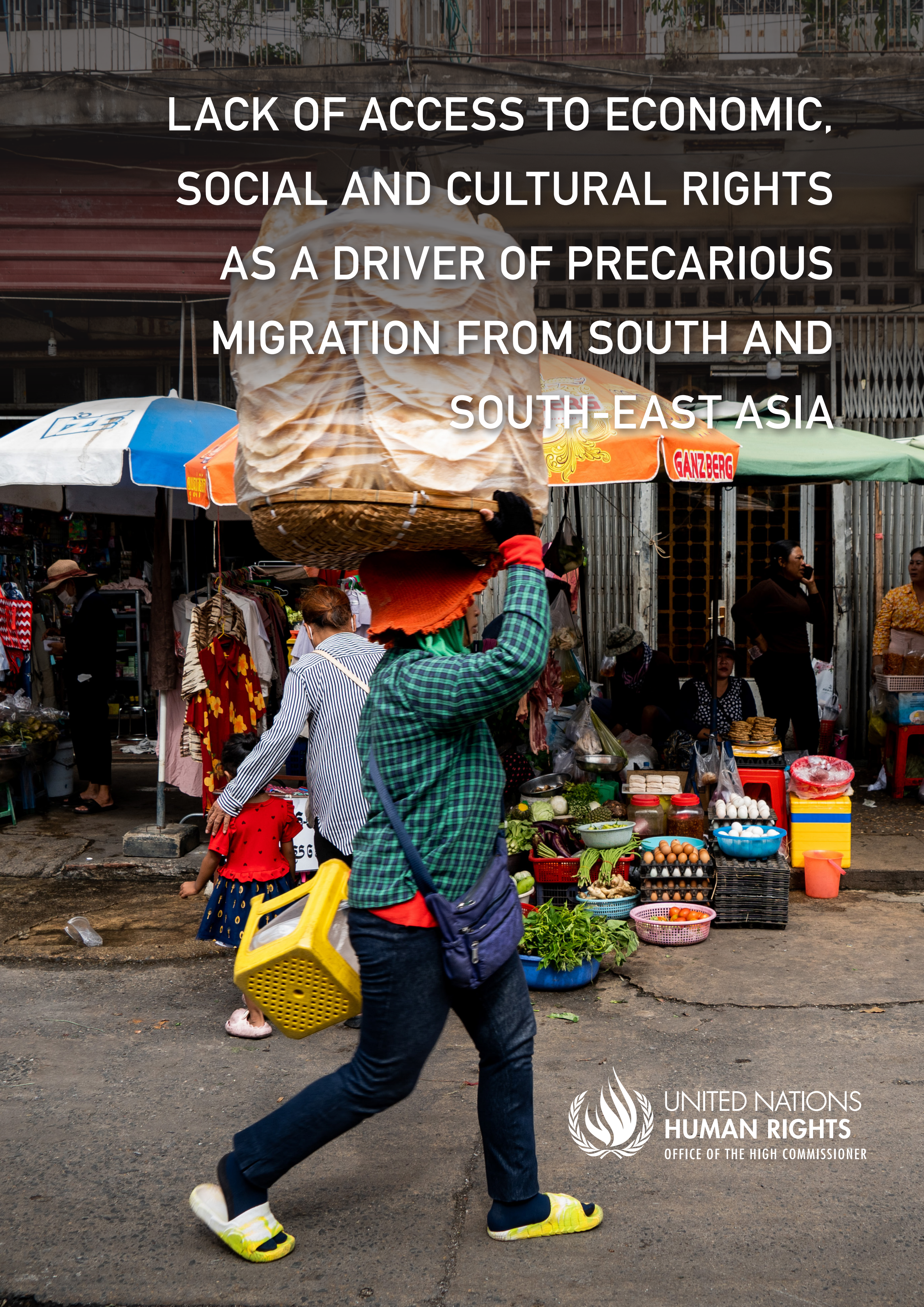
LACK OF ACCESS TO ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS AS A DRIVER OF PRECARIOUS MIGRATION FROM SOUTH AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA



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1 Introduction

Elementary school children buy snacks and drinks at a nearby kiosk before school starts in Bangsal, South Sumatra, Indonesia, on 11 June 2025. (Yasuyoshi Chiba/AFP)

Migration can be a positive and empowering experience, the outcome of a genuine choice between a future at home and one abroad. Migration can lift individuals and communities out of poverty, under the right conditions it can bring diversity, socio-economic contributions and empowerment to home and host communities. But for many migrants and people in Asia who aspire to migrate, their mobility is the result of a compulsion to leave their country because they see no future for themselves, their families and communities there. The resulting migration can take place along regular as well as irregular pathways, but in most cases, it will be precarious, and often dangerous and exploitative. While the countries of South and South-East Asia are diverse in their economies, demographics, geography, polities and history, the lack of adequate enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR) emerges as a common key driver of precarious forms of migration from these subregions.[1] It should be recalled that within the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), Member States acknowledged the varied compulsions that lead people onto precarious migration pathways:

> "We commit to create conducive political, economic, social and environmental conditions for people to lead peaceful, productive and sustainable lives in their own country and to fulfil their personal aspirations, while ensuring that desperation and deteriorating environments do not compel them to seek a livelihood elsewhere through irregular migration."[2]

As described by the sociologist and geographer Hein de Haas in his aspirations-capabilities framework, the decision to migrate is informed by a combination of migrants' life aspirations, the belief that they will not be able to realize these aspirations at home and that better opportunities exist elsewhere, and the existence of structural conditions (economic, environmental, political, or socio-cultural) which trigger, enable or constrain people's ability to choose – that is, their capability – to migrate in practice.[3] Migration governance plays a role, too. When countries enact restrictive migration policies, people may adapt by taking irregular rather than regular routes, remaining in the destination country longer, or deciding not to return home, for fear of not being able to re-migrate later.

While research exists on the ability of migrants to access their rights, including ESCR, in transit and at destination, the role that limited ESCR realization in countries of origin may play in shaping people's decisions to migrate has been, so far, under-explored.[4] With an overall focus on the broad framework of ESCR, this study focuses in more detail on the rights to decent work, housing and education, and the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. While the study also references other rights more briefly, such as the rights to food, an adequate standard of living and social protection, the focus rights have been determined inter alia by the availability of existing research, information and statistical data.

The relationships between access to ESCR, sustainable development and drivers of migration are complex and, in some cases, ambiguous, and this study does not purport to establish a conclusive, direct causal relationship between limited access to ESCR in countries of origin and migration trends in the region. Instead, it attempts to reflect on the possible links between the two phenomena, in order to stimulate debate and bring attention to the role that economic and social rights play within the context of migration drivers. Consequently, the aim of the present study is to explore lack of access to ESCR and more broadly to a human rights economy in South and South-East Asia in order to provide a broad picture of the ways in which lack of access to fundamental rights underpins precarious migration, with a view to:

a) Bridge the gap between existing research on drivers of migration and the international legal framework related to ESCR;
b) Contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the traditional distinction between forced and voluntary migration and offer an additional tool for the analysis of the drivers of migration; and
c) Support advocacy efforts for improved access to ESCR and to promote human rights economies in South and South-East Asia.

1.1. Research methodology

Relevant information and data were gathered from the four main sources listed below. In addition to desk review and other secondary research, the study benefited from primary research and consultations conducted in Bangladesh and Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) as representative countries of origin within the subregions of South Asia and Southeast Asia respectively:

1) Data on migration trends, macroeconomic data, and data on socioeconomic indicators in the region, with a focus on countries of origin of migrants in the region, compiled and disseminated by relevant states, international organizations (including various United Nations agencies and human rights mechanisms, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank) and civil society organizations;
2) Literature drawn from academic analysis and relevant reports from UN entities on migration drivers, migration trends, and the state of ESCR realization in the region;
3) Semi-structured qualitative interviews with aspiring, current and returning migrants from Bangladesh (12) and Lao PDR (5) as well as one recruitment agent from Lao PDR; and
4) Two multi-stakeholder workshops held in Vientiane, Lao PDR and Dhaka, Bangladesh, in June 2024, and one virtual regional roundtable with informed experts in October 2024.

It should be noted that the collection of data from these sources presented some limitations. National statistical offices in the region do not always regularly collect and disseminate country-relevant migration and macroeconomic data, for reasons that can include limited technical and institutional capacity. In addition, often the data that is collected does not follow international formats and classifications, which can make it difficult to compare between countries in the region and with international standards. Finally, the lack of aggregation of national data (migration, macroeconomic, ESCR) by regional stakeholders renders the collection, comparison and analysis of data at the regional level challenging.

The responses and statements made by the migrants and aspiring migrants interviewed in the context of the country case studies have been reviewed, using a thematic approach, to identify common issues, attitudes and trends. The quoted interviews below are not intended to elevate any individual experience to a representation of objective trends, but rather to enrich the analysis and narration of the study with the lived experience of the people directly involved in the reality of precarious migration in the region.

The study was shared with relevant States for factual comments prior to publication.

1.2. Understanding migration drivers

The decision to migrate is usually not motivated by a single factor. The drivers of migration are often multidimensional and can be interlinked.[5] People seek to leave their country for a complex set of interconnected reasons that can include poverty, lack of access to healthcare, education, water, food, housing, the inability to secure decent work, conflict, insecurity, educational and employment aspirations, family reunification, discrimination, marginalization, the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation, among others. As the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants has noted, "Migration decisions are often made in a context of constrained life choices, where children and families are caught between aspirations, a sense of responsibility towards family members and communities, and pressures to leave their homes."[6] Migrating internationally also incurs considerable costs, which can include the means to cover the financial costs of migration, access to information and relevant social networks as well as good physical health. Costs, both financial as well as social, are thus part of the decision-making landscape at the individual and household level. Remittances sent home by migrants can play a significant role in economies and households in South and South-East Asia, though often at a high personal and social cost for migrants themselves and the families and communities left behind.

While accepting that motivations for migration can be mixed, changing, complex, and conflicting, it is also the case that migration that is motivated by the inability to access rights at home can put migrants in situations of vulnerability throughout their migration. Indeed, migrants who move out of necessity face a heightened risk of human rights violations throughout their migration and the conditions in which they migrate are more likely to be precarious.[7] International human rights law therefore places an obligation on States to provide migrants in vulnerable situations with a heightened duty of care.[8]

People who are believed to be leaving their country for reasons in which their socioeconomic circumstances play a large role have been portrayed in pejorative terms – called "economic migrants" and often dismissed as people who are seeking unfair financial advantage. Narratives built on a binary understanding of forced/voluntary motivations suggest that such migration is entirely voluntary and absent of any compulsion and, in some cases, that migrants who leave for these reasons are less deserving of rights and protection than those whose main reasons for fleeing are linked to the political context, conflict or violence in their countries of origin.[9]

It should be recalled in this context that the lack of access to ESCR can in itself trigger the principle of *non-refoulement*, the obligation on States to not return a person to a place where they would be at risk of serious human rights violations.[10] Under international human rights law, when assessing whether there is a real risk that a person would face irreparable harm if returned, States should take into account the impact of limited access to ESCR such as facing severe destitution[11] or being unable to access adequate healthcare,[12] as well as the adverse effects of climate change.[13] In the latter context, the International Court of Justice has recently emphasized that environmental conditions caused by climate change may put people's lives at risk or expose them to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, thus triggering states' obligations not to return them under the principle of *non-refoulement*.[14] This reinforces the authoritative understanding that all human rights must be treated in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing and with the same emphasis.[15]

The study also locates its inquiry within the emerging concept of a 'human rights economy.' As understood by OHCHR, a human rights economy puts people and the planet at the centre of economic decisions, urging States to be guided by their human rights obligations in order *inter alia* to steer budget decisions and to invest sufficiently in public education, health, social protection and other rights as well as to take meaningful action to reduce inequalities. A human rights economy recognizes that ESCR and the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment are an integral part of the rule of law and calls on governments to protect them equally.[16] Further, the concept of a human rights economy is located both at national levels – for instance through fair taxation policies - and at global level, including through debt restructuring.[17]

Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration

Under the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration – endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 2018 – governments have committed to '[m]inimize the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin' (Objective 2) and 'to create conducive political, economic, social and environmental conditions for people to lead peaceful, productive and sustainable lives in their own country and to fulfil their personal aspirations, while ensuring that desperation and deteriorating environments do not compel them to seek a livelihood elsewhere through irregular migration' (para. 18). To realize this commitment, states have affirmed they will, among other things, '[i]nvest in programmes that accelerate [their] fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals with the aim of eliminating the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin, including through poverty eradication, food security, health and sanitation, education, inclusive economic growth, infrastructure, urban and rural development, employment creation, decent work, gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, resilience and disaster risk reduction, climate change mitigation and adaptation, addressing the socioeconomic effects of all forms of violence, non-discrimination, rule of law and good governance, access to justice and protection of human rights, as well as creating and maintaining peaceful and inclusive societies with effective, accountable and transparent institutions' [para. 18(b)].

States also committed to "respond to the needs of migrants who face situations of vulnerability, which may arise from the circumstances in which they travel or the conditions they face in countries of origin, transit and destination, by assisting them and protecting their human rights, in accordance with [States'] obligations under international law" (objective 7) and to "adapt options and pathways for regular migration in a manner that facilitates labour mobility and decent work reflecting demographic and labour market realities, optimizes education opportunities, upholds the right to family life, and responds to the needs of migrants in a situation of vulnerability, with a view to expanding and diversifying availability of pathways for safe, orderly and regular migration" (Objective 5) including for migrants compelled to leave their countries due to sudden or slow onset disasters (paras. g and h).

1.3. Regional migration trends

Migration has long been a central feature of economies and societies in Asia, and mobility within and outside the region has grown dramatically over several decades. According to the latest available data, in 2024 almost a quarter (nearly 72 million) of all international migrants in the world (around 304 million) originated from South and South-East Asia.[18] Migrants from India (the country with the largest diaspora in the world at over 18.5 million in 2024), Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, the Philippines and Viet Nam alone made-up nearly 20 percent of all international migrants. Nine of the top 21 international country-to-country migration corridors in the world emanate from the region, with other countries in the region and Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC)[19] as primary destinations, followed by North America.[20]

In 2024, more than 47 million migrants worldwide originated from South Asia (compared to approximately 24 million circa in 1990) and 24 million from South-East Asia (compared to more than 6 million in 1990). After India, Bangladesh (8.7 million), Afghanistan (7.5 million) and Pakistan (6.9 million) were the countries of origin of most migrants from South Asia. The Philippines (nearly 7 million), Myanmar (4.3 million), Indonesia (3.7 million) and Viet Nam (nearly 3.7 million) were the countries of origin of most migrants from South-East Asia in the same year.

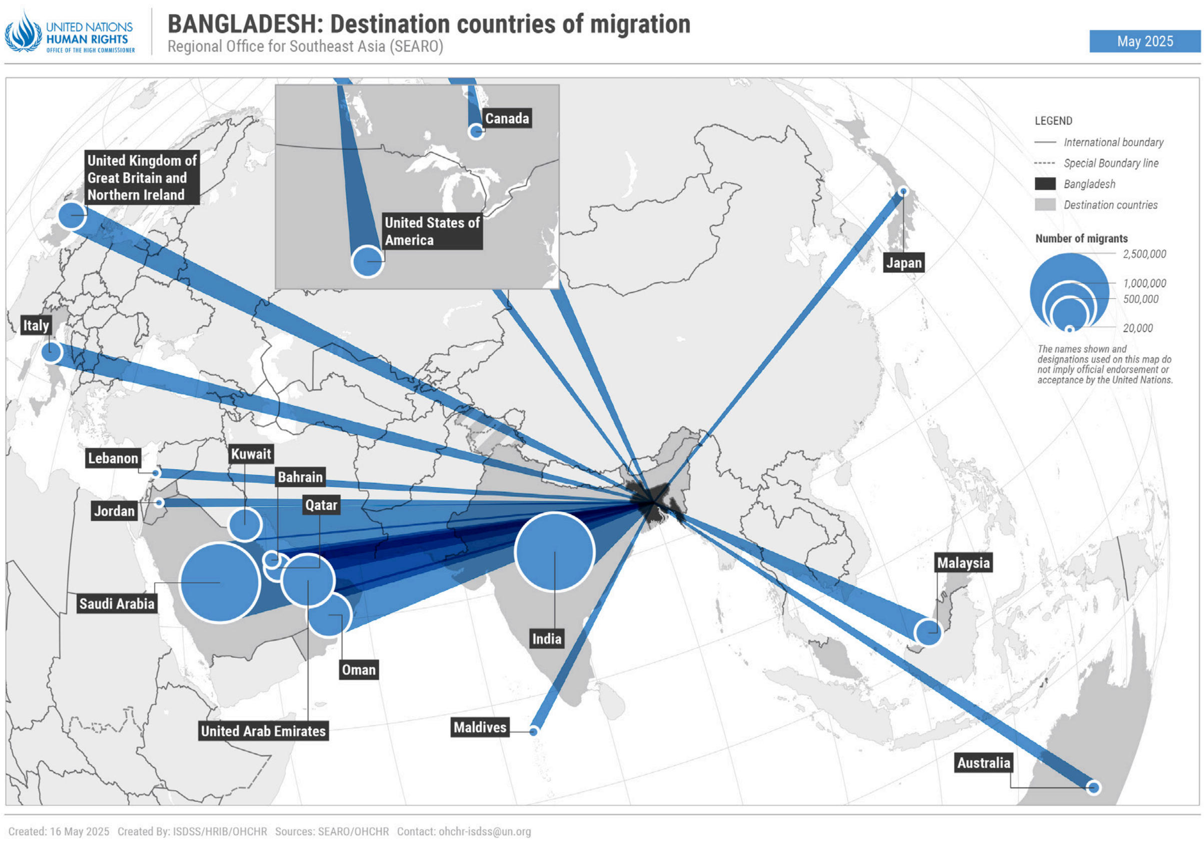
The primary destinations of migrants originating from the South Asia subregion in 2024 were West Asia (more than 19 million migrants), especially GCC countries and in particular Saudi Arabia (6.7 million), the United Arab Emirates (5.3 million), Kuwait (2 million) and Oman (1.8 million); North America (6.6 million), particularly the United States of America (4.8 million) and Canada (1.8 million); and Europe (5.7 million), especially the United Kingdom (2.4 million). The number of people moving within the subregion in 2024 was 12 million, especially to India (4 million) and Pakistan (3.5 million). In addition, while the number of people moving outside the subregion increased in the period of 1990-2024, the number of those moving within the subregion decreased from 17 million in 1990 to 12 million in 2024. (see Figure 1)

Unlike South Asia, the primary destinations of migrants originating from South-East Asia were significantly *within* the subregion, numbering 7.1 million in 2024 (nearly six times more than in 1990, when the number was 1.3 million), especially to Malaysia (nearly 2.5 million), Thailand (2.4 million), and Singapore (1.7 million). Other destinations of South-East Asian migrants include North America (nearly 5.7 million), especially the United States of America (4.5 million) and Canada (1.1 million); Eastern Asia (3.5 million), especially Japan (1.2 million), followed by Republic of Korea and China; Western Asia (2.6 million), especially Saudi Arabia (1 million) and Southern Asia (2.1 million), especially Bangladesh (1.9 million). (see Figure 1)

Globally, nearly half (48 percent) of all international migrants are women. Migration from South Asia is significantly male dominated, with over 63 percent of migrants being male. Similar trends are also found in the individual countries of origin in South Asia. On the other hand, migration from South-East Asia is more balanced. However, as countries of origin, male-dominated migration is found in Myanmar and Indonesia, at over 60 percent, while female-dominated migration is observed in Lao PDR and the Philippines.

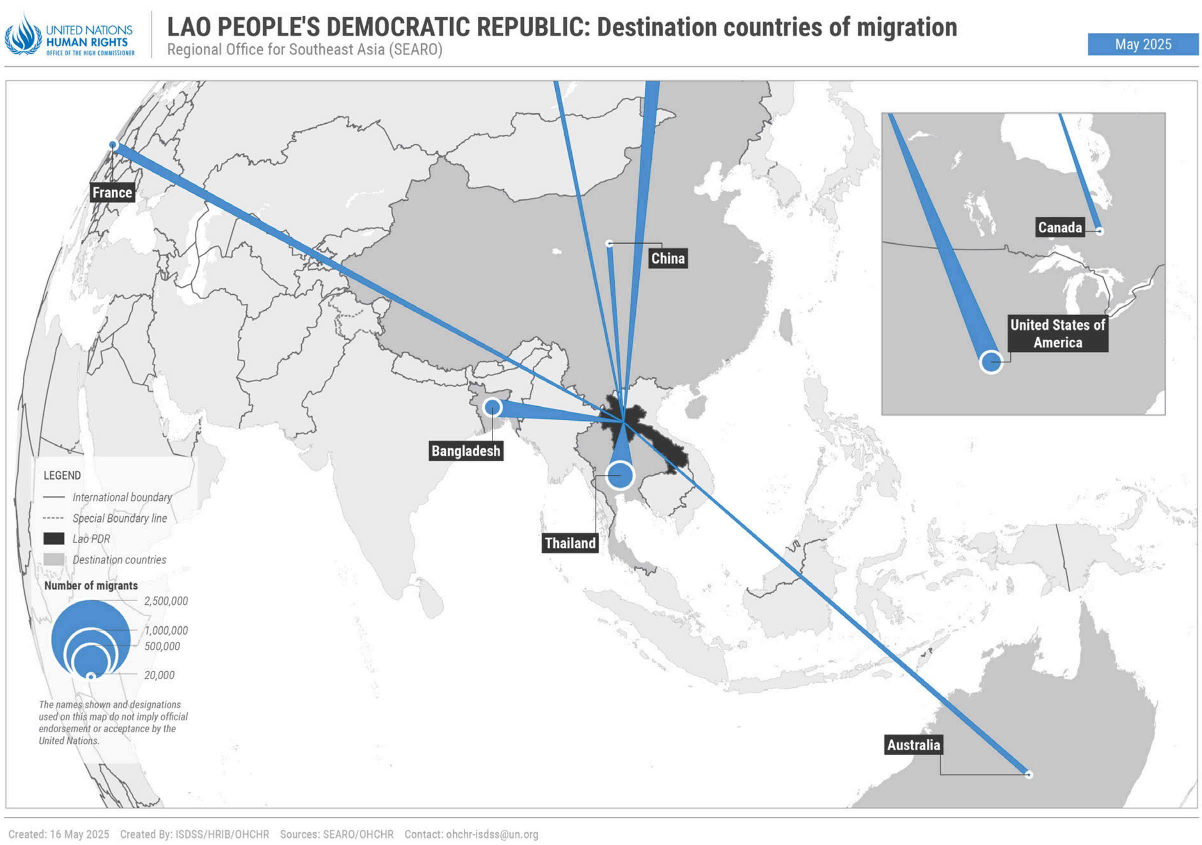
It should be noted here that the figures used in this study reflect official data sources which in general do not capture irregular migration statistics. This form of migration remains prevalent and even sizeable in the region but is rarely reflected within official data. It is of note that to establish whether they are meeting their treaty obligations, and to ensure that their conduct is not creating inequalities in the enjoyment of human rights, States are obliged to monitor the effects of their policies and actions, including their social policies. To do so, they have a duty to gather disaggregated data such as data on irregular migration trends.[21]

Figure 1: International migrants originating from Bangladesh by country of destination (2024)



Source: UNDESA, Population Division (2024). International Migrant Stock 2024.

Figure 2: International migrants originating from Lao PDR by country of destination (2024)



Source: UNDESA, Population Division (2024). International Migrant Stock 2024.

2 The Macroeconomic Picture in the Region

A clothing store owner waits for customers in Vientiane, Lao PDR on October 8, 2024. (Nhac NGUYEN / AFP)

Macroeconomic conditions in countries of origin can influence the decision to migrate internationally as well as impact considerations about when and how to move, as individuals and communities respond to resulting socio-economic circumstances.

In 2024, most South and South-East Asian countries faced continued macroeconomic challenges and instability due to slower-than-expected economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and to a series of external financial, geopolitical and environmental shocks, as well as pre-existing financial and fiscal vulnerabilities. These factors have been compounded recently in a more general global context of increased protectionism with negative economic impacts in the region.[22]

Higher global commodity prices have led to higher domestic inflation and a reduction in private consumption and foreign investment, both significant sources of growth stimulus. Tighter monetary policies have impacted interest rates and, consequently, foreign exchange rates, triggering local currency devaluations and reducing the availability of foreign reserves, which are essential, especially for countries that heavily rely on imports, to pay for their import bills including basic goods and services necessary for the realization of ESCR.

Higher foreign exchange rates and higher inflation have not only worsened the balance of payments of several countries in the region and increased the cost of the existing, largely foreign, public debt. They have also forced countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan – which, as most South Asian countries, are net energy importers and strong importers of agricultural products – to impose import restrictions (especially on fuel), a measure which in turn has a negative impact both on local industrial and agricultural production and foreign investment (and therefore, once again, on growth). Bangladesh, in particular, has experienced severe energy crises in recent years, due to the combined effects of: a) increased global fuel prices; b) climate change (the country has been struck by a series of heatwaves which have caused a significant imbalance between energy demand and its supply capacity); and, consequently, c) a reduced capacity to pay for fuel, also due to the local currency's devaluation and reduced availability of foreign reserves.[23]

2.1. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth

The GDP growth rates of South and South-East Asian countries from 2014 to 2023 reveal distinct trends across pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, while countries like Bangladesh and Lao PDR exhibited consistent growth, others were less stable.

However, in 2024, GDP growth was weaker than pre-pandemic levels in many South and South-East Asian countries (Table 1).[24] In the South-East Asia subregion, the World Bank has found a strong link between per capita GDP and emigration, where "over 90 percent of low-skilled migrants in Thailand and Malaysia come from neighbouring [low-income countries]."[25]

A downward trend in Bangladesh's GDP growth rate is observed, with 5.8 percent in 2023, 4.2 percent in 2024, and a projected decline to 3.8 percent in 2025. Similarly, GDP growth in Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in particular, decelerated in 2023 and, despite moderate improvements in 2024, it is projected to remain significantly below potential in 2025, with rates at 4.0 percent in Nepal and 2.6 percent in Pakistan according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).[26]

In South-East Asia, GDP growth reached 4.3 percent in 2024 in Lao PDR – mostly due to the recovery in the service sector (increased tourism, transport and logistics service, mining, and foreign investment) – but remains significantly below pre-COVID-19 levels,[27] and is estimated to fall to 2.5 percent in 2025, especially because of the country's persistent macroeconomic instability (see below).

2.2. Inflation

Since peaking in mid-2022, median inflation has been declining in both South and South-East Asia. However, in 2024 it remained for most countries higher than economic peers, and exceptionally high in Myanmar (28.6 percent),[28] Lao PDR (25.4 percent in 2024), Bangladesh (11.7 percent in July 2024) and Pakistan (headline inflation of 9.6 percent in August 2024, down from its peak of 38 percent in May 2023).[29]

Table 1: GDP growth (annual %)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Afghanistan	2.7	1.5	2.3	2.6	1.2	3.9	-2.4	-20.7	-6.2	2.7	..
Bangladesh	6.1	6.6	7.1	6.6	7.3	7.9	3.4	6.9	7.1	5.8	4.2
Bhutan	5.9	6.7	8.5	2.1	3.5	5.8	-10.2	4.4	5.2	4.9	..
Brunei Darussalam	-2.5	-0.4	-2.5	1.3	0.1	3.9	1.1	-1.6	-1.6	1.4	4.2
Cambodia	8	7.2	7.9	8.1	8.8	7.9	-3.6	3.1	5.1	5	6.0
India	7.4	8	8.3	6.8	6.5	3.9	-5.8	9.7	7	8.2	6.5
Indonesia	5	4.9	5	5.1	5.2	5	-2.1	3.7	5.3	5	5.0
Lao PDR	7.6	7.3	7	6.9	6.2	5.5	0.5	2.5	2.7	3.7	4.3
Malaysia	6	5.1	4.4	5.8	4.8	4.4	-5.5	3.3	8.9	3.6	5.1
Maldives	7.8	4	6.6	7.1	8.7	7.3	-32.9	37.5	13.8	4.7	5.1
Myanmar	8.2	7	5.9	6.1	6.3	6.6	-9	-12	4	1	-1.0
Nepal	6	4	0.4	9	7.6	6.7	-2.4	4.8	5.6	2	3.7
Pakistan	4.1	4.2	6.6	4.4	6.2	2.5	-1.3	6.5	4.8	0	3.2
Philippines	6.3	6.3	7.1	6.9	6.3	6.1	-9.5	5.7	7.6	5.5	5.7
Singapore	3.9	3	3.6	4.5	3.5	1.3	-3.9	9.7	3.8	1.1	4.4
Sri Lanka	6.4	4.2	5.1	6.5	2.3	-0.2	-4.6	4.2	-7.3	-2.3	5.0
Thailand	1	3.1	3.4	4.2	4.2	2.1	-6.1	1.6	2.5	1.9	2.5
Timor-Leste	4.5	2.5	3	-3.2	-0.5	24.2	31.7	5.4	-20.6	-18.1	-2.2
Viet Nam	6.4	7	6.7	6.9	7.5	7.4	2.9	2.6	8.1	5	7.1

Source: World Bank Data (18/7/2025 update)

Table 2: Inflation, consumer prices (annual %)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Afghanistan	4.7	-0.7	4.4	5.0	0.6	2.3	5.6	5.1	13.7	-4.6	-6.6
Bangladesh	**7.0**	**6.2**	**5.5**	**5.7**	**5.5**	**5.6**	**5.7**	**5.5**	**7.7**	**9.9**	**10.5**
Bhutan	**8.3**	**4.5**	**3.2**	**5**	**2.7**	**2.7**	**5.6**	**7.3**	**5.6**	**4.2**	**2.8**
Brunei Darussalam	-0.2	-0.5	-0.3	-1.3	1.0	-0.4	1.9	1.7	3.7	0.4	-0.4
Cambodia	3.9	1.2	3.0	2.9	2.5	1.9	2.9	2.9	5.3	2.1	..
India	6.7	4.9	4.9	3.3	3.9	3.7	6.6	5.1	6.7	5.6	5.0
Indonesia	6.4	6.4	3.5	3.8	3.2	3.0	1.9	1.6	4.2	3.7	..
Lao PDR	**4.1**	**1.3**	**1.6**	**0.8**	**2.0**	**3.3**	**5.1**	**3.8**	**23.0**	**31.2**	**23.1**
Malaysia	3.1	2.1	2.1	3.9	0.9	0.7	-1.1	2.5	3.4	2.5	1.8
Maldives	2.1	1.0	0.5	2.8	-0.1	0.2	-1.4	0.5	2.3	2.9	1.4
Myanmar	5.0	9.5	6.9	4.6	6.9	8.8	..	..	..	..	..
Nepal	8.4	7.9	8.8	3.6	4.1	5.6	5.1	4.1	7.7	7.1	..
Pakistan	7.2	2.5	3.8	4.1	5.1	10.6	9.7	9.5	19.9	30.8	12.6
Philippines	3.6	0.7	1.3	2.9	5.3	2.4	2.4	3.9	5.8	6.0	3.2
Singapore	1.0	-0.5	-0.5	0.6	0.4	0.6	-0.2	2.3	6.1	4.8	2.4
Sri Lanka	3.2	3.8	4.0	7.7	2.1	3.5	6.2	7.0	49.7	16.5	-0.4
Thailand	1.9	-0.9	0.2	0.7	1.1	0.7	-0.8	1.2	6.1	1.2	1.4
Timor-Leste	0.8	0.6	-1.5	0.5	2.3	1.0	0.5	3.7	7	8.4	2.1
Viet Nam	4.1	0.6	2.7	3.5	3.5	2.8	3.2	1.8	3.2	3.3	3.6

Source: World Bank Data (18/7/2025 update)

Higher inflation in the region reflects rising food and electricity prices, and/or rapid depreciation of local currencies (linked, as mentioned above, to higher interest rates globally and unfavourable exchange rates fluctuations). Without adequate remedies, high inflation negatively affects the ability of vulnerable household to purchase goods and services necessary for the realization of their ESCR, in particular their right to an adequate standard of living. In South Asia in particular, the World Bank has identified persistent higher regional food inflation – caused by 'local supply disruptions, some of which may be related to climate change' – as 'an important reason that inflation has receded more slowly' than elsewhere in the world.[30] Higher food prices disproportionately impact poorer households, which typically allocate over half of their budget to food expenditure.

2.3. Financial and fiscal vulnerabilities

The region's macroeconomic vulnerability and related migration trends are not the result of policy choices at the country level alone. They are also a consequence of economic, financial, environmental and political circumstances and measures taken at the global level which constrain the choices available to governments, institutions and people.[31] The countries in the region that are suffering the most from unfavourable global economic and climate circumstances are also the ones characterized by the most serious financial and fiscal vulnerabilities, which significantly limit their ability to respond to external challenges.

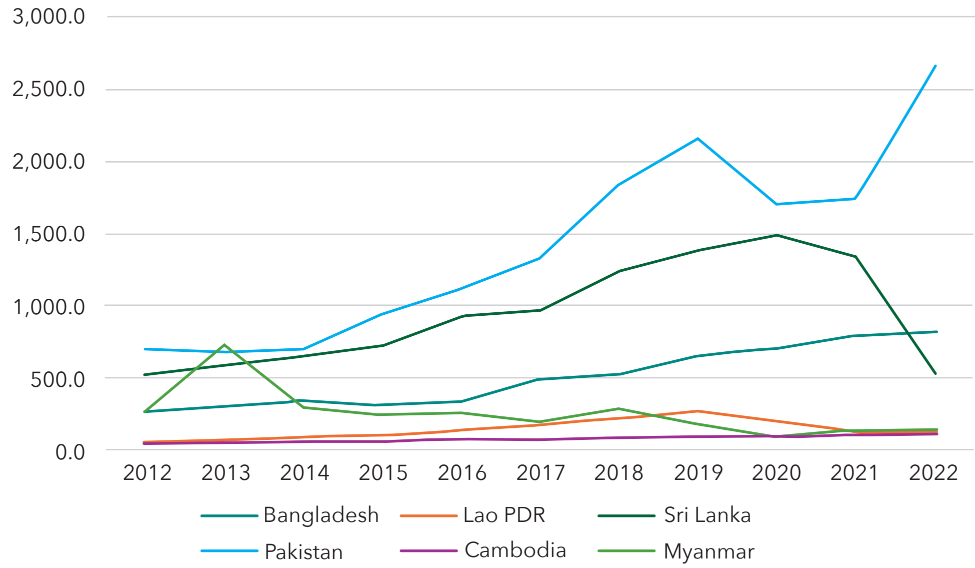
Slower growth rates and higher interest rates have increased the burden of general government debt as a share of GDP and, consequently, interest payments, especially on external debt, in most of the region's economies. Higher service payments and increased costs of borrowing constrain public investment and divert resources away from investing in public services (including health and education) or climate mitigation spending.

The World Bank has observed that in Bangladesh – where macroeconomic stability is already being supported through IMF loans[32] – 'there are signs of growing risks in the financial system: 9 percent of outstanding loans were nonperforming in late 2023, with a particular concentration in state-owned banks',[33] and 'this ratio understates vulnerabilities due to lax regulatory definitions and studying standards'.[34] This financial strain may lead to reduced credit availability, higher interest rates, and a slowdown in economic activity, all of which impact ESCRs by limiting employment opportunities, increasing poverty, and undermining access to essential services.

Further, South and South-East Asian countries have experienced a rising trend in interest payments on long-term and short-term debt as a percentage of GDP. For instance, Myanmar saw a rise from 0.14 percent to 2.40 percent between 2014 to 2022.[35] This growing debt burden reduces fiscal space, as a larger share of government revenue is diverted to debt servicing rather than social services like healthcare and education. Governments may face tough choices, such as cutting social spending or increasing borrowing, further limiting their ability to address public needs. For countries like Sri Lanka for example, where the interest payment on debt as a percentage of GDP rose from 0.97 percent in 2014 to 2.01 percent by 2020,[36] this strain likely contributed to the country's economic challenges, potentially exacerbating social inequalities.

In Lao PDR, PPG debt reached 112 percent of GDP in 2022 (noting that the value of PPG debt can rise to over 120 percent).[37] These external debt service deferrals, however, accumulated to 16 percent of GDP in 2023, and average annual external debt repayment obligations remain at $1.3 billion (9 percent).[38] The cost of debt servicing doubled during 2023 to $950 million, equivalent to 55 percent of state revenues. In addition, Lao PDR has been grappling with high inflation (remaining above 20 percent in 2024) and the continued depreciation of the national currency, the Lao Kip (LAK). These pressures have impacted both household welfare and the Government's ability to make priority investments in the social sectors, in particular health and education. As a result, public spending on education and health in Lao PDR decreased from 4.9 percent of GDP in 2013 to an estimated 2.3 percent in 2023, marking a reduction of over 50 percent.[39] According to the IMF, PPG debt in Lao PDR is projected to reach 118.3 percent of GDP in 2025 and will continue to rise over the next few years, reaching 126.7 percent.[40]

Figure 3: Interest payments on long-term PPG debt (US$ millions, selected countries)



Source: WB, International Debt Statistics 2023 (29/02/2024 update)

Domestic public revenues are the most reliable and significant source for expanding fiscal space and financing development. A World Bank study has estimated that a minimum tax to GDP ratio of 15 percent is needed to invest in public services.[41] However, there is considerable variation in the level of domestic revenue collection across South and South-East Asian countries. While Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka collect low levels of tax revenue (less than 10 percentage of GDP), countries such as Cambodia, India, Nepal and Thailand are able to generate more than 15 percent of their GDP through tax revenue. Low revenue collection tends to contribute to increased government debt and to low spending on public services such as healthcare and education.[42] As a result, poverty reduction can slow (and in some cases reverse) and lead to stagnation or widening inequality.[43]

In light of low tax-to-GDP ratios, the CESCR has made several recommendations in its concluding observations. To **Bangladesh**, it recommended optimizing the tax system to enhance available resources by addressing tax evasion, broadening the tax base, and improving tax collection.[44] To **Indonesia**, the CESCR has advised adopting a more efficient, progressive, and socially equitable fiscal policy, including revisiting the share of state revenue from personal and corporate income to expand the tax base and fiscal space.[45] To **Pakistan**, the CESCR suggested a review of its tax regime to increase tax revenue.[46]

2.4. Role of remittances

Remittances may play an important role in the ability of households to cover essential needs such as food, health and education, and in the economies of many countries of origin of migrants from South and South-East Asia. As such the potential to earn remittances can serve as a significant driver of migration.[47] Remittances can also be an important source of foreign currency, which is especially important for import-relying countries to pay for essential goods, including energy. In Objective 20 of the Global Compact on Migration, States have committed to "optimize the transformative impact of remittances on the well-being of migrant workers and their families, as well as on the sustainable development of countries, while respecting that remittances constitute an important source of private capital and cannot be equated to other international financial flows, such as foreign direct investment, official development assistance or other public sources of financing for development."[48] As of the second quarter of 2024, the global average cost for sending remittances was 6.65 per cent.[49]

According to data from the Bank of Lao PDR, between 2016 and 2021, Lao nationals working in other countries were sending back an average of 412 million annually in remittances through formal channels, a nearly fourfold increase compared to 2010. This figure accounts for about 2.3 percent of the country's GDP each year.[50] The Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) of Lao PDR estimates that an additional $150 to 200 million are sent annually through informal channels such as money exchanges, phone shops, gas stations, and community agents.[51] It has been noted that the remittance corridor from Thailand to Lao PDR is the highest-cost corridor in the East Asia and Pacific sub-region – in 2021 the total cost to send USD 200 amounted to USD 22.7.[52]

Migrants can send home cumulatively large sums of money, reaching in some cases up to a quarter of the GDP of the country of origin (see Table 3). In developing countries, remittance flows are generally more than three times larger than official development assistance, and more than 50 percent higher than foreign direct investment (excluding in China).[53] The UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, for instance, acknowledged that in Sri Lanka, '[r]emittances have become the key source of foreign exchange earnings […], as well as a source of economic dependency for nearly one third of the population.'[54] The Special Rapporteur, as well as the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, made similar findings for Bangladesh and Nepal.[55]

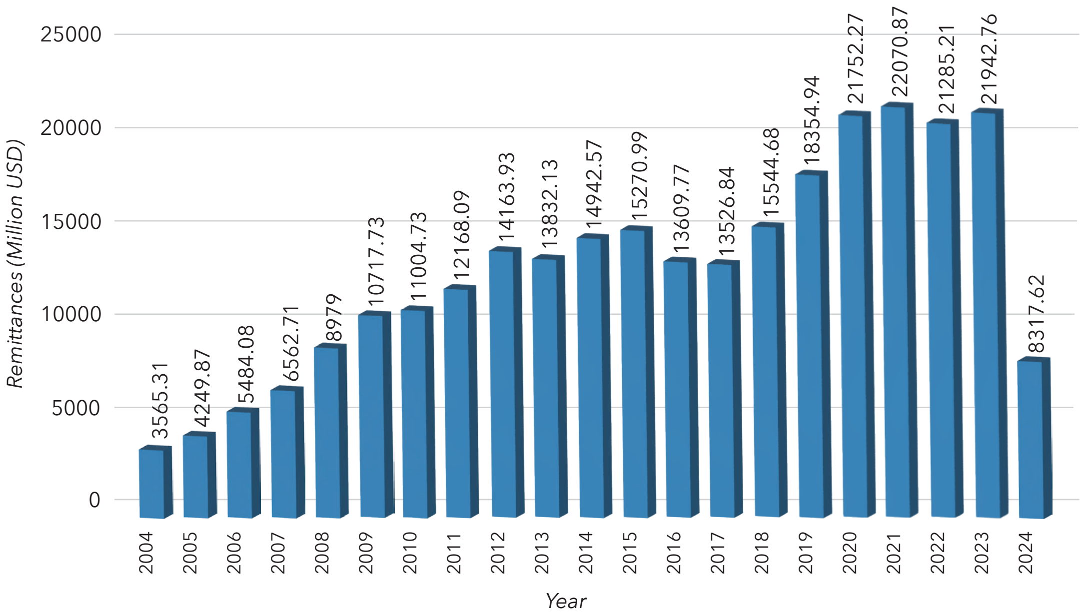
Some studies have highlighted the significance of remittances in enabling households to improve their access to economic and social rights. For example, research shows that remittances improve educational and health outcomes for South Asian families.[56] Likewise, evidence suggests that households receiving remittances in Nepal dedicate a larger portion of their budgets to health and education compared to those without such funds.[57] This is consistent with observations that remittances may be used for daily expenses and investments in health and education, leading to better living standards in South-East Asian nations.[58] At the same time, research also indicates that remittances for poorer households typically may be used to meet basic needs such as food, utilities and emergency healthcare as well as to pay off debts, with little left to cover education or long-term health needs.[59]

Table 3: Personal remittances, received (% of GDP)

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Afghanistan	1.2	1.8	3.5	4.4	4.5	4.4	4.0	2.2	2.2	1.9
Bangladesh	**8.7**	**7.8**	**5.1**	**4.6**	**4.8**	**5.2**	**5.8**	**5.3**	**4.7**	**5.1**
Bhutan	0.7	0.9	1.5	1.7	2.3	2.1	3.4	2.6	3.3	..
Brunei Darussalam	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Cambodia	6.6	6.6	6.0	5.8	5.8	9.8	10.0	9.4	8.9	8.8
India	3.5	3.3	2.7	2.6	2.9	2.9	3.1	2.8	3.3	3.4
Indonesia	1.0	1.1	1.0	0.9	1.1	1.0	0.9	0.8	1.0	1.1
Lao PDR	**1.4**	**1.3**	**1.2**	**1.4**	**1.3**	**1.6**	**1.2**	**1.2**	**1.5**	**1.5**
Malaysia	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4
Maldives	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
Myanmar	2.8	3.2	3.6	3.7	3.9	3.4	3.4	1.9	2.0	1.7
Nepal	25.9	27.6	27.0	23.9	25.0	24.1	24.3	22.3	22.6	26.2
Pakistan	6.4	6.4	6.3	5.9	6.0	6.9	8.7	9.0	8.1	7.8
Philippines	9.6	9.7	9.8	10.0	9.7	9.3	9.6	9.3	9.4	8.9
Singapore	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Sri Lanka	8.5	8.2	8.3	7.6	7.5	7.6	8.5	6.2	5.2	7.1
Thailand	1.6	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.5	1.6	1.8	1.8	1.9
Timor-Leste	3.0	3.9	4.9	5.4	6.2	3.6	5.2	4.1	5.1	8.6
Viet Nam	4.2	3.4	3.3	3.3	3.3	3.3	3.1	3.5	3.2	3.3

Source: World Bank Data (1/5/2025 update)[60]

Figure 4: Remittances to Bangladesh by fiscal year (2004 to April 2024)



Source: BMET, 2024

It is important to recall that remittances are personal transfers between migrants and their families and communities, taken out of wages that are often earned at a high personal cost to the individual, particularly in the case of low-wage migrant workers. The economic benefits of remittances can mask the social cost of migration to families and communities of migrants who stay behind - children who grow up with little or no contact with one or both parents, ageing people who are left without the care and support of their adult children; communities that are left without large numbers of people of working age.[61] At the same time, while remittances have been found in macro-economic studies to reduce poverty, their impact on inequality is less clear, with research showing that in South Asia they can have a large inequality-enhancing effect (in contrast to East Asia and the Pacific where the same study found they can have a moderate inequality-reducing effect).[62] A country's heavy reliance on remittances can result in inadequate investment in job creation, education, housing, food and health delivery or poverty reduction, areas that are key to ensuring that citizens can access their ESCR at home.[63]

3 Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Context of Migration Drivers

A rickshaw van puller rides through smoke rising from burning garbage by the roadside in Dhaka, Bangladesh on February 18, 2025. (Md. Rakibul Hasan Rafiu/NurPhoto/ Getty Images)

3.1. Economic, social and cultural rights framework

ESCR are recognized and protected under several international human rights law instruments, first and foremost in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). All countries in the region, except for Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia and Singapore are States Parties to the ICESCR.

Article 2.1 of the ICESCR states:

> "Each State Party to the present Covenant undertakes to take steps, individually and through international assistance and cooperation, especially economic and technical, to the maximum of its available resources, with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of the rights recognized in the present Covenant by all appropriate means, including particularly the adoption of legislative measures."

States that are a party to the ICESCR are obligated to respect, protect and fulfil the ESCR of all individuals under their jurisdiction. The obligation to respect requires States to refrain from interfering directly or indirectly with the enjoyment by such individuals of their ESCR. The obligation to *protect* requires States to prevent third parties from interfering with the enjoyment by such individuals of their ESCR. Finally, the obligation to *fulfil* requires States to adopt the measures necessary to create conditions in which these rights can be fully realized.

States have certain immediate obligations in relation to ESCR. Specifically, they have a duty to:

- Eliminate discrimination;
- Take steps to realize ESCR;
- Meet minimum core obligations; and
- Avoid adopting retrogressive measures.

Under international human rights law, States have an obligation to ensure at least minimum essential levels of each ESCR[64] and to make use of as many resources as is possible to gradually achieve ESCR. The ICESCR recognizes that a lack of resources can impede their realization, and that some rights can be achieved only over a longer period. At the same time, a lack of resources does not justify indefinite inaction or postponement of implementing measures. A State that is constrained by a lack of resources still has a duty to "take steps," including steps to protect the most disadvantaged, vulnerable and marginalized groups in society, as well as refrain from retrogression, that is measures that would diminish the current enjoyment of rights. The CESCR has stressed that "even in times of severe resources constraints whether caused by a process of adjustment, of economic recession, or by other factors the vulnerable members of society can and indeed must be protected by the adoption of relatively low-cost targeted programmes."[65]

In line with the concept of a human rights economy, when formulating budgets States should follow core human rights principles of:

- Transparency: by making information available to all stakeholders throughout the process (including planning, enactment, implementation and follow-up), to enable them to have a say in policy choices affecting them;[66]
- Participation: by enabling meaningful input from all stakeholders, including those who are at particular risk of vulnerability, from the impact of certain policies;[67] and
- Accountability: by ensuring access to justice and to an effective remedy so that decision-makers can be held accountable for their actions or omissions related to economic reform.[68]

The Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (CESCR) has recommended that countries in South and South-East Asia increase government expenditures on basic social services, including education, healthcare, and social protection. For instance, in 2023 it recommended that Cambodia "ensure the progressive realization of [ESCR] by substantially increasing the level of public social expenditure, especially in the areas of social security, health care and education, with a view to reducing inequalities in the enjoyment of these rights."[69] The Committee also recommended that Cambodia elaborate and implement its national budget in a transparent and participatory manner.[70] In 2024, the CESR recommended that Indonesia establish a mechanism for resource allocation to enhance the delivery and quality of basic public services.[71] In 2025, the CESCR urged the Philippines to "increase its tax-to-gross domestic product ratio and review existing tax policies with a view to increasing their redistributive effect, increase the budget dedicated to social spending and education and generally improve the State Party's capacity to mobilize domestic resources for the full realization of economic, social and cultural rights."[72]

In the context of migration drivers, lack of access to ESCR can influence decision-making on international migration, and lead in particular to forms of migration that are irregular or otherwise precarious such as some low-wage, temporary labour migration. As noted by the Special Rapporteur on the right to health, "Structural and political forms of violence that create poor social and economic conditions are key mobility drivers."[73] Research in rural Lao PDR found that international migration was largely viewed as a last resort, particularly if it meant risky border crossings and long-term separation from families. Respondents to that research noted that the lack of decent work as well as worries about going hungry, being unable to cover health costs and other basic needs or having unsustainable debt burdens were among the primary motivations for undertaking precarious migration.[74]

3.2. Right to decent work

Right to work and to just and favourable conditions of work

The right to work is a fundamental human right, recognized in several international legal instruments and most comprehensively in Articles 6-8 of the ICESCR.[75] The right to work is essential for realizing other human rights and for allowing every individual to live their life in dignity. International human rights law recognizes the individual and collective importance of work, not only for personal development, but also for social and economic inclusion.[76] While the right to work does not imply "an absolute and unconditional right to obtain employment," it does mean that people have the right "not to be unfairly deprived of employment."[77] The right to work is the right to decent work, and this includes fair wages that allow workers to support themselves and their families.[78]

The right to work requires States to create and implement employment policies that include addressing unemployment and underemployment, including for women and people belonging to marginalized and underprivileged groups.[79]

3.2.1 Inadequate job creation and high unemployment

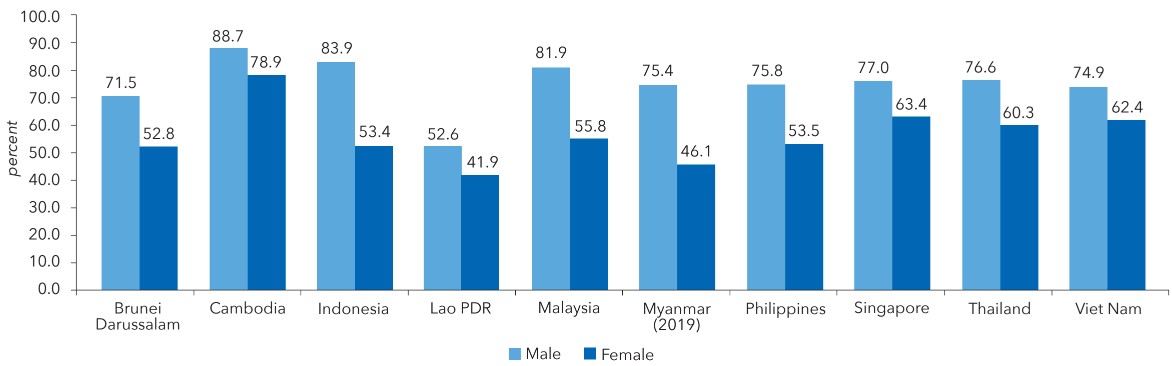
In April 2024, the World Bank noted that, in absolute terms, South Asia 'created an average of 10 million jobs a year when the working-age population was growing by an average of 19 million a year,' and that as the subregion transitions away from agricultural jobs, other sectors have not been absorbing workers as fast.[80]

For instance, in Lao PDR, the number of people employed in the agriculture, fishery and forestry sector decreased from approximately 2.5 to approximately 1.5 million between 2015 and 2022, yet employment in the other main sectors of the Lao economy (wholesale and retail trade, restaurants, and hotels; public services and construction) has not grown in a comparable manner.[81] Total labour force participation in Lao PDR went from 68 percent to 47.1 percent between 2015 and 2022, with women suffering a proportionally higher decrease in labour force participation: the percentage of working-age women went down from 69 percent in 2015 to 41.9 percent in 2022, compared to a decrease from 62 percent to 52.6 percent for men.[82] In Indonesia, the World Bank found that the lack of good job opportunities in the domestic labour market was the most important factor driving labour migration from the country.[83]

A 27-year-old man from Lao PDR, said:
"I attended a polytechnic school in Luang Prabang Province, but due to my poverty, I was unable to find employment. I was unable to pay for a motorcycle to commute to work for a company, and I lacked the necessary connections to enrol in the government system, the bribe was very expensive for me, leaving me with no choice so I decided to travel to Thailand to find employment."

In surveys conducted by the World Bank, an increasing number of migrants from Lao PDR cited higher pay and better employment prospects as the main reasons for leaving their country, a proportion that reached 99 percent among migrants from low-income families.[84]

Figure 5: Labour force participation rate in ASEAN by sex, 2022



Source: ASEAN Statistical Yearbook 2023.

With a lack of sufficient job opportunities in Bangladesh, many young people see international migration as a way for them to support their families through remittances.[85] Limited job prospects for youth are also a key driver of migration from Nepal.[86]

In Bangladesh, a woman whose son migrated abroad said:
"It is painful to see my son doing nothing apart from roaming here and there and spending time with his friends. He was neither studying nor taking any training, not finding a job. There was debate and argument every day. Actually, there are not many jobs available locally. There are not many industries or factories in the district. Seeing no hope, he became desperate to migrate for overseas jobs. As a family, we also supported the decision."

During a visit to Nepal, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights stated that when he inquired about the government's job creation strategy, 'the Government referred to foreign employment and remittances only, suggesting a misguided prioritization of encouraging outward migration as a solution to unemployment, rather than strengthening decent job-creating sectors at home'.[87]

In Pakistan, studies have identified the lack of employment opportunities as a key driver of irregular migration from the country to Europe.[88] While this route is only taken by a minority of overall emigrants from Pakistan, a shipwreck in which more than 300 Pakistani nationals lost their lives off the Greek coast in 2023 and other incidents of lives lost at sea are examples of the dangerous journeys people are willing to take when they see no future at home.[89]

3.2.2 Unfair remuneration and unfavourable work conditions

Many countries in South and South-East Asia have a high proportion of informal workers in their labour markets. Informal workers are typically not protected under domestic labour laws, lack social security protection and are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.[90] Workers in Economic Processing Zones in Bangladesh face particularly high levels of precarity.[91]

UN Human rights experts have noted how the minimum wage in Bangladesh is too low to enable workers to enjoy their right to an adequate standard of living, in light of the cost of living,[92] and that the low minimum wage in Bangladesh is a push factor for international migration.[93]

A Bangladeshi migrant in Malaysia said:
"[In Dhaka,] my room rent was Bangladeshi Taka (BDT) 2,500 to 3,000 [At the time of writing, $1 is equivalent to about BDT 120], the food cost was BDT 5,000 to 6,000. Per month, I could save BDT 10,000. I sent that money to my village. But that income was not sufficient for the family. There are medication costs, treatment costs, festival costs and clothing. Even though I was earning money, my basic needs were not fulfilled. I would not have

been able to get married or feed my wife. If I had continued to do that job in the garment factory, I don't know when I would have been able to make enough money to make a good house. That's why I decided to migrate. After coming abroad, I initially earned BDT 20,000 to 25,000 a month doing 18h of work in a day. It is hard work in Malaysia."

Another man who migrated from Bangladesh to Malaysia said:
"While I was looking for a driving job in Bangladesh, I was offered a job of 10,000 BDT. Unfortunately, a driver may get a duty of 24 hours a day. How it is possible to do this job with the amount of 10,000 BDT.? [...] I don't know how it's possible to bear the expenses with 10,000 BDT. Despite my efforts to pursue various opportunities in the country, I could not succeed, it is disheartening. I decided that this country was not for me. I don't have any security over my future. My blood boiled up and I preferred to migrate to another country."

And a further man from Bangladesh in Malaysia said:
"My hometown is Narayanganj. Before I came to Malaysia, I was a salesman in a shop in Araihazar Bazar. It was just $2 a day I earned. I was not well and, had not made any progress living in Bangladesh so I decided to come to Malaysia to improve my luck, many of my neighbours came to Malaysia…I was thinking let's see if I can change my life, change my future through migrating to Malaysia. Everyone has the hope to be rich or attain affordability. I was thinking if I could come to Malaysia I could earn more, and my family would have a better life."

In June 2024, the Lao Minister of Labour and Social Welfare (MOLISA) cited the low minimum wage (1.6 million LAK, or $75, at that time) as one factor, along with inflation, resulting in the depreciation of the LAK, that drives people to migrate from the country, noting that the minimum wage should be at least 3.8 million LAK ($174, at that time).[94] In October 2024, the government increased the minimum wage to 2.5 million LAK ($114 at that time).[95] The insufficiency of the minimum wage has had a particularly negative impact on the most vulnerable groups of the population and driven many, young people in particular, to seek better paying jobs abroad.[96]

One migrant woman from Lao PDR said:
"I dropped out from pursuing a bachelor's degree of my final year in computer science academic program in Laos and was forced to take an illegal job as a scammer in the Special Economic Zone during the COVID-19 pandemic. After being saved by the local authorities in Laos, I was hired as a chef assistant at a restaurant in town, but the 1.5 million kip (LAK) salary was insufficient to meet my needs, so I fled to Thailand in search of irregular work. I presently work as a chef assistant at a restaurant in Pattaya, earning 12,000 THB per month. With the help of my employer, I was able to obtain legal employment status."

3.2.3 The struggle for decent work

In South and South-East Asian countries, many workers, especially in informal sectors like construction, domestic work or agriculture, endure unsafe working conditions, with frequent reports of workplace accidents due to inadequate safety measures, such as the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh, which killed over 1,100 workers.[97] Wages often fall below the threshold for a decent standard of living; for instance, in Cambodia, garment workers earn an average of $200 per month, insufficient to cover basic needs like housing and food.[98] Furthermore, the right to unionize and engage in collective bargaining is severely restricted in many South and South-East Asian contexts, stifling workers' ability to advocate for fair treatment. In Viet Nam, for example, independent trade unions remain prohibited, and state-controlled unions significantly limit workers' bargaining power.[99] These issues highlight a broader failure to embed decent work within employment practices in the region, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality, and raising the likelihood of precarious migration.

3.3. Rights to education and health

Right to education

The right to education includes an obligation on States to provide primary education that is compulsory and available free for everyone; to deploy all appropriate means to make secondary education available and accessible to all; and to make higher education equally accessible to all on the basis of capacity.[100] States must also ensure that education, at all levels, is available and accessible to all without discrimination, including physical as well as economic accessibility; that it is acceptable culturally and in terms of quality, and that it is adaptable to the needs of changing societies and communities.[101] States must make every effort to progressively realize the right to education, even if resources are limited. They should mobilize all available resources through domestic means, such as fair and progressive taxation, or international assistance.

Right to health

Everyone has the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health under international human rights law.[102] The right includes access to timely and appropriate healthcare as well as "as access to safe and potable water and adequate sanitation, an adequate supply of safe food, nutrition and housing, healthy occupational and environmental conditions, and access to health-related education and information, including on sexual and reproductive health."[103] States must make public healthcare and health services available in sufficient quantity; accessible to all without discrimination, including persons belonging to vulnerable or marginalized groups and physically accessible and affordable to all, as well as information accessibility; respectful of medical ethics and culturally appropriate; and of good quality.[104] States that are party to the ICESCR also have an obligation to create "conditions which would assure to all medical service and medical attention in the event of sickness."[105]

When asked to explain the main drivers of their decision to migrate, people often cite only work opportunities and the potential for enhanced earnings as these usually are the most readily available – and often socially justifiable - explanations for migration. However, particularly in contexts where public healthcare or education are inadequate or widely perceived to be so, the inability to access basic services for themselves and their family members can be a significant driver of precarious migration. In the complex decision-making pathways that lead to international migration, feelings of "futurelessness" at home that motivate young adults to leave their countries of origin will often relate to the inability of the individual to access affordable healthcare for their parents, say, or quality education for their children.[106]

3.3.1 Education

Education in South and South-East Asia faces significant accessibility and quality challenges driven by socio-economic, infrastructural, and systemic factors. Accessibility is limited by geographic, social and economic barriers, particularly in rural areas of South Asian countries, where schools are scarce, transportation is inadequate, and poor infrastructure, such as dilapidated buildings or lack of electricity, discourages attendance.[107]

Poverty forces millions of children out of school, with UNESCO reporting in 2019, figures of 21.5 percent children (primary, lower secondary and upper secondary age) in South Asia and 9.1 percent in Eastern and Southeastern Asia, exacerbated by hidden costs like uniforms and books that render "free" education unaffordable.[108] Gender disparities restrict access, especially when boys' education is prioritized, and girls face early marriage or domestic duties. Conflict and displacement also disrupt education, leaving displaced children with minimal access.[109]

The quality of education in countries in South and South-East Asia is undermined by a multitude of factors, including insufficient funding, a lack of qualified teachers and specialized staff, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-economic disparities. For instance, in India, a notable percentage (about 19 percent) of teachers do not meet national minimum qualifications, which directly impacts student learning outcomes.[110] In Nepal, although equity is emphasized in initiatives like the School Sector Development Programme, many teachers lack formal training in their subject areas.[111] Bangladesh confronts issues such as overcrowded classrooms and insufficient resources, resulting in lower learning outcomes compared to global standards.[112] The Philippines faces similar challenges, where efforts to implement school management reforms have not fully addressed the funding and facility deficits that rural schools experience.[113] These examples illustrate systemic issues that, compounded by socio-economic factors, contribute to the persistent quality challenges faced by educational systems in the region.

The Education 2030 Framework for Action calls on States to allocate at least four to six percent of their GDP and/or at least 15 to 20 percent of their total public expenditure to education.[114] Yet as of 2021, most countries in South and South-East Asia spent a lower percentage of their GDP on education (see figure below).

South-East Asia has seen fluctuating trends in education expenditure, with the regional average hovering around 3.19 percent to 3.22 percent of GDP from 2018 to 2021. South Asia has shown a slightly higher expenditure level, with the regional average rising from 3.85 percent to 4.01 percent of GDP during the same period.

South-East Asia shows a modest increase in per capita education spending, rising from $158 in 2018 to $ 172 in 2021. However, this is an average and masks significant disparities between countries. South Asia also shows a gradual increase in per capita spending, from $74 in 2018 to $89 in 2021, though these figures are much lower than those in South-East Asia, reflecting the region's larger population size and more constrained financial resources. Cambodia and Myanmar show the lowest per capita spending in South-East Asia, with Cambodia's spending decreasing to just $27 in 2021, and Myanmar's spending remaining below $30 for all years. In South Asia, Afghanistan and Bangladesh have extremely low per capita spending, under $50, which raises concerns about the sufficiency of education investment in these countries.

Reports from Lao PDR have suggested a link between low wages and labour shortages with low university enrolment as well as school dropouts,

Table 4: Education Expenditure (% of GDP)

	2018	2019	2020	2021
South-East Asia	**3.19**	**3.08**	**3.46**	**3.22**
Cambodia	2.45	2.83	3.00	1.67
Timor-Leste	4.88	4.18	3.66	2.97
Indonesia	2.75	2.84	3.49	3.05
Lao PDR	2.34	2.12	1.92	1.86
Malaysia	4.13	3.98	4.52	4.27
Myanmar	2.16	2.14		
Philippines	3.86	3.36	3.88	3.88
Singapore	2.86	2.73	2.69	2.83
Thailand	3.20	3.02	3.15	2.99
Viet Nam	3.30	3.09	3.22	2.95
South Asia	**3.85**	**3.48**	**3.76**	**4.01**
Afghanistan	3.45	3.19	2.89	1.65
Bangladesh	1.66	1.68	1.76	1.83
India	4.38	3.90	4.29	4.64
Maldives	3.93	4.21	5.80	4.49
Nepal	3.66	3.49	4.21	3.96
Pakistan	2.33	2.21	2.06	1.69
Sri Lanka	1.99	1.93	1.55	1.51

Source: World Bank Data for all the countries.

Table 5: Education Expenditure Per Capita ($)

	2018	2019	2020	2021
South-East Asia	**158**	**160**	**169**	**172**
Brunei	1249	1144	1133	1165
Cambodia	38	47	47	27
Timor-Leste	61	66	61	82
Indonesia	107	118	136	132
Lao PDR	60	55	50	47
Malaysia	458	443	459	476
Myanmar	28	30		
Philippines	123	115	125	134
Singapore	1909	1804	1652	2256
Thailand	228	231	221	211
Viet Nam	108	108	115	111
South Asia	**74**	**68**	**70**	**86**
Afghanistan	17	16	15	6
Bangladesh	33	36	39	45
Bhutan	206	170	190	248
India	86	80	82	104
Maldives	434	478	418	452
Nepal	43	41	48	49
Pakistan	38	32	27	25
Sri Lanka	87	79	60	60

Source: World Bank Data for all other countries and Brunei Statistical Yearbook 2023 for Brunei and Population data at World Bank Data.

as the lack of future decent work prospects may reduce the appeal of higher education.[115] Enrolment and completion rates from primary to secondary school in 2023 showed a marked downward trend compared to previous years.[116] As of 2022, just under 19 percent of women aged 25 and older, and just over 30 percent of men over 25, had any secondary education at all. Community research carried out in Laos' Soukhuma district indicated that children are dropping out of school to migrate in search of reunion with family members and livelihood opportunities Thailand. More than half of the 63 villages in Soukhuma district have only primary schools up to the third grade, and five have no primary school.[117]

In a context of insufficient public funding on education, individuals and communities who are not able to mitigate these gaps while remaining at home may see a rise in precarious migration either to provide resources for private education inside the country or as a route to better education options outside the country. Surveyed on what would persuade them to remain in the country, 49 percent of potential migrants answered that they would consider remaining in Bangladesh if there were more opportunities to study including more affordable or higher quality education.[118] Recalling that education is also a means of achieving other human rights, prospective migrants may view migration as an investment in the future of their family and community particularly where getting access to better education represents a route out of poverty and a chance to improve their socio-economic situation.

3.3.2 Accessibility and quality of healthcare services

Accessibility of healthcare services in South and South-East Asian countries is severely constrained by systemic inequities, inadequate infrastructure, and human resource shortages, disproportionately affecting rural and marginalized populations. In Bangladesh, human resource challenges are stark, with only 8.3 doctors and 5.54 nurses per 10,000 inhabitants, well below WHO's recommended minimum of 15 physicians per 10,000 to meet SDG targets.[119] Similarly, Lao PDR reports a mere 3.31 doctors and 11.8 nurses and midwives per 10,000 inhabitants, with a health service coverage index of 52, significantly lower than the global average of 68.[120] Lao PDR's National Health Insurance, despite a generous design, is hindered by inadequate supply-side readiness, including a lack of basic amenities and medicines, creating financial and physical barriers for ethnic minorities and rural communities.[121] In Nepal, only 45 percent of households have access to a Primary Health Center within 30 minutes travel time, exacerbating urban-rural disparities.[122] Cambodia faces low utilization of cost-effective services due to provider shortages in rural areas, limiting service availability.[123]

The quality of healthcare services continues to be a major concern across South and South-East Asia, directly affecting patient trust and overall health outcomes. In Myanmar, public health facilities are frequently criticized for delivering substandard care. Key issues include incomplete treatment, poor service readiness due to insufficient funding, a lack of essential supplies, and significant shortages of medical personnel.[124] In the Philippines, quality concerns also persist. A notable proportion of women in both urban and rural areas opt not to give birth in healthcare facilities, largely due to distrust and dissatisfaction with the level of service provided.[125] Similarly, in Nepal, the quality of care remains a persistent weakness. Data from the Health Facility Survey reveal that only 17 percent of health facilities are equipped with all the basic amenities needed to adequately serve patients.[126]

Research has found that at least 5 percent of GDP should be allocated to health spending to achieve universal health coverage.[127] In this context, the two tables below provide a comparative analysis of government health expenditure in terms of percentage of GDP and per capita health expenditure ($) for countries in South Asia and South-East Asia between 2018 and 2021. This data provides insight into the commitment of these countries to healthcare, both relative to their economies and on a per-person basis.

In South-East Asia, the average health expenditure as a percentage of GDP increased steadily from 1.52 percent in 2018 to 2.28 percent in 2021. This increase likely reflects greater public spending in response to health crises like COVID-19. Thailand shows relatively high health expenditures, at 3.18 percent in 2021. Myanmar and Lao PDR display the lowest health expenditure, with Myanmar spending 0.92 percent of GDP in 2021 and Lao PDR spending 0.65 percent.

In South Asia, the health expenditure as a percentage of GDP increased modestly, from 0.93 percent in 2018 to 1.09 percent in 2021. This level

Table 6: Government Health Expenditure (% of GDP)

	2018	2019	2020	2021
South-East Asia	**1.52**	**1.54**	**1.97**	**2.28**
Cambodia	1.68	1.83	2.00	2.68
Timor-Leste	5.55	4.21	6.73	4.34
Indonesia	1.03	1.01	1.58	1.97
Lao PDR	1.04	1.43	0.69	0.65
Malaysia	1.93	2.01	2.18	2.46
Myanmar	0.79	0.62	0.75	0.99
Philippines	1.29	1.44	2.07	2.24
Singapore	1.70	1.89	2.96	2.98
Thailand	2.52	2.48	2.81	3.18
Viet Nam	1.22	1.13	1.01	1.33
South Asia	**0.93**	**0.97**	**1.12**	**1.09**
Afghanistan	1.41	1.27	1.98	1.17
Bangladesh	0.48	0.44	0.41	0.48
India	0.95	0.99	1.17	1.13
Maldives	5.69	5.99	9.28	8.65
Nepal	1.10	1.15	1.60	2.12
Pakistan	0.89	0.90	1.04	0.96
Sri Lanka	1.68	1.86	2.02	2.03

Source: Calculated using health expenditure data available at WHO, Global Health Expenditure Database (for all countries except Brunei). Data for Malaysia is from the Government of Malaysia.

Table 7: Government Per Capita Health Expenditure ($)

	2018	2019	2020	2021
South-East Asia	**70.79**	**75.23**	**91.13**	**114.29**
Cambodia	25.70	30.67	31.53	43.53
Timor-Leste	68.93	66.57	111.98	118.97
Indonesia	40.20	41.76	61.73	85.50
Lao PDR	26.63	37.21	17.84	16.45
Malaysia	210.07	219.45	216.67	268.11
Myanmar	10.13	8.72	11.04	12.27
Philippines	41.33	49.20	66.63	77.59
Singapore	1,135.01	1,252.24	1,816.97	2,368.70
Thailand	179.76	189.32	196.68	225.09
Viet Nam	39.72	39.34	36.27	49.99
South Asia	**17.92**	**18.97**	**20.70**	**23.38**
Afghanistan	6.95	6.34	10.15	4.16
Bangladesh	9.38	9.43	9.14	11.91
India	18.77	20.36	22.38	25.47
Maldives	627.73	679.96	669.86	871.61
Nepal	12.75	13.68	18.27	26.01
Pakistan	14.40	12.93	13.76	14.40
Sri Lanka	73.38	75.89	77.54	81.08

Source: Calculated using health expenditure data available at WHO, Global Health Expenditure Database (for all countries except Brunei) and Brunei Darussalam Statistical Yearbook-2023 and Population data at World Bank Data. Data for Malaysia is from the Government of Malaysia.

of spending is significantly lower than in South-East Asia, indicating lower government prioritization of healthcare. Bangladesh and Pakistan consistently show the lowest health expenditure as a percentage of GDP, with Bangladesh spending only 0.49 percent in 2021 and Pakistan 0.89 percent. This indicates very low public health investment relative to their economies.

Migrants cite lack of access to quality healthcare for themselves and their families as factors behind their decision to migrate internationally. In a large-scale survey of migration drivers in Bangladesh, 29 percent of respondents indicated that they would reconsider their decision to move if there were more accessible health services in the country.[128] One prospective migrant explained:

> "The treatment in Bangladesh is good. For example, the standard of surgical operations is good. But the problem is the huge waiting time to get admitted to a government hospital or receive timely proper treatment. Only a few people who can tolerate months of waiting and finally get admitted to a hospital (in most cases without a bed) will be able to get in the queue for surgery. On the other hand, if you go to a private clinic, they will charge you too much. You have to spend BDT 100,000 just for a few days of hospitalization in a private clinic." He added, "if I do a small job in Bangladesh, it would be hard for me to manage the healthcare, food, education costs of my family. Hence, I am preparing to migrate to Korea."

Low levels of health expenditure, especially in terms of per capita spending, suggest significant challenges for the provision of quality healthcare services. Countries with low spending face difficulties in expanding healthcare access and maintaining healthcare quality. Insufficient investment can result in inadequate health infrastructure, lack of medical personnel, and poor access to essential healthcare services. Low government health expenditure forces individuals to pay out-of-pocket for healthcare, further deepening inequalities. Those who cannot afford private healthcare are left with limited or no access to quality medical services. In such circumstances, migrants may move in search of adequate healthcare for themselves or their family members in other countries or take up livelihood options abroad in order to secure better healthcare outcomes at home.

3.4. Addressing inequality

3.4.1 Income inequality

In South and South-East Asia, high levels of income inequality are contributing to increased emigration pressures, as economic disparities push individuals to seek ways in which to mitigate entrenched inequalities. Data for Asia in 2023 shows the top 1 percent of earners capturing 20 percent of pre-tax national income, while the bottom 50 percent share just 10.95 percent, highlighting a stark wealth gap. The region's Gini coefficient, a measure of income inequality, stands at 63 percent indicating significant economic imbalance. Compared to East Asia, where the top 1 percent hold 17.79 percent and the bottom 50 percent share 12.71 percent with a lower Gini coefficient of 59 percent, South and South-East Asia exhibit more pronounced inequality. The Lao PDR migration profile notes for instance that while the country has made significant progress in recent years, with an average annual growth rate of around 6 percent, driven by the expansion of the mining, hydropower and tourism sectors, the benefits of this growth have not been evenly distributed, and "poverty and inequality remain significant challenges".[129]

Seeking to explain high levels of irregular migration from Bangladesh, one study noted that "[a] significant driving force is systemic inequalities which, despite consistent improvements in the country's Human Development Index ranking in recent years, has meant that many Bangladeshis have not reaped the benefits. Access to meaningful employment opportunities and to essential services such as education, healthcare and other basic amenities remains a challenge, particularly for women."[130] A prospective migrant highlighted the crisis of unfair distribution of state resources, saying:

"What are we getting from the government while we are paying taxes and VAT? We are mere citizens, and our welfare is not considered or is invisible in their eyes when resources are distributed. We are neglected. We have to build our own future and migrating to overseas jobs is our only chance."

The Gini coefficient for income inequality in Bangladesh rose from 0.482 in 2016 to 0.499 in 2022, while consumption inequality also saw an increase from 0.324 to 0.334 over the same period.[131] This suggests that the benefits of economic growth have not been evenly distributed among the population. The most recent study of the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2022 reveals that the top 10 percent of the population now holds a substantial 41 percent share of the nation's total income, while the poorest 10 percent claim only 1.31 percent.[132]

Research has indicated a broad global trend wherein higher income inequality in a country of origin is generally associated with greater emigration propensity.[133] Uneven economic development within countries and across the region is a key driver of migration, as poor economic prospects at home mean that those who are able to, will turn to international migration. In country situations where a large portion of the population struggle to access economic resources, people from lower-income groups are incentivized to migrate in pursuit of improved living standards and economic prospects, often having to rely on precarious routes to realize their migration ambitions.[134]

3.4.2 Gender inequality

Gender-based discrimination, poverty, violence and lack of access to affordable healthcare and quality education play a role in women's decision-making on migration.[135] Unemployment and low wages affect women disproportionally and, as reported by the World Bank, 'the women's employment ratio in South Asia is about half the average among other [emerging market and developing economies], and only about one-third of the employment ratio for men in the region."[136] Discrimination, particularly regarding wage disparities for female workers, combined with inadequate legal protections, are key factors diminishing women's participation in the labour market.

The Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty noted that '[t]he average gender pay gap [in Nepal] in terms of hourly wages is 28.9 percent, nearly double the global average of 15.6 percent'.[137] In Cambodia, persistent gender inequality prevents women from accessing rights, especially decent work, healthcare and education, among others.[138] In Indonesia, where women face gender-based discrimination, stereotyping and a gender pay gap, they are over-represented in the informal economy and in lower-paying, part time and temporary work.[139] In Sri Lanka, women face high rates of gender-based violence, persistent gender stereotypes and discriminatory social norms, as well as low participation in the labour market, and, for women who do participate, a gender pay gap and a concentration in the informal economy.[140] Gender-based violence, including domestic violence, and a gender pay gap are also serious concerns in the Philippines.[141]

In Bangladesh, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights noted that women are overrepresented among workers in informal sectors, and are particularly vulnerable to precarious working conditions, abuse and discrimination,[142] and the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants found that gender inequality and discrimination often impacted women's decision to migrate.[143] Female migrants described their indebtedness through taking micro-credit loans, maintaining high interests and being unable to address poverty or meet every-day needs as a reason for their migration. One returning migrant woman said:

"I was born in a poor family of Kurigram [a city in northern Bangladesh] and my parents have five daughters. When I got married my husband pressured my parents for dowry. I was beaten by my husband a couple of times. Then, to support my husband I went, first to Dhaka to do garments job. But I had to give all my earnings to my husband, and we lived hand to mouth and could not make any savings. Seeing no prospects, I have decided to migrate overseas. I worked as domestic worker in Saudi Arabia."

Another migrant woman who was in Bangladesh on a visit said:
"My husband got addicted to drugs. He used to take all my savings and beat me to give him cash. I had no other shelter, no protection, and I continuously felt insecure and seeing no respite I agreed to work as a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia."

Such situations of vulnerability can contribute to women's decision to migrate internationally.[144]

3.5. Right to a healthy environment

The right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, including a safe and stable climate

In 2022, the UN General Assembly recognised "the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment as a human right" and affirmed that its promotion "requires the full implementation of the multilateral environmental agreements under the principles of international environmental law."[145]

While no universally agreed definition of the right to a healthy environment exists, it is generally understood to include procedural elements (access to information, the right to participate in decision-making, and access to justice and effective remedies) and substantive ones (clean air, a safe and stable climate, access to safe water and adequate sanitation, healthy and sustainably produced food, non-toxic environments in which to live, work, study and play, and healthy biodiversity and ecosystems).[146]

The duty to uphold the human right to a healthy environment lies first and foremost with States, who have an obligation to respect, protect and fulfil all human rights. Other actors too, however, bear responsibility and can play a significant role in the realization of the right to a healthy environment, including businesses and international organizations such as development finance institutions.[147]

The challenge in identifying a single driver of migration is especially evident in the case of climate impacts. One study assert of this relationship is that while climate change is undoubtedly a driver of migration, complex and interconnected social, economic, environmental and other factors will combine to determine who does or does not move.[148] Both sudden-onset events such as floods, hurricanes and wildfires, and slow-onset events such as droughts and rising sea levels play a role in people's decision to migrate.

Climate change interferes with the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment and can have a direct impact on livelihoods as well as indirect impacts on the ability of individuals and households to enjoy other ESCRs. It has been recognized in particular that slow onset events can negatively impact a range of substantive human rights, such as the rights to adequate food, water, health, and housing, as well as the rights to participation and information.[149] For example, in relation to the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation - sea level rise can result in salinization of fresh water sources; drought can reduce access to water supplies; and flooding can impact the quality of water. Poverty, geography and historical and structural inequity and discrimination will affect people's exposure and vulnerability to the adverse effects of climate change.[150]

The top three countries with the highest disaster risk worldwide are in South and South-East Asia: the Philippines, Indonesia, and India. They are followed by Myanmar and Bangladesh, which rank sixth and ninth, respectively.[151] Globally, Asia is disproportionately affected by weather-, climate- and water-related disasters, accounting for 47 percent of reported deaths from 1970 to 2021, with 79 extreme weather, climate, and water-related hazards affecting over nine million people in the region and claiming over 2,000 lives in 2023.[152]

Most people displaced by climate-related events move – at least initially - within their country. Where cross-border migration occurs, it tends to be to neighbouring countries. The largest number of people displaced by extreme weather events are in Asia.[153] In 2023, the Philippines and Bangladesh ranked among the top five countries with the highest levels of internal displacements caused by disasters, with nearly 2.6 million and nearly 1.8 million displacements, respectively.[154] In 2023, floods alone displaced approximately one million people in the Philippines while geophysical hazards, including earthquakes, led to 462,000 displacements. In addition, Indonesia recorded 184,000 disaster-related displacements in the same year.[155]

Countries in South-East Asia are highly vulnerable to climate change hazards given that significant proportions of their populations rely on livelihoods in climate-sensitive sectors including agriculture, forestry, and fishing and many communities are situated in high-risk areas, including coastal regions and river deltas. A study of labour migration to Thailand and Malaysia found that "economic and environmental drivers of migration are intrinsically intertwined," and that low-income migrants, especially those who had been farmers in their country, reported the strongest link between environmental hazards and migration.[156] The study found that when farmers suffer losses because of the impacts of climate change, leading them to incur debts, they may seek to migrate internationally to repay those debts.[157] In Viet Nam, which faces escalating climate risks including major flooding linked to sea-level rise and coastal storms, the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) 2021–2030 with a vision to 2050, highlights that migration is a likely outcome of climate change.[158]

With a largely rural population that is heavily dependent on agriculture and highly exposed to economic and climatic shocks, Lao PDR is highly vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change, being ranked 142 out of 181 countries in the ND-GAIN Index.[159] Disasters triggered 117,000 new internal displacements between 2019–2023, with storms accounting for 87 percent of disaster displacement recorded and floods accounting for 12 percent.[160] Research has found that climate-disrupted livelihoods is also contributing to precarious migration out of Laos. In one rural district, for instance, low crop yields and crop failures has meant that a significant portion of respondents (approximately 20 percent) are unable to feed their family during certain months of the year, while many households face crushing debts often linked to floods, droughts or storms.[161]

The World Bank has warned that climate change is expected to have particularly severe consequences for South Asia, even as the region has thus far contributed little to the global emissions responsible for climate change.[162] The region is highly vulnerable to climate change impacts, particularly in coastal and deltaic areas threatened by sea-level rise and storm surges. Melting glaciers and thawing permafrost are also affecting water systems and contributing to droughts and desertification. Cross-border displacement after sudden disasters in South Asia often involves movement to nearby countries. Though the long-term effects of major floods on human mobility are less studied, there are indications that as areas become prone to more regular flooding, people are more likely to move permanently.

Bangladesh is particularly vulnerable to extreme weather events as well as slow-onset effects like river erosion, rising sea levels, floods and storms and increasing temperatures, which impact rice production and food security. The World Risk Index 2023 ranks Bangladesh ninth worldwide for climate disaster risk and it is estimated that by 2050, Bangladesh will lose 17 percent of its territory due to rising sea levels, resulting in the loss of 30% of the country's agricultural land.[163] Saltwater intrusion and continued sea-level rise are expected to worsen salinization, reduce freshwater availability, and potentially displace millions in coastal areas. Bangladesh's National Adaptation Plan 2023-2050 acknowledges the likelihood of increased precarious migration as a result of the adverse impacts of climate change.[164] While migration in response to climate stressors will be primarily internal and directed towards four urban centres, the inability of cities to absorb large populations of internal migrants will mean onward international migration often along irregular and precarious pathways.[165]

OHCHR has previously recognized that the interaction of climate events with high poverty levels, food insecurity, and low adaptive capacity can impact access to fundamental human rights. For instance, internal movement as a response to climate drivers is likely to be predominantly from rural to urban areas, where skills developed in rural economies may not be transferable to urban settings. In turn, internal migrants will be forced into low-waged, vulnerable and easily exploitable work, while being compelled to live in overcrowded conditions with insecure access to basic services. This mix, along with other contextual stressors, can then tip the balance towards precarious international migration as people seek security and dignity for themselves and their families.[166] Consequently, while recognizing that most displacement related to climate change will be internal, the protracted nature of climate impacts can lead to further and secondary migration in and from the region.

4 Conclusion

Sri Lankan market stall owner Shiyana Akram, 60, waits for customers at a market on December 14, 2024 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. (Rebecca Conway/ Getty Images)

Behind every person who leaves their country is a story. For many South Asians and South-East Asians, it involves long hours of work in a foreign land with little time to rest or connect with others; a sacrifice to be able to send money home so that loved ones may be able to afford food, shelter, education and healthcare.

A single study cannot capture the complex factors that lead millions of people to take these precarious migration pathways to other countries in the region and beyond.

However studying the macroeconomic context in key countries of origin of migrants from South Asia and South-East Asia and speaking with migrants and aspiring migrants reveal a clear pattern whereby a lack of decent work opportunities, public services, including health and education, that are underfunded and widely perceived to be inadequate, persistent gender-based discrimination, and youth who see a future only abroad are the norm. These challenges are exacerbated by climate change and its particularly damaging effects on livelihoods and living conditions in countries of South Asia and South-East Asia. For those who lack the resources that migration requires, leaving is not an option and they must continue to endure a life in which they are deprived of their rights. And it must be recalled that the lack of access to fundamental economic and social rights as well as the adverse impacts of climate change are experienced more keenly by those in disproportionate situations of vulnerability – including persons living in poverty, minorities, women at risk, children and others.

Countries of origin of migrants in South and South-East Asia should prioritize the ESCR of their people and invest in the future of their youth at home, ensuring decent jobs, quality public services, sustainable economic growth, and reduced inequality through equally distributing wealth and effectively addressing discrimination. These are all core goals of the 2030 Agenda which countries in South and South-East Asia have resoundingly committed to achieving, including through the central promise to leave no one behind. Countries of destination in the region and beyond should apply a human rights-based approach to all those who reach their borders and make human rights pathways available to people who were compelled to leave because their ESCR were not protected at home. Lenders and international financial institutions should incorporate human rights obligations into debt policies. This study calls above all for further research at local, national and regional levels to investigate the multifaceted relationships between lack of access to ESCR and precarious migration, in order to encourage governments in the region to prioritize human rights economies.

People will continue to migrate from and within South and South-East Asia as they will in the rest of the world; migration in and of itself is not a problem to be fixed. As stated in the Global Compact for Migration, "Migration has been part of the human experience throughout history, and we recognise that it is a source of prosperity, innovation and sustainable development in our globalized world, and that these positive impacts can be optimized by improving migration governance" (para. 8). Providing conditions whereby people can enjoy their fundamental ESCR, including decent work, health and education as well as the human right to a safe and healthy environment, will go a long way towards creating the conditions to enable people to build rights-based and sustainable futures in their countries, with their families and in their communities. In this way, migration from South and South-East Asia can fulfil the promise that is set out in the Global Compact for Migration - where it is not the only option available to people compelled to move in search of their human rights, but a genuine choice.

5 Recommendations

Two Bangladeshi women carry drinking water after collecting it from a fresh-water source in the coastal area of Khulna, Bangladesh on April 27, 2024. (Zabed Hasnain Chowdhury/NurPhoto/ Getty Images)

The recommendations that follow aim to give practical effect to the commitment within the Global Compact for Migration to eliminate the adverse drivers and structural factors that compel people to leave their country of origin and therefore to create conducive political, economic, social and environmental conditions for people to lead peaceful, productive and sustainable lives in their own country including through:

- Investing in poverty eradication, public services such as food security, health and sanitation, education, infrastructure, urban and rural development, employment creation, decent work, gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, resilience and disaster risk reduction, climate change mitigation and adaptation […] (Objective 2(b));

- Investing in sustainable development at the local and national levels in all regions, allowing all people to improve their lives and meet their aspirations, by fostering sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, including through private and foreign direct investment and trade preferences […] (Objective 2(d)); and

- Developing adaptation and resilience strategies to sudden-onset and slow-onset natural disasters, the adverse effects of climate change, and environmental degradation, such as desertification, land degradation, drought and sea level rise, taking into account the potential implications for migration […]" (Objective 2(i)).

These recommendations are offered to countries of origin, countries of transit and destination and to International Financial Institutions inter alia as a means to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of their citizens including migrants and potential migrants.

To countries of origin

Human rights economy

- When formulating budgets, ensure this prioritizes expenditure on economic, social and cultural rights and is aligned with the core human rights principles of transparency, accountability and participation.

- Ensure equal access to economic, social and cultural rights for all members of society, including persons of diverse genders, ethnic groups and with particular focus on marginalized groups and communities from which migrants originate.

- Adopt effective and equitable measures to transition from the informal to the formal economy.

- Seek to increase tax revenue through a progressive, socially equitable fiscal policy that addresses tax evasion and avoidance.

Decent work

- Invest in job creation, with a particular focus on job creation for youth so that young people can see a future for themselves in their own country.

- Enforce the payment of fair wages, including a minimum wage that is regularly adjusted to the cost of living, to secure the right to an adequate standard of living ensuring that all workers can provide for themselves and their families and live in dignity.

- Provide education and training that are tailored to the needs of the labour market, including for youth and women.

Public services

- Increase resources in a progressive manner to fund public services, including health and education, in line with international human rights standards and ensure adequate infrastructure, staffing and accessibility for all.

- To ensure healthcare quality and accessibility, initiate comprehensive, systemic reforms aimed at strengthening the coverage and quality of health services, including targeted investments in infrastructure, workforce training, and culturally sensitive interventions to bridge access gaps.

- In tandem with increased resource allocation to education, ensure equitable resource distribution and workforce expansion to improve quality and access.

Clean, healthy and safe environment

- Implement legislation and policies to respect, protect and fulfil the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

- Put in place mechanisms at the national, subregional and regional levels to address the vulnerabilities of persons affected by sudden-onset and slow-onset natural disasters including by promoting rights-based outcomes that increase resilience and self-reliance.

- Strengthen analysis and sharing of information to better map, understand, predict and address migration movements that may result from the adverse effects of climate change and environmental degradation.

Migration governance

- Seek inclusion of human rights protections within bilateral and multilateral migration agreements and take steps to ensure that all policies affecting human rights aspects of migration are coherent, by requiring all departments and offices of government to adopt an integrated and coordinated approach.

- Ensure that all responses designed to manage or mitigate the drivers of migration, including those associated with climate change and environmental degradation, comply with international human rights law and standards.

Gender Equality

- Ensure that policies, including related to the labour market, access to public services as well as policies and measures relevant to migration, are gender responsive and address all forms of gender-based discrimination, stigma and stereotypes that women may face before migrating and after their return.

Data collection

- Consistently collect and publish data on the realization of human rights and SDGs and on levels of inequality. Ensure collection of data is disaggregated inter alia on the basis of gender, age, sector of work and migration status, ensuring safeguards to prevent any abuse of such data.

- Undertake and support quantitative and qualitative research on migrants' experiences to provide a sound evidence base for policies relevant to migration at all skills and sectoral levels including analysis of why and how migrants move from and into situations of vulnerability, such as the factors that trigger migration and influence migrants' decision-making.

To countries of transit and destination

- Promote international cooperation between countries of origin, transit and destination in order to address the drivers of precarious migration in a rights-based and sustainable manner.

- Ensure that migration governance includes attention to the lack of access to ESCR in countries of origin as possible grounds to prevent return and provide secure legal status, in line with the scope of the prohibition of refoulement and other relevant standards of protection under international human rights law.

- Expand and enhance pathways for admission and stay, including regularization, based on human rights and humanitarian grounds, in line with the commitments made in the Global Compact for Migration. These pathways should give full consideration to the lack of enjoyment of ESCR that have compelled people to move and would be faced again upon return, and to the situations of vulnerability associated with this.

- In line with Objective 20 of the Global Compact on Migration and with target 10.C of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, take measures to reduce the effective transaction costs of remittances to under 3 per cent.

To International Financial Institutions

- Incorporate human rights obligations and recommendations, including ESCR, in IFI framework of cooperation, policies and recommendations to ensure that human rights in countries of origin of migrants in South and South-East Asia are not undermined by unsustainable sovereign debt. Recognize and respect domestic policy space particularly of developing countries to implement targeted and constructive measures, such as introducing subsidies for remittance transfers through formal channels to tackle illicit financial flows that are consistent with human rights principles of transparency and international commitments under the 2030 Agenda as well as the Seville Commitment (*Compromiso de Sevilla*).

Endnotes

1 This study focuses on the two sub-regions of South Asia and South-East Asia, adopting the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs classification of geographic regions and subregions with the exception of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Accordingly, South Asia includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka; South-East Asia includes Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam. The term 'region' is used in this study to refer to the two sub-regions together. Furthermore, the terms 'migration' and 'migrant' (for which no internationally agreed definitions exist) as herein used in line with the OHCHR definition of international migrant as "any person who is outside a State of which they are a citizen or national or, in the case of a stateless person, their State of birth or habitual residence. The term includes migrants who intend to move permanently or temporarily, and those who move in a regular or documented manner as well as migrants in irregular situations." (OHCHR, "Recommended Principles and Guidelines on Human Rights at International Borders," 2014). Whenever relevant, the study will signal a distinction between different forms of migration and categories of migrants.

2 UN General Assembly, Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration A/Res/73/195 (19 December 2018).

3 Hein de Haas, 'A theory of migration: the aspirations-capabilities framework' (2021), *Comparative Migration Studies* 9:8, pp.17 and 24. Carling adds in a methodological sense that the formulation of reasons for migration are themselves social constructions, some of which are more cognitively accessible than others. This signals a need to locate any analysis of drivers of migration within an understanding of constructions of social legitimacy or what is considered a "normal" aspiration, and how these perceptions then interact with structural factors. Jorgen Carling, 'Why Do People Migrate? Fresh Takes on the Foundational Question of Migration Studies', *International Migration Review*, Volume 58, Issue 4 (2 September 2024).

4 See for instance Chulalongkorn University and UNICEF Thailand, *Investing in a global future: A situational analysis of migrant children's education in Thailand* (December 2022).

5 World Bank, *Migration: Leveraging human capital in the East Asia and Pacific region* (January 2025), p. 23; OHCHR, *Leveraging regular migration pathways for human rights* (June 2025).

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A vendor carries fresh bread in a basket on their head at a wet market in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on June 6, 2023.
(Matt Hunt/Anadolu Agency/ Getty Images)

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