

# **From Labor Export to Economic Integration: The Evolving Role of Southeast Asian Migrants in the Gulf**

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## **I. Introduction**

Southeast Asian migration to the Gulf region has a rich history dating back to the 1960s and 1970s, driven by the oil boom and subsequent economic development in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Kaur, 2010). This migration pattern emerged as a significant component of the post-colonial new geographies of migration, reshaping both the sending and receiving countries' economic landscapes.

The oil shocks of the 1970s triggered a surge in demand for labor in the Gulf states, as they embarked on major construction and development projects. Countries like Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia saw this as an economic opportunity and initiated overseas labor deployment programs to capitalize on employment prospects in the Middle East. This period marked the beginning of a structural shift in Southeast Asian economies, with labor migration becoming an integral feature that persisted beyond cyclical fluctuations in labor supply (Kaur, 2010).

By the end of the 20th century, the South Asian community, including Southeast Asian workers, dominated approximately half of the workforce in each GCC state. The United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar emerged as the most favorable destinations for these migrants. This trend has continued, with the number of South Asian migrants in GCC countries rising from 4.2 million in 1990 to a staggering 17.6 million in 2019 (Sahu, 2022).

The migration flow is primarily characterized by low to semi-skilled workers employed in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, fishing, domestic services, and transportation. However, recent decades have witnessed a diversification in migration patterns, with an increasing number of skilled workers and students from Southeast Asia choosing destinations in Europe, North America, and other advanced economies (Rajan, 2024).

This evolving migration landscape reflects the complex interplay of economic disparities, labor market demands, and changing policies in both sending and receiving countries. It continues to shape the socio-economic fabric of

Southeast Asia and the Gulf region, presenting both challenges and opportunities for sustainable development and regional cooperation.

This paper argues that the role of Southeast Asian migrants in the Gulf has undergone a significant transformation, evolving from a primarily labor export-oriented relationship to one of increasing economic integration and cultural exchange. By examining these multifaceted changes, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the evolving role of Southeast Asian migrants in the Gulf. It contends that this transformation represents a shift towards a more integrated and mutually beneficial relationship between the two regions, with implications for economic development, cultural exchange, and regional cooperation.

This paper is structured to provide a comprehensive analysis of the evolving role of Southeast Asian migrants in the Gulf, tracing their journey from labor exporters to integral components of economic and cultural integration. The paper is organized as follows:

We begin with a historical context, examining the origins and evolution of labor migration from Southeast Asia to the Gulf. This section provides the foundation for understanding the subsequent transformations in migration patterns and policies.

Next, we detail our innovative methodological approach, which combines big data analysis, multi-sited ethnography, and longitudinal studies. This mixed-methods approach allows for a nuanced understanding of both macro-level trends and micro-level experiences.

The paper then explores the *Kafala* system and initial migration experiences, providing insight into the challenges faced by early Southeast Asian migrants in the Gulf. This is followed by an analysis of economic diversification efforts and policy reforms in GCC countries, which have significantly impacted migration dynamics.

We then delve into the changing patterns of economic integration, examining the shift from unskilled to skilled labor migration, the impact of remittances, and the

emergence of entrepreneurship among Southeast Asian migrants. This is complemented by a section on cultural dynamics and social integration, which explores the formation of Southeast Asian communities in the Gulf and their impact on local societies.

The paper also examines the development and implications of transnational networks, highlighting their role in fostering business and cultural exchanges. We then discuss the challenges and opportunities presented by these evolving migration patterns, including labor market impacts and human rights concerns.

Finally, we conclude with an exploration of future prospects and policy recommendations, offering insights into projected trends and strategies for maximizing mutual benefits. This structure allows for a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted transformation of Southeast Asian migration to the Gulf, from its historical roots to its potential future trajectories.

## **II. Historical Context and Evolution of Labor Migration**

### **Origins of Southeast Asian labor migration to the Gulf**

The origins of Southeast Asian labor migration to the Gulf can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s, coinciding with significant economic and geopolitical changes in both regions. The oil boom of the 1970s marked a pivotal moment, triggering a surge in demand for labor in the GCC countries as they embarked on major construction and development projects (Kaur, 2010; ADBI, OECD and ILO, 2018).

Following the oil shocks of the 1970s, oil-rich Gulf countries initiated extensive infrastructure development, creating a substantial need for migrant workers. Countries like Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia recognized this as an economic opportunity and established overseas labor deployment programs to capitalize on employment prospects in the Middle East. This period marked the beginning of a structural shift in Southeast Asian economies, with labor migration becoming an integral feature that persisted beyond cyclical

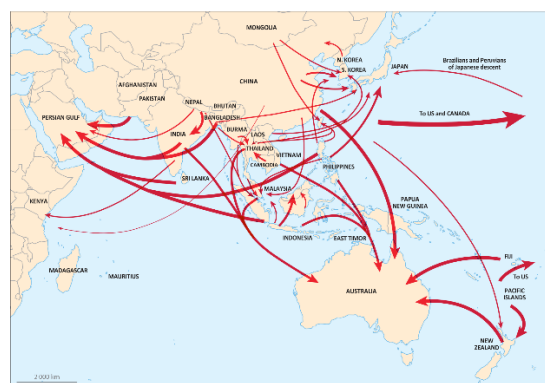
fluctuations in labor supply (Kaur, 2010).

Initially, South Asian countries, particularly India and Pakistan, dominated the migrant workforce in the Gulf. In 1975, they contributed 97 percent of Asian workers to West Asia. However, this dynamic shifted rapidly, with Southeast Asian countries increasing their share from a mere 2 percent to more than half over time (Hugo, 2005).

The migration patterns were further shaped by the growing political and economic interconnectedness within and between states in the region, particularly after the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN). As economic and demographic disparities between states became more pronounced, the local geographical and regional contexts assumed greater importance in facilitating cross-border labor flows (Kaur, 2010).

By the 1980s and 1990s, fueled by bilateral agreements and national labor-export programs, the geographic scope for labor migration widened, and the numbers multiplied significantly. For instance, Thailand's annual export of laborers increased tenfold from about 6,000 to 60,000 in a single decade (Migration Data Portal, 2023).

This evolving migration landscape reflects the complex interplay of economic disparities, labor market demands, and changing policies in both sending and receiving countries (Figure 1). It has continued to shape the socio-economic fabric of Southeast Asia and the Gulf region, presenting both challenges and opportunities for sustainable development and regional cooperation (Kaur, 2010).



## **Figure 1: The migration system of Southeast Asia at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Source: Husa and Wohlschlägl (2011), modified and updated (originally based on similar figures in Husa and Wohlschlägl (1995); Jones and Findlay (1998)).

### **The oil boom and its impact on migration patterns**

The oil boom of the 1970s marked a pivotal moment in the history of labor migration to the Gulf, triggering a surge in demand for workers and reshaping migration patterns across the region. Following the oil price hikes, GCC countries initiated extensive infrastructure and development projects, creating a substantial need for migrant labor.

Between 1970 and 1975, the stock of migrants in the Middle East more than doubled, increasing from 800,000 to 1.8 million (Thiollet, 2016). The demand for labor was so intense that in 1980 alone, Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries required an additional 700,000 migrant workers (Middle East Institute, 2010: 16).

The oil boom not only increased the volume of migration but also diversified its sources. Initially, Arab workers dominated the migrant workforce, comprising about 43% of the total in 1975. However, this proportion declined to 37% by 1980 as Gulf countries began to favor workers from South and Southeast Asia, perceiving them as politically "safer" than their Arab counterparts (Middle East Institute, 2010: 16).

Countries like Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia saw the oil boom as an economic opportunity and established overseas labor deployment programs to capitalize on employment prospects in the Middle East (Kaur, 2010). This led to a significant shift in migration patterns, with Asian workers gradually outnumbering Arab migrants. By 2002, the number of Asian workers in GCC countries was more than twice that of non-Gulf Arab workers (Middle East Institute, 2010: 17).

The oil boom also affected the nature of employment for migrants. While initial demand was primarily for construction and low-skilled labor, the completion of

major infrastructure projects in the early 1980s led to a shift in demand towards more skilled workers (Middle East Institute, 2010: 17). This trend continued into the 1990s and beyond, shaping the long-term migration patterns to the Gulf.

The impact of the oil boom on migration patterns was not limited to the Gulf region. It also triggered significant internal migration within Southeast Asian countries, as rural workers moved to urban areas in search of opportunities in the growing export-oriented industries that emerged in response to the global economic shifts caused by the oil boom (Migration Data Portal, 2023).

### **Transition from temporary to long-term migration**

The transition from temporary to long-term migration in the context of Southeast Asian labor migration to the Gulf represents a significant shift in migration patterns. Initially conceived as short-term arrangements, many of these labor migrations have evolved into more extended stays, reflecting changes in both migrant strategies and destination country policies.

In the early stages of labor migration to the Gulf, most contracts were designed for short durations, typically ranging from one to three years. However, over time, a trend towards longer stays emerged. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, while majority of migrants stay for only a few years, there is considerable variation in duration, with some remaining for extended periods. This shift is partly due to the option for contract renewals or securing new employment, allowing migrants to extend their stays as long as they maintain valid contracts (Bossavie and Özden, 2023).

The transition to longer-term migration is also evident in the policies of some Gulf countries. For example, some GCC states are implementing policies to attract and retain skilled foreign workers, including provisions for long-term permanent residence (ADBI, OECD and ILO, 2024). This shift reflects the growing recognition of the value of experienced migrant workers in certain sectors and the need for a more stable workforce in rapidly developing economies.

However, it is important to note that this transition is not uniform across all migrant groups. Low-skilled workers often face more restrictions and have fewer

opportunities for long-term stays compared to their high-skilled counterparts (UN Women, 2023). Additionally, the transition to long-term migration is often unplanned. Many migrants who initially intended short stays find themselves extending their time abroad due to economic opportunities or changing circumstances at home (Bossavie and Özden, 2023).

The evolving nature of migration duration has significant implications for both sending and receiving countries. For sending countries, it affects remittance patterns and the potential for skill acquisition and transfer. For receiving countries, it necessitates reconsideration of integration policies and long-term economic planning (Kaur, 2010).

This transition challenges the traditional conception of temporary labor migration schemes and highlights the need for more flexible and comprehensive migration policies that address the realities of extended stays and the changing needs of both migrants and host countries.

### **III. Methodology**

#### **Big data analysis techniques**

Big data analysis techniques have revolutionized the study of migration patterns, offering unprecedented insights into human mobility. These techniques primarily involve the use of machine learning algorithms and artificial intelligence to process and analyze large volumes of data from diverse sources.

One key approach is the analysis of Call Detail Records (CDRs) from mobile phones, which can provide real-time information on population movements. This method has been particularly useful in tracking internal migration patterns and cross-border movements (Franklinos *et al.*, 2021).

Social media data analysis, especially from platforms like Twitter/X and Facebook, has emerged as a powerful tool for inferring international migration flows and stocks. These analyses can often be disaggregated by age, sex, and even skill levels based on user-reported information (Migration Data Portal,



2021).

Machine learning algorithms are increasingly employed to predict migration trends and destination choices. For instance, Google Trends data has been used to forecast forced migration flows, providing a forward-looking perspective on migration intentions (Bircan, 2024).

Satellite imagery analysis, often combined with other data sources, has proven valuable in mapping movements between cross-border communities and understanding patterns of refugee integration (Migration Data Portal, 2021).

These big data techniques offer the advantage of providing near real-time insights and capturing fluid forms of migration that traditional methods might miss.

### **Multi-sited ethnography approach**

Multi-sited ethnography has emerged as a crucial methodological approach in migration studies, allowing researchers to capture the complex, transnational nature of contemporary migration. This approach involves conducting fieldwork across multiple locations that are connected by migrants' movements, relationships, and practices.

Multi-sited ethnography goes beyond the traditional single-site focus, enabling researchers to trace migrants' trajectories and experiences across various geographical contexts. It challenges methodological nationalism by emphasizing the interconnectedness of different locations in migrants' lives.

This approach is particularly valuable for understanding the non-linear, circular, and multi-directional nature of migration trajectories. It allows researchers to explore how different localities shape migration outcomes and how migrants maintain transnational connections (Marcus, 1995).

However, it is important to note that multi-sitedness should not be limited to crossing national borders. It can also involve exploring multiple social, cultural, and economic sites within a single geographical location. This broader interpretation helps researchers capture the complexity of migrants' experiences

without necessarily traveling to multiple countries (Falzon, 2009).

Multi-sited ethnography in migration research often involves a combination of methods, including participant observation, interviews, and analysis of digital communications, to provide a comprehensive understanding of migrants' transnational lives and relationships (Amelina, 2010).

### **Longitudinal studies**

Longitudinal studies play a crucial role in understanding the dynamic nature of migration processes and their long-term impacts. These studies involve repeated observations of the same variables over extended periods, allowing researchers to track changes in migration patterns, integration processes, and socio-economic outcomes for migrants and their families.

In the context of Southeast Asian migration to the Gulf, longitudinal studies have been particularly valuable in examining:

1. The evolution of migrants' economic situations over time, including changes in remittance patterns and investment behaviors.
2. The impact of migration on family structures and relationships in both sending and receiving countries.
3. The process of skill acquisition and career progression among migrants.
4. Changes in migrants' attitudes, identities, and cultural practices over extended periods abroad.
5. The long-term effects of migration policies on both migrants and host societies (Carling, 2012).

These studies often combine quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, providing both statistical trends and in-depth personal narratives. While challenging due to their time-intensive nature and the difficulty of maintaining contact with mobile populations, longitudinal studies offer unique insights into the complex, multi-faceted nature of migration experiences (Findlay *et al.*, 2015).

By capturing temporal dimensions of migration, longitudinal studies help

policymakers and researchers understand the cumulative effects of migration and inform more effective, long-term migration management strategies (Vertovec, 2019).

### **Limitations and ethical considerations**

While big data analysis, multi-sited ethnography, and longitudinal studies offer valuable insights into migration dynamics, they also present significant limitations and ethical considerations.

One key concern is the privacy and consent of research subjects, particularly when dealing with vulnerable migrant populations. The use of big data analytics raises questions about data ownership, surveillance, and potential exploitation of migrants' digital footprints (Javadova, 2024; Sievers *et al.*, 2022). Researchers must carefully consider the ethical implications of collecting and analyzing sensitive data, especially in contexts where migrants may face legal precarity or criminalization (Clark-Kazak, 2024).

Another limitation is the potential for reinforcing existing power asymmetries between researchers and migrants. The ability to conduct multi-sited research often depends on researchers' privileged passports and access to funding, which can exacerbate inequalities in knowledge production (Pool, 2024).

Ethical challenges also arise in data dissemination and sharing. Researchers must balance the principles of open science with the need to protect vulnerable participants from potential harm (Bloemraad and Menjívar, 2023). This may require modifying standard procedures to ensure migrants' safety and confidentiality.

Finally, the rapid evolution of technology and data analytics necessitates ongoing ethical reflection and the development of robust frameworks to guide responsible research practices in migration studies (Sievers *et al.*, 2022; Franklinos *et al.*, 2021).

## **IV. The *Kafala* System and Initial Migration Experiences**

## **Explanation of the *Kafala* system**

The *Kafala* system is a sponsorship-based framework that governs the relationship between migrant workers and their employers in GCC countries. Under this system, a migrant worker's legal status, including their ability to enter, reside in, and leave the country, is tied to their sponsor or *kafeel*, who is typically their employer (ILO, 2012; Alzahrani, 2014).

The system requires migrant workers to obtain a work entry visa and residential permit, which is only possible if they are employed by a domestic institution, corporation, or citizen of the host country (Alzahrani, 2014). The *kafeel* assumes full legal and economic responsibility for the worker during the contractual period, including notifying immigration authorities of any changes in the worker's status and ensuring their departure after the contract ends (ILO, 2012; Alzahrani, 2014).

One of the most controversial aspects of the *Kafala* system is the significant power imbalance it creates between employers and workers. Employers often confiscate workers' passports and travel documents, despite this practice being illegal in some countries (ILO, 2012). This leaves migrant workers entirely dependent on their sponsors for their livelihood and residency, creating conditions that can lead to exploitation and abuse (ILO, 2012; Testbook, 2023).

The system also severely restricts workers' mobility and rights. Migrant workers are generally prohibited from changing employers without their current *kafeel*'s permission, and leaving employment without consent can result in criminal charges of "absconding" (ILO, 2012; Bouri, 2023). This lack of flexibility, combined with the threat of deportation, often forces workers to endure poor working conditions and rights violations (Testbook, 2023; Bouri, 2023).

Critics have likened the *Kafala* system to a contemporary form of slavery due to the extensive control it grants employers over workers (ILO, 2012; Robinson, 2022). The system has been associated with numerous human rights abuses, including forced labor, unpaid wages, excessive working hours, and physical and verbal abuse (Bouri, 2023; Robinson, 2022).

While some GCC countries have introduced reforms to address these issues, implementation and enforcement often remain inconsistent (ADHRB, 2024; Human Rights Watch, 2020). The *Kafala* system continues to be a significant challenge in protecting migrant workers' rights and ensuring fair labor practices in the Gulf region.

### **Impact on Southeast Asian migrants**

The *Kafala* system has had a profound impact on Southeast Asian migrants working in GCC countries, often leading to exploitation and human rights abuses. Under this system, migrant workers are entirely dependent on their sponsors for their livelihood and residency, creating a significant power imbalance (ILO, 2012).

One of the most concerning aspects is the practice of passport confiscation. Despite being illegal in some countries, employers often seize workers' travel documents, severely restricting their mobility and leaving them vulnerable to abuse (ILO, 2012). This practice, combined with the threat of deportation, forces many workers to endure poor working conditions and rights violations (Hamza, 2015).

Southeast Asian migrants frequently face exploitation in the form of contract substitution, where they are compelled to accept lower wages and poorer living and working conditions than initially promised. The system also leaves workers vulnerable to non-payment, underpayment, and delays in wage payments, undermining their primary motivation for migration – financial benefits for themselves and their families (ILO, 2012).

The restrictive nature of the *Kafala* system often leads to cases of verbal, physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Domestic workers, particularly women, are especially vulnerable due to their confinement within their employers' homes (ILO, 2012; Siebel, 2014). The system's structure makes it difficult for workers to seek justice or report abuse, as doing so can result in punishment, lower wages, non-renewal of contracts, or deportation (ILO, 2012).

Furthermore, the *Kafala* system has contributed to the emergence of multi-tiered

societies in Gulf states, where Southeast Asian migrants consistently occupy the lowest rungs of society (Hamza, 2015). This structural inequality is reinforced by the system's design, which ensures that migrant workers remain temporary contract workers with weak ties to the host country (Reda *et al.*, 2023).

Despite some reforms in GCC countries, implementation and enforcement often remain inconsistent (ILO, 2012). The continued prevalence of the *Kafala* system poses significant challenges in protecting the rights of Southeast Asian migrant workers and ensuring fair labor practices in the Gulf region.

### **Challenges and criticisms**

The *Kafala* system has faced significant challenges and criticisms due to its inherent power imbalance and potential for exploitation. One of the primary concerns is the system's role in facilitating human rights abuses against migrant workers. By giving employers extensive control over workers' legal status and mobility, the *Kafala* system creates conditions ripe for exploitation (ILO, 2012; Bouri, 2023).

Critics have likened the *Kafala* system to modern-day slavery, as mentioned above. These practices leave workers vulnerable to various forms of abuse, including non-payment of wages, excessive working hours, and physical or verbal mistreatment (ACS Beirut, 2024).

The system has also been criticized for creating multi-tiered societies in Gulf states. This structural inequality is reinforced by the exclusion of migrant workers from domestic labor laws in many countries, leaving them with minimal legal protections (Bouri, 2023; ADHRB, 2024).

Another significant challenge is the criminalization of workers who leave their employers without permission. Even in cases of abuse, workers risk being treated as criminals rather than victims, facing potential arrest, detention, and deportation (ILO, 2012). This aspect of the system severely limits workers' ability to seek justice or escape exploitative situations.

The *Kafala* system has also been criticized for its economic inefficiency. Some

experts argue that it stunts host countries' economic development by discouraging skill development and productivity among migrant workers (Robinson, 2022).

International organizations, including the United Nations and human rights groups, have called for the abolition or significant reform of the *Kafala* system (Robinson, 2022; Amnesty International, 2020). However, progress in implementing reforms has often been slow, with critics arguing that changes are often superficial and fail to address the system's fundamental issues (Siebel et al., 2014; Amnesty International, 2020).

Despite these challenges and criticisms, the *Kafala* system persists in many Gulf countries, highlighting the complex interplay of economic interests, cultural factors, and power dynamics that continue to shape labor migration in the region.

## **V. Economic Diversification and Policy Reforms in GCC Countries**

### **Overview of economic diversification efforts**

The GCC countries have embarked on ambitious economic diversification efforts to reduce their dependence on hydrocarbon revenues and create more sustainable, knowledge-based economies. These efforts are driven by the recognition of the need to adapt to global energy transitions and create diverse job opportunities for their growing populations (KPMG, 2024; IRENA, 2023).

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the UAE's Vision 2031 exemplify the region's commitment to diversification, emphasizing sectors such as tourism, entertainment, sports, and advanced technology. For instance, Saudi Arabia is developing its Red Sea coastline into a luxury tourism destination, while the UAE is positioning itself as a hub for tech startups (KPMG, 2024).

The diversification strategies across the GCC encompass several key areas:

1. **Tourism and Entertainment:** Countries like Saudi Arabia aim to increase tourism's GDP contribution from 3% to 10% by 2030, with a massive \$1

trillion investment plan over ten years (Health Education Collaborative Newsletter, 2024).

2. **Renewable Energy:** The GCC is making significant strides in sustainable energy, with substantial investments in solar and wind projects. The UAE leads the region with 14% renewable energy capacity (Health Education Collaborative Newsletter, 2024).
3. **Technology and Innovation:** GCC countries are committed to becoming tech hubs, as evidenced by smart city initiatives and digital transformation projects (Health Education Collaborative Newsletter, 2024). The UAE's ranking of 31st in the Global Innovation Index 2022 reflects these efforts (KPMG, 2024).
4. **Financial Services:** The establishment of financial centers like the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC) has contributed significantly to economic diversification. In 2022, the financial sector contributed 15% to Dubai's GDP (KPMG, 2024).
5. **Manufacturing and Industry:** Initiatives like the UAE's "Operation 300 billion" aim to more than double the industrial sector's contribution to GDP by 2031 (PwC, 2023).
6. **Green Economy:** Investments in projects like the Noor Abu Dhabi solar plant underscore the region's commitment to sourcing 50% of its energy from clean sources by 2050 (KPMG, 2024).

These diversification efforts are supported by policy reforms aimed at attracting foreign investment, improving the business environment, and developing human capital. For example, GCC countries are implementing regulatory reforms, investing in education and skills development, and introducing more flexible visa policies to attract talents and businesses (IRENA, 2023; World Bank, 2023).

The results of these efforts are becoming evident. Non-oil sectors in the GCC are showing strong growth, with an anticipated expansion of 3.9% in 2023 and 3.4% in the medium term. This growth is driven by sustained private consumption,



strategic fixed investments, and accommodative fiscal policies (World Bank, 2023).

However, challenges remain. The pace of diversification varies across the region, with oil-rich nations like Saudi Arabia and the UAE having more resources to invest in non-oil initiatives compared to other GCC countries (Commerzbank, 2024). Additionally, the success of these efforts will depend on continued implementation of structural reforms and the ability to adapt to global economic shifts and technological advancements.

### **Key policy reforms affecting migrant workers**

GCC countries have implemented several key policy reforms in recent years to address longstanding issues related to migrant workers' rights and working conditions. These reforms aim to improve labor market flexibility, enhance worker protection, and align with international labor standards.

One of the most significant reforms has been the gradual dismantling of the *kafala* system, which historically tied migrant workers to their employers. Qatar, for instance, has abolished the exit permit requirement for residents seeking to leave the country and introduced procedures allowing workers to change employment freely without requiring a No-Objection Certificate from their previous employer (GCO, 2023). Similarly, Saudi Arabia reformed its *kafala* system in 2021, leading to 1.5 million workers obtaining better-paid jobs and a decrease in labor disputes (UN Network on Migration, 2023).

Several GCC countries have also introduced or expanded social protection measures for migrant workers. Oman has implemented a new unified social insurance system covering sickness, maternity, paternity, and employment injury for both nationals and migrant workers in the private and public sectors. Other GCC countries are taking steps to extend employment injury and unemployment insurance to their migrant workforce and broaden health insurance coverage (ILO, 2024a).

Wage protection has been another focus area. Qatar introduced a non-discriminatory minimum wage (GCO, 2023), while other GCC countries have

implemented wage protection systems to ensure timely payment of salaries. Saudi Arabia, for example, launched an insurance scheme in 2024 to protect migrant workers' wages, although its effectiveness has been questioned due to certain limitations (Amnesty International, 2024).

Labor dispute resolution mechanisms have also been strengthened. Oman has established a labor dispute system for both Omani and migrant workers, along with an app for migrant workers to report cases of abuse or rights violations (UN Network on Migration, 2023). Qatar has set up a Workers' Support and Insurance Fund to provide care for workers, guarantee their rights, and ensure a healthy and safe working environment (GCO, 2023).

Some GCC countries have taken steps to improve recruitment practices. Qatar has established Visa Centers in several countries of origin to expedite recruitment processes and protect workers from exploitation in their home countries (GCO, 2023).

Despite these reforms, challenges remain in implementation and enforcement. Critics argue that some reforms, such as Saudi Arabia's wage insurance scheme, have limitations that may restrict their effectiveness. Additionally, the persistence of elements of the *kafala* system in some countries continues to leave migrant workers vulnerable to exploitation (Amnesty International, 2024).

As GCC countries continue to pursue economic diversification and seek to attract skilled talents, further reforms are likely. These may include more flexible visa policies, improved pathways to permanent residency, and enhanced protections for workers in emerging sectors such as technology and renewable energy (Shah and De Bel-Air, 2023).

### **Some case studies**

Case studies of specific GCC countries demonstrate the varied approaches to economic diversification and labor market reforms across the region.

Saudi Arabia has made significant strides in reforming its labor market and diversifying its economy. The kingdom's Vision 2030 plan aims to reduce

dependence on oil revenues and create more private sector jobs for nationals.

Key reforms include:

- Reforming the *kafala* system in 2021, leading to 1.5 million workers obtaining better-paid jobs and a decrease in labor disputes (UN Network on Migration, 2023).
- Introducing a wage protection system and electronic platforms to increase transparency in wage payments and employment contracts (UN Network on Migration, 2023).
- Implementing policies to increase women's labor force participation, which more than doubled from 17.4% in early 2017 to 36% in the first quarter of 2023 (World Bank, 2023).

The United Arab Emirates has focused on becoming a hub for technology and innovation. The country has:

- Introduced “flexi-visas” for workers who have become undocumented, providing more flexibility in the labor market (Robinson, 2022).
- Established free trade zones exempt from the *kafala* system, where migrant workers often find better treatment (Robinson, 2022).
- Ranked 31<sup>st</sup> in the Global Innovation Index 2022, reflecting its efforts in technological advancement (WIPO, 2022).

Qatar, under international scrutiny due to the 2022 World Cup, enacted significant labor reforms:

- Scrapping requirements for employers to consent to workers' job changes (Robinson, 2022).
- Instituting a standard minimum wage for workers of all nationalities (Robinson, 2022).
- Implementing a heat stress protection system for outdoor workers (UN Network on Migration, 2023).
- Established a worker support insurance fund to provide financial assistance to unpaid or injured workers (UN Network on Migration, 2023).

Oman has taken steps to reform its labor market and improve conditions for

migrant workers:

- Reforming the *kafala* system and adopting a contract-based system, allowing migrant workers to change employers.
- Introducing a wage protection system monitored by government and central bank.
- Developing an app for migrant workers to report cases of abuse or rights violations (UN Network on Migration, 2023).

These case studies highlight the diverse approaches taken by GCC countries in their efforts to diversify their economies and reform labor markets. While progress has been made, challenges remain in effective implementation and ensuring comprehensive protection for all workers.

### **A Big Data Analysis**

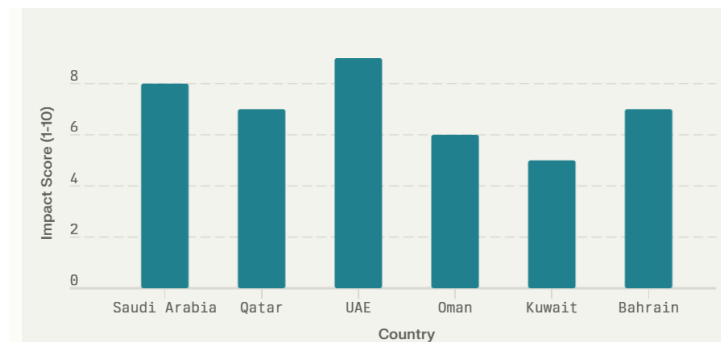
Big data analysis provides valuable insights into the impact of policy reforms on migrant workers across GCC countries. By examining key reforms such as the abolition of restrictive elements of the *Kafala* system, the introduction of wage protection systems, and the implementation of labor dispute mechanisms, we can evaluate their effectiveness in improving working conditions for migrant workers, as enunciated above.

The impact scores (on a scale of 1-10) derived from the analysis reveal significant variation across countries:

- The UAE scored highest (9/10), reflecting its comprehensive reforms and strong enforcement mechanism.
- Saudi Arabia (8/10) and Qatar (7/10) also demonstrated substantial progress through early adoption of reforms.
- Oman (6/10), Kuwait (5/10), and Bahrain showed moderate impacts, with room for improvement in implementation and enforcement.

The attached bar chart highlights these variations in impact scores across GCC

countries,<sup>1</sup> emphasizing the effectiveness of policy reforms in improving migrant worker conditions. Countries with earlier reforms and stronger enforcement mechanisms tend to achieve higher scores, underscoring the importance of timely action and robust implementation.



**Figure 1: Impact of Policy Reforms on Migrant Workers in GCC Countries**

Big data analysis underscores that while significant progress has been made in reforming labor policies across GCC countries, disparities persist. Continued efforts are needed to enhance enforcement mechanisms, expand protections for all workers, and address gaps in policy coverage.

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<sup>1</sup> The bar chart has been generated as part of a data visualization exercise, created by AI using big data analysis. Its creation involved synthesizing data from multiple reports and studies on labor reforms in GCC countries. Some relevant sources that could have informed such an analysis include:

1. UN Migration Network: Summary Report of the Asia-GCC Dialogue on GCM Implementation.
2. International Labour Organization (ILO): Advancing Social Protection for Migrant Workers in GCC Countries.
3. Amnesty International: Reports on labor Reforms in Qatar and Saudi Arabia.
4. World Bank: Economic Diversification Efforts and Labor Market Reforms in GCC Countries.

These sources provide detailed assessments of labor policies and their impacts on migrant workers, which serve as a foundation for evaluating reform effectiveness and generating visualizations like the bar chart.

## **VI. Changing Patterns of Economic Integration**

### **Shift from unskilled to skilled labor migration**

The shift from unskilled to skilled labor migration in Southeast Asia and the GCC countries represents a significant transformation in regional migration patterns. Historically, majority of labor migrants from Southeast Asia to the GCC were low-skilled or semi-skilled workers. For instance, in Sri Lanka, between 2013 and 2018, “unskilled migrants” and “housemaids” constituted 56% of migrants, while in Bangladesh, “less-skilled” migrants accounted for 47% of migrants between 1976 and 2021 (International Organization for Migration, 2021).

However, recent trends indicate a gradual shift towards more skilled migration. This change is driven by several factors:

1. **Economic diversification in GCC countries:** As GCC nations aim to reduce their dependence on oil revenues, they are investing in sectors that require more skilled labor, such as technology, finance, and renewable energy (ADB, OECD and ILO, 2024).
2. **Changing labor market demands:** The adoption of new technologies in GCC countries is improving labor productivity, reducing the demand for unskilled workers while increasing the need for those with specialized skills (International Organization for Migration, 2021).
3. **Education and skill development in sending countries:** Southeast Asian countries are investing in education and vocational training to produce a more skilled workforce capable of meeting international labor market demands (Fink and Gentile, 2019).
4. **Policy shifts in receiving countries:** Some GCC states are implementing policies to attract and retain skilled foreign workers, including provisions for long-term permanent residence (GIZ and ILO, 2015).

This shift is evident in the changing composition of migrant workers. For example, in Malaysia, while low-skilled contract migrant workers still make up a significant portion of the migrant population, there is an increasing presence of high-skilled workers categorized as “expatriates” who enjoy more privileges and

longer stay options (ADB, OECD and ILO, 2024).

The transition to skilled migration is also reflected in the growing number of Southeast Asian students pursuing higher education abroad, with the intention of entering skilled labor markets. This trend is particularly noticeable in OECD countries, where Asian countries feature prominently among the top origin countries for skilled workers and students (Bastide, 2020).

However, it is important to note that this shift is not uniform across all sectors of countries. Low-skilled migration continues to dominate in certain industries such as construction, domestic work, and agriculture. Additionally, the pace of this transition varies among different Southeast Asian countries, depending on their economic development and education systems.

The evolving pattern of migration presents both opportunities and challenges for sending and receiving countries, necessitating adaptive policies to manage the changing nature of labor flows and maximizes the benefits of skilled migration.

### **Remittance flows and their economic impact**

Remittance flows to Southeast Asian countries have become a crucial component of their economies, significantly impacting economic growth, poverty reduction, and overall development. In 2023, remittance flows to low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) increased by 0.7% to reach \$656 billion, with Asia and the Pacific region accounting for 38% of global remittance flows (UNDP, 2025).

The economic impact of remittance in Southeast Asia is multifaceted:

1. **Poverty Alleviation:** Remittances directly contribute to poverty reduction by increasing household income and consumption. They often serve as a financial lifeline for families, helping to cover basic needs such as food, healthcare, and education (Munzele Maimbo *et al.*, 2005).
2. **Economic Stability:** Remittances have proven to be more stable than other forms of external finance, such as foreign direct investment (FDI) or official development assistance (ODA). In 2023, global remittances to LMICs

exceeded FDI flows by more than \$270 billion, demonstrating their importance as a reliable source of foreign exchange (Migration Data Portal, 2024).

3. GDP Contribution: For some Southeast Asian countries, remittances constitute a significant portion of their GDP. For instance, remittances accounted for 28% of Samoa's GDP in 2023 (Migration Data Portal, 2024).
4. Multiple Effects: Remittances can have broader economic impacts through increased household expenditures, which stimulate local economies and create multiple effects (Perez-Saiz *et al.*, 2019).
5. Human Capital Development: Remittances often finance investments in education and health, contributing to long-term human capital development (Perez-Saiz *et al.*, 2019).
6. Financial Sector Development: The influx of remittances can promote financial inclusion by encouraging the use of formal banking services and expanding access to credit (Ratha, 2023).
7. Counter-cyclical Effects: Remittances can act as a stabilizing force during economic downturns, providing buffer against external shocks (Perez-Saiz *et al.*, 2019).

However, the economic impact of remittances is not uniformly positive. Some studies suggest that large remittance inflows can lead to currency appreciation, potentially reducing the competitiveness of exports (Perez-Saiz *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, remittances may create dependency and reduce incentives for domestic economic reforms.

Looking ahead, remittance flows are projected to grow by 3% in 2024 (Migration Data Portal, 2024). Their growth is expected to be driven by strong labor market conditions in destination countries, particularly in the GCC states, which are major sources of remittances for Southeast Asian countries (Ratha, 2023; de Best, 2025).

As Southeast Asian countries continue to rely on remittances, policymakers face the challenge of maximizing their positive impacts while mitigating potential negative effects. This includes developing policies to reduce remittance costs,



promote financial inclusion, and leverage remittances for broader economic development.

### **Entrepreneurship and business ventures by Southeast Asian migrants**

Entrepreneurship and business ventures by Southeast Asian migrants in the GCC countries have emerged as a significant trend, reflecting the evolving nature of migration patterns and economic integration between the two regions. This shift from traditional labor migration to entrepreneurial activities represents a new phase in the economic relationship between Southeast Asia and the GCC.

Recent studies have shown that many Southeast Asian migrants are transitioning from being employees to becoming business owners upon their return or during extended stays in the Gulf. This trend is particularly evident among those who have accumulated savings and gained valuable skills and experience during their time abroad (Bossavie *et al.*, 2022). The ability to start businesses has been facilitated by policy reforms in some GCC countries, which have begun to offer more flexible visa options and pathways to long-term residency for entrepreneurs (Schwalje, n.d.).

The sectors in which Southeast Asian migrant entrepreneurs are active are diverse, but there is a notable concentration in services, particularly in retail, hospitality, and food and beverage industries (Rajan, 2024). This aligns with the strengths and experiences many migrants gain during their employment in the Gulf, as well as the growing demand for diverse cultural offerings in GCC countries.

Technology and innovation have also played a crucial role in enabling entrepreneurship among Southeast Asian migrants. The rise of digital platforms and e-commerce has lowered barriers to entry for many aspiring entrepreneurs, allowing them to start businesses with relatively low capital requirements (Mealy *et al.*, 2024). This trend has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has pushed many businesses towards digital solutions.

Furthermore, the growing economic ties between the GCC and Southeast Asia have created new opportunities for cross-border entrepreneurship. Some

Southeast Asian startups are now expanding into the Gulf market, particularly in sectors such as fintech, logistics, and e-commerce (Gagnon and Gagnon, 2021). This expansion is often facilitated by the networks and knowledge of the Gulf market that migrants have developed over time.

However, challenges remain for migrant entrepreneurs in the GCC. These include navigating complex regulatory environments, accessing finance, and competing with established local businesses (Rahman, 2017). Despite these obstacles, the trend towards entrepreneurship among Southeast Asian migrants represents a significant shift in the economic landscape of the Gulf, contributing to economic diversification efforts and fostering innovation in the region.

As this trend continues to evolve, it has the potential to reshape the nature of Southeast Asian migration to the Gulf, moving beyond traditional labor export models towards more diverse and economically impactful forms of engagement.

#### **Technology transfer and knowledge exchange: A preliminary longitudinal assessment**

The transfer of technology and knowledge between Southeast Asian migrants and GCC countries has evolved significantly over the past decade, reflecting changing migration patterns and economic priorities in both regions. This longitudinal assessment examines the dynamics of this exchange from 2015 to 2025, highlighting key trends and their implications for economic development and integration.

In the early part of the study period, technology transfer was primarily unidirectional, with Southeast Asian migrants acquiring skills and knowledge in GCC countries to bring back to their home countries. This was particularly evident in sectors such as construction, oil and gas, and hospitality. However, as GCC countries intensified their economic diversification efforts, the nature of this exchange began to shift.

By 2020, there was a noticeable increase in the number of skilled Southeast Asian professionals in sectors such as information technology, renewable energy, and finance. This trend aligns with the GCC's focus on developing

knowledge-based economies, as outlined in various national vision documents. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this shift, highlighting the importance of digital skills and remote work capabilities (Capaldi, 2023; Sta. Maria, 2023).

One significant development has been the rise of transnational entrepreneurship. Southeast Asian migrants, leveraging their understanding of both markets, have increasingly established businesses that bridge the two regions. This has facilitated not only economic ties but also cultural exchange and innovation transfer (ADB, OECD and ILO, 2018).

The study also reveals an evolution in the mechanisms of knowledge exchange. While traditional methods such as on-the-job training and formal education remain important, digital platforms and remote collaboration tools have gained prominence. This has enabled more continuous and diverse forms of knowledge sharing, even after migrants return to their home countries.

Furthermore, the research indicates a growing recognition of the value of reverse knowledge transfer. GCC countries are increasingly tapping into the expertise of Southeast Asian professionals in areas where their home countries excel, such as digital services and sustainable urban planning (International Organization for Migration, 2008).

However, challenges persist in maximizing the benefits of this exchange. Issues such as skill recognition, language barriers, and cultural differences continue to impact the effectiveness of technology and knowledge transfer. Additionally, the study highlights the need for more structured programs to facilitate knowledge exchange and retention, particularly for returning migrants.

Looking ahead, the trajectory suggests an increasingly symbiotic relationship in technology and knowledge exchange between Southeast Asia and the GCC. As both regions continue to prioritize innovation and diversification, the role of migrant professionals as conduits of expertise and cultural understanding is likely to grow in importance.

The longitudinal study underscores the dynamic nature of technology and knowledge exchange in the context of international migration. It highlights the

need for adaptive policies that can harness these flows for mutual benefit, fostering innovation and economic growth in both Southeast Asia and the GCC region.

## **VII. Cultural Dynamics and Social Integration**

### **Formation of Southeast Asian communities in the Gulf**

The formation of Southeast Asian communities in the Gulf represents a significant aspect of the cultural dynamics and social integration process resulting from labor migration. Over the past few decades, as the number of Southeast Asian migrants in GCC countries has increased, distinct communities have emerged, creating microcosms of their home cultures within the Gulf's urban landscapes.

These communities often develop around shared national or ethnic identities. For instance, Filipino communities in Dubai and Abu Dhabi have established their own social clubs, churches, and cultural centers (Kathiravelu, 2016; Vora, 2013). Similarly, Indonesian and Thai communities have formed their own social networks and cultural associations in various GCC countries (Gardner, 2010; Mahdavi, 2016).

The development of these communities serves multiple important purposes:

1. **Cultural preservation:** These communities provide spaces for migrants to maintain their cultural practices, celebrate traditional festivals, and speak their native languages. This helps Southeast Asian migrants retain their cultural identity while living abroad.
2. **Social support:** The communities offer crucial support networks for newcomers, helping them navigate the challenges of living and working in a foreign country. This can include assistance with practical matters as well as emotional support.
3. **Economic opportunities:** Many Southeast Asian entrepreneurs have established businesses catering to their compatriots, creating economic

ecosystems within these communities. This fosters entrepreneurship and provides familiar goods and services to migrants.

4. Integration facilitation: Paradoxically, these communities can also serve as bridges to the broader host society, providing a safe space from which migrants can gradually integrate into the larger community. They act as a stepping stone for cultural exchange and adaptation.
5. Diplomatic engagement: The presence of these communities has contributed to stronger diplomatic ties between Southeast Asian and GCC countries. For example, the inaugural ASEAN-GCC Summit held in Riyadh in October 2023 marked a significant milestone in diplomatic engagement between the two regions (ul Khaliq, 2023; Institute, 2024).
6. Economic cooperation: The communities have played a role in fostering economic ties between Southeast Asia and the GCC. This is evident in the increasing Gulf investments in Southeast Asian startups and ventures (Al-Sarihi, 2024).
7. Cultural exchange: These communities contribute to promoting awareness of ASEAN traditions, arts, heritage, and cultures in the GCC countries, as highlighted in the Joint Statement of the ASEAN-GCC Summit (ASEAN, 2023a).

However, the formation of these communities also presents challenges. There are concerns about social segregation and potential for these communities to become isolated enclaves. Some Gulf states have implemented policies to prevent the concentration of migrant communities in specific areas, aiming to promote greater integration.

The evolution of these communities reflects the changing nature of migration to the Gulf, from temporary labor arrangements to more settled, long-term residency. As GCC countries continue to diversify their economies and implement reforms to attract and retain skilled workers, the role and nature of these Southeast Asian communities are likely to continue evolving.

### **Cultural exchanges and their impact on Gulf societies: A multi-sited ethnographic interpretation**

The cultural exchanges between Southeast Asian migrants and Gulf societies have significantly impacted the social fabrics of the region, as revealed through multi-sited ethnographic studies. These exchanges have led to a complex interplay of cultural preservation, adaptation, and transformation in both migrant communities and host societies.

One of the most notable impacts has been the emergence of hybrid cultural spaces in Gulf cities. For instance, in Dubai and Abu Dhabi, Filipino communities have established social clubs, churches, and cultural centers that serve as microcosms of their home culture while also interacting with the broader Emirati society (Thiollet, 2016). These spaces not only allow migrants to maintain their cultural practices but also serve as points of cultural exchange with local populations.

The influence of Southeast Asian cuisines on Gulf food culture is particularly evident. Multi-sited ethnography research has shown how the proliferation of Southeast Asian restaurants and food stalls in Gulf cities has introduced new flavors and culinary practices to local populations. This gastronomic exchange has led to the emergence of fusion cuisines that blend Gulf and Southeast Asian culinary traditions (Dakkak, 2022).

Language has been another significant area of cultural exchange. While Arabic remains the dominant language, the presence of large Southeast Asian communities has led to the increased use of languages like Tagalog, Indonesian, and Tamil in everyday interactions, particularly in service sectors. This linguistic diversity has contributed to the cosmopolitan character of Gulf cities and has facilitated intercultural communication (Thiollet, 2016; Dakkak, 2022).

The impact of these cultural exchanges on Gulf societies is multifaceted. On one hand, they have contributed to a more diverse and cosmopolitan urban culture in Gulf cities. The presence of Southeast Asian cultural events, festivals, and artistic performances has enriched the cultural landscape of these societies (Institute, 2024). On the other hand, this cultural diversity has also led to challenges in terms of social integration and national identity formation in Gulf states.

Multi-sited ethnographic studies have revealed that these cultural exchanges are not unidirectional. Gulf cultural elements, particularly Islamic practices and Arabic language, have also influenced Southeast Asian migrant communities. This is especially evident in the religious practices of Muslim migrants from countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, who often find themselves navigating between their home country's interpretations of Islam and those prevalent in Gulf societies (Singh, 1999).

The impact of these cultural exchanges extends beyond the social sphere into the economic realm. Southeast Asian entrepreneurs have established businesses catering to both their compatriots and local populations, contributing to the economic diversification efforts of countries (Institute, 2024). These businesses serve as important sites of cultural interaction and exchange.

However, it is important to note that these cultural exchanges occur within the context of existing power structures and social hierarchies. Multi-sited ethnographic research has shown that while cultural exchanges have led to increased interaction between migrant communities and Gulf societies, they have not necessarily translated into full social integration of equality (Thiollet, 2016; Singh, 1999).

Therefore, multi-sited ethnographic analyses reveal that cultural exchanges between Southeast Asian migrants and Gulf societies have significantly impacted the social, cultural, and economic landscapes of Gulf countries. These exchanges have contributed to the emergence of more diverse and cosmopolitan urban cultures while also presenting challenges to traditional notions of national identity and social integration. As Gulf countries continue to diversify their economies and implement reforms to attract and retain skilled workers, the nature and impact of these cultural exchanges are likely to evolve further.

### **Challenges in social integration**

Southeast Asian migrants in GCC countries face significant challenges in social integration, stemming from various structural, cultural, and policy-related

factors.

One of the primary obstacles is the systematic social exclusion experienced by migrants. Strict naturalization policies in GCC countries effectively turn migrants into “permanent outsiders,” limiting their access to citizenship and even permanent residential rights. This perpetuates their unstable legal status and hinders long-term integration into the host society (Heeren, 2025).

The *kafala* system, despite recent reforms, continues to pose challenges for social integration. By tying migrants’ legal status to their employers, it creates a power imbalance that can lead to exploitation and abuse. This system restricts migrants’ mobility within the labor market and society at large, further isolating them from the local population (ILO, 2015).

Cultural and linguistic barriers also play a significant role in hindering integration. Many migrants find themselves isolated in closed communities, with limited opportunities for interaction with the local population. This isolation can reinforce a sense of alienation and make migrants more vulnerable to stress and potential radicalization (Heeren, 2025).

The temporary nature of migration regimes in GCC countries presents another challenge. Most receiving states strive to keep migration temporary, ruling out family reunification and long-term settlement. This approach creates a state of “differential inclusion”, where migrants are incorporated into low-wage end of the labor market but denied access to other areas of society, such as social welfare and political participation (Yeoh, 2024).

Lastly, the lack of comprehensive social protection systems for migrant workers in GCC countries exacerbates their vulnerability and hinders integration. Despite some progress, challenges remain in extending social protection to migrant workers across GCC countries, particularly for those in low-skilled occupations (ILO, 2024).

### **Role of religion and shared Islamic values**

Religion, particularly Islam, plays a significant role in shaping the cultural



dynamics and social integration of Southeast Asian migrants in GCC countries. Shared Islamic values often serve as a common ground for interaction between migrants and host societies, facilitating a sense of connection and mutual understanding.

For many Muslim migrants from Southeast Asia, the Gulf region represents an opportunity to live in a society where Islamic practices are deeply embedded in daily life. This shared religious foundation can ease the initial cultural shock and provide a sense of familiarity in an otherwise foreign environment. Islamic institutions, such as mosques and religious schools, often become important spaces for community building and social support among migrants.

However, the role of religion in integration is complex. While shared Islamic values between Southeast Asian migrants and Gulf societies can also lead to challenges. For instance, the stricter Wahhabi interpretation of Islam prevalent in Saudi Arabia may differ from the more moderate practices common in countries like Indonesia or Malaysia (Heeren, 2025).

Religious networks and communities often serve multiple functions for migrants, including providing emotional and social support, acting as guides to the new society, and sometimes functioning as aspects of resistance or critique of the dominant social order (Beckford, 2019). These religious communities can become crucial in helping migrants navigate their new environment and maintain a sense of identity.

At the same time, the emphasis on shared Islamic values in GCC countries can sometimes overshadow other aspects of migrants' identities, potentially leading to expectations of cultural assimilation rather than integration. This dynamic can be particularly challenging for non-Muslim migrants from Southeast Asia.

Despite these complexities, shared Islamic values continue to play a significant role in shaping the experiences of Southeast Asian migrants in the Gulf, influencing both the opportunities for integration and the challenges they face in their host societies.

## **VIII. Transnational Networks and Their Implications**

### **Development of transnational social networks**

Transnational social networks have emerged as a crucial aspect of migration between Southeast Asia and GCC countries. These networks facilitate the flow of information, resources, and social capital across borders, significantly impacting the migration experience and socio-economic dynamics in both sending and receiving countries.

The development of these networks has been driven by several factors:

1. Technological advancements: The proliferation of digital communication tools and social media platforms has enabled migrants to maintain strong ties with their home countries and communities (Candelo *et al.*, 2018).
2. Circular migration patterns: The transitory nature of migration between Southeast Asia and the GCC has strengthened transnational links, as migrants frequently move between their home and host countries (Oommen, 2016).
3. Religious connections: Shared religious values, particularly Islam, have facilitated the formation of transnational religious networks that provide support and a sense of community for migrants (Oommen, 2016).
4. Economic motivation: These networks play a crucial role in facilitating remittance flows and investment decisions in the home country (Candelo *et al.*, 2018).
5. Cultural preservation: Transnational networks help migrants maintain their cultural identities and practices while abroad (Othman, 2024).

These networks serve multiple functions, including:

- Providing information about jobs opportunities and living conditions in destination countries (Candelo *et al.*, 2018).
- Offering social and emotional support to new migrants (Othman, 2024).
- Facilitating the transfer of skills and knowledge between countries (UN Network on Migration, 2023).
- Influencing investment decisions and economic behaviors in the home

country (Candelo *et al.*, 2018).

However, the development of these networks also presents challenges, such as the potential for the spread of misinformation or the reinforcement of social inequalities (Othman, 2024).

As migration patterns continue to evolve, transnational social networks are likely to play an increasingly important role in shaping the experiences of migrants and the broader socio-economic relationships between Southeast Asia and the GCC countries.

### **Impact on business and trade relations**

Transnational networks between Southeast Asia and the GCC countries have significantly influenced business and trade relations between the two regions. These networks have facilitated increased economic cooperation and investment flows in recent years.

Trade between ASEAN and GCC countries has grown substantially, with Gulf-ASEAN traded increasing by 44% year-on-year to US\$138 billion in 2022 (Institute, 2024). This growth reflects a shift from traditional oil-based trade to more diverse sectors such as food, financial services, and e-commerce. For instance, countries like Indonesia and Malaysia are looking to export more halal-related products to the Middle East (Institute, 2024).

The UAE has emerged as a leader in commercial activity with Southeast Asian countries. In 2022, the UAE signed a comprehensive economic partnership agreement with Indonesia, building on already significant bilateral non-oil trade of \$2 billion in 2020 (Mason, 2023). The agreement is expected to further boost economic ties between the two regions.

Transnational networks have also facilitated increased investment flows. Gulf investments in Southeast Asian startups and ventures have been on the rise (Institute, 2024). Similarly, Southeast Asian companies are expanding their presence in the Gulf market, particularly in sectors such as fintech, logistics, and e-commerce (Routledge and Polyzos, 2023).

The development of financial hubs in both regions has created new opportunities for collaboration. Singapore, as a financial center, is increasingly engaging with Middle Eastern financial hubs like Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Riyadh in areas such as fintech innovation and blockchain (Institute, 2024).

These evolving business and trade relations are reshaping the economic landscape of both regions, moving beyond traditional petro-economic ties towards more diverse and innovative partnerships. As both regions continue to prioritize economic diversification, the role of transnational networks in facilitating business and trade relations is likely to grow in importance.

### **Cultural and educational exchanges**

Cultural and educational exchanges between ASEAN and GCC countries have gained significant momentum in recent years, fostering mutual understanding and strengthening people-to-people ties between the two regions.

The ASEAN-GCC Framework of Cooperation 2024-2028 outlines several initiatives to promote cultural and educational exchanges. These include organizing joint cultural activities and exhibitions, such as ASEAN Day in GCC countries and GCC Cultural Day in ASEAN nations. The framework also encourages media and journalist exchanges to enhance cross-cultural awareness (Centre for International Law, 2023).

To promote cultural diversity and understanding, both regions are committed to organizing cultural festivals, art exhibitions, film festivals, workshops, and book fairs. These events aim to showcase the rich traditions, arts, heritage, and cultures of ASEAN and GCC countries (ASEAN, 2023b).

In the realm of education, the ASEAN-GCC Action Plan on Education includes initiatives for joint conferences and workshops involving the ASEAN University Network (AUN), ASEAN and GCC Secretariats, think tanks, and other educational institutions. The plan also promotes exchange programs for students, researchers, and education personnel (Centre for International Law, 2023).

There is a growing trend of Southeast Asian students pursuing higher education

within Asia, with Japan and South Korea emerging as popular destinations. This shift is driven by attractive work-study programs and job opportunities in these countries (Sharma, 2024).

The development of transnational education (TNE) programs has also contributed to increased educational exchanges. Countries like the UK and Australia have established significant TNE markets in Southeast Asia, with Vietnam becoming the UK's fastest-growing TNE market globally (Sharma, 2024).

These cultural and educational exchanges play a crucial role on fostering mutual understanding, promoting dialogue among civilizations, and strengthening people-to-people ties between ASEAN and GCC countries. As both regions continue to prioritize these initiatives, we can expect to see even greater collaboration and exchange in the coming years.

## **IX. Challenges and Opportunities**

### **Labor market impacts in sending and receiving countries**

The migration of workers from Southeast Asia to other regions, particularly the GCC countries, has significant impacts on labor markets in both sending and receiving countries.

In Southeast Asian sending countries, labor migration has helped alleviate unemployment pressures and underemployment. The outflow of workers has provided employment opportunities for many who face limited prospects at home due to factors like low per capita income and financial pressures (ASEAN, 2022). This has contributed to poverty reduction in some countries, with Viet Nam experiencing a notable 17% decrease in poverty rates among migrant households (Harkins *et al.*, 2018).

However, the reliance on labor exports has also led to challenges. There are concerns about brain drain and skills mismatches, as many migrants work in low to semi-skilled jobs in sectors like construction, manufacturing, and domestic services, often below their qualification levels (ASEAN, 2022). The lack of mutual

recognition systems for skills and qualifications between Southeast Asia and destination countries hinders migrants' ability to leverage their experience for better opportunities upon return (Harkins *et al.*, 2018).

In receiving countries, migrant workers have played a crucial role in supporting rapid economic growth and development. Foreign labor comprises a significant portion of the workforce in many destination countries, particularly in sectors such as construction, hospitality, and domestic services (World Bank, 2017). This has allowed receiving economies to develop more quickly than if they had relied solely on domestic labor.

However, the heavy reliance on foreign workers has also resulted in challenges for receiving countries. It has led to concerns about declining or stagnating productivity levels and difficulties in creating private-sector jobs for nationals (IOM, 2023). In response, some countries have implemented nationalization policies aimed at increasing employment of citizens, particularly in the private sector.

As both sending and receiving countries continue to adapt their migration policies, the labor market impacts are likely to evolve. The future may see a shift towards more skilled migration, as above-mentioned that Southeast Asian countries invest in education and vocational training to produce more skilled workforce capable of meeting international labor market demands.

### **Human rights concerns and labor protections**

The treatment of migrant workers from Southeast Asia in GCC countries has been a subject of significant concern for human rights organizations. Despite recent reforms, several issues persist:

The *kafala* system, though modified in some countries, continues to tie workers' legal status to their employers, creating power imbalances that can lead to exploitation. This system often restricts workers' ability to change jobs or leave the country without employer permission (Human Rights Watch, 2013; Kakar and Siddique, 2020; Economist, 2020; Bouri, 2023).

Working conditions remain problematic in many cases. Reports indicate that some workers face excessive working hours, unsafe environments, and substandard living conditions. In the construction industry, heat-related illnesses are a particular concern during summer months (Tonev and Timmermans, 2024).

Wage issues are prevalent, with some workers reporting non-payment, underpayment, or delayed payment of wages. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that many workers have incurred debts to secure their jobs (Rajan, 2024).

While some GCC countries have introduced reforms, implementation and enforcement often lag. For instance, Qatar has made efforts to improve labor laws, but Amnesty International warns that systematic abuses continue due to inadequate labor protections (Tonev and Timmermans, 2024).

Gender-based issues are also significant, with female domestic workers particularly vulnerable to abuse, including physical and sexual violence (Oppenheim, 2019; Hindustan Times, 2010; Naya Daur, 2019).

Recent positive developments include Oman's introduction of a unified social insurance system covering nationals and migrant workers, and efforts by other GCC countries to extend employment injury and unemployment insurance to migrant workers (ILO, 2024a).

Despite these improvements, human rights organizations continue to call for more comprehensive reforms, including the complete abolition of the *kafala* system, stronger enforcement of labor laws, and greater accountability for employers who violate workers' rights (Tonev and Timmermans, 2024; Bouri, 2023).

### **Skill mismatches and brain drain/gain dynamics**

The migration of workers from Southeast Asia to GCC countries has led to complex skill mismatch and brain drain/gain dynamics. Many migrant workers face educational and skill mismatches in their host countries, often working in

jobs below their qualification levels. This underutilization of human capital can result in lower earnings, job satisfaction, and employment opportunities for migrants compared to matched individuals (Budría and de Ibarreta, 2020).

The brain drain phenomenon, where highly skilled workers leave their home countries, has been a concern for Southeast Asian nations. However, recent research suggests that this outflow may also lead to a “brain gain” effect. The prospect of migration can incentivize individuals in sending countries to invest in education and skills development, potentially increasing the overall human capital stock (Berger, 2022).

Despite this potential benefit, the net effect of brain drain remains contentious. An analysis of the dynamics shows that the net brain gain is equal to zero in the steady state, suggesting that a “beneficial brain drain” may not be sustainable in the long term (Budría and de Ibarreta, 2020). The actual impact depends on various factors, including the migration probability and the ability distribution of those who stay versus those who leave.

For Southeast Asian countries, the challenge lies in balancing the potential benefits of remittances and knowledge transfer with the loss of skilled workers. Some countries have implemented policies to attract return migrants, aiming to capitalize on the skills and experiences gained abroad (Cheong, 2016). However, the success of these programs varies, and they may not always be the most cost-effective approach to addressing skill shortages.

The lack of mutual recognition systems for skills and qualifications between Southeast Asia and GCC countries exacerbates the skill mismatch problem. This gap makes it difficult for migrants to certify the skills and experience gained abroad, potentially limiting the effective transfer of knowledge upon return (ILO, 2024b).

To address these challenges, policymakers in both sending and receiving countries need to focus on developing mechanisms for skill recognition, improving information flows about labor market needs, and creating opportunities for returning migrants to apply their acquired skills effectively.



## **Opportunities for enhanced regional cooperation**

The inaugural ASEAN-GCC Summit in 2023 marked a significant milestone in the relationship between the two regional blocs, paving the way for enhanced cooperation across various sectors. The adoption of the ASEAN-GCC Framework of Cooperation 2024-2028 outlines several key areas for collaboration:

1. **Trade and Investment:** Both regions aim to promote trade and investment relations by enhancing public-private sector engagement and business-to-business relations. This includes exporting new opportunities in sustainable infrastructure, renewables, petrochemicals, agriculture, manufacturing, healthcare, tourism, logistics, smart cities, connectivity, and digitalization.
2. **Economic Partnership:** The framework emphasizes strengthening regional market integration, sustainability and decarbonization, digital transformation, and inclusivity, with a focus on Micro, Small and Medium enterprises (MSMEs).
3. **Technology and Innovation:** Cooperation in science, technology, and innovation is encouraged, including policy studies, capacity building, and joint research activities in areas such as health, environmental management, and agricultural technologies.
4. **Education and Human Resource Development:** Both regions seek to explore cooperation in higher education, technical vocational education and training (TVET), and digital skills development.
5. **Sustainable Development:** The framework promotes collaboration in sustainable and circular agriculture, food production, and development of the halal industry.
6. **Energy Cooperation:** There are opportunities to explore combined efforts in energy efficiency, renewable energy, and alternative sources of clean energy.
7. **Digital Economy:** Both regions recognize the importance of cooperation in the digital economy, as highlighted in the Joint Statement from the GCC-ASEAN Summit.
8. **Cultural Exchange:** The Framework encourages the promotion of ASEAN

traditions, arts, heritage, and cultures in GCC countries, fostering greater understanding between the regions (ASEAN, 2023a; 2023c; Ali, 2023).

To maintain momentum, the framework includes an implementation mechanism involving annual meetings between the ASEAN and GCC Secretariats (Burchill, 2024). The ASEAN-GCC Economic and Investment Conference in 2024 and Malaysia's commitment to host the next summit in 2025 further demonstrate the commitment to strengthening this interregional partnership (Burchill, 2024; Ali, 2023).

## **X. Future Prospects and Policy Recommendations**

### **Projected trends in Southeast Asian migration to the Gulf**

The migration patterns from Southeast Asia to the GCC countries are expected to evolve in the coming years, shaped by various economic, social, and policy factors:

1. **Continued Demand for Labor:** Despite efforts to diversify their economies, GCC countries are likely to maintain a significant demand for foreign workers. In 2023, Saudi Arabia alone was the destination for more than 1.6 million Asian workers, setting a new record (ADBI, OECD and ILO, 2024). This trend is expected to continue, driven by ambitious development plans such as Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 (Nazir, 2022).
2. **Shift in Skill Requirements:** As GCC countries focus on economic diversification, there will likely be an increased demand for skilled workers in sectors such as technology, renewable energy, and healthcare. This may lead to a gradual shift from low-skilled to more specialized labor migration (Nazir, 2022).
3. **Changing Destination Preferences:** Recent data suggests a slight decline in the preference for GCC countries among some Southeast Asian migrants. For instance, the Kerala Migration Survey 2023 showed a drop in emigrants choosing GCC countries from 89.2% in 2018 to 80.5% in 2023 (Rajan, 2024).
4. **Impact of Nationalization Policies:** GCC countries' ongoing efforts to

increase employment of their nationals may affect the demand for foreign workers in certain sectors. However, the overall impact on Southeast Asian migration is expected to be limited due to the continued reliance on foreign labor (Rajan, 2024).

5. **Increased Competition:** Southeast Asian countries may face growing competition from other regions as source countries for migrant workers, potentially leading to changes in migration flows and patterns (GIZ and ILO, 2015).
6. **Technological Advancements:** The increasing adoption of artificial intelligence and blockchain technology in GCC countries may create new opportunities for skilled Southeast Asian workers while potentially reducing demand in traditional low-skilled sectors (Nazir, 2022).
7. **Climate Change Impact:** As climate-induced displacement becomes more prevalent, it may influence migration patterns, potentially increasing the number of migrants seeking opportunities in the Gulf (ICMPD, 2023).

These projected trends highlight the need for Southeast Asian countries to focus on upskilling their workforce to meet the evolving demands of the GCC labor market while also preparing for potential shifts in migration patterns.

### **Recommendations for policy makers in both regions**

1. **Skills Development and Recognition:**
  - Implement comprehensive skills development programs in Southeast Asian countries to align with evolving GCC labor market needs.
  - Establish mutual recognition agreements for qualifications and skills between Southeast Asian and GCC countries to facilitate better job matching and reduce skill mismatches.
2. **Labor Rights and Social Protection:**
  - GCC countries should continue reforming labor laws to enhance migrant worker protection, including further modifications to the *kafala* system.
  - Extend social protection measures, including health-insurance and pension schemes, to migrant workers in GCC countries.
3. **Ethical Recruitment Practices:**

- Strengthen regulation and monitoring of recruitment agencies in both sending and receiving countries to prevent exploitation and reduce migration costs.
  - Implement government-to-government recruitment models to ensure transparency and protect workers' rights.
4. Data Sharing and Management:
    - Develop a comprehensive labor market information system shared between Southeast Asian and GCC countries to better match labor supply with demand.
    - Enhance data collection and analysis on migration flows, remittances, and socio-economic impacts to inform evidence-based policymaking.
  5. Reintegration Support:
    - Southeast Asian countries should develop comprehensive reintegration programs for returning migrants, including skills recognition, entrepreneurship support, and job placement services.
  6. Gender-Responsive Policies:
    - Implement policies that address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of female migrant workers, particularly in domestic work sectors.
  7. Climate Change Adaptation:
    - Develop policies that address the potential impact of climate change on migration patterns, including support for climate-displaced individuals.
  8. Technology and Innovation:
    - Invest in digital platforms for migrant worker management, including blockchain-based systems for contract verification and remittance transfers.
  9. Regional Cooperation:
    - Strengthen dialogue and cooperation mechanisms between ASEAN and GCC countries on labor migration issues, building on frameworks like the Abu Dhabi Dialogue.
  10. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Alignment:
    - Align migration policies with the SDGs, particularly Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and Goal 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

These recommendations aim to create a more sustainable, equitable, and mutually beneficial migration ecosystem between Southeast Asia and the Gulf regions.

### **Strategies for maximizing mutual benefits**

To optimize the outcomes of labor migration between Southeast Asia and the GCC countries, several strategies can be implemented:

1. Skill-matching and development:
  - Implement pre-departure training programs in Southeast Asian countries aligned with GCC labor market needs.
  - Develop joint vocation training initiatives between Southeast Asian and GCC institutions.
  - Establish a regional skills recognition framework to facilitate better job matching and career progression.
2. Enhancing remittance impacts:
  - Promote financial literacy among migrants and their families.
  - Develop innovative remittance-linked financial products to encourage productive investments.
  - Reduce remittance costs through technology-driven solutions and increased competition among service providers.
3. Knowledge transfer and entrepreneurship:
  - Create programs to support returning migrants in starting businesses, leveraging skills and experiences gained abroad.
  - Facilitate knowledge sharing between GCC employers and Southeast Asian institutions to enhance skill development.
4. Bilateral and regional cooperation:
  - Strengthen existing frameworks like the Abu Dhabi Dialogue to address emerging challenges in labor migration.
  - Develop government-to-government agreements to ensure ethical recruitment and worker protection.
5. Leveraging technology:
  - Implement blockchain-based systems for contract verification and

remittance transfers.

- Develop AI-driven platforms for job matching and skills assessment.
6. Promoting circular migration:
    - Design flexible visa policies that allow for easier movement between home and host countries.
    - Implement portable social security benefits to encourage circular migration.
  7. Addressing gender-specific issues:
    - Develop targeted programs to support female migrants, particularly in vulnerable sectors like domestic work.
    - Promote gender-responsive policies in both sending and receiving countries.
  8. Aligning with sustainable development goals:
    - Integrate migration policies with broader development strategies in both regions.
    - Focus on creating decent work opportunities and reducing inequalities through migration.

By implementing these strategies, both Southeast Asian and GCC countries can work towards a more sustainable and mutually beneficial migration ecosystem that contribute to economic growth and social development in both regions.

## **XI. Conclusion**

This study has examined the evolving dynamics of labor migration from Southeast Asia to the GCC countries, revealing a complex landscape of challenges and opportunities. Key findings include:

1. A gradual shift from unskilled to skilled labor migration, driven by economic diversification efforts in GCC countries and improved education levels in Southeast Asia.
2. The significant economic impact of remittances on Southeast Asian economies, contributing to poverty reduction and development.

3. The emergence of transnational social networks facilitating information flow, cultural exchange, and business opportunities between the two regions.
4. Persistent challenges in labor rights and social integration, despite recent policy reforms in GCC countries.
5. The growing importance of technology in shaping migration patterns and experiences, from job matching to remittance transfers.

The research contributes significantly to our understanding of South-South migration patterns and their implications for economic development and social change. By examining the multifaceted nature of Southeast Asian migration to the Gulf, it provides valuable insights for policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders in both regions.

The study highlights the need for a more nuanced approach to migration management that considers the interests of both sending and receiving countries. It underscores the potential for migration to contribute positively to development when managed effectively, while also drawing attention to areas where further improvements are needed to protect migrant rights and maximize mutual benefits.

Furthermore, this research contributes to broader discussions on global labor mobility, economic integration, and the role of migration in achieving sustainable development goals. It provides a foundation for developing more effective policies and strategies to harness the potential of labor migration while mitigating its challenges.

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