

What is the benefit of Migration Information Centres?



Migration Information Center in Hikkaduwa Divisional Secretariat.
Photo: Helvetas

SUMMARY

Migration Information Centres (MICs) were established between 2015 - 2016 in several divisions in Galle, Batticaloa and Ampara districts by Helvetas Sri Lanka, ESCO and SWOAD respectively under the Safe Labour Migration project funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) to provide the newly appointed Development Officers Foreign Employment (DO FEs) with a conducive working environment to deliver their services to the migrant workers (MWs) and their families.

As opposed to colleagues in other districts, they were trained in various Safe Labour Migration issues including psychosocial support and case handling. At the same time, they were given a separate space within the Divisional Secretariat as well as office equipment such as computers, information material and a printer.

This Experience Paper is taking stock of experiences of the DO FEs working in these Migration Information Centres (MICs).

CONTEXT AND INTRODUCTION

When the Development Officers Foreign Migration (DO FEs) were recruited in 2012, many of the Divisional Secretariats were not able to provide them with the space and equipment necessary for their work. As the years of 2012 and 2013 were also peak years for female labour migration (SLBFE), many of these DO FEs were not familiar with how to provide quality services to Migrant Workers (MWs) and their families and many were overwhelmed with the magnitude and gravity of the issues they were confronted with. These concerns were also raised by Civil Society organisations, working with MWs. One of the biggest challenges for DO FEs to adequately respond to were family related problems, which arose due to the absence of the mother or the father. Distraught family members would storm into the Divisional Secretariat, yet the DO FEs were unable to receive them in an appropriate set-up and provide them with the necessary services, since they were lacking a private space to listen and talk to those who sought help. At the same time, labour recruitment agencies, were regularly visiting and submitting complaints to the DO FEs. In the framework of the Labour Migration Project Sri Lanka, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) therefore funded the establishment of 3 Migration Information



Migration Information Center in Hikkaduwa
Divisional Secretariat
Photo: Helvetas

Centres at the Divisional Secretariat level in Galle district and 14 centres at the Divisional Secretariat level in Ampara and Batticaloa. (In Batticaloa all Divisional Secretariats have MICs.)

FUNCTIONS AND SET-UP OF MIGRATION INFORMATION CENTRES

The MICs were established to:

- provide counselling services for migrants and their family members in a safe and secure environment promoting privacy,
- provide effective information for migrants and their family members on safe labour migration and display migration related information to increase awareness of people who visit the MICs,
- receive, process, store, retrieve, and disseminate information/material related to migration,
- provide space for DO FEs to coordinate other government and private institutions who provide services for migrants and their families and
- make people aware of welfare services for migrant workers provided by SLBFE.

At the inception of the MICs, the DO FEs were provided with training on Safe Migration (by ILO), legal issues related to labour migration, psychosocial assistance, client handling as well as financial literacy. They were also familiarized with how to reach out to the communities and local civil society. As of recent, the DO FEs in both the Batticaloa and the Ampara MICs, have undergone the 7 day introductory training for DO FEs as well as some introduction to Anti Trafficking.

Current use and experiences

The MICs, which were under review (South and East), on average are receiving between 60 to 100 clients per month, out of which the majority are women. Prospective female MW mostly visit the MIC to acquire the Family Background Report. This is often the start of a conversation about family issues such as guardianship of minors and schooling. These discussions are

then linked to the Family Care Plan that the DOFEs have to prepare. Some DO FEs also use this opportunity to summon the whole family to discuss these issues, provide guidance and if necessary, refer them to the services of other government officials in the Divisional Secretariat such as the Child Rights Promotion Officer and psychological counsellor. The other main issues MWs approach the MICs for, are Safe Labour Migration information, the reporting of complaints by the MWs in the destination country, the acquirement of Government forms, such as application forms for passports. The more knowledgeable DO FEs provide some degree of psychosocial counselling, advise men and women on finance management (how to manage and use the money they earn productively) and some even facilitate returnee migrant workers to secure self-employment opportunities. The DO FEs also follow-up on the Family Care Plans and conduct monitoring visits to homes and schools of migrant worker children to inspect on their education and wellbeing. Apart from migrant workers and their families, civil society organizations and community-based organizations such as Women Rural Development Society, Rural Development Society - Mahila Samithi as well as the Mediation Boards refer migrant worker cases and problems to MICs. This is a common practice in Batticaloa and Ampara districts.

Support and assistance from the other officials including the Divisional Secretary is important for the functioning of MICs. In some divisions the DO FEs reported the Divisional Secretary to be very appreciative of the role of MICs and where necessary providing moral support and guidance to the DOFEs as well providing support for maintenance, stationery, office supplies and covering the cost of the internet. In one instance, the Divisional Secretary has gone to the extent of building a staircase in front of the MIC for Do FEs to easily reach the Divisional Secretary in urgent situations. The DOFEs in MICs are among the few officials who possess a computer in the Divisional

Secretariat. This has enabled them to document cases, maintain a database containing information of registered migrant workers in the division, compile and administer the Family Care Plans and to provide MWs with a number of necessary forms. DOFEs having a separate and private space has encouraged more migrant workers and their family members to open up and discuss difficult issues. This in turn has helped the DOFEs to better understand the issue and to be in a better position to advise families in distress or refer them to other government officials such as the Child Protection Officer. However, even in districts where male migration is high, it is

mostly women who seek the support from of DO FEs, whereas men mostly come to collect forms related to migration.

Challenges

- **Limited Space**

Limited space within the MIC premises appears to be an issue common in all districts MICs, which cater to hundreds of migrant workers and their families every month. Certain MICs lack space for storage of equipment and documents, while a considerable number of MICs lack space to conduct safe labour migration related awareness programmes for migrant workers and their families inside the MIC. Some MICs, complained of having the



DOFEs at work. Photo: Helvetas

space, but not the not necessary privacy to attend to migrant workers in distress.

DOFEs in the Hikkaduwa MIC flagged difficulties in working inside the MIC during the afternoon due to an inappropriate office space. Currently, the DO FEs in Ambalangoda are functioning in a temporary space in the corridor of the Ambalangoda Divisional Secretariat as the building is under construction and the computer of the MIC has been temporary moved to the office of the Divisional Secretary. Not having access to the computer, has affected their daily work and documentation. The Divisional Secretary has however, promised to allocate a permanent space for the MIC upon completion of the construction.

- **Limited logistical support**

While acknowledging the often excellent support provided by the Divisional Secretariat to run the MIC, DO FEs in some MICs in Ampara and Batticaloa note, that the assistance provided in terms of equipment is not sufficient to meet the needs of the MIC.

Around 4 MICs in Ampara do not have access to a photocopier machine and several MICs reported that the stationary provided to them is not adequate. Another issue that was flagged was lack of assistance by the Divisional Secretariat to conduct necessary repairs to the MIC.

- **Disparities among capacities and competences of DOFEs**

As per field level observations made by HELVETAS and partner organizations in the East, there are considerable disparities among the DO FEs serving in MICs with regards to their capacity, level of skills and knowledge, competency and field level experience. In some MICs, the respective DO FEs were observed to be dedicated, competent and would go out of the way to deliver their services making a positive impact on the lives of the migrant worker in their respective divisions. The DOFEs in the Hikkaduwa MIC reported that the training they provide to migrant workers on financial

literacy has helped the migrant workers in managing their remittances and to raise funds of housing and educating their children.

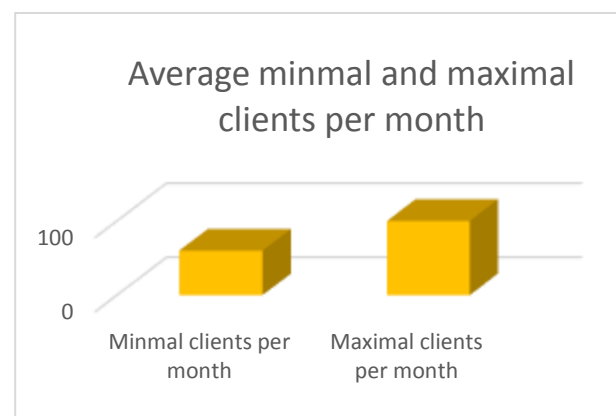
In some MICs that were reviewed, the DO FEs showed little interest in their work and the level of knowledge on labour migration related issues in their areas were limited.

In terms of capacity building received, the DOFEs in Ampara and Batticaloa have been trained on more issues (eg: seven day training as well as anti-trafficking) than the DO FEs in Galle who have only been trained on delivering psychosocial assistance, financial literacy and paralegal services. Several DO FEs in Galle also requested for additional training to develop their knowledge and capacity on the issues to facilitate their service delivery.

MIC and DO FE ratio



Average minimal and maximal clients per month



LESSONS LEARNED

Overall the MICs seem to be a successful model and have greatly enhanced service provision for MWs. The following features were identified as crucial for the success of MICs:

The package matters: Providing DO FEs with separate rooms and infrastructure without giving them the skills and knowledge on delivering their services to MWs, is not going to be successful. Only the combination of skills and the necessary infrastructure, is making the model a success.

Recognition: The establishment of the MIC helps to enhance the recognition of DO FEs and their services with the administration as well as by MWs. The recognition of DO FEs by the respective Divisional Secretary is a crucial aspect for the success of the model

Training and motivation: At the same time, the DO FEs who are working in MICs and who have received repeated as well as multiple trainings seem to be much more motivated and willing to go the extra mile for their clients.

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Migrant workers' day in Galle. Photo: Helvetas

Conclusions and Recommendations

For high-migration areas, the establishment of a Migration Information Centre is highly recommendable. If the establishment of a MIC is foreseen:

- Make sure they receive adequate training and necessary infrastructure
- Make sure the respective Divisional Secretary is committed and supportive
- Make sure to allocate enough physical space to ensure sufficient privacy for discussions with MWs

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