, providing a simple narration of the questions via What’sApp, forming What’sApp groups on standard guidelines, sending and receiving audio clips, and making follow-up telephone calls.



Chapter 2

▶ Chapter 2. An overview of labour migration governance and recruitment

Labour migration governance falls within the purview of the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, which executes its mandate through three independent agencies: the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, the Overseas Employment Corporation and the Overseas Pakistanis Foundation. All three perform different roles vis-à-vis the protection and welfare of migrant workers and their families in Pakistan.

The Emigration Ordinance of 1979 is the overarching legal framework that governs labour migration from Pakistan.⁶ It outlines the institutional mechanisms for labour migration governance which includes the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, Protectorate of Emigration Offices (POEs) and Community Welfare Attaches (CWAs). It also outlines mechanisms of labour recruitment and migration through overseas employment promoters and recruitment agencies. Following the ordinance, the Emigration Rules of 1979 – updated in 2019 – prescribe detailed measures to regulate the migration process.

2.1 Key organizations for labour migration governance

Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development

The Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development was established in June 2013, following the merger of the former Ministry of Human Resource Development with the former Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis.⁷ Since its creation, the ministry works as an umbrella organization for other entities concerned with labour migration governance.

Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment

Established in 1971, the bureau aims to control and regulate the emigration process, as well as to promote and protect Pakistani migrant workers.⁸ It is the central federal government agency responsible for governing the recruitment of Pakistani workers, especially those bound for Gulf Cooperation Council countries and other states in the Middle East. It regulates the licensing of overseas employment promoters who recruit Pakistani workers in response to market demands. The bureau also administers nine regional Protectorate of Emigrants Offices that facilitate emigration processes. These protectorates are based in all four of Pakistan's provinces: Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab and Sindh.

⁶ Khan, Themrise, "Labour migration governance in Pakistan: Protecting Pakistan's overseas labour migrants", London School of Economics (LSE) Blog, 3 June 2020.

⁷ Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, "Official website".

⁸ Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, "Functions".

Overseas Employment Corporation

The Overseas Employment Corporation, set up in 1976, is a government-owned private limited concern. It acts as a conduit for government-to-government recruitment demands for the employment of Pakistani workers overseas. It does so by assisting overseas employers to select migrant workers from Pakistan.⁹

As such, the Overseas Employment Corporation is meant to provide competent, reliable and cost-effective Pakistani human resources to the international labour market. It is currently engaged in registering returning migrant workers and aims to provide them with reintegration-related and/or 're-migration' services.

Overseas Pakistanis Foundation

The Emigration Ordinance of 1979 established the Overseas Pakistanis Foundation in the same year. This autonomous public sector company works under the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, and is registered under Section 42 of the Companies Act of 2017. Its principal objective is to ensure the social welfare of migrants and their families, in Pakistan and abroad.¹⁰

The foundation is currently supporting migrant workers who have returned from abroad to seek transitional justice, particularly the recovery of unpaid wages or dues from destination countries. It has also provided immediate relief support to migrants who were laid off and stranded abroad due to travel restrictions.

Overseas employment promoters

As noted above, the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment regulates the licensing of private recruitment agencies known as 'overseas employment promoters' and supervises the recruitment of workers through these agencies.¹¹

The Pakistani Overseas Employment Promoters' Association is meant to be a representative body of overseas employment promoters. It was granted a licence in 2008 by the Ministry of Commerce under the Companies Ordinance of 1984.

2.2 Recruitment channels

Prospective Pakistani migrant workers usually use three channels to secure jobs overseas:

1. **direct company selection**, a channel generally used by skilled professionals including doctors, engineers, computer programmers and others;

⁹ Overseas Employment Corporation, "[Overview](#)".

¹⁰ Overseas Pakistanis Foundation, *OPF Performance Report 2016–17*.

¹¹ According to the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment's website, there were a total of 2,025 licenced overseas employment promoters on 7 January 2021.

2. **recruitment through overseas employment promoters or recruitment agencies/companies**, a private recruitment channel used by most migrant workers, especially those bound for Gulf Cooperation Council countries; and
3. **selection through the Overseas Employment Corporation**, a public sector recruitment channel that caters to government-to-government demands/bilateral agreements. To date, this channel has concentrated on labour migration to Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

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Chapter 3

▶ Chapter 3. Snapshot of migration trends and the impact of COVID-19

3.1 Pakistan's migration trends

Most Pakistani migrant workers migrate to Gulf Cooperation Council countries, particularly Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). They are predominantly men (see table 1 and figure 1).

Since 1971, some 11.29¹² million Pakistanis have registered as migrant workers. Of this sizable number, 96 per cent emigrated to Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates host the largest numbers of migrant workers from Pakistan.

However, the latest available reports reflect a gradual declining trend in the number of workers emigrating for work. In 2019, only 4,079 women (0.65 per cent) were registered among 625,203 Pakistani migrants who registered for employment abroad.¹³

Table 1. Migration trends by destination, 1971–2020

No.	Region	1971–2010	2011–2015	2016–2020	Total	Percentage
1	Africa	81,941	13,755	5,127	100,823	0.9
2	East Asia	41,384	48,209	46,053	135,646	1.2
3	Europe and the United States of America	35,455	13,201	6,093	54,749	0.5
4	Gulf Cooperation Council countries, excluding Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates	751,833	351,379	254,007	1,357,219	12.0
5	Saudi Arabia	2,742,962	1,686,548	1,144,446	5,573,956	49.4
6	United Arab Emirates	1,595,574	1,289,725	1,040,932	3,926,231	34.8
7	Other states	105,187	14,414	24,784	144,385	1.3
Total		5,354,336	3,417,231	2,521,442	11,293,009	100

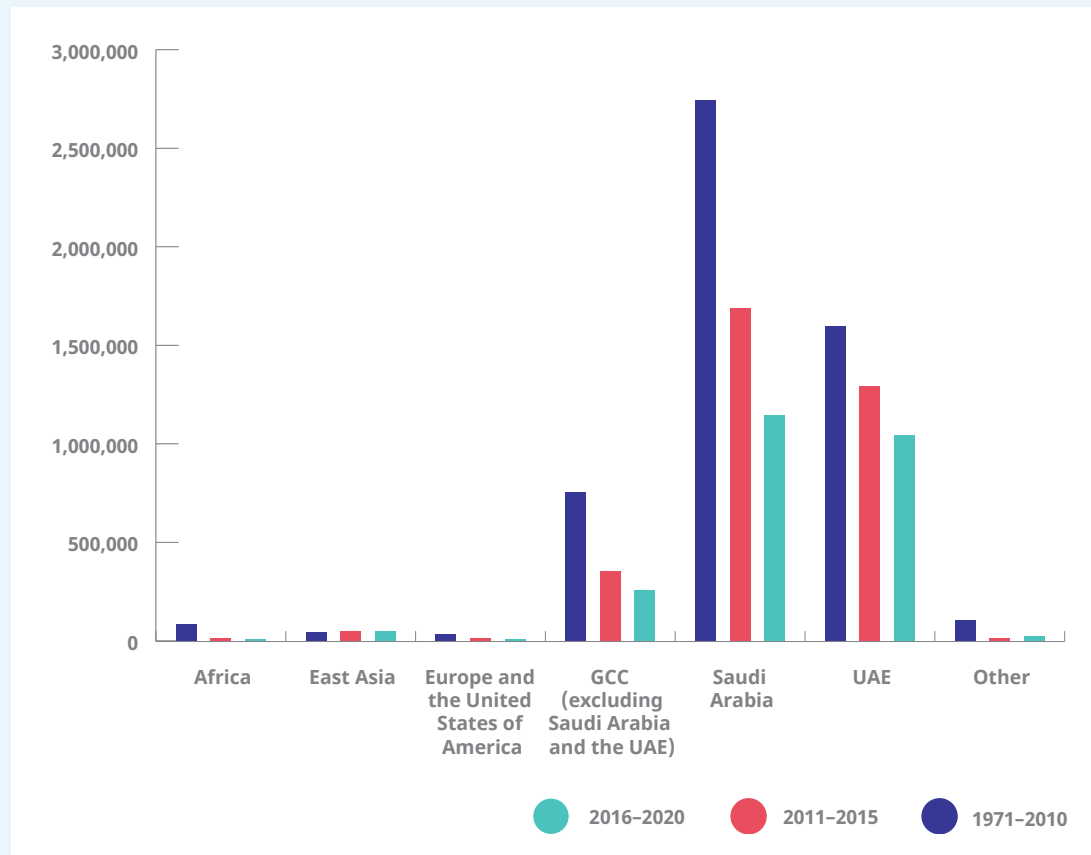
Source: Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, 2020.

¹² Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, *Statistical Report 2020*.

¹³ Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, *Annual Analysis of Manpower Export 2019 Report*.

▶ FIGURE 1.

Migration trends by destination, 1971–2020



Source: Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, 2020.

Most Pakistani migrant workers are employed in low-skilled or unskilled occupations in Gulf Cooperation Council countries¹⁴ (see table 2 and figure 2). In recent years, it appears that more highly skilled and semi-skilled workers are migrating abroad, according to the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment’s latest report for 2020.

¹⁴ Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, *Statistical Report 2020*.

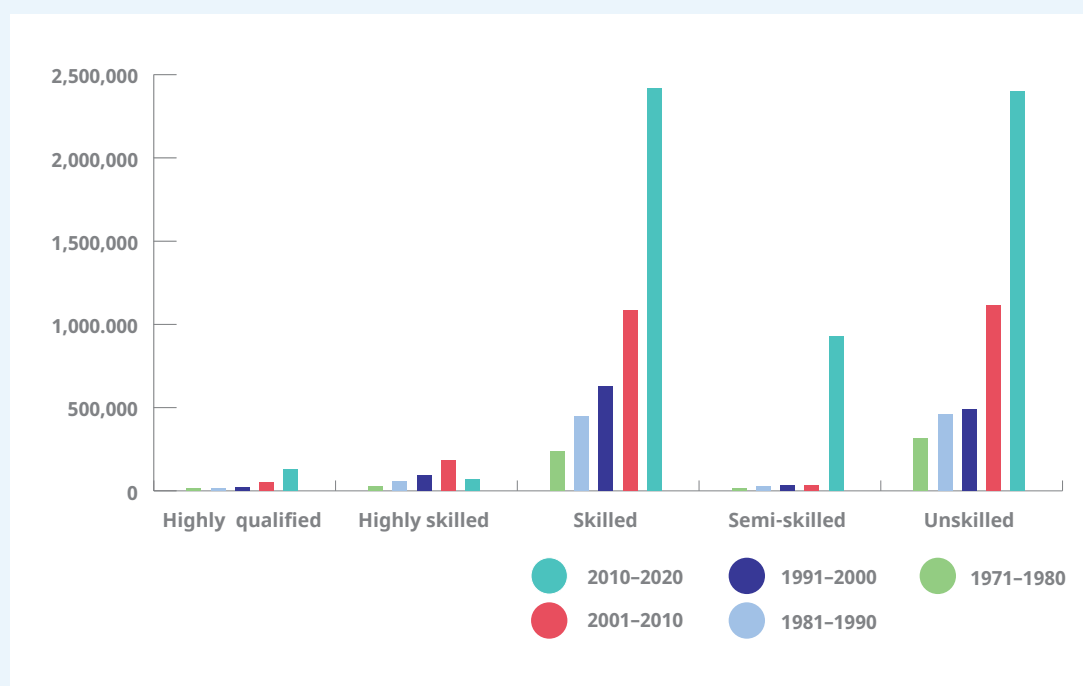
Table 2. Migration trends by occupation, 1971–2020

Year	Highly qualified	Highly skilled	Skilled	Semi-skilled	Unskilled	Total
1971–1980	12,616	25,032	237,669	16,986	315,790	608,093
1981–1990	13,471	54,705	444,715	27,761	461,245	1,001,897
1991–2000	19,314	95,949	630,529	34,252	491,983	1,272,027
2001–2010	51,154	184,190	1,084,615	35,593	1,116,767	2,472,319
2010–2020	128,228	66,655	2,416,139	925,186	2,402,465	5,938,673
Total	224,783	426,531	4,813,667	1,039,778	4,788,250	11,293,009

Source: Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, 2020.

▶ **FIGURE 2.**

Migration trends by occupation, 1971–2020

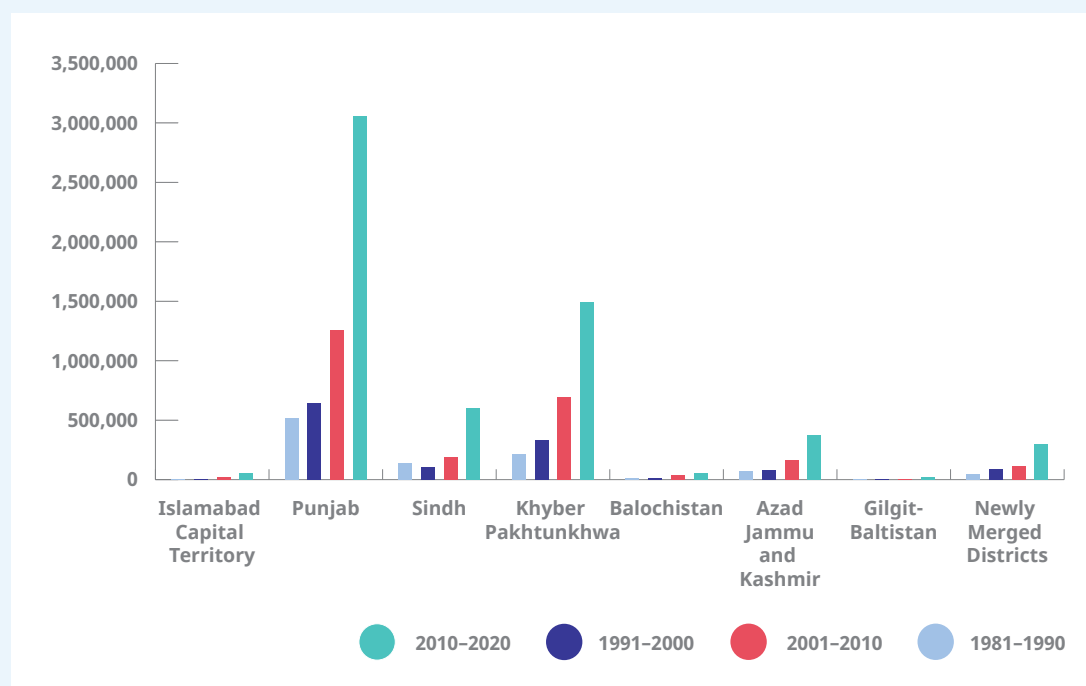


Source: Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, 2020.

Most Pakistani migrant workers are from Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, making these the country’s two greatest ‘human resource-exporting’ provinces (see figure 3). This means that Protectorate of Emigrants Offices in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa receive and manage the largest caseload of migrant workers in the country.

▶ FIGURE 3.

Migration trends by region of origin, 1981–2020



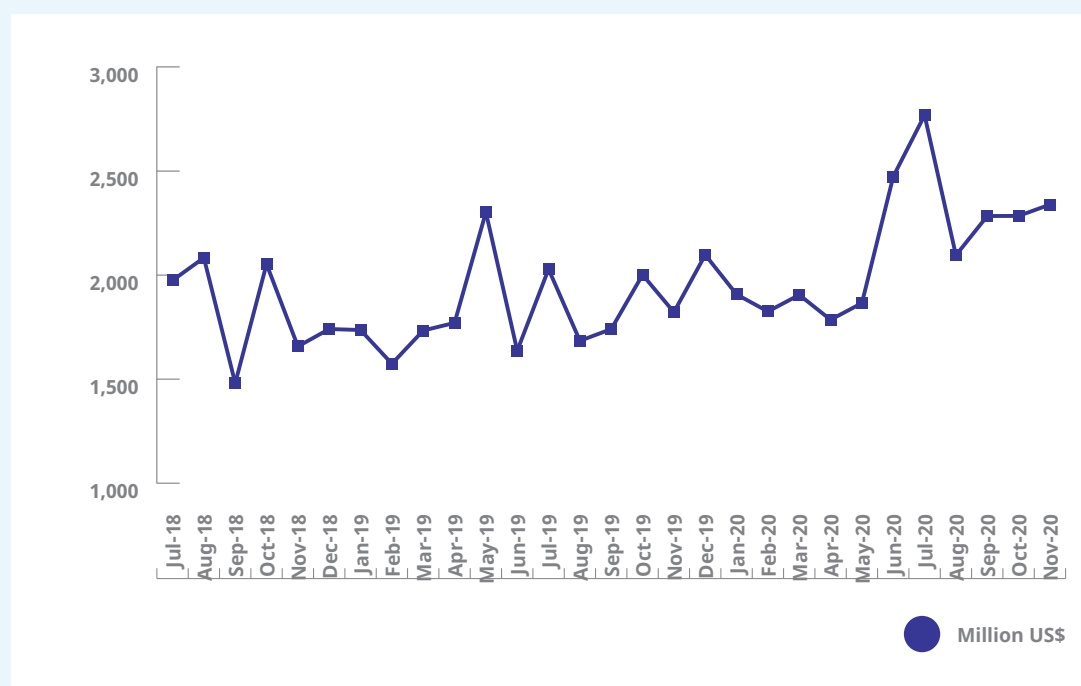
Source: Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, 2020.

Pakistani migrant workers send substantial foreign remittances back to Pakistan¹⁵, which represent a sizeable contribution to the national economy and the balance of payments (see figure 4).¹⁶ The State Bank of Pakistan recorded US\$16.99 billion in remittances from abroad in the first nine months of the 2019–20 fiscal year (FY2019–20), an increase of 6 per cent compared to FY2018–19, when remittances totalled US\$16.03 billion.¹⁷ Monthly average remittances continued to amount to US\$1.91 billion, recorded since July 2018. Due to COVID-19, monthly remittances declined to US\$1.7 billion in April 2020.¹⁸ However, by July 2020, the total monthly amount of remittances rose to US\$2.77 billion, before reaching US\$2.34 billion by the end of November 2020.

¹⁵ Shah, Sabir, “Pakistan among nations that depend substantially on foreign remittances”, *The News*, 25 December 2019.
¹⁶ Ibid.
¹⁷ Khan, Inayatullah, “COVID-19 and overseas Pakistanis”, *The News International*, 22 June 2020.
¹⁸ Iqbal, Shahid, “Remittances decline to \$1.7bn in April”, *Dawn*, 12 May 2020.

▶ FIGURE 4.

Monthly remittances, July 2018–November 2020



Source: Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment data retrieved from the State Bank of Pakistan, 2020.

In part, this may be due to the measures taken by the Government of Pakistan and banks in the country to maintain the steady inflow of remittances.¹⁹ These include aggressive awareness raising campaigns by Pakistani banks to inform senders and receivers of the availability of digital channels for sending and receiving remittances.²⁰ The Government also exempted cash withdrawals and transfers from withholding tax for amounts equivalent “to the extent of [the] remittances[] amount received from abroad in that account in a year.”²¹

¹⁹ Finance Division, Government of Pakistan, “Timely action helped Pakistan mitigate COVID’s impact on home remittances”, *Press Release No. 331*, 18 June 2020.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Ansari, Irshad, “Govt moves to offset remittances shortfall”, *The Express Tribune*, 3 May 2020.

3.2 COVID-19's impact

COVID-19 has ravaged world economies on an unprecedented scale, beyond all expectations. The real magnitude of the lurking global economic recession remains unknown, although it is expected to be the worst downturn since the Great Depression.²² According to the World Bank's initial estimates, global economic growth could shrink by almost 8 per cent in 2020.²³ As businesses close worldwide, a sizable rise in unemployment is evident across most economic sectors. Estimates by the ILO also highlight the grave situation of global workplace closures, lost working hours and income loss.²⁴ The *ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work*²⁵ reveals that lockdown measures continue to affect a sizeable share of the world's workforce. However, the imposition of lockdown measures has varied throughout 2020 in response to the first wave of COVID-19 infections, declining prevalence and resurgence trends.²⁶

Pakistan's economic outlook has worsened considerably due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before the pandemic, promising economic developments were afoot. Many international financial institutions reported that the economy was on a path towards stabilization. Despite slow economic growth, overall economic indicators were encouraging, thanks in large part to financial packages from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Saudi Arabia.²⁷ Pakistan's economic outlook changed dramatically with the onset of COVID-19. As a lockdown was imposed in the last week of March 2020, businesses were closed and economic activity ground to a halt nationwide. The negative impact was already apparent in the monthly economic update issued by the Finance Division for March 2020²⁸, with particular challenges evident in the external sector – that is, in exports and migrant workers' remittances.²⁹ Alongside COVID-19, swarms of desert locusts decimating crops across Pakistan have negatively affected its economic prospects.³⁰

The economic fallout is becoming apparent. A range of experts have predicted that Pakistan's economy will experience negative growth for the first time in 68 years.³¹ Its short-term economic outlook is poor, with negative growth estimated at -1.5 per cent in FY2020. A gradual recovery is expected in FY2021 as the economy reopens.³² The Finance Division's monthly update for September 2020 was hopeful about recovery prospects based on the continued expansion of the agricultural and manufacturing sectors, as well as the external sectors of exports and remittances.³³

²² United Nations, "Amid fears of worst recession in decades, urgent calls for solidarity, a united economic front", *UN News*, 22 July 2020.

²³ World Bank, "Global Economic Outlook During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Changed World", *World Bank News*, 8 June 2020.

²⁴ ILO, *ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Sixth edition: Updated estimates and analysis* (September 2020).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The prevalence of different types of closure measures has changed considerably. ILO, *ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Sixth edition: Updated estimates and analysis* (September 2020).

²⁷ Sherani, Tahir "Moody's upgrades Pakistan's outlook from negative to stable", *Dawn*, 3 December 2019.

²⁸ Economic Adviser's Wing, Finance Division, Government of Pakistan, *Monthly Economic Update March 2020*.

²⁹ Ibid. The current account deficit was reduced by 71 per cent. Exports experienced modest growth (2.7 per cent) as did workers' remittances (5.3 per cent). There was a significant reduction in imports (17.5 per cent).

³⁰ Economic Adviser's Wing, Finance Division, Government of Pakistan, *Monthly Economic Update July 2020*.

³¹ "Pakistan's GDP to show negative growth of 0.38% after 68 years", *Mettis Global News*, 18 May 2020.

³² International Monetary Fund, "Policy Responses to COVID-19".

³³ Economic Adviser's Wing, Finance Division, Government of Pakistan, *Monthly Economic Update September 2020*.

Nevertheless, COVID-19 will drive up unemployment in Pakistan. The Board of Investment (BOI) anticipates a rise of up to 8.1 per cent in the unemployment rate, foreseeing between 12.3 million and 18.53 million layoffs.³⁴ It considers that this will significantly reduce households' disposable income, prompting a decline in consumption expenditure by 4 to 8 per cent. Sluggish demand is likely to slow down the economy further.

A recent study³⁵ highlights the pandemic's profound impact on micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) in Pakistan, most of which were caught off-guard by the crisis. The bulk of these enterprises lacked fallback plans and faced financial shortfalls, supply chain disruptions and shrinking demand, sales and profits.

The plight of migrant workers has worsened due to COVID-19. As a result of the ban on air travel, thousands of Pakistanis were stranded in destination countries where businesses had already closed.³⁶ Such measures affected labour markets both at home and abroad. Stranded workers in Gulf Cooperation Council countries were in double jeopardy: many were without work and without the opportunity to return to Pakistan. The pandemic has exacerbated the already dismal plight of Pakistani workers in the Middle East.³⁷

According to recent ILO estimates, nearly 2.2 billion workers – 68 per cent of the global workforce – live in countries where workplace closures are recommended or required. Migrant workers represent 4.7 per cent of this global labour pool, totalling 164 million migrant workers, nearly half of whom are women. Most are concentrated in sectors that are unregulated or informal, leaving them unprotected by labour laws, confined to extremely low wages and deprived of social protection. All of this heightens migrant workers' vulnerability manifold.³⁸

Reports of discrimination and xenophobia against migrants are on the rise. So too are reports of food insecurity, rampant layoffs and worsening conditions at work, including the reduction or non-payment of wages. It appears that migrant workers are increasingly faced with cramped or inadequate living conditions, growing restrictions on their movements and forced returns to countries where they may be stigmatized as 'coronavirus carriers'.³⁹

New research also indicates that recently recruited migrant workers, or those who have returned home on leave, are no longer able to be (re)deployed due to travel restrictions and delays in the processing of documentation. This puts them at risk of losing their jobs.⁴⁰

³⁴ Board of Investment, "Invest Pakistan: COVID-19 and Pakistan".

³⁵ Shafi, Mohsin, Junrong Liu and Wenju Ren, "Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises operating in Pakistan", *Research in Globalization* (2 December 2020).

³⁶ Khan, Iftikhar A., "Around 40,000 Pakistanis stranded abroad", *Dawn*, 14 April 2020.

³⁷ "Coronavirus intensifies plight of migrant workers in Gulf countries", *The News*, 24 April 2020.

³⁸ ILO, *Protecting migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic: Policy Brief* (April 2020).

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ ILO, *Ensuring fair recruitment during the COVID-19 pandemic: Policy Brief* (June 2020).

Migrant workers who have been laid off face new challenges in their countries of origin. ILO research finds that migrant workers are prone to be excluded from national COVID-19 policy responses – such as wage subsidies, unemployment benefits or social security and social protection measures.⁴¹ Local and international media reports are a testament to migrants' struggle to survive, in Pakistan and around the world.⁴²

3.3 Reintegration of returning and repatriated migrant workers

To guide the COVID-19 response, the Government of Pakistan formulated a seminal *National Action Plan for COVID-19*, outlining the guiding principles for outbreak preparedness, containment and mitigation. It has established a National Coordination Committee whose meetings – conducted virtually – are chaired by the Prime Minister and attended by the Chief Ministers of all four provinces to review measures to address the pandemic.⁴³

In June 2020, the Overseas Employment Corporation launched a portal to assist returning migrant workers to secure jobs in Pakistan and abroad, after documenting their data. According to officials of the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, 77,000 migrant workers had registered on the portal by November 2020.

COVID-19 has jeopardized the future of Pakistan's migrant workers.⁴⁴ Reintegrating returning or repatriated workers into local markets is enormously challenging. One major study on labour migration governance in Asia and the Pacific⁴⁵ highlights that most migrants prefer to return to their destination countries but they feel uncomfortable when adjusting to local jobs. Officials from the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment interviewed for this assessment confirm this trend in Pakistan. To assist the reintegration process, the Government is attempting to expand the coverage of existing social protection programmes.

Notable efforts include plans to provide technical and financial assistance to returning migrants through the *Kamyab Jawan* programme, with its loan schemes for young entrepreneurs' businesses, and the *Ehsaas* programme, the country's most wideranging social security scheme. In addition, public sector training institutions are gearing up to deliver technical and vocational training for returning migrants.⁴⁶ Annex 1 summarizes relevant initiatives for reintegrating migrants into Pakistan's labour market.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² See for instance: "Coronavirus intensifies plight of migrant workers in Gulf countries", *The News*, 24 April 2020; "Foreign workers struggle to return to UAE amid virus", *Dawn*, 15 July 2020; Khan, Iftikhar A., "Around 40,000 Pakistanis stranded abroad", *Dawn*, 14 April 2020; Khan, Inayatullah, "COVID-19 and overseas Pakistanis", *The News International*, 22 June 2020; Khan, Yasir Habib, "Returning to uncertainty", *The News on Sunday*, 16 August 2020.

⁴³ Sarwana, Jawad, Anees Ahmed, Bilal Channah and Ayesha Noureen, "COVID-19 Legislation & Policies: Pakistan".

⁴⁴ "Foreign workers struggle to return to UAE amid virus", *Dawn*, 15 July 2020.

⁴⁵ Stalker, Peter, *Protecting Migrant Workers: Governance of Labour Migration in Asia and the Pacific* (ILO, 2008).

⁴⁶ "Plan to re-employ expats under way: SAPM says efforts afoot to offer financial aid to such workers under Ehsaas Programme", *The Express Tribune*, 6 July 2020.

Such measures are especially relevant as migrant workers' prospects for returning to destination countries remain uncertain.⁴⁷ In the aftermath of the pandemic, the reopening of international labour markets and travel operations will need to be re-adjusted. Although it is impossible to foresee the full-scale impact of COVID-19, it is clear that the pandemic will cause an enormous loss of jobs – in Pakistan and overseas – and force scores of businesses to close. As such, a comprehensive national policy to expand employment in Pakistan is urgently needed, now more than ever.

⁴⁷ Khan, Yasir Habib, "Returning to uncertainty", *The News on Sunday*, 16 August 2020.

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Chapter 4

▶ Chapter 4. Key findings: Migrants' perspectives of COVID-19's impact, the crisis response and their prospects

4.1. Respondents' profiles

Categories of respondents

Of the 80 stakeholders interviewed for this assessment, 54 are migrant workers, 13 are representatives of organizations that facilitate migration – including CSOs/NGOs, UN agencies, Migrant Resource Centres and the Pakistan Workers' Federation – seven represent overseas employment promoters or the Pakistan Overseas Employment Promoters' Association, and six are government officials.

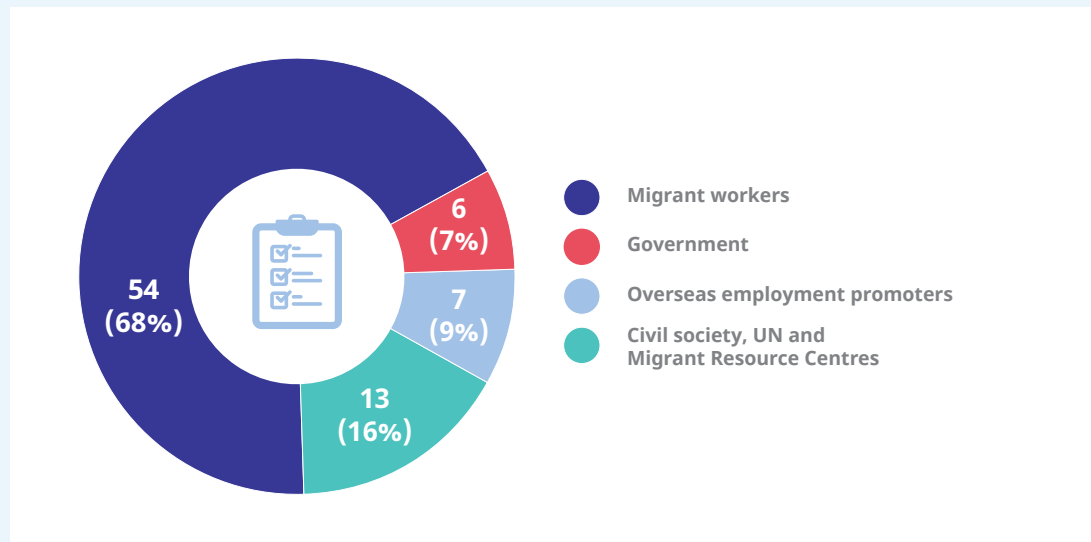
Table 3 and figure 5 highlight the different categories of respondents interviewed.

Table 3. Categories and numbers of respondents

No.	Respondent categories	Number of respondents
1	Government authorities, including representatives of the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, the Protectorate of Emigrants Offices, the Overseas Employment Corporation and the Overseas Pakistanis Foundation	6
2	Overseas employment promoters/recruitment agencies and the Pakistan Overseas Employment Promoters' Association	7
3	Pakistan Workers' Federation	3
4	Civil society organizations, UN agencies and Migrant Resource Centres	10
5	Migrant workers, including returnees, currently employed workers or those stranded abroad and prospective migrant workers	54
Total		80

▶ FIGURE 5.

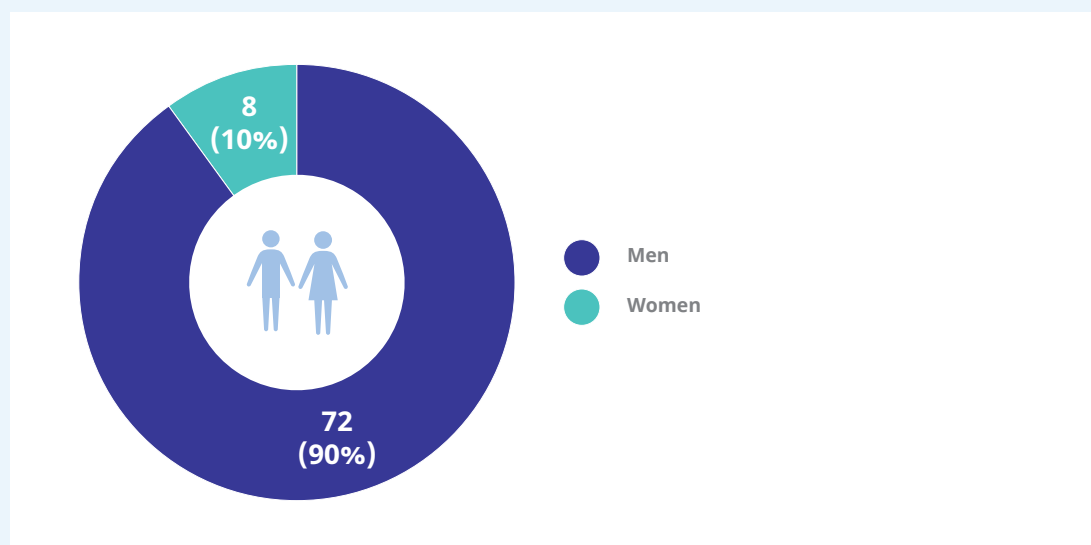
Categories/affiliation of respondents



Source: ILO, *Rapid assessment survey*, 2020.

▶ FIGURE 6.

Respondents' gender



Source: ILO, *Rapid assessment survey*, 2020.

Respondents' gender

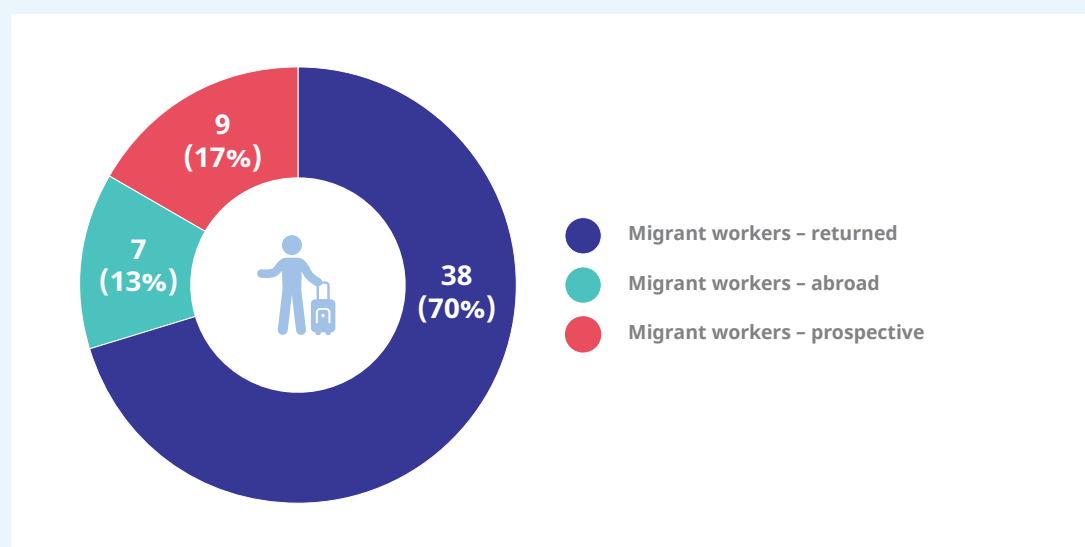
Of the 80 respondents interviewed, eight are women (10 per cent) (see figure 6). They include one woman migrant worker employed as an assistant sales engineer by a company based in the United Arab Emirates.

Types of migrant workers interviewed

Of the 54 migrant workers interviewed for this assessment, 38 have returned to Pakistan – 23 from Saudi Arabia, 12 from Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, and one each from Qatar, Bahrain and Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates. The assessment also interviewed seven workers who are still employed abroad, four of whom work in the United Arab Emirates and three in Saudi Arabia. Among the nine prospective migrant workers interviewed, five are bound for Iraq and four for Qatar, Dubai, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

► FIGURE 7.

Types of migrant workers interviewed



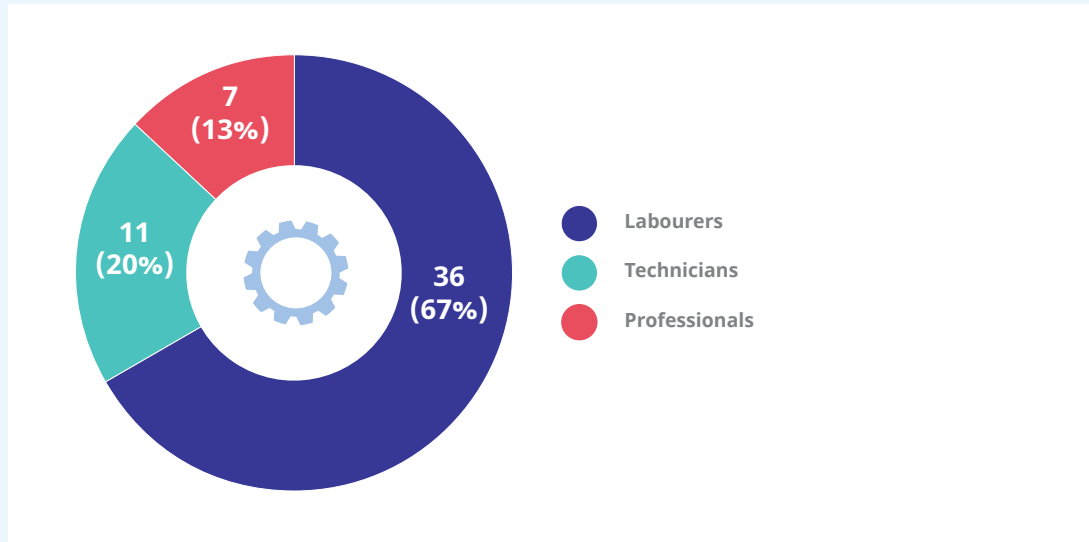
Source: ILO, *Rapid assessment survey*, 2020.

Migrant workers' occupations

The assessment sorted the migrant workers interviewed into three occupational categories, corresponding to their skills and competencies. Of these 54 respondents, 36 are 'labourers', 11 are 'technicians' and seven are 'professionals' (see figure 8).

▶ FIGURE 8.

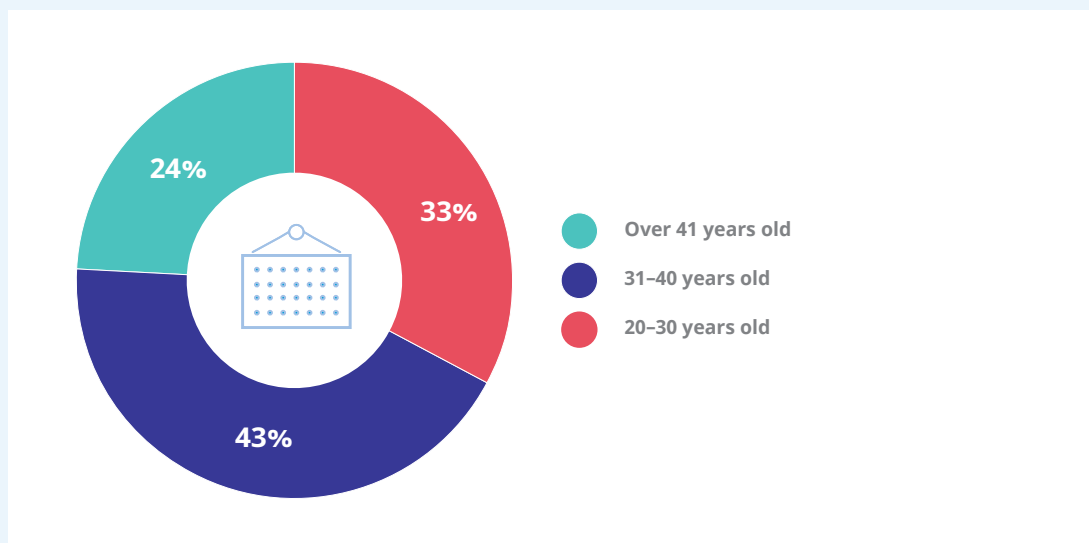
Occupational categories of the migrant workers interviewed



Source: ILO, *Rapid assessment survey*, 2020.

▶ FIGURE 9.

Ages of the migrant workers interviewed



Source: ILO, *Rapid assessment survey*, 2020.

Migrant workers' ages

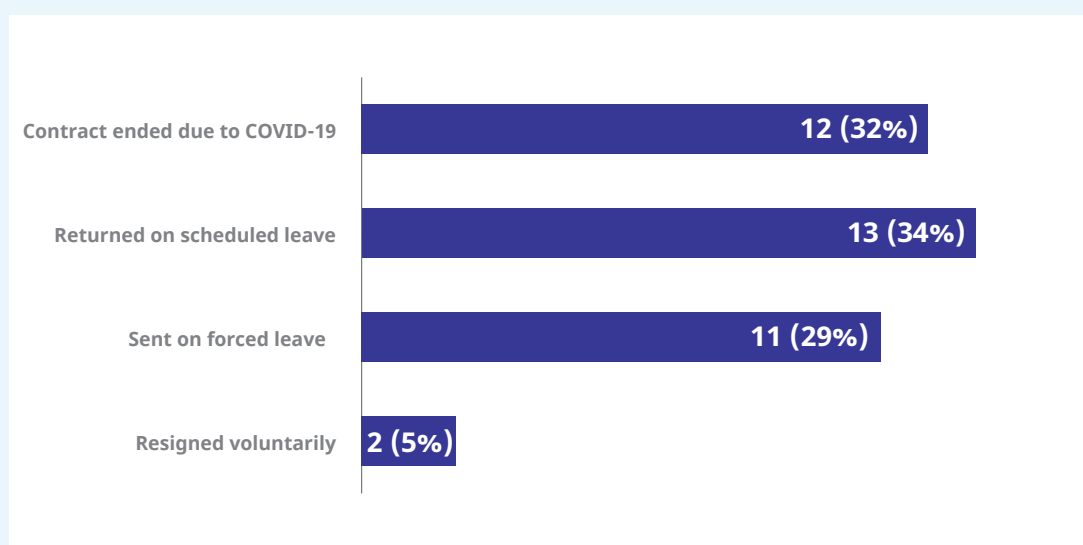
The majority of the migrants interviewed are between 31 and 40 years old (43 per cent). Roughly one-third (33 per cent) are between 20 and 30 years old and nearly one-quarter are over the age of 40 (24 per cent).

4.2. Why have migrant workers returned to Pakistan?

Of the 38 migrant workers interviewed who have returned to Pakistan, 13 came back on scheduled leave, while 11 were forced to take leave by their employers due to COVID-related business closures and lockdown measures. Another 12 returned because their employers ended their contracts prematurely given the pressure that the pandemic placed on their businesses. Only two respondents returned after resigning voluntarily, largely due to COVID-related family pressure.

► FIGURE 10.

Reasons for the return of migrant workers



Source: ILO, *Rapid assessment survey*, 2020.

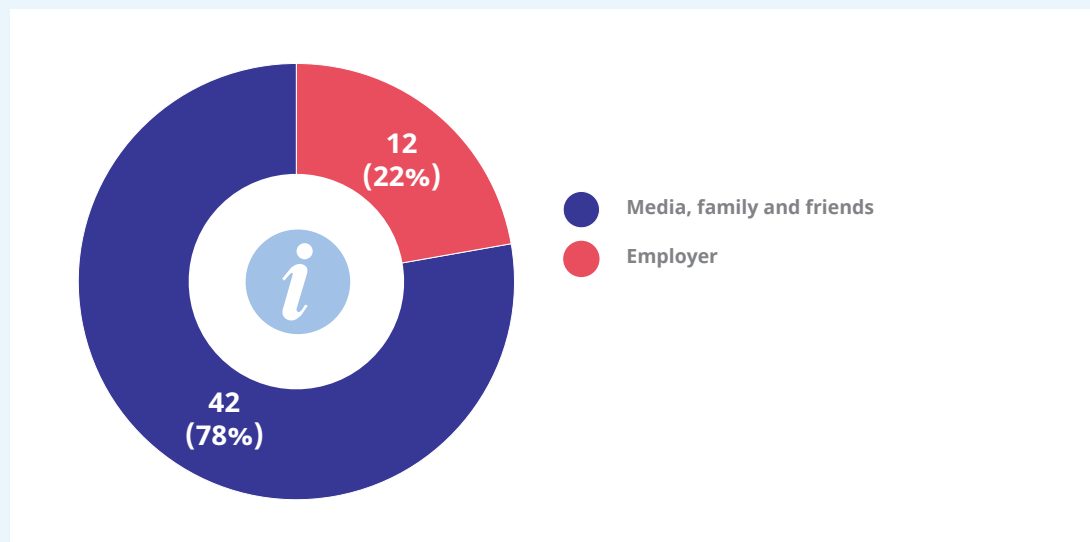
Workers who returned on scheduled leave have not been able to resume their work in destination countries, remaining stuck in Pakistan by lockdowns and travel restrictions. Most are hopeful that they will be able to return to their jobs overseas. This is in stark contrast to workers on forced leave, who doubt that they will be able to take up their jobs again. One respondent forced to take leave recently received a layoff notice from his employer; others fear the same fate.

4.3. What information do migrant workers have on COVID-19?

Most respondents rely on social media, the national and local mass media, family members and friends for information on COVID-19. Fewer than one-quarter of respondents have received information on the pandemic from their employers.

▶ FIGURE 11.

Migrant workers' sources of information on COVID-19



Source: ILO, *Rapid assessment survey*, 2020.

Pakistani migrant workers appear well-aware of the symptoms of COVID-19 and precautions to take to avoid infection. Almost all respondents are able to list the primary symptoms of COVID-19, reflecting a clear understanding of the illness. Almost all respondents consider that the information they have received on COVID-19 is useful.

This suggests that the information migrants have received is fairly comprehensive, ostensibly because of the proliferation of COVID-related content in the mainstream media and social media worldwide. Their awareness is also based on personal experience. Several respondents witnessed friends and colleagues suffer from COVID-19. Most migrants who returned to Pakistan were quarantined upon arrival, either in quarantine facilities in March–April 2020 – which they were obliged to pay for – or at home if they arrived after April.

“The massive awareness campaign in Pakistan and worldwide seems to help people in surviving this pandemic. Without a vaccine, coronavirus could have been far more fatal – than it has proved [as] yet – if the media would have not spread the word so widely.”

– A Pakistani migrant worker who returned from Saudi Arabia

“The term COVID-19 SOPs [Standard Operating Procedures] has become a global parlance and is being comprehended everywhere beyond any distinction of identities. Hardly anyone could be found unaware of such an enormous calamity. The governments and the businesses, in Pakistan and destination countries, were reported to have launched special awareness campaigns that helped to reach out to almost every migrant worker too.”

– A Pakistani migrant worker who returned from Saudi Arabia

4.4. What information do migrants have on COVID-19’s impact on travel and migration?

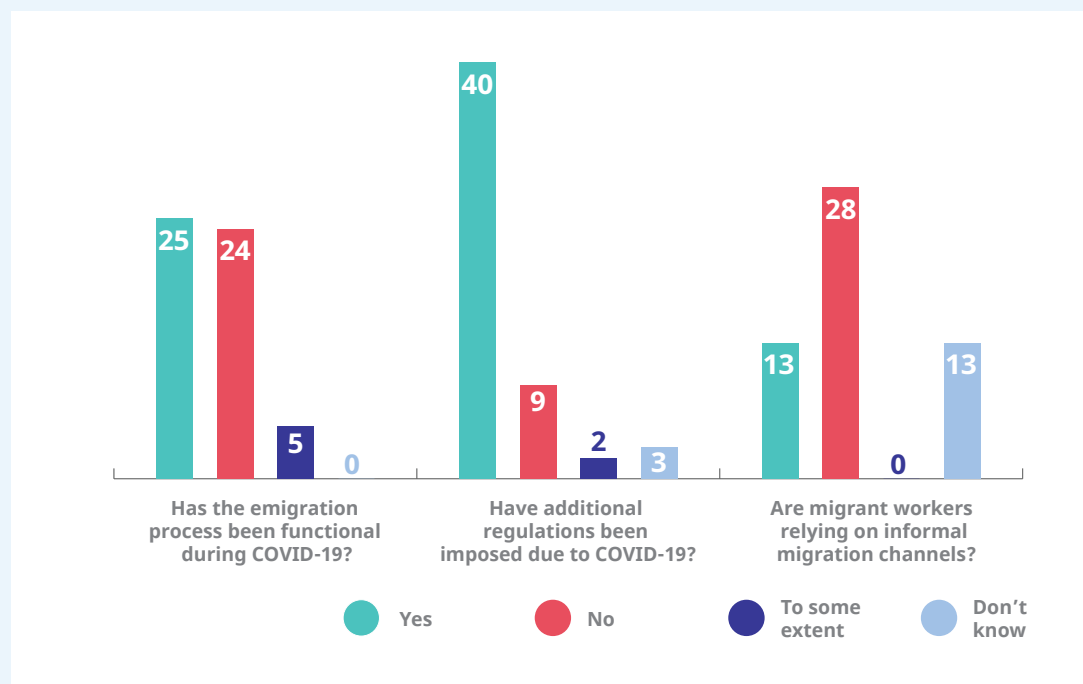
Half of the migrant workers interviewed believe that the migration process stopped completely between March and June 2020; the other half feel that it remained fully functional. A small number of skilled workers consider that travel and migration processes continued to function to a certain extent, enabling diplomats, public officials, professionals or experts to travel to selected countries.⁴⁸

The vast majority of respondents understand that workers could not proceed overseas from March to June due to COVID-related restrictions. Very few respondents were unaware of these restrictions.

⁴⁸ This involved very stringent restrictions and specialized arrangements.

▶ FIGURE 12.

Migrant workers' information on migration trends during the COVID-19 pandemic



Source: ILO, *Rapid assessment survey*, 2020.

Most respondents believe that, once travel restrictions are eased, workers with valid documentation will be able to proceed overseas. The majority are also aware of additional regulations imposed on travel to and from Pakistan, such as COVID-19 test requirements and quarantine protocols.

More than half of the migrant workers interviewed do not believe that migrants are using informal channels to secure overseas employment, although one-quarter of respondents feel that they are. When asked to define an 'informal migration channel', some pointed to the practice of illegally crossing borders. Others defined it as an arrangement known as a 'freelancing visa' provided by a fake recruitment company or a *kafeel* (local sponsor/guarantor). It enables workers to arrive in a destination country without a job waiting for them, and to then search for work. Respondents highlight how such arrangements make migrants highly vulnerable to human rights violations and leave them without recourse to support services, including health care and social protection.

Most respondents do not believe that Pakistan is repatriating its migrant workers. They regard current migration trends as uncertain, with gloomy prospects for the future.

“The workers who choose to proceed overseas to the GCC countries on a ‘freelancing visa’ are treated like slaves by their guarantor. Such workers have no rights to [make] claims about their wages, working hours and choice of employment. Hardly any such migrants could claim and access health benefits and other protective mechanisms.”

– A prospective Pakistani migrant worker from Jhang, Punjab

4.5. How has COVID-19 affected migrant workers’ well-being?

As figure 13 shows, COVID-19 has severely impacted the well-being of Pakistani migrant workers. The migrant workers interviewed foresee a significant decline in new jobs, as demand for workers plummets abroad. This projection is echoed by overseas employment promoters and other independent reports, which predict a significant decrease in overseas job opportunities.⁴⁹ Some respondents feel that employment opportunities were stagnant even before the pandemic. Almost all the migrants interviewed agree that there will be few opportunities for unskilled and semi-skilled workers as economies slow worldwide due to COVID-19. Some believe that job prospects for migrant workers will be confined to certain skilled professionals, such as medical workers.

“I have been working in Saudi Arabia as a crane operator for the past five years. I wished to bring my brother-in-law here to work as a semi-skilled construction worker. However, the COVID-19-related restrictions and the closure of businesses do not seem to promise better prospects for migrant workers anymore. The situation may last longer because of the global scale of the pandemic.”

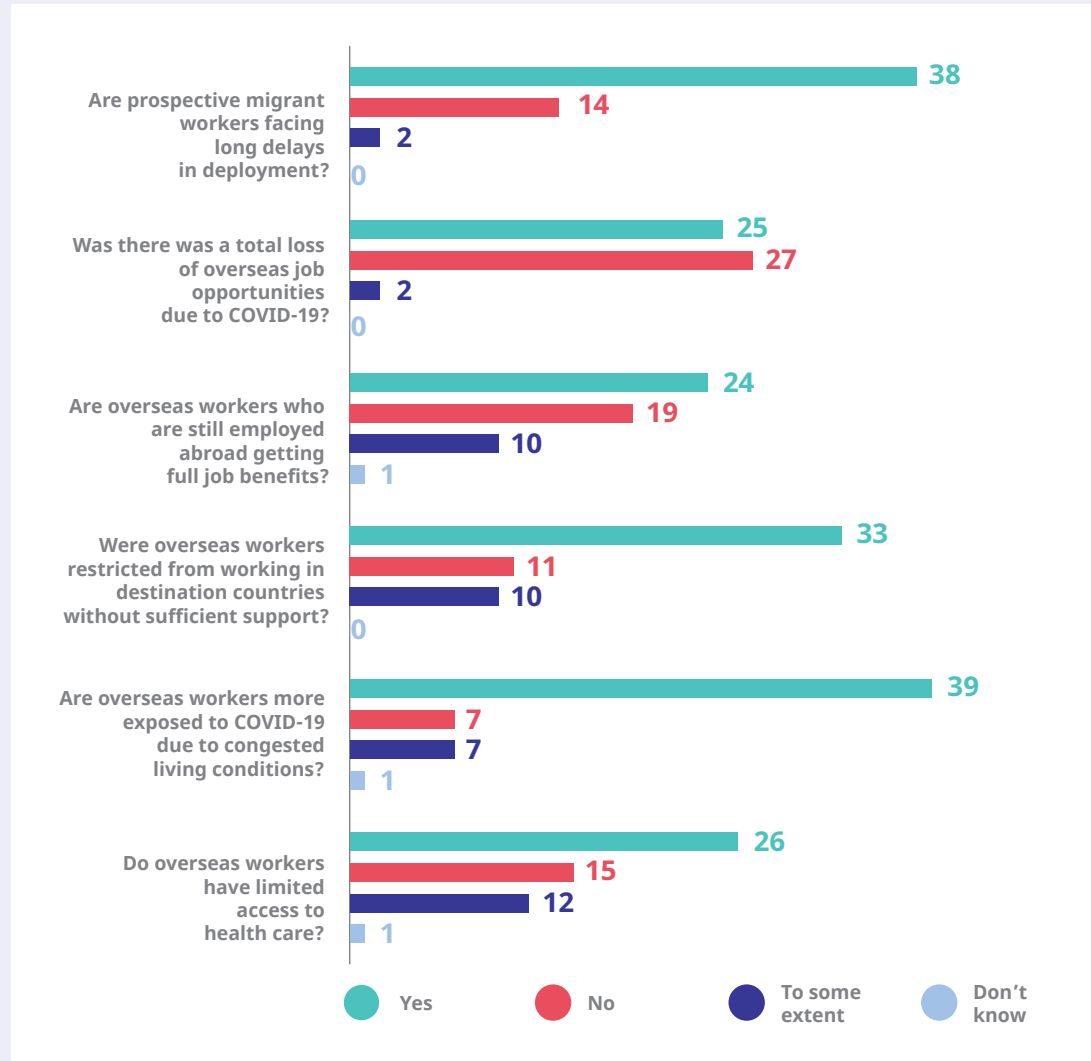
– A Pakistani migrant worker in Saudi Arabia

Prospective migrants are facing long delays in deployment due to COVID-related restrictions, causing significant distress. Those who have completed the cumbersome recruitment process are left with little choice but to wait indefinitely; they have no work in Pakistan, but they cannot get to their jobs abroad. Prospective migrant workers who have not yet obtained visas or work placements worry about how they will recover the money they have paid to recruitment agents.

⁴⁹ ILO, *ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Sixth edition: Updated estimates and analysis* (September 2020).

► FIGURE 13.

COVID-19's impact on migrant workers, March–November 2020



Source: ILO, *Rapid assessment survey*, 2020.

“There are several cases that I am aware of about prospective workers. Their emigration process is at a halt due to COVID-19 and the money they have paid to the agents remains unrecovered. These prospective workers are neither going to get overseas employment nor get back the money paid to agents any time soon.”

– A Pakistani migrant worker who returned from Saudi Arabia

“I received a work visa for two years to proceed to Qatar and cleared my medical tests too. I paid a hefty amount to an agent, who was facilitating my emigration process. My passport has yet to be submitted for further procedures but here I am, stuck due to COVID-19. The situation is quite distressing.”

– A prospective Pakistani migrant worker from Nowshera, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

According to most respondents, an enormous number of overseas workers have lost their jobs because of the pandemic. Those who returned to Pakistan on regular leave are unsure when – or if – they will be able to return to work. While they yearn to get back to their jobs, their employers are noncommittal, telling them to wait for further instructions. Many feel that their jobs abroad are in jeopardy and worry that they have little chance of securing employment in Pakistan as its economy contracts. The vast majority of respondents are visibly frustrated – all this uncertainty is causing serious mental stress.

“I came to Pakistan in January 2020 but couldn’t return to my job in Saudi Arabia due to the lockdown. While yearning to return, my employer sent me a termination letter. This job was my sole source of income. My employer still owes me my bonus. I appeal to the Government of Pakistan to help me recover my dues.”

– A Pakistani migrant worker who returned from Saudi Arabia to Nowshera, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

"I am seriously depressed due to prolonged unemployment by now. My company sent me on forced leave during the spread of COVID-19. I am trying to return to my job in Dubai and maintaining continuous contact with my employer. My visas expired in June 2020 and the employer isn't clarifying my prospects. The future remains quite uncertain for me and many of my friends."

– A Pakistani migrant worker who returned to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa from Dubai

While many workers have been forced to return to Pakistan, or become stuck in the country by travel restrictions, others were unable to return at all. Curbs on travel prevented some from attending the funerals of close family members. Others had their approved leave cancelled, keeping them from visiting their families in Pakistan. Some 75 per cent of the migrants interviewed cite 'returning to Pakistan' as a major challenge, either due to travel restrictions and/or a lack of financial resources.



BOX 1.

The case of a Pakistani migrant engineer employed in Saudi Arabia

"I came to Pakistan on the 7th of January 2020 from Dammam on a month's leave to see my family after a year-long stay in Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, my father fell ill and was diagnosed with a brain tumor; the doctors did not expect him to survive for long. I wanted to extend my leave period to take care of my ailing father, but COVID-19 spread worldwide, and strict lockdowns and travel restrictions were about to come into force. Fearing that I might get stuck in Pakistan during a lockdown and lose my job, I took one of my life's hardest decisions: I returned Saudi Arabia to avoid the impending lockdown and left my ailing father behind.

Upon resuming the work, I learned that my employer had slashed work structures owing to business downsizing in the aftermath of COVID-19. I was offered only a part-time contract and I had to accept the offer, as I was not in a position to negotiate terms.

Since I emigrated to Saudi Arabia, my father continued insisting that I should not to leave him during the last part of his life. Having been unemployed for over two years before getting a job in Saudi Arabia, I was more nervous about employment prospects. I returned to work knowing that my decision would have a hard impact on my father's emotional well-being. After my decision, my father's health deteriorated fast and he died on the 29th of March 2020. The travel restrictions prevented me from returning to attend my father's funeral. Here I am: left with half my job lost and lifelong remorse to live with."

"I belong to a very poor family. In search of better employment prospects, I was inspired by the plentiful remittances that migrant workers used to send to their families back in Pakistan. I learned to drive and got an overseas job, but it required me to borrow a heavy loan. I was working for a monthly salary of 1,200 Dirhams in Dubai. My employer used to treat us very indecently and often imposed fines for uncommitted offences. My company reduced my salary by half when COVID-19 started spreading. Eventually, the company laid off several workers, including me, and withheld three months' salary."

– A Pakistan migrant worker who returned from Dubai to Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Half of the migrant respondents interviewed believe that migrant workers are experiencing salary cuts and delays in the payment of wages or benefits. One-quarter feel that this is not the case, while the remaining 25 per cent consider that salary and benefit cuts are a reality 'to some extent'. Several migrant workers who have returned to Pakistan report that their own salaries have been slashed, as have other employment benefits due to the pandemic.



BOX 2.

The case of a Pakistani migrant worker, recently returned from Saudi Arabia

"I have been working in Saudi Arabia for over a decade. I am from a very poor family. As I grew up, I saw my father struggling to meet our daily needs. I remained melancholic, worrying about how I could give him a helping hand. My father took me to a local motor mechanic and asked him to help me learn this skill. I spent some years in the workshop and became a skilled motorcycle mechanic. However, I always thought that my earnings would not fulfil our family's needs. Realizing the meagre employment prospects here in Pakistan, I started looking for overseas employment opportunities. My resources fell short of visa and emigration expenses. I had to borrow PKR 300,000 from my friends to cover these costs. Eventually, I landed in Saudi Arabia. I worked very hard and established my workshop there. I brought my brother to Saudi Arabia and we started earning a good income and sending remittances to our family too. I came to Pakistan in November 2019 on my regular annual leave, much before the spread of coronavirus. I was to return to Saudi Arabia in April 2020.

Despite rigorous efforts, I couldn't return to Saudi Arabia. The money I had brought with me has finished, leaving me penniless. I am worried about my business in Saudi Arabia, which remains unattended and shut down. I don't know what to do in this situation. The future remains uncertain."

In destination countries, most of the migrant workers interviewed have faced restrictions on their work and limited access to support systems. Some report a complete lack of access to support, while more than half – largely based at remote project sites, far from urban centres – could not obtain information about such services. Roughly one-fifth successfully accessed supplies and support provided by destination countries' governments. Overall, migrant workers' perceptions of the scope of support mechanisms, and their ability to access them, depend on their individual experiences.

Being exposed to COVID-19 and unable to access health care is a major concern for migrant workers. Half of the respondents claim that most foreign workers have very limited access to health services, or no access at all. Only one-third believe that migrant workers have adequate access to health care. These differences in opinion appear linked to migrants' occupational categories. Technical and professional workers are often covered by health insurance provided by their employers, while labourers usually lack such coverage.

Three-quarters of the migrant workers interviewed feel that their congested living conditions in destination countries put them at enormous risk of COVID-19 infection. It was traumatic to witness how their close colleagues, coworkers and roommates contracted coronavirus; many fell ill, some even died. Such trauma worsened migrant workers' suffering, far more so than their financial woes.

"Our employer confined us in a special camp in Saudi Arabia for three months and sent us back to our countries of origin afterwards. The health conditions in the camps were not very adequate."

– A Pakistani migrant worker who returned to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

"My employer forced us to stop working and stay in the camp for four months. The company paid us two months' salary and sent us back to Pakistan."

– A Pakistani migrant worker who returned from Saudi Arabia

**BOX 3.****Reflections of a Pakistani migrant worker who returned from Saudi Arabia**

"Being far from home during a crisis is a devastating experience. I was working for a company with a good salary for many years. Then, in March 2020, this virus started spreading in the world. The county where I was based was also affected. A strict lockdown was imposed in the country. Some workers were sent on leave and some were laid off. I had to pay rent for the building where I lived even though I had no income – there was no work at all. It was quite impossible to pay rent in this situation. However, the Government of my destination county took pity on us and waived our rent. It also arranged food and rations with the help of the Red Cross for stranded and jobless workers.

However, my troubles didn't end there. I was trying to return home, but flights were suspended. My father died in Pakistan but I couldn't come back to attend his funeral. This devastated me and I became seriously depressed.

After a struggle of three months, at last in June 2020, I was able to get a flight to return to Pakistan. Now that my job has ended, I am trying to revive my father's small business, but the future seems very uncertain. I want to go back [to Saudi Arabia], but I don't know what to do in such uncertain times."

**BOX 4.****The case of a Pakistani migrant worker who returned from Saudi Arabia**

"We were five people living in a small room in March 2020. One of my roommates from India was infected with coronavirus and he died within a few days. The offices and workplaces were being closed down due to COVID-19, along with other restrictions.

I was very worried – about myself and my family back in Pakistan. I got severe depression as more and more people were contracting the virus and we had such limited facilities to hand. At last, due to this situation, I ended my contract with my employer and returned to Pakistan after a great struggle. I am jobless now and struggling to find a job here."

COVID-related restrictions moderately affected migrants' ability to send remittances to Pakistan. While 60 per cent of the migrant workers interviewed found transaction processes functional during the pandemic, the other 40 per cent experienced difficulties in transferring remittances, including through informal channels – a particular challenge for low-skilled or unskilled labourers.

Respondents consider that special initiatives by Pakistani banks have been helpful. They also believe that the formalization of the remittance transfer system will be beneficial in the long-term.

“Many of us couldn’t send money to our families in Pakistan since the banks [were closed] with the imposition of lockdowns. Without this money, my family experienced serious financial crisis and distress.”

– A Pakistani migrant worker who returned from Saudi Arabia

4.6. What concerns do migrant workers have about their current and future prospects?

Most respondents (98 per cent) agree that it will be extremely difficult for returning migrants to find work in Pakistan, especially as COVID-19 drives up the unemployment rate. They consider economic activity sluggish and fear that it will remain so for the foreseeable future.

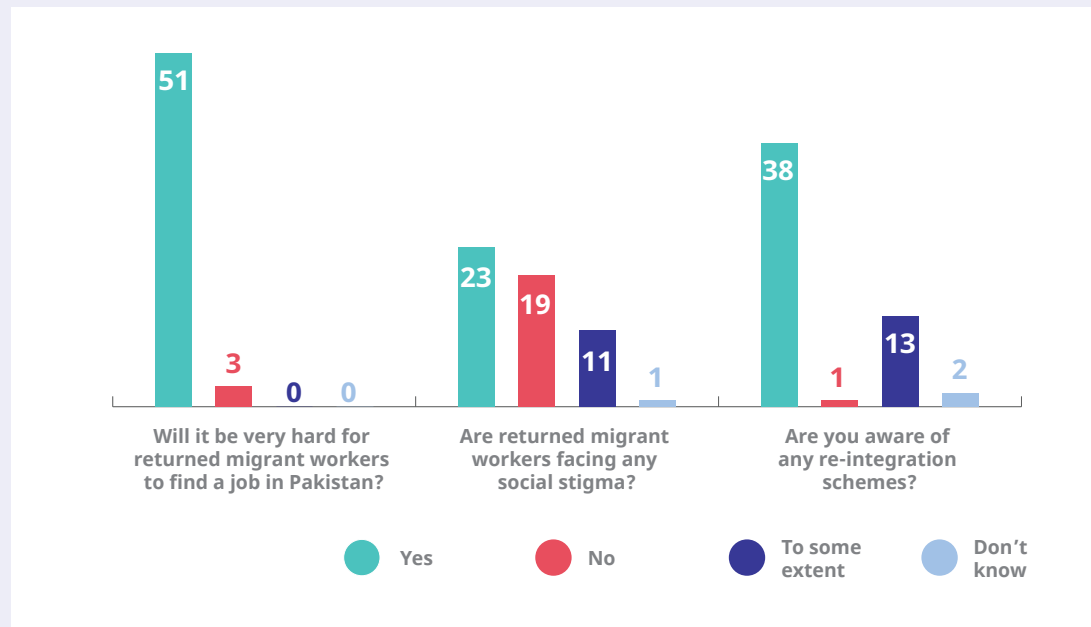
Almost all of the migrants interviewed worry that the pandemic will worsen their own employment prospects, causing them significant anxiety about the future. Many fear that, having spent so much time working abroad, their occupational skills do not make them ‘employable’ in Pakistan. They also feel that salaries in Pakistan will be significantly lower than wages abroad. While working overseas has always been difficult, it afforded them greater prospects for income generation and sustainable livelihoods. As such, limited opportunities to resume, or take up, work overseas due to COVID-19 are a major concern.

“I feel so dejected and frustrated amidst COVID-19. I would earnestly advise young people to brighten their employment prospects in Pakistan. They should never think of overseas employment since it leaves you feeling lonely and depressed in times of crisis.”

– A Pakistani migrant worker in Dubai

▶ FIGURE 14.

Migrant workers' apprehensions



Source: ILO, *Rapid assessment survey*, 2020.

“Times are changing in the aftermath of COVID-19. Economies worldwide were already switching to ‘human-less’ manufacturing technologies. COVID-19 is accelerating this exponentially. Businesses around the world, including in the Middle East, are aspiring towards less labour intensive management models post-COVID-19. All such developments are visibly reducing the employment prospects of migrant workers and would place significant pressure on unemployment in Pakistan.”

– A Pakistan migrant worker who returned from Saudi Arabia

Most respondents who returned during Pakistan’s lockdown, particularly those who arrived in April 2020, consider that they incurred significant financial losses as a result of quarantine measures. COVID-19’s impact on travel and migration procedures depleted their savings, while preventing them from earning. As noted above, several migrants bore high costs for urgent travel and quarantine facilities in the immediate aftermath of the lockdown, when all incoming travellers were required to quarantine at designated facilities for 14 days. These requirements were gradually relaxed, allowing travellers to quarantine at their residences in Pakistan.

“My father died when COVID-19 travel restrictions were relaxing a little bit. Therefore, I returned to Pakistan. However, travelling then was a very hectic experience with very expensive tickets. Other COVID-related special measures (e.g. social distancing and filling out coronavirus special information forms) and the stigmatizing behaviour of airport and aviation staff created a lot of additional hassle.”

– A Pakistani migrant worker who returned from Dubai

Many respondents did not need to access COVID-19 testing services for incoming travellers, either because they returned before the lockdown, or because they had test reports from destination countries. A significant proportion did not pay attention to testing services amidst the crowds at airports, although a similar share were aware of the testing services provided at arrival counters. Very few respondents were unaware of these services.

Returning migrants faced a degree of social stigma, especially early on in the pandemic, as people feared contracting COVID-19 from them. Nearly 43 per cent of respondents experienced considerable stigmatization, 20 per cent faced a degree of social stigma, while some 35 per cent faced none. Social stigma appears to have gradually waned over the course of 2020.

“Most returned migrant workers, like myself, were feared. [People thought we] had brought back some kind of deadly disease with us. Our close relatives and friends were afraid to make contact with us in the beginning. I felt quite desolate.”

– A Pakistani migrant worker who returned from Sharjah

“COVID-19 shocked our lives like an oscillating tremor. I lost my job, my father and a sister – all due to the spread of coronavirus. I don’t think that most COVID-stricken people will soon be settled enough to think about their employment, let alone take stock of government policies.”

– A Pakistani migrant worker who returned from Bahrain to Samundri, Punjab

Reeling from job loss, financial uncertainty and the threat of COVID-19 infection, many respondents have been too preoccupied to take note of national reintegration policies, such as the Overseas Employment Corporation's portal to support returning migrants. Most respondents appear unaware of reintegration policies and schemes in Pakistan, although one-quarter have some level of awareness.

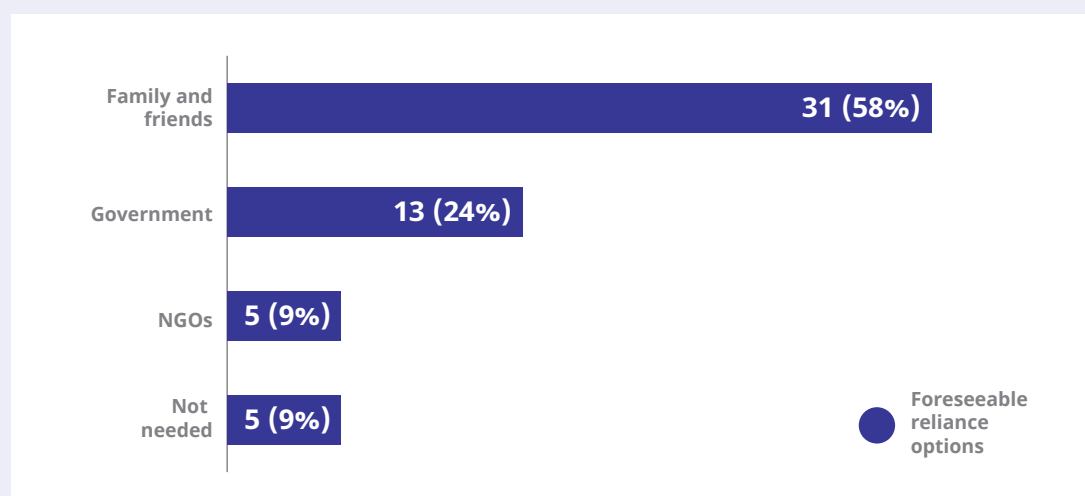
Very few of the migrant workers interviewed have accessed reliable information on support mechanisms available in Pakistan, or their rights. Most are unaware of such information or how to access it. Discussions with migration regulators, facilitators and other stakeholders affirm that Pakistani migrants tend to have low levels of education, as noted above. Thus, there is little demand for information on support mechanisms, particularly as the anxiety caused by the pandemic has distracted them from seeking support. The only migrants interviewed who have access to this information are usually 'technicians' or 'professionals', with fairly high levels of education.

4.7. What subsistence and employment options do migrant workers have?

Over half (57 per cent) of the migrants interviewed plan to rely on family or friends to cover their core subsistence needs. About one-quarter (24 per cent) aim to seek government support, while 9 per cent may reach out to non-government organizations. A similarly small proportion (9 per cent) do not believe that they will need outside assistance to meet their basic needs.

► FIGURE 15.

Migrant workers' foreseeable subsistence options



Source: ILO, *Rapid assessment survey*, 2020.

“I should be quickly switching to another job in Pakistan or some other country outside the GCC since Vision 2030 of Saudi Arabia envisions reducing the employment of migrant workers in professional categories.”

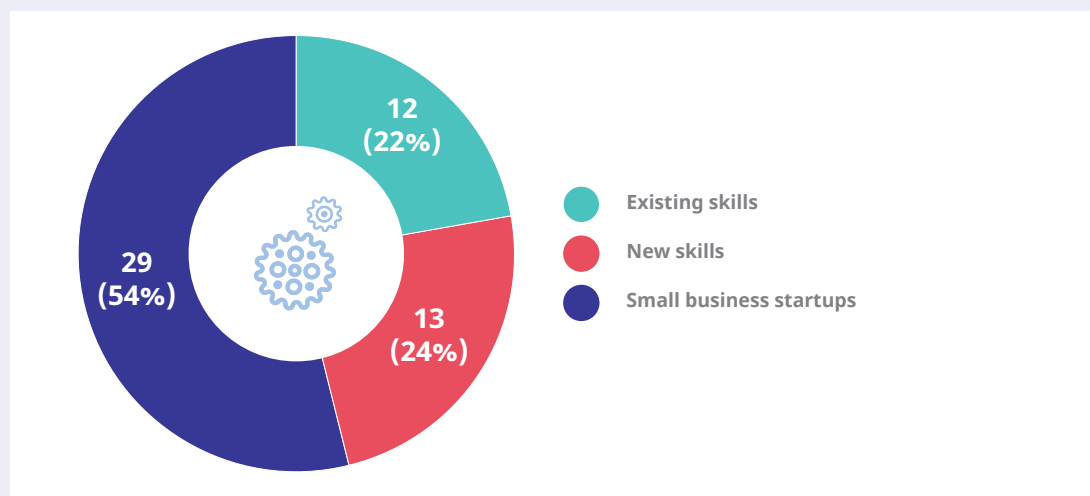
– A Pakistani engineer employed in Saudi Arabia

As discussed above, migrants who have returned to Pakistan worry that they will not be able to resume their work abroad, particularly those on forced leave. ‘Technicians’ and ‘professionals’ are more hopeful about returning to work, although they too are pessimistic about their long-term prospects as destination countries alter their employment strategies.⁵⁰ One respondent – an engineer in Saudi Arabia – fears that he may be forced to seek work in Pakistan or elsewhere, as jobs for foreign professionals are shrinking in Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

To improve opportunities for returning migrants in Pakistan, more than half of the respondents want the Government of Pakistan to establish a dedicated financial support mechanism for small-scale businesses. A similar number highlight the need to enhance migrants’ existing skills to increase their employability, in Pakistan and overseas, as well as to help migrants learn new skills so that they can pursue new opportunities.

▶ FIGURE 16.

Migrant workers’ employment reliance options



Source: ILO, *Rapid assessment survey*, 2020.

⁵⁰ See Saudi Arabia’s *Vision 2030*.

Most of the migrants interviewed are unsure about what types of businesses they could start, and how viable the prospects for startups are in Pakistan. Some feel that their lack of entrepreneurial skills may hold them back. They believe that a dedicated government fund for migrant workers would help cover financial losses in emergency situations, while enabling the effective reintegration of returned migrants by supporting skills enhancement and startups' access to finance.

As discussed in chapter 3 (see table 2 and figure 2 above), the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment's statistical reports reveal that 52 per cent of Pakistani migrant workers are low-skilled or semi-skilled. This highlights the urgent need for skills development. Most respondents are not sure what kinds of technical skills will enhance their employability, or whether enhanced skills will improve their prospects at all. Similarly, the migrant workers interviewed are uncertain of the value of new technical skills.

Nevertheless, migrants are interested in acquiring new skills that could help them find new job opportunities or start their own small businesses. Respondents who already have considerable technical skills are most interested in enhancing these skills to improve their employability and enable them to secure higher wages, either in Pakistan or abroad.



BOX 5.

International practices: Social protection and social security for migrant workers

Sri Lanka's Overseas Workers Welfare Fund (OWWF)

The Overseas Workers Welfare Fund provides assistance to Sri Lankan migrant workers and their families through its compulsory insurance scheme. It covers the cost of repatriation, provides scholarships for children and offers loan schemes with partner banks to cover migrants' pre-departure expenses, alongside startups and self-employment schemes. The fund also supports returnees who come to have disabilities while working overseas.⁵¹

Employee hardship funds

Employee hardship funds cover workers affected by natural disasters and other crises.⁵² They are usually created at the national level for workers in general, although they could be replicated specifically for migrant workers. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that the nature of crises is changing and can strike anyone, anywhere,⁵³ making it all the more important to protect migrant workers in innovative ways.

⁵¹ ILO, "Social protection for migrant workers."

⁵² Aspen Financial Security Program and Commonwealth, *Illuminating a Hidden Safety Net: Lessons from Research into Employee Hardship Funds*, 2019.

⁵³ Gopnik, Melissa, "Best Practices: How to Create Emergency Cash Programs", *BlackRock's Emergency Savings Initiative's Blog*, 20 April 2020.

Pakistan's Workers' Welfare Fund (PWF) could be one of such example. Established under the Workers' Welfare Fund Ordinance of 1971⁵⁴, the fund's primary objective is to provide low-cost housing and other amenities to industrial workers. They receive financial grants to educate their children and cover their wedding expenses, alongside scholarships and death grants. At present, the fund does not cover migrants employed abroad. However, a similar fund could be created for the protection and welfare of migrant workers.

4.8. Government and stakeholders' perspectives of COVID-19's impact on labour migration

4.7.1 Government perspectives

This section is based on information provided by the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, the Protectorate of Emigrants Offices in Rawalpindi, Peshawar and Karachi, the Overseas Employment Corporation and the Overseas Pakistanis Foundation.

The Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment registers Pakistani migrant workers in 41 occupational categories. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, labour migration from Pakistan decreased significantly in 2020. Only 189,653 migrant workers were registered between January and November 2020 according to the bureau's website⁵⁵, down from 625,203 in 2019 – reflecting a clear declining trend. Regional Protectorate of Emigration officials interviewed for this assessment note that the number of applicants who visit their offices has fallen from 400–500 to just 10–15 per day.

Pakistan expects a huge influx of repatriated or returning migrant workers due to the business closures, layoffs and retrenchments prompted by the pandemic – adding to the normal number of migrants who visit Pakistan on periodic leave. In response, the Government of Pakistan has taken several measures to aid migrant workers:

- The Government arranged special flights for stranded overseas Pakistanis between 3 April and 20 June 2020. According to the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, more than 250,000 Pakistanis were repatriated during this period. The Government of Pakistan facilitated the return of many as 90,308 of these individuals from different countries, including 48,500 migrant workers. After 21 June, the Government permitted 25 per cent of regular flight operations to resume, enabling more migrants to return. Thus, another 100,375 Pakistanis returned between 21 June and 8 July 2020.

⁵⁴ Workers Welfare Fund, Government of Pakistan, "Overview."

⁵⁵ See: <https://BE&OE.gov.pk>

The migrant workers interviewed for this assessment report that travellers were required to bear the costs of a one-way ticket for special flights, which they consider substantially higher than usual market rates. In some instances, ticket costs were subsidized or waived to help impoverished migrant workers return to Pakistan.

- A Crisis Management Cell was established within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to oversee the Government's crisis response operations. Twenty-eight focal persons were appointed to lead activities on the ground, assisting Community Welfare Attaches and diplomatic missions in destination countries. The focal persons were supported by 'ground operation teams' to execute and coordinate emergency relief operations. The Government also set up helplines and forums that resolved the complaints of 135 callers, responded to 16,546 telephone calls, replied to more than 19,342 What'sApp calls, What'sApp messages and social media messages, and responded to 4,195 emails.
- Community Welfare Attaches were instructed to maintain close contact with stranded Pakistanis via telephone hotlines and the Pakistani diaspora in destination countries. These attaches and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs distributed more than 19,000 ration bags to Pakistanis stranded in the United Arab Emirates, 15,000 to those in Saudi Arabia, 1,500 to those in Bahrain and 230 to those in Iraq. Pakistan's embassies distributed ration packs with the support of the Pakistani diaspora. The ministry and attaches also provided return tickets, medical treatment and shelter services to destitute migrant workers in destination countries. According to the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment's presentation to the Senate Committee, this support included 712 return tickets for migrants based in the United Arab Emirates, PKR 3,269,477 for migrants in Saudi Arabia, US\$51,015 for migrants in Iraq and assistance for 1,800 migrant workers in Qatar.
- The Government engaged with the senior management of companies that employ Pakistanis in destination countries, in order to mobilize testing and medical facilities for these workers. Pakistan's embassies and diplomatic missions abroad registered and supported stranded Pakistanis, in coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development.
- The Overseas Pakistanis Foundation arranged accommodation and medical treatment for migrant workers who tested positive for COVID-19 and had to isolate in destination countries. Both the foundation and the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development made special arrangements for the return of ill and deceased Pakistanis. For instance, the Overseas Pakistanis Foundation arranged for the bodies of deceased workers to be transferred from Italy to Karachi through a special Turkish Airways' cargo flight, and then on to their hometowns.
- The Government arranged several quarantine facilities in Pakistan. Their numbers increased as flights resumed and more migrants returned to the country.

- The Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development maintained contact with Ministries of Labour in destination countries to minimize layoffs, call for the timely payment of wages, and encourage employers to cover the cost of workers' return tickets. The outcomes of its coordination efforts are not yet clear.

According to the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, migration services have completely resumed since July 2020 and Protectorate of Emigration Offices are fully functional. These offices are monitoring compliance with the requirement for outgoing migrants to have a negative COVID-19 test. As discussed above, uncertainty remains since the future of labour migration from Pakistan will depend on destination countries' evolving policies. In terms of prospective migrants who have paid for migration procedures but have not been able to proceed overseas due to COVID-19, bureau officials indicate that these workers seldom apply for the recovery of the fees they have paid. Instead, these migrants prefer to wait, remaining hopeful that they will be able to take up employment abroad.

Registration of returned migrant workers

The online portal launched by the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment on the Overseas Employment Corporation's website⁵⁶ is registering returned migrant workers to assist their reintegration in Pakistan. As noted above, according to the bureau as many as 77,000 workers registered on the portal by the end of November 2020. The portal envisions synergies within the Government's ongoing social protection and development programmes. Thus, data collected through the portal is being shared with the *Ehsaas* programme, the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, the Overseas Pakistanis Foundation, the National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTTC) and the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority (SMEDA).

Return and reintegration strategy

Reintegrating migrant workers will be challenging. More jobs will be needed to accommodate the influx of returning migrants – a daunting task, as the pandemic spurs job losses nationwide. This is complicated by the fact that most migrant workers wish to resume their work overseas.

To guide the return and reintegration of migrant workers, the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment has adopted a four-pronged strategy. It focuses on:

1. facilitating the **return** process of migrant workers and compiling essential data to share with other key facilitating institutions;
2. supporting the **reintegration** process by helping returnees to secure work in Pakistan or abroad through skills enhancement, the certification/recognition of prior learning and support for setting up their own businesses via the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority and the National Youth Development Framework (NYDF);

⁵⁶ Overseas Employment Corporation, "OEC Job Portal: Registration of Overseas Returning Workers".

3. facilitating **claims** for the recovery of refundable dues by using a complaint redress mechanism; and
4. advancing **social inclusion** by helping returning migrants to access loans for entrepreneurship, *Ehsaas* cash transfers, *Ehsaas* school fee support and informal labour registration by the Employees Old-Age Benefits Institution (EOBI).

Annex 1 provides a summary of these programmes and schemes.

The Overseas Pakistanis Foundation has signed a project agreement with the German Development Agency (GIZ) to facilitate the return and reintegration of migrant workers. Valued at EUR 3 million, the project will establish two facilitation and reintegration centres – one at the foundation’s regional office in Lahore, Punjab, and another at its headquarters in the federal capital, Islamabad. These centres will provide returnees with technical skill development opportunities and microloans to set up small businesses.

The foundation is currently analysing returnees’ qualifications and skill sets to tailor specialized interventions to their needs. To date, for instance, it has learned that some 17,000 returned migrants are skilled drivers, who could be supported to establish their own product delivery businesses. The Overseas Pakistanis Foundation envisages collaborating with the National Vocational and Technical Training Commission on the project’s skills enhancement component. The commission will also contribute to the certification and recognition of prior learning, as well as training returned and prospective workers through its National Employment Exchange programme.

Providing transitional justice for migrant workers

To facilitate transitional justice, the Overseas Pakistanis Foundation has established a desk at its Citizen Facilitation Centre, housed in a police station in Islamabad’s F-7 sector. The desk works to enhance migrants’ access to a complaint redress mechanism. The foundation also provides financial assistance of PKR 400,000 to the impoverished families of deceased migrants and PKR 300,000 to migrant workers with disabilities. It pays fines for minor offences by Pakistani workers and helps returnees recover unpaid wages, benefits and other dues. This support is only offered when individual migrants lodge a formal complaint.

The Overseas Pakistanis Foundation is collaborating with the Ministry of Law and Justice to design a special authority that can efficiently address the complaints of migrant workers. It is intended to be empowered with the authority to take decisions independently, which would require the enactment of a law by Parliament.

To strengthen the representation and inclusion of overseas Pakistanis, the Overseas Pakistanis Foundation’s Board of Governors includes representatives of the Pakistani diaspora. The foundation aims to strengthen migrant workers’ representation in the Overseas Pakistanis Advisory Council (OPAC), which is currently being re-constituted.

4.7.2. Perspectives of overseas employment promoters

This section summarizes the insights of the overseas employment promoters, recruitment agencies and representatives of the Pakistan Overseas Employment Promoters Association interviewed for this assessment.

According to these respondents, migration processes have been virtually at a standstill since March 2020. While many workers began the emigration process, as noted above, they could not proceed overseas during the pandemic. Moreover, there is no new demand for Pakistani workers abroad due to the socio-economic fallout of COVID-19.

Overseas employment promoters believe that uncertainty about the impacts of COVID-19 will continue for the foreseeable future. Future prospects for overseas employment remain in limbo due to travel restrictions and stagnant migration processes. Most small recruitment companies are on the verge of shutting down. Larger companies – who recruit in bulk for businesses abroad – are on firmer footing, although they too are unsure of how the ‘new normal’ post-pandemic world will affect labour migration. Private recruitment companies affirm that COVID-19 has damaged their businesses. While some wish to explore opportunities in other service sectors, the prevailing uncertainty prevents them from making concrete plans.

Like migrant workers, the overseas employment promoters interviewed affirm that jobs for migrants are only available in a few selected sectors and countries. As a result of COVID-19, opportunities are largely confined to the health sector and other specialized professional sectors, such as education. In this regard, government-to-government recruitment demands remain intact. According to overseas employment promoters, previously popular occupational categories – particularly unskilled, low-skilled or semi-skilled construction workers – are now the least ‘in demand’ by companies abroad.

Overseas employment plays a prominent role in Pakistan’s economy, particularly as personal remittances represent a huge share of external financial flows to Pakistan. Thus, overseas employment promoters highlight the need to strengthen institutional coordination and organize regular consultations between regulators and promoters. They feel that overseas employment promoters should be nationally recognized as a business industry and that their representation in key bodies should be increased. They also call for programmes or initiatives to foster collaboration between Pakistani overseas employment promoters and recruitment companies in destination countries.

4.7.3 Perspectives of other stakeholders

This section summarizes the insights of other stakeholders interviewed for this assessment. They represent civil society, international organizations, workers’ and facilitators’ organizations, including:

1. Democracy Reporting International;

2. the International Centre for Migration Policy Development;
3. the Justice Project Pakistan;
4. the Centre for International Migration Research and Development (CIMRAD) of the Lahore School of Economics;
5. Mera Maan;
6. Migrant Resource Centres in Lahore and Islamabad;
7. the Pakistan Rural Workers' Social Welfare Organization;
8. the Pakistan Workers Federation; and
9. the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Civil society representatives echo migrant workers' fears that COVID-19 will take a severe toll on migrants' lives and livelihoods. The pandemic has triggered a visible decline in overseas employment opportunities. Interviewed representatives highlight concerns about the health of migrant workers in Gulf Cooperation Council countries, where most live in overpopulated residences with tenuous working conditions. This puts migrants at high risk of contracting COVID-19. Overall, civil society organizations highlight the need for an intensive, scaled-up reintegration response programme.

Representatives of the Pakistan Workers Federation agree that COVID-19 has taken a severe toll on migrants, both at home and abroad. Their lives have been thrown into disarray by the loss of work overseas, few prospects for employment in Pakistan and growing pressure on work opportunities in the country. Workers' organizations have taken several immediate steps to boost migrant workers' welfare. They have distributed rations, food items and other essential supplies to families nationwide. Yet, they note that the pandemic continues to restrict access to returned workers and affected families. Workers' organizations call for strengthened coordination between all stakeholders to ensure an effective response that safeguards workers' well-being. In particular, they highlight the need for stronger social safety nets, skill enhancement programmes and awareness raising campaigns that target prospective and returning migrants.

According to representatives of the Pakistan Workers' Federation, the ILO's REFRAME project has helped reach out to migrants. The project strengthened the capacities of 36 trainers – all of whom are volunteer workers' representatives – to roll out community and cluster level orientation sessions for prospective and returned migrant workers. These master trainers report how grateful migrants are for such support. In several concrete cases, the information migrants' received during these orientation sessions helped them enormously. Workers' representatives also found these community level orientation sessions relatively more useful than other conventional awareness raising approaches. Trainers feel that community sessions are needed now more than ever, as destination countries' policies change and COVID-19 regulations evolve. The stakeholders interviewed also emphasize the need to learn from international best practices – such as efforts in Sri Lanka⁵⁷ – in order to better protect Pakistan's migrant workers.

⁵⁷ ILO, "Social protection for migrant workers".



Chapter 5

▶ Chapter 5. Recommendations

This assessment's respondents suggested a range of ways in which Pakistan can address the challenges facing labour migration governance, recruitment practices and migrant workers. Drawing on their inputs and the analysis of the assessment's key findings, this chapter offers recommendations for action in the short-, medium- and long-term.



A. Continue and scale up emergency relief services for migrant workers (immediate actions)

- **A1: Continue to provide emergency relief services for migrant workers.**
The Government of Pakistan should continue its provision of relief services for migrants. This is particularly vital as migrant workers will remain at high risk of retrenchment/layoffs in destination countries during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **A2: Continue to identify migrant workers stranded abroad to ensure that they return to Pakistan safely.**
The migrant workers interviewed suggest enhancing the role of Community Welfare Attaches by establishing a more accessible and efficient mechanism for registering Pakistani migrants in destination countries. This would enable a systematic approach to gathering data on workers' unpaid wages, wage deductions before their return and other issues. Scaling up awareness raising campaigns by Community Welfare Attaches in destination countries is also important.
- **A3: Enhance the effectiveness of systems to ensure migrant workers' access to justice.**
Migrant workers require the Government of Pakistan's support to help them access to justice in cases where their employers have ended their job contracts prematurely, or withheld payment. The Overseas Pakistanis Foundation needs a stronger mandate to negotiate – with overseas employers and host governments – for the recovery of workers' unpaid salaries and employment benefits overall, rather than pursuing individual complaints.
- **A4: Advocate with destination countries' governments to ensure migrant workers' welfare.**
The Government of Pakistan should advocate strongly with the Governments of destination countries to continue support for Pakistan migrants, including relief packages (rations and supplies) as well as travel discounts to facilitate their safe return.

- **A5: Ensure that migrant workers are treated with dignity.**
Migration officials and airport staff – both in Pakistan and in destination countries – should uphold improved customer engagement behaviours and treat migrants with respect.



B. Reintegrate returned migrant workers effectively (medium-term actions)

- **B1: Devise a comprehensive, sustainable reintegration policy for migrant workers.**
The Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment, under the auspices of the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, is currently finalizing a *National Emigration and Welfare Policy for Overseas Pakistanis*, which will address the issue of reintegration. It is imperative that this policy includes a focus on skills enhancement and the recognition of the prior learning of migrant workers to reintegrate them effectively.
- **B2: Continue and expand the registration of returned migrant workers.**
A reintegration policy for migrant workers should prioritize their registration. Respondents also stress the need for a clear classification of the skills and professional credentials of returning migrants, in order to determine the nature and scale of the Government's reintegration strategies.
- **B3: Leverage *Ehsaas* and other social safety nets to provide a financial relief package for returning migrant workers.**
Respondents consider a financial relief package necessary for the sustainable and effective reintegration of migrants, many of whom have been left destitute by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **B4: Prioritize urgent government-to-government engagement with destination countries.**
The Government of Pakistan should actively engage with the governments of destination countries, as this will create vital space for the re-employment of returned migrant workers while negotiating bilateral agreements.
- **B5: Leverage public-private partnerships to help migrants find work as soon as possible.**
Public-private partnership arrangements – particularly in the manufacturing and construction sectors – can enhance the design and execution of programmes to effectively help returned migrant workers to secure employment sooner rather than later.
- **B6: Consider establishing contingency schemes to enhance support for migrants.**
Contingency schemes – such as an emergency welfare fund – could be a strong support mechanism to safeguard migrants' rights and well-being during future crises.



C. Broaden decent work opportunities overseas after the COVID-19 pandemic (long-term actions)

- **C1: Diversify overseas employment markets and occupational categories.**

Respondents highlight that the future of overseas work for Pakistani migrants cannot rely on Gulf Cooperation Council countries alone. Demands for unskilled and semi-skilled workers are set to decline post-COVID, especially in the Gulf.⁵⁸ The Government of Pakistan should explore new destination countries to diversify overseas job markets, while enhancing workers' skills. According to respondents, paramedical staff and nurses trained in eldercare are the types of skilled workers likely to be in demand abroad. The National Vocational and Technical Training Commission has a key role to play in enhancing national skillsets for overseas labour markets.
- **C2: Introduce special measures to ensure the effective implementation of laws related to migrant workers.**

According to respondents, prospective migrants often pay large sums to agents or other middle-men to help them secure visas and find work overseas. The Government should restrict such potentially exploitative practices by improving the monitoring system for migration processes.
- **C3: Prioritize long-term government-to-government engagement with employers in destination countries.**

The Government of Pakistan should continuously engage with the governments of destination countries to ensure that International Labour Standards and relevant legal frameworks are upheld, in order to safeguard the rights and welfare of Pakistani migrants. Respondents consider government negotiations crucial for the realization of decent work conditions, decent living conditions and better wages for Pakistani migrant workers.
- **C4: Encourage outgoing migrant workers to make use of government orientation programmes.**

More efforts are required to ensure that migrants are engaged by government orientation programmes. Overall, migrants do not seem interested in attending the periodic orientation sessions organized by Protectorate of Emigration Offices. Representatives of these offices consider that rigorous orientation will become ever more important in the post-COVID-19 context, especially as migration regulations become more stringent. Introducing a post-orientation test could be one way of making orientation sessions more effective.
- **C5: Diversify strategies for raising awareness among prospective migrant workers.**

Orientation sessions should be organized at the community level or cluster level in areas with a high density of prospective migrant workers. Respondents believe that direct local orientation sessions will be more useful than digital media-based orientation.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Saudi Arabia's [Vision 2030](#).

- **C6: Establish a centralized authority to improve job testing and accreditation, certification and the recognition of prior learning.**

A centralized authority should be established to monitor migration processes, discourage infringements or exploitative practices, improve job testing and facilitate accreditation, certification and the recognition of prior learning. Respondents consider this essential to boost employers' confidence in workers' capacities, while preventing exploitation.

- **C7: Consider providing a government relief package for overseas employment promoters.**

The Government should consider introducing a special relief package to mitigate the business losses incurred by overseas employment promoters during the COVID-19 pandemic. This would have to be grounded on strict adherence to International Labour Standards. Respondents suggest providing tax rebates for overseas employment promoters. They also call for government support to: (i) strengthen the representation and consultative role of Pakistan's overseas employment promoters in negotiating bilateral agreements, (ii) help them build stronger linkages with employment promoters abroad, and (iii) foster the institutional development of their representative body, the Pakistan Overseas Employment Promoters' Association.

- **C8: Develop a tripartite consultation mechanism to enhance migrants' representation.**

A comprehensive tripartite mechanism should be chalked-out to enhance migrant workers' representation, both in Pakistan and overseas.

- **C9: Prioritize skills enhancement programmes for unskilled and low-skilled migrant workers.**

Government training institutions should scale up skills enhancement programmes so that prospective migrants can move up from 'unskilled', 'low-skilled' or 'semi-skilled' occupations to technically-skilled occupational categories. The National Vocational and Technical Training Commission has a key role to play in this process, as noted above, and should forge stronger ties with prospective migrants. Respondents believe that a highly skilled labour force will enable Pakistan to diversify the foreign markets open to Pakistani workers, instead of relying heavily on Gulf Cooperation Council countries. The Government should also consider increasing funding for migrants' startups and small businesses. Respondents agree that enabling migrants to start their own businesses will strengthen their reintegration.

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References

▶ References

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Annex 1

▶ Annex 1. Government reintegration schemes

1. Kamyab Jawan – Youth Entrepreneurship Scheme

In July 2020, the Government of Pakistan launched the second phase of the Prime Minister's *Kamyab Jawan* programme's Youth Entrepreneurship Scheme (YES).⁵⁹ The scheme enables young people to apply for subsidized business loans to start or expand their business. There are three tiers of loans available:

1. Tier 1 (T1) loans, ranging from PKR 100,000 to PKR 1 million;
2. Tier 2 (T2) loans, ranging from PKR 1 million to PKR 10 million; and
3. Tier 3 (T3) loans, ranging from PKR 10 million to PKR 25 million.

The age bracket for applicants is fairly broad – anyone between 21 and 45 years old can apply for a loan, provided that they have a 'matriculation' (matric) or equivalent level of education. The loan scheme caters to all types of businesses, including those in the agricultural sector. To help people apply, the Government has launched an online portal for the submission of applications.⁶⁰

The scheme represents a potential opportunity for migrant workers who have lost their jobs or whose jobs have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. It could be a particularly promising source of start-up finance for young migrant workers looking to start their own businesses.

2. Ehsaas

In March 2019, the Government of Pakistan launched the *Ehsaas* ('Compassion') social security programme. The Division of Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety was specially created for this umbrella initiative, whose objective is to reduce inequality, invest in people and lift up districts that are lagging behind.⁶¹

Ehsaas targets the most vulnerable people in Pakistan: the extremely poor, orphans, widows, the homeless, persons with disabilities, those who are financially unable to afford medical treatment, the jobless, poor farmers, labourers, the sick, the undernourished, students from low-income backgrounds, poor women and the elderly.

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, the Government of Pakistan announced an economic relief package worth PKR 1.2 trillion to support businesses hard hit by the pandemic.⁶² In April 2020, the Prime Minister launched the *Ehsaas* Emergency Cash Transfer programme to mitigate COVID-19's

impact. It disburses PKR 12,000 (US\$75) to poor and needy households, in line with criteria set by the Government.⁶³

Although the Ehsaas programme does not specifically include migrant workers among its target groups, unemployed migrants can apply for relief as part of the 'jobless' category. It is important to further engage with the Government to include a special package for migrants within the Ehsaas programme. This could prove a lifeline for migrant workers whose jobs and businesses have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Roshan Digital Account

In September 2020, the Government of Pakistan launched the *Roshan* Digital Account, a banking service for overseas Pakistanis. It addresses a longstanding challenge faced by migrants: the problem of sending remittances to Pakistan when they lack the facilities to open a bank account. Launched under the supervision of the State Bank of Pakistan in collaboration with commercial banks operating in Pakistan, *Roshan* provide banking facilities for millions of non-resident Pakistanis (NRPs) seeking to undertake banking, payment and investment activities in Pakistan. Opening an account is an entirely digital process, with no need to visit a bank. It is also exceptionally fast; accounts take just 48 hours to open. It is expected that the *Roshan* Digital Account will help to integrate the Pakistani diaspora in Pakistan's banking and payment system.⁶⁴

4. Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority

Established in 1998, the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority (SMEDA) fosters an enabling environment and business development services for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It envisions the "*Growth of [a] globally competitive SME sector, through a conducive environment and support services, serving as an engine of sustainable growth for the national economy.*" Its mission is to advance employment generation and value addition through the development of the SME sector by helping to increase the number, scale and competitiveness of SMEs in Pakistan. Migrant workers stand to benefit from SMEDA's initiatives to:

- facilitate business development services for SMEs;
- strengthen SME representative bodies, associations and chambers;
- facilitate SMEs' access to finance; and
- assist SMEs in obtaining international certifications for their products and processes.

⁶³ For more on COVID-19 legislation and policies in Pakistan, see: <https://www.coronavirus-legislation.com/home/pakistan>

⁶⁴ See the Ministry of Foreign Affairs's overview of the Roshan Digital Accounts: <http://mofa.gov.pk/roshan-digital-account-5/>



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