



*Mutasim Mubde lead researcher for the USAID Asia CTIP JDR3 research team.*

## Bangladesh-Malaysia Labor Migration Study Allows Young Researchers to Shine

When Mutasim Mubde read that the USAID Asia Counter-Trafficking in Persons (USAID Asia CTIP) project was accepting proposals for a policy research project, he was interested in the topic but assumed he would not be competitive. “Usually, a call for research like this would require 15+ years of experience, backed by a PhD and experience with migration.” However, he was pleasantly surprised to see that the call for proposals was aimed at researchers under age 45.

USAID Asia CTIP, implemented by Winrock International, aims to reduce the trafficking of persons in Asia through coordinated action by governments, civil society, and business. A key focus area is improving the quality of data available on human trafficking.

The economy of Bangladesh is highly dependent on remittances from overseas workers. Currently, an estimated one million migrants from Bangladesh are working in Malaysia. The governments of Malaysia and Bangladesh have established agreements to regulate labor migration since the early 1990s, but exploitation of migrants has persisted. The Malaysian government suspended the agreement in 2018 to investigate allegations of a syndicate operating a human trafficking scheme. USAID Asia CTIP saw an opportunity to inform the negotiations between the two countries by documenting the experiences of migrant laborers, including how they are recruited, their level of knowledge about their rights, how much they pay to migrate, and their labor and living conditions while working in Malaysia. In the fall of 2020, USAID Asia CTIP partnered with Winrock’s John D. Rockefeller 3<sup>RD</sup> Scholars Program (JDR3 Program) to commission a team of researchers representing both countries. The JDR3

Program provides grants for locally led social science research supporting the governance and policy goals of Winrock’s donor-funded projects. In many countries, including Bangladesh, research associated with development projects is conducted by a small cadre of senior researchers or by US or EU experts. To challenge this status quo, the JDR3 model prioritizes researchers under age 45, encourages gender and ethnic diversity within the research team, and provides training on how to produce research results and recommendations that are directly useful to policy makers.

At the time Mr. Mubde, who graduated from Brac University in 2018, was a Senior Research Associate at Economic Research Group. He reached out to his former classmate Ms. Afraim Karim, and together they applied for the \$46,000 research grant along with four research assistants, two in Malaysia and two in Bangladesh. “When we won the bid, we felt it was primarily because of the methodology we had proposed – fresh, confident, and modern,” says Mr. Mubde. “The JDR3 process encouraged us to be creative and come up with new ideas and techniques.” The team’s methodology proved successful in overcoming the challenge of locating and interviewing returned migrant workers, many of whom are understandably wary of speaking about their difficult experiences.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the team planned to survey returned migrants by phone. “Our target number of survey respondents was 600. To reach this number, we had to contact more than 10,000 people,” says Mr. Mubde. One hurdle was that many migrants did not have phones, so they

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simply listed the phone number of their recruiting agent in their migration record. “We did manage to reach 600 migrants who were forthcoming and eager to share their stories with us.”

Thanks to connections facilitated by Winrock, the team was able to present their findings to the Malaysian Ministry of Human Resources and the Ministry of Home Affairs. “I would like to think that the work we did informed the discussion between the governments of both Malaysia and Bangladesh about the challenges of migrant workers,” reflects Mr. Mubde. Bangladesh and Malaysia are in the process of signing a new agreement on migration.

Mr. Mubde, who is pursuing a Masters degree in economics at Simon Frasier University in Canada, says the JDR3 study has shifted his ambitions: “My aspiration is to protect the interests of those who are under-represented. I want to work on behalf of people who never had the option of a better life.”

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## STUDY FINDINGS



MIGRANTS REPORTED PAYING **10 TIMES** THE LEGALLY REQUIRED AMOUNT FOR MIGRATION EXPENSES, ON AVERAGE



**80%** REPORTED EARNING LESS THAN THEY WERE PROMISED



**50%** WERE NOT OFFERED AN EMPLOYMENT CONTRACT BEFORE MIGRATING



**50%** REPORTED NOT HOLDING A WORK VISA FOR MALAYSIA



**72%** REPORTED THAT THEIR PASSPORT WAS HELD BY THEIR EMPLOYER, AND THEY DID NOT HAVE ACCESS TO IT



REPEAT MIGRANTS REPORTED BEING LODGED IN A 162 SQUARE FOOT ROOM WITH 7 OTHERS, ON AVERAGE