

THE NEED FOR A SOUTH ASIA MIGRATION COMMISSION

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CONCEPT PAPER

Background and Rationale

South Asia is one of the most significant migrant-exporting regions in the world, with a long history dating back to the indentured labour system in the 19th Century. The migration patterns from this region in terms of destination countries, the jobs they take up in these countries, and their socio-economic backgrounds in their home countries are also similar. Relative to the sheer number of migrants and the contributions they make to their home countries however, (3 of the countries in South Asia are in the world's top 10 in terms of remittances earned), due attention has not been accorded to this issue in the countries that comprise South Asia. Given its vital importance to the countries of South Asia, through the nexus between migration and development about which there is no longer any scope for doubt, a need was recognized in international forums for a South Asian Migration Commission as part of the effort to leverage the benefits of migration in the best interests of all stakeholders, including the migrants themselves, host societies, and sending countries, as well as to minimize its negative effects for the same set of stakeholders. Under this purview, the work of this Commission will examine the various aspects of migration from and within South Asia, including, but not confined to the human security of migrants, the conditions and consequences of labour migration, migration induced by climate change, asylum, the integration of migrants into their host societies, etc.

Objective/Mandate

The overall objective of such a Commission would be to formulate the framework for a coherent and comprehensive response to the issues

surrounding migration that is generally applicable to all the countries of South Asia, with a few changes to address issues specific to each country. Through its work, the Commission will endeavour to develop and disseminate a broader understanding of the issues involved for the people of South Asia. In order to achieve maximum benefit, the Commission will look to work closely with the governments of South Asia in order for the framework it develops to be implemented. Consistent with this objective, the Commission's mandate can be broken down into the five following parts:

- i) Firstly, to place the issues facing migration from South Asia on the forefront of the national agenda in all member countries. This would be done by fostering debate and deliberation on all issues related to migration from the region between governments, NGOs, all the international organizations and donors present in the region, and also through involving academia, civil society, the private sector and the media across the region.
- ii) Secondly, the advocacy of policies aimed at easing the hardship of migrants from member countries at an international level, particularly in countries receiving the largest number of migrants from the region, so that the issues facing migrants from South Asia are at the forefront of the national discourse in receiving countries too. Some of the issues that would receive particular attention in this regard would include facilitating remittances through official channels, the return of migrants whose contracts or visas have run out, integration of South Asian migrants into host societies, and making employers accountable for violating contracts.
- iii) Thirdly, the Commission would work to identify existing gaps in policies adopted by member states towards migration, and also to establish clear linkages, or the lack thereof, between migration from

the region and other issues such as economic development, demography, trade, human rights, labour supply and demand, and national and regional security, amongst others.

- iv) Fourthly, the Commission would work to formulate policies that can harness the benefits of migration in the best way possible for all stakeholders, as well as to minimize its negative effects, and recommend these policies to be adapted by the governments of member states.
- v) Finally, the Commission will look into the work being done within key international organizations such as the WTO, ILO, IOM, the UN, UNDP as well as several regional organizations, with a view to developing a strategy and a plan of action. In this, a key point for the Commission to note will be to not duplicate the work of these organizations, but rather to synergize their efforts. The Commission could also look into the matter of how best to leverage the South Asian Diaspora in many parts of the world; the best of our brain power who are today contributing to the growth and development of the developed world.

Composition

The Commission may be comprised of 12 Commissioners drawn from all the countries of South Asia who are eminent personalities with high-level experience and expertise in the field. One of the Commissioners can assume the responsibility of its Chair, and an Executive Director appointed from within this Group would head its Secretariat, which can rotate with its Chair or be permanently based in a member country. The possibility might be explored of one of the international organizations that the Commission will be working closely with, such as the IOM, hosting the Secretariat, which will also be staffed by policy analysts and administrative officers.

Activity and Approach

The Commission will adopt a work-intensive agenda and an outreach approach, actively consulting governments, international bodies, academia, migrants' organizations, recruitment agencies, and other stakeholders. These consultations will take place at regular intervals, in each of the countries concerned, and over a defined period of time. On each occasion, participants in these country-specific consultations will be drawn from government, NGOs, the media, the private sector, trade unions and other stakeholders. A more detailed work programme and priority areas may be decided upon once its composition is more definite.

Output

The final report of the Commission will seek to put forward a variety of options that can be pursued as part of a strategy with well-defined, actionable steps for the consideration of the governments of South Asia and other stakeholders. As such, it may be produced in time for a SAARC Summit. The final report can become an important input for the next Summit, and can also help to bolster the position of the region in the ongoing discussions and debate in various multilateral forums.