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Pakistan Migration Report 2024 Launch Ceremony
Lahore School of Economics, Burki Campus

I would like to begin by congratulating Dr Nasra Shah and her esteemed colleagues at CIMRAD and the Lahore School of Economics on the publication of the Third Pakistan Migration Report. CIMRAD's Migration Reports are invaluable to advancing our understanding of the complex migration situation in Pakistan – an area where scholarly attention does not match its critical importance to Pakistan.

The 2024 Migration Report explores four key aspects. And, for the first time, includes a section on the trends in irregular migration from Pakistan, particularly towards European countries. The Report's insightful analysis underscores a concerning trend: the apparent increase in irregular migration from Pakistan necessitating urgent and targeted interventions to mitigate the risks faced by these vulnerable migrants.

The realities depicted in the Report resonate deeply, as we witness the harrowing images of migrants risking their lives in pursuit of better opportunities. I wholeheartedly echo the Report's call for sustained, focused attention to address the risks faced by irregular migrants and the report's emphasis on the need to delve deeper into the root causes of failed migration, along with the formulation of effective policies to counter these dangerous practices.

Pakistan is one of the top sending countries in the world with regard to labour migration, with an outflow of over 13 million registered labour migrants between 1971 and 2023 through the formal, regular channels.

Irregular migration from Pakistan goes on in parallel, especially in the form of migrant smuggling and trafficking in persons, and associated criminal activities such as money laundering, document fraud, and corruption are of rising policy concern for the Government of Pakistan as well as the governments of receiving countries.

Irregular migration flows from Pakistan have risen over the years, with flows primarily directed to the Gulf and Europe, followed by Southeast Asia and Australia, and to a smaller extent, North America. Over the past decade, Pakistan has been continuously ranked among the top five countries of origin for irregular entries in Europe.

Despite stricter border control, low success rate of their asylum applications and the high risks and costs of the journey, every year, thousands of young Pakistanis, mostly men, enter Europe irregularly to fulfil their dream ...s.

[While an accurate and updated number of irregular migrants from Pakistan is not known at a global scale, some indicators reflect the extent of this activity, such as the number of irregular Pakistanis detected in Europe. Between 2012-14, the number of irregular Pakistani migrants detected irregularly entering the European Union were around 4,600 each year. In terms of irregular arrivals, the flow peaked in 2015 when 43,310 irregular migrants from Pakistan were detected crossing the border irregularly, and since then have declined.

In 2019, before the onset of COVID-19, the number of irregular border crossings by Pakistanis had gone down to 3,799, which further declined to 2,603 in 2020. As per Eurostat data, the number of Pakistanis found to be illegally staying in Europe was at its peak in 2015 with over 70,000 over stayers, which has reduced to just over 20,000 by 2020.

The International Centre of Migration Policy Development contributes to the development of more effective and safer migration policies and programmes. Adopting a holistic approach to migration, ICMPD integrates policy and research, fosters cooperation, conducts community outreach and facilitates capacity development initiatives.

In Pakistan, ICMPD operates three Migrant Resource Centres, in collaboration with key stakeholders such as the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and HRD in Islamabad and Peshawar as well as the Department of Labour in Lahore. These Migrant Resource Centres raise awareness on educational and employment opportunities abroad, while also highlighting the risks of irregular migration. Their awareness campaigns are carefully designed, drawing upon extensive research to identify target audiences, pinpoint information gaps, determine credible messengers and select appropriate communication channels.

The primary objective of these information campaigns is to discourage potential irregular migrants from embarking on dangerous journeys by providing them with essential information. The MRCs outreach efforts over the years have shown that potential migrants often lack accurate and complete information necessary for making well informed migration decisions.

Research conducted by ICMPD to inform targeted information campaigns in six districts of Pakistan - Faisalabad, Gujrat, Gujranwala, Mandi Bahauddin, Jhelum and Sialkot dives deep into the underlying drivers of irregular migration.

These districts, often referred to as the 'migration belt' of Pakistan, have some of the highest legal migration outflows from Pakistan. Of the top 20 sending districts of Pakistan contributing to 50% of Pakistan's labour outflows between 1981- 2021, 13 are in Punjab, six are located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), and one is in Sindh (Karachi). A UNODC study, based on data from the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), indicates that central and south Punjab and the Newly Merged Districts of KP (formerly Federally Administered Tribal Areas - FATA) are the main sources of irregular migrants. This trend persists (as confirmed by an FIA official).

The high irregular migration from these districts to Europe can be attributed to economic, political, and social factors, with each driver dominating in different eras. Initially, economic forces, such as the labour demand in Europe drove migration from districts like Jhelum to the United Kingdom, and Gujrat to Norway in the 1950s and 1960s.

Currently, social connections, combined with economic and political pressures are the primary drivers of migration to Europe. Understanding these dynamic root causes, which build on historical patterns and are shaped by current circumstances, is crucial for devising effective interventions to address irregular migration from these regions. This approach can help avoid reductionist strategies and better deter irregular migration to Europe.

Our research indicates that the primary factors motivating migration are predominantly economic in nature, including challenges such as poor standard of living, limited business development and work opportunities, and financial hardships or debts. Conversely, the main pull factors towards Europe, as perceived by our survey respondents, are availability of jobs, the potential of acquiring citizenship in Europe, availability of investment and business opportunities, and the presence of established social networks such as friends and family. However, it is also common to have migration as an aspiration in and of itself, especially among individuals with lower levels of education and income.

ICMPD's research confirms the general profile of potential irregular migrants identified in previous research studies. These individuals are typically young, unmarried males, engaged in daily wage labour or self-employed, with educational levels ranging from primary to secondary level (five to ten years of formal education), and an average household income of less than PKR 50,000 (EUR 255). Moreover, they are slightly more likely to originate from rural areas than urban areas across the six study sites.

Interestingly, returnees emerge as the primary source of migration-related information among potential irregular migrants, underscoring the importance of leveraging their experiences in shaping migration discourse.

Social networks, both in Pakistan and the country of destination, along with migration agents, play significant roles as facilitators in the migration process. The main reasons for choosing irregular migration are that it is perceived by potential migrants in these districts to be cheaper, more common and a quicker mode of migration to reach Europe – particularly among those with lower levels of education belonging to lower income groups.

Despite their intentions to migrate within the next two years, potential irregular migrants exhibited low levels of preparation, such as obtaining passports or visas, although they demonstrated a high reliance on migration agents as intermediaries.

While potential irregular migrants self-reported limited awareness of the risks associated with migration, their desire to migrate irregularly remains high, indicating that they value migration outcomes more than the risks experienced in the process.

Furthermore, our research suggests that potential irregular migrants may benefit from balanced information approach, which incorporates both negative messaging highlighting risks and positive or neutral content such as legal pathways and domestic employment opportunities. This nuanced approach improves the reception of information by potential migrants. Interestingly, returnees emerge as the primary source of migration-related information among potential irregular migrants underscoring the importance of leveraging their experiences – where possible – in shaping awareness campaigns,

Based on the research findings, ICMPD, through the MRCs, raises awareness about the risks and consequences of irregular migration, the realities of life in Europe for irregular migrants, and safe and legal channels for migration.

Understanding of the risks of irregular migration alone however, is not sufficient to deter potential migrants from adopting these dangerous pathways. To combat irregular migration, migrant smuggling and trafficking in persons, the Government of Pakistan developed national strategies to prevent and suppress these crimes while protecting the rights of victims.

For example, the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), as Pakistan's chief national law enforcement agency, is mandated to prevent and suppress trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling. It is uniquely positioned to combat these phenomena, along with related crimes such as money laundering, document fraud, and corruption. Pakistan also has a robust institutional framework to guide labour migration towards legal pathways, direct remittances through formal channels, and protect migrant rights.

Leveraging knowledge from ICMPD studies, research, expertise and global best practices in migration management, awareness campaigns, and border management, ICMPD collaborates closely with key stakeholders including the FIA, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development and others to enhance migration governance and strengthen the capacity of the authorities working on migration management and border control.

For countries of origin and destination to achieve their migration goals, effective migration partnerships that prioritise regular migration pathways and the protection of migrants rights are essential. Such cooperation, based on mutual interests, continuous engagement, and trust building between countries of origin, transit and destination should be adopted. Securing borders and respecting the human rights of people on the move are not contradictory objectives.

I have briefly outlined some of the findings of the research conducted by ICMPD to determine the root causes of irregular migration in six districts of Punjab and referred to the Migrant Resource Centres efforts to educate and raise awareness about the risks of irregular migration, migrant smuggling and human trafficking. Given the complexity of this issue, it is challenging to cover any aspect in depth within the allocated time.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Dr Nasra Shah and CIMRAD for inviting me to speak today on this important topic. I also wish to acknowledge and appreciate Dr Shah and CIMRAD's significant contributions to migration scholarship – a field of critical importance not just in Pakistan but globally.

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