Executive Summary

Regional Overview

International Migration is a key factor behind the socio-economic development of South and South-West Asia, one of the fastest growing subregions in the world economically. Historically, international migration has acted to alleviate population pressures and unemployment while remittances from overseas migrants have contributed to poverty reduction and helped ensure relative macroeconomic stability even during times of crises. Notably, South and South-West Asia comprises 42 per cent of the population of the Asia-Pacific region and is the largest remittance-receiving subregion in nominal terms, receiving 40 per cent of the officially recorded $206 billion of remittances sent to the region in 2010.

Despite recent impressive growth, several countries in South and South-West Asia are still classified as developing countries and three are least developed countries. Poverty remains widespread throughout the subregion, with 36.2 per cent of the population living on less than $1.25 per day in 2007. Consequently, migrants are drawn to wealthier subregions that offer better opportunities. Political instability and conflict, as well as frequent natural disasters, also continue to trigger migratory movements.

This report analyzes migration issues taking into account socio-economic complexities. Analysis is provided in both the country and thematic chapters. The country chapters present an overview of migration dynamics in 10 countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Turkey while the thematic chapters contain an analysis of regional migration trends and issues from eight standpoints, namely environment and climate change, gender, health, labour migration, policy and international cooperation, protection of the rights of migrant workers, refugees and stateless persons, and remittances.

As is often the case among migrants globally, better job opportunities serve as a major pull factor for migrants in South and South-West Asia. The majority of labour migrants from the subregion work in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Malaysia and private agencies typically play an extensive role in the recruitment process. From the perspective of countries of origin, the main challenges pertaining to labour migration are: increasing bilateral and multilateral cooperation with destination countries to improve working conditions and the treatment of migrants; reducing the cost of migration,
minimizing recruitment fraud and abuse and extending labour-law protection to all workers, including domestic workers, who are mostly women; developing and recognizing skills; and reducing the proportion of migrant workers engaged in high-risk and low-wage sectors.

While the majority of the countries of origin in South and South-West Asia have enacted legislation and put in place mechanisms to protect migrant workers, exploitative practices in labour recruitment and employment in low-wage occupations remain. In addition, the importance of inter-state cooperation among countries of origin in the subregion and destination countries has been recognized but thus far only a few binding agreements have been signed.

As a result of increasing rates of labour migration, remittances to South and South-West Asia have also risen over time and their relative importance to the economy of the subregion as a whole has substantially increased in the past decade. In several countries, remittances are the most important source of foreign income. For example, remittances to Nepal and Bangladesh accounted for 22 and 10 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), respectively, in 2010. Studies have shown that recipients of remittances mainly use the funds to build a house or upgrade an existing house and for essential household expenditures which support human and social development, such as the payment of school fees and health-care costs. These funds contribute to macroeconomic stability. However, they also have adverse effects, such as enabling policymakers to delay the implementation of structural reforms which may increase employment opportunities at home. Also of note, a large number of remittances are sent through informal channels and thus remain unrecorded despite efforts to increase the proportion remitted through official channels.

Any balanced discussion on international migration should include both the positive and negative aspects associated with it. One area of major concern is the protection of migrants. Despite the protection provided to all migrants under international human rights and international labour law, many migrants from South and South-West Asia who either live and work in the subregion or elsewhere, are at risk of human rights violations. Key features of migration dynamics and migration governance in some destination countries exacerbate the vulnerability of migrants, including, among others, labour migration policies that tie employees to one employer and recruitment and hiring processes that are dominated by the private sector in both countries of origin and destination. Although the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW) provides a robust tool that addresses the specific vulnerabilities faced by migrant workers, ratification among countries in the subregion remains low, even among countries of origin of migrants. Ratification and implementation of the ICRMW and other core
international human rights instruments would be an important step towards greater protection of the rights of all migrants in South and South-West Asia.

From a gender perspective, women notably have increased their economic role through migration, contributing to the economies of both countries of origin and destination. To maximize this contribution, migration policies need to take into account gender equality and the empowerment of women. Studies show that women migrant workers both at the country of origin and destination are subjected to discriminatory practices, and human and labour rights violations at every stage of the migration cycle. Moreover, their access to legal or social protection or psychosocial services in the countries of destination is often very limited. In some countries of origin, women constitute about half of the overseas migrant workforce. A large majority of this workforce are domestic workers. Demand for such occupation groups has increased in line with the global demographic and labour market developments. They account for 4 to 10 per cent of the workforce in developing countries and about 2 per cent of the workforce in developed countries.

The issue of migration and health has been well researched over an extended period of time but very little of this work has focused on disease, especially communicable diseases other than HIV/AIDS. Moreover, the dominance of the “healthy migrant” model whereby migrant populations are considered to be healthier than non-migrant populations because of the selectivity of the migration process has masked the complexity of the relationship between migration and health. The 2008 World Health Assembly (WHA) and the 2010 Global Consultation on Migrant Health have directed the attention of States towards a more holistic consideration of the diversity of migrants’ vulnerability to health problems and the need for developing more migrant-sensitive health systems.

The subregion witnesses movements that are complex and rooted in a combination of different motivations. In addition to economic drivers, a major push factor for migrants are underlying human rights violations or persecution. Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran continue to host one of the largest and most protracted refugee populations in the world. Pakistan hosts more than 1.9 million registered Afghans, and another one million undocumented Afghan migrants are estimated to be living in the country. More than one million Afghan refugees reside in the Islamic Republic of Iran (UNHCR, 2011). Many Afghan migrants have lived outside their country of citizenship for three decades. In spite of the high number of refugees living within South and South-West Asia, only three countries in the subregion have ratified the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and its protocol. Another area of concern is the high number of stateless persons. Notably, some countries in the subregion have already
made efforts to give citizenship to selected groups of people who were previously classified as being stateless.

The association between environmental change and migration has become a major topic of discussion in recent years. This is due to growing recognition of the need for a global response and international cooperation on adaptation strategies to reduce vulnerability and build resilience in developing countries to meet the challenges of environmental change. The Copenhagen Accord, which endorses the continuation of the Kyoto Protocol, highlighted the importance of adaptation strategies. These strategies not only aim to mitigate risks of possible climate-induced migration, but also include migration. Although further research and debate is required to support such strategies, building resilience of countries and communities affected by a changing climate, environmental hazards and structural factors of vulnerabilities are broadly acknowledged, and were reaffirmed by the Cancun Agreements, of the sixteenth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP) at the United Nations Climate Conference, held from 29 November until 10 December 2010 in Cancun, Mexico.

**Increasing cooperation**

International migration is inherently a multilateral concern, and desired outcomes are most likely to be achieved if countries of origin and destination meet on a regular basis to discuss labour migration issues and the best way to resolve them. Bilateral and regional meetings, with discussions guided by international principles and norms, offer the best hope for improving labour migration governance in South and South-West Asia. Strategic international cooperation within the region is required to overcome these challenges. Various migration initiatives have provided forums for discussion and a platform to propose suggestions for solutions to these issues. This has led to several positive examples of sharing of good practices and lessons learned within the region.

**Gaps in knowledge**

Existing gaps in knowledge on international migration in South and South-West Asia reflect the difficulty in obtaining reliable data and information, the complexities of migration issues in the subregion, as well as the limited resources available to produce accurate data. To address these gaps, greater effort should be put into increasing the capacities of national governments and academic institutions in securing accurate and reliable data to inform policymaking.
Key recommended actions

The following are the key recommendations pointed out in this report.

- Labour migration can be mutually beneficial for employers and migrants as well as for residents of countries of origin and countries of destination. For all groups to benefit, the migration process must be well-managed. This entails making sure migrants receive complete and accurate information about employment and implementing regulations that would lead to a reduction of recruitment costs, minimize irregular migration, ensure that migrants are treated equally while abroad and assist with the return and reintegration of migrants.

- The countries in the subregion as well as countries of destination for migrants outside South and South-West Asia should be encouraged to ratify and effectively implement all core international human rights instruments, including the ICRMW. Impediments to the ratification of this important instrument must be addressed. Also necessary are capacity-building and strengthening activities on the scope and content of international human rights standards that protect migrants, with government officials, parliamentarians, national human rights institutions and civil society.

- A large proportion of remittances are transferred through informal channels. To promote the use of formal channels, banking procedures need to be simplified and bank transfers must be more efficient and cost less. In addition, raising the level of financial literacy of migrants as well as of remittance recipients would increase familiarity with banking procedures and reduce obstacles to remit through official channels, and ultimately increase the flow of remittances.

- In many countries of the subregion, investment opportunities and incentives must be made available to migrant workers. Currently, only a small proportion of remittances are used for investment purposes. This percentage could be increased by offering more investment opportunities catering to migrants. These types of remittance flows would ultimately generate long-term income as well as enable the offering of remittance-backed bonds.

- Migration policies in the region should be gender-sensitive, taking into account specific needs of men and women. Women migrants should be placed at the centre of the migration policy instead of being mere spectators to the process. Governments need to shy away from efforts to restrict the migration of women by making
the process burdensome as this approach ultimately encourages irregular forms of migration. Instead, countries of origin and host countries should work together to create a structure that facilitates safe migration and provides skill training to boost the potential of migrant women for upward mobility.

- Governments need to develop migration management policies that protect migrants and enhance their rights. This would include mechanisms that identify people in need of international protection and do not compromise the right of asylum. Additionally, providing protection and services to refugees and stateless persons is an ongoing issue in the subregion. To reduce the number of stateless persons, it is important to advocate for the adoption of appropriate citizenship laws and policies, consistent with international standards.

- The scale of migration is expected to rise as a result of environmental change and the vulnerability of the subregion to natural hazards and disasters. Therefore, governments need coherent policies, legal and institutional frameworks as well as stronger technical and operational capacities to effectively address migration resulting from environmental change and vulnerability. Policy is not a solution in itself but instead its effectiveness must be based on how it catalyzes local communities to become more involved in addressing this critical issue which affects migrants and those who remain.

- In order to improve the health status and utilization of health services by migrants, monitoring variables related to migrant health should be promoted. Governments, in partnership with other stakeholders, must consider their national migration and health context and take the lead in translating these recommendations into policies and legal frameworks that spur the development of migrant-sensitive health systems. Ensuring the continuity and quality of care received by migrants throughout the migration cycle is a recognized priority in South and South-West Asia. Another area of importance in the subregion is building capacity of the health and relevant non-health service sector to address the health and social issues associated with migration.