SOUTH ASIA LABOR MOBILITY

CONFERENCE

MAY 20-21, 2025

THIMPHU | BHUTAN

SUMMARY OF CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

This note summarizes the discussions at the South Asia Labor Mobility Conference, in which policymakers from around the world shared their experiences with labor mobility. This summary is organized in the order of the conference agenda (presented in Annex 1).

Participants at the South Asia Labor Mobility Conference, May 20-22, 2025, Bhutan

The South Asia Labor Mobility Conference held in Thimphu, Bhutan on May 20-21, 2025 was jointly organized by the *World Bank Social Protection and Labor South Asia*, the *Social Protection and Labor Global Unit*, and the *Office of the South Asia Chief Economist* in collaboration with the *Royal Government of Bhutan*. The two-day conference provided a platform for cross-country sharing of best practices and solutions and promoted collaboration among high-level government officials and experts from both migrant-sending and host countries.

This event gathered over 150 participants, including officials from 15 countries across five continents, and representatives from development aid agencies, international organizations, and the private sector.

Participants discussed migration trends, policies, challenges, and good practices both within and outside the South Asia region. The event highlighted the global demographic trends that shape migration pressures. In the face of these pressures, many countries have chosen to skill workers, leverage diasporas, and forge formal agreements that generate benefits for workers, employers, host, and home countries. Several discussants shared their experiences with such agreements, including agreements to train potential migrants ("skills partnerships"). Others shared their experiences with attracting return migrants and re-integrating them productively into home economies. While it can yield substantial benefits to home economies, return migration is unlikely to occur in large numbers, and with major benefits, unless home countries make return and re-integration easy. Large remittance inflows support household incomes but can distort especially smaller economies towards real estate and consumption. A capacity building workshop followed, focusing on practical strategies for skills training, labor market intermediation, adult learning, and regional partnerships.

OPENING REMARKS

LYONCHHOEN DASHO TSHERING TOBGAY
Prime Minister, Royal Government of Bhutan

"Saving my village is a race against time, we need to address this challenge on a war footing."

His Excellency **Lyonchhoen Dasho Tshering Tobgay**, Prime Minister, Royal Government of Bhutan began his opening remarks with an overview of the unprecedented development that has taken place in Bhutanese villages over the past two decades facilitated by remittances from those working abroad. The problem of empty villages as people migrate was emphasized, whereas the potential of 75,000 young Bhutanese who were working and studying abroad needs to be harnessed. His Majesty, King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, has called for an "Enlightened Entrepreneurial Bureaucracy" to provide opportunities for youth both at home and abroad, with the vision of growing the economy tenfold in the coming years. International experiences would help build Bhutan's future.

ANNA BJERDE
Managing Director of Operations, World Bank

"Governments can leverage their diasporas to promote vibrant private sectors and job creation at home."

Anna Bjerde highlighted the opportunities and challenges presented by significant demographic changes underway in South Asia. The region's population aged 15 and above is projected to grow by 22 million each year, while the economy currently creates only 15 million jobs annually—leaving a growing gap to be filled by faster job creation. At the same time, the region needs to boost female labor force participation to close the stark gap between the employment rates of men and women. Constraints to economic growth and job creation include restrictive regulations, limited foreign direct investments, slow technological advancement, and an expanding informal sector. The South Asian diaspora plays a vital role in economic development through remittances, knowledge sharing, trade, and global networks. Harnessing this potential, along with addressing regulatory barriers, are crucial to fostering economic growth and innovation in South Asia.

FRAMING PRESENTATION

SYUD AMER AHMED
Program Leader for Human Development, Bangladesh and Bhutan, and Lead Economist, World Bank

"Remittances are a tremendous source of macroeconomic stability to the sending countries."

Syud Amer Ahmed discussed how labor mobility can be leveraged for development across all stages of migration. Historical evidence showed that out-migration typically rises and then falls as countries become richer. In South Asia, the continued expansion of the working-age population presents opportunities, if the region's youth can be fully engaged in productive activities. Given the large wage gap between foreign and domestic labor markets, migration will remain an attractive path for many young people. Migration also benefits sending countries, through remittances, increased financial and human capital, and contributions of return migrants. To fully realize these economic potentials for development, countries need to adopt comprehensive migration policies that support migrants throughout all stages of migration: offering timely information and training before departure; providing protection and facilitating remittances while abroad; and encouraging return and reintegration upon arrival at the origin.

SESSION 1: SKILLS PARTNERSHIPS

OVERALL FRAMEWORK: GLOBAL SKILL PARTNERSHIP REPORT

PABLO ACOSTA
Global Lead for Migration and Lead Economist
Social Protection and Labor Global Unit
World Bank

LIMON BADE RODRIGUEZ
Economist (Consultant)
Social Protection and Labor Global Unit
World Bank

SESSION KEYNOTE

YOUNG-BUM PARK
Professor, Hansung University
Former President, Human Resources Development Korea

CASE: INDIA

LIJU GEORGE
Lead, Triple Win Program in India
Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit

CASE: MOROCCO

HALIMA SALAK
Head of Partnership and Cooperation Division
Morocco National Agency for the Promotion of Employment and Competencies

Pablo Acosta presented the global skill partnership model in light of demographic shifts and labor market demand around the world. In lower-income countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, working-age populations will continue to expand over the next decades. Meanwhile, higher-income countries could face a shortfall of up to 750 million workers. The global skill partnership is a bilateral training and migration agreement between lower-income sending and higher-income receiving countries that seeks to simultaneously meet the skill needs of both countries. The essential components of such partnerships include training in sending countries to meet mutual skill demand, shared responsibility in financing, and agile and legal pathways to migration along with skill recognition. The World Bank's operations and expertise on youth employment, education, technical and vocational education and training, and labor market intermediation can be leveraged for global skill partnerships. Currently, the World Bank is supporting three such partnerships: Latin America and Caribbean (Colombia, Dominican Republic, and Ecuador) and Spain, Tunisia and Morocco, and Kenya and Canada.

Limon Bade Rodriguez shared best practices and lessons of global skill partnerships. The Australia Pacific Training Coalition, a multi-sector skill partnership between the Pacific Island countries, Timor Leste, and Australia, collaborates with local providers to improve curricula and train teachers. The program has strengthened the technical and vocational education and training capacity of Pacific islands, reduced the cost per graduate through economies of scale, cost sharing, and cost reduction, and has produced over 20,000 full qualification graduates. The global skill partnership in nursing between Germany and the Philippines has enhanced nursing training and embedded skills recognition. By training a larger number of nurses for the domestic employment track, the program has helped mitigate brain drain. The model is planned to be replicated in other countries, including India and Uzbekistan.

Young-bum Park pointed out labor mobility as a solution to labor shortages, especially in an aging economy such as South Korea. The country's Employment Permit System is a temporary labor migration scheme with countries in Asia and the Pacific. To promote skills development, the scheme partners with South Korean vocational institutes that provide courses to migrant workers. Low-skilled workers can change visa status to semi-skilled to take on a wider range of occupations. After their employment contract, returning migrants can work for South Korean companies operating in sending countries. Managed by public institutions instead of private recruitment agencies, the scheme has significantly reduced the cost of migration. Key challenges include promoting migrant workers' human rights and improving anti-foreigner sentiment.

Liju George discussed the German Agency for International Cooperation's Triple Win program in healthcare. The program showcased three models that seek to promote fair and ethical migration, benefitting the migrant workers, the destination country, and the origin country. First, the professional migration model involves moving trained professionals to the destination country, and ensuring their integration and recognition with necessary skills and language proficiency. Second, the vocational education migration model allows individuals to gain skills and integrate into the labor force in the destination country, though recognition measures are lacking. Third, the global skill partnership bridges gaps in education and technical skills between origin and destination countries, ensuring recognition and integration from the outset with robust curricula and language preparation. Strong curricula, language proficiency, and additional skill training, such as in elderly care, are essential components for successful integration.

Halima Salak presented Morocco's labor mobility programs, which are supported by robust legal frameworks and bilateral labor migration agreements. Morocco's National Agency for the Promotion of Employment and Competencies is at the forefront of labor mobility initiatives, ensuring mutual benefits for the sending country, the destination country, and the migrant workers involved. Cooperation between public employment services of Morocco and destination countries—Belgium, Germany, and Spain—helped develop scalable, structured, and transparent recruitment schemes. Collaboration, targeted preparation of migrant workers, and adaptive models tailored to the specific contexts of both origin and destination countries are necessary to make these schemes a success.

PANEL DISCUSSION I: HOST COUNTRIES

MODERATOR

CEM METE
Practice Manager
South Asia Social Protection and Labor
World Bank

PANELISTS

MACIEJ DUSZCZYK
Undersecretary of State
Ministry of the Interior and Administration
Poland

STEVEN BIDDLE
Minister Counsellor
Department of Home Affairs and Regional Director South Asia
Australia

FRANZISKA OHNSORGE
Chief Economist for South Asia
World Bank

Maciej Duszczyk shared insights on Poland's transformation over the past decade, shifting from a migrant-sending to a migrant-receiving country. During this period, the migrant population hosted by Poland grew from 100,000 to 3 million, driven largely by the country's labor market opening to Ukrainian workers amid ongoing conflict and demographic shifts. Seventy percent of female migrants in Poland are engaged in economic activities—a rate higher than in Germany and the Czech Republic—highlighting their strong integration and contributions to the workforce. However, the rapid influx of migrants has also presented challenges, particularly around social cohesion and public acceptance.

Steven Biddle spoke about the South Asian community, including 40,000 Bhutanese, and their contributions to Australian society. To maintain a competitive edge in the digital age, Australia is focusing on cyber partnerships and technology skills development across South Asia. To address future skill shortages, the country's skilled migration program has identified priority skills and occupations and is working to integrate migrants effectively into the economy. Australia also offers a temporary graduate visa that allows international students to work in the country for two to four years after completing their studies. The community liaison network assists migrants in settling and integrating smoothly into their new communities. Through these efforts, migrants are revitalizing rural and regional Australia, particularly in sectors such as agriculture and healthcare.

Franziska Ohnsorge stressed the significant contributions of South Asian migrants to their host countries. These migrants, ranging from low- to high-skilled, bring remittances, savings, and knowledge networks to home countries, and entrepreneurial skills to host countries. In the United States, for example, more than one-half of unicorn startups had immigrant founders, and almost one-half of 2023 Fortune-500 companies were founded by immigrants. Host countries benefit from the successful integration of migrants. Integration can be encouraged through bilateral agreements, including skills partnerships.

SESSION 2: SUPPORT TO PROSPECTIVE MIGRANTS

OVERALL FRAMEWORK

CEM METE
Practice Manager
South Asia Social Protection and Labor
World Bank

SESSION KEYNOTE

PATRICIA YVONNE M. CAUNAN
Undersecretary
Department of Migrant Workers
The Philippines

CASE: SRI LANKA

ANTHONIGE ANIL JAYANTHA FERNANDO
Minister of Labour and Deputy Minister of Economic Development
Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development
Government of Sri Lanka

CASE: KOSOVO

BESA KABASHI-RAMAJ
Executive Advisor
Heimerer Healthcare and Wellbeing Eco-Village
Kosovo

Cem Mete pointed out how remittances build resilience of households during times of crisis. Remittances play a pivotal role in reducing poverty and providing essential support when they are most needed. Their benefits are further enhanced when the countries sending remittances and the industries employing migrants are diverse. But remittances can also be associated with high costs and over-indebtedness, in part due to charges imposed by recruitment agencies and intermediaries.

Patricia Yvonne M. Caunan provided an overview of the Philippines' comprehensive governance framework for labor migration, aimed at protecting the rights of migrant workers and offering them extensive support. The country has a long-standing overseas labor migration program that commenced in the 1970s. The program is supported by several institutions, such as the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration and the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration. The Department of Migrant Workers focuses on training and upskilling Filipino workers, manages an overseas Filipino worker hospital, and has signed over 60 bilateral labor migration agreements. The labor migration program is embedded in a national skills certification system and includes pre-departure orientation seminars that also offer financial literacy training for migrant workers and their families. Migrant workers' offices abroad can support workers in distress. Remaining challenges include third-country hiring and illegal recruitment.

Anil Jayantha Fernando outlined the new Sri Lankan government's approach to migration. Currently, 1.7 million Sri Lankans reside abroad, yet remittances have declined in recent years to $2-3 billion, contributing to balance of payments pressures. In addition, concerns over human trafficking have emerged. In response, the government has introduced the National Policy and Action Plan on Migration for Employment (2023-2027) aimed at promoting decent employment, ensuring protection, and empowering migrant workers. This comprehensive policy includes financial support for migrants and schemes to validate the skills of returning workers—facilitating smoother reintegration into the domestic labor market. The challenge is in the uneven-handed implementation of this policy.

Besa Kabashi-Ramaj presented the Heimerer Healthcare and Wellbeing Ecovillage as an innovative response to the rapid decline of Kosovo's young population over the past decade. Kosovo's vocational education system remains poorly aligned with international labor market requirements, and limited language proficiency continues to pose a barrier for those seeking employment abroad. The Heimerer Ecovillage is a model for private sector engagement in workforce development, operating within a broader ecosystem that includes educational and research institutions, government, and business. To ensure lasting impact, young potential migrants must be actively involved throughout the process—whether they choose to stay, remain connected while abroad, or eventually return. Despite Heimerer's success in maintaining ties with the diaspora and encouraging return migration, return incentives are limited, and mechanisms to leverage the expertise and networks of Kosovo's diaspora are still underdeveloped.

SESSION 3: MIGRATION IN SMALL STATES & ISLAND COUNTRIES

OVERALL FRAMEWORK

ZOE LEIYU XIE
Senior Economist
Chief Economist Office for South Asia
World Bank

SESSION KEYNOTE

DASHO TASHI WANGMO
Secretary
Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Employment
Royal Government of Bhutan

CASE: PAPUA NEW GUINEA

HAKAUA SUSAN HARRY
Director
Labour Mobility Unit, Department of Treasury
Papua New Guinea

CASE: MALDIVES

ALI HAIDAR AHMED
Minister of Higher Education, Labor and Skills Development
Maldives

CASE: JAMAICA

ANTONETTE RICHARDS
Director
Social Policy, Planning and Research Division
Planning Institute of Jamaica

Zoe Leiyu Xie detailed the particularly severe challenges of small states: the small population sizes, limited geographic areas (often islands), undiversified economies, reliance on food and fuel imports, exposure to climate disasters, remoteness from markets, and weak connectivity (both transportation and digital). These vulnerabilities often lead to economic volatility. Migration can arise as a response to these limitations and vulnerabilities.

Dasho Tashi Wangmo showed the rapid rise in out-migration from Bhutan, with Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States as preferred destinations. Despite its benefits such as increased remittance inflows, the surge in out-migration has contributed to Bhutan's growing labor shortages in critical service sectors. To address youth unemployment and support safe international migration, Bhutan's Overseas Employment Program was introduced. The program offers awareness campaigns, pre-departure briefings, and skills development initiatives to prepare migrants for opportunities abroad. Strategic interventions—such as foreign worker recruitment from talent pools and enhanced career guidance—are being implemented to mitigate domestic labor shortages.

Hakaua Susan Harry discussed Papua New Guinea's engagement in labor mobility programs with Australia and New Zealand, focusing on semi-skilled and unskilled workers. To support migrant workers, robust systems have been established, including pre-departure training and worker readiness initiatives. To encourage participation and reduce the cost of joining, a fast-track lane with expedited processing of required documentation has been introduced. Welfare and wellness support is delivered in collaboration with employers and host governments, while reintegration efforts focus on matching the skills of returning workers with opportunities in the domestic labor market. Although the program remains small in scale, it has already made meaningful impacts on the lives of the 5,000 Papua New Guineans who have taken part.

Ali Haidar Ahmed highlighted Maldives' heavy reliance on migrant workers, particularly unskilled workers in the tourism and construction sectors, with international migrants making up one-quarter of the country's total population. Persistent data discrepancies have prompted the government to launch a biometric registration initiative to document all migrant workers. An estimated 63,000 undocumented workers—mostly in the informal sector—underscores the urgent need for regularization programs that enforce penalties for recruitment violations and protect migrant workers from exploitation. To support migrant well-being, the country has implemented the Migrant Health Policy to ensure access to essential health services. The country aims to adopt evidence-based policymaking through improved labor statistics and research, the development of a comprehensive labor market information system, and enhanced inter-agency coordination.

Antonette Richards spoke about the significant brain drain from Jamaica that resulted in labor shortages in key sectors. At the same time, large remittance inflows are reshaping Jamaica's economy, fueling growth in real estate and consumption rather than productive investment. To address these challenges, Jamaica's National Policy for International Migration and Development promotes evidence-based policymaking. Strategies include the implementation of formal labor migration programs, pre-departure orientation sessions, and greater engagement with the diaspora through technology and biennial conferences. Efforts to support return and reintegration focus on both voluntary and involuntary returnees, providing skills training and other reintegration support. Jamaica plans to diversify its labor migration programs, develop initiatives to attract return migrants, and promote more inclusive labor market participation.

SESSION 4: REMITTANCES & DIASPORA

OVERALL FRAMEWORK

FRANZISKA OHNSORGE
Chief Economist for South Asia
World Bank

SESSION KEYNOTE

LYONPO LEKEY DORJI
Minister
Ministry of Finance
Royal Government of Bhutan

CASE: MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

ROBERTA GATTI
Chief Economist for Middle East and North Africa
World Bank

CASE: THE PHILIPPINES

PATRICIA YVONNE M. CAUNAN
Undersecretary
Department of Migrant Workers
The Philippines

Franziska Ohnsorge emphasized that South Asia has one of the world's largest diasporas, with about 3 percent of its working-age population living abroad—well above the emerging markets and developing economies average. South Asia's diaspora is split into two types: about one-quarter resides in advanced economies and is typically high-skilled; about one-half resides in other emerging markets and developing economies and typically low-skilled. Remittances from these migrants are vital for their home countries, frequently surpassing foreign direct investments, aid, and portfolio flows combined. Yet, these inflows can also trigger macroeconomic shifts—such as Dutch disease—by skewing economies toward services and consumption, at the expense of exports and investment. This makes domestic efforts to ease business climates all the more important.

Lyonpo Lekey Dorji stressed the vital role of remittances and the Bhutanese diaspora in driving the nation's economic and social development. Labor mobility is becoming central to Bhutan's national narrative, with remittances now accounting for 3.3 percent of gross domestic product—far exceeding the 0.3 percent of gross domestic product from foreign direct investments. Australia has become a key source of these inflows, which support household welfare, foreign reserves, and long-term resilience. Many Bhutanese abroad are highly educated—over one-half hold university degrees and nearly one-half have served in the civil service. To better leverage their economic potential requires structured diaspora engagement, including knowledge sharing, networking, and financial literacy.

Roberta Gatti showed how geography and history have shaped migration patterns in Middle East and North Africa, positioning the region as both a source and destination for migrants. The region is a corridor for movement from South to North, driven by demographic forces, including from South Asia to Europe and the United States. The region also has sizable within-region migration, often shaped by conflict and climate change, with refugees making up two-fifths of within-region migrants. Migration has social and cultural implications for communities across the region. At the same time, migration has generated sizable economic benefits, both through remittances and through the network of diasporas.

Patricia Yvonne M. Caunan provided details on the Philippines' comprehensive strategy to transform migration and remittances into a driver of inclusive growth. In 2023, remittances reached 8.3 percent of gross domestic product. To lower remittance costs, the Philippines joined Project Nexus, targeting fees under 3 percent by 2030. The government is also enhancing digital access through the Overseas Filipino Bank, enabling migrants to open accounts and connect with remittance services easily. Initiatives such as financial literacy programs and enterprise loans aim to convert savings into productive investments. The country also promotes "brain gain" through efforts like the Balik Scientist Program, which has brought back 664 experts to support national development.

PANEL DISCUSSION II: SENDING COUNTRIES

MODERATOR

STEFANO PATERNOSTRO
Acting Regional Director for People
South Asia Region
World Bank

PANELISTS

LYONPO NAMGYAL DORJI
Minister
Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Employment
Royal Government of Bhutan

CHITHRA ARUMUGAM
Principal Secretary
Labour and ESI Department; and Science and Technology Department
State Government of Odisha, India

MACIEJ DUSZCZYK
Undersecretary of State
Ministry of the Interior and Administration
Poland

ROBERTA GATTI
Chief Economist for Middle East and North Africa
World Bank

Lyonpo Namgyal Dorji outlined strategic policies to promote return migration, especially among youth seeking better opportunities abroad. The aim is for youth to migrate by choice—not by necessity—and return with skills that benefit Bhutan's development. To that end, Bhutan is developing a National Reintegration Program (NRP) offering job placement, investment opportunities, entrepreneurship training, mentorship, and incubation support for returnees. A flagship initiative, the Gelephu Mindfulness City, led by His Majesty the King, has sparked strong diaspora interest, and is set to become a global hub to inspire the return of diaspora.

Chithra Arumugam pointed out distress migration as a pressing issue in Odisha, India and shared how individuals, especially low-skilled workers, can benefit from economic opportunities abroad. State initiatives supporting migrant workers with information and community-based mechanisms include the Protector of Emigrants office, help desks in neighboring states, the e-shram portal, and seasonal hostels that ensure education and nutrition for children of migrating parents. Cultural ties, language, and food help migrants settle in new areas, and local associations and networks can help reach migrants. Odisha also aims to create opportunities within Odisha to ensure that migration is a choice.

Maciej Duszczyk shared insights from Poland's experience of productively reintegrating returning workers into domestic industries and entrepreneurship. Before becoming a destination country for migrants, Poland was a major migrant sending country, particularly after joining the European Union. The opening of labor markets in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Sweden led to massive emigration, with over a million Poles leaving within two years. In response, Poland launched a program in 2007 to remove bureaucratic barriers for returnees. However, despite strong economic growth and falling unemployment, only a small share of emigrants chose to return. To address this, the country worked to shift public perception around returnees, reframing them not as failures, but as individuals bringing valuable skills and experiences back to the economy.

Roberta Gatti spoke about diverse migrant groups and their unique challenges in the Middle East and North Africa region. Refugees—both low- and high-skilled—often remain away from home for an average of 13 years. Low-skilled temporary migrants to Gulf countries tend to have smoother return and reintegration experiences. Documented migrants generally earn higher wages, remit more, and start businesses, but often return with conservative views on women. High-skilled migrants, about one-third of migrants from the region, return for better business environments and access to finance. Diaspora engagement through policies on dual citizenship, financial markets, and consular services support return migrants' reintegration.

SESSION 5: RETURN & REINTEGRATION

OVERALL FRAMEWORK

SOONHWA YI
Senior Economist
East Asia and Pacific Social Protection and Labor
World Bank

CASE: INDIA

KANAK VARDHAN SINGH DEO
Deputy Chief Minister and Head of Special Task Force on Distress Migration
State Government of Odisha, India

CASE: BANGLADESH

A.T.M. MAHBUB-UL KARIM
Project Director and Joint Secretary
Wage Earners' Welfare Board
Bangladesh

CASE: BHUTAN

KUNZANG LHAMU
Director General, Department of Employment and Entrepreneurship
Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Employment
Royal Government of Bhutan

CASE: THE PHILIPPINES

FRANCIS RON DE GUZMAN
Assistant Secretary for Reintegration Services
Department of Migrant Workers
The Philippines

Soonhwa Yi differentiated reintegration challenges between low- and high-skilled migrant workers. Low-skilled migrants often return home with temporary or seasonal work experience, facing issues such as skill mismatches, information asymmetry in the labor market, and limited access to finance and social security. High-skilled migrants tend to migrate independently, often with their families, and may require stronger incentives to return home, such as suitable job opportunities, recognition of qualifications, and social considerations like access to international schools for their children. The reintegration process can be made smoother if policies and programs cater to the specific needs of each group.

Kanak Vardhan Singh Deo discussed the three types of migration prevalent in Odisha: temporary short-term migration, skilled aspirational migration, and distress migration. Distress migration, often driven by lack of employment during lean periods, inadequate livelihood from agriculture, economic hardships, calamities, and lack of local opportunities, remains a significant issue in Odisha, affecting 14 out of 30 districts. Targeted interventions, including skill development, financial inclusion, and stringent law enforcement, would help address the challenges faced by migrant workers.

A.T.M. Mahbub-ul Karim presented Bangladesh's Recovery and Advancement of Informal Sector Employment project, which supports the reintegration of return migrants. Launched in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, the project operates 31 welfare centers across 64 districts and has registered 200,000 return migrant workers. Under the project, registered participants receive orientation and reintegration counseling, need-based psychological first aid, subsidized recognition of prior learning, and a one-time cash transfer to promote economic stability. A survey of participants revealed that 80 percent of respondents reported significant improvement in livelihoods, increased self-reliance, and enhanced income-generation opportunities. The government plans to scale up the program by expanding to more districts and linking skill profiles with wage employment or self-employment opportunities.

Kunzang Lhamu articulated Bhutan's National Reintegration Program, launched in August 2023, to support Bhutanese nationals returning from abroad. The program's three main strategies include economic support via skills training and job placement, psychosocial support through networking events and counselling, and career guidance to help returnees navigate the labor market. The initiative is intended to address challenges faced by overseas workers, including health risks, scams, trafficking, and legal issues.

Francis Ron de Guzman outlined the Philippines' approach to managing the reintegration of migrant workers. The approach includes welfare support for returning workers, the successful reintegration of over a million Filipino workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, documentation and registration, post-return measures like quarantine and repatriation assistance, and provision of skills development and livelihood opportunities. Lessons from previous reintegration initiatives led to the development of a unified governance system under the Department of Migrant Workers Act. The new framework for reintegration builds financial literacy, family involvement, and holistic support for returning workers to ensure their successful reintegration into society.

CLOSING REMARKS

KUNZANG LHAMU
Director General, Department of Employment and Entrepreneurship,
Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Employment, Royal Government of Bhutan

Kunzang Lhamu noted that the best practices and experiences shared during the conference will significantly contribute to Bhutan's strategies as the country addresses labor shortages, prepares its citizens for meaningful overseas employment, and builds an enabling ecosystem for reintegration and youth deployment. The lessons learned during the conference can be carried forward as seeds of policy reform, pragmatic innovation, and regional cooperation. The conference should be the beginning of a deeper, more strategic collaboration for ethical, sustainable, and human-centered labor mobility.

DAY 1 / AGENDA

Tuesday,
May 20, 2025

8:30 AM REGISTRATION

9:00 AM OPENING ADDRESS

- **Lyonchhoen Dasho Tshering Tobgay,** Prime Minister, Royal Government of Bhutan
- **Anna Bjerde**, Managing Director of Operations, World Bank

9:15 AM FRAMING PRESENTATION

- **Syud Amer Ahmed**, Program Leader for Human Development, Bangladesh and Bhutan and Lead Economist, World Bank

9:30 AM SESSION 1: SKILLS PARTNERSHIPS

This session explores how skills partnerships such as the Global Skill Partnership (GSP) model embed skills development to meet labor shortages for international labor mobility and domestic employment as well.

OVERALL FRAMEWORK: GLOBAL SKILL PARTNERSHIP REPORT

- **Pablo Acosta**, Global Lead for Migration and Lead Economist, World Bank
- **Limon Bade Rodriguez**, Economist (Consultant), World Bank

SESSION KEYNOTE

- **Young-bum Park**, Professor, Hansung University; Former President, Human Resources Development, Korea

CASE: INDIA

- **Liju George**, Lead, Triple Win Program in India, GIZ

CASE: MOROCCO

- **Halima Salak**, Head of Partnership and Cooperation Division, Morocco National Agency for the Promotion of Employment and Competencies (ANAPEC)

11:00 AM COFFEE BREAK

11:15 AM PANEL DISCUSSION I: HOST COUNTRIES

This panel presents perspectives from migrant host countries around the world and identify priorities and policy options for better skills partnership and support to migrants.

- **Maciej Duszczyk**, Undersecretary of State, Ministry of the Interior and Administration, Poland
- **Steven Biddle**, Minister Counsellor, Department of Home Affairs and Regional Director South Asia, Australia
- **Franziska Ohnsorge**, Chief Economist for South Asia, World Bank

Moderator

- **Cem Mete**, Practice Manager, South Asia Social Protection and Labor, World Bank

DAY 1 / AGENDA
Tuesday,
May 20, 2025

12:15 PM LUNCH

1:30 PM SESSION 2: SUPPORT TO PROSPECTIVE MIGRANTS

This session explores how governments and partners can better support migrants before departure, while overseas, and after their return.

OVERALL FRAMEWORK

- **Cem Mete**, Practice Manager, South Asia Social Protection and Labor, World Bank

SESSION KEYNOTE

- **Patricia Yvonne M. Caunan**, Undersecretary, Department of Migrant Workers, the Philippines

CASE: SRI LANKA

- **Anil Jayantha Fernando**, Minister of Labour and Deputy Minister of Economic Development, Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development, Sri Lanka

CASE: KOSOVO

- **Besa Kabashi-Ramaj**, Executive Advisor, Heimerer Healthcare and Wellbeing Eco-Village, Kosovo

3:00 PM COFFEE BREAK

3:15 PM SESSION 3: MIGRATION IN SMALL STATES & ISLAND COUNTRIES

This session focuses on the unique migration challenges and opportunities faced by small states and island countries.

OVERALL FRAMEWORK

- **Zoe Leiyu Xie**, Senior Economist, Chief Economist Office for South Asia, World Bank

SESSION KEYNOTE

- **Dasho Tashi Wangmo**, Secretary, Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Employment, Royal Government of Bhutan

CASE: PAPUA NEW GUINEA

- **Hakaua Susan Harry**, Director, Labour Mobility Unit, Department of Treasury, Papua New Guinea

CASE: MALDIVES

- **Ali Haidar Ahmed**, Minister of Higher Education, Labor and Skills Development, Maldives

CASE: JAMAICA

- **Antonette Richards**, Director, Social Policy, Planning and Research Division, Planning Institute of Jamaica

5:00 PM GROUP PHOTO

5:30 PM RECEPTION & CULTURAL SHOW

7:00 PM DINNER

DAY 2 / AGENDA

Wednesday,
May 21, 2025

8:30 AM CHECK-IN

9:00 AM RECAP OF DAY 1

- **Kunzang Lhamu**, Director General, Department of Employment and Entrepreneurship, Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Employment, Royal Government of Bhutan

9:15 AM SESSION 4: REMITTANCES & DIASPORA

This session explores the impact of remittances and the role of diasporas in supporting development, with a focus on how countries can harness these financial flows for sustainable growth.

OVERALL FRAMEWORK

- **Franziska Ohnsorge**, Chief Economist for South Asia, World Bank

SESSION KEYNOTE

- **Lyonpo Lekey Dorji**, Minister, Ministry of Finance, Royal Government of Bhutan

CASE: MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

- **Roberta Gatti**, Chief Economist for Middle East and North Africa, World Bank

CASE: PHILIPPINES

- **Patricia Yvonne M. Caunan**, Undersecretary, Department of Migrant Workers, the Philippines

11:00 AM COFFEE BREAK

11:15 AM PANEL DISCUSSION II: SENDING COUNTRIES

This panel explores how migrant sending countries can better leverage the economic potential of diasporas while supporting the reintegration of return migrants.

- **Lyonpo Namgyal Dorji**, Minister, Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Employment, Royal Government of Bhutan
- **Chithra Arumugam**, Principal Secretary, Labour & ESI Department; and Science & Technology Department, State Government of Odisha, India
- **Maciej Duszczyk**, Undersecretary of State, Ministry of the Interior and Administration, Poland
- **Roberta Gatti**, Chief Economist for Middle East and North Africa, World Bank

Moderator

- **Stefano Paternostro**, Acting Regional Director for People, South Asia Region, World Bank

12:15 PM LUNCH

DAY 2 / AGENDA
Wednesday,
May 21, 2025

1:15 PM SESSION 5: RETURN & REINTEGRATION

This session focuses on the challenges and opportunities associated with the return and reintegration of migrant workers, examining how governments can support their economic and social reintegration.

OVERALL FRAMEWORK

- **Soonhwa Yi**, Senior Economist, East Asia and Pacific Social Protection and Labor, World Bank

CASE: INDIA

- **Kanak Vardhan Singh Deo**, Deputy Chief Minister and Head of Special Task Force on Distress Migration, State Government of Odisha, India

CASE: BANGLADESH

- **A.T.M. Mahbub-ul Karim**, Project Director and Joint Secretary, Wage Earners' Welfare Board (WEWB), Bangladesh

CASE: BHUTAN

- **Kunzang Lhamu**, Director General, Department of Employment and Entrepreneurship, Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Employment, Royal Government of Bhutan

CASE: PHILIPPINES

- **Francis Ron de Guzman**, Assistant Secretary for Reintegration Services, Department of Migrant Workers, the Philippines

3:00 PM CLOSING REMARK

- **Kunzang Lhamu**, Director General, Department of Employment and Entrepreneurship, Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Employment, Royal Government of Bhutan