

*Trend Assessment*

**New trends on return and  
remigration in the COVID era?  
Evidence from Bangladesh and  
Pakistan**

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**International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)**

Gonzagagasse 1  
A-1010 Vienna  
[www.icmpd.com](http://www.icmpd.com)

**International Centre for Migration Policy Development**

Vienna, Austria

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This report is authored by Ayesha Qaisrani.

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## Executive summary

This trend assessment is part of an ongoing series launched by ICMPD's Policy, Research and Strategy Directorate. These assessments analyse emerging trends related to the field of migration based on expert opinions and ICMPD's knowledge and insight on the subject in the context of changing geopolitical situations and external shocks that may influence existing trends of migration. In this vein, this study assesses the impact of COVID-19 on migration flows from Pakistan and Bangladesh, especially exploring the potential of an increased trend of irregular flows towards Europe. The two countries are not only among the top sending countries for labour migration in the West and South Asian (Silk Routes) Region, but are also among the top in the list of countries of origin with highest irregular migrant detections in Europe. In this context, it has been identified as relevant to examine how COVID-19 may influence migration flows from Pakistan and Bangladesh with respect to regular and irregular migration, specifically with an inquiry into migration trends foreseen towards Europe.

Based on key informant interviews and desk research, this trend assessment focuses on the impact COVID-19 has had on migration flows from these two countries, specifically return migration, the governments' response to this sudden reversal in migrant flows, as well as impacts on future migration trends. The study presents country-specific information on how migration patterns may evolve based on the experience during the pandemic. While country-specific contexts differ for Pakistan and Bangladesh to some degree, both countries share some similar patterns: the majority of labour migration from both countries is towards the Middle East, and towards North Africa for Bangladesh, migrants have similar skillset and educational backgrounds, both countries are among the top countries of origin for irregular migrants detected in Europe, both countries are heavily dependent on remittances as part of their foreign exchange, and the institutional setup in both countries has been predominantly concerned with the promotion of labour migration with limited institutional mechanisms in place for the management of returnees. Considering these commonalities, the comparison of emerging trends in a post-COVID-19 scenario has rendered some interesting insights:

1. Experts in both countries agreed that in the medium to long-term, migration trends would not significantly alter because of the current reversal in flows. **The predominant trends prior to COVID-19 are expected to prevail in a post COVID-19 scenario once travel restrictions are lifted.** This means that the majority of the migration flows, including the re-migration of returnees, would continue towards the traditional destination countries, i.e. the Middle East for both Pakistan and Bangladesh, and North Africa for Bangladeshi migrants.
2. Stakeholders in both countries perceived that an uptick in irregular migration towards Europe may occur depending upon a number of factors, including the age of returnees, the experience of migration for returnees (failure or success), the previous destination country, as well as the previous means of migration (regular vs. irregular). **Potential irregular migration towards Europe may be attempted by those who are "stuck" in the traditional countries of destination e.g. GCC countries and Libya, rather than by those who have returned.**
3. Smugglers and intermediaries play a key role in exploiting the domestic economic downturn to lure more young people to opt for irregular migration. Most stakeholders viewed new irregular migration trends as unlikely, while they agreed that pre-COVID-19 trends of irregular

migration may be amplified. **More experts in Bangladesh perceived the likelihood of increased irregular migration towards Europe than in Pakistan.**

4. **Regional political instability**, specifically with reference to the Afghanistan situation for the case of Pakistan, emerged as a key factor that may influence irregular migration trends from the country. Similarly, experts in Bangladesh also believed that **regional political unrest close to the traditional destination countries (such as in Libya) and in transit states** may also influence irregular movements by Bangladeshis towards Europe.
5. While the reintegration initiatives in light of COVID-19 returns in both countries were appreciated by the experts, there is much room for improvement. The **management of returnees and reintegration** is a new policy focus area for both countries, **with limited understanding among the target population (i.e. returnees) about the usefulness of the mechanisms introduced** (such as registration data portal, loan packages for returnees, seed funding for small enterprises, etc.) leading to limited uptake.

Based on these emerging trends and patterns, this trend assessment highlights key implications for the consideration of the governments of both Pakistan and Bangladesh, European counterparts, and the international community. Analysis of these implications is complemented with conclusions that focus on the promotion of safe and regular migration, enhanced intergovernmental cooperation, and widening and strengthening of the mechanisms related to return and reintegration.

## 1. Context

As part of the series of Emerging Trend Assessments carried out by ICMPD, this report explores the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on return, reintegration, and emerging migration trends (including re-migration) for the cases of Pakistan and Bangladesh. The study also looks into the potential of new and shifting trends of irregular migration, specifically towards Europe, as a result of the implications caused by the pandemic.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic raised considerable alarm and concern worldwide, particularly for labour exporting countries that experienced mass return migration as a result.<sup>1</sup> Lockdowns and precautionary measures taken for COVID-19 have led to widespread layoffs globally, making migrant workers, specifically the less skilled and low-paid ones, vulnerable to job loss and return (both forced and voluntary) to countries of origin. Immediate implications of mass layoffs and migrant return combined with the continued restrictions in travel, border closures and disrupted demand and supply of labour has the capacity to shift migration patterns for origin and destination countries, including the emergence of new preferred destinations, and migration routes.<sup>2</sup> Anticipating the changes in the migration patterns, migration governance is also expected to be impacted considerably.<sup>3</sup>

In light of the expected shifts in migration dynamics, ICMPD has undertaken this analysis using Pakistan and Bangladesh as case studies, to assess **the changes in migration patterns** taking place due to COVID-19-induced returns and analyse if **new trends impact the (irregular) flow towards the European Union (EU)**. For countries such as Pakistan and Bangladesh that rely heavily on their international migrant workers for employment and remittances, the unprecedented mass return amid a global health crisis is perceived as a daunting economic and social challenge.<sup>4</sup> Combined with rising domestic unemployment rates and a looming recession, the return of migrants not only has implications for the future flow of remittances on which the economies greatly rely, it also aggravates domestic unemployment, and puts further strain on states to devise reintegration measures for the crisis-induced returnees. Serious implications have arisen, not just for the economies, but also for the millions of households that are further pushed to the brink of vulnerability and deprivation as migrants are laid off and return home.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, **lockdowns and border closures related to COVID-19 have also affected irregular arrivals on European borders from the top countries of origin**. For the cases in point, irregular border crossings on entry at European borders decreased for Pakistan from 3,799 in 2019 to 3,377 in 2021,

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<sup>1</sup> Coz, Camille le and Newland, Kathleen (2021). Rewiring Migrant Returns and Reintegration after the COVID-19 Shock. Migration Policy Initiative.

<sup>2</sup> Knomad and World Bank Group (2020). COVID-19 Crisis through a Migration Lens. Migration and Development Brief 32.

<sup>3</sup> Newland, Kathleen (2020). Will International Migration Governance Survive the COVID-19 Pandemic? Migration Policy Institute. Policy Brief. Available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/globalcompact-migration-governance-pandemic-final.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Siddiqi, Zishan Ahmad (2021). Rapid Assessment: the Impact of COVID-19 on Labour Migration Governance, Recruitment Practices, and Migrant Workers. ILO REFRAME Project Pakistan.

Sahai, Ridhi, Bansal, Vaiddehi, Sikder, Muhammad Jalal Uddin, Kysia, Kareem, and Shen, Sharon (2021). Shattered Dreams: Bangladeshi Migrant Workers during a Global Pandemic. *Journal of Modern Slavery*. vol.6, no. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Sahai, Ridhi, Bansal, Vaiddehi, Sikder, Muhammad Jalal Uddin, Kysia, Kareem, and Shen, Sharon (2021). Shattered Dreams: Bangladeshi Migrant Workers during a Global Pandemic. *Journal of Modern Slavery*. vol.6, no. 2.

while for Bangladesh, there was a significant increase from 2,254 in 2019 to 8,667 in 2021.<sup>6</sup> The additional layers of vulnerabilities in countries of origin resulting from the economic downturn, increasing social inequities and disproportionate economic recovery trends across different regions and countries may act as additional push factors, propelling an increase in irregular migratory movements towards Europe. Exploring the probability and context of this aspect is one of the key themes of discussion in this report.

### 1.1 Methodology and limitations of the study

This Trend Assessment draws on **17 key informant interviews** (KIIs), conducted with relevant stakeholders in Pakistan and Bangladesh. The stakeholders included representatives from academia, civil society organisations, government institutions and international organisations. Interviews were conducted in August and September 2021, largely over web-based apps such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, with the exception of two interviews which were conducted in person in Islamabad. Where possible, findings have been triangulated with existing studies and literature.

This study must be interpreted with certain **caveats**: as a scoping study to understand the influence of COVID-19 on migration dynamics, this report does not focus on non-COVID-19 related returnees such as (forced or voluntary) returns from Europe and other countries<sup>7</sup>. However, where relevant, such statistics and findings from surveys that profile other returnees are also used to triangulate information.

This report is organised as follows: Chapter 2 provides the migration-related contextual backgrounds for Pakistan and Bangladesh, specifically focusing on the pre-COVID-19 migration trends and highlighting the significance of remittances to the economies of both countries. Chapter 3 discusses how COVID-19 impacted existing migration patterns and describes the profile of returnees in Pakistan and Bangladesh, including insights on their future aspirations. Based on KIIs, chapter 4 analyses the future migration trends as per the perspectives of relevant experts. Finally, chapter 5 concludes and highlights policy implications for three tiers of policy actors: i) Europe; ii) Governments of Pakistan and Bangladesh; and iii) the international community and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).

## 2 A situational context of migration from Pakistan and Bangladesh

### 2.1 Migration context in Pakistan

Pakistan is **seventh** on the list of countries with the highest emigration of migrant workers.<sup>8</sup> Between 1971 and 2021, about 11.3 million registered labour migrants have migrated abroad, many of whom may have returned over the years as their contracts ended.<sup>9</sup> The United Nations Department of

<sup>6</sup> FRONTEX (2021). Risk Analysis for 2021. Warsaw. Available at: <https://euagenda.eu/upload/publications/risk-analysis-2021.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> While acknowledging the surveys conducted by international organisations, such as IOM, that profile returnees from Europe over the last few years, the focus of this study is to map returns due to COVID-19, and identify emerging migration trends resulting from the economic and social shifts occurring due to the pandemic.

<sup>8</sup> International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2020). World Migration Report 2020. Geneva. Available at: [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr\\_2020.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE) (2020). Labour Migration Report 2020. Government of Pakistan. Available at: <https://beoe.gov.pk/files/statistics/yearly-reports/2020/2020-full.pdf>; Shah, Nasra, et al. (2020). Pakistan Migration Report 2020. Centre

Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) estimates that 6.3 million people of Pakistani origins currently live abroad,<sup>10</sup> while the Government of Pakistan estimates that 8.8 million people of Pakistani origins live outside of Pakistan.<sup>11</sup> Flows of registered migrants peaked in 2015 when 0.9 million people emigrated from Pakistan. In 2019, before the onset of COVID-19, 0.62 million emigrated from Pakistan, and the flow dropped to 0.22 million in 2020.<sup>12</sup> In 2021, a slight improvement in labour outflow was observed compared to 2020, and about 0.28 million Pakistanis migrated abroad.<sup>13</sup> Today, 96% of labour migrants work in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries, 1% are in other Middle Eastern countries, and 0.3% in European Union countries, besides other destinations.<sup>14</sup> Labour migration from Pakistan is dominated by men, the majority of whom are less skilled and are engaged in professions such as general labourers, drivers, masons, technicians, and carpenters.

In the 1970s, rising oil prices in the Gulf region created a huge demand for labour, attracting workers from South Asia, including Pakistan. **This is the time when Pakistan started developing its institutions aimed at promoting and streamlining labour migration from the country.**<sup>15</sup> Unlike prior flows of migrants towards the UK, which led to more permanent movements and was followed by family reunifications, migration towards the GCC countries was guided by more regularisations and conditions which inhibit permanent settlement and restrict family reunification.<sup>16</sup> Table 1 below depicts the distribution of Pakistani migrants across the world.

Table 1 Distribution of Overseas Pakistanis

Country/Region	Percentage of Overseas Pakistanis (1971-2016)
Middle East	53%
Europe	24%
Americas	15.3%
Africa	3.22%
Asia and Far East	2.35%
Australia and New Zealand	1.20%
Others	0.02%

Source: MOPHRD (2018)<sup>17</sup> based on estimates of 8.84 million Overseas Pakistanis.

In the late 1990s, another trend of migration from Pakistan emerged: irregular flows towards Europe. While the percentage of migrants opting for irregular flows is small compared to the proportion of

for International Migration, Remittances and Diaspora. Lahore School of Economics. Available at: <https://www.gids.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Migration-Report-2020-Complete-Grayscale-1.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) (2020). International Migration 2020 Highlights.

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development (MOPHRD) (2018). Year Book 2017-18. Government of Pakistan. Available at: <http://www.ophrd.gov.pk/SiteImage/Misc/files/Year-Book-2017-18.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE) (2021). Number of Pakistani Workers Registered by Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment for Emigration Abroad (1971-2021). Government of Pakistan. Available at: <https://beoe.gov.pk/files/statistics/2021/country.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE) (2020). Labour Migration Report 2020. Government of Pakistan. Available at: <https://beoe.gov.pk/files/statistics/yearly-reports/2020/2020-full.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Qaisrani, Ayesha (2020). Reaching Out, Inviting In: Pakistan's Approach to Diaspora Engagement. Migration and Development.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development (MOPHRD) (2018). Year Book 2017-18. Government of Pakistan. Available at: <http://www.ophrd.gov.pk/SiteImage/Misc/files/Year-Book-2017-18.pdf>

those going through legal channels, over the years irregular migratory flows towards Europe have garnered a lot of policy concern from the European countries.<sup>18</sup> **In fact, Pakistan has remained as one of the top ten countries of origin for irregular entries in Europe since the late 2000s**, reaching a peak in 2015 with 43,310 irregular border crossings detected by Pakistani migrants.<sup>19</sup> In 2011, there were 26,690 Pakistanis living irregularly in the EU. This number peaked in 2015, when a total of 73,640 Pakistanis were recorded to be irregularly present in the EU, but has since then reduced, totalling to 20,055 in 2020.<sup>20</sup>

Since the peak in 2015, the number of Pakistanis attempting to irregularly enter Europe has also declined considerably. In 2017, 10,015 attempted to enter Europe irregularly, while in 2019, 3,799 people were detected at borders, which further reduced to 3,377 in 2021.<sup>21</sup> Stricter border controls in host and transit countries have led to a large number of forced return of irregular migrants over the years. Just in 2020, about 19,145 Pakistanis were ordered to leave by European authorities, following which 2,065 Pakistani returned.<sup>22</sup> The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) of Pakistan also estimates that since 2015, about 618,877 Pakistanis have been forcibly returned from 138 countries across the world based on their unauthorised entry into the country, travelling with forged and fraudulent documents, or overstaying their legal stay period.<sup>23</sup> **As a result of restricted legal migration options due to uncertainties related to COVID-19, and geopolitical developments in the region (i.e. takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban regime), new trends of regular and irregular migration may emerge from Pakistan**, which are discussed in the chapters that follow.

## 2.2 Migration context in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is ranked as the **sixth** largest countries of origin for labour migrants, with an estimated population of 7.8 million living outside the borders.<sup>24</sup> Between 1976 and 2021, Bangladesh has exported 13.6 million migrant workers to different destinations, of which 76% migrated to the GCC countries, while other popular destinations include Malaysia (7.83%), Singapore (6.03%), Lebanon (1.98%), Jordan (1.45%) and Libya (0.91%).<sup>25</sup> Data for only two European countries is available publicly which shows that 0.41% migrate towards Italy, and 0.08% towards the UK. Most of the labour migrants (regular and irregular) are low skilled, and are engaged in low-paying, mostly labour-intensive jobs<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> Qaisrani, Ayesha, Rashid, Samar, and Ahmad, Yunas (forthcoming). Pakistan: Country Level Policy Review. MIGNEX.

<sup>19</sup> FRONTEX (2018). Annual Risk Analysis for 2018. Warsaw. Available at:

[https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk\\_Analysis/Risk\\_Analysis/Risk\\_Analysis\\_for\\_2018.pdf](https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Risk_Analysis/Risk_Analysis_for_2018.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> EUROSTAT (2021). Third Country Nationals Found to be Illegally Present - Annual Data (rounded). Available at:

[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR\\_EIPRE\\_custom\\_1786236/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_EIPRE_custom_1786236/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>21</sup> FRONTEX (2021). Migratory Map. Warsaw. Available at: [Migratory Map \(europa.eu\)](https://frontex.europa.eu/migratory-map/)

<sup>22</sup> EUROSTAT (2021). Third Country Nationals Returned following an Order to Leave (Annual). Available at :

<http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>

<sup>23</sup> Gishkori, Zahid (2021, June 24). 283 Pakistanis Being Deported Every Day since 2015. The News. Available at:

<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/854253-283-pakistanis-being-deported-every-day-since-2015>

<sup>24</sup> International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2020). Bangladesh: Survey on Drivers of Migration and Migrants' Profile. Displacement Tracking Mechanism (DTM). Available at: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/SDM\\_BGDFINAL\\_gov.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/SDM_BGDFINAL_gov.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) (2021). Overseas Employment and Remittances from 1976 – 2021 (up to May). Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment. Available at: <http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction>

<sup>26</sup> BMET 2019.

Estimates about Bangladeshi diaspora are somewhat outdated<sup>27</sup> and are based on guestimates of government officials who have first-hand experience with Bangladeshis abroad. According to these estimates, as of 2004, the top three destinations of Bangladeshi diaspora are the UK, the USA, and Italy, with a population size of 900,000, 800,000 and 400,000 respectively.<sup>28</sup> Among other European countries, significant numbers of Bangladeshi population reside in Greece (80,000), Spain (20,000), France (7,000), the Netherlands (6,000), Belgium (5,000) and Switzerland (2,000).<sup>29</sup>

Similar to the trajectory of Pakistan, **labour migration flows from Bangladesh** to the Gulf started in the 1970s following the oil boom, soon after Bangladesh's independence.<sup>30</sup> Prior to this, permanent or long-term migration trends of Bangladesh can also be traced back to pre-independence times with initial flows towards Burma, Assam, and Calcutta during the British times, and later large scale flows towards the US and the UK after partition in 1947, and then towards the GCC countries in the 1970s. Around 2014, new migrant flows initiated towards Singapore to fill in the labour demand in its construction industry. Today, the Bangladeshi diaspora is estimated to be spread across 89 countries across the world.<sup>31</sup>

While traditionally, labour migration from Bangladesh is also male-dominated as in Pakistan, **an increase in female labour migration** has been observed over the years as a result of relaxation in restrictions for female mobility and incentives such as no cost migration opportunities for women (after policy reforms introduced in 2003)<sup>32</sup> combined with stricter regulations for male migrants to the GCC countries. The most popular destination countries for female Bangladeshi migrants are UAE, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, Lebanon and Mauritius, where most are employed as domestic workers.<sup>33</sup> In certain countries, women are also increasingly being hired in the garment industry. The latest data shows that the gender-ratio of international migrants is 85% male and 15% female.<sup>34</sup>

Besides the regular flows of labour migrants, **irregular migration from Bangladesh is also on the rise**. Historically, because of the long and previously porous border with India (about 4000 km long), many Bangladeshi migrants migrated to India undocumented.<sup>35</sup> Since the late 2000s, the number of Bangladeshis irregularly present in Europe has also risen according to EUROSTAT data. In 2008, the number was 3,995, which gradually increased to 12,705 in 2012. A sudden spike was observed in 2015 when 17,125 Bangladeshis were recorded to be irregularly present in Europe, which reduced by more

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<sup>27</sup> Studies as recent as 2018 have used data from a 2004 report: "Institutionalizing Diaspora Linkage- the Emigrant Bangladeshis in UK and USA, Ministry of Expatriate's Welfare and Overseas Employment, Government of Bangladesh and International Organization for Migration (IOM), Dhaka, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> Ministry of Finance and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2018). Engagement of Non-resident Bangladeshis (NRBs) in National Development: Strategies, Challenges and Way Forward. Available at: [https://erd.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/erd.portal.gov.bd/page/83abb6f9\\_b264\\_45f9\\_92c0\\_2596b2421dc9/NRB.pdf](https://erd.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/erd.portal.gov.bd/page/83abb6f9_b264_45f9_92c0_2596b2421dc9/NRB.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Prasenjit, Prateek (2021, March 26). Bangladeshi Diaspora: A Force Multiplier, from Culture to Economy. Available at: <https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/bangladeshi-diaspora-a-force-multiplier-from-culture-to-economy-373426>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ali, Sheikh Muhammad Refat (2021). Female Migrant Workers' Employment: Challenges and Ways to Overcome. Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> BMET (2019).

<sup>35</sup> Etzold, Benjamin and Mallick, Bishawjit (2015, November 30). International Migration from Bangladesh. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung. Available at: <https://www.bpb.de/gesellschaft/migration/laenderprofile/216104/international-migration-from-bangladesh>

than half the next year (6,870). In 2020, there were 8,510 Bangladeshis found to be irregularly present in Europe.<sup>36</sup>

**Even amidst the pandemic, a sharp spike of irregular Bangladeshi migrants was recorded on the European borders.** About 5,414 irregular Bangladeshi migrants were found to be irregularly entering Europe in 2020, and about 8,667 in 2021, reflecting a higher flow than the previous two years (2,043 in 2018 and 2,254 in 2019).<sup>37</sup> A sudden uptick in irregular entries was noted on the Central Mediterranean Route by Bangladeshi migrants – from 750 in 2019 to 4,447 in 2020 and 7,574 in 2021. These were noted to be flows from Libya, which is a popular labour migration destination for Bangladeshis, reflecting that some regular migrants may have opted for irregular migration towards Europe as the pandemic hit. For European stakeholders, this trend, if continued, may be of concern, hence this analysis draws on experts' opinion to understand the potential of this trend to scale up in the near future.

**The global economic halt due to COVID-19 however greatly impacted population flows to and from Bangladesh.** In 2020, only 217,669 people migrated abroad from Bangladesh showing a decline of 69% as compared to the previous year, with the majority (74%) headed towards Saudi Arabia.<sup>38</sup> Of these, more than 80% had migrated between the months of January to March, before COVID-19 related lockdowns were enforced. About 21,934 migrants of these were female. About 100,000 people who had applied for overseas employment and completed the requirements could not migrate due to the travel restrictions and lockdowns. In 2020, the sectors that experienced major job losses for Bangladeshi workers in the Gulf are tourism, services and construction. Estimates suggest that as a result of COVID-19, some 408,000 labour migrants returned to Bangladesh in 2020,<sup>39</sup> a rate which is eight times higher than the annual average of the previous years.<sup>40</sup> Of these, 46,000 returnees were female. However, in 2021, the flow picked pace again close to pre-COVID-19 levels as restrictions were eased and about 617,209 Bangladeshi labour migrated abroad.<sup>41</sup>

### 2.3 The significance of remittances in Pakistan and Bangladesh

For both Pakistan and Bangladesh, the importance of remittances cannot be undermined. Emigration eases **labour market pressures** and **provides employment** to hundreds of thousands of workers in the two countries with already high domestic unemployment rates (4.5% for Pakistan and 5.3% for Bangladesh in 2020).<sup>42</sup> Besides buffering unemployment for many, emigration is also a major **source**

<sup>36</sup> EUROSTAT (2021). Third Country Nationals Found to be Illegally Present - Annual Data (rounded). Available at:

[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR\\_EIPRE\\_custom\\_1786236/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/MIGR_EIPRE_custom_1786236/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>37</sup> FRONTEX (2021). Risk Analysis for 2021. Warsaw. Available at: <https://euagenda.eu/upload/publications/risk-analysis-2021.pdf>

FRONTEX (2021). Migratory Maps. Warsaw. Available at: [Migratory Map \(europa.eu\)](https://migratory-map.europa.eu)

<sup>38</sup> Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) (2020). Overseas Employment in 2020. Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment. Available at: <http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction>

<sup>39</sup> Statistics of Return Migrants from 1st April to 31 December 2020, Welfare Desk, Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, Dhaka. Quoted in Refugee and Migration Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) (2020). Labour Migration from Bangladesh 2020: Achievements and Challenges. Available at: <http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Migration-Trends-Report-2020.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> Refugee and Migration Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) (2020). Labour Migration from Bangladesh 2020: Achievements and Challenges. Available at: <http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Migration-Trends-Report-2020.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) (2020). Overseas Employment in 2021. Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment. Available at: <http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction>

<sup>42</sup> World Development Indicators (2020). Unemployment % of total labour force. The World Bank. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=PK>

**of foreign revenue** for both the countries through the inflow of remittances. In the fiscal year (FY) 2019-20, Pakistan received \$23.1 billion as remittances,<sup>43</sup> and Bangladesh received a total of \$21.7 billion, amounting to about 7% of the GDP.<sup>44</sup> In the FY 2020-21, Pakistan received \$29.4 billion and Bangladesh received \$22 billion as remittances.

Major sources of remittance inflows in Pakistan are Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the UK, and the US, together accounting for more than \$15 billion in 2019. The biggest contributors of remittances remained the same for 2020 and 2021 except that remittances from the EU replaced the US in the fourth place in 2021 (between July – October).<sup>45</sup> Similarly, the top sources of remittances in Bangladesh are Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the USA, contributing about 19.9%, 14.9%, and 11.3% respectively to the total remittance inflow in 2018-19. Within Europe, the UK contributed 7.7%, Italy 4.4%, and Germany contributed 0.3% to the total of \$18.3 billion remittance inflow in the same year.<sup>46</sup> Some studies also relate unemployment benefits given to the citizens in the US as a factor leading to consistent high remittances from the US to Bangladesh, which could also hold true for the rise of remittances from the EU to Pakistan.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, **while the record high inflows from Saudi Arabia was a pleasant surprise for the economies of Pakistan and Bangladesh, it could also be the cause of largescale layoffs in Saudi Arabia, pushing migrants to send off their savings back to their countries.**

Of interest to note is that both **Pakistan and Bangladesh defied popular forecasts predicting a sharp fall in remittances** due to the COVID-19 related lockdowns and global economic slowdowns. Although both countries experienced a decline in remittances between March and May 2020, remittances inflow increased drastically thereafter, demonstrating an uptick of 27% in Pakistan in June 2020-21<sup>48</sup> and a rise by 34% in Bangladesh during the same time period.<sup>49</sup> While the amount of remittances soared, it does not indicate that migrants have not experienced a negative impact of the pandemic in terms of their earnings and savings. For Bangladesh, the Refugee and Migration Movement Research Unit (RMMRU) opines that many migrants have sent more money in 2020 as they were apprehensive about the safety of their savings in the banks of host countries.<sup>50</sup>

A number of **factors** explain this growth in remittances, including the governments' efforts to channel remittance flow through **formal mechanisms and digital means** by providing cash incentives,

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<sup>43</sup> Zaidi, Erum (2021, July 24). Remittances Record Fastest Growth in Two Decades to Reach \$29.4 billion'. The News. Available at: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/863698-remittances-record-fastest-growth-in-two-decades-to-reach-29-4bln>

<sup>44</sup> Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) (2020). Overseas Employment in 2020. Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment. Available at: <http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/statisticalDataAction>

<sup>45</sup> Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (2019). Annual Analysis of Manpower Export 2019. Government of Pakistan. Available at: <https://beoe.gov.pk/files/statistics/yearly-reports/2019/2019-full.pdf>

State Bank of Pakistan (2021). Country-wise Workers' Remittances. Government of Pakistan. Available at: <https://www.sbp.org.pk/ecodata/Homeremit.pdf>

<sup>46</sup> Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) (2019). Wage Earners Remittance Inflow: Country Wise (Monthly) 2019. Available at: <http://www.old.bmet.gov.bd/BMET/viewStatReport.action?reportnumber=10>

<sup>47</sup> Uddin, Mahtab (2020, October 5). Remittances in the time of Pandemic. Financial Express. Available at: <http://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/>

<sup>48</sup> Zaidi, Erum (2021, July 24). Remittances Record Fastest Growth in Two Decades to Reach \$29.4 billion'. The News. Available at: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/863698-remittances-record-fastest-growth-in-two-decades-to-reach-29-4bln>

<sup>49</sup> Uddin, Mahtab (2020, October 5). Remittances in the time of Pandemic. Financial Express. Available at: <http://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/>

<sup>50</sup> Refugee and Migration Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) (2020). Labour Migration from Bangladesh 2020: Achievements and Challenges. Available at: <http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Migration-Trends-Report-2020.pdf>

unavailability of informal, in-person channels of remittances transfer due to COVID-19 restrictions, altruistic transfers to family members in times of adversity (COVID-19 and floods in Bangladesh), redirecting savings made for Hajj towards families due to border closures, increased transfers during months of Eid, etc. More recently, the Government of Bangladesh increased the cash incentive on remittances from 2% to 2.5% and the Government of Pakistan introduced an incremental cash reward based on the amount remitted (e.g. 1% for remittances up to \$10,000, 1.25% for up to \$30,000 and 1.5% for an annual remittance of more than \$30,000).<sup>51</sup> Mass return of migrants due to job loss and unemployment at destination is also one of the prime reasons for the sudden spike in the remittance growth, as many returnees brought back with them all their savings in view of the uncertainty caused by COVID-19.<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, in both countries, the actual impact of the shifts in flows of migration may be experienced with a lag as the **slowdown in the rate of migration may reflect in reduced remittances in the following years**. Change of policies in the Gulf region leading to a stricter quota for foreign workers may lead to a decline in remittances in the future.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> World Remit (2021). Bangladesh Cash Incentive. Available at: <https://www.worldremit.com/en/bangladesh-cash-incentive>  
Kiani, Khaleeq (2021, August 30). Points Earned through Remittances to be Redeemed in Cash. Available at:  
<https://www.dawn.com/news/1643380>

<sup>52</sup> International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) (2021). Regional Migration Outlook 2020: South and West Asia (Silk Routes). Silk Routes Regional Coordination Office. Available at:  
<https://www.icmpd.org/file/download/51562/file/ICMPD%2520Migration%2520Outlook%2520Silk%2520Routes%2520Region%25202021.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> Uddin, Mahtab (2020, October 5). Remittances in the time of Pandemic. Financial Express. Available at:  
<http://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/>

### 3 COVID-19: Returns to Pakistan and Bangladesh

With the onset of COVID-19, the economic aftermath and border closures brought the issue of managing overseas labour at the forefront of policy decisions in both Bangladesh and Pakistan. **Neither country has an official policy for return and reintegration of migrants.** While Pakistan's forthcoming National Emigration and Welfare Policy for Migrants (developed with technical assistance provided by ICMPD) includes a section on return and reintegration, it does not reflect in detail on mechanisms to adopt for crises-induced returns such as the one experienced due to COVID-19. More recently, the MOPHRD in Pakistan has requested ICMPD to develop a comprehensive reintegration policy framework catering to all returnees, independent of countries of destination. Similarly, the Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment Policy 2016 of Bangladesh also mentions the need for a thorough plan for reintegration of returning migrants, but the country lacked a comprehensive return and reintegration policy when the pandemic hit. In both countries, the policy response during the pandemic, however, has been guided by their respective COVID-19 national action plans, which focus on the following policy priorities: i) repatriation; ii) registration and profiling; and iii) reintegration.

Of course, **repatriation of stranded labour migrants** was the prime policy concern initially. Both the Pakistani and Bangladeshi governments introduced special repatriation measures through chartered flights as well as negotiating agreements with host country governments to prevent mass layoffs and forced returns. Besides the arrangements for return, the respective governments also provided ration food and emergency accommodation to those in need through the missions in host countries.

By July 2020, the Pakistani government claims bringing back about 300,000 Pakistani citizens through 535 special flights.<sup>54</sup> Overall, the highest number of returnees in 2020 were from the UAE (154,856), Saudi Arabia (63,595), and Qatar (17,062). Returnees not only included migrant workers, but also visitors, pilgrims, and detainees in destination countries. **As per government officials' estimate shared during KII, about 250,000 of the returnees were labour migrants.** During the same period (2020), a total of 19,145 Pakistanis in Europe were ordered to leave the EU. About 2065 people returned following an order to leave.<sup>55</sup>

In Bangladesh, estimates suggest that as a result of COVID-19, **some 408,408 labour migrants returned to Bangladesh,**<sup>56</sup> a rate which is eight times higher than the annual average of the previous years.<sup>57</sup> Of these, 49,924 returnees were female. Overall, in 2020 the highest number of total returnees were

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<sup>54</sup> The Express Tribune (2020, July 28). Pakistan Completes 99% of the Repatriation Process. Available at: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2257109/pakistan-completes-99-of-repatriation-process>

<sup>55</sup> EUROSTAT (2021). Third Country Nationals Returned following an Order to Leave. Available at: <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>

<sup>56</sup> Statistics of Return Migrants from 1st April to 31 December 2020, Welfare Desk, Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, Dhaka. Quoted in Refugee and Migration Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) (2020). Labour Migration from Bangladesh 2020: Achievements and Challenges. Available at: <http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Migration-Trends-Report-2020.pdf>

<sup>57</sup> Refugee and Migration Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) (2020). Labour Migration from Bangladesh 2020: Achievements and Challenges. Available at: <http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Migration-Trends-Report-2020.pdf>

from Saudi Arabia (119,172), the UAE (112,966), and Qatar (49,252).<sup>58</sup> In 2020, EU had ordered about 9,400 Bangladeshis to return to Bangladesh. About 515 returned following an order to leave.<sup>59</sup>

**Registration and documentation** was another priority area of concern. Up until the pandemic, there were no mechanisms in place to register return migrants in Pakistan and Bangladesh to understand the trends, profiles and rates of return. However, the mass returns witnessed as a result of COVID-19 necessitated this gap to be filled. In Pakistan, MOPHRD initiated the documentation and registration of returnees to create a database, determining their profiles and skills in order to provide relevant services for their reintegration. This task was delegated to the Overseas Employment Corporation (OEC) under the MOPHRD which developed an online portal for registration of returnees. According to official records as shared during the KIIs, the database holds information for 94,000 returnees (as of October 2021). This may not be a representation of the actual number of the returnees, as it only includes information of those who self-registered themselves. Effort is currently underway to expand the outreach of this database to enrol more returnees (besides COVID-19 induced returnees).

Similarly, the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies partnered with the MoEWOE to gather a large dataset on returnee migrants, arriving at the airports. The database is designed to help in reintegration efforts by determining the **profile of returning migrants, monitoring their whereabouts and health, and provide support for reintegration measures**. The MoEWOE also collaborated with IOM to design another database called the Returning Migrants Management of Information Systems (ReMiMIS). This database is designed to **collect and analyse information on returnees' skills** for skill profiling for fulfilling relevant labour demand and also supporting the design of a comprehensive reintegration programmes.<sup>60</sup>

Besides safe repatriation and developing returnee databases, **economic reintegration of the returning migrants** was a prime consideration for the two governments. In Pakistan, the emergency social protection programme (worth PKR 200 billion; approx. 1 billion euros), called the Ehsaas Emergency Cash Programme, was introduced to provide relief to the most vulnerable population during COVID-19, however, it did not cover returned migrants.<sup>61</sup> This was a major lacuna that hampered provision of emergency relief to the underprivileged returnees and their families. While not covered under social protection, a number of programmes have been introduced for the economic, and to a smaller extent, social reintegration of returnees. These include an effort to guide and counsel returnees about employment prospects and jobs in Pakistan and abroad, investment in skilling and re-skilling of migrants through the joint venture between OPF and GIZ's Pakistan-Germany Facilitation and Reintegration Centre (PGFRC), and integration of returnees into the national entrepreneurship scheme

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<sup>58</sup> International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2020). Returnee Sitrep: Number of Bangladeshi Migrants Returned due to COVID-19, April-December 2020. Available at:

[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Returnee%20Sitrep\\_GoB\\_Apr%20to%20Dec%202020\\_19May2021\\_Final\\_V2.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Returnee%20Sitrep_GoB_Apr%20to%20Dec%202020_19May2021_Final_V2.pdf)

<sup>59</sup> EUROSTAT (2021). Third Country Nationals Returned following an Order to Leave (Annual) Available at:

<http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>

<sup>60</sup> IOM (2021). First-ever Digital Data Platform for Improved Reintegration of Returning Migrants. Available at:

<https://bangladesh.iom.int/news/first-ever-digital-data-platform-improved-reintegration-returning-migrants>

<sup>61</sup> Criteria for eligibility to Ehsaas Emergency Cash Grant excludes people with a biometric National ID card, and a passport – both conditions making migrant workers ineligible for the scheme.

called Kamyab Jawaan Programme which offers seed loans for initiating small business ventures.<sup>62</sup> While most of these programmes were introduced to cater to COVID-19 induced returnees, some of the initiatives such as the PGFRC were already in place, but had not been scaled up to cover returnees from non-European countries previously. Moreover, most programmes seem to be at a smaller scale or ad hoc.

Similarly, the Government of Bangladesh introduced a special stimulus package worth 75 million Euros for the reintegration of returning migrants.<sup>63</sup> This package was made available to returning migrants in the form of low-interest loans for skill development and capacity building and/or initiating small ventures for self-employment. Moreover, survivors of migrants who died due to COVID-19 while in destination countries could also access these funds. Additionally, to encourage entrepreneurship among returnees, the Probashi Kallyan Bank (PKB) introduced loans with a ceiling of BDT 500,000 (approx. 4,855 euros ) at 4% interest rate. The government also allocated BDT 200 million (approx. 19 million euros) in cash incentives for stranded workers through Bangladeshi missions abroad.<sup>64</sup> The Wage Earners' Welfare Board also partnered with the World Bank to provide cash incentives for the reintegration of returning migrants. The government also introduced measures to accredit the skills acquired in host countries through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) through certifications and reskilling through short trainings in order for them to find relevant employment. As informed by a government representative, about 200 returnees have been certified through the RPL programme so far (as of October 2021).

A study conducted by Sahai et al. (2021) argues that **the application process for these loans, as well as the relatively high interest rate made it difficult for deserving migrants to access these funds.** ICMPD's recent needs assessment study<sup>65</sup> also notes that most of the returnees are not well educated, and hence find it difficult to start businesses on return on their own. Moreover, the loan service was only available to labour migrants who used legal pathways of migration. Irregular migrants were not eligible for this scheme.

In addition to the government-led initiatives, relevant international organisations such as IOM, ILO and GIZ have provided immediate services (food, accommodation, counselling) and medium term services for economic and psychosocial reintegration of the returnees through skill development, job matching services, and facilitating enterprise development in both countries.<sup>66</sup> However, **the role of local civil society organisations focused on reintegration of returnees was more prominent in Bangladesh than in Pakistan.** Organisations such as BRAC, Ovbashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP) and WARBE foundation were quite active in providing relief, rehabilitation, registration, and reintegration services for the returnees. For re-migration, support in vaccination and registration was also of high

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<sup>62</sup>Siddiqi, Zishan Ahmad (2021).Rapid Assessment: the Impact of COVID-19 on Labour Migration Governance, Recruitment Practices, and Migrant Workers. ILO REFRAME Project Pakistan.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> UNDP (2020). Covid-19: An Uncertain Homecoming for Bangladeshi Migrant Workers, UNDP in Bangladesh. Available at: <https://www.bd.undp.org/content/bangladesh/en/home/stories/2020/covid-19--an-uncertain-homecoming-for-bangladeshi-migrant-worker.html>

<sup>65</sup> Centre for Women and Children Studies (CWCS) and Pathways Consulting Services Lt. (PCSL) (2020). Information Needs of Potential and Returnees in Bangladesh: Migrant Resource Centres. ICMPD.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

importance. MRCs in Bangladesh provided support to migrant workers for their registration on the vaccine portal and providing safety kits at the airports.

While the process of devising a comprehensive framework for the reintegration of returnees was underway in both countries, and in its infancy at best before COVID-19, **large-scale returns due to the pandemic are opined by experts to give an impetus to institutional strengthening related to return and reintegration.**

### 3.1 Profile of COVID-induced returnees

This section draws on the KIIs carried out with relevant stakeholders, official data collected from government institutions, and rapid assessment surveys carried out by international organisations such as ILO and IOM.

#### 3.1.1 Age and gender demographics of returnees

Data from official sources in both countries shows that the average age of return was slightly higher than the average age of potential migrants in both countries. In Pakistan, as per OEC data shared during a KII, the average age of returnees registered with the data portal is 36 years, while in Bangladesh, the official age range of returnees is 30-44 years.<sup>67</sup> According to the Needs Assessment Study conducted by ICMPD's MRC (Bangladesh), most of the migrants who return to Bangladesh by choice are above the age of 45. **The fact that the majority of the returnees in 2020 range younger reflects that even if migrants returned voluntarily, this was not the ideal choice for them, rather they were forced to make this decision based on their circumstances.**

Return migration to Pakistan was predominantly male – a reflection of the male majority labour migration trends, while in Bangladesh about 12% of the returnees were female.<sup>68</sup> A heavy majority of female migrants from Bangladesh are employed as domestic workers in the destination countries, and during the lockdowns, as people were confined to their homes and more in need of domestic help, many female workers were able to retain their jobs to support these families.<sup>69</sup>

#### 3.1.2 Places of origin and return

In terms of districts of return, in Pakistan the returnees registered with the government data portal hail originally from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Tribal Areas (now included in KP). The top five districts of origin for the returnees are all in KP, including Kurram Agency, Khyber Agency, Bannu, Peshawar and Bajaur Agency.<sup>70</sup> Although labour migration from KP and former tribal areas is increasing, the top sending districts are still in Punjab. **The trends of return, therefore, differ from the trends of**

<sup>67</sup> IOM (2020). Rapid Assessment: Needs and Vulnerabilities of Internal and International Return Migrants in Bangladesh. Available at: [https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/BGD\\_Returnee\\_edited2.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=9220](https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/BGD_Returnee_edited2.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=9220)

<sup>68</sup> International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2020). Returnee Sitrep: Number of Bangladeshi Migrants Returned due to COVID-19, April-December 2020. Available at:

[https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Returnee%20Sitrep\\_GoB\\_Apr%20to%20Dec%202020\\_19May2021\\_Final\\_V2.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Returnee%20Sitrep_GoB_Apr%20to%20Dec%202020_19May2021_Final_V2.pdf)

<sup>69</sup> Sahai, Ridhi, Bansal, Vaiddehi, Sikder, Muhammad Jalal Uddin, Kysia, Kareem, and Shen, Sharon (2021). Shattered Dreams: Bangladeshi Migrant Workers during a Global Pandemic. *Journal of Modern Slavery*. vol.6, no. 2.

<sup>70</sup> Information obtained from BEOE.

Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), including the Bajaur, Kurram, Khyber agencies have been merged with KP under a constitutional amendment passed in 2018. They are now referred to as Newly-merged Districts of KP.

**outmigration.** This finding may reflect two aspects: i) migrant workers from KP were engaged in more vulnerable employment situations in destination countries and experienced more layoffs and consequent returns perhaps due to the recent emerging trend of migration, partially fuelled by protracted conflict in the region; or ii) since the data portal is based on self-registration, more returnees from KP registered with the portal owing to a targeted advocacy campaign or word of mouth. So, while this finding should be interpreted keeping this caveat in mind, it also posits important questions about the changing trends of migration dynamics over the years related to geographic distribution. Moreover, current trends of irregular migration from Pakistan to Europe are largely from Central Punjab, rather than from KP.<sup>71</sup> **The high rate of return to KP may indicate that the tendency to opt for irregular migration towards Europe may actually be low as the trend is not very common in KP.**

In Bangladesh, in a survey conducted by IOM among 1,486 international returnees in May and June 2020,<sup>72</sup> the highest number of returnees were from Chattogram, followed by Dhaka, Brahmanbaria, and Cox's Bazaar. In terms of labour migration between 2005 and 2019, district Cumilla has the highest outflow of migrants (939,773 migrants), while in the rapid assessment by IOM, Cumilla ranked at fifth place with regard to returns. Chattogram, Brahmanbaria, and Dhaka rank second, third, and fifth respectively in terms of labour migration, showing that the trend of return has largely mirrored outmigration patterns from Bangladesh. In this case, **the fact that the age and district of origin of returning migrants is closer to the profile of irregular migrants from Bangladesh, there may be a chance that some returnees may attempt irregular migration if travel options to traditional destinations remain restricted over time, depending upon their aspirations.**

### 3.1.3 Reasons of return

Generally, returning migrants during COVID-19 can be categorised into **three main segments** for the case of Pakistan and Bangladesh:

- i) Those who returned temporarily (for family visits etc.) before the lockdowns were enforced due to COVID-19 and could not return to their countries of employment;
- ii) Those who were forced to return due to layoffs and unemployment in host countries, as well as those whose work permits and visas expired during the pandemic; and
- iii) Those who voluntarily returned to Pakistan to be with family or following wage cuts in employment.<sup>73</sup>

Information from BEOE in Pakistan shows that most of the returning migrants were engaged as drivers, labourers, technical assistants, foremen, and electricians in the host countries.<sup>74</sup> A post-COVID-19

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<sup>71</sup> Hahn-Schaur, Katharina (2021). Awareness Raising and Information Campaigns on the Risks of Irregular Migration in Pakistan (PARIM). Background Report. Vienna: ICMPD.

<sup>72</sup> IOM (2020). Rapid Assessment: Needs and Vulnerabilities of Internal and International Return Migrants in Bangladesh. Available at: [https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/BGD\\_Returnee\\_edited2.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=9220](https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/BGD_Returnee_edited2.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=9220)

<sup>73</sup> Categories as defined during multiple KIIs.

<sup>74</sup> Information obtained from BEOE officials.

study<sup>75</sup> conducted by ILO included several returnees in their sample.<sup>76</sup> The study shows that 34% of the returnees were visiting Pakistan on scheduled leaves and were then unable to return to their jobs, while 29% returned due to business closures following lockdowns in host countries, and 31% were laid off or sent on forced leave by their employers. Only 5% returned voluntarily to be with their families. Even those who returned temporarily on scheduled leaves were uncertain when they would be able to go back to their jobs, and many feared layoff from their employers due to extended absences. Many were also experiencing salary cuts and delayed payments, as reported in survey by ILO.

Among the respondents of IOM's trend assessment in Bangladesh, 29% shared that they were told to leave the host country, 23% returned voluntarily due to fears of COVID-19, 14% had returned on scheduled leave and were unable to return because of border closures, another 14% returned due to family reasons, and 12% were asked to return by the families due to fear of COVID-19.<sup>77</sup> The qualitative Needs Assessment Study for MRCs reveals that both regular and irregular migrants returned during COVID-19 because of job loss, lack of money, and lack of medicines in case of illness. Experts interviewed for this study also mentioned that while the economic situation in host countries became dire leading to layoffs, **many migrants also made panicked return decisions**, even though they did not necessarily lose their jobs.

### 3.1.4 Current employment status

The returnee data portal in Pakistan does not currently have updated status of returnees' employment. One of the main reasons is that the **registration with the portal is voluntary** and relevant stakeholders shared that many returnees do not update their status on the portal if they find employment. In Bangladesh as well, **lack of a formal mechanism for returnee management** makes it difficult to determine any change in their employment status. Multiple experts stated that the main reason for lack of comprehensive information on returnees is that they do not have a working cell phone number when they arrive at the airport, so even though the number of returnees is being recorded, follow-up detail on their reintegration progress is difficult to track.

However, in Bangladesh a few post-COVID rapid assessments of returnees have been conducted which help in understanding the status of returnees.<sup>78</sup> In all of these surveys, an overwhelming majority of returnees in the sample were found to be **unemployed and the daily wagers** were the second most common category, depicting that a heavy majority of the returnees were in a vulnerable employment upon return.

While the domestic labour markets are already under pressure, returnees may experience further difficulties as the skills they have developed over the years abroad may not match the labour demand

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<sup>75</sup> Siddiqi, Zishan Ahmad (2021). Rapid Assessment: the Impact of COVID-19 on Labour Migration Governance, Recruitment Practices, and Migrant Workers. ILO REFRAME Project Pakistan.

<sup>76</sup> Out of the 80 respondents in their sample for KIIs, 34 were returnees.

<sup>77</sup> IOM (2020). Rapid Assessment: Needs and Vulnerabilities of Internal and International Return Migrants in Bangladesh. Available at: [https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/BGD\\_Returnee\\_edited2.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=9220](https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/BGD_Returnee_edited2.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=9220)

<sup>78</sup> IOM (2020). Rapid Assessment: Needs and Vulnerabilities of Internal and International Return Migrants in Bangladesh. Available at: [https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/BGD\\_Returnee\\_edited2.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=9220](https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/BGD_Returnee_edited2.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=9220); Centre for Women and Children Studies (CWCS) and Pathways Consulting Services Lt. (PCSL) (2020). Information Needs of Potential and Returnees in Bangladesh: Migrant Resource Centres. ICMPD; USAID and Winrock International (2020, July). Situational Assessment of Labour Migrants in Asia: Needs and Knowledge during COVID-19. Available at: [https://winrock.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Bangladesh\\_migrant-study-.pdf](https://winrock.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Bangladesh_migrant-study-.pdf)

in countries of origin.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, their vulnerabilities are often magnified as they are **ineligible for social protection** under the present conditions of accessing emergency cash schemes due to their perceived higher economic status as migrant returnees (as in the case of Pakistan).<sup>80</sup>

High and protracted unemployment have also affected savings of returnees, if any, which may impact any future investment opportunities for business initiatives. While the government and international organisations have introduced certain financial instruments for start-ups, a key point to consider is that most of the returnees in Pakistan and Bangladesh are from GCC countries where they were in contractual employments. Although they might have developed certain skills while they were abroad, they **do not necessarily have the aptitude to run and sustain businesses**, especially during uncertain times such as COVID-19. To that end, the government-led interventions for skilling and re-skilling may prove fruitful to meet the skill demand of the domestic labour market, however, the value of investment in these skills also depends on returnees own' aspirations and plans for the future.

Another relevant point of concern for the two countries is the status of future migrants who had made all the arrangements for migration and paid all the costs, but could not travel due to the sudden closures. **Some of them lost their jobs even before joining them**, and lost all the money they spent on making the arrangements. With the focus on returnees, the stakeholder highlighted, this vulnerable group often falls through the cracks of policy attention.

### 3.1.5 Future aspirations

Stakeholders with direct interaction with returnees shared that **the aspiration to re-migrate is high among returnees, especially among the young returnees**. This observation held true for both Pakistan and Bangladesh, and is also reflected in the rapid assessments carried out with returnees.<sup>81</sup> It is estimated that by October 2020, about 284,000 people who were stuck in Bangladesh returned to their countries of work to resume their jobs,<sup>82</sup> reflecting a high tendency among migrants to re-migrate. For Pakistan, official data depicting re-migration is not publicly available. Although the scale of migration has been affected severely for both the countries, the general trends appear to have retained the pre-COVID-19 characteristics. As migration reopened slowly, highest flows continued to be towards Saudi Arabia for Bangladeshi workers, followed by Oman, Singapore, Jordan and Qatar.<sup>83</sup> For Pakistan, while data does not differentiate between re-migration and first time migration, the highest number of migrants headed to Saudi Arabia, followed by Qatar and Oman in 2020 and 2021. In pre-COVID-19 times, the UAE was the second most common destination for Pakistani migrants,

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<sup>79</sup> Siddiqi, Zishan Ahmad (2021). Rapid Assessment: the Impact of COVID-19 on Labour Migration Governance, Recruitment Practices, and Migrant Workers. ILO REFRAME Project Pakistan.

<sup>80</sup> As echoed by 3 key informants.

<sup>81</sup> IOM (2020). Rapid Assessment: Needs and Vulnerabilities of Internal and International Return Migrants in Bangladesh. Available at: [https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/BGD\\_Returnee\\_edited2.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=9220](https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/BGD_Returnee_edited2.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=9220); Centre for Women and Children Studies (CWCS) and Pathways Consulting Services Lt. (PCSL) (2020). Information Needs of Potential and Returnees in Bangladesh: Migrant Resource Centres. ICMPD; USAID and Winrock International (2020, July). Situational Assessment of Labour Migrants in Asia: Needs and Knowledge during COVID-19. Available at: [https://winrock.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Bangladesh\\_migrant-study-.pdf](https://winrock.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Bangladesh_migrant-study-.pdf)

<sup>82</sup> RMMRU (2020)

<sup>83</sup> Refugee and Migration Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) (2020). Labour Migration from Bangladesh 2020: Achievements and Challenges. Available at: <http://www.rmmru.org/newsite/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Migration-Trends-Report-2020.pdf>

however, flows towards the UAE have declined considerably (211,216 in 2019, as compared to 53,676 in 2020, and just 27,442 in 2021).<sup>84</sup>

Discussions with the MRC coordinators in both countries also revealed that returnees approach them with questions regarding re-migration options to the same countries of destination where they returned from (mostly GCC countries). Moreover, **remigration was of interest to not only those returning from the Gulf countries, but also those that returned through IOM's AVRR programme to Pakistan and Bangladesh.**<sup>85</sup>

However, as identified by several experts, the desire to re-migrate and find gainful employment depends on a number of factors including the returnees' age, skillset, their relationship with previous employer, their contractual conditions, and their social network in the host country etc. **Younger returnees are more motivated to re-migrate** as compared to those closer to the age of retirement. Similarly, **those with specialised skills that are still considered 'in-demand'** in host countries are more hopeful to find employment in host countries as the travel restrictions become eased. **Returnees with valid work permits are more eagerly counting on opening up of flights** and many have already returned to the host countries (mostly GCC countries for both Pakistan and Bangladesh) to their previous jobs or in search of new ones. **Those with a stronger social network in the host country**, as well as those who have spent more time in the country previously are more confident about finding employment opportunities again.

Both the Pakistani and Bangladeshi governments are prioritising the vaccination of those who hold valid work permits for different destinations, and are making efforts to offer vaccinations as per the demands of destination countries, showing that **remigration trends are backed with government support**, as informed by the stakeholders. In Bangladesh, re-migration is also being supported through remigration financing at easy terms to those with valid jobs in host countries as well as through support for PCR testing and providing relief for quarantine expenses through subsidies provided in certain destination countries such as Saudi Arabia.

In the meantime, **while job search facilities and financial instruments for small enterprises are welcomed by the returnees, as shared by some experts, they are often considered as 'temporary fixes' while they await another chance to migrate, mostly to the same host countries as before.** In Pakistan, some also got absorbed in construction work on their return as a result of a boom in the sector following government-led incentives to revive economic growth, as well as in the textile industry. However, a key government official in Pakistan expressed that even this employment is a temporary solution for most returnees as they want to re-migrate. An interesting point highlighted during one of the interviews is that returnees from GCC countries are more interested to find employment, while returnees from Europe are keener on starting a business using seed money provided by reintegration services. Intentions of re-migration may, therefore, also explain why government-led financial initiatives for entrepreneurship promotion among returnees are not that

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<sup>84</sup> Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE) (2021). Number of Pakistani Workers Registered by Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment for Emigration Abroad (1971-2021). Government of Pakistan. Available at: <https://beoe.gov.pk/files/statistics/2021/country.pdf>

<sup>85</sup> IOM Pakistan. Snapshot Report: Returnees from Greece, Germany, and Bosnia and Herzegovina – Returnee Longitudinal Survey; IOM Bangladesh (2020). Snapshot Report: Bangladeshi Returnees from Libya and Greece – Returnee Longitudinal Survey.

popular and their uptake has been slow in both countries. In Bangladesh, RMMRU's assessment states that this may be not only because the process of applying for these financial incentives is complicated, but also that returnees do not have the skills to initiate business ventures, and many aim to re-migrate.<sup>86</sup>

## 4 Future migration dynamics from Pakistan and Bangladesh

An overwhelming majority of stakeholders interviewed in Pakistan and Bangladesh were of the opinion that in general, **migration dynamics may not alter significantly**, despite the current scenario of largescale returns. Almost all stakeholders in both countries echoed that in terms of scale of migration, profile of migrants and choice of destination, existing trends will continue to dominate once travel restrictions are lifted. In fact, experts from relevant government institutions and CSOs confirmed that as travel restrictions with some regular destination countries lifted, many returnees have re-migrated to the same destinations where they had legal permit to work. Queries reaching the MRCs in both countries also reflect that returnees are keen to know when travel restrictions would be lifted for their previous host countries. A few experts raised the concern that the likelihood of people opting for irregular pathways of migration may rise, but so far they do not expect any major inclinations like that based on recent trends, and their discussions with returnees and potential migrants. **More experts in Bangladesh believed that irregular migration trends may rise** as a result of the mobility restrictions and the reversal in the direction of international migratory movements in Bangladesh than in Pakistan. Moreover, some reports also raised the concern that many poor and desperate returnees, some of whom may be victims of trafficking, may be vulnerable to re-trafficking in the wake of rising debt burdens and economic problems.<sup>87</sup>

Some nuanced perspectives in Pakistan also showed that since COVID-19 has led to sudden returns for many, it may be the case that there are a number of "failed" migrants – those who had to return sooner than they could earn enough to cover their cost of migration, often funded through huge amount of debt. A few experts opined that these **failed migrants may perhaps attempt to re-migrate to other destinations, even irregularly**, if they do not expect to be rehired or acquire a visa for the previous host country. This may hold true for Bangladesh as well since similar trends are observed there. In the absence of valid visas, they would find remigration to the same areas of destination costly and quite competitive. It is this group of returnees that may consider migrating to some other destinations through irregular channels. However, these speculations could not be backed with accurate data at the time of this analysis. Experts shared that it is very complicated to measure the true extent of irregular migration from Bangladesh, as the majority travels to transit countries or even intended destinations (including Europe and Malaysia) on legal and valid documents. Their journey either becomes irregular when they travel from those transit countries without papers or decide to overstay their authorised visit. As a result, **many migrants may be "regular" from the perspective of**

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<sup>86</sup> RMMRU (2020)

<sup>87</sup> Karim, Naimul (2020). Twice trafficked? COVID-19 fuels fears for survivors in Bangladesh. Thomas Reuters Foundation. Available at: <https://news.trust.org/item/20201208000440-i7cku/>

**Bangladeshi government, but at the same time be “irregular” as per the legal system of the receiving countries,** necessitating the need for a rigorous follow-up mechanism on their legal status.

Based on the similarities in the characteristics of regular and irregular migrants in ages, skill level, prior employment condition, and the almost same cost of paying migrant facilitators for regular and irregular migration,<sup>88</sup> it can be expected that continued restrictions on travel to regular destinations may have a spill-over impact on irregular movements. The **age of the returnee** is also an important characteristic which may determine the decision to re-migrate (regularly or irregularly). Experts agreed that younger returnees (below the age of 30 years) have a higher propensity to re-migrate, and take on risks. In that sense, the database being developed for returnees, if verified for data accuracy, could offer interesting insight into the average age of returnees in specific irregular migration hotspot districts in Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Another important factor that emerged from conversations with experts was **the previous place of destination and means of migration (regular vs. irregular)**. Most stakeholders were of the opinion that those who migrated through regular means previously would not attempt to re-migrate irregularly. The main reason cited for this was that these returnees are not necessarily “risk-takers” and since they know the benefits of having a regular status in the host country, they would not attempt to opt for more perilous ways. Having a social network in the country from which they returned and familiarity with the laws, customs and surroundings of that country were also cited as important factors for their preference.

**The returnees from Europe** (such as the 2,065 people from Pakistan and 515 people from Bangladesh that returned following an order to leave in 2020)<sup>89</sup>, on the other hand, **may attempt again** since they know the process, know what kind of risks to watch out for, and their fear of the unknown in an irregular migration journey is lesser compared to first-time irregular migrants. Yet, the stakeholders also clarified that these were mere speculations and they have not observed a rising trend in irregular migration of returnees.

Despite these perspectives, FIA data shows that the number of interceptions made at the Pakistan-Iran border increased from 807 in 2019 to 1009 in 2020. In 2021, as of 15 August, the number of intercepted migrants at the borders was 636 (updated data not publically available, but it can be guessed that by the end of the year 2021, the number of intercepted people exceeded the level in 2020). However, as shared by a government official, the increased number of interceptions are not necessarily reflective of the increased rate of irregular migration. **Rather, increased border securitisation and more advanced technology to detect irregular movements might be responsible for the higher number of detections.** However, as stated by a government official and in line with migrant smuggling research, in light of the increased border control on traditional routes, migrant smugglers and **irregular migrants may seek new routes for the journey**, which is a point of concern

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<sup>88</sup> IOM Bangladesh (2019). Bangladesh: Survey on Drivers of Migration and Migrants’ Profile. Regional Evidence for Migration Policy and Analysis (REMAP).

<sup>89</sup> EUROSTAT (2021). Third Country Nationals Returned following an Order to Leave (Annual) Available at: <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>

for migrants' own safety as well as for law enforcement agencies. Lack of evidence on this, however, makes it difficult to identify which routes would be adopted.

Stakeholder in both countries also highlighted the **facilitating role of human smugglers in irregular migration**. In Pakistan, some stakeholders labelled these human smugglers as “dream-sellers”, and they mentioned that in districts where migration is seen as a rite of passage, closure of regular migration routes have only lured more people to smugglers. However, these districts with a “culture of migration” are not the same as the districts to which the majority of COVID-19 returnees belong to, thus reflecting that irregular migration may not necessarily be attempted at scale by returnees, but rather by new migrants. In Bangladesh as well, stakeholders described that **human smugglers are capitalising on the despair of young people** who are looking for economic opportunities outside of the country considering the dire economic situation in Bangladesh during the pandemic. This was also mentioned in the recent Needs Assessment study.<sup>90</sup> Commenting on the increased number of irregular Bangladeshi arrivals on European borders during 2020 and 2021, one stakeholder emphasised how this shows that tactics of smugglers are working even in the transit states, as most of the recently intercepted Bangladeshi migrants on European borders are those who travel from the Middle East or from traditional destinations in North Africa, such as Libya.

However, stakeholders also added that these “**new trends**” are not necessarily an outcome of COVID-19, rather the pandemic-related uncertainties may have amplified existing trends. For instance, in 2017, about 9,009 Bangladeshis used the Central Mediterranean Route to reach Europe. The flow declined in 2018 and 2019 to 543 and 750 respectively, however, it spiked up considerably again in 2020 with 4,447 border crossings by Bangladeshis reflecting a 493% increase in irregular flow from this route.<sup>91</sup> In 2021, the number spiked to 7,574.<sup>92</sup> While this is definitely a spike in irregular entries into Europe through this route in the last two years, estimates from 2017 show that this is not a new phenomenon. Most Bangladeshis also arrived via sea borders in 2020 (4,527 compared to 887 via land),<sup>93</sup> which may also reflect that many Bangladeshis attempt onward migration from other destination countries or transit states towards Europe. For Pakistanis, the Eastern Mediterranean Route has gained more popularity in the last few years. In 2017, irregular entries from the Eastern Mediterranean Route into Europe were recorded to be 901. The number increased to 1,823 in 2018, and 1,556 in 2019, but there was a decline in 2020 (771), perhaps because of COVID-19 related reasons. Land routes are more popular among Pakistani migrants.

A Pakistani expert working at the community level in migration-prone areas also shared the perspective that youth in those areas are not aware of the difference between regular and irregular modes of migration, rather act on whatever information they acquire easily, and choose the method which is quicker and cheaper for them, and that which has been adopted by their peers before. Drawing from the interviews with CSOs, **irregular migration is not a preference for potential migrants, rather it is the only available option to them in their knowledge**. This indicates to not only the “culture

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<sup>90</sup> Centre for Women and Children Studies (CWCS) and Pathways Consulting Services Lt. (PCSL) (2020). Information Needs of Potential and Returnees in Bangladesh: Migrant Resource Centres. ICMPD.

<sup>91</sup> FRONTEX (2021). Risk Analysis for 2021. Warsaw. Available at: <https://euagenda.eu/upload/publications/risk-analysis-2021.pdf>

<sup>92</sup> FRONTEX (2021). Migratory Map. Warsaw. Available at: <https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map/>

<sup>93</sup> FRONTEX (2021). Risk Analysis for 2021. Warsaw. Available at: <https://euagenda.eu/upload/publications/risk-analysis-2021.pdf>

of migration” in certain areas, but also the “culture of migrating irregularly” as it is very common for young men to migrate through irregular means. Lack of information about regular and legal migration among potential migrants was also attributed to the outreach models of recruiting entities. Experts in both countries shared that smugglers (or middlemen) go out in the communities and sell “visions” of what life could be like for people who choose to go through them to Europe, leading to more active recruitment. This is more common when registered recruiting agencies are not common in certain sending areas. The illicit recruiting agents (smugglers or middlemen) share narratives of “success stories” to aspiring migrants, who are then easily lured into opting for this option.<sup>94</sup>

Moreover, also of relevance are those migrants who are stranded in the host countries and have experienced layoffs or wage cuts, but have not been able to return to their countries. In assessing future migration trends, consideration of their situation would also be important as being in a foreign country during challenging circumstances, their aspirations and future plans may also influence new migration trends. For instance, a few key informants shared that **some Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants that have experienced job losses or wage cuts may consider onward migration towards Europe from the GCC countries through irregular means if the economic situation does not improve soon in their current host countries.** Some evidence of this is also found from Bangladeshi migrants’ experience of migrating onward towards Europe from Libya in 2020 and 2021. As of 2017, a higher percentage of Bangladeshis has been observed to be embarking on the Central Mediterranean Route, from the GCC countries and Libya towards Europe.<sup>95</sup> Reports attribute this trend to the economic slowdown experienced in the GCC countries due to falling oil prices, worsening work conditions for foreign labour, and the policies of GCC countries to recruit more national labour.<sup>96</sup>

Some stakeholders also commented on the gap between the changing political landscape in Europe and the understanding and awareness levels of potential irregular migrants from Bangladesh and Pakistan about these changing dynamics. As is evident in numerous studies, social circles (including friends, family and acquaintances in the destination countries) play a significant role in determining migration decisions of potential migrants. Experts commented that people follow the migration pattern of their friends and family, sometimes even oblivious of the political climate of the destination country. The support from their social networks and the demand for cheap labour in those countries thus encourages such trends. According to stakeholders, **the existing trends of irregular migration may perpetuate, thus, it is unlikely that new patterns will emerge prominently.**

On the other hand, rising labour demands from certain European countries received by Pakistani Overseas Employment Promoters from countries such as Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Italy are advertised on BEOE website, which may consequently give rise to **new legal migration corridors.** Bangladesh has also observed an increased trend of labour migration towards **Poland, Romania, Germany, Albania, Serbia and Croatia.** Stakeholders commented that while initial movements towards these destinations may have been irregular, those who are settled there have been supporting

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<sup>94</sup> Khan, Sarfaraz, and Awan, Sajid Mahmood (2020). Case Study of Irregular Migration from Pakistan to Europe: Reflections on Contemporary Trends. University of Karachi.

<sup>95</sup> Qayum, Nayma (2017). Chasing the Dubai Dream in Italy: Bangladeshi Migration to Europe. Migration Policy Initiative. Available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/chasing-dubai-dream-italy-bangladeshi-migration-europe>

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

new people through legal channels more recently through family reunifications and finding seasonal employment for them (although many migrants then tend to become irregular by overstaying their visas). As more labour migrants get absorbed in these labour markets, this trend may develop further. However, experts argued that these new corridors would not substitute the trends towards the GCC countries. Additionally, the kind of labour demand for both destinations (Europe and GCC countries) would be different: while GCC countries still need low-skilled labour for their economy, the demand in Europe is for educated and skilled labour.

Moreover, in the short run, avenues for legal migration also depend heavily on the **vaccination requirements of destination countries** and protocols for COVID-19. With destination country-specific requirements for vaccination and their policies on quarantine and testing, regular travel has become even more expensive. Stakeholders also expressed that for labour to be able to migrate to Europe with dignity and through regular channels, there is a need to upskill their profiles to the needs of European markets.

Moreover, an analysis of future migration trends due to COVID-19 cannot take place without consideration of other factors that may influence the migration decision. As mentioned in the MRC Needs Assessment Study, **the migration hotspots in Bangladesh are the districts which are also undergoing detrimental climatic and environmental shifts**, pushing the vulnerable in these areas further into poverty. Imposition of additional hardships related to COVID-19 and the subsequent economic slowdown may burden the poor beyond their capacities, pushing many to choose risky opportunities due to desperation.

Another aspect raised by several experts was **the crisis in Afghanistan**, and the consequent impact on irregular migration across the borders, especially impacting migration flows from Pakistan. It is estimated that between 500,000 to 700,000 Afghan refugees might newly seek abode in Pakistan in light of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan.<sup>97</sup> The Government of Pakistan, however, has announced only to take in Afghans with legal identity documents and visas for Pakistan.<sup>98</sup> Some experts were of the view that stricter control over the borders through border fencing along the 2500 km border between the two countries and increased security in light of the crisis may inhibit undocumented flows. Conversely, a few stakeholders also perceived that **if some European countries indicate that they are willing to take in Afghan refugees, some Pakistanis may also attempt to avail those opportunities, especially those who have tried earlier but failed or those who have been forcibly returned**. Many Afghans also have acquired Pakistani identity through legal or illegal means, thus making the identification tracking more difficult.

Regarding reintegration services introduced within Pakistan and Bangladesh recently, the majority of the stakeholders were sceptical about the effectiveness of the programmes. One of the main reasons for this concern was the **lack of awareness and advocacy of the services offered for reintegration**. Several stakeholders were aware that the government had initiated certain programmes in

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<sup>97</sup> Rana, Shahbaz (2021, July 18). Housing 700,000 Afghans Will Cost \$2.2 billion for 3 Years. Express Tribune. Available at: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2311234/hosting-700k-afghans-will-cost-22-b-for-3-years>

<sup>98</sup> Rehman, Zia-ur (2021, September 8). Afghans Flee to Pakistan: An Uncertain Future Awaits. The New York Times. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/08/world/asia/pakistan-afghanistan-refugees.html?auth=link-dismiss-google1tap>

partnership with international organisations, but were not familiar with the actual services offered and the scale of those activities and services to comment on their effectiveness. Moreover, while the data portal developed for returnees registers their information, it does not necessarily offer guaranteed solutions (e.g. job placement or remigration) to those who register (as of yet). This limits the popularity of the portal, leading to limited registrations. Under the current circumstances of economic slowdown and protracted travel restrictions, government officials shared that it is difficult to find gainful employment opportunities for those who have registered, and thus advertisement of this service has also been limited.

Moreover, a few stakeholders also highlighted that **people do not necessarily trust such data acquiring initiatives** if they have not heard of the benefits within their social networks. As the returnee registration portal is new, with limited proof of benefits being given to returnees, it may not be popular with the target audience until they see or hear about people actually benefitting from them.

Some stakeholders were also sceptical about **the sustainability of reintegration services that were sponsored by destination country governments**. Viewing this initiatives as ‘externalising’ of European migration policies, a few stakeholders called it the transfer of the burden of responsibility on countries of origin. They also stated that such programmes are narrowly-focused, targeting only voluntary returnees from European countries, and making their services not available for returnees from other destinations. Some stakeholders also questioned the long-term impact of these EU-returnees focused reintegration services as many of these returnees attempt to migrate again through irregular channels. While during COVID-19, the services of the PGFRC funded by GIZ in Pakistan were made available to returnees from the Gulf as well, a relevant expert confirmed that indeed these services prioritised voluntary returnees from Europe over other returnees. This could also be a reason for the lack of wider advocacy of such programmes which may inhibit a longer-term institutional response to cater to returnees from all destinations. Nevertheless, COVID-19 has provided an impetus to the federal government to devise a mechanism for the reintegration of returnees as majority of labour migrants from Pakistan migrate temporarily and eventually return to Pakistan.

Another key aspect that emerged from the discussions with experts was **the impact on future remittances**. While the inflow of remittances has defied all predictions of a slowdown and soared at record levels since 2020, experts raised the concern that if the outflow of labour continues to be restricted, and does not reach the level of 2019 and before, the upward trend of remittances may halt and inflow might start to decrease, which could then become an issue at the macro level with serious implications for households that rely heavily on remittances. Moreover, as informal modes of remittances transfer such as hawala/hundi are again possible as travel restrictions are lifted, there is a high chance that transfer through formal channels may again decline.

## 5 Conclusions

In light of the challenges and opportunities created by the current migration situation in both Pakistan and Bangladesh, the following conclusions have been compiled based on expert interviews and desk research. While the context of both countries is different, they share many characteristics in terms of migration and return dynamics. Hence, the statements below may apply to both contexts, unless specified otherwise.

**For Pakistani and Bangladeshi governments:** The emphasis on government-to-government negotiations not only emerged during the interviews, but also in recent studies that analysed post-COVID-19 migration dynamics.<sup>99</sup> Across the board, all experts highlighted the need for training and upskilling the labour according to the needs of the destination countries, especially European labour markets. Some stakeholders also mentioned that the onus of improving the skillset of the migrants would increase on the domestic governments if Europe agrees to open some legal labour migration corridors. National governments have to take note of the changes in labour markets in countries with which legal migration corridors are sought, and prepare their labour accordingly. A government representative in Bangladesh suggested that based on the skill demand of Europe, the Bangladeshi government could take on the responsibility of providing dedicated three to six-months training to aspiring labour migrants in that particular skill to ensure that labour migration takes place on merit.

Similarly, experts in Pakistan also highlighted that while opening of legal migration pathways to Europe is desired, it cannot be fruitful unless the national government actively strives to improve the skillset that Pakistan exports to other countries. Some experts also believed that when legal migration options exist for certain skillsets, then potential migrants would be motivated to acquire them and migrate in a safe and regular way. The Community Welfare Attachés (CWAs) appointed in certain European countries could play an important role in identifying such labour market opportunities that Pakistan can capitalise on. The CWAs could work in collaboration with the Labour Market Cell proposed to be hosted at MOPHRD (with technical assistance provided by ICMPD) to conduct research on labour market trends. In the same vein, stakeholders also emphasised that the national governments need to devise a system for skill recognition at the international level. International support could also be sought for this task. Offering training that does not meet the international standards would not lead to the desired results of promoting skilled migration.

Stakeholders in both countries highlighted the urgent need to crackdown on smugglers and unregistered recruitment agents and intermediaries. In Pakistan, numerous experts appreciated the efforts made by FIA to strengthen border control with the help of donor support, however, the key role that smugglers play in luring aspiring migrants through irregular channels needs to be addressed at the source. In Bangladesh as well, intermediaries were labelled as the opportunists who are using the post-COVID-19 mobility restrictions to their advantage to entice people to choose the irregular way for which people are willing to pay exorbitant amounts of money and suffer exploitation.

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<sup>99</sup> Siddiqi, Zishan Ahmad (2021). Rapid Assessment: the Impact of COVID-19 on Labour Migration Governance, Recruitment Practices, and Migrant Workers. ILO REFRAME Project Pakistan.

Since mechanisms for registering and documenting returnees have been set up in both Pakistan and Bangladesh, more effort is required to ensure that some specific services are also introduced for those who register in order to incentivise returnees to get registered.<sup>100</sup> There is need for a sustained effort to improve the mechanism for returnees' reintegration and address the challenges of low response (complicated application procedures, lack of implementation etc.) of returnees to the financial instruments offered to spur entrepreneurial activities. Relevant government authorities should also endeavour to make migrants and returnees eligible for national social safety nets such as pension schemes. Stakeholders also called for making reintegration centres more accessible to returnees by opening these centres at the district level in migration hotspots in both countries.

**For European countries:** There was unanimous agreement among the local stakeholders in both the countries that irregular migration trends from these two countries cannot be managed without opening up some legal channels for labour migration. Especially relevant would be devising formal channels towards countries that are already popular destinations among irregular migrants as returnees from these countries may attempt re-migration. The demand for labour migrants supports this trend, and hence addressing just the supply side of these movements will not be adequate to have the desired impact. Experts in Pakistan emphasised that recognising this relationship between labour shortages and skills demand in Europe, the EU has initiated the Talent Partnership programme for certain African countries. Based on the same logic, a specialised programme could also be introduced for South Asian labour to fulfil the European demand of labour through safe and regular migration.

Another important aspect for European consideration is to broaden the scope of return and reintegration services to returnees from non-European countries. Keeping the focus on just returnees from Europe was criticised as being ineffective as the large percentage of returnees comes back on end of their legal contracts in the Middle East and other destinations. As one of the government stakeholders in Bangladesh stated, *"A reintegration mechanism that only applies to returnees from Europe was never going to be sustainable in Bangladesh"*. Another CSO member also highlighted the need for a returnee centre in each of the migration hotspot districts as a one-stop shop for all returnees to know about the facilities and services available for them on coming back to Bangladesh. The same applies to the Pakistani context, and there is scope for the MRCs to fill this gap.

Academic experts in both Pakistan and Bangladesh also highlighted the need for international cooperation, especially with the European countries to create regional peace and stability to avoid trickle down impacts on irregular movements from other countries. The developments in neighbouring countries (e.g. Afghanistan) and conventional destination countries for labour migration (the GCC countries and North Africa) should be followed to analyse how they may influence migration flows of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis. Moreover, engaging with popular transit countries on the route may also be a viable option, especially for ensuring the migration management is done with the utmost respect towards human rights.

**For international organisations and CSOs:** Experts believed that the lobbying role of international organisations and CSOs in migration governance is critical to the limiting irregular migration and the

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<sup>100</sup> Coz, Camille Le and Newland, Kathleen (2021). Rewiring Migrant Returns and Reintegration after the COVID-19 Shock. Migration Policy Initiative.

creation of regular and safe migration routes, including towards Europe, for Pakistani and Bangladeshi labour. Especially in a post-COVID-19 scenario, platforms such as the Colombo Process, Budapest Process, and Abu Dhabi Dialogue (to which both Pakistan and Bangladesh are participants) can address the changing migration dynamics. In this vein, under the Budapest Process a new initiative is to be launched this year focusing on vocational training of labour migrants. Moreover, existing guidelines (such as those for Migrants in Countries in Crisis,<sup>101</sup> OHCHR's Guidelines on Human Rights at International Borders,<sup>102</sup> OHCHR's Practical Guidelines on the Protection of the Human Rights of Migrants in Vulnerable Situations<sup>103</sup>) can be drawn upon to improve responses at the national, regional and international level.<sup>104</sup> International organisations are seen by experts to be in a unique position to influence legislation and policy in both sending and receiving countries, and thus stakeholders urged on these organisations to mediate favourable migration agreements between countries of settlement and the two sending countries.

Stakeholders highlighted the need for more collaboration and coherence among the international organisations in activities related to migration, return and reintegration. The role of international organisations such as ICMPD, the World Bank, IOM etc. were lauded for their efforts in strengthening government institutions and supporting the implementation of migration, return and reintegration related programmes. Areas highlighted for cooperation include research, awareness raising about initiatives for migrants and returnees, and capacity building of law enforcement authorities on tools and technological systems for curtailing irregular border crossings. Regarding migration information campaigns, a few experts commented that such campaigns should shift their perspective from imparting knowledge-based information to sharing experiential and behavioural content to impact migrant decision-making – an approach which the MRCs in both countries have adopted already.

Moreover, in both countries, CSOs played a prominent role in supporting government departments and international organisations in reintegration efforts of returnees. Capacities of these organisations can be strengthened and more dedicated CSOs with expertise in reintegration services can enter the field to support a more streamlined and sustainable programme of reintegration in both countries as return of migrants is a reality that both countries have to experience owing to large flows of temporary labour migration.

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<sup>101</sup> Migrants in Countries in Crisis (MICIC) (2016). Available at: <https://micicinitiative.iom.int/about-micic#:~:text=The%20Migrants%20in%20Countries%20in,a%20conflict%20or%20natural%20disaster>.

<sup>102</sup> OHCHR (2014). Recommended Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights at International Borders.

<sup>103</sup> OHCHR (2017). Report On Principles and Practical Guidance on the Protection of the Human Rights of Migrants In Vulnerable Situations Within Large and/or Mixed Movements, on the Basis Of Existing Legal Norms. Available at:

<sup>104</sup> RMMRU (2020)

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### Contact Information

For more information please contact:

**Veronika Bilger**

Head of the Research Unit

Directorate for Policy, Research and Strategy

International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)

Gonzagagasse 1, 5th floor

1010 Vienna, Austria

Tel: +43 1 504 46 77 2327

Email: [Veronika.Bilger@icmpd.org](mailto:Veronika.Bilger@icmpd.org)

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