

Community Study on the Needs of Returned Migrants Following the Andaman Sea Crisis



International Organization for Migration
The UN Migration Agency

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IOM Bangladesh

2017



International Organization for Migration
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Contents

- 1. Executive summary 1
- 2. Introduction 7
- 3. Method 11
- 4. Findings 15
 - A. Migrants’ profile 15
 - Age of returned migrants 15
 - Education of migrants 15
 - B. Migration flows 16
 - Intended destination countries 16
 - Country reached and status of returns 19
 - Districts of origin 20
 - C. Experiences of return 23
 - Aspirations and intentions of returned migrants 23
 - Difficulties faced by returned migrants 30
 - Interest in skills training 32
- 5. Case studies 35
- 6. Ways forward 41
- 7. References 48



List of figures

Figure 1: Age group of returned migrants.....	15
Figure 2: Educational background	16
Figure 3: Intended destination of migrants.....	16
Figure 4: Country reached and status of returns	20
Figure 5: District-level concentration of returned migrants	21
Figure 6: Future intentions of returned migrants	23
Figure 7: Intention to migrate again by age	24
Figure 8: Intention to migrate again by level of education	24

List of maps

Map 1: Smuggling and trafficking boat departure points in Cox's Bazar	10
Map 2: Concentration of Bangladeshi migrants involved in the Andaman Sea Crisis by district of origin	22

1. Executive summary

Following the Andaman Sea Crisis of May–June 2015, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Bangladesh conducted a community-based study to understand the push factors influencing migrants to travel through irregular channels and the challenges experienced by migrants upon returning to Bangladesh. The study aimed to build the evidence base regarding the needs of returning migrants to inform the development of more effective migrant reintegration practices.

Since early 2015, IOM has worked with the Government of Bangladesh to assist migrants who had been stranded or detained in Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand during the Andaman Sea Crisis to return home. As of June 2016, this successful collaboration enabled 2,813 survivors, including 183 children, to return voluntarily to Bangladesh in a safe and dignified manner. As many migrants experienced physical and sexual violence and starvation during the crisis, IOM has also provided psychosocial support to around 2,000 migrants upon return. Many, however, continue to suffer from debilitating health conditions that limit their ability to work, many are in debt as a result of their migration experiences, and some are now financially destitute. There is an urgent need for a more comprehensive approach to support the sustainable reintegration of migrants into their home communities following the crisis.

The study draws on a combination of in-depth interviews and analysis of survey data collected by IOM.¹ The survey data is based on a simple questionnaire administered to 2,813 migrants upon return to Bangladesh. It captures demographic data, key features of the migration experience, as well as returning migrants' future intentions and aspirations regarding migration and other livelihood opportunities. To complement the survey findings with qualitative

¹ The questionnaire is available from IOM's office in Dhaka, Bangladesh upon request.

insights about the process of reintegration, in-depth interviews were conducted with 22 migrants in two districts of Bangladesh where the highest numbers of migrants involved in the Andaman Sea Crisis originated (Cox's Bazar and Narsingdi). These additional interviews were conducted around four to six months following their return to Bangladesh. The study concentrates on the experiences of Bangladeshi migrants who were involved in the Andaman Sea Crisis, as this is the group that have been assisted to return to Bangladesh by IOM.

The research has been undertaken to inform new initiatives aimed at supporting the sustainable reintegration for returning migrants, building the resilience of individuals and their home communities, and promoting safe migration pathways.²

Key findings:

- Migrants with little or no formal education constituted the majority of those involved in the Andaman Sea Crisis in May–June 2015. Of those who recorded their education upon return, 63 per cent had either no formal education or incomplete primary school education. Around 4 per cent of migrants had completed secondary school.
- All Bangladeshi migrants assisted to return following the crisis are male.
- Overall, the migrants are young, with over half (67%) under the age of 25 years.
- Almost all, or 99 per cent, of Bangladeshi migrants involved in the crisis were trying to travel to Malaysia. Most migrants interviewed undertook the journey by sea in search of work, and tended to be looking for work in the construction industry.

² For example, the research has informed the development of a new IOM programme, “Building Resilience of Returning Migrants from the Andaman Sea Crisis through Economic Reintegration and Community Empowerment”, funded by the Government of Australia, to be implemented from mid-2016 in four communities: Cox's Bazar, Narsingdi, Shirajgang and Jhenaidha.

- The primary motivation for attempting the journey to Malaysia by boat, as revealed in the interviews, is to search for work that would provide sufficient income for families left behind in Bangladesh. The in-depth interviews suggested that the desired minimum income is around USD 250 per month (around 20,000 taka (Tk)), as indicated by at least three migrants during the discussions.³ Migrants describe making the decision to migrate because they were not able to earn enough money in Bangladesh.
- In the interviews, some migrants describe being inspired by neighbours who had worked overseas and had managed to build nicer, more durable and weather-resistant houses upon return, leading them to believe that if they go overseas, they will also be able to provide this minimum level of comfort for their families.
- Travelling by boat to Malaysia, rather than using a regular and safer migration route, appealed to migrants because it was less costly and did not necessarily require an upfront payment. All of the migrants interviewed, except for one, revealed that when they embarked on their journeys in 2015, they did not have to pay any money upfront to the middlemen, referred to as *dalals*. This is a key factor in their decision to use the irregular maritime route. This is notwithstanding that their families later needed to make costly payments for the journey. Migrants seemed to have chosen the maritime route because it is the one that friends, families and the *dalals* had advised, and because there was no other available option to them that they could readily access or afford.
- Some migrants described being deceived into travelling to Malaysia, explaining how they were told that they would be working in the construction industry once they arrived. While it is unclear how many of the 2,813 survivors experienced human trafficking, 5 of the 22 people interviewed claimed some form

³ This amount was indicated as an approximate amount needed to cover basic living costs by three migrants in separate interviews.

of coercion or deception to encourage them to undertake the journey. Many of the migrants who were interviewed also described initially going voluntarily and then changing their minds once they reached the departure points in Cox's Bazar, but were not allowed to turn back.

- Upon return, migrants are experiencing significant financial hardship as they attempt to reintegrate with family members, re-establish livelihoods and overcome high levels of debt. Some migrants are also under pressure from family members to go abroad again, even though they are still recovering from their recent experiences.
- Debt is the most commonly reported issue that migrants are seeking assistance with following their return. Families of the migrants often sold income-generating assets (such as land, rickshaws, CNGs⁴ and cars) during the crisis to pay the fees sought or extorted by *dalals* during the journey. Returned migrants have experienced serious difficulties re-establishing businesses and incomes reliant on these assets. Families are also using land as collateral for loans following the crisis, risking destitution not only for the individual, but also for the household if the land is taken by creditors.
- Many returned migrants describe wanting assistance to establish their own small businesses. Very few indicated in the interviews that they are interested in being employed by others or undertaking skills training. Low literacy rates contributed to perceptions that training programmes would be difficult. Training, skills programmes or apprenticeships that interfere with or require time away from existing jobs are also not appealing to returned migrants, although some could see the benefits of the training if the conditions were carefully structured.

⁴ A CNG is similar to an auto-rickshaw.

- The financial stress experienced by migrants upon return is motivating many of them to search for ways to migrate again. The survey of all returned migrants suggested at least 24 per cent were considering travelling abroad again when they first returned. The interviews suggested that the proportion of migrants contemplating migration after they had been home for a period of time again is even higher. Of the 22 migrants interviewed, 18 indicated they want to travel abroad in search of work again.
- When returned migrants were specifically asked in the interviews whether they would prefer to travel through regular or irregular routes, almost all indicated that they would prefer regular, legal migration channels if they go abroad again. However, when asked how they would access legal migration channels, most could not describe how they would do this.
- At least 4 of the 22 returned migrants interviewed stated that they would prefer to stay and work in Bangladesh rather than go abroad; however, they do not believe they could establish sufficient sources of livelihoods within their communities.
- At least three of the returned migrants described how they followed media updates about new government-to-government arrangements relating to labour migration, such as new agreements to allow Bangladeshis to work in Malaysia.
- For younger returned migrants, motivations for wanting to migrate again are not only related to incomes, but also because they cannot see a future for themselves in their communities. In this way, the motivations for migration, especially for younger people, include aspirations to travel.

2. Introduction

The Andaman Sea Crisis describes the period between May and June 2015 when international attention focused on thousands of migrants from Bangladesh and Myanmar who were abandoned by their smugglers on ships adrift in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. The crisis was the product of a well-established maritime smuggling route that began on the coasts of Bangladesh and Myanmar, and ran across the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, to Malaysia, often transiting in Thailand. Migrants had been using this dangerous maritime route for a number of years, at least since 2012, either to pursue employment opportunities or to seek asylum. It is estimated that the number of migrants using this route tripled between 2012 and 2014, reaching 63,000 in 2014, with an additional 25,000 migrants travelling in the first quarter of 2015.⁵ In 2015, this maritime route was three times deadlier than Mediterranean routes, with an estimated 815 deaths in the region.⁶

Following the discovery of shallow graves near Thailand's land border with Malaysia in early May 2015, Thai authorities disrupted the existing maritime smuggling networks. The interventions resulted in smugglers abandoning migrants already en route to Thailand by sea. Unable to find safe harbour, around 8,000 migrants were left adrift at sea for many weeks, and many died or went missing during this period. The Bangladeshi migrants involved in the crisis came from all over Bangladesh.⁷ Migrants describe fairly consistent stories of how they

⁵ For background on the crisis, see K. Newland, *Irregular Maritime Migration in the Bay of Bengal: The Challenges of Protection, Management and Cooperation*, Issue in Brief No. 13, IOM and MPI, July 2015, available from http://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/mpi-iom_brief_no_13.pdf

⁶ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Mixed Maritime Movements in South-East Asia in 2015* (UNHCR Regional Office for South-East Asia, 2016). Available from <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20-%20Mixed%20Maritime%20Movements%20in%20South-East%20Asia%20-%202015.pdf>

⁷ Migrants came from at least 57 districts in Bangladesh; see the analysis in the following sections.

came to be involved in the crisis, usually through being introduced to a *dalal* or “middleman” through family members, neighbours or friends who encouraged them to undertake the journey, promising that once they arrived in Malaysia, they would be able to find work that paid between USD 254–891 (around Tk 20,000–70,000) per month. Migrants were also told that they would be taken to Malaysia for no initial cost, but most were aware that they would need to make payments later.

Most migrants first travelled to Cox’s Bazar where they boarded small fishing boats off the coast of Bangladesh and Myanmar where they waited for a number of days until they were transferred onto larger vessels. Personal belongings, such as phones, wallets and money, were confiscated at the outset of the journey. Soon after the boats departed, many migrants reported that their family members received phone calls from the *dalals* demanding payments of around USD 1,800, threatening to kill the migrants if the debts were not paid.⁸ Migrants also reported being deprived of food and water, and some explained that they were beaten. The experiences were described by migrants as extremely frightening during the interviews for this study.

Once it became clear that the smugglers would not be able to land their boats in Thailand due to interventions and increased vigilance from Thai authorities, they abandoned the boats at sea with thousands of migrants on board and without sufficient food or water. Some migrants were on board the boats for many weeks before being rescued by border and coast guards and taken to the nearby countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Myanmar.

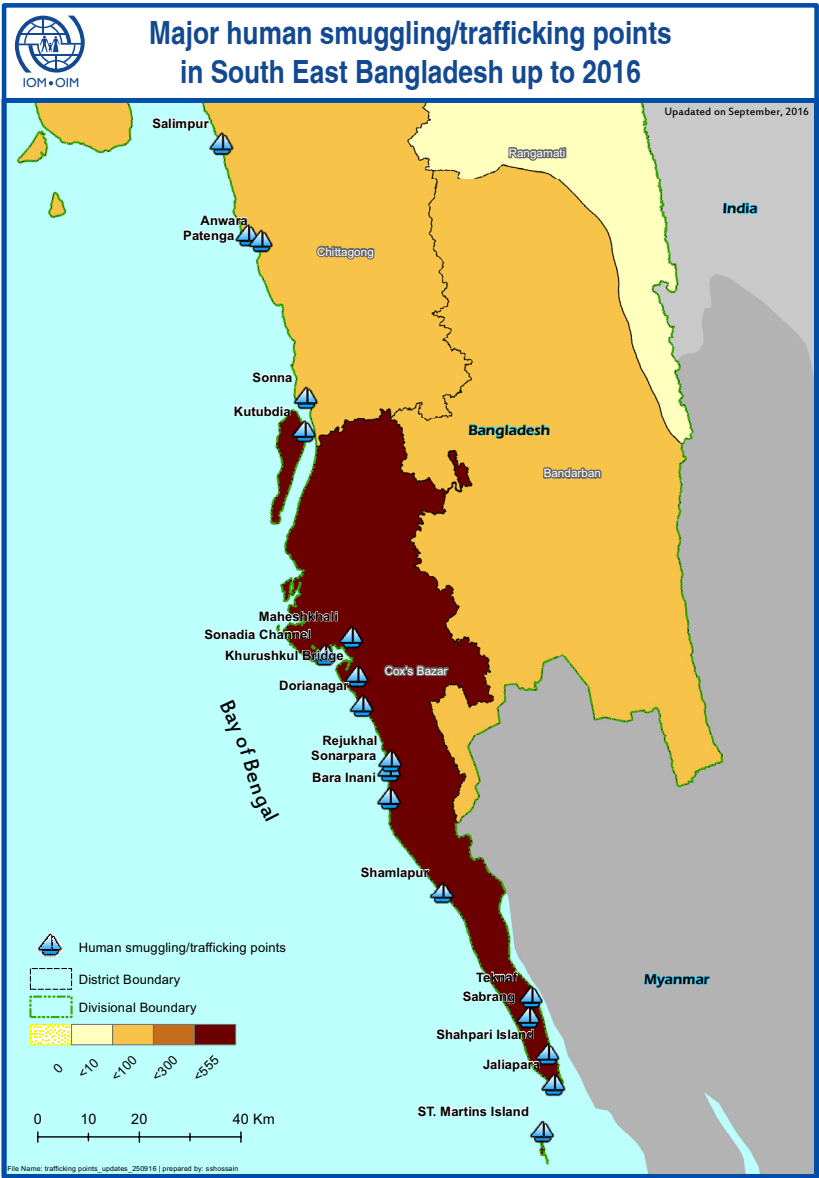
Many migrants spent months waiting in camps in Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and Myanmar before the government-to-government agreements were put in place that allowed IOM to assist them to return to Bangladesh. As of June 2016, 2,813 survivors have returned home, including at least 183 children, but 1,025 stranded migrants

⁸ This cost is estimated based on the interviews conducted. Migrants reported that the amount demanded was anything between USD 127 to USD 2,937, with an average of USD 1,869.

(both Bangladeshis and Myanmar Muslims from Rakhine State and Bangladesh) remain in shelters and immigration detention centres in Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia. IOM continues to provide humanitarian and other assistance, including shelter support, non-food items, health screenings, water, sanitation and hygiene and psychosocial support to these migrants.

Map 1 depicts the boat departure points in Cox's Bazar, according to law enforcement agencies and local civil society groups in Bangladesh.

Map 1: Smuggling and trafficking boat departure points in Cox's Bazar



Source: IOM, 2016.

3. Method

This study combines data from IOM's case management database with in-depth interviews with 22 returnees to Bangladesh involved in the crisis, along with information from IOM's partners to better understand migrants' experiences and needs. The study is small-scale and undertaken to provide broad insights to inform the development of IOM's reintegration programmes in Bangladesh. While the survey captures data from a large number of returned migrants, interviews were undertaken only with a small number of people, thus, the insights conveyed in the study are not representative, although they may reflect wider trends.



IOM staff conducting interviews with families of returned migrants in Cox's Bazar.

The study has involved the following activities:

Analysis of IOM case management database: All migrants involved in the crisis who have returned to Bangladesh through regular channels were assisted jointly by IOM and the Government of Bangladesh. A short questionnaire was administered to all migrants upon arrival to record basic identification and demographic details, capturing data relating to districts of origin, age, education and intentions.⁹

In-depth interviews: To supplement the general data collected in the survey, 22 in-depth interviews with migrants were conducted in early 2016 in the two districts from which the highest numbers of migrants originated (Narsingdi and Cox's Bazar). Nine interviews were conducted in Narsingdi and 13 in Cox's Bazar. Interview participants were identified through local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who have been working with the returned migrants and randomly through the database of migrants collected by IOM. Most interviews were conducted individually with migrants, except for one group interview in Narsingdi, which was conducted jointly with four migrants who had travelled together during the crisis. Some interviews were undertaken at the IOM office in Cox's Bazar, and some were conducted at the households of migrants, which often meant that other family members were present. Migrants were contacted by phone in advance of the interviews to explain the study and arrange a convenient time. Transportation costs were covered for those who travelled to the IOM office in Cox's Bazar.

The interviews were informal and focused on trying to elucidate individual stories, motivations and the immediate needs of migrants. A semi-structured discussion guide was used to guide the interviews to ensure key issues were covered wherever possible and appropriate, depending on the circumstances of the interview.

⁹ The questionnaire is available from IOM's office in Dhaka, Bangladesh upon request. Note that the number of respondents to the survey varies throughout the analysis, as not all migrants answered every question. The varying sample size is noted throughout in the standard format: n = number of respondents.

Participant information sheets, translated into Bangla, were provided to interviewees. Where participants were not able to read, the information sheet was translated verbally. Interview and photo consent forms were also translated and collected. It was made clear to all participants that the interviews were voluntary; they could also participate without answering all questions, and they could stop the interview at any stage. All interview participants were male, aged 16 years to 32 years.¹⁰ For most of the returned migrants, it had been around four to six months since they had returned to Bangladesh when the interviews were conducted.

Additional information: To assist in providing additional context and better understand the process of reintegration, a small number of additional meetings were also undertaken with local grass-roots organizations working with the migrants, including Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program or OKUP in Narsingdi, Young Power in Social Action and HELP NGO in Cox's Bazar. The following sections draw together the different data sources available to present the key insights of the study.

¹⁰ All returned Bangladeshi migrants following the crisis were male. There were some discrepancies relating to the age of migrants that emerged in the interviews. While some migrants had documentation identifying them as over 18 years old, they described their age as younger during the interviews.

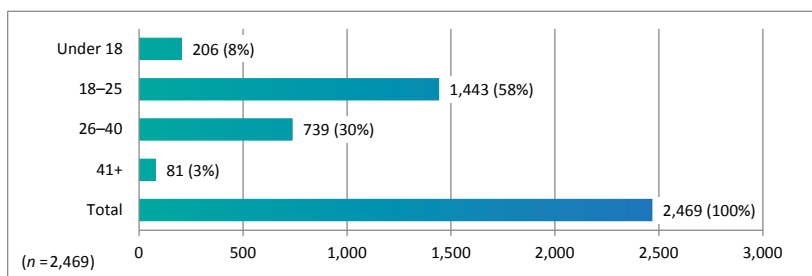
4. Findings

A. Migrants' profile

Age of returned migrants

Overwhelmingly, the migrants involved in the Andaman Sea Crisis were young. Around 8 per cent of migrants were under the age of 18 years. More than half, or 58 per cent, were between 18–25 years of age. Another 30 per cent were 26–40 years old. Only 3 per cent of returned migrants were 41 years or older.

Figure 1: Age group of returned migrants

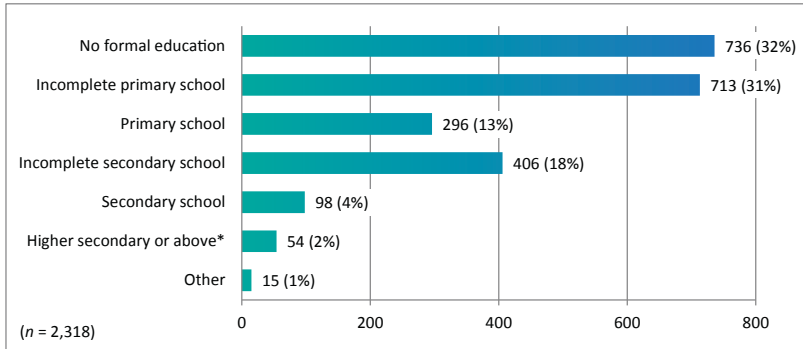


Note: Age was not recorded for 344 returned migrants.

Education of migrants

Bangladeshi migrants involved in the Andaman Sea Crisis predominantly had no or little formal education. Only four people with graduate-level educational qualifications were among those involved in the crisis who returned to Bangladesh. As shown in Figure 2, around two thirds of all migrants had either no formal education or incomplete primary school (32% and 31% respectively). Around 4 per cent had completed secondary school.

Figure 2: Educational background



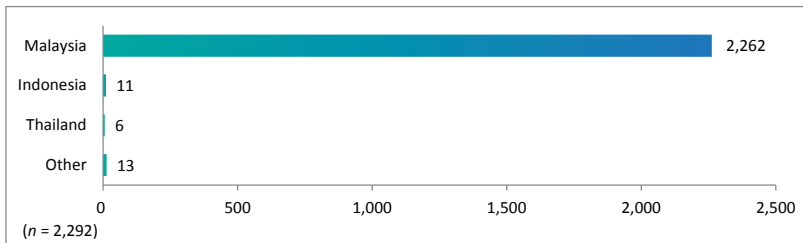
Note: (*) Includes incomplete higher secondary (16), higher secondary (34) and tertiary qualification (4).

B. Migration flows

Intended destination countries

Most Bangladeshi migrants involved in the Andaman Sea Crisis intended to travel to Malaysia. As shown below, of the 2,292 Bangladeshi migrants who recorded their intended destination, 2,262 or 99 per cent intended or thought they were being taken to Malaysia.

Figure 3: Intended destination of migrants



In the interviews, migrants explained how the *dalals* had convinced them to undertake the journey, by promising them that they would be able to earn between USD 254–891 (Tk 20,000 and 70,000) per month in Malaysia. As one 17-year-old migrant from Narsingdi district explained:

The dalal asked me: “What are you doing in Bangladesh?” He offered me Tk 60,000–70,000 per month in Malaysia. I had no job so I went. I paid no money initially. I went to Chittagong with my friends, and the dalal fed us and put us in a hotel for the night. Then we went to Cox’s Bazar.¹¹



A returned migrant in Narsingdi, a district in central Bangladesh, sharing his migration experiences (left). The returned migrant in front of his village home (right).

¹¹ This interview was conducted with the parents of the migrant present.

Migrants explained how they had not been able to earn enough money in Bangladesh to provide for their families and generally needed around USD 250 (around Tk 20,000) per month to cover essential costs, particularly costs relating to health, education and transportation. Many migrants believed they would find work in the construction industry in Malaysia, and some migrants had been told they would find “desk jobs” that paid up to USD 636–700 (Tk 50,000–55,000) per month. One migrant from Cox’s Bazar, aged 42, who had an incomplete primary school education, explained how he had been convinced to go on the journey:

The dalals promised me a desk job where I could earn Tk 50,000–55,000 per month.

Other migrants had similar stories.

I wanted to make my parents happy. They have no money. (19-year-old male, Cox’s Bazar)

I thought if I went overseas, I could bring back money. I have a low income. My in-laws were the middlemen. I got a phone call from them, and I went to Teknaf and stayed in a house. I didn’t know about the risks of the journey. I was tortured from the very beginning. (26-year-old male, Cox’s Bazar)

In the interviews, migrants describe how their neighbours, who had worked overseas, had built nicer, sturdier houses once they returned. As a 22-year-old migrant from Cox’s Bazar explained:

The dalal told me I could pay later. I went because there are no livelihood options in my village. I saw someone go to Malaysia from my village and bring back lots of money. My neighbour convinced me to go.

Comparing his house to his neighbour's house, who had worked overseas, one 28-year-old migrant from Narsingdi stated:

I was hard up for money. I had a tea shop, but I left the tea shop and wasn't working so I thought I would go abroad. I live in a tin shed, not a nice tiled house.

Country reached and status of returns

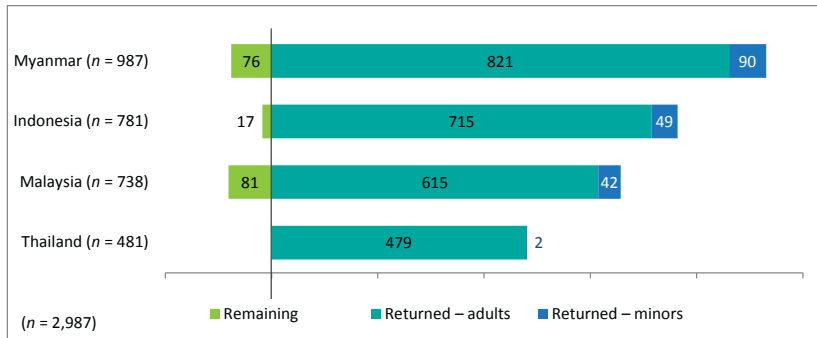
Most migrants did not make it to their intended destinations and were assisted to shore, usually by coast guards, and were then stranded in Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. As shown on Figure 4, 911 people, including 90 children, have returned from Myanmar. Seven hundred and sixty-four (764) people, including 49 minors have been returned from Indonesia. From Malaysia, 657 people, including 42 minors, have returned and 481 people, including 2 minors, have returned from Thailand. A total of 174 Bangladeshis involved in the crisis remain stranded, with 76 people remaining in Myanmar, 81 in Malaysia and 17 in Indonesia.¹²



Two returned migrants in Cox's Bazar, a southern district of Bangladesh, shared their migration experiences with the research team.

¹² These numbers are accurate as of January 2017.

Figure 4: Country reached and status of returns

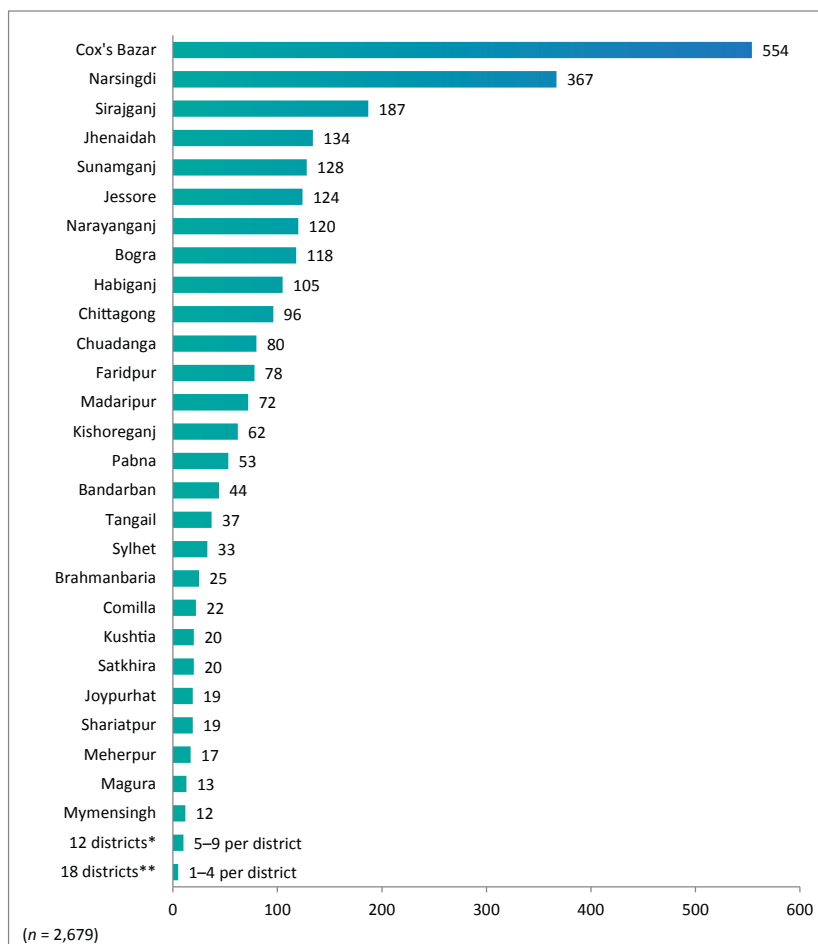


Districts of origin

Migrants involved in the Andaman Sea Crisis were from all over Bangladesh (57 districts were recorded). Cox's Bazar had the highest concentration with 554 persons (around 21%) followed by Narsingdi with 367 persons (around 14%), Sirajganj with 187 persons (7%) and Jhenaidah with 134 persons (5%). The district-wise concentration of the returned migrants is set out in Figure 5.

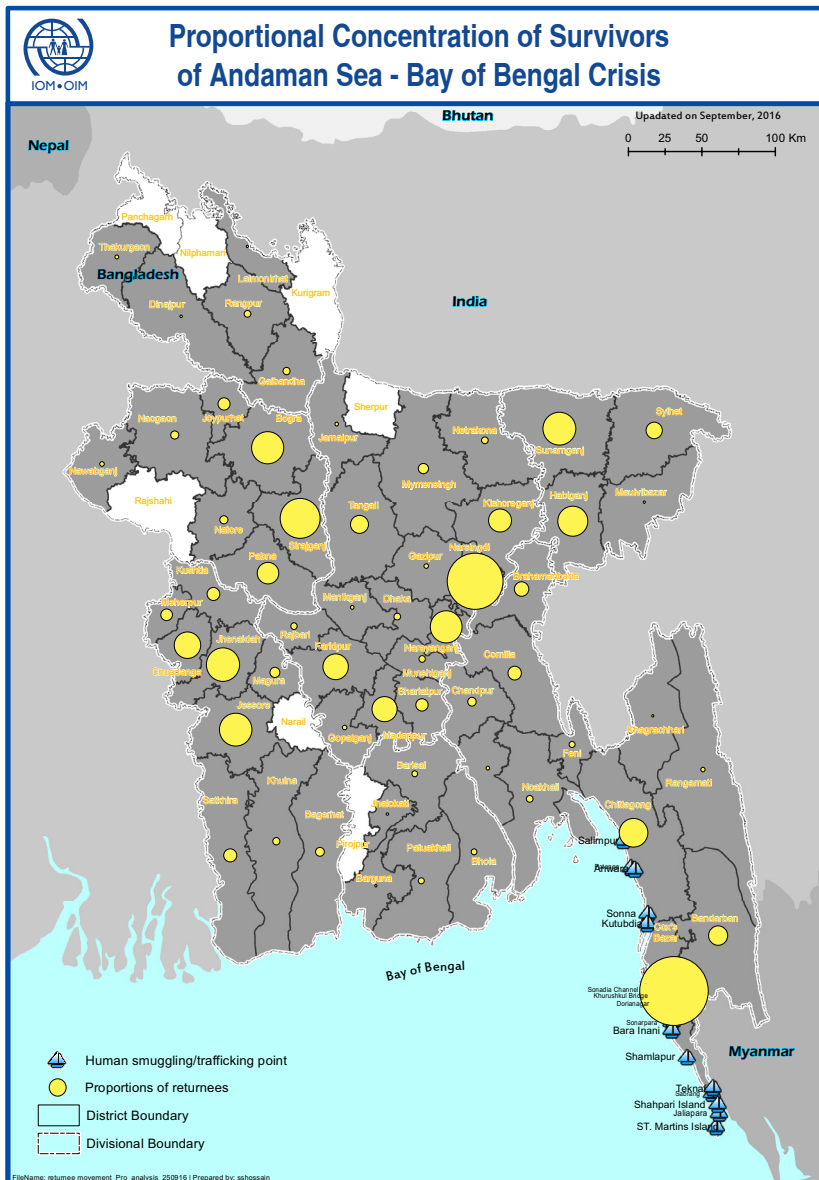
In the interviews conducted in Narsingdi, returned migrants were asked why so many people had come from that district, especially as it was not on the coast. While there were no definitive answers to this question, some migrants explained that it had become popular in their village to go abroad, and that once people saw others going, they also thought it would be a good idea to go. Others said that the *dalal* networks were particularly strong in Narsingdi, and so these middlemen had been able to convince large numbers of people to join the boats to go to Malaysia.

Figure 5: District-level concentration of returned migrants



Notes: (*) Bagerhat (9), Chandpur (9), Naogaon (8), Natore (8), Gaibandha (7), Khulna (7), Dhaka (6), Noakhali (6), Munshiganj (5), Netrokona (5), Rajbari (5), Rangpur (5).
 (**) Bhola (4), Feni (4), Patuakhali (4), Barisal (3), Gazipur (3), Gopalganj (3), Rangamati (3), Chapainawabganj (2), Jamalpur (2), Lakshmipur (2), Manikganj (2), Thakurgaon (2), Borguna (1), Dinajpur (1), Jalokathi (1), Khagrachari (1), Lalmonirhat (1), Moulvibazar (1).

Map 2: Concentration of Bangladeshi migrants involved in the Andaman Sea Crisis by district of origin



Source: IOM, 2016.

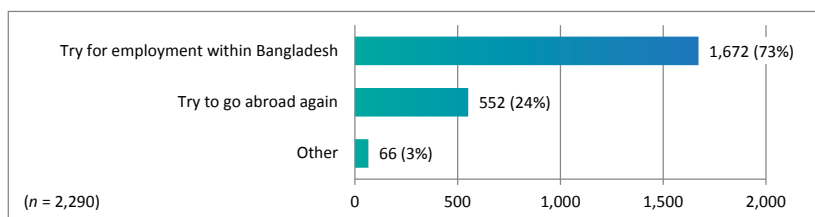
C. Experiences of return

Aspirations and intentions of returned migrants

Understanding the motivations and intentions of returned migrants is particularly important for designing assistance programmes to support migrants, and preventing similar crises from unfolding in the future.

When migrants first returned to Bangladesh, the majority (73%) indicated that they wanted to stay in Bangladesh to find employment following the crisis.

Figure 6: Future intentions of returned migrants

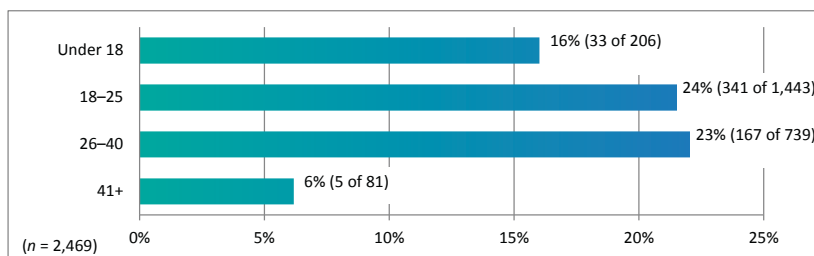


However, a significant minority expressed their interest in travelling abroad again (24%), despite their difficult experiences. The interviews also suggested that the desire to migrate again may be increasing among returned migrants after they have been home for a period of time, and as they encounter ongoing difficulties finding employment and other income-generating opportunities. Of the 22 migrants interviewed, four to six months after return, 18 indicated they want to travel abroad in search of work again.

Younger migrants are more likely to want to migrate again compared with older returned migrants. Interest in migrating again is highest in the age group of 18–25 years, with 24 per cent of migrants in this age group indicating that they want to travel abroad again. Sixteen (16) per cent of returned migrants aged 18 years or younger, and 23 per cent of migrants aged 26–40 years, stated that they want to

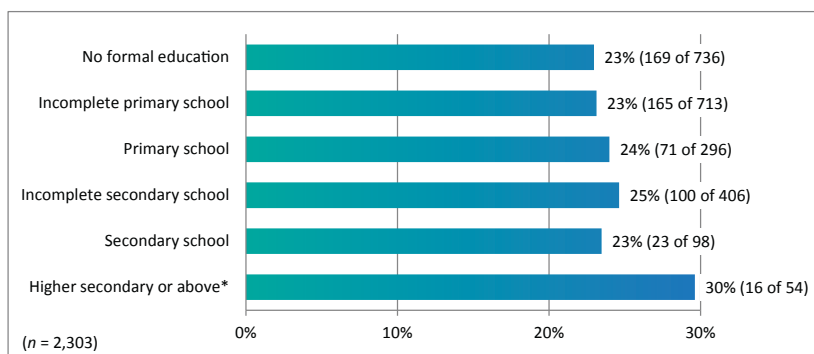
migrate again. Interest in migrating again declined for those over 41 years of age, with only 6 per cent expressing an interest in migrating again.

Figure 7: Intention to migrate again by age



Migrants' intentions and future plans did not vary significantly depending on their level of education, however, a slightly higher proportion of people with higher secondary school education or above was interested in migrating again compared to other groups. Twenty-three (23) per cent of migrants with either no formal education or incomplete primary school education expressed an intention to migrate again in search of work. Similar results were found for migrants with primary school education (24%), incomplete secondary school education (25%), and secondary school education (23%), whereas 30 per cent of migrants with higher secondary school qualifications or above stated that they were interested in travelling abroad again for work.

Figure 8: Intention to migrate again by level of education



The interviews provided insights into the decision-making processes of migrants and the different factors they were balancing. For some migrants, their experiences on the boats were so negative that they did not want to migrate abroad again. As one 35-year-old migrant from Cox's Bazar stated:

I do not want to go overseas again. I will not let my kids go overseas like that.

Many of the migrants interviewed who stated that they are interested in migrating again also explained that they would prefer to stay in Bangladesh and find work, but that since returning, they had not been able to establish sufficient incomes.

A 23-year-old male from Cox's Bazar who could not read or write explained his reasons for wanting to go abroad:

I want to go abroad. As soon as I have money, I will go. Not on the boats. I want to go safely, and now I have a passport. It costs USD 3,195 (around Tk 250,000) to go abroad. I would stay in Bangladesh if I could make more money here, like if I could earn USD 250 (Tk 20,000) per month.

This migrant had secured a passport; however, most migrants interviewed who are planning to go abroad again did not know how to travel through regular migration routes, or how to get a passport and secure a valid visa. As one 18-year-old male from Cox's Bazar said:

I want to go to Saudi Arabia, but I need money. I know people who went to Saudi Arabia, and they have nice houses. Plus, I want to go because of religious similarities. I know that if I have a visa, it is safe, but I don't know how to get a visa.

These comments from migrants also reveal that despite their recent experiences on the boats, many have a very limited understanding of the risks involved in working overseas. Migrants also tended to conflate safe migration with regular or legal migration, assuming that if they are travelling with a passport and visa, then they would have a safer, less risky experience, which is not always the case. Migrants are often exposed to various risks and exploitation in destination countries, even when they travel through regular channels.¹³ When asked about what safe migration constituted, another 35-year-old returned migrant from Cox's Bazar said:

I know that safe migration is when you get a visa, but I don't know the process.

Of the 18 migrants who described that they were contemplating migration again, at least 4 were planning to depart imminently. The other migrants were at varying stages of planning these journeys. Some were again actively trying to re-establish connections with *dalals* whom they thought they could trust to facilitate their journey legally. Of those who knew where they wanted to go, eight migrants wanted to travel to the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Oman and Jordan), two migrants wanted to go to Australia, and one wanted to go to Malaysia. One of the migrants who wanted to go to Australia explained that he is supporting his four children to complete school. As he had not completed primary school education, it is important that his children finish school. He came to know about Australia while he was in the camps in Indonesia following his rescue from the boats during the Andaman Sea Crisis:

¹³ See, for example, IOM, *The Other Migrant Crisis: Protecting Migrant Workers against Exploitation in the Middle East and North Africa* (IOM, Geneva, 2015), available from https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/other_migrant_crisis.pdf

I learned about Australia in Indonesia. I want to go to Australia because in the camps in Indonesia, the people told me about Australia. The middlemen came near to the camps and offered to take me onwards. I don't know anything about the risks of going to Australia.

The same migrant explained how people he know were getting visas to go to Saudi Arabia:

People from my village are going to Saudi Arabia. ... They start on a difficult visa, but then they change. But they think that kind of thing is regular migration. I do not know how to access safe migration routes. I would trust a Union Parishad Information Centre, but I think the Parishad will ask for money. (42-year-old male, Cox's Bazar)

One of the migrants planning to depart imminently was relatively young (18 years old) and appeared to be under considerable pressure from family and friends to attempt the journey to Malaysia again to join his father and brother-in-law in seeking work. The brother-in-law in Malaysia was organizing a Malaysian visa for him and trying to arrange his travel. The young man was adamant he wanted to travel legally through safe regular channels, but described how he had no way of knowing whether the visa he was receiving was legitimate, and he also had no details about what kind of work he would be doing, or the conditions he would be under once he arrived in Malaysia. He also explained that he tried to follow media updates about any new government-to-government arrangements, such as new agreements to allow additional Bangladeshi workers to travel to Malaysia so that he could take up this option.



The river that leads to the sea route of irregular migration from Cox's Bazar to Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Another migrant interviewed who was departing imminently to the Middle East had already organized a passport and visa, which he believed to be legitimate. Obtaining legitimate visas to travel to other countries from Bangladesh is a complicated process, and migrants sometimes receive fraudulent or incorrect visas even when they believe they have followed the correct process. He had requested the local NGO, OKUP, to check and validate his documents. This is a service offered to migrants by OKUP in Narsingdi.¹⁴

¹⁴ OKUP offers a range of community-based migration services and outreach; see <http://okup.org.bd/>

While some migrants had high hopes for their next migration attempt, others were very realistic about the opportunities overseas:

Overseas, I would do anything. I know there are no dream jobs. (23-year-old male, Cox's Bazar)

There is no guarantee that I can earn more abroad, but I want to go. (42-year-old male, Cox's Bazar)



Members of the Border Guard of Bangladesh about to check human trafficking in the state lines.

For those indicating that they would stay in Bangladesh if they could find adequate work, there was a high level of interest in trying to establish small businesses. At least 9 of the 22 migrants interviewed explained that they wanted to start their own business, but needed the capital to do so. For example, some wanted to buy rickshaws (rather than rent them) or expand existing shops to increase business.

One migrant described being so traumatized by the Andaman Sea experience that he would not migrate again under any circumstances. He was instead hoping to establish a business at home with his family, but had so far not been able to accumulate the capital required. Another believed he would earn more in business than in a job working for someone else. He stated:

I think if I stay in Bangladesh and look for a job, I will only earn USD 110 (around Tk 8,000–9,000) per month, but I would earn more if I had my own chemist business shop. (42-year-old male, Cox's Bazar)

Interest in business was both because migrants felt they would have more autonomy and that there was a stronger likelihood of being able to earn sufficient income from business than from standard employment.

Difficulties faced by returned migrants

The most common difficulty described by migrants in the interviews was dealing with financial hardship after returning to Bangladesh. Returned migrants trying to re-establish livelihoods after being away for many months often face high levels of debt upon return. At least 7 of the 22 migrants interviewed appeared extremely distressed about not being able to provide for their families or not being able to service existing debts. One migrant was wearing a bandage around his hand during the interview. When asked what had happened to him, he explained that the money lenders had injured him because he had not been able to repay his loans. This migrant had multiple loans. He explained:

I am facing financial pressure because I cannot pay the loans back. I have loans from three banks, plus loans from other providers totalling USD 2,800 (2 lakh, Tk 20,000). My wife took loans out against my ID card while I was away. (42-year-old male, Cox's Bazar)

Families of the migrants often sold assets (such as rickshaws, CNGs, cars and land) during the crisis to pay the fees sought or extorted by *dalals* during the journey, making it very difficult to restore income once the migrants returned. A young migrant explained how his family sold their land to pay the *dalals* to ensure that he was safe. He explained:

My family sold our house to the middleman, the owner of the ship. Now we have to move out. We are now trying to gather money to buy land. We also sold the CNG we owned. My parents had to pay 3,182 (2 lakh, Tk 50,000) to the dalal to get me back from Thailand. (18-year-old male, Cox's Bazar)

The interviews also revealed how the Andaman Sea Crisis could potentially have a long-lasting psychological impact for those involved. These impacts appeared to be especially severe for those who were physically beaten and abused during the journey, and for those who witnessed the deaths of other migrants. For some, this seemed to have implications for how confident they were about returning to or participating in the workforce. When asked about plans for the future, one migrant explained:

My health is a problem. I am unwell and in pain. I have no job. I was tortured on the ship; I had blood coming from my ear, and it still hurts. (22-year-old male, Cox's Bazar)

Family members of the returned migrants (who were present in the interviews) also appeared to have suffered considerably throughout the process, especially while they waited for their children/relatives to return.

Some migrants were also experiencing ongoing threats from the *dalals* in their communities who convinced them to go abroad. Threats were usually related to unpaid debts or made to prevent returned migrants from making complaints against the *dalals* to the police. When the returned migrants were asked whether they made a complaint to

police against the *dalal* upon return, at least four migrants explained that they had been subject to counter-claims. In these examples, the *dalal* had responded to the complaint by making the counter-claim to police that the victims themselves were the smugglers or traffickers. This meant that in at least four cases, complaints had been stalled through these alleged tactics. Of the migrants interviewed, there was not a single case where police had assisted complainants effectively to bring a charge against the *dalal* who had facilitated the journey. There were, however, two examples of local NGOs assisting returned migrants in negotiations with *dalals* to “write-off” existing debts, which, according to the NGOs, had significantly helped the families of migrants to deal with their financial difficulties. In these examples, the NGOs had approached the *dalals* and placed pressure on them to relieve the families of the debts through a type of mediation.

Interest in skills training

While skills training is a possible way of supporting returned migrants, there was not a high level of interest in undertaking further education and training among the interview participants. There was more interest in receiving small grants to invest in establishing small businesses or entrepreneurial ventures.

Migrants were asked directly during the interviews whether they were interested in undertaking skills training to assist them to find more reliable employment. Some migrants felt that the training programmes would disrupt their existing sources of livelihood, especially if they needed to travel to go to the training or if they were held during the day or when they were otherwise meant to be working. Some migrants indicated that they would not be able to participate in the programmes unless they were able to earn money during this time, such as being paid a wage equivalent to what they would be earning otherwise for the period of the training.

The following quotes from migrants provide an indication of the different perspectives that returned migrants have in relation to skills training. The responses reveal the considerations involved and the ambivalence held by some migrants:

Not sure. I am too old, and I can't read or write. I want to set up a business. (28-year-old male, Narsingdi)

My hands are damaged due to my profession. I want to shift to a new profession, like a local shop owner, or agriculture, but I have no land. (35-year-old male, Cox's Bazar)

No, because I don't have an educational background. I haven't had the opportunity to do a course. I'm not sure. If I want to learn how to fish, I just take another fisherman with me. (22-year-old male, Cox's Bazar)

I want to be a driver with my own car. I also want to learn how to drive a CNG, but I can't afford to buy a CNG. I want to be a driver or go to Saudi Arabia. (18-year-old male, Cox's Bazar)

I would like a microloan with training. (37-year-old male, Cox's Bazar)

Yes, I would like training in construction. (23-year-old male, Cox's Bazar)

I'm not sure. I cannot work hard. I need surgery. Maybe I can have my own business. (26-year-old male, Cox's Bazar)

No, I don't want or need training. I want to have a business and be a shop owner. (22-year-old male, Cox's Bazar)

Not sure. I want a business, but I need capital. (17-year-old male, Narsingdi)

I'm not sure. I want to buy a minibus, but I have no money to buy one. (28-year-old male, Narsingdi)

Maybe. I would do training in driving, construction, or to become an electrician, but only if it doesn't interfere with my current job. (20-year-old male, Narsingdi)

I don't want to pay for training because I want to give the money to my parents for my brother and sister. I am interested in any job that I can physically do. (21-year-old male, Cox's Bazar)

I'm not sure. I want a small business, but I feel like there is no guarantee that I can earn money in Bangladesh. (31-year-old male, Cox's Bazar)

These responses suggest that any skills support/training would need to be accompanied by a well-targeted communications strategy explaining the benefits of training, as well as the potential for job placement following successful completion of the programme. Support for small business development, including grants, financial literacy training and small business development training and support are also other areas to explore further. Ensuring that existing employment is not disrupted by training programmes is critical.

To further convey the range of circumstances facing returned migrants, a series of case studies is presented below based on the interviews. The names of participants have been changed to protect their identities.

5. Case studies

Case study 1

Zahir is a 31-year-old vegetable seller from Ramu Upazila of Cox's Bazar district. He went to Madrasa Primary School until grade 3 and can read and write a little. The Andaman Sea Crisis was not the first time Zahir had migrated in search of work to secure a better future for his family. He first went to Oman in 2012. At the cost of 2 lakh, Tk 80,000 (USD 3,564), he managed to enter Oman on a visa. He believed he was travelling to Oman to become a cleaner, but he was required to work in construction upon arrival instead. The work was very physically intensive in Oman, and he became very unwell. As he was unwell and unfit to work, his employer returned him to Bangladesh in 2014.

During his 18 months in Oman, he managed to send 1 lakh, Tk 50,000 (USD 1,910) to his family, which did not cover the cost of his migration. His unanticipated return to Bangladesh pushed him into debt with a microfinance provider. He continued to fail to earn the minimum level of income required for the survival of his family. In this critical situation, in early 2015, one of his friends told him about a less costly irregular migration route via boat. His friend also said he would accompany him on the journey. The middleman, a migrant in Malaysia, talked with them over the phone, assuring them that they would be able to get jobs and earn Tk 25,000–35,000 (USD 320–380) per month, and that the journey would be safe and only take seven days to get to Malaysia. There were zero pre-departure or investment costs required and no processing time, which were critical factors that led Zahir to make the decision to go abroad again, this time through an irregular maritime route.

Yet, once the journey was underway, the smugglers called his family and demanded they pay 1 lakh, Tk 20,000 (USD 1,527) to secure his freedom and onward journey. To pay these costs, his family mortgaged their own house, as well as his brother's house, placing the family into spiraling debt. Since Zahir has returned, he has tried to recover and settle in Bangladesh. When interviewed in early 2016, he had decided to migrate to Oman again with the help of his neighbour who is currently working in Oman. This time, the visa fee will cost 1 lakh, Tk 60,000 (USD 2,036) according to his neighbour, although it is not clear whether this visa is legitimate. Zahir says that he is very reluctant to go through the regular migration channels because they are so expensive.

Zahir describes his motivation to migrate again as stemming from a lack of livelihood options and assurance that he will get any return on investments in Bangladesh. He also states that it is easier for him to get a loan for the purposes of migration than it is to get a loan to invest in a business locally in the country. Even though he is overburdened with debt, he thinks it is a wiser option to take another loan and attempt another migration rather than stay in Bangladesh and invest in a business. He also believes he will never be able to repay all the loans if he stays in Bangladesh with his existing work, and he is under immense pressure from his wife and family to solve the problem. He believes that going abroad is his last option to integrate himself again into Bangladeshi society by repaying all his debts.

Case study 2

Jahenger is a 23-year-old construction worker in Cox's Bazar. He wants to go to Australia through regular channels, because he thinks he can earn more money there. He doesn't have any idea how to travel through regular channels, but says that he will ask a neighbour for help. When he went away last year, he did not want to go. A man in his village tricked him into going to Malaysia. One day, he was asked to go to work on a construction job, and then when he arrived, he was told that he had been sold. He spent many weeks on the large boats out at sea. The *dalals* called his family and asked for 2 lakh, Tk 30,000 (USD 2,935). His family took out a mortgage on their house to make the payments. He spent time waiting in the camps in Indonesia. When he was working as a construction worker in Bangladesh, he earned around Tk 350 per day (USD 4.50). Things have been much worse for him since he returned, because he is now in debt, and his family took on debt to pay the *dalals*.

Case study 3

Said is a 17-year-old male living in Narsingdi, with an incomplete primary school education. He travelled on the boats last year with four of his friends. They all made the decision to go together because they believed they would earn more money if they went to Malaysia. Said has seven people in his family, and they have a lot of expenses. Even though he had a difficult time on the boats last year, his first choice now is to go abroad again because he will have "a very simple life" if he stays in Bangladesh. He also doesn't believe he will make enough money if he stays and works in Bangladesh. Said does not know how to travel through regular channels, but says that he will find another *dalal* to help him, but one that he

trusts this time. Now, he would only go abroad if he has a job lined up.

Last year when they travelled on the boat, they didn't pay any money upfront, but they were told that they would have to pay around USD 1,500 later. The *dalal* said the he would be able to earn around Tk 60,000–70,000 per month in Malaysia. He was unemployed so he went. First, the *dalal* gave him Tk 1,000 (USD 12.70) to go to Chittagong. The *dalal* fed them all and put them in a hotel for the night. Then he went to Cox's Bazar. There was a second *dalal* there, and they knew each other. They waited 11 days on the boats in Cox's Bazar before they left. The *dalals* took their phones, money, belts, and they beat them. They fed them instant noodles and molasses on the boats. Said knew that things were not right when they got onto the boat, and the *dalals* took their phones, but there was nothing they could do. That's when they started to feel threatened. When they got closer to Thailand, the *dalals* called their families to say that they had to pay. He is now working in Bangladesh, but he only earns Tk 6,000–7,000 per month (USD 76–89). He works in the mills. He wants to start a business, but he needs money.

Case study 4

Mohammad is 21 years old and lives in Cox's Bazar. He has a primary school-level education and can read a little. He wants to go to Saudi Arabia, but he has no idea how to access regular migration channels. He will not go on a boat again. When he went abroad last year, he was not informed of the risks. The *dalal* told him he could pay later. When he went missing, his parents paid Tk 30,000 (USD 383) to the local police to look into the case. Before he left for Malaysia, he was working on a fish farm earning Tk 3,500 per month (USD 44), which was not enough. He wants to help his parents pay for his sister and brother's education. Now he is working in a soap factory and earns Tk 7,000 per month (USD 89). He doesn't want to pay for any training for himself because he wants to give the money to his parents for his brother and sister. He is interested in any job that he is physically capable of doing.

6. Ways forward

There are a number of insights from this small-scale study that can inform the future development of programmes designed to assist returning migrants and prevent them from travelling again through unsafe irregular migration routes, as summarized below.¹⁵

Increasing appeal, accessibility and appropriateness of skills training programmes

Migrants involved in the Andaman Sea Crisis have very low literacy rates, and do not have significant previous experiences of education and training. While the limited skills and qualifications of migrants are critical barriers to finding sustainable work, in the interviews, most migrants indicated that they were not interested in skills training programmes. For some, this was because they felt their low education levels would inhibit their ability to learn and benefit from the programmes.

Low levels of interest in training programmes does not mean investment in skills and training is not useful; however, it does suggest the programmes need to be of a high quality, carefully tailored and that the benefits of the programmes need to be well communicated. Potential strategies include income compensation for the period of the training programme, clearly delineated job placement pathways established at the outset of training programmes and confidence-building and counselling for migrants who have not previously been exposed to training and formal education systems. Other considerations include the need for a variety of different types of training based on specific needs and aptitudes, careful selection and matching of migrants to training programmes and management of migrants' expectations.

¹⁵ These considerations have informed the development of the new IOM programme “Building Resilience of Returning Migrants from the Andaman Sea through Economic Reintegration and Community Empowerment”, funded by the Government of Australia, and implemented from mid-2016 in four communities: Cox’s Bazar, Narsingdi, Shirajgang and Jhenaidha.



With the assistance of the Government of Australia, IOM is now working to reduce irregular migration by sea through raising community awareness in Cox's Bazar, Narsingdi, Naryanganj and Sirajganj district. In the pictures above, community people from Narsingdi district are taking part in an interactive theatre on the unreliability of human smugglers and the dangers of irregular migration by sea.

Providing financial literacy training, debt restructuring and relief

The most immediate need identified by migrants in the interviews is assistance in managing or paying debts. Many migrants emerged from the crisis in greater debt than before they undertook the journey. Migrants did not work for extended periods of time while they were away, and families sold significant assets (such as land, cars, rickshaws and businesses) to secure enough cash to pay middlemen demanding payments for the migrants' onward journeys. Since returning, migrants have also taken out high-interest loans with unmanageable repayments to cover costs. In many of the interviews, debt was first and foremost in the minds of migrants, especially those who had multiple loans and were falling into arrears. The anxiety associated with debt was a major distraction from trying to establish sustainable livelihoods, and instead was leading to risky, desperate decisions, such as another migration attempt through irregular channels.

To ensure migrants are able to focus and commit to skills training and other initiatives designed to facilitate longer term income sustainability, immediate debt-related needs should be assessed and factored into individual migrant plans. Financial literacy training would also assist to ensure migrants are aware of the loan conditions attached to finance, of the different types of loans available, the significance of practices such as compound interest, and ways to avoid predatory loan providers. Assistance in restructuring debts so that lower or no interest is being paid, and even potentially providing debt relief in certain cases, would also be one way of ensuring particularly vulnerable returned migrants are not pushed further into impoverishment.¹⁶ However, restructuring debt so that it is more manageable (lower interest with longer repayment periods and through a reputable provider) is generally preferable to debt relief in most situations. If debt relief is provided, consideration needs to be given to equity within the community and transparent processes need to be followed to assess eligibility, as there is potential to

¹⁶ These possibilities could be investigated in future research, including consideration of the legal and policy implications of assisting migrants to restructure debts stemming from irregular migration.

create negative unintended impacts on community relationships and dynamics.

The advocacy role played by some NGOs to reduce the debts of migrants is also an area to investigate further, to see whether there are forms of assistance that could be increased or extended with additional support.

Promoting safe, regular and orderly migration

The appeal of irregular migration still lies in its ease of access and the lower financial cost of this route of travel, although the migrants interviewed stated that they would prefer to migrate through regular channels if these are available.



Law enforcement officials explain boat departure points in Cox's Bazar district.

A significant proportion of migrants are interested in travelling

abroad again, partly due to the debts they incurred from the previous journey, but do not know how to access regular migration routes. Connecting migrants to local NGOs specializing in safe migration that are able to verify visas, provide migration advice and assistance and connect migrants to Migrant Information Centres is needed.

The interviews also revealed that migrants tend to have many misconceptions about the costs, benefits and risks of migration. Often, the costs of migration through both regular and irregular channels are very high, and it takes many years to break even. A failed migration attempt has the potential to impoverish families further through high levels of debt. Dispelling myths about migration is an important aspect of assisting migrants and their families to make informed choices and invest more time at the outset, ensuring they understand the conditions under which they are travelling abroad and the potential safeguards available to them if they do encounter difficulties.

Physical and mental health

The physical and psychological impacts experienced by returned migrants appeared to be significant during the interviews. Some returned migrants described how their physical and/or mental health was affecting their capacity to take up new employment opportunities, especially work involving manual labour. There are major gaps in terms of medical and allied health assistance available to returned migrants. While these gaps in health care affect the population more generally in Bangladesh, they still need to be considered when planning future migration reintegration support. There is also an ongoing need to provide psychosocial support to migrants upon return, in the form of counselling and assistance to individuals and families, so that the impacts of trauma are better understood and families are provided with resources and ways to try and make sense of the experiences they have endured. This support needs to be coupled with ongoing practical assistance to address households' immediate needs, especially indebtedness, as the distress experienced by returned

migrants appeared to be exacerbated by the financial circumstances they faced upon return.

Capturing more comprehensive migrant data on return and reintegration

A more systematic and longitudinal method is needed to capture detailed socioeconomic data about the circumstances, aspirations and subsequent activities of returning migrants, both at the point of return and later during reintegration, in order to respond to the needs of these individuals and their communities. As increasing numbers of migrants are being returned to Bangladesh, especially from Malaysia, Europe and the Middle East, there is a need for ongoing community-level research to better understand the needs of people contemplating migration and returning from abroad.

The current survey data collected by IOM provides a valuable evidence base; however, more detailed information could be collected at the point of return or at critical points in time following return. Questions relating to motivations for leaving, average incomes prior to leaving and other issues pertaining to financial and social needs are not routinely collected upon return. Currently, it is a challenge to collect this information from returning migrants when they are re-entering the country, as often migrants return in large groups, and there are many distractions and competing priorities at airports or border crossings, which are typically where the survey is undertaken.

If a more systematic data collection approach could be prioritized by development partners and resourced adequately, then more regular, timely interviews and reporting on returned migrants would be possible across the whole cohort of returned migrants. This process would be assisted by linking up the existing IOM database on returned migrants with any newly formed databases of beneficiaries for new assistance programmes, ensuring migrants have a unique identifier across these databases to track individual developments. This would also help to assess the utility of new interventions, such as skills training programmes, and help to identify predictors or factors (such

as attitudes, education and age) that have a bearing on the success of various initiatives for different individuals.

Further research with returned migrants should also include interviews with the family members of migrants, to elucidate the expectations and pressures coming from family and other household considerations. The interviews for this study suggested that these family pressures have a strong bearing on the decisions of returned migrants.

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