



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 15

Strengthening Migration Data to Maximise Development in the Gulf and in the Countries of Origin

Sponsored by the Gulf Labour Markets, Migration and Population (GLMM) Programme

Workshop Directors:

Prof Nasra M. Shah

Professor

Lahore School of Economics

Pakistan

Email: nasrashah465@gmail.com

Dr Françoise De Bel-Air

Senior Researcher

GLMM

France

Email: f_dba@hotmail.com

Abstract

Gulf countries, as well as origin countries, have visions and plans about future development in which labour migration to the GCC region is an important factor. Efforts regarding development goals are likely to be faced with several constraints, including a dearth of detailed and high-quality data needed for the required plans. Data on the volume, patterns and trends of migration suffer from several weaknesses. One example of goals where the dearth of accurate data may compromise rational planning is the desire, and initiatives, of the Gulf countries to nationalise their populations and labour forces.

Some reasons for data weaknesses consist of the following. First, universal definitions are not fully endorsed or adopted that hinders a systematic development of national and international databases, such as GLMM, and limits the analysis possible. Second, some key variables are not systematically recorded. For example, duration of stay of the migrant in the host country is an essential piece of information to build an accurate picture of the labour market structure and dynamics; however, these data are not available or published. Third, data are affected by inconsistencies, in terms of changes in definition over time, or other aspects.

In order to gather and present ideas for strengthening migration data in the Gulf, the broad objectives of this workshop are to: 1. Take stock of existing data and their use; 2. Identify gaps; 3. Suggest tools and mechanisms to strengthen such data to maximise effective and efficient comprehensive economic and social development planning; 4. Use available data to make projections.

Description and Rationale

Why are accurate, reliable and timely migration data necessary for planning future economic and social development in Gulf countries, as well as in countries from which migrants originate? The host and origin countries require continuous reliable and valid information on the stock, flow, and characteristics of migrants, workers as well as family members, in order to understand and monitor such trends, as well as measure their impacts on society and the labour force.

Lack of data limits an assessment of the living and working conditions of migrant workers, and of workers in irregular situations. Accurate statistics on migration and labour is also an essential element of policy-making. In the context of current Gulf States' policies of workforce's nationalisation, for instance, detailed data on migrants' skills, occupations and labour history could help adjust labour nationalisation measures and the training of national workforce. Such data are also necessary for evaluating the effectiveness of any policies that governments put in place to manage and regulate migration in general.

Additionally, lack of relevant data restrains the analysis of contextual factors on migration in terms of external forces such as conflict and war, or economic downturns. More data are also needed to measure the effects of migration dynamics on sending states, for instance through migrants' remittances, as well as to anticipate future returns of expatriates to their origin country. For lack of information, some issues indeed remain little known, for example migrants' mobility within the GCC region, as well as to and from third countries, outside expatriates' country of origin. Nonetheless, national data from sending and receiving Gulf countries retain a wealth of information, yet largely untapped.

Some data issues in the Gulf

Statistics on migration from receiving countries often diverge from sending states' data, as migration is always better apprehended from the country of destination (where the migrant is present) than from the country of origin (where the migrant is absent). Yet, data quality and data collection and dissemination policies in the destination Gulf countries are subject to certain specific issues, some of which are outlined below.

Universal definitions of international migration¹ are not fully endorsed and all foreign residents ("non-nationals") are considered migrants, whether born inside or outside the host country. Many variables, key to understand migration dynamic remain unpublished, such as expatriates' country of birth, of citizenship, duration of stay. Data on non-workers, and especially, family members are also scarce.

Data are affected by inconsistencies over time, as categories, concepts' definitions, data-collecting and processing bodies often change. Figures also vary between data-collecting bodies. Besides, data may also be inconsistent in space. Comparability of data between GCC countries, as well as between sending and receiving states can be problematic. Despite considerable improvements achieved in recent years, metadata available on the definition of categories, methodologies used for calculations are often missing or unclear, which limits the significance and possibility of use of data by researchers.

¹ An international migrant is defined as "any person who changes his or her country of usual residence" (see: <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/definitions>). Estimates of the "international migrant stock" in a given country is primarily based on "the country's population that is born abroad" (<https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/international-migrant-stocks>).

Some data issues in the origin countries

Several countries of origin, especially in Asia, have developed fairly comprehensive databases on migration that are frequently updated and are available for public use. However, government databases only capture those migrants that go through government channels and undergo the mandated procedural requirements. They miss migrants who may have gone through informal channels, for example on visit visa that was then converted to a work visa in the country of destination. The regularity with which data are updated varies across countries. Such databases also vary in scope and coverage; some provide data by gender while others do not, for example. They do not use a standardized definition of the key variables they include that makes it hard to undertake comparative analysis across countries.

Whenever databases of migration are available they are usually restricted to a few variables such as the annual outflows of worker, and selected characteristics of such workers (e.g., occupation group, skill level, geographical area within the country of origin etc.). They are typically published in a PDF format that often limits the analysis to simple graphs and tables, without the possibility of exploring any associations between various characteristics.

Databases from countries in the Arab region are often less well developed and accessible than those in Asia. Despite the stated preferences for Arab workers expressed by several Gulf countries, analysis of migration flows, stocks, and characteristics from such countries is harder to undertake. Governmental and private placements agencies in origin countries only record a small share of the Arab expatriates to the Gulf, who are often skilled and highly-skilled migrants. These often rely on their own networks and resources to secure employment in the Gulf.

Moreover, statistical apparatuses in some Arab countries lack comprehensive coverage of migration movements or are reluctant to publish figures. As in the case of Asian countries, definitions and concepts are not standardised across countries that limits comparative analysis, and the data collected on recorded emigrants is most often limited to their numbers. Moreover, only recently did some surveys tackle the issue of return migrants.

Some suggestions for improving data in future

With regard to Gulf countries, an increased willingness to share data on public platforms would greatly enhance scholarship and analysis related to destination countries. Such data must be provided in a manner that enables a clear disaggregation of nationals and non-nationals.

Furthermore, information on additional key variables (especially duration of stay of a migrant worker in the Gulf country) should be made available. The adoption of standardized definitions and concepts across the Gulf countries would greatly enhance comparative analysis. Finally, access to data on EXCEL (non-PDF) files that allow a researcher to conduct cross-tabulations and more complex analyses would enable in-depth analysis of issues.

With regard to sending countries, ones that are lagging behind in their efforts to provide regular data on user-friendly databases should be encouraged and supported to be more proactive in producing, tabulating, and uploading relevant data. Also, cooperation between the sending countries on producing standardised definitions and concepts should be encouraged, in order to enable comparative analysis.

Anticipated Participants

In the meantime, researchers' contribution may be three-fold:

1. Make the most of existing data: use existing datasets to describe and analyse specific, migration-related questions; if possible, explore possibilities to develop and expand specific methodologies to process existing types or sources of data to better understand Gulf migration dynamics;
2. Explore possible reasons (for instance, technical, socio-economic or political) behind available data's limitations, propose ways to assess their validity;
3. Suggest ways for researchers to contribute to the process of quality improvement and expansion of data made available to the public by relevant bodies.

GLMM encourages especially (young) scholars from the GCC countries to apply.

Workshop Director Profiles

Prof. Nasra M. Shah is a professor at the Lahore School of Economics. She was for 35 years (until September 2018) Professor of Demography at the Department of Community Medicine and Behavioral Sciences at the Faculty of Medicine, Kuwait University. She received her doctoral degree in Population Dynamics from the Johns Hopkins University, School of Public Health, USA. She is the Scientific Co-Director of the Gulf Labor Market and Migration Program (<http://gulfmigration.eu/>) with Philippe Fargues. Labor migration, especially from Asian to oil-rich Gulf countries, has been a consistent theme in her multi-faceted research interests. Her numerous migration-related publications focus on: socioeconomic profiles and economic progress of migrant workers, domestic worker migration, violence against women migrants, increasingly restrictive policies of host countries, the role of social networks in migration, second generation non-nationals in the Gulf, and irregular migration. Her recent publications on migration include: *Skillful Survivals. Irregular Migration to the Gulf* (with Philippe Fargues, GRC, Cambridge, forthcoming 2016). Her other books include *Asian Labor Migration: Pipeline to the Middle East*; *Pakistani Women: Basic Needs, Women and Development*; and *Population of Kuwait: Structure and Dynamics*.

Dr Françoise De Bel-Air is a senior researcher and consultant based in Paris, France. A sociologist and demographer by training, she specializes in the demography of Arab countries. Since 2013, she has been the Scientific Coordinator for the Demographic Module of the Gulf Labour Market and Migration Programme (GLMM). She was a research fellow at the French Institute for the Near East (IFPO) in Amman, Jordan for several years and a part-time Professor at the Migration Policy Centre, EUI. Her research and expertise focus on political demography, as well as on the demographic and socio-political dynamics in the Arab region (Maghreb, Middle East and the Gulf): youth, intergenerational and gender relationships, family structures, labour and forced migration, migration and population policies. Her recent publications include Chapter 7 "Exclusion, Mobility and Migration" in the *Arab Human Development Report 2016* on Youth and "Blocked Youth": The Politics of Migration from the SEM Countries before and after the Arab Uprisings." *The International Spectator* (53): 2018.

Key Data Source

The workshop directors strongly encourage the use of the GLMM demographic and economic database: <http://gulfmigration.eu/glmm-database/demographic-and-economic-module/>.

Selected Readings

De Bel-Air, F. “Irregular Migration in the Gulf States: What Data Reveal and What They Conceal”, in: Fargues, P. / Shah, N. M. (Eds.). *Skilful Survivals. Irregular Migration in the Gulf*, 2017, pp. 33-56. (assessment of the data available on irregular migration in Gulf States). <http://gulfmigration.org/media/pubs/book/BookChapters/GLMM%20-%20IM%20Volume%20-%20Chapter%20III%20-%20Extract%20-%202017-05-16.pdf>.

Fargues, P. “The fuzzy lines of international migration: a critical assessment of definitions and estimates in the Arab countries”, *EUI/RSCAS Working Papers - MPC Series* 2014/71, 2014, 12 p., http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/31695/RSCAS%202014_71%20%281%29.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

Fargues P. “Advancing knowledge on international migration: data and research needs”, *IUSSP Policy & Research Papers* n. 24, 2018, 42 p. <https://iussp.org/sites/default/files/prp24.pdf>.

Winckler, O. “How Many Qatari Nationals Are There?”, *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2015.

Shah, N. M. “Dangers of Using Aggregated Data for Understanding Socio-Demographic Realities of the Gulf Region,” Explanatory Note No. 01/2017, GLMM, http://gulfmigration.org/media/pubs/exno/GLMM_EN_2017_01.pdf.

Shah, N. M. *Population of Kuwait. Structure and Dynamics*, Kuwait: Kuwait University Academic Publication Council, 2010.

UN. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, General Assembly, 70th session, 2015. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld> (Goal 17.18).