

GLMM Webinar No. 11

Assessing Social Protection for South Asian Migrants in the GCC:

Views from the Countries of Origin and Destination

Wednesday 8 July 2026 – 2:00 pm-3:30 pm Arab Standard Time (AST)¹

2 July 2026

Focus

The South Asia-Gulf corridor is one of the most dynamic labour migration routes in the world. Around 24 million foreign workers reside in the GCC, mainly from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. Most of them migrate to send money to their families back home. These workers are central to GCC economies, yet many remain excluded from adequate social protection. The webinar will assess recent policy changes in the Gulf and the South Asian countries; the difficulties migrant workers still face in accessing their rights, cope with legal restrictions, administrative hurdles, and limited portability of benefits; and the bilateral and multilateral efforts involving both countries of origin and destination to address these challenges.

The labour migrants contribute substantially to the economy of the GCC. Despite recent reforms in Gulf states, the *kafala* (sponsorship) system in many cases still defines the relationship between most foreign workers and their local sponsors, who are usually their employers. It grants sponsors almost total control over a worker's employment and immigration status. By holding labour costs down and keeping workers dependent, the system has long underpinned the region's economic model — but at a direct cost to workers' rights and bargaining power.

As a result, and despite recent policy changes in the six Gulf states -for example in Oman- and bilateral and multilateral discussions between countries of origin and destination, many among the migrant workers still face difficulties in accessing their rights, and must cope with legal restrictions, administrative hurdles and limited portability of benefits. Additionally, some of the professions they occupy are placed outside the protection of national labour laws. Access to social protection is limited in terms of occupational injury and death, job loss, health insurance. Women are particularly exposed: they often occupy jobs such as domestic workers or caregivers and tend to be more exposed to discrimination and less likely to be covered by social protection.

These overlapping vulnerabilities underline the need for a coordinated regional response that can extend meaningful social protection to migrant workers and their families across the South Asian-Gulf corridor. The International Labour Organization (ILO), with funding from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the European Union and the Ford Foundation, implements the project “*Extending Social Protection to Migrant Workers and Their Families in the South Asian-Gulf Corridor*” (STREAM).

STREAM's purpose is to extend the social protection of the migrant workers within five focus areas: employment injuries benefits, maternity protection, health insurance, unemployment insurance, and end-of-service indemnities. In addition, the project will foster a gender-responsive approach so that equity, inclusion and empowerment are taken into consideration.

¹ Bangladesh 5-6:30pm; Nepal 4:45-6:15pm; India 4:30-6pm; Sri Lanka 4:30-6pm; Pakistan 4-5:30pm

Running over four years (until 2028), STREAM works through policies and regulatory reforms, advocacy capabilities, dialogues and coordination between the GCC and the South Asian countries, as well as the improvement or creation of social protection provisions.

Complementary to STREAM, partners from South Asian countries of origin and GCC countries of destination have joined forces to establish a cross-regional Knowledge Network Hub on Social Protection for Migrant Workers across this corridor. This Hub will serve as a collaborative platform to generate evidence, strengthen capacities, and foster policy dialogue among key stakeholders in both regions.

As part of these projects' broader efforts to support policy dialogue, advocacy, and cross-border cooperation, this webinar will provide a platform to discuss the social protection gaps faced by South Asian migrant workers in the GCC and the policy options needed to address them, both in countries of destination and in countries of origin.

A panel of members from the Knowledge Network Hub and STREAM will examine the perspectives and policies of countries of origin and destination on migrants' social protection and reflect on the factors that need to be addressed to improve them.

Key Questions

- How will the social protection policy shape the migration trajectory in the South-Asia-Gulf corridor?
- What policy pathways will help to address social protection gaps for migrant workers?
- How can social protection policies benefit to the labour migrants as well as the sponsors and/or employers in the GCC?
- Can expanding social protection strengthen the region's economic growth and labour-market resilience?
- What implications are there for the Kafala system if social protection reforms are undertaken?

Speakers

- S. Irudaya Rajan, Chairman, International Institute of Migration and Development (IIMAD), Kerala, India
- Tasneem Siddiqui, Executive Director, Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) and Former Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh
- Jeevan Baniya, Deputy Director, Social Science Baha (SSB), Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility (CESLAM), Nepal
- Bilesha Weeraratne, Research Fellow and Head of Migration and Urbanization Policy Research Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) of Sri Lanka
- Nasra Shah, Professor of Migration and Development at the Lahore School of Economics (LSE), Pakistan and Scientific Director Gulf Labour Markets, Migration, and Population (GLMM) programme
- Luca Pellerano, Senior Technical Advisor on social protection at the International Labour Organization (ILO) and manager of the STREAM programme
- Sarah Estermann, Senior Advisor and Knowledge Manager Migration at Caritas Switzerland

Moderator

- Imco Brouwer, Executive Manager Gulf Labour Markets, Migration, and Population (GLMM) programme

Bio Notes

S. Irudaya Rajan is Chairman, International Institute of Migration and Development (IIMAD), Kerala, India. He was a Former Professor at the Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Kerala (close 40 years of post-graduate experience) Currently, he is the chair of the KNOMAD (The Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development) World Bank working group on internal migration and urbanization. He is one of the expert committee members to advise the Government of Kerala on Covid-19. He has published in international journals on social, economic, demographic, psychological and political implications of migration on individuals, community, economy and society. He is the editor of the annual series India Migration Report since 2010 and South Asia Migration Report since 2017 published by Routledge. Founder Editor in Chief, Migration and Development (Taylor and Francis).

Tasneem Siddiqui is the Executive Director of the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU)- Bangladesh's premier migration thinktank and a former Professor of Department of Political Science, University of Dhaka. Her work on climate change and displacement, adaptation, international labour migration and remittances has been published in reputed international journals. She led the drafting of the National Strategy for Internal Displacement in Bangladesh, 2021, The National Action Plan, 2022, and the Template for Climate Vulnerable Forum Countries to Manage Internal Displacement, 2025, to be followed by its 74 member States. In the past she drafted the Overseas Employment Policy, 2006, which was the first national policy on migration in South Asia. Siddiqui was a member of the Global Editorial Board of Oxford Journal of Migration Studies and in the advisory boards of state-led international initiative, Platform on Disaster Displacement (PDD) and Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). She serves as the elected South Asia Representative to the Global Board of Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction (GNDR).

Jeevan Baniya has a PhD in Political Science from the University of Oslo, Norway, and an MA from Graduate School of International Studies (GSIS) Ajou University, South Korea. He has served as a faculty member at Tribhuvan University where he taught master's and PhD degree courses and supervised students in dissertation work. He has provided advisory and technical support to the Ministry for Labour, Employment and Social Security, the National Reconstruction Authority (NRA), Government of Nepal; the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) Nepal; the ILO (Geneva, Nepal and Kenya); Centre for Policy Research, the United Nations University, trade unions and CSOs. His academic interests include public policy, labour and migration, democracy and development, governance, disaster, gender and social inclusion (GESI), and state-society relations, among others. Occasionally, he writes op-eds in and is regularly interviewed for commentaries by national media.

Bilesha Weeraratne is a Research Fellow and Head of Migration and Urbanisation Policy Research at the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka. Previously, she was a Postdoctoral Research Associate at Princeton University, New Jersey, USA. Her research interests include internal and international migration, climate mobility, urbanisation, labour economics and economic development. She has collaborated with and served as a consultant to prominent international organisations such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the

World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). She has published extensively in international publications and peer-reviewed journals. Bilesha holds a BA in Economics from the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, an MA in Economics from Rutgers University, USA and an MPhil and PhD in Economics from the City University of New York, USA.

Nasra M. Shah is a Professor of Migration and Development at the Lahore School of Economics, Pakistan. She is the scientific director of the Gulf Labor Markets & Migration Program. Prior to returning to her homeland, she was Professor of Demography at Kuwait University for over 30 years. Prof. Shah received her doctoral degree in Population Dynamics from the Johns Hopkins University, School of Public Health, Baltimore, USA, in 1974. Before joining Kuwait University, she worked in Hawaii, USA at the East-West Population Institute and at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, Islamabad. Her population related research has focused on various themes including the role of social factors in infant and child mortality; predictors of fertility and contraceptive use; women's role and status; utilization of health services; and psychosocial and physical health of older persons. Labor migration, especially from Asian to oil-rich Gulf countries, has been a consistent and very prominent theme in her research throughout her professional career. Her many publications include books on Asian Labor Migration: Pipeline to the Middle East; Pakistani Women; Basic Needs, Women and Development; Population of Kuwait: Structure and Dynamics; Skillful Survivals: Irregular Migration to the Gulf; Migration to the Gulf: Policies in Sending and Receiving Countries; and Covid-19 Crisis and Asian Migration; Social Remittances and Social Change: Focus on Asia and the Middle East.

Luca Pellerano is a development economist with more than 15 years of experience in social protection policy advice and reform. He is currently a senior technical advisor on social protection at the International Labour Organization and the manager of STREAM, an ILO global programme on extending Social Protection to Migrant Workers in the corridor between GCC and South Asia. He has provided technical assistance on the design, implementation and evaluation of contributory and non-contributory social protection systems and programmes in the Arab region, Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia. Prior to joining the ILO Luca was leading the Poverty and Social Protection team at Oxford Policy Management (OPM) and a Research Economist at the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) in London. Twitter: luca_pellerano

Sarah Estermann is Senior Advisor and Knowledge Manager Migration at Caritas Switzerland, has several years of experience in migration and forced displacement, both in Switzerland and abroad – including Egypt, Palestine and Bolivia. Her thematic expertise spans livelihoods, refugee law, climate-induced displacement, and gender, and she brings in-depth experience in research, analysis and publication drafting, as well as in organising learning events such as communities of practice and learning journeys. She is fluent in six languages, including English and Arabic.

Imco Brouwer is Managing Director of the Gulf Labour Markets, Migration, and Population (GLMM) programme, at the Gulf Research Center (GRC). He is affiliated with the GRC since 2009, initially assisting in the setting up of Gulf Research Meeting (GRM, 2009-2011) and then establishing and managing the GLMM. Over the past three decades, Imco Brouwer has worked with universities, research centers, foundations, and non-governmental organizations. His focus has been on international migration, human rights, democratization, higher education, and international cooperation. During the last 16 years he has focused on international migration into, through and from the Middle East and North Africa, with particular attention to the Gulf countries.