

SUMMARY

# The Role of Local Authorities in Central Asia's Migration Governance



With the help of local governments in their countries, migrant workers can reach their socioeconomic goals and reintegrate into society when they return. Photo credit: ADB.

*Local government can enhance the developmental impact of remittances, increase migrants' capacities, and support their communities.*

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## Overview

Migration patterns within and from Central Asia are diverse [1] in terms of socioeconomic composition, length of stay, and purpose. The biggest factors that drive people to migrate are unemployment, low wages, and limited opportunities for improving livelihoods at home. Faced with economic difficulties, they seek job opportunities abroad to support themselves and build financial sustainability for their families.

Traditionally, migration-related policies are set by national governments and international bodies. The role of local authorities in policymaking is often neglected in global dialogues on migration management. Although isolated cases exist of local governments' innovative involvement in migration processes, they are not given the necessary platforms for experience-sharing and knowledge-building.

Based on a review of literature and data and in-depth interviews with field experts from target countries, the paper—*Reviewing Migration and Development: The Role of Local Authorities in Central Asia*—identifies areas where local authorities can have significant impact on migration governance. These include pre-departure orientation of migrants, reintegration services, remittances, diaspora engagement for local development, and the potential of *mahallas*. Mahalla is a collective of resident families in a neighborhood, and has a long history in Central Asia, especially among Uzbek and Tajik ethnicities.

The paper also offers recommendations on how to insert local governments in these areas of migration management to improve the wellbeing of migrants and the sending communities.

This article provides a summary of the paper, which was written with the assistance of Maya Komakhidze, a researcher at the PMC Research Center.

## Leveraging Local Authorities' Potential

Engagement of local authorities remains one of the most underexplored avenues in development-oriented migration management. Mounting evidence shows advantages of local governments in leveraging developmental benefits of migration but the extent of their engagement remains marginal around the world.

The paper focuses on one of the most stable and large-scale migration flows in the world—migration from the southern rim of Central Asia (Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) to the Russian Federation. It also looks into the migration and remittance trends in the region, literature on development implications of labor migration, and policy gaps in migration governance.

Based on the analysis of policy gaps in development-oriented migration management in these countries, the following measures are recommended to facilitate impactful engagement of local authorities in migration governance:

### Predeparture services

Given the scale of labor migration from the southern countries of Central Asia, decentralizing the provision of predeparture services can improve migration management.

Local governments can lead efforts to protect migrants by providing them wider access to quality pre-departure consultation and trainings, where they are briefed on their legal rights and obligations in destination countries and connected with key support services abroad. To ensure the quality and extensiveness of consultations and trainings, it is important to develop a centralized curriculum in collaboration with migrant groups, local authorities, and local and international nongovernmental bodies.

### Reintegration services

Reintegration services remain severely lacking in the sending communities of Central Asian countries.

Even with the presence of government programs, outreach to migrants remains a problem. Migrants' awareness of reintegration programs is limited, underscoring the need for a more decentralized administration of such initiatives.

It is important to actively engage local authorities, including mahallas, in the delivery of these services and provide reintegration packages tailored to regional contexts. Local authorities are uniquely placed to provide reintegration services to returning migrants and facilitate their smooth readjustment to local social and economic settings. Studies show that migrants from Central Asia are predominantly young and their work in the Russian Federation is often their first employment experience. Given the lack of experience engaging with the local labor market, returning migrants struggle to adjust and require additional support from authorities.

### Use of remittances for local development

The effective use of remittances for long-term investment in households and community development remains a challenge for the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. While there are community initiatives spearheaded by mahallas in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which direct communal remittances to public good, these initiatives currently have no official support from local governments. Building on the experiences of other countries receiving large flows of remittances, countries of Central Asia have a good opportunity to introduce 1x1 schemes, in which remittances of migrants are matched by an equal amount of funds from local governments.

Financial literacy trainings for migrant families is also a good intervention for countries with large dependence on remittances because these provide skills on safe and efficient ways of saving and investing money, teach about the management of household budgets, and increase the use of funds for developmental purposes.

### Diaspora engagement

Initiatives of diaspora engagement are often spearheaded by central authorities, but it is important to recognize the relevance of engaging local authorities in this process. Surveys of Central Asian migrants show greater willingness to contribute to the development of their immediate communities. In this case, *mahallas* and other local authorities are better placed to encourage investment and engagement from diasporas. In addition, when centrally administered, such schemes tend to neglect certain regions of a country and as a result, opportunities are not equally available.

The continuous outflow of workers from Central Asia has created large communities of Central Asian nationals abroad. However, diaspora formation is not necessarily an automatic process and requires active facilitation from sending communities. By providing quality predeparture orientation and creating mechanisms of diaspora's engagement with their home communities, local authorities can play an important role in supporting the formation of migrant associations abroad. Evidence from the experiences of other countries shows these associations can be a valuable platform for improving migrants' integration into host communities and facilitating their continued engagement in the local development of their home communities.

*Note: ADB placed on hold its assistance in Afghanistan effective 15 August 2021.*

[1] IOM. 2015b. *Mapping on Irregular Migration in Central Asia 2014*. Astana.

## Resources

EC-UN Joint Migration and Development Initiative. 2010. *From Migration to Development: Lessons Drawn from the Experience of Local Authorities*. Brussels.

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