

**Remarks by Bangladesh Permanent Representative Dr. Abdul Momen,
at the Panel on National Experiences and Regional Cooperation in Migration and
Development**

24 April 2013

It's indeed a pleasure for me to join the distinguished Panel – with John Wilmorth and Marion Barthelemy from UN DESA, Amb. Lacy Swing from IOM, and Udo Janz from UNHCR Liaison Office.

This week, we are in the midst of very stimulating and engaged discussions and reflections on population issues, more focused to migration. On a number of counts, this is apt, timely and strategic.

Let me very quickly reflect on Bangladesh scene.

Bangladesh has a large a population of around 150 million. Having a high density, competition for resources is intense. Yet, over the past four decades, could substantially bring down population growth rate. We are however challenged with rapid – and often uneven – urbanization. Presently, 29% of total population live in urban areas – which, by 2031, would be 46% of total population. That is, almost half of the people would be crowding urban space in less than two decades!

With this scenario, how does migration feature for us?

Currently, Bangladesh has around eight million migrants, across 150+ countries of the world. Around with six and half million are migrant workers, essentially short-term. Notably, the migrant workers are concentrated in the Middle-Eastern countries.

Impact of such a large migrant population on Bangladesh economy has been notable: share of remittances in national income has grown rather fast: in 2001, it was 4% of our GDP. In just a decade, it is now 14% of GDP. For comparison: as against annual exports of around 28 billion dollars, remittances received this year is likely to be around 14 billion dollars. Financials apart, we have seen significant qualitative changes on the lives and livelihoods of people - on empowerment, entrepreneurship, networking. That is why, Bangladesh has declared overseas employment sector as a thrust sector.

Against this backdrop, how can and should regional cooperation on Migration feature ?

In South Asia, most of the countries are primarily countries of origin, who are engaged within the Colombo Process – a regional consultative process on Migration. However, within the political space – South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) – ‘Migration’ in a wider sense is not yet in. Perhaps, viewed as ‘mobility’ and the border, history and other complexities, it is not yet within the political agenda. It might thus be interesting to learn how other regional/sub-regional groupings are working on mobility. Within MERCOSUR, for example, six countries have recently entered into an arrangement for mobility of skilled personnel.

There is another dimension: In spite of constraints, we are seeing some mobility of skilled and semi-skilled personnel. Within South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA), negotiation has begun on Trade in Services. Once the Services Trade comes in the offing, we would see greater mobility within the region. And, the manner in which demography and economies are transforming and wage differentials widening within the region, regional economies integrating and South Asia emerging as a hub within Asia-Pacific, the region is quite likely to see more movement of people within and beyond the region. Against that, the large South Asian countries – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh – are having demographic dividend at the same time, and over next four decades plus.

Issue would be: how can the regional countries and outside partners complement national efforts in tapping benefits out of migration, particularly given that five 5 out of 8 countries in South Asia are LDCs, most of which are climatically vulnerable?

Let me flag a few aspects for consideration:

For some time, discussions on protection agenda has been critical for us. It has advanced much. But, similar thrust is not visible on preparedness and awareness of migrant workers. Also, not on enhancement of skills – both in terms of technical and vocational training as much as for job-oriented education. Job-matching remains another challenge.

Channels of movement or mobility still remains an issue. There, we often see criminalization as well. I shared this morning with the Commission plenary our experience in making the channels orderly, safe, secure still remains a challenge. I mentioned of Code of Conduct as well. Its really

a challenging area. Clearly, private sector just cannot be done away with. Issue is: how do we make them responsible?

Migration is yet not incorporated within the current development planning robustly. Migration or mobility is dealt with by various lime Ministries and authorities; and, quite often, coordination and policy coherence remains a key challenge. This vacuum need to be seriously and urgently looked at.

Utilization or proper channeling of remittances remains challenging. Yes, for bulk of low-skilled, low-paid migrant workers, is likely to end up in consumption back home in families. But, collectively, still a sizable amount could be tapped that can be channeled for productive use. There again, the usual recourse offered is a range of financial instruments like Bonds. I think: we may survey as against the available investment opportunities, which ones the migrant workers prefer? What interesting or innovative ones might attract them more? That way, we may drive a chunk of remittances to truly investible track.

We are perhaps witnessing some early signs of the region opening up to circular migration, for example seasonal farming. Again, informality remains a challenge. It might be interesting for the regional countries to consider possible modest engagement on circular migration through some institutional arrangements.

Finally, South Asian countries have substantial diaspora, spread over almost all corner of the world. On that front, only India has moved to tap the strengths, multifarious partnerships through and of diaspora. For others, approach to diaspora and engagement with them remains a far cry. So far, we are talking of diaspora in terms of remittances, skill transfer, social remittances, etc. It would be useful how countries from other regions – with large diaspora – is engaging with them.

These are few aspects that we may reflect on at this stage.

I thank you!
