

COVID-19

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**The Facts of Return Migration in the
Wake of COVID-19: A Policy
Framework for Reintegration
of Pakistani Workers**

**Shujaat Farooq
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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has caused massive return migration around the globe. Current research investigates the adverse impacts of the pandemic on overseas migration—outflows and inflows. The key objective is to propose a policy framework for the successful reintegration of return migrants in the local labour market.

The findings reveal that around 2 million overseas Pakistanis have been affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic, where 1.5 million could not go abroad, and another 0.3 to 0.4 million had to return from the Middle East. The reintegration measures for returnees were mainly made on a smaller scale, and most of the returnees lacked information on governmental support and follow-up mechanisms. Our proposed reintegration framework suggests that intending or potential migrants and their families must be educated about their reintegration or resettlement in their home communities when they plan for overseas employment. The prudent use of remittances by directing them to productive investment will ensure the successful reintegration of returning workers and promote entrepreneurship in the country, creating more job opportunities. The support from the government and enabling factors (district-level opportunities) will ensure various aspects of reintegration, including economic self-sufficiency, social stability, and the psychosocial well-being of return migrants.

Keywords: Overseas Migration, COVID-19, Return Migration, Reintegration, Pakistan

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the existing inequalities by affecting the economy, jobs, trade, and poverty around the globe, particularly in low-income countries where the informal sector dominates the economy (Crawley, 2021). Due to the lockdown and other trade and travel-related restrictions, economic activities essentially shrink and disrupt worldwide. Millions of workers are still vulnerable due to job loss or the intimidation of being unemployed and underemployed. In addition to the health challenges, the economic and social disruption threats are significant in low-income countries, as governments lack sufficient funds to compensate for the income losses (Rasul & Nepal, et al. 2021).

Due to COVID-19, overseas labour migration has been affected at a massive scale since early 2020. On the one hand, millions of intending workers could not go abroad due to travel restrictions. On the other hand, many overseas workers had to return due to a global recession, job loss, changeable socio-economic situation and health-related challenges in host countries (Guadagno, 2020). The combined pressures of the pandemic and global economic downturn have created an intricate situation for migrant workers and host/native governments. All this necessitates formulating a global policy framework, having international coordination and cooperation for providing basic needs and help to avoid forced layoffs and repatriation, as well as measures for worker reintegration (Meer & Villegas, 2020).

The precautionary response measures (i.e., lockdowns and border closures) have significantly amplified their vulnerabilities. Although not precisely measurable, the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are disproportionately higher for overseas migrants than the workers at home. COVID-19's impacts vary across countries, subject to the documentation level of workers and social security benefits offered by the host governments (ILO, 2020). Various governments in Europe and other developed economies compensated the legal workers and permanent residents; however, irregular migrants were mainly excluded from such benefits (Foley & Piper, 2021). In general, the benefits were also missing for emigrant workers in the Middle East. Employers sought alternative ways to reduce their cost base by wage cuts and sending workers on forced unpaid leave in many countries. Many overseas workers lost their jobs, contracts were terminated, and many had to return to their countries of origin. Many were forced to accept underprivileged terms and conditions of employment with reduced salaries or work without pay (ILO, 2020). Many of them have no option except to stay abroad, hoping for economic recovery, keeping in mind the worse job situation in their native country.

Pakistan heavily relies on overseas migration for the employment of its large workforce. The country has been passing through a demographic transition where 60 percent of the population is below the age of 25 years, and the annual labour force growth rate stands at 4 percent—more than a million workers enter the labour force annually. Over the last three decades, economic growth has not been sufficient to absorb the new

entrants in the labour force. In this situation, overseas employment is a big respite for the local labour market as the country has successfully exported over one-third of the new labour market entrants since 2001.

The registered overseas data shows that more than 11 million Pakistanis proceeded abroad for employment between 1975 and 2019 to over 50 countries through official procedures (ILO). The official data also shows that 96 percent of them are employed in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. These contract workers have to return home after completing their contractual jobs in these countries.

The overseas migration to other regions, particularly North America, Europe and Australia, is under-reported mainly due to the non-registration of Pakistanis settled abroad permanently. The information on irregular overseas Pakistanis is largely missing as well. However, the Government of Pakistan does provide data on the stock of overseas Pakistanis (or Pakistani diaspora) by region/country of destination through its foreign missions. More than 8 million Pakistanis were living abroad in June 2021, primarily in three regions – the Middle East, Europe and North America.

As noted above, the emigration of workers from Pakistan to the GCC countries is for temporary employment. On average, a worker spends nearly less than a decade abroad, and then they must return home after the expiration of their contract. On the other hand, emigration to Europe and North America is generally permanent. COVID-19 has primarily restricted the overseas emigration of Pakistani workers, especially to GCC countries; it has also caused the return migration from the Middle East, where a sizeable number of workers have had to return. The such unanticipated return has created recurring challenges in the local labour market. All this necessitates a policy framework to assist returning emigrants in reintegration into home communities, including counselling, business start-ups etc. Although the government has taken few measures to compensate the overseas and local workers, they might be inadequate in the context of sluggish economic growth, high unemployment, and the unexpected return flows of overseas workers.

The current research aims to answer some pertinent questions about the overseas migration of Pakistani workers: how much has COVID-19 interrupted overseas migration outflows and return flows? What is the impact of this interruption on the domestic labour market? What reintegration strategies are in place? What are the views of overseas workers, including return migrants, on their adjustment in the domestic labour market? How can the reintegration of Pakistani return migrants be improved in the future by considering unforeseen crises such as COVID-19?

This study focuses on the situation and conditions of emigration of Pakistani workers to the Middle East, their return since the pandemic outbreak, and socio-economic reintegration in their original communities in Pakistan. The scale and size of affected emigrant workers in this region is large. Although emigration to other continents (i.e., Europe, North America, and East Asia) also got disruption due to travel restrictions, return flows of Pakistani workers are relatively high from the Middle East, where most of the emigration is temporary and contractual.

The rest of the study is organised as follows: Section II discusses a theoretical perspective of return migration and reintegration, followed by data and methodological details in Section 3; Section 4 explains the diaspora of overseas Pakistanis and their

importance in the national labour market and economy; and Section 5 enumerates the impact of the COVID-19 on emigration and returns migration. The coping strategies of overseas workers are detailed in Section 6, followed by insights on reintegration initiatives and views of overseas workers in Section 7. A critical review of reintegration programs is detailed in Section 8, whereas the proposed policy framework is placed in Section 9. The last section presents policy insights and suggestions to improve and strengthen reintegration strategies to leverage Pakistani workers as a tool for economic transformation.

2. A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE OF RETURN MIGRATION AND REINTEGRATION

2.1. Theoretical Considerations on Return Migration

According to neoclassical economics, individuals always maximise their lifetime returns where both national and international migration helps promote human capital and other skills (Wilson, 1985). Return migration mainly depends on the initial inspiration for migration and certain other factors, including duration of stay, level of experience, financial well-being, and particularly the conditions under which the return takes place (Ghosh, 2000). The willingness and readiness of the migrant to return essentially depends on the type of migration (labour, refugee, asylum seeker, etc.), nature of visa, skill-set, and available resource mobilisation for reintegration (Cassarino, 2004).

Various theories explain the dynamics of return migration. According to the *neoclassical theory*, the wage difference between destination and native countries inspires the workers to stay abroad until the targets of income and saving are not achieved (Todaro, 1969). Therefore the stay abroad continues until the marginal benefits are higher than the marginal cost of staying abroad (Yang, 2006). The *new economics of labour migration* further added that return migration is the logical outcome of a ‘calculated strategy’ where certain other factors also matter in the decision of return migration, including attachment with family (Stark, 1991), living place of the spouse, etc. (Constant & Massey, 2002).

According to the *structural approach*, return migration is not solely analysed concerning returnees’ success and failure largely depend on aspirations, expectations, and needs. The individual’s experience also depends on social and institutional factors. There are many reasons for returning, including non-adjustment in host societies, retirement, and preparation, so their skill-set can offer more opportunities in their native country (Cerase, 1974).

Transnationalism theory attempts to formulate a theoretical and conceptual framework to understand better the solid socio-economic links between migrants’ host and origin countries. The back-and-forth movement of migrants provides sufficient knowledge and information and ultimately prepares them for return and reintegration. Once the workers have enough financial earned resources and information level, they take return decisions in favourable circumstances with the hope of successful reintegration and upward mobility in skills and earnings (Portes, 2001). Another characteristic of transnational migrants is maintaining economic, political, and social networks that span several societies (Al-Ali & Koser, 2003).

Social network theory considers that tangible and intangible resources determine the return migration. They include interpersonal relationships (Nohria, Eccles et al. 1992), cross-

border socio-economic networks (Church & Bitel, 2002), social capital, etc. (Coleman, 1988). Using all the social capital networking, migrant workers optimise their triumphant return and reintegration by mobilising the remittances, savings and skills acquired abroad.

Overall the return behaviour varies and could be subject to voluntary and involuntary factors. The voluntary factors may include; age, retirement decision, saving, skills acquisition, social capital, family circumstances/affiliation, and economic situation in the native country. The involuntary factors may include temporary contracts, illegal migration, lack of permanent residency status, change in migration policy, and unforeseen crises (Kang & Latoja, 2022).

Return migration creates positive externalities for the native country through investment, transfer of skills, and new ideas (Yuniarto, 2019) and boosts the local economy (Haase & Honerath, 2016). However, successful reintegration is not easy and is subject to tax incentives, credit facilities, and the local business environment (Kang & Latoja, 2022). In the case of Pakistan, the data on return migration is missing as the government authorities maintain data only for emigrant workers. So, it is not easy to evaluate the reintegration of emigrants who returned after the outbreak of COVID-19. The study by Arif & Irfan (1997) found that return migration was challenging in the 90s when many migrants changed their occupations upon return. The preferences of switching toward business activities largely depend on education, skill level, and available economic opportunities in the local area (Arif & Irfan, 1997). Return migration of Pakistanis from Europe and other developed countries may be called ‘lifestyle choices’, where it is an open-ended rather than permanent return migration (Prio, 2015). It is primarily permanent for workers returning from the Middle East after working for several years, although the possibility of re-emigration exists.

2.2. Defining the Reintegration of Returning Workers

This study considers that ‘return migration’ is an integral part of the contemporary contract labour migration system dynamics, thus enforcing the importance and centrality of their reintegration in communities of origin. The concept of reintegration covers social, economic and psychological aspects. It includes their re-employment in the local labour market, occupational mobility, acquisition of productive assets and real estate, financial investment, and social engagement. These aspects could help migrants and their families to continue the change process beyond the migration period.

Based on the literature review and empirical evidence, the study considers that the reintegration of return migrants is linked with their success in managing the period(s) of overseas migration in terms of accumulation of foreign savings, skills acquisition and directing resources to productive investment (Athukorala, 1990; Arowolo, 2000; Kuschminder, 2017). The four key factors in this success are: (i) the maintenance by return migrants of social and economic contact with their country of origin while abroad; (ii) the ability of return migrants and their families to improve their economic and social lot with resources acquired from overseas; (iii) the support or priority given by authorities in the country of origin as well as destination to the resettlement of return migrants; and (iv) an enabling environment that promotes opportunity and resilience (IOM, 2019).¹

¹A policy framework for the reintegration of workers returned from overseas employment is presented in section 9 of this study.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Although Pakistan started providing a significant number of workers to the GCC countries in the mid-1970s, the bulk of the emigration occurred in the last decade and a half. The analysis carried out in this study has covered the 2006-2021 period by focusing on the GCC countries. The bulk of Pakistani labour emigration happened during this period, but it was halted after April 2020 due to COVID-19.

We have used multiple data sources, including the annual/monthly data maintained by the Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment (BEOE) and the various rounds of the Pakistan Social and Living Measurement Survey (PSLM). The data generated by Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the United Nations on the global stock of overseas Pakistanis have also been used in the analysis. The provincial and district level analysis helped understand how much overseas migration has relieved the local labour market by exporting a reasonable percentage of new entrants in the international market. In some districts, the number of migrants who went abroad for employment was equal to the number of new entrants into the labour force of these districts.

The present analysis also uses the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) and district-level ranking data to gauge the importance of overseas migration in district-level development. We have used the district-level MPI for the 2014 year, whereas the district-level ranking is carried out on the share of overseas migration flows in the labour market from 2006 to 2019. One expects districts with a larger share of overseas migration should have less MPI rates, as a significant share of remittances is spent on education, health, and living standards.

In addition to secondary data sources, this study has used primary data as well, first, by interviewing 171 overseas Pakistanis, including 86 currently living abroad, 27 who temporarily returned, and 58 who returned permanently during the pandemic. Keeping in view the focus of the study, these respondents have served in the Middle East. Most respondents were young, as 86 percent were up to age 40. They hold a fair experience abroad, with an average of 7.5 years. Their overseas experience reveals that 8 percent were managers and professionals (i.e., doctors, engineers, etc.), 17 percent were associate professionals and technicians, 38 percent were skilled workers, and 37 percent were labourers. Only 5 percent of them had their own business; the rest were paid workers. Second, we interviewed some officials to understand the steps taken by the government for overseas migrants and returnees affected by the pandemic.

The analysis is carried out in five steps. Firstly, the effects of COVID-19 are estimated on the outflows of Pakistani workers for 2020 and 2021 by calculating the gap – would-be emigrants who could not go abroad because of COVID-19-related restrictions. Secondly, the return flows have been estimated at the provincial level based on the recent work by Arif & Farooq (2021) and available data. Thirdly, the implications of the standstill in outflows workers and unexpected return flows are drawn for the domestic labour market.

Given the significant variations across the provinces and districts on overseas migration, the study focuses on the provincial dimension. Fourthly, an examination of the reintegration services provided recently by the Government of Pakistan to returning workers is carried out. Finally, this study has developed a framework for the reintegration of return migrants by extending the pioneering work of Arif (Arif, 1995).

4. OVERSEAS MIGRATION OF PAKISTANI WORKERS, DOMESTIC LABOUR FORCE AND COVID-19

The stock of overseas workers or Pakistani diaspora refers to all living abroad as permanent residents, students, or temporary workers. The size of the Pakistani diaspora in June 2021 was 8.4 million living in 139 countries. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs generates data on the number of overseas Pakistanis by country of destination through its overseas missions. Table 1 shows the data for the top 17 countries where 95 percent of overseas Pakistanis presently live, work or study, with a heavy concentration in the Middle East (53 percent), Europe (24 percent) and North America (17 percent). In fact, as Table 1 shows, three-quarters of the Pakistani diaspora is in four countries: Saudi Arabia (27.5 percent), UAE (19.1 percent), the USA (14.3 percent) and the UK (14.1 percent). These are also the primary source countries for the inflows of workers' remittances to Pakistan.

Table 1

*Overseas Pakistanis Living, Working and Studying Abroad by Destination,
as of 8th of June, 2021*

Country	Number of Overseas Pakistanis	Percentage Distribution
Total Overseas Pakistanis	8,375,481	100
Saudi Arabia	2,300,000	27.5
United Arab Emirates (UAE)	1,600,000	19.1
United States of America (USA)	1,200,000	14.3
United Kingdom (UK)	1,175,000	14.0
Canada	223,000	2.7
Italy	200,000	2.4
South Africa	170,000	2.0
Oman	168,182	2.0
Qatar	160,000	1.9
Bahrain	120,000	1.4
Spain	120,000	1.4
Australia	100,000	1.2
France	100,000	1.2
Kuwait	95,453	1.1
Germany	75,355	0.9
Malaysia	61,912	0.7
Greece	60,000	0.7

Source: Data generated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and obtained from the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development.

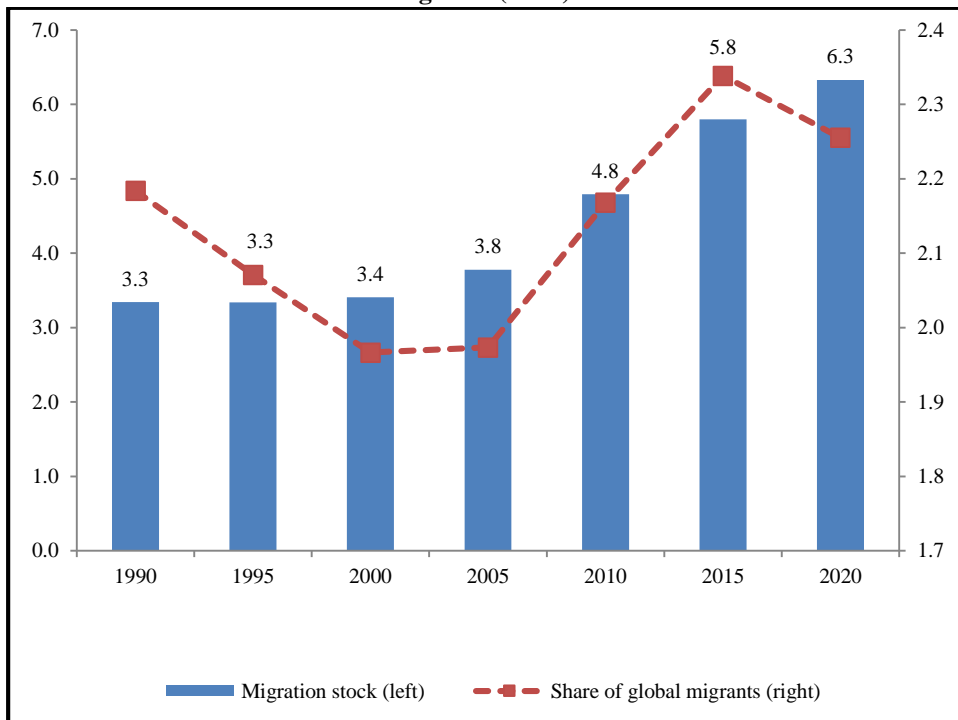
The size of the Pakistani diaspora, according to the UN database, is 6.3 million (Figure 1), much lower than the estimates of Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs –8.4 million (Table 1). The UN database shows Pakistan among the top global countries of origin of migrant workers. The UN data also shows a large

concentration of Pakistani-origin migrants in the Middle East, followed by Europe (Figure 2). The UN data shows that females' share in emigration is around one-third of the total migration. Most females are settled in Europe or North America with their families. The share of females in emigration to the Middle East is small, at around 4 percent.

The Pakistani diaspora differs a great deal when it comes to their residential status. Most Pakistanis in North America and Europe consist of permanent settlers. At the same time, all Pakistani emigrants in the Middle East are temporary workers who must return home after completing their jobs or the expiry of their contracts. According to the BEOE database, 11.7 million Pakistani workers found employment abroad between 1971 and 2021, primarily in the Middle East (97 percent).

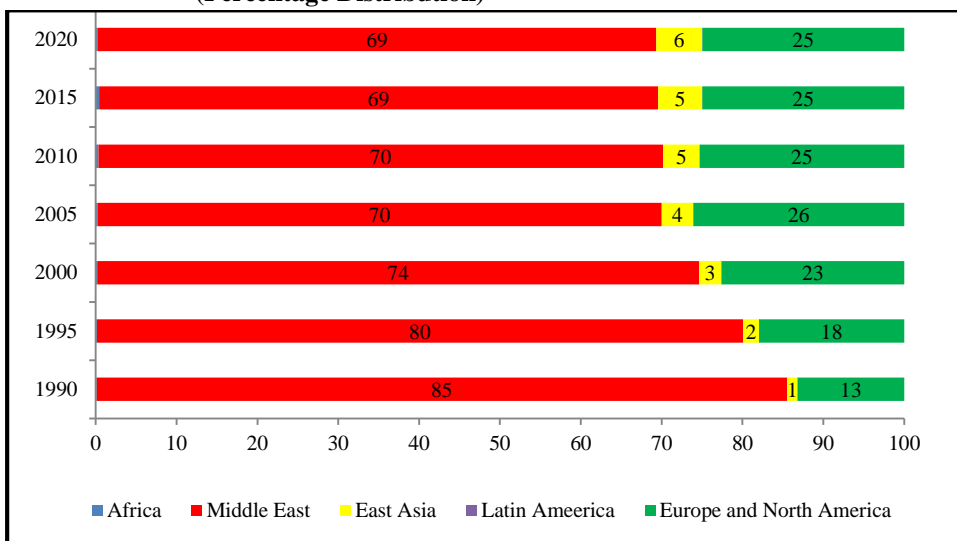
These simple statistics show the importance of the reintegration of return migrants into the domestic labour market. As reported in Table 1, more than half of the Pakistani diaspora in 2021 or 4.5 million, were in the Middle East region. This figure of 4.5 million is less than half of the Pakistani emigrant workers (11.7 million) who were placed abroad by the BEOE during 1971-2021, indicating that around 7 million Pakistanis worked for some time in the region have returned home during the last five decades. Unlike a solid system for registering emigrating workers for employment, no mechanism exists to register overseas Pakistanis returning home from abroad.

Fig. 1. Pakistan's Migrant Stock (in Millions) and Share in Total Global Migrants (in %)



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2020).

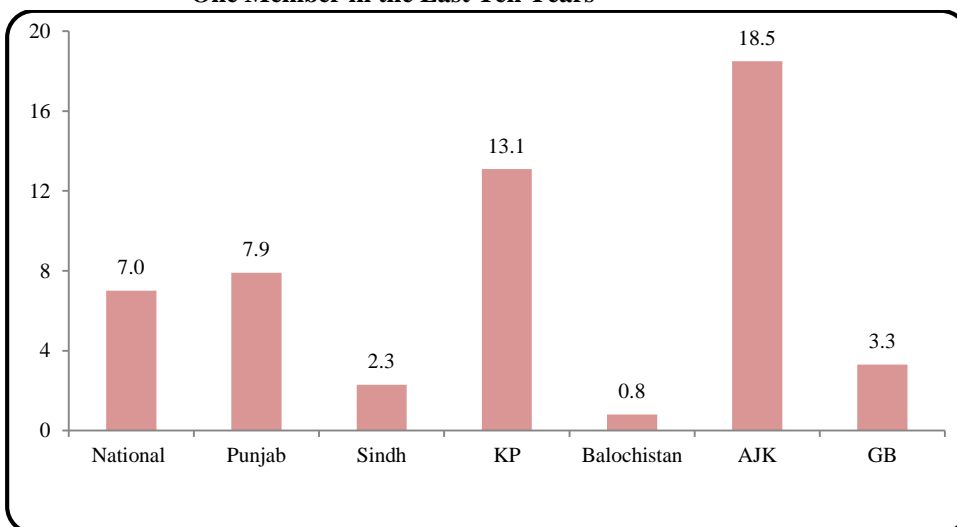
Fig. 2. Top Destinations of Pakistani Workers by Region of Work (Percentage Distribution)



Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2020).

The 2017/18 Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) shows that around 7 percent of the households succeeded in sending abroad at least one of their household members during the ten years preceding the survey. The provincial analysis of the DHS data reveals a higher prevalence of workers' emigration from AJK, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Punjab provinces than from Sindh, Balochistan and Gilgit Baltistan (Figure 3).

Fig. 3. Percentage of Households Having the Emigration of at least One Member in the Last Ten Years



Source: Demographic and Health Survey, 2017/18.

The placement of Pakistani workers in overseas labour markets is a significant relief for the domestic labour market and the economy. Pakistan has been passing through a prolonged demographic transition, starting in the early 1990s (Sathar and Casterline 1998), and it may continue till the 2050s (Durr-e-Nayab 2008). The fertility rate in Pakistan is the highest among South Asian countries, with 3.6 births per woman for 2017/18 (3.9 percent in rural and 2.9 in urban). The annual population growth rate is around 2.4 percent, higher in urban regions (3 percent) than in rural (2.1 percent), primarily due to rural-urban migration.² As a result, there is immense pressure on the local labour market as every year, around 2.5 million new entrants are ready to start their carrier. However, during the last three decades, economic growth remained at about 4-5 percent and was insufficient to create enough jobs. An annual growth rate of 7-8 percent is required to provide gainful employment to a 4 percent growing labour force keeping in view employment elasticity.³ Informal employment is still a significant source of employment (72 percent). The unemployment rate is highest among educated youth.

Table 2

Overseas Migration as a Proportion of New Entrants in the Labour Force, 2006 to 2019

Province	Labour Force (15 & Above Years) (in Millions)*		Labour Force Growth Rate During 2006- 2019 (in %)	Workers Placed Abroad During 2006-2019 (in Millions)	Emigrants as Percent of New Entrants 2006- 2019
	2006	2019			
Pakistan	42.2	62.5	48.1	6.4	31.5
Punjab	26.3	42.1	60.1	3.9	24.7
Sindh	10.0	14.5	45.0	0.7	15.6
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	4.5	7.8	73.3	1.8	54.5
Balochistan	1.4	2.7	92.9	0.07	5.4

Source: Estimated by using *district-level Pakistan Social and Living Measurement Survey (2006 & 2019),

** Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment (BEOE).

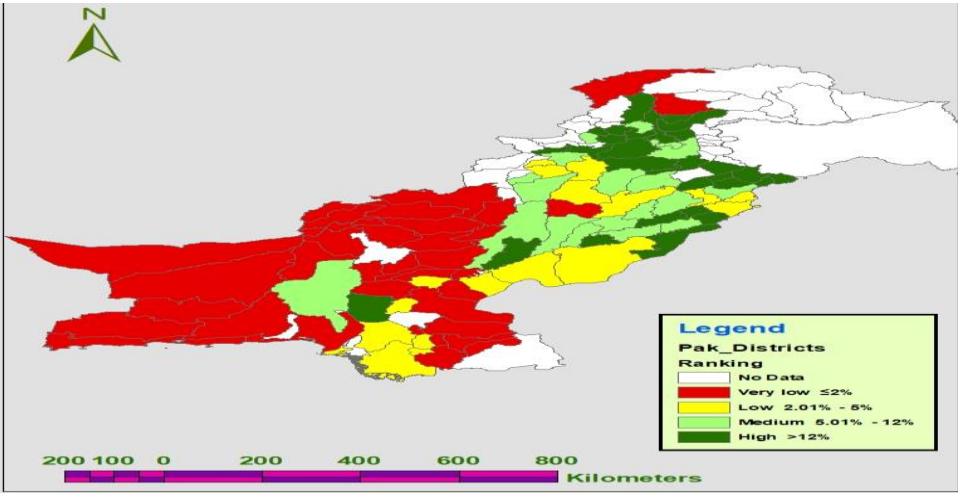
Due to high fertility, the Pakistani labour force increased from 42 million in 2006 to 63 million in 2019. Variations prevail across provinces where Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have the highest labour force growth. Table 2 shows that the total placement of workers abroad during the 2006-19 period was equal to around one-third of the new entrants. The overseas placement of workers from KP was equal to 55 percent of new entrants into the provincial labour force (Table 2). The corresponding equivalence for Punjab was 25 percent. It was quite low, 16 percent for Sindh. Balochistan lagged behind in securing jobs abroad for its workers. It appears that the overall emigration of workers has significantly reduced the pressures on the local labour market. It is worth reporting here that when return migration is considered, the net effect of overseas migration on the domestic labour market could be much lower.

Figure 4 shows the percentage share of overseas migration of new entrants in the labour market by district from 2006 to 2019. The district-level analysis suggests that some districts have placed more workers than the new entrants in their labour force, such as Dir and Swat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Narowal, Sahiwal, and Sialkot in Punjab. Most other districts also fall in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces.

²The population growth rate is estimated by using 1988 and 2017 Census data.

³The PIDE Reform Agenda for Accelerated and Sustained Growth, April 2021.

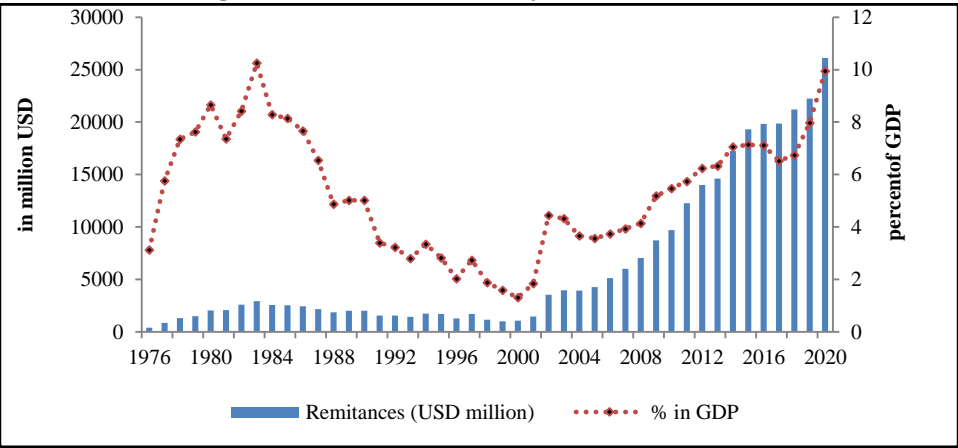
Fig. 4. Emigrants as a Percentage of New Entrants at the District Level from 2006 to 2019



Source: Estimated from PSLM 2006 & 2019 and Bureau of Emigration &Overseas Employment (BEOE).

Overseas migration has played a crucial role in the country’s national and regional development. During the last two decades, workers’ remittances from abroad have had a rising share in GDP; currently, it stands at 10 percent (Figure 5). Over the last few years, the country has received more remittances than export revenues; one may argue that Pakistan’s human resources have remained more efficient than exporting goods. The country has been facing a rising trade deficit as exports have been almost stagnant over the last ten years, with around USD 24 billion. On the other hand, imports are continuously rising, and the trade gap is more than USD 25 billion. In such a situation, workers’ remittances primarily finance the country’s trade deficit, forex reserves accumulation, dependence on foreign borrowing, and reduce the government’s external financing needs (Sutradhar, 2020).

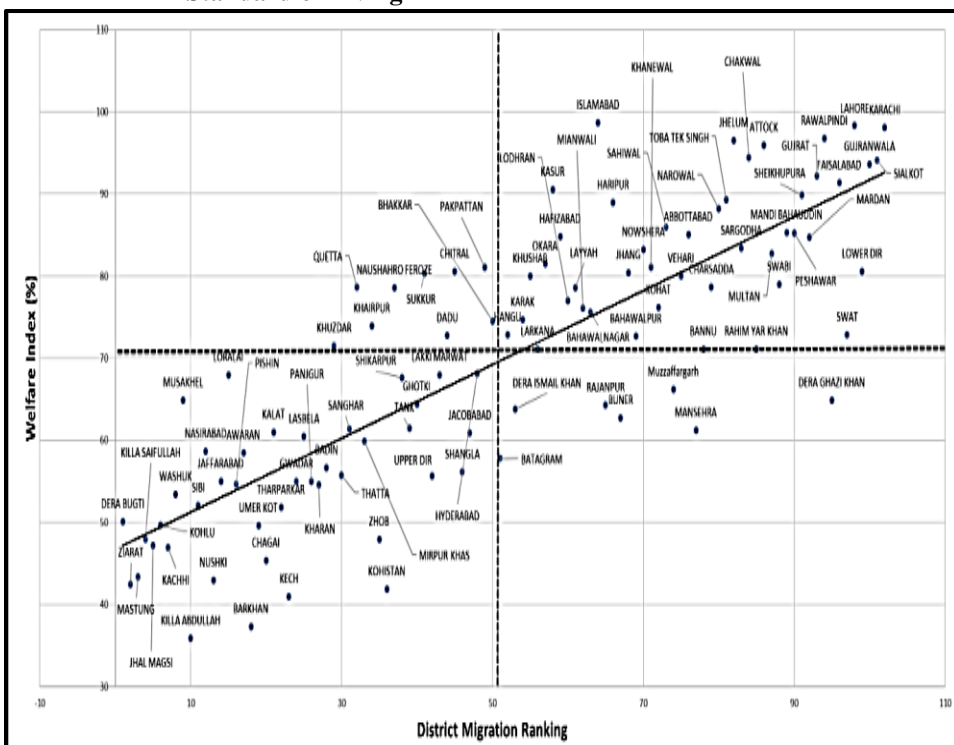
Fig. 5. Remittances Earned by Pakistani Workers



Source: World Bank database.

Overseas workers have altered the socio-economic standing of their families back in Pakistan by financing education, health, and entrepreneurial activities. The high emigrant districts have a spillover effect of remittances on the local economy, especially on construction, real estate, and rural economy (agriculture and non-form activities). The analysis in Figure 6 shows that districts with a higher emigration during the 2006 to 2019 period have, on average, a high level of living standard ranging, as measured through the inverse of the multidimensional poverty index 2014.

Fig. 6. District-level Relationship between Overseas Migration and Standard of Living



Note: On the x-axis, the district ranking is taken where a high rank is placed to the district having more export of workers during the 2006-2019 period. On the y-axis, the inverse of the multidimensional poverty index (100-MPI) is taken.

The COVID-19 pandemic has largely interrupted the emigration of Pakistani workers to all the continents, especially the Gulf region. Based on the trend analysis of 2018 and 2019 (Appendix Figure 1), we estimated that around 1.6 million Pakistani workers were unable to go abroad in just two years—2020 & 2021 (Table 3). The situation or the placement of workers abroad is likely to improve gradually, depending upon the pandemic-related restrictions and the demand for Pakistani workers in the GCC countries. The provincial analysis reveals that the impact is more on Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces than on Sindh and Balochistan.

Table 3

Impact of COVID-19 on Overseas Migration of Pakistani Workers

Year	Pakistan	Punjab	Sindh	KP	Balochistan	Others*
Actual Went						
2019: No. of Emigrants (000)	625	317	57	213	5	33
2020: No. of Emigrants (000)	225	119	17	68	2	19
2021: No. of Emigrants (000)	288	158	22	76	2	30
Likely to go in 2022***						
2022: No. of Emigrants (000)	816	458	73	191	12	83
Potential to Go Abroad in Case of no COVID**						
Potential Outflows for 2020 (000)	1048	534	77	398	8	30
Potential Outflows for 2021(000)	1048	534	77	398	8	30
Unable to Go Abroad						
2020 & 2021(000)	1583	792	115	653	12	11

Source: Calculation by the authors.

*Others include AJK and northern areas

**Growth rate of emigration for 2018 and 2019 is used to calculate the potential for 2020 & 2021.

***The date of January 2022 is used for the projection of the rest of the 10 months, where 68,000 went abroad in just one month.

5. COVID-19 AND RETURN MIGRATION OF PAKISTANI WORKERS

5.1. Overseas Workers' Experience

The challenges emigrant workers faced during the COVID-19 pandemic in the GCC countries include unemployment, less availability of working hours, pandemic-related isolation, poor quality of living, and mental stress (Tazyeen, et al. 2021). Some measures taken by the GCC governments for overseas workers, such as a rise in taxes, an increase in visa fees and non-provision of health facilities and social security benefits, led to a vast out flux of labour. There is uncertainty about the re-emigration of returning workers. Thus, when viewed through a migration lens, the economic crisis induced by the pandemic could be even longer, deeper, and more pervasive than the vast repatriation of emigrant workers (Bank, 2020).

This view is supported by the small sample of overseas workers and returnees interviewed for this study. As noted in the methodology section, we interviewed 171 overseas Pakistanis, including 86 currently living abroad, 27 who temporarily returned, and 58 who returned permanently during the pandemic. The respondents were asked about the reduction in 'working hours', 'income' and 'remittances' during the pandemic. As shown in Table 4, approximately 90 respondents experienced these reductions. About one-third of them experienced a reduction of more than 40 percent in their working hours (29 percent), income (34 percent) and remittances (36 percent).

Table 4

*Adverse Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Selected Livelihood Indicators
(Percentage Distribution)*

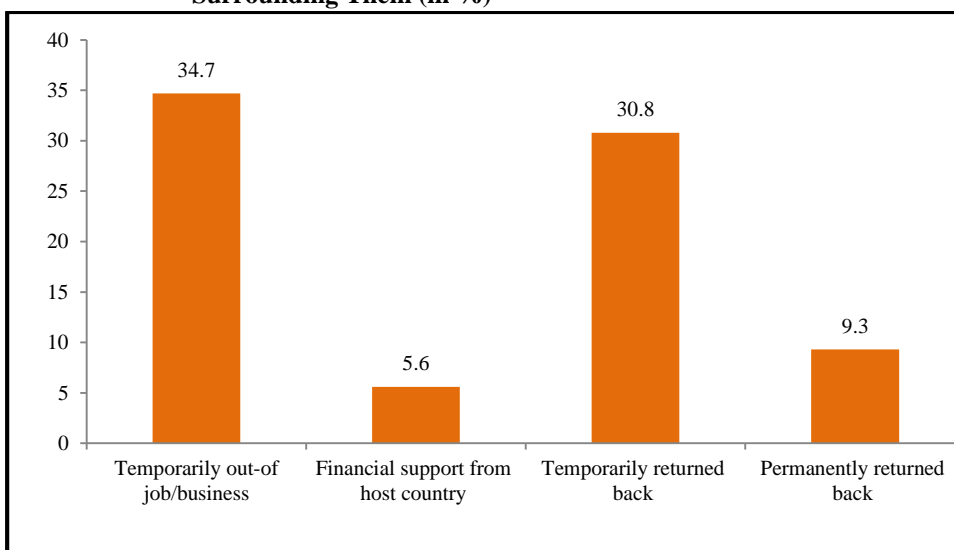
Impact Level	Reduction in Working Hours	Reduction in Income	Reduction in Remittances
Not at all	10.0	12.1	12.1
Up to 20 percent	38.6	22.1	12.9
21 percent to 40 percent	22.1	31.4	38.6
41 percent to 60 percent	15.0	15.0	17.9
61 percent and above	14.3	19.3	18.5
Total	100	100	100

Source: Estimated from Overseas Workers Survey, 2022.

In addition to the personal experience of the respondents, they were asked to give their views on the experience of Pakistani workers residing in their surroundings while abroad. They reported, as shown in Figure 7, that:

- Over one-third of the overseas Pakistani workers remained temporarily out-of-job during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Only 6 percent of the overseas Pakistani workers got financial assistance from the host government during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- More than 30 percent of overseas Pakistani workers temporarily returned to Pakistan due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Nine percent of the overseas Pakistani workers permanently returned to Pakistan after the outbreak.

Fig. 7. Perception of Respondents on Overseas Pakistani Workers Surrounding Them (in %)



Source: Estimated from Overseas Workers Survey, 2022.

5.2. COVID-19 and the Magnitude of Return Migration

Arif & Farooq (2021) developed three variants to estimate the return-flows of Pakistani workers— low, medium and high—based on three factors: (i) COVID-19-related health problems; (ii) no extension in workers’ contracts; and (iii) job loss. Under the low variant, 10 percent of the Pakistanis in the Middle East were likely to return home, whereas under the medium- and high-variants, 20 percent and 30 percent of workers were respectively likely to return. They assume no return migration from Europe, North America and other destination countries. Arif & Farooq (2021) estimated that 0.6 million to 1.7 million workers were likely to return home, equaling 0.8-2.5 percent of the domestic labour force (Table 5).

Table 5

Impact of COVID-19 on Return Flows Pakistani Workers, 2020-21

Indicators	Pakistan	Punjab	Sindh	KP	Balochistan	Others
Expected Return Flows						
Low Scenario (000)	577	302	58	173	5	38
Medium Scenario (000)	1153	603	116	347	11	77
High Scenario (000)	1730	905	175	520	16	115
Labour Force Impact of Return Migration						
Low (percent of labour force)	0.8	0.7	0.4	2.0	0.2	—
Medium (percent of labour force)	1.6	1.4	0.7	3.9	0.5	—
High (percent of labour force)	2.5	2.1	1.1	5.9	0.8	—

Source: Arif & Farooq (2021).

Note: The estimation is carried out by using the 2011-2020 overseas stock in the Middle East.

* Others include AJK and northern areas.

The available evidence supports the low variant, developed by Arif & Farooq (2021), to some extent. For instance, during the first six months of the pandemic, around 100,000 Pakistanis registered to return home, and 60,000 were only from Dubai (Reuters, 2020). About 400,000 Pakistani workers in Saudi Arabia were stranded at their residences due to travel restrictions (Shahzad, 2021). On the direction of the Government of Pakistan, more than 500 flights were arranged to facilitate the return travelling of overseas Pakistanis during the two years when COVID-19 was at its height.

Several irregular Pakistanis in Europe (19,145) were also ordered to leave the EU (ICMPD, 2022). Based on this information, Arif & Farooq’s earlier estimates and overseas workers’ perception, as reported above, it is estimated that 0.3-0.4 million Pakistanis have returned home in 2020-21, including those who returned from countries other than the Middle East region. It is less than 10 percent of the stock of Pakistanis in the Middle East and less than 5 percent of the Pakistani diaspora.

Most emigrant workers preferred to stay abroad, with only a tiny proportion returning home. Since return migration is a regular phenomenon of international contract labour migration, the return of 0.3-0.4 million in two years should not be of significant concern. But the situation of these returnees is different. It requires urgent action and strategy from the Government of Pakistan not only to arrange their timely return but also to assist them in reintegration into the country. It was not a planned return, usually at the end of an overseas job contract. It is associated with mental preparation and savings

sufficient for the local community's readjustment. Instead, a return linked with some emergency, such as the pandemic, is likely to be a very painful experience in terms of a sudden job loss, no savings, serious health issues, and mental stress.

5.3. Impact on the Domestic Labour Market

As reported in Table 2, because of COVID-19, 1.6 million would-be Pakistani emigrant workers could not go abroad for employment in 2020 and 2021. The above evidence shows that around 0.3-0.4 million have also returned home during the pandemic. Overall the proportion of those who returned from abroad recently and those who could not go abroad during 2020 and 2021 is around 4.6 percent of the total labour force (Table 6). The impact was massive, considering the sluggish economic growth, high inflation, and rising unemployment. The government estimates suggest that before the pandemic, 35 percent (55.7 million) of the population (aged 10 and above) was working, and the number declined to 22 percent (35 million) from April to July 2020. However, the situation has gradually improved significantly after July 2020.

Table 6

Impact of COVID-19 on the Local Labour Market

Impact Type	Pakistan	Punjab	Sindh	KP	Balochistan
A. Returned in 2020 & 2021 (000)	350	196	38	113	3
B. Would be Emigrants who could					
Go Abroad in 2020 & 2021 (000)	1583	792	115	653	12
Total Affected (000)	1933	988	153	766	15
Percent of the Labour Force					
(A+B)	4.6	3.8	1.5	17.0	1.1

Source: Calculation by the authors.

6. UNDERSTANDING THE COPING STRATEGIES OF WORKERS AFFECTED BY COVID-19

As reported earlier, we interviewed recently (March, 2022) three types of respondents: (i) workers who returned permanently after the outbreak of COVID-19; (ii) workers who returned home temporarily (on leave); and workers currently living/working abroad. We asked about their coping strategies against the challenges they faced during the pandemic. About half of the workers (46 percent), who had to return home permanently, were unemployed in Pakistan at the time of the interview. They reported that their current savings are sufficient to meet their household expenses only for 4-5 months. Only a quarter of them have some amount or resources for investment, and the rest have no idea what to do. The nature of the job of more than half of the currently employed returnees is according to their overseas skills, but their monthly income is much lower than their overseas earnings. The main challenges reported by return migrants include (i) readjustment in the local labour market; (ii) lack of financial resources to start a business; (iii) no support from the government in guiding the overseas workers; (iv) limited job opportunities; (v) lack of sufficient skills; and (vi) lack of adequate knowledge about the local labour market.

Respondents working abroad were asked to give their potential coping strategy if COVID-19 continues for the next 1-2 years. Around two-thirds of them would prefer to stay abroad, whatever the adverse situation is. They thought the employment situation was not good in Pakistan, and it would be better to make an optimal effort to seek opportunities in overseas markets. Only 12 percent of them thought they would return to Pakistan in an uncertain situation. Among returnees, 57 percent of them would start a business, 24 percent would search for a job, and the rest, 19 percent, would try to engage themselves in a family setup. Among those who want to establish a business, only 23 percent of them have enough savings to start a business. However, only 20 percent of them are optimistic that they will successfully start a business; 67 percent of them are averagely favourable, and 13 percent are not optimistic.

Many overseas Pakistanis, especially in Saudi Arabia, consider that the recent government policies have raised workers' vulnerabilities as the Saudi government has imposed various taxes and other labour market restrictions. Many of them are now thinking of making an effort to migrate to Europe and other developed countries.

7. REINTEGRATION INITIATIVES AND VIEWS OF OVERSEAS WORKERS

The Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development (MOPHRD) has the mandate to promote overseas employment and look after the welfare matters of overseas workers. Still, the central policy of the ministry is to encourage emigration. The two autonomous bodies under the ministry, The Overseas Employment Corporation (OEC) and the Bureau of Emigration and Overseas Employment (BEOE), are mandated to promote and regulate the emigration processes. OEC has developed a portal with skilled applicants and available overseas jobs. More than 4,000 Overseas Employment Promoters (OEPs) and foreign employers have the data access of registered applicants. The BEOE, on the other hand, mainly focuses on maintaining data on registered emigrants, regulates OEPs, and protects the job rights of overseas workers through Pakistani Consulates. Overseas Pakistan Foundation (OPF), another corporate body under the ministry, provides certain facilities to overseas workers, including a complaint cell and one window facilitation desk at airports, housing projects, schools, hospitals, etc.

The Prime Minister of Pakistan constituted a special task force to facilitate the returnees affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ A portal was developed by Overseas Employment Corporation (OEC), where so far, 95,692 returnees have voluntarily registered themselves. The data on these returning workers was shared with the following organisations, engaged for their assistance:

- (i) *The BEOE* was assigned the task of helping returnees with their re-employment abroad. The BEOE has assisted 6,000 returned workers by successfully placing them on overseas jobs.

⁴There is no official policy for the reintegration of returning emigrants. The draft migration policy includes a section on return migrants and their reintegration, but still, the policy requires approval, and implementation mechanisms are yet to be delineated.

- (ii) *Benazir Income Support Program (BISP)* was tasked to assist the returnees with cash assistance. According to the BISP policy, benefits were limited for vulnerable populations and domestic lay off workers. The families cannot be given benefits when someone from the family has travelled abroad.
- (iii) *Overseas Pakistan Foundation (OPF)* was assigned to adjust the returnees in its existing projects. The OPF initiated a project/centre named Reintegration of Returnees (RoR) with the financial support of GIZ. Around 1800 returnees got the following sort of support:
 - (a) One thousand three hundred individual advice sessions were held at the PGFRC in Lahore and Advisory Desk in Islamabad.
 - (b) Six hundred of them were placed in employment, keeping in view their skill-set.
 - (c) One thousand one hundred got financial support for business start-ups.
 - (d) More than 300 received vocational and educational training.
- (iv) *Kamyab Jawan Programme* was tasked to provide seed loans for initiating small business ventures under the national entrepreneurship scheme. The program lacks details on how many returnees were facilitated through soft loans.
- (v) *Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority (SMEDA)* provides the necessary training, mentoring, and help in developing a business plan to start their businesses. SMEDA has facilitated the returnees through its 21 regional Help Desks by guiding them on a business plan, possible profitable businesses, loan funding, etc. SMEDA lacks a record of how many of the returnees have received counselling.
- (vi) *Pakistan Housing Authority (PHA)* has an unbending policy to provide housing facilities in instalments. No such relaxation was given to returnees, i.e., concession in loan, housing facility, etc. Only overseas workers have a quota of 5 percent in PHA schemes.
- (vii) *Economic Affairs Division (EAD)* is responsible for exploring foreign funding for returnees. However, no such project was initiated for returnees from the EAD forum.

Our discussion with the above stakeholders and returnees reveals that most institutes made an effort to adjust the return migrants in their ongoing programs; as such, no new program was initiated to reintegrate return migrants. The interventions were mainly made on a smaller scale or on an ad hoc basis. Overall the overseas workers lack information on governmental support and follow-up mechanisms after portal registration.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government was committed to the economic and psychosocial reintegration of the returnees; however, this commitment did not materialise fully at the latter stages. The Task Force lacked clear TORs and a follow-up mechanism to actively pursue with the concerned departments to devise policies and operational strategies. Even after two years of the pandemic, the Overseas Employment Corporation (OEC), which shared the data with eight organisations, has no progress details made by respective organisations.

There are other initiatives for the reintegration of return migrants, mainly initiated with the support of international organisations, i.e., IOM, ILO, GIZ, European Union, etc.

But, these initiatives are also at a small scale and without a central reintegration policy umbrella. The two main initiatives are:

- (i) The European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN) has a policy for irregular migrants residing in various countries of the European Union (EU). After registration, an irregular worker is supported through essential and reintegration services, including medical support, travel to Pakistan, job placement assistance, business loans, housing, etc. Under the project, WELDO in Pakistan has provided returns and reintegration support to over 12,000 voluntary and forced returnees.⁵
- (ii) Reintegration of Returnees in Pakistan (RoR) is an initiative started by Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) that offers reintegration assistance to Pakistani returnees and Pakistani nationals. RoR is an initiative commissioned by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH in partnership with the National Vocational and Technical Training Commission (NAVTTTC). Pakistan-German Facilitation and Reintegration Centre (PGFRC) was established in Lahore; it has supported 15,000 individuals, including 6,500 returnees from Germany and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. The project provides support in four areas: career and entrepreneurship advisory services, employment promotion, recognition of prior learning, and competency-based training and assessments.⁶

8. ADEQUACY OF REINTEGRATION SERVICES/PROGRAMS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The return of overseas workers at the expiry of their contract is an integral part of the present international labour migration system, active in different parts of the world, including the Middle East. In the case of Pakistan, the return phenomenon is also part of the ongoing labour emigration system between Pakistan and the Middle East. As noted earlier, the BEOE placed 11.1 million workers abroad, primarily in the GCC countries (97 percent) during 1972-2020. The data on the Pakistani diaspora generated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs shows that in June 2021, approximately 4.5 million Pakistanis were working/living in the Middle East, suggesting that a large majority of migrant workers returned to their communities of origin in Pakistan after completing their contract. This mandatory return phenomenon links the reintegration of returning workers with their success in managing the period(s) of overseas migration in terms of accumulation of foreign savings, skills acquisition and directing resources to productive investment.

The key question is that more than half of the overseas workers in GCC countries are low-skilled (labourers) and semi-skilled (masons, carpenters, drivers) workers. How can they be readjusted in the domestic labour market? Most returning workers may not prefer to find a job as labourers in the country; instead, as in other parts of the world, they

⁵For details see <https://www.weldo.org/about.php>

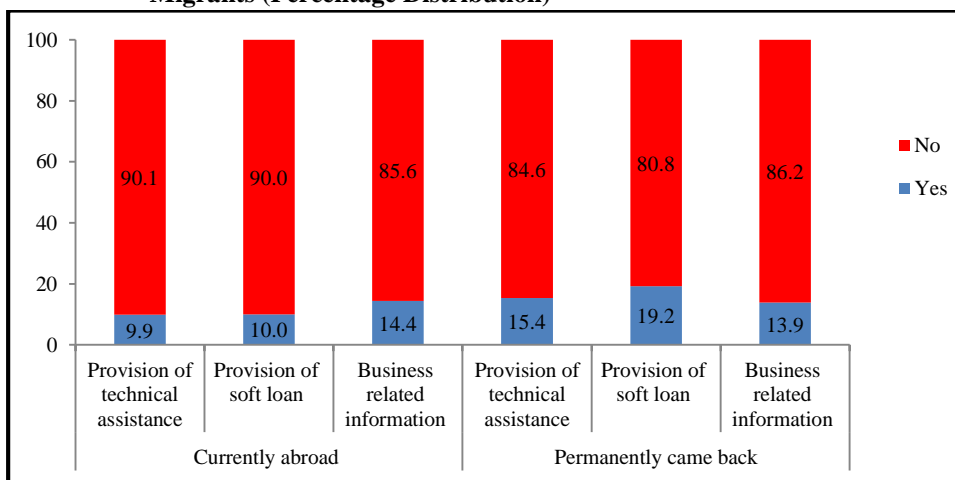
⁶For details see <https://tvetreform.org.pk/reintegration/>

intend to establish their businesses with their savings and experience. But an unplanned return, associated with some emergencies like COVID-19, may be very painful in terms of the economic, social and psychological cost of this return—end of an overseas job, no or minimal savings and an unfavourable situation at home.

Authorities in the country of origin may support individual return migrants by, among other things, helping them find jobs, providing housing and granting credit. The reintegration initiatives of the Government of Pakistan, as outlined in the previous section, can be grouped into four major categories: (i) re-employment abroad through the BEOE; (ii) assistance for subsistence through *Ehsaas* programme; (iii) financial support for business through KJP and SMEDA; and (iv) training and skills improvement. All these initiatives give the impression of multidimensionality of the reintegration of return migrants, which is a positive thing. However, the scale of the interventions is very small compared to the size of return migrants, e.g. only 600 returnees could be sent abroad, and skill-enhancing opportunities could be offered to a small group of returning workers.

Figure 8 shows that only a minor percentage of the respondents, who are currently abroad/on-leave or permanently returned, know about the ongoing governmental facilitations for returnees. When asked the returnees whether they tried to contact some government department for specific business support, 43 percent of them contacted but failed to receive some support, and 54 percent did not contact any government department. Only 3 percent were able to receive some governmental support. More than two-thirds of them have not readjusted themselves in the local labour market and plan to re-emigrate when the opportunity arises. Thus, the return of foreign workers in an emergency like COVID-19 has very serious implications for their reintegration in the society of origin.

Fig. 8. Knowledge of Respondents on Government Facilitation for Return Migrants (Percentage Distribution)



Source: Estimated from Overseas Workers Survey, 2022.

Moreover, despite its multidimensionality, the adopted approach by the government of Pakistan lacks some key dimensions of sustainable reintegration. As listed in IOM's conceptual framework, the reintegration of workers must cover three aspects; psychological, social, and economic (IOM, 2019). The integration efforts can be made at

the three tiers: (i) at the individual level, where the collected information should be used for necessary counselling, mitigate various forms of vulnerabilities, build requisite skills for reintegration, provide financial support for start-ups, etc., (ii) at the community level, where an enabling environment can promote resilience and opportunity.

Every local government must liaise with overseas migrants to transfer their knowledge, skills, and foreign investment in the local economy. Community and local governments can help in social networking, joint business initiatives, and returnees' learning culture; and (iii) at the governmental level, where national and local development agendas must be aligned for successful reintegration by designing specific policies and programs. When judged under these concepts or approaches of reintegration, the current initiatives in Pakistan are inadequate and lack some key social and economic dimensions necessary for successful reintegration.

9. DEVELOPING A POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR THE REINTEGRATION OF RETURNED MIGRANTS

A review of the literature shows that the reintegration of return migrants may largely depend on four factors: (i) the maintenance by return migrants of social and economic contact with their country of origin while abroad; (ii) the ability of return migrants and their families to improve their economic and social lot with resources acquired from overseas; (iii) the support or priority given by authorities in the country of origin as well as destination to the resettlement of return migrants; and (iv) an enabling environment that promotes opportunity and resilience. Considering the importance of these factors, the reintegration framework developed by Arif (1995) is modified for the current research. His framework linked the integration of return migrants with three interrelated phases of migration; the pre-migration phase, the migration phase and the post-migration phase taking into account the classical theoretical orientations (push-pull and cost-benefit) and adopting the household as its basic decision-making unit, with individual interests subsumed under the family rubric. The pre-migration phase includes the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of migrants and the social and economic position of their households before migration, which predict specific goals, are shown in the pre-migration phase (Figure 10).

These initial conditions of workers and their households, together with the specific goals, affect migration decision-making. Individual and household characteristics, including life-cycle variables and family characteristics, are the most frequently identified differentiating factors in migration behaviour. Migrants are also likely to differ widely concerning their pre-migration household economic and social status. Workers from better-off households will likely have access to some assets and resources before migration. These resources may form a base for further improvements and investment from overseas migration. Arif's framework used individual and household characteristics to explain the reintegration process.

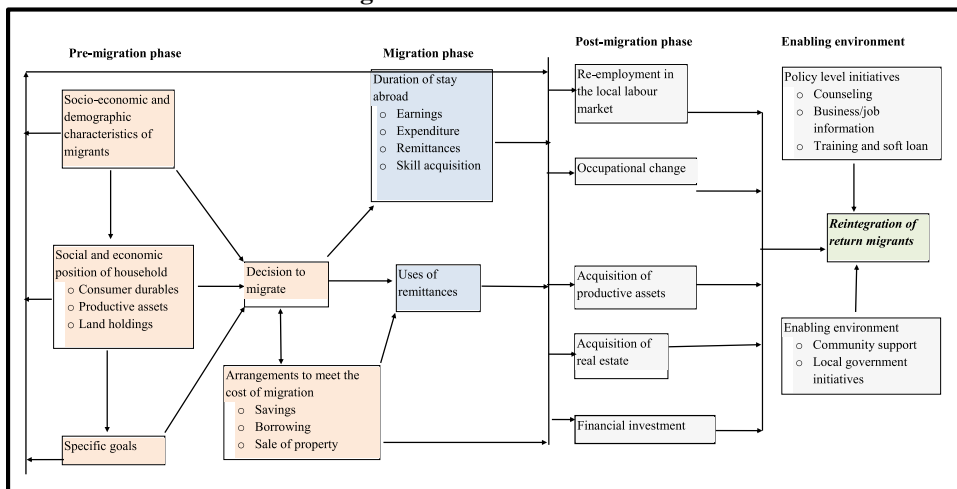
The pre-migration phase of the framework also covers the cost of migration and the means of its financing. If high costs are involved in obtaining employment in the Middle East, and migrants borrow money to finance the employment, a substantial proportion of overseas earnings may be used to repay the debts, with little left for investment.

In the migration phase, Arif's framework included variables which operate during the migrants' stay in the host country, such as earnings, duration of stay, work experience and uses of remittances. Pre-migration individual and household characteristics and specific goals affect variables operating during the migration phase. Variables which show the conditions of migrants after their permanent return home are presented in the post-migration phase, and these variables are the integral components in assessing return migrants' reintegration.

Under the post-migration phase, five socio-economic variables are indicated: re-employment experience of return migrants, occupational change after return, acquisition of productive assets and real estate and financial investment. In other words, the readjustment of returnees in the domestic labour market and the use of remittance money to enhance productive household assets may enable them and their families to maintain higher standards of living beyond the period of migration.

In Arif's framework, two elements or factors are critical in the present context of return migration—the support or priority given by authorities in the country of origin as well as the destination to the resettlement of return migrants and an enabling environment that promote resilience and opportunity—are missing. As presented in Figure 9, the revised framework includes these two key factors/elements for integrating workers returning from overseas employment. In the post-return phase, authorities in the country of origin may support individual return migrants by, among other things, helping them find jobs, providing housing and granting credit. However, it could be argued that any special measures for return migrants would discriminate against those who have never had an opportunity to emigrate. That is why, with few exceptions, policy measures in Asian labour-exporting countries often stress the provision of equal services to return migrants and to other members of the community. But the situation of workers returning in an emergency like COVID-19 is entirely different, demanding an effective mechanism to support workers in their reintegration efforts in communities of origin. Any assistance provided by local authorities and communities would certainly accelerate the process of return migrants' reintegration.

Fig. 9. Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of Reintegration of Return Migrants



Regarding the enabling environment, the proposed revised framework includes providing socio-economic opportunities at the community level (Figure 10). The district of origin of a worker returning from overseas employment is considered the community domain for their reintegration. Our district-level analysis reveals that the districts with a medium and high migration share are economically better off and can generate employment activities for returning workers. As shown in Table 7, the medium and high migrant districts have less poverty, more percentage of construction and industrial jobs, relatively high levels of urbanisation, and comparatively higher wages for blue-collar workers due to the high demand.

Table 7

District-level Economic Opportunity by Migrant Level

Economic Opportunity	Emigration Level			
	Very Low	Low	Medium	High
Multidimensional Poverty Index (%)	49.0	34.9	23.0	14.6
Share of Non-farm and Paid Employment (%)	58.0	63.5	64.6	74.2
Share of Agricultural Jobs (%)	47.7	43.6	36.9	26.9
Share of Industrial Jobs (%)	6.4	7.0	12.8	23.4
Share of Construction Jobs (%)	12.3	14.7	17.6	22.4
Share of Urban Population (%)	21.1	22.4	29.6	40.1
The Monthly Wage of Blue-collar Workers (PKR)	19,475	20,508	22,121	25,363
Number of Districts	25	25	25	27

Source: Estimated from PSLM 2019, MPI is taken from PSLM 2014/15.

In short, when a return migrant is successfully reintegrated economically and socially, their success (or failure) is primarily a function of the capacity of migrants and their families to manage resources acquired from overseas employment, factors operating during the pre-migration and migration phases, the support given by the government and enabling environment for resettlement. This function shows a complex interplay of factors in the reintegration of returning workers (Figure 10). Return migration is an essential part of the dynamics of contract labour migration and reintegration of return migrants, which includes re-employment in the local labour market, occupational mobility, acquisition of productive assets and real estate, and financial investment. This assistance could help migrants and their families to continue the process of change beyond the period of migration.

10. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Massive return migration occurred in the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly due to uncertainty, border closure, lockdown, and shutdown of economic activities. With time, the host governments and workers gradually adjusted to the pandemic, and the number started declining. Pakistan took temporary measures for returnees during the pandemic; however, there must be a policy framework for the reintegration of returnees for three reasons. First, most overseas Pakistanis have been working temporarily in GCC countries with an average duration of 6-10 years. Their skill-set and experience could be highly useful for the economy to promote entrepreneurial activities and the development of SMEs.

Second, the irregular migrants in Europe, though small in number, often face forced return, rejection in an asylum, etc. These migrants require rehabilitation counselling and skill support for proper absorption in the local labour market. Third, any future pandemic or socio-political shock can cause massive return migration where mostly the workers face an interrupted migration cycle with no return preparedness. The same happened with Pakistani workers in the 1990 Kuwait-Iraq war. The country must have a policy perspective to avoid any catastrophe for decent reintegration of returnees by ensuring the economic self-sufficiency, social stability, and psychosocial well-being of such returnees.

The reintegration framework must be dynamic and heterogeneous, keeping in view the Diaspora, skill-set, time pattern of returnees, and level of return preparedness. This study has developed a framework for the reintegration of returning workers (Figure 10), demonstrating that intending or potential migrants and their families need to be educated about their reintegration or resettlement in their home communities when they plan for overseas employment. The workers and their families must understand the temporariness of their overseas jobs. Recruitment practices may be fair to minimise the financial cost of emigration. Workers' earnings during a couple of early years of overseas employment are used to return the cost of emigration.

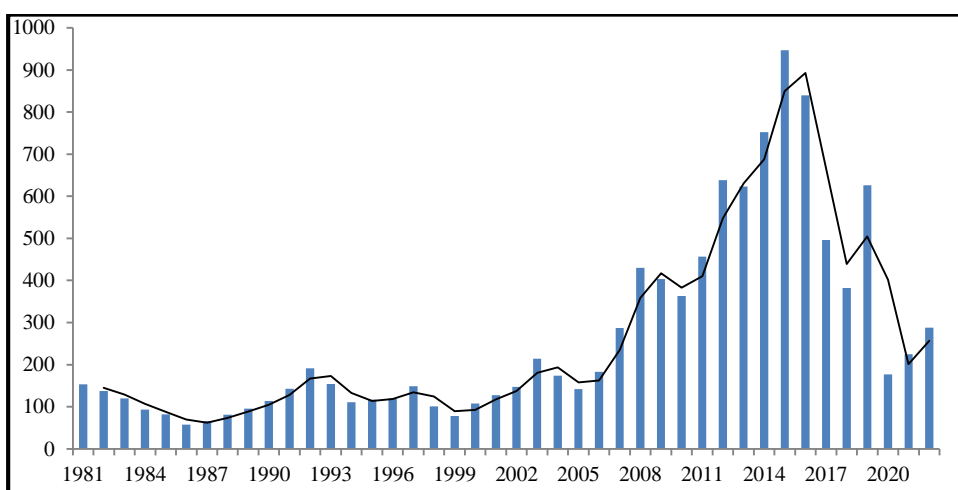
A key factor for the reintegration of returning workers is how foreign remittances are used. The prudent use of remittances by directing them to productive investment will ensure the successful reintegration of returning workers and promote entrepreneurship in the country, creating more job opportunities. The support from the government and enabling factors (district-level opportunities) will ensure various aspects of reintegration, including economic self-sufficiency, social stability and the psychosocial well-being of return migrants.

It is recommended that:

- (i) A system for the registration of return migrants may be developed. This registration may be part of Pakistan's workers' emigration system, like the registration of emigrating workers. It is required to provide reintegration counselling, services and promotion of entrepreneurship. The system must include information on the skill composition of workers, their districts of origin, type of migration cycle (completed or interrupted), period of stay abroad, level of return preparedness, and economic preferences. The data must be available to relevant stakeholders.
- (ii) A pilot project may be initiated in 10 high-emigration districts to educate workers and their families about reintegration linking it with their success in accumulating foreign savings, skills acquisition and investment in communities of origin. After piloting, its scope may include all intending workers and their families.
- (iii) In some of these high-emigration districts, Special Economic Zones may be set up to attract investment from overseas workers, to help their successful reintegration.
- (iv) Turkish workers in Germany established joint workers' companies in Turkey in the 1970s. Overseas Pakistani workers may be encouraged to develop joint ventures in their communities (districts) of origin.

- (v) The country must emphasise ‘innovation’ by shaping the talent in the country’s national development agenda. Multiple existing organisations should be part of the reintegration framework, including; SMEDA for mentoring, counselling, and development of the business plan; TVET for skills provision; and KJP for soft loans.
- (vi) Various Pakistanis face forced returns due to irregular migration, non-renewal of visas, health issues, financial hurdles, and other crises. The government must ensure such Pakistanis’ safe and dignified return by providing travel assistance, logistic support and necessary counselling on arrival.

Appendix Fig. 1.
Annual Placement of Pakistanis in Overseas Markets (in 000s), 1981-2021



Source: Bureau of Emigration & Overseas Employment (BEOE), 2020.

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