

State Consultative Meeting on Labour Migration from Bihar

October 12th, 2017

Concept Note



Background

Bihar has long been a prominent sending state of labour migrants in India. However, the trend seems to have sharply risen in the last decade, with about 62% of rural households in the state reporting migration as a major source of livelihood (Datta, 2016)¹. Today, it is estimated that at least 4.5-5 million persons from Bihar work outside the state as migrant labourers (IIPA, 2010). While Bihar has seen considerable economic growth in the past few years, the benefits of such development have excluded the most vulnerable communities that are traditionally found in the agricultural sector of the state. High levels of poverty, coupled with falling agricultural incomes, and a lack of opportunities in the non-farm sectors in the state, has led to an increase in share of migration from vulnerable communities. Major migrant destinations include Delhi, Punjab, Maharashtra, Gujarat, West Bengal, the southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, as well as the neighbouring states of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand (Rodgers et al, 2013).

The narrative around internal labour migration from Bihar is focused on the state's identity as a 'remittance economy'. Migration has largely been viewed as a positive phenomenon for poor rural households to exit out of poverty and caste restrictions (Datta, 2016; Rodgers et al, 2013; Haan, 2010; Deshingkar et al, 2006; Sharma, 1995). This view obscures the diversity that exists in varying forms of labour mobility and differing outcomes across socio-economic groups. 50% of the migrants from Bihar work in short-term, casual and insecure jobs. This group is dominated by vulnerable communities including Muslims and groups from SC, ST and OBC categories (Rodgers et al, 2013). They also belong to economic classes that form the lowest income groups, including landless workers, and agricultural labourers (Datta, 2016). Unlike their upper-caste counterparts that are more likely to be engaged in long term, regular waged work; migrants from poorer groups are engaged in very precarious forms of labour. According to Pushpendra and Jha (n.d.), migration in these cases is more likely to just marginally pull the family out of absolute poverty and provide some degree of freedom from feudal structures in the villages. IIPA stresses that remittances only allow for these groups to achieve subsistence consumption and relief from total starvation. Moreover, structural inequalities they face in rural Bihar are often reproduced in labour markets at destination, placing large limitations on the benefits that accrue from migration (Pushpendra and Jha, n.d.).

The average wages of migrants from Bihar remains low, with very small chances of occupational mobility over the lifetime due to a lack of skills. Due to the compulsion to save and remit money, they live and work in cramped and unhygienic conditions; and face a number of health issues (IIPA, 2010). Hard physical labour and bad living conditions leads to an early exit from the labour market, causing these households to slip back into poverty (Rodgers et al, 2013). The

¹ In the absence of adequate and recent official data on labour migration, the concept note used estimates from the studies conducted by IHD (in 7 sample districts of Bihar) and IIPA (covering a sample of migrants from 6 districts in Bihar, working across 3 destination states), which are most commonly cited in the context of migration from Bihar.

lack of identity documents increases vulnerability to harassment, and lack of access to basic services at destination (IIPA, 2010). Migrant labourers also lack avenues to seek redressal in the case of labour disputes such as the denial or underpayment of wages. Furthermore, child labour, bonded labour and other extreme conditions are commonplace in the Bihar (IIPA, 2010). Back home, women and female relatives are left with the double burden of managing the household. Remittances are largely used to finance subsistence consumption (IIPA, 2010). With high reliance on remittance, low availability of credit, constraints on access to public entitlements, women struggle to cope in the absence of men.

Labour migration is an important factor in the socio-economic and political transformations currently underway in Bihar, and has led to a number of positive changes in its rural areas. While it is well established that migration plays an important role in the state's economic growth, much remains to be done in order to address the precarious nature of labour migration from Bihar. Migration needs well-designed interventions and support. This calls for collaborative efforts between source and destination governments, and other stakeholders such as worker and labour organisations. This will allow migration to realize its potential as a productive livelihood strategy for poor, vulnerable communities.

About the Event

The objective of the consultative meeting is to bring together stakeholders from governments, trade unions, civil society organizations and academia, who are experts in the area to engage in a dialogue on enhancing migration outcomes for vulnerable migrant workers from Bihar. Available evidence on the issue will be presented and experts will be requested to share their views and suggestions on identifying possible strategies to bring incremental changes in the working and living conditions of migrant workers.

More specifically, the consultative meeting will deliberate on the following themes:

- Building a deeper understanding of the issues and challenges, and strategies that can help realize the goal of decent work for this category of informal, often invisible workforce
- Creating an enabling environment for promoting decent work for migrant workers from Bihar to other states and within Bihar
- Designing potential policies, programmes and legislative action to enable their fair recruitment into decent jobs, promote their rights and entitlements as well as ensure decent living and working conditions in destination areas
- Promoting inter-state coordination between sending and receiving states of migrant workers

This consultative meeting is being organized by the Labour Resources Department, Government of Bihar and International Labour Organization (ILO), with Aajeevika Bureau and Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Patna as knowledge partners. This meeting is part of a larger roundtable process that began in Delhi with a vision to organize policy dialogues across prominent migration corridors in the country. The central idea was to engage stakeholders from sending and receiving states to work in tandem for improving conditions of migrant workers.

Expected Outcomes

- Critically analyze the prominent issues that affect the lives of migrant workers from Bihar at both source and destination
- Reflect on the possible short term, medium term and longer term action points that can be adopted to promote the rights of migrant workers within Bihar and at major destinations
- Suggest policy, legislative, programme designing and strengthening measures to enable better outcomes for migrant workers including:
 - Promotion of core labour standards and rights at work pertaining to child labour, forced labour, equality of treatment between local and migrant workers and freedom of association of migrant workers
 - Dignity and decent work at the destination, ensuring income security, social protection, right to entitlements as local workers, portability of entitlements and decent living conditions
- Discuss inter-state coordination with key destination states on promoting decent work for migrant workers including:
 - Roles and responsibilities of the sending state
 - Roles and responsibilities of destination states

Date and Time: October 12, 2017, Thursday. 10.00 AM to 5 PM

Venue: Kautilya Hall, Hotel Maurya, Patna

Participants

- **Organizers – Department of Labour Resources, Govt. of Bihar, ILO** with knowledge partners- Aajeevika Bureau and TISS Patna.
- **Ministry of Labour and Employment, Govt. of India** – Jt. Secretary and DG LW, Mr. Rajit Punhani.
- **Department of Labour Resources, Govt. of Bihar** – Hon'ble Minister of Labour Resources, Mr. Vijay Kumar Sinha; Principal Secretary, Labour, Mr. Deepak Kumar Singh; and Labour Commissioner, Mr. Gopal Meena.
- **Other Government departments** – Social Welfare Department (Principal Secretary, Mr. Atul Prasad and Director, Mr. Sunil Kumar); Panchayati Raj Department (Director, Mr. Kuldeep Narayan); Rural Development Department (Principal Secretary, Mr. Arvind Kumar Chaudhary); Weaker Section Department (IG, Mr. Anil Kishor Yadav)
- **Trade Unions** – Central trade unions such as BMS, HMS, CITU, INTUC, AITUC, AICCTU, TUCC, UTUC, AIUTUC and other workers' organizations
- **Welfare Board for Workers-** Construction Workers Welfare Board and the Unorganized Workers Welfare Board
- **Civil Society Organisations** – Action Aid Bihar, PRAXIS Patna, Pratham Education Foundation and Sri Dorabji Tata Trust Migration Support Programme
- **Academia** – Prof. Pushpendra (TISS) and Prof. DM Diwakar (Former Director and Professor, AN Sinha Institute of Social Sciences)
- **UN Organizations** – UNICEF and UNFPA