



JOHN D. ROCKEFELLER 3RD

SCHOLARS PROGRAM

AT WINROCK INTERNATIONAL

Pursuing a passion for socio-economic development research through the JDR3 Program

By Afraim Karim

In a country like Bangladesh, where development research is still spearheaded by senior or foreign researchers, an economics and social science major who just completed undergraduate does not have much hope of having the opportunity to get involved in research design or leading research projects that lead to impactful outcomes. Since my last year in undergraduate, I have been enthusiastic and curious about development research that could result in positive outcomes for people who are vulnerable and relatively disadvantaged in society.



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The **John D. Rockefeller 3rd (JDR3) Scholars Program** acknowledged this potential enthusiasm for young researchers and offered an opportunity to participate in and design a research study for a cause I deeply felt connected to. The study's goal was to identify any hidden costs that migrants incur during the labor migration process in the Bangladesh-Malaysia corridor. This is a common corridor in Bangladesh, and with the massive amount of labor supply, the absence of any legal agreement between the two countries ends up making the potential migrants more susceptible to exploitation and harm than they already are. The idea of the research was to inform improvements in the current process of labor migration and work on addressing the vulnerabilities of migrants.

I, along with my team, built a concept note that would use quantitative and qualitative evidence to back up recommendations put forward to leaders and policymakers, facilitated by the JDR3 Program. Thinking back to when we were building the concept and framework for the research, I was most keen on making sure that the design would be interactive, and not only about the numbers and data, but resulting in deep conversation with the stakeholders to gain perspective on their personal experiences and derive useful insights throughout.

Although conversations have always happened to make the migration corridor safer for these vulnerable migrant workers, I did not anticipate being able to engage in research that would facilitate the policies to do so. Without evidence, it is always challenging to build robust recommendations for policy advocates and improve the system that was already in place in the past Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Bangladesh and Malaysia on labor migration. Thus, this research was an opportunity to serve as one of the crucial backbones that would enable policy advocates and government representatives to understand the nature of various challenges such as gender equality and social cohesion, with the potential to address the different forms of vulnerability these migrants face on a day-to-day basis, during and after the process of migration.

Our research design also needed to take into consideration that it was peak COVID-19, and to consider such a unique challenge during our design phase had been an opportunity to take a steep learning curve and become more confident and efficient with research designs. Taking into consideration the safety of all stakeholders while still being able to gather the survey data we needed, groomed my understanding and experience. The team conducted these surveys over the phone, through tools such as the KOBO toolbox, and we cleaned and analyzed data using STATA as the statistical software, also adding to the opportunity of improving and utilizing my soft skills.

Another completely new, yet exciting phase of the research was to communicate and engage with the stakeholders who serve as decision-makers for the MoU. While it might have been a challenge to reach them initially, with assistance from the JDR3 Program we managed to build the recommendations of our research based on our conversations with such decision-makers at the bureaucratic level.

When the final report was published with the recommendations we worked on for months, it was a delight to know that this report was circulated to important decision-makers and would be taken into consideration for making better policies. It was encouraging to see our research turn to impact.

Labor migration is a very sensitive yet crucial source of income for the massive labor force in Bangladesh. With the incoming economic recession, this study is important now, more than ever. The JDR3 program has not only successfully encouraged young researchers such as myself to keep pursuing the line of development research, but also, to stay determined whenever unexpected challenges come through. Because at the end of it all, what we are trying to do as researchers is to support the vulnerable using evidence and have an impact in making their lives better!