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# EVIDENCE & INSIGHTS

Economic Series • No. 3



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December 2024

Economic Series No. 3

Published by  
BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD)  
Brac University

Cover and Layout Design  
Md. Abdur Razzaque

Photos  
Cover photo: BRAC

# Socio-Economic Reintegration of Returnee Migrant Workers of Bangladesh

## 1. Rationale of the Study

Migration is a vital livelihood strategy in Bangladesh. According to 2020 data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Bangladesh is the sixth-largest source of migrant workers and the eighth-largest recipient of remittances globally. Migration also contributes to social development and economic empowerment by enhancing social capital, transferring knowledge, skills, and resources, and supporting local projects through remittances and investments (Islam, 2010).

However, a substantial number of Bangladeshi migrants return home annually, particularly those who had migrated to the Middle East and other Asian countries. These migrants typically return after a certain period, with some opting for voluntary repatriation driven by the desire to complete a migration cycle (Dumont, 2005), while others return involuntarily due to factors such as job displacement or difficulties integrating into the host society (Bircan et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this phenomenon, accelerating the rate of return; it is estimated that approximately 466,000 migrants returned during the height of the pandemic between 2021 and 2022 (Siddiqui, 2021).

The reintegration of returnee migrants is a complex process, as they encounter various social and economic obstacles. The IOM reported in 2018 that most returnees had not planned their return; instead, they were compelled to return due to unfavourable circumstances, faced significant difficulties finding employment upon return, and often failed to utilize their saved funds productively. During the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, 70% of returnees struggled to secure employment<sup>1</sup>.

In addition to economic challenges, returnee migrants may experience social isolation and estrangement, especially those who have spent extended periods abroad (Barrett et al., 2013). Adverse living conditions, limited employment opportunities, and a sense of disconnection from Bangladeshi cultural norms can engender significant hardships for returnees (Konzett-Smoliner, 2016; Mensah, 2016). They may also face challenges in re-establishing familial relationships and integrating into social networks (De Bree et al., 2010; Vathi & Duci, 2016).

These diverse socioeconomic challenges necessitate multi-pronged, comprehensive reintegration strategies. Studies by Ruben et al. (2009) and Van Houte & Davids (2008) suggest that reintegration initiatives for returnee migrants may have limited success if they do not adequately address the specific social, psychological, and economic needs of the returnees.

With this in mind, BRAC's Returnee Migrants' Reintegration Project adopted a holistic approach, offering counselling, financial support, and skills training to returnees to facilitate a more sustainable and effective reintegration process. The BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) evaluated the project to measure its impact on the returnees' prospects for remigration, employment, income, and overall well-being.

<sup>1</sup><https://bangladesh.iom.int/news/iom-reports-70-cent-returning-migrants-bangladesh-struggle-find-employment>

## 2. Returnee Migrant's Reintegration Project

The Reintegration Project, funded by the Royal Danish Embassy, was implemented in two distinct phases: an initial two-year period followed by a three-year scale-up phase. The project was carried out in 10 strategic locations with high migration rates, targeting 40 upazilas (sub-districts). It provided direct assistance to approximately 10,000 returning migrants and imparted knowledge on the complexities of safe migration and effective reintegration to a significant cohort of 595,000 individuals.

Upon their return, migrants received immediate assistance, including essential provisions such as sustenance and medical care. The District Reintegration Service Centre (DRSC), established as part of the project, conducted comprehensive assessments of individual needs and offered a range of support services, including training, financial assistance, and counselling. The training covered various skill categories, including basic entrepreneurship, product and service development,

marketing and sales management, financial management of enterprises, and technical skills for trade-based enterprise development. The trainees were also provided with job placement services. Financial support was offered as in-kind assistance based on thorough needs assessments, while counselling support included psychosocial counselling, family counselling, trauma counselling, and medical treatment.

The DRSC also facilitated other social support measures, linking returnees with various safety net initiatives, educational aid, and assistance with document preparation. Other forms of support included medical care and emergency airport assistance. The DRSC played a crucial role in delivering these services, often in collaboration with other public and private entities through formalized memorandums of understanding (MoUs). These combined efforts aimed to help returnees overcome challenges such as social stigma, financial constraints, and cultural barriers.

## 3. Selection Criteria

The BRAC Anuprerona (Phase-2) project initially selected 21,000 returnee migrants with the assistance of 360 volunteers from the project areas. The selection process involved meticulous verification of the returnees' documentation, including their passport, out-pass, National ID, and travel documents. Subsequently, volunteers administered a structured questionnaire to assess the diverse support needs of the migrants in areas such as training, employment opportunities, psychosocial and trauma counselling, medical assistance, in-kind support, and job linkages.

A secondary screening process, conducted by DRSC staff at the district level, scrutinized the socioeconomic conditions of the identified migrants. From the initial pool of 21,000 selected migrants,

10,000 beneficiaries were chosen based on their level of vulnerability. The migrants were then categorized for three types of support according to their specific needs. Those who had acquired skills abroad were selected for training support, while those who had experienced psychological abuse were identified for counselling. Migrants facing the most severe financial hardships were chosen for financial assistance. A small number of individuals received a combination of two or three types of support. The program aimed to support 250 beneficiaries from each of the 40 selected upazilas.

## 4. Evaluation Design

Following the completion of beneficiary selection, a roster of all beneficiaries was compiled and systematically categorized by ward, union, upazila, and district. A ward-level randomized strategy was implemented to assess the impact of the program. Individual randomization was avoided to minimize potential spillovers and enhance the strength and reliability of the impact assessment.

A total of 2,018 wards and 8,370 returnees were enlisted for the study. Approximately two-thirds of the total sample (1,349 wards) were randomly assigned to the treatment group, with the remaining 669 wards assigned to the control group. All selected returnees in the treatment wards received the interventions, while those in the control wards did not. Consequently, the final list of beneficiaries comprised 5,749 individuals from the treatment wards and 2,621 from the control wards.

## 5. Data Collection

The quantitative baseline survey was conducted over the phone between 21 August and 16 September 2021. Out of the 8,370 samples, 5,992 (72%) were available for interviews. The endline survey was conducted 14 months later, from 17 November to 25 December 2022, targeting participants who were interviewed during the baseline survey. The enumerators successfully reached 95.9% of the 5,992 baseline participants; the rest could not be located. The surveys were conducted with the returnee migrants themselves; however, in instances where the returnee migrants were unavailable or had relocated to another country, responses were obtained from the heads of their households.

The evaluation employed a hybrid approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the project's impact. This combined methodology enabled us to capture both impact and contextual insights for a nuanced interpretation of the results.

The qualitative part of the study was conducted in two upazilas, one in Narshingdi and the other in Sirajganj districts. These upazilas were selected after consultation with program officials in these districts. Narshingdi was chosen for its higher prevalence of female migration, allowing exploration of migration and reintegration from a gendered perspective. Sirajganj, on the other hand, was selected for its remoteness, enabling an assessment of the program's effectiveness in addressing spatial challenges.

The qualitative data collection utilized various research tools targeting specific groups associated with the program. These tools included in-depth interviews with returnee migrants and members of migrant households, key informant interviews with key stakeholders, focus group discussions with community members, observations of field settings, document collection, and case studies with selected participants. A process documentation of the project was also conducted under the qualitative component, providing deeper insights into on-the-ground realities.

## 6. Findings

The study examines the effects of BRAC's reintegration support on the social, economic, and psychological well-being of returnee migrants by comparing outcomes between those who received support (the treatment group) and those who did not (the control group). The empirical analysis is organized into five key areas: (a) comparing the outcomes of individuals who received various forms of entrepreneurial and technical skills training; (b) assessing the impact on those who received financial support, especially the most vulnerable and those affected by COVID-19; (c) analyzing the benefits of counselling and referral support, with a focus on financial management, challenges faced abroad, and mental health post-repatriation; (d) examining the combined effects of financial assistance and training programs, referred to as economic reintegration; and (e) evaluating the overall effect of reintegration support across the treatment and control groups. In all cases except the last, the treatment group was compared with relevant control groups, i.e., individuals in the control group identified by the DRSC as eligible for the corresponding services.

### 6.1. Impact of Training Support

The BRAC Migration Programme offered specialized training to returnees who had acquired specific skills during their time abroad and were in a more favourable financial position compared to those selected for financial assistance and counselling.

The training support led to noteworthy improvements in several areas. The average monthly household income of returnees who received training increased by BDT 5,813 compared to control group households, a result significant at the 10% level. Individual earnings among returnees rose by 42.54%, and the unemployment rate decreased by 6.6 percentage points, significant at the 5% level. Additionally, household consumption increased by 13.67%. However, training support did not significantly reduce the intent of returnees

to remigrate, nor did it show statistically significant differences between the treatment and control groups in areas such as family pressure to remigrate, access to housing, education, justice and law enforcement, healthcare, and overall access to opportunities.

### 6.2. Impact of Financial Support

The project provided financial aid to highly vulnerable returnees and those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, aiming to foster sustainable economic reintegration. This support took the form of in-kind assistance, based on a needs assessment and tailored financial plans for each returnee, to help them establish sustainable livelihood opportunities.

The impact of financial support was varied and, at times, counterintuitive. Recipients of financial support experienced an 84.01% decline in income compared to the control group, although this difference was not statistically significant. Similarly, financial support appeared to increase unemployment among recipients by 13.4 percentage points, but this result was also not statistically significant. These counterintuitive findings, albeit not statistically significant, may be attributed to the disadvantaged nature of the recipients and the timing of the support. Since financial support was provided shortly before the endline survey, there was insufficient time to observe its full impact on economic outcomes such as income and employment. Nevertheless, household consumption among financial support recipients grew by 8.68%, and the intent to remigrate among these returnees declined by 78.7 percentage points, a result marginally significant at the 10% level.

### 6.3. Impact of Counselling Support

BRAC Migration Center provided direct psychosocial counselling to returnees and their families. These services focused on helping returnees manage their financial situations, cope with challenges faced

abroad, address mental hardships, gain family and societal acceptance, and build overall support systems. Returnees in this group were slightly better off financially than those in the financial support group.

The impact of counselling support was mixed. No significant differences in household income or employment were observed between the treatment and control groups. However, household consumption increased by 21.47% among the treatment group, the highest among all support categories. Counselling reduced family pressure to remigrate by 15.2 percentage points, significant at the 10% level, and increased awareness of the risks of irregular migration by 15.3 percentage points.

#### **6.4. Impact of Economic Reintegration (Training + Financial Support)**

Economic reintegration, which combined training and financial support, yielded positive outcomes. The average monthly household income of those who received both training and financial in-kind support increased by BDT 6,055.717, significant at the 5% level. Earnings among returnees in the treatment group rose by 36.18%, and unemployment rates decreased by 8.5 percentage points, also significant at the 5% level. Household consumption increased by 13.58%. Although economic reintegration reduced family pressure to remigrate, this effect was not statistically significant.

#### **6.5. Impact of Reintegration Support (Full Sample Analysis)**

The overall impact of the reintegration project on individual income was an increase of 14.68%, although this result was not statistically significant. However, a 4.9 percentage point reduction in unemployment among treatment group returnees was significant at the 10% level. Additionally, a 7.3 percentage point increase was observed in the number of program participants reporting an improvement in their financial status over the past

year, which was statistically significant. Household consumption increased by 14.22%, and remigration rates decreased by 7.8 percentage points, marginally significant at the 10% level.

#### **6.6. Impact of Social Reintegration Support**

Social awareness tools and community leaders played a vital role in supporting migrants. While awareness campaigns received mixed feedback, forum members were instrumental in assisting migrants and addressing cases of migration fraud. Although access to healthcare, justice, and law enforcement services improved for the treatment group, these changes were not statistically significant. The study also did not find any significant improvement in the mental well-being of returnees.

#### **6.7. Impact on Those Returning During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Compared to the program recipients who did not lose their overseas employment during the COVID-19 pandemic, those who did were less inclined to remigrate, especially those who received financial support, and they also experienced a greater reduction in unemployment.

#### **6.8. Safiqur Rahman: A Case of Successful Need-Based Adaptation**

Safiqur Rahman's case exemplifies the challenges faced by returnee migrants and the impact pathway of reintegration programs. Despite initial success in Malaysia, Safiqur encountered unemployment, natural disasters, and injuries, leading to financial hardship and an irregular migration status. His return was further complicated by medical needs resulting from an accident.

BRAC's Migration Programme played a crucial role in Safiqur's reintegration. As training opportunities were initially infeasible due to his health, the program identified a viable alternative—a small shop stocked with in-kind support valued at BDT 75,000. This

intervention addressed Safiqur's limited mobility and provided a source of income. Safiqur demonstrated adaptability by adjusting his inventory based on local market preferences, leading to business growth and self-sufficiency. This case highlights the effectiveness of a responsive program design in facilitating the successful reintegration of returnee migrants.

### **6.9. Md. Mandal: A Case Study of Challenges Faced by Returnee Migrant Entrepreneurs**

The case of Md. Mandal, a returnee migrant, examines the challenges of establishing a business upon returning to Bangladesh. Despite accumulating substantial wealth during his 13-year stay abroad,

financial obligations and mismanagement by relatives left him with limited capital. The Migration Programme played a crucial role in connecting him with loan opportunities offered by Probashi Kallyan Bank (PKB). However, bureaucratic hurdles and delays resulted in a higher interest rate than initially anticipated. Moreover, Mr. Mandal faced challenges such as a lack of training and unexpected livestock deaths. Additionally, limitations on loan amounts due to insufficient collateral restricted the potential for business growth. Mr. Mandal's case highlights the importance of program intervention in facilitating loan applications and the need for long-term support to mitigate risks faced by returnee migrants.

## **7. Conclusion**

Overall, economic reintegration (training + financial support) emerged as the most effective strategy for improving the financial situation of returnee migrants. Counselling primarily addressed psychological issues post-migration but did not have a significant impact on participants' economic situations. Compared to financial or counselling supports, training led to better financial outcomes, as participation in income-generating activities after training increased earnings. These findings suggest that while financial and counselling supports are important, training plays the most crucial role in achieving the program's impact.

It is important to emphasize that the intervention was tailored to individual needs, with recipients selected

based on their specific vulnerabilities. Consequently, our results should not be interpreted as indicating that one type of support is fundamentally better than another. For instance, those who received financial support were generally more economically vulnerable than those who received training or counselling.

However, our analysis clearly indicates that counselling alone has limited impact on economic outcomes. Therefore, combining counselling with training or financial support may yield greater benefits.

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