



حوار أبوظبي بين الدول الآسيوية المرسلية والمستقبلة للعمالة
Abu Dhabi Dialogue among the Asian Labor-Sending and Receiving Countries

ABU DHABI DIALOGUE

| SENIOR OFFICIALS' MEETING |

THEME 3

PRE-DEPLOYMENT TESTING OF WORKERS IN ASIA GCC CORRIDORS.

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MIGRANT WORKERS' SKILLS EXAMINATION IN THE COOS AND THE RECOGNITION OF SKILLS BY CODS.

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**Human Resources and
Social Development**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Skills Verification Program aims to validate workers qualifications and skills required to perform their profession. Through theoretical and practical tests and examinations in field of specialization withing Saudi Arabia and abroad. Targeting more than 1.7M expats, divided into more than 1,000 occupations, currently working inside the kingdom and more than 400,000 newly joining the Labour force yearly. To facilitate the exams, we have designed the Testing Engine to host most of the spoken languages by the workers from COO:

- Arabic
- English
- Urdu
- Tagalog
- Hindi

SVP set and applied acceptance criteria for accrediting Test Centers, to enable the exist infrastructure inside the Kingdom with applying required standards for both non-profit and private test Centers. Local SVP is launched officially on the 7th of March 2021 to verifies the skills of the existing skilled workers. The implementation planned to be in different phases based on the establishment size. Our target is to complete testing for all targeted existing workers by 2023.

International SVP targeting 7 COO as phase one which will cover more than 87% of new skilled workers:

- India
- Philippine
- Pakistan
- Bangladesh
- Egypt
- Sri Lanka
- Indonesia

Working in cooperation with governmental bodies in these countries in order to facilitate the test centers accreditation as well as assuring that all of workers in the targeted occupations are following the new procedure and pass the exams inside COO before leaving.

Major goals:

- Preventing unskilled labor from entering the labor market.
- Improving the quality of services in the labor market.
- Reduce number of returned workers.
- Create new opportunities for training sector.
- Minimising the financial waste in the Saudi market.

Thriving economy is one of the main pillars in Kingdom's 2030 Vision, and in order to achieve this, the Kingdom should focus on hiring talented people, in different sectors in order to verify the right skills needed for a specific job, so the Skills Verification Program was the program needed to help in raising the quality of services and transferring the knowledge and expertise.

So, we have started drawing the main lines of this program by analyzing Saudi labor market:

- Categorized the market into 3 main categories (professional, skilled, and general labors)
- Sorting all 3000 occupations we have in the market into job families.
- Select targeted job families.
- Build National Occupational Standards for these targeted job families, which are listed below:
 - Electricity
 - Plumbing
 - HVAC
 - Welding
 - Building
 - Painting
 - Plastering
 - Tilework
 - Mechanical Maintenance Technician
 - Metal Forming
 - Mining Technician
 - Electronic Technician
 - Construction Blacksmith
 - Shuttering Carpenter
 - Carpenter
 - Electrical Automotive
 - Mechanical Automotive
 - Automotive Primary Service
 - Car Body Repair
 - Engine Mechanics
 - Metal Processing
 - Mining Digger Operator
 - Stone Crushers

Where SVP Aims to Validate Workers Qualifications and skills required to perform their profession. Through theoretical and practical tests and examinations in field of specialization withing Saudi Arabia and abroad. Targeting more than 1.7M expats, divided into more than 1,000 occupations, currently working inside the kingdom and more than 400,000 newly joining the Labour force yearly. These exams will be added as prerequisite to Issue/renew work permit and working visa.

While aiming to test more than 1.7M skilled worker; we decided to facilitate the exams as much as we can as the majority of these workers are uneducated or have some difficulties in reading so, we designed the Testing Engine to serve most of the spoken languages by the workers, therefore our engine can speak:

- Arabic
- English
- Urdu
- Tagalog
- Hindi

Also, we have enabled a feature designed for those whom having difficulties in reading to allow the system to Speak and Read the exams in their preferred language.

As a part of vision 2030 implementation and also to boost up the execution of SVP we have enabled private and governmental sector, where SVP set and applied acceptance criteria for accrediting Test Centers, so they can use the existing infrastructure inside the Kingdom by accrediting non-profit test centers and privet test centers.

Program goals:

- Preventing unskilled labor from entering the labor market.
- Improving the quality of services in the labor market.
- Ensuring professional examination contributions in improving the skills of the workforce.
- Create new opportunities for training sector.
- Minimising the financial waste in the Saudi market. (for example: please see Figure 1)



Figure 1: it shows the average total cost of recruiting 100 skilled workers and financial waste.

BENCHMARK:

When we planned to start SVP first, we did a research on the COD practices and we have evaluated each example and compare it with our capabilities and infrastructure inside and outside the kingdom, we looked into many existing examples in UAE and its partnership with India in 2019 and how they were able to launch the skills verification program in cooperation with leading institutes in India which were familiar to our target but in expanded scope.

Also, Singapore has its own practice in skills verification system, prepare a Year Calendar of visits to COO and examine the candidates both technically and Linguistically.

SVP LOCALLY:

We have piloted the program on 3 pilot rounds to test the stability and maturity of it. Launched officially the first phase for the first two specialization (Electricity and plumbing) on the 7th of March.

The program aims to verifies the skills of the existing skilled workers and the implementation planned to be in different phases, so SVP is will start be mandated in July 2021 based on the establishment size.

Our target is to finalize all targeted existing workers by 2023.

SVP INTERNATIONALLY:

The program targeting 7 counties as phase one which will cover more than 87% of new skilled workers:

- India
- Philippine
- Pakistan
- Bangladesh
- Egypt
- Sri Lanka
- Indonesia

Cooperation with these governments in order to implement SVP is an essential step, facilitate test center accreditation and Saudi standards implementation.

DID COVID-19 HAVE AN IMPACT ON THE PROGRAM?

yes, it does. We have piloted the program internationally with India in 2019 by testing 100 electrician and plumber, and due to the restrictions of COVID-19 in 2020, the launching was delayed officially to this year after raising these restrictions.

As well as locally Covid-19 directly impacted the initiative through limiting the test centers capacity where it decreased by 50% due to social distancing and implementing the governmental instructions in that matter.

The program will have a great impact on the Saudi labor market, were:

- Knowledge and experience transfer to local workers.
- Create more efficient labor market by injecting only qualified workers.
- Improve the services level provided to our community.
- Minimizing risk of Occupational exposure of a certain provision
- Create more chances to gradually localize national workforce in these provisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Applying such program will impact positively on COO by raising skills level of workers and reduce number of workers returns after obligation to defined standards.

Improving the services provided and impact on economy in COD by implement such program where most of the GCC standards are similar we can work along with our partners in order to reach a quick execution in the region.

INTRODUCING THE GULF HEALTH COUNCIL PROGRAM FOR EXPATRIATE HEALTH CHECKUP

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GULF HEALTH COUNCIL

مجلس الصحة
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Gulf Health Council



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Gulf Health Council (GHC) Program for Expatriate Health Check-up was developed almost 20 years back. The main objective was to ensure that the expatriates undergo a medical screening examination in designated centers in their home countries prior to obtaining a permit to work or reside in the GCC countries. The aims of the program were, to ensure that expatriates migrating to the GCC are physically and psychologically fit and able to perform the job they are hired to do. And that the expatriates are declared disease-free, especially for infectious diseases that could threaten the health security and safety of the Gulf community.

The program provides direction on medical fitness criteria, the roles of different GCC entities health facilities, the accreditation standards and process and the roles of accredited medical centers.

Currently, the GHC expatriate health Check-up program umbrella covers 395 accredited medical centers around 23 countries.

In 2019, there was a total of 2,690,616 candidates that has been registered and examined at the GHC accredited centers in their home country. Out of this number, 167,927 (6%) candidates that have been found unfit.

Data shows that the percentage of unfit candidates reported by GHC accredited centers remained steady for the past five years (2015 to 2019).

Out of 2,522,689 expats that have arrived the GCC countries, only 171 (0.007%) expats were declared unfit by GCC ministries of health after re-examination.

This proves that without the implementation of the GHC Program for Expatriate Health Checkup, these candidates could have been travelled to the GCC countries, requiring them to make significant effort for travel, and on the other hand, posing risk to the health security of the GCC country. The most common reported diseases were, Tuberculosis (TB) 79 (0.0031%), Hepatitis B & C 64 (0.0025%), Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) 3 (0.0001%), Malaria 5 (0.0002%) and Non-Infectious Diseases 20 (0.0008%).

The GHC plans to:

1. Expand the umbrella of the program to cover more countries.
2. Introduce the online evaluation of accredited medical centers and the online accreditation of new medical centers. The aim of these processes, are to move from the traditional process conducted by the Gulf technical committees, the committee concerned with conducting field visits to inspect and evaluate the centers for Expatriates' Health Check-up, to a more sustainable process that uses the GHC eProgram with the objective to produce more unified and quick field visit reports.

1. BACKGROUND

The rapid development and growth at all levels witnessed by the GCC countries in the last decades mandated the need for manpower from other countries to assist in this development and continuous movement.

Therefore, the GCC member states had to take appropriate actions and take precautionary measures to protect these workers and the Gulf community.

From this perspective, in January 1995 the Health Ministers of the GCC issued a resolution stipulating to develop a program with the objective to ensure that the expatriates undergo a screening examination in designated centers in their home countries prior to obtaining a permit to work or reside in the GCC countries.

The main policy instruments currently available in the GCC countries for employing foreign employees are:

- Employers are prohibited from employing foreign employees without a valid work permit issued.
- All foreign employees are required to do a medical checkup at the country of origin from GHC approved medical centers.
- On arrival, employers shall present the foreign employees for another medical examination in order to confirm the medical fitness of the worker before getting their residents permit.
- The foreign employee must be medically fit and free of contagious diseases for the issuance of work permits.
- Foreign employees are not charged any money for medical examination, issuing a work permit, or renewing it.
- If a foreign employee is found to be unfit for work, the employer is responsible for the cost of deportation of the employee.
- The employer shall be granted a work visa to employ a foreign employee, should he had fulfilled his obligations of providing insurance for his employees with the Social Insurance Organization.

It is worthwhile to mention that, for most of the times, recruitment agencies in the GCC countries charge employers very high recruitment fees for recruiting a foreign employee. The recruitment fees include any fees, costs or expenses related to medical tests, police clearances, recruitment advertisements, interviews, insurance, government taxes in the country of origin, pre-departure orientations, airline tickets and airport taxes.

a. Program Aim

The aim of the Gulf Health Council (GHC) Program for Expatriate Health Checkup was to ensure that expatriates migrating to the GCC are physically and psychologically fit and able to perform the job they are hired to do. And to ensure that the expatriates are declared disease-free, especially for infectious diseases that could threaten the health security and safety of the Gulf community.

b. Program Aim

1. Protect the interest of the worker through:
 - i. Provide the best of care
 - ii. Prevent Psychological impact of repatriation if declared unfit in the GCC countries|
2. Protect the interest of the employer
 - iii. Healthier employees
 - iv. Prevent financial impact by prohibiting the collection of excessive fees for medical examination charged by the recruitment agencies.
3. Protect the health and security of the GCC countries.

c. Components of the program

The program is governed by different authorities including:

- a. The Gulf Health Council (GHC)
- b. The GCC ministries of Health.
- c. The GCC Embassies and consulates.

At the GHC level, the program consists of different entities including:

- a. Central Committee
- b. Technical Committee
- c. Accredited Health Centers

All the above mentioned parties are abided by the GHC Rules & Regulations for Health Check-up of Expatriates Coming to GCC States for Residence.

The GHC uses an online application to foster the implementation of the Expatriate Health Checkup program rules and regulations. This called the “GHC eProgram for Expatriate Health Checkup”.

2. DATA ANALYSIS

Using the GHC eProgram, data from 1st January 2019 to 31st December 2019 were analyzed. Data of the year 2020 were not used, as it does not reflect the migration to the GCC because of travel ban or restrictions due to COVID19.

a. Demographics

Currently, the GHC expatriate health Check-up program umbrella covers 395 accredited medical centers around 23 countries.

Figure 1 shows the number of accredited medical centers in each country. The Republic of India has the largest number of accredited centers, with a total of 118 centers, and a percentage of 29.87% of the total number of accredited centers. This is followed by the Republic of Bangladesh with a total of 62 centers, representing 15.70% of the total number of accredited centers.

Figure 1 The number of accredited medical centers in each country

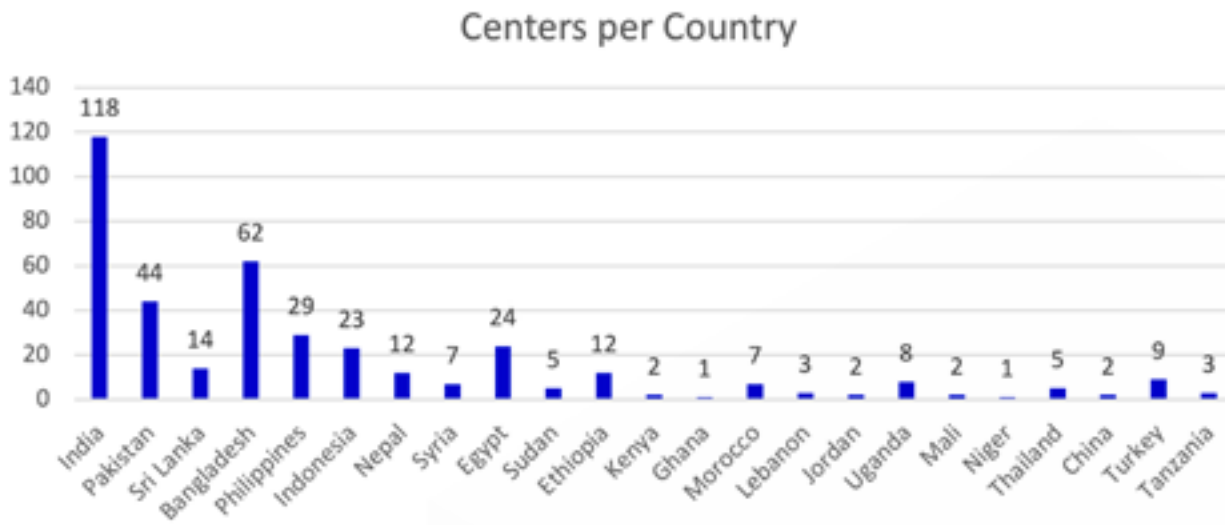
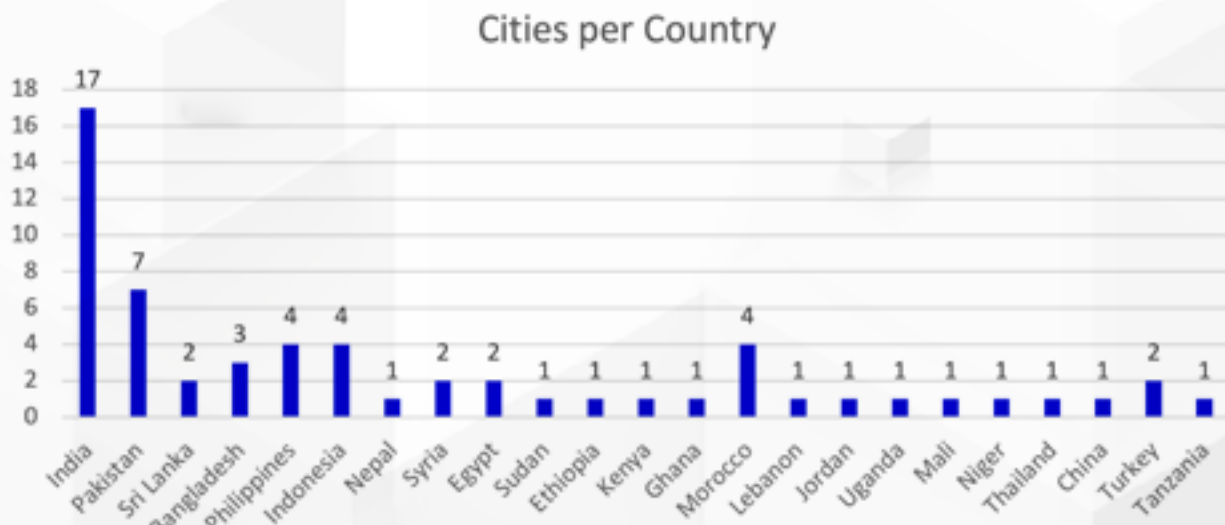


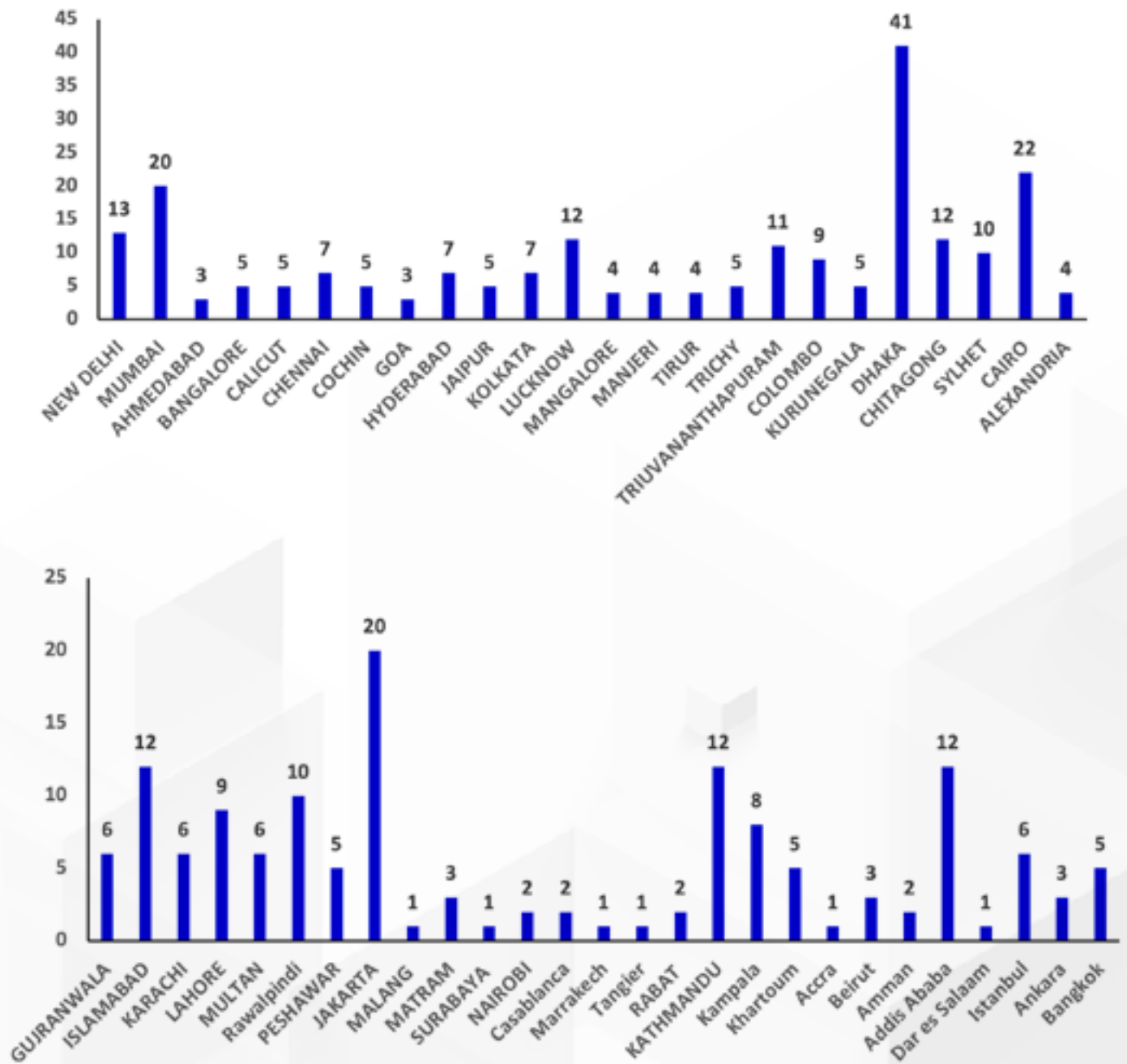
Figure 2 shows the number of cities covered by the program in each country. The Republic of India has the largest number of cities, with a total of 17 cities, followed by the Islamic Republic of Pakistan with a total of 7 cities.

Figure 2 The number of cities that the program covers in each country



The GHC Rules & Regulations governing medical examination for expatriates to reside in the GCC countries requires a proportion of the number of accredited centers to the number of attending clients per day in each city. Figure 3 shows the distribution of the number of accredited health centers in each city. It is noted that the capital of the Republic of Bangladesh, Dhaka, has the highest number of accredited centers with a total of 43 centers. While the cities of Mumbai, Manila and Jakarta are equal in the number of centers, 20 centers in each city.

Figure 3 The number of accredited medical centers in each city



b. Vital Statistics

The following tables show the number of registered expats across all accredited centers. Table 1 shows that there was gradual increase in the number of registered expats across all accredited centers from the year 2017 to 2019. In 2020 there was a drop, which can be explained by restriction of travel due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

YEAR	NUMBER OF REGISTERED EXPATS
2017	993,711
2018	1,849,875
2019	3,002,117
2020	1,210,874

Figure 4 Total registered expats (2017-2020)

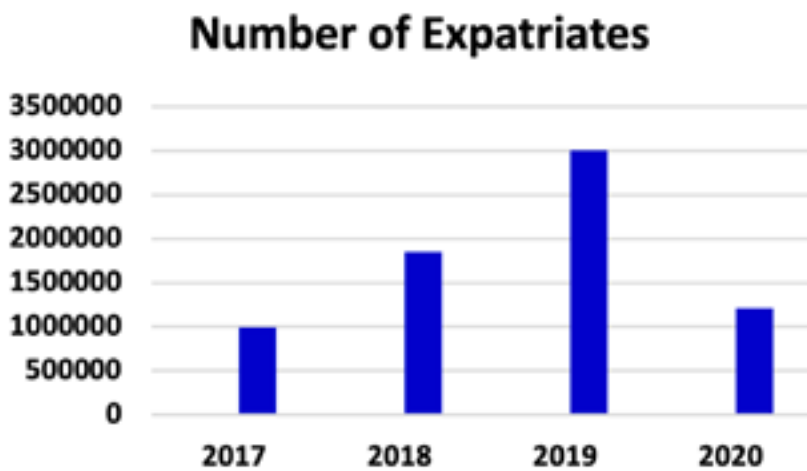


Table 2 shows the breakdown of the registered expats during the year 2019 by GCC countries destination. The kingdom of Saudi Arabia rank first of registrants followed by the State of Kuwait and the Sultanate of Oman consecutively.

Table 2 Total registered expats per GCC country (2019)

GCC COUNTRY	NUMBER OF REGISTERED EXPATS
Saudi Arabia	2,078,449
Bahrain	146,013
Oman	326,533
Kuwait	342,559
UAE	90,059
Qatar	18,504
Grand Total	3,002,117

c. Health Check-up outcome:

From a total of 2,690,616 candidates that has been registered and examined at the GHC accredited centers in their home country, there were 167,927 candidates that have been found unfit.

Table 3 shows a breakdown of candidate's health fitness status reported by the GHC accredited centers. It also shows that the average percentage of unfit candidates of the total registered and examined expatriates was 6%.

Table 3 Candidates Health fitness status reported by accredited centers (2019)

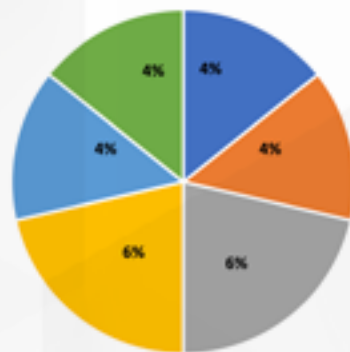
Total Candidates	Health Status			Percentage of Unfit
	Fit	Unfit	Not finalized reports	
3,002,117	2,522,690	167,926	311,501	6%

Table 4 shows the breakdown of unfit candidates reported by accredited centers as of GCC destination country.

Table 4 Candidates status per GCC destination country

GCC State	Total Candidates	Unfit candidates	Percentage of Unfit
United Arab Emirates	90,059	4,002	4%
Kingdom of Bahrain	146,013	6,484	4%
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	2,078,449	121,425	6%
Sultanate of Oman	326,533	20,742	6%
State of Qatar	18,504	792	4%
State of Kuwait	342,559	14,481	4%
Total	3,002,117	167,926	6%

Figure 4 Unfit Candidates per GCC destination country



■ United Arab Emirates ■ Kingdom of Bahrain ■ Kingdom of Saudi Arabia ■ Sultanate of Oman ■ State of Qatar ■ State of Kuwait

According to the GCC residency rules, all expats arriving the GCC countries for work and residency, should undergo another pre-employment examination. These examinations are fully paid by the employers. Out of 2,522,689 expats that have arrived the GCC countries, only 171 expats were declared unfit after reexamination. Table 5 shows the percentage of unfit candidates reported by GCC ministries of health.

Table 5 Candidates reported unfit by GCC countries (2019)

Total Candidates	Reported as unfit	Percentage of unfit candidates
2,522,690	171	0.007%

Table 6 shows a comparison of reported diseases by the GCC ministries of health for candidates that has been examined in accredited centers from those who has been examined in centers outside the program.

Table 6 Comparison of reported diseases (2019)

Disease	Accredited centers	%
Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)	3	0.0001%
Leprosy	0	0.0000%
Malaria	5	0.0002%
Hepatitis B & C	64	0.0025%
Tuberculosis (TB)	79	0.0031%
Non-Infectious Diseases	20	0.0008%
Total	171	0.007%

3. DISCUSSION

The data analysis previously mentioned, clearly indicate that the implementation of the expatriate health Check-up program through the past years, allowed to achieve the GHC goals by reducing the number of unfit candidates arriving the GCC countries and hence reducing psychological impacts on the employees and the economic impact on employers. This could not be possible without the collaboration between the GHC and the accredited centers.

Data from tables 3 & 4, showed that 6% of registered and examined candidates have been declared unfit in their home countries; and only 0.007% (table 5) have been declared unfit in the GCC countries. This proves that without the implementation of the GHC Program for Expatriate Health Checkup, these candidates could have been travelled to the GCC countries, requiring them to make significant effort for travel, and on the other hand, posing risk to the health security of the GCC country.

The following tables demonstrates an analysis of the data of unfit candidates reported by GHC accredited centers and GCC ministries of health from the year 2015 to 2019. Table 8, shows that the percentage of unfit candidates reported by GHC accredited centers remained steady for the past five years.

Table 8 The Overall Unfit candidates reported by accredited centers (2017-2020)

Year	Total Candidates	Reported as unfit	Percentage of unfit cases
2017	993,711	71,378	7%
2018	1,849,875	110,731	6%
2019	3,002,117	167,926	6%
2020	1,210,874	61,391	5%

Table 9, shows the number of unfit candidates reported by GCC ministries of health during the period from 2015 to 2019. The fluctuation of in numbers can be explained partly because of the fluctuation in the number of candidates arriving the GCC countries.

Table 9 Unfit candidates reported by GCC countries (2018-2020)

Year	Total Candidates	Reported as unfit	Percentage of unfit cases
2018	1,629,124	515	0.03%
2019	2,522,690	171	0.007%
2020	1,037,913	432	0.04%

4. RECENT UPDATES

The GHC expatriate health checkup program work has been updated including:

I. Rules & Regulations

The Rules and regulations pertaining to expatriate health checkup have been designed in 2001 and updated four times, the most recent one is the 2019 version. It is published in both Arabic and English languages.

It outlines the followings:

a. Roles and responsibilities of:

- Health Council
- GCC Health Ministries
- GCC Embassies and consulates
- Central Committee

- Technical Teams
- The accredited medical centers

b. Conditions for accreditation of New Health Centers

c. Standards for accreditation of expatriate health screening centers

d. Medical Examination standards

II. GCC Approved Medical Centers' Association «GAMCA»

GAMCA offices used to do the data entry and receive payments from all new applicants.

Based on the comments and complaints received from all parties involved in the program, and in order to succeed in today's technology-driven world, the GHC decided to create a friendly user system to ensure the satisfaction of all, and to find a substitute to GAMCA offices.

Accordingly, the GCC ministers of Health Council, Resolution No. (4) of 2017 at the 42nd Conference, states that the GAMCA was officially cease to exist in all countries from April 1st 2019.

III. GHC eProgram for Expatriate Health Checkup

In view of a substitution to GAMCA, the eProgram has been recently updated to include online booking to allow easy and quick access to expatriates.

Currently, the eProgram is linked with the ministries of health and residency permit issuing authorities in some GCC countries, including Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

The eProgram features are:

1. Enable tracking clinical data of the expat.
2. Allows multiple care providers through the GCC states, regardless of location, to simultaneously access, retrieve and analyze the expat clinical data.
3. Securely sharing electronic information with other countries.
4. The ability to report unfit cases by the GCC states.
5. Enable creation of more legible and barcoded certificates that can permit fast and easy verification by visa issuing authority.
6. Enables Online appointment scheduling for clients. This adds flexibility for clients by making bookings outside of normal business hours and from anywhere. Also clients can find a timeslot that best suits their needs and save time, as they no longer have to spend time on queues.
7. Enable the application for new centers.

In view of the importance of this vital program in maintaining the health security of the GCC States, the 37th Gulf Summit of GCC Supreme Council (Kingdom of Bahrain, December 2016) urged the embassies and consulates of the GCC States, and the relevant authorities to commit to verify the validity of the expatriate's health status through the GHC eProgram for Expatriate Health Checkup

5. FUTURE PLAN

I. Program Umbrella

The GHC will expand the umbrella of the program to cover more countries. Including: [Madagascar, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Burundi, Eritrea, Sierra Leone and Guinea].

II. Online evaluation

The aim of this process, is to move from the traditional evaluation process conducted by the Gulf technical committees, the committee concerned with conducting field visits to inspect and evaluate the centers for Expatriates' Health Check-up, to a more sustainable process that uses the GHC eProgram with the objective to produce more unified and quick field visit reports.

III. Online accreditation

The aim of this process, is to move from the traditional accreditation process conducted by the Gulf technical committees, to a more sustainable process that uses the latest methodologies and modern technologies.

This is to identify the health services provided by these centers in terms of their compliance with the GHC standards for the Accreditation of Expatriates' Health Check-up Centers. It also aims to move from the traditional accreditation process.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

1. The GCC Expatriate Health Screening Program was developed to:

- Protect the interest of the worker (psychological and economical.)
- Reduce and prevent the risk of transmission and spread of infectious diseases to the GCC.
- Protect the interest of the employer.

2. The Implementation of the program helped to reduce the number of unfit candidates from an average of 6% to 0.007%. those candidates could have been arrived to the GCC countries.

3. Online appointment scheduling enables

- Online appointment scheduling, adding flexibility for expats
- Creation of barcoded certificates that can permit reliable authentication of the medical certificate which ease

RECOMMENDATIONS

- To expand the umbrella of the Expatriates' Health Check-up program to include more countries.
- To support and develop the Expatriates' Health Check-up Program.
- To continuously update and develop the Expatriates' Health Check-up Electronic System.
- To continuously support the accredited medical centers.
- Embassies and consulates of the GCC States and the relevant authorities shall use the Expatriates' Health Check-up Electronic System; pursuant to the Resolution of the Supreme Council of the Gulf Cooperation Council in its 37th session of 2016 on the medical check for expatriate workforce; the
- The Ministries of Health in the GCC states shall be committed to report unfit expatriate workers through the Electronic System immediately after assessment of their health conditions

EXPLORING THE EXISTING PRACTICES OF SKILL ASSESSMENT (NEPAL AND BANGLADESH) AND RECOGNITION (UAE AND QATAR): A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With some 164 million migrant workers around the world (ILO 2018), international labour migration (ILM) and skilling migrant workers have become key concerns for all regions of the world. Within Asia, ILM is rising, benefitting both migrant-sending and migrant-receiving countries. It has been helping to address domestic labour shortages in many Asian countries, including the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC), Japan, South Korea and Malaysia. Migrant-sending countries such as Nepal, India, Laos, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have also benefitted from the remittances sent by their citizens engaged in ILM. With rising labour mobility, international organizations, policy makers as well as researchers have raised critical issues of ethical recruitment, low wages, and other forms of exploitative practices associated with labour migration. Lack of skill testing and recognition of skills in many cases have been often considered as one of the reasons behind the issues related to exploitative employment and low wages.

Focusing on the two Asian countries of origin (COOs) of migrant workers Nepal and Bangladesh and the two countries of destination (CODs) UAE and Qatar, the paper aims to provide some policy insights for further strengthening skill testing, certification and recognition in intra-Asian labour migration. Methodologically, it draws on a review of the relevant existing policy documents and other secondary resources on countries of origin and destination. The review has been complemented by interviews with relevant government authorities, including the Foreign Employment Board, as well as some MWRA and returnee migrant workers to understand the existing practices of skill assessment and recognition by CODs.

Analysis suggests that Nepal and Bangladesh feature almost similar institutions and processes to send their citizens for overseas employment, although certain regulatory and welfare provisions slightly vary. Both countries seem to have considered 'foreign employment' both as an important pillar of economic diplomacy as well as alternative to domestic employment. Our surveys reveal that both Nepali and Bangladeshi migrant workers to UAE and Qatar feel both of these labour receiving countries as attractive employment destination. However, there does not seem to have any mechanism in all of these four countries that would assess the skills of migrant workers. There are some occupations in labour receiving countries that require highly qualified individuals yet their method to assess the skills of prospective employees is heavily unsystematic. This results in inter alia the dismissal of the value of skilled labour migration from Nepal and Bangladesh to UAE and Qatar.

Our findings suggest that both labour sending and receiving countries must have bilateral agreement to incorporate the need to provide skills training in labour sending countries. The Abu Dhabi Dialogue can be an instrumental regional platform for both labour sending and receiving countries to introduce institutions and processes to (a) offer systematic skills training packages to prospective foreign employees in Nepal and Bangladesh, (b) explore dignified jobs that require skilled human resources in UAE and Qatar, and (c) develop strategies to reutilize the skills (for reemployment in destination countries as well as for reintegration in economic activities in labour sending countries).

INTRODUCTION

With some 164 million migrant workers around the world (ILO 2018), international labour migration (ILM) and skilling migrant workers have become key concerns for all regions of the world. Within Asia, ILM is rising, benefitting both migrant-sending and migrant-receiving countries. It has been helping to address domestic labour shortages in many Asian countries, including the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC), Japan, South Korea and Malaysia. Migrant-sending countries such as Nepal, India, Laos, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have also benefitted from the remittances sent by their citizens engaged in ILM. Since intra-Asian labour migration is largely temporary, migrant workers return home after the end of their employment contracts with enhanced social remittances such as skills and ideas, social networks and entrepreneurial ideas, which potentially shape the development of migrant-sending communities.

With rising labour mobility, international organizations, policy makers as well as researchers have raised critical issues of ethical recruitment, low wages, and other forms of exploitative practices associated with labour migration. Lack of skill testing and recognition of skills in many cases have been often considered as one of the reasons behind the issues related to exploitative employment and low wages. Skill testing and recognition may lead to better skills matching, higher wages, and improved productivity (Branka 2016). It also provides an opportunity for the recognition of the skills acquired informally or the formal qualifications that are not readily recognized in countries of destination. Skill testing also helps to identify gaps in the skillsets of prospective migrant workers, guiding them to gain additional trainings for skill enhancement.

Several international organizations (including ILO) and global and regional migration processes and frameworks have increasingly highlighted the importance of skill testing, certification and recognition for the benefit of migrant workers, employers as well as the countries of origin and destination. The Global Compact for Migration (GCM) has emphasized on investment in skills and mutual recognition. Out of the GCM's 23 objectives for safe, orderly and regular migration, Objective 18 reads: "Invest in skills development and facilitate mutual recognition of skills, qualifications and competences." The research agenda (2020-2021) of the Abu Dhabi Dialogue (ADD) has also prioritized skill testing and recognition in its member states. Consequently, there has been growing interest of migrant-sending and receiving countries to invest into skill testing and mutual skills recognition. Nevertheless, there has been limited research to understand progress and challenges associated with skill testing and recognition in intra-Asian labour migration. This policy paper intends to partly address the gap by exploring not only the existing practices of skill testing, certification and recognition in some Asian countries of origin and destination, but also the unilateral, bilateral or multilateral initiatives on the issue.

Focusing on the two Asian countries of origin (COOs) of migrant workers Nepal and Bangladesh and the two countries of destination (CODs) UAE and Qatar, the paper aims to provide some policy insights for further strengthening skill testing, certification and recognition in intra-Asian labour migration. Methodologically, it draws on a review of the relevant existing policy documents and other secondary resources on countries of origin and destination. The review has been complemented by interviews with relevant government authorities, including the Foreign Employment Board, as well as some MWRA and returnee migrant workers to understand the existing practices of skill assessment and recognition.

SKILLING MIGRANT WORKERS

Considering the fact that Nepali migrant workers are low skilled, the Government of Nepal has recently prioritized skills development to create positive impacts on labour productivity, poverty reduction and economic growth (GON 2020). Nepal has developed national vocational/skill frameworks and standards. However, it is yet to be linked with international labour governance. Several vocational institutes including the Council for Technical Education & Vocational Training (CTEVT) do provide training for gaining different skills. The National Skill Testing Board (NSTB), under CTEVT, has been tasked with skill testing and certification – for assessing skills gained formally, non-formally or informally and providing skill certificates. The NSTB has developed National Occupational Skill Standards/Profiles in 299 different occupations. So far 108,000 persons have sat for skill testing with 72,730 receiving national skill certificates. Interviews with recruitment agencies suggested that CTEVT certificates are not recognized by employers in destination countries, and at the same time the certificate holders are not well skilled to perform the required tasks. It raises a question over the quality of skill testing as well as recognition.

While there is no specific system to provide skills to aspirant migrant workers in Nepal there is mandatory pre-departure training for aspiring migrant worker to make their stay comfortable and safe while working abroad. The training provides necessary information on safety and various aspects of the destination countries such as the culture, tradition, traffic rules and general laws. While this training is crucial for prospective migrant workers, it is not skills training. Similarly, destination countries and employers are not engaged in providing training to their future workers. Nonetheless, similar to pre-departure training, employers in Qatar and UAE do provide training on health and safety.

Recently, there is a new development in Nepal in regard to skilling potential migrant workers. The Government of Nepal has started to impart free training in as many as 19 different skills to youths including aspirant migrant workers and returnee workers in a bid to produce skilled human resource that would cater to the domestic as well as international labour markets. The Foreign Employment Board under the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security has been tasked to offer such training in collaboration with the Council for Technical Education & Vocational Training (CTEVT) and private sector training institutes. After the completion of training and skill testing, participants are provided skill certificates. Potential migrant workers and returnees appear unaware of the system or its multiple benefits in terms of increased earning power and access to better-paid jobs at home and overseas. Again, whether such certificates will be recognized by employers in destination countries remain an open question.

Similarly, Bangladesh has also moved in a positive direction in terms of promoting skills development of migrant workers (both prospective and returnee), as well as skill assessment and certification. The Government of Bangladesh has realized that the Bangladeshi migrant workers in the GCC countries receive low wages due to the lack of proper skills certification. In response, the government has recently taken a decision to provide skills training for migrant workers, in line with the National Technical and Vocational Qualifications Framework

(TDS 2021). The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process has been promoted to help people acquire a formal certification reflecting their knowledge and skills attained in formal, non-formal or informal learning environments. It is expected that such certification contributes to enhancing workers' employability, lifelong learning as well as self-esteem. Bangladesh has 411 RPL centres which have already provided skills certificates to over 41,500 workers (TBS 2020). Bangladesh is also trying to include returnee migrants as well as those who are currently working overseas in the RPL process.

Interviews and a review of reports/documents suggest that different agencies or actor are offering skills training in both countries. These training providers include government agencies, along with the private sector and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which have promoted technical and vocational education and training. However, the training modules and standards vary from one skills training provider to another. There appears a lack of a coordination mechanism for ensuring quality skills training.

EMPLOYERS' ASSESSING THE SKILLS OF THEIR ASPIRANT WORKERS

In both origin countries, expectedly skills assessment procedures by employers at the time of hiring seem to vary by occupation. Recruitment agencies and HR managers or their representative from Qatar and UAE select their employees based on interviews with applicants and the screening of documents such as educational certificates and experience letters. Generally, it is found that in the pre-pandemic times, HR managers from companies visited Nepal to observe the skills of prospective employees and interview them. They mainly visited Nepal in the case of hiring skilled or semi-skilled workers while they rarely did so for recruiting 'general labour' for elementary occupations. Rather they conducted a phone or Skype interview with their potential employees and asked the Nepali recruitment agencies to check the physical fitness and health of potential employees.

Overall, employers from Qatar and UAE recruit low-skilled employees. The hiring process and selection criteria for Qatar and UAE are the same. It appears that the recruiters come to Nepal not with an intention of finding highly skilled workers, but they rather aim to select workers with honesty and integrity. The employers have the perception that Nepalis can learn by doing. Still, particularly in the case of skilled or semi-skilled workers, representatives of employers from Qatar and UAE make a hiring decision based on different selection criteria by occupation. In the case of masons, they interview the aspirants, observe their skills to construct walls in a training centre in Kathmandu (see Table 2). Applicants for security guards/ PSBD (Personal Security Business Department) have to sit for a written examination. Potential employees with prior experiences in the Gulf member countries are given a top priority in the selection process. Language skills seem to matter a lot. Interviews with returnee migrant workers and recruitment agencies revealed that Hindi, English and/or Arabic skills along with prior work experiences increase chances for getting recruited and better salaries.

It seems that there are no clear selection criteria for elementary jobs in Qatar and UAE. As part of selection process, applicants need to submit CV, educational/training certificates, experience letters/proof of previous employment in similar jobs. Although educational qualifications do not guarantee their jobs and higher

wages, recruitment agencies seem to prefer those with some qualifications over others as they believe such qualifications come with some knowledge and language skills. For the positions of cleaners and waiters, previous work experiences plus candidates with 12 years of education (high school graduates) are preferred. In housekeeping, SCL (10 years of schooling) graduates and the one with basic skill in English to communicate and understand the names of home appliances are often hired.

Recruitment agencies suggested that training certificates constitute a strong form of evidence for the employer during job interviews, but actual skills are more important. It turns out that recruitment agencies and employers do not strongly value or trust the training certificates provided by the Council of Technical Education and Vocation Training (CTEVT) and other Nepali training institutes. They suggested that those with CTEVT certificates fare poorly when it comes to demonstrating skills. A representative from a recruitment agency said, “We have the experiences that we sent overseas some people with CTEVT training, but they were not skilled to work there. The only thing Nepalis have is their honesty and integrity.” Employers seem to have the perception that Nepali workers learn by doing when they join the company. Recruitment agencies shared that the Nepalese driving licenses are recognized in Qatar and UAE.

Table 2: Required skills (by occupation) for employment in Qatar and UAE

Occupation	Skills to be demonstrated during the hiring process
Cook	Demonstration of skills to prepare certain food items
Mason	Preparation of the mixture of sand and cement with the help of shovels; construction of a small wall
Plumber	Regarding the plumber, we prepare a video of the worker fixing water pipes and taps of bathroom and something like.
Waiter/waitress	Basic English language skills
Security guard	Written examinations, performing drill, salute etc.

SKILLS RECOGNITION: BILATERAL INITIATIVES

Providing aspirant migrant workers with training and skills certificates is an important step in the right direction to develop a pool of skilled human capital. However, the quality of training and whether workers' certification is accepted in the international labour market remain the vexed issues. There is good news, however. The government of Nepali is working towards mutual recognition agreements with destination countries to ensure that Nepali migrant workers' skills certificates are accepted for international job markets. Destination countries are also positive about such policy initiatives. In the similar vein, as noted earlier, while the Bangladeshi government has planned to provide skills training for migrant workers, in line with the National Technical and Vocational Qualifications Framework, the government is wondering whether workers' certification is accepted in the international labour market. The government of Bangladesh is under process of signing mutual recognition

agreements (MRA) with different countries and regional bodies to ensure that Bangladeshi migrant workers' skills certifications are recognized and accepted internationally. At the same time, origin countries will also need to rework and harmonize national qualifications, standards and frameworks as well as skill testing with the needs of employers in destination countries. Skill recognition by employers is particularly important because companies and firms in the destination countries should fully abide by those agreements for the impacts.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Labour migration from Nepal and Bangladesh is heavily concentrated in the GCC countries. Given that migrant workers are overwhelmingly low-skilled with implications for wages, safety and self-esteem, both origin countries have recently focused on providing skills for migrant workers, certification and recognition. Despite some development in skill training and certification in the origin countries, recruitment agencies suggested that training certificates are poorly recognized as a strong form of evidence by the overseas employers, rather the employers tend to observe the actual skills demonstrated by potential workers at the time of hiring.

Our findings reveal that the certificates of potential migrant workers, in the most part, have not been recognized by employers and destination countries. Such poor recognition is partly associated with a mismatch between the kinds/quality of skills provided to migrant workers and the skills required by employers, indicating a need for skills partnership between origin countries (governments, vocational institutes, etc.) and destination countries (governments, employers, etc.) for skills partnership.

Building upon our analysis of the available primary and secondary information in our focused countries, we provide important policy suggestions for both origin and destination countries for skill training, certification and mutual skill recognition.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ORIGIN COUNTRIES

- Origin countries should gather important job market details from destination countries for understanding the demand for workers as well as the specific requirements for different occupations. Such information will be useful for re-designing technical and vocational education curricula and certification in relation to the demands of the international labour market.
- It is important for origin countries to develop a robust database of migrant workers (both aspirant and returnee) in a bid to develop solid skills training programs.
- It is crucial to develop a nationally and internationally accepted National Technical and Vocational Qualifications Framework (NTVQF) embodying Competency-Based Training & Assessment (CBT&A) and implementing a quality assurance mechanism. The capacities of existing training providers should be enhanced.

- Targeting both aspirant and returning workers, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) should be promoted.
- There is an urgent need to adopt the competency framework and implement
- It is important to initiate dialogues for bilateral/multilateral arrangements (mutual recognition agreements) between origin and destination countries for skills partnership.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DESTINATION COUNTRIES

- Destination countries should support origin countries in their efforts to collect details of demand for different occupations/specific selection requirements. For this purpose, they can also create a platform for origin countries, recruitment agencies, and employers/private sector to discuss various aspects of job market and specific demands from employers.
- It is important to organize and promote dialogues on skills partnership for forging bilateral/multilateral agreements on skill development and recognition.
- Destination countries should provide financial support to origin countries for redesigning their technical and vocational education curricula and certification system in relation to job market requirements of their countries.

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Annex 1: Nepali migrant workers in UAE and Qatar by occupation (2018/2019)

Occupation Category	UAE	%	Qatar	%
Cleaning and laundry	20242	44.19	5466	15.80
Security	6129	13.38	2315	6.69
Retail	2859	6.24	971	2.81
Mason	2282	4.98	5206	15.05
Waiter/Waitress	1915	4.18	1044	3.02
Packaging, Loading, Shipping & Delivery	1910	4.17	204	0.59
Carpenter	1660	3.62	2939	8.50
Office/Administrative/Associate Professionals	1351	2.95	1173	3.39
Driver	1061	2.32	5957	17.22
Cook/chef	1054	2.30	696	2.01
Steel Fixture	979	2.14	1137	3.29
Electrician	689	1.50	1939	5.61
Beauty & Fitness	516	1.13	135	0.39
Aviation & Cruise	497	1.09	301	0.87
Machine operator	476	1.04	0	0.00
Painter	351	0.77	1408	4.07
Tailor	221	0.48	231	0.67
Manufacturing	220	0.48	0	0.00
Scaffolding	203	0.44	0	0.00
Supervisor	196	0.43	658	1.90
Agriculture	180	0.39	22	0.06
Welder	154	0.34	282	0.82
Plumbing/pipe fitter	129	0.28	1385	4.00
Barista/coffee maker	119	0.26	36	0.10
Automotive	86	0.19	7	0.02
Housekeeping	81	0.18	0	0.00
Managers	77	0.17	104	0.30
Baker/Dessert Maker	72	0.16	86	0.25
AC Technician	51	0.11	77	0.22
Professionals	44	0.10	115	0.33
Foreman	0	0.00	695	2.01
Total	45804	100.00	34589	100.00