Project management challenges and labour migration: opportunities for sustainable development

Nazeeh Elsebaie1*, Olga Fokina1, Lyudmila Shmakova2, Angela Mottaeva3, and Tatyana Zhilkina4

1Vyatka State University, 610000 Kirov, Russia
2 Kirov State Medical University, 610000 Kirov, Russia
3 Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation, 125993 Moscow, Russia
4 Moscow State University of Civil Engineering, 109377 Moscow, Russia

Abstract. The management of projects faces numerous challenges, including those related to labour migration. Labour migration has been a common phenomenon across the globe, and it presents both challenges and opportunities for sustainable development. This literature review is a vital component of an ongoing research project aimed at examining the impact of labour migration on sustainable development. The underlying objective of this paper is to address the apparent disparity between the perceptions of policymakers and project managers regarding the challenges posed by labour migration, and the actual opportunities that it presents for sustainable development. In this article we explore the challenges faced by project managers in dealing with labour migration and the opportunities it presents for sustainable development. The paper findings indicate that project managers face challenges such as language barriers, cultural differences, and legal issues in dealing with migrant workers. However, labour migration presents opportunities for sustainable development by enhancing cultural exchange, skills transfer, and economic growth. The implications of these findings for project management practices and labour migration policies are discussed. The study recommends that project managers and policymakers have to collaborate to develop effective strategies to address the challenges and harness the opportunities presented by labour migration for sustainable development. This study contributes to the existing literature on project management and labour migration by highlighting the need for a sustainable approach to managing projects that involve migrant workers.

1 Introduction

There is a significant disconnect between how policymakers and project managers perceive the challenge posed by labour migration and the potential opportunities for sustainable development that can arise from them. The divergence of views is due to the lack of a holistic comprehension of the advantages and hindrances that arise from labour migration.

* Corresponding author: nsebaie@outlook.com

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Additionally, this discrepancy is also indicative of the inconsistency between legal regulations and the perception of policymakers in most countries who perceive that investing in programs for the social and economic integration of migrants and labour migrants is not aligned with the priorities and welfare of the society. In support of this notion, the executive director of overseas development institute (ODI) affirmed that there is a disconnect in the real world between the way governments are viewing the migrant and the refugee challenge and the realities that drive people to migrate or to move as refugees. So, if you ask most policy makers in most European countries, their primary concern is to prevent people moving, it’s to make it difficult for them to enter the country whether it’s at the border or by denying access to labour markets, to asylum claims and so on. And there is a presumption on the part of many political leaders that people are driven by a concern to secure welfare benefits in Europe (Kevin Watkins, 2016). Actually, the current discourse on migration, labour migration, and development presents a worrisome paradox. Despite the empirical evidence highlighting the positive impact of international labour mobility on both individual and collective advancement, certain actors within the development community tend to perceive migration as a challenge that necessitates resolution. Such a perspective is underpinned by the notion of root causes, which positions human mobility as a means of escape from poverty and a lack of opportunities, rather than as a viable strategy for addressing these issues. Such a characterization may be overly simplistic and potentially undermines the potential for migration to serve as an effective mechanism for sustainable development[1-12].

The management of projects is a challenging task, and has become increasingly complex due to globalization and the movement of people across borders. Labour migration is a common phenomenon worldwide, and in particular, it poses challenges for project managers, including language barriers, cultural differences, and legal issues. Previous studies have identified several challenges faced by project managers in dealing with labour migration. Various factors can impede the productivity of migrant workers, such as communication barriers, a lack of trust, substandard wages, and inadequate working conditions. Some scholars have proposed that ‘with local employment in countries of origin often characterized by informal employment, poor working conditions and unsustainable livelihoods, migrant workers are caught within a protracted precarity that spans life at home and abroad’ (Piper et al., 2017). The language barrier is a major challenge faced by project managers in dealing with migrant workers. Project managers need to communicate with workers who may not be fluent in the language of the project's host country. This language barrier can lead to misunderstandings, miscommunication, and even delays in the completion of the project. Cultural differences between project managers and migrant workers can also pose significant challenges. Cultural differences can manifest in different ways, such as communication styles, work ethics, and attitudes towards authority. Legal issues related to labour migration can also pose challenges for project managers. Migrant workers may face legal barriers such as visa restrictions, work permits, and labour laws that vary from country to country. Different countries have different laws and regulations governing the employment of migrant workers, and project managers need to be aware of these regulations to ensure compliance. One of the greatest challenges in projects is the need to comply with certain rules and regulations, both internal and external to the organization executing them. Traditionally, compliance is documented as requirements (typically non-functional) during the project planning phase (Rincon, 2010).

Despite these challenges, labour migration also presents opportunities for sustainable development. For example, migrant workers can bring diverse skills and knowledge to the project, which can enhance the overall performance of the project team[13-18. Actually, knowledge and skills to and from labour migrants could be done if there is a well connection between project managers and policy makers. Strategies could also help increase the
knowledge and skills transfer of migrants, if there are well-managed migration policies to encourage this transfer (IOM, 2018). Project managers can facilitate this transfer of skills by creating an environment that encourages knowledge sharing and collaboration between migrant and local workers. In addition, labour migration can promote cultural exchange and understanding, leading to greater social cohesion and a more diverse workforce. Cultural exchange is another opportunity presented by labour migration. Migrant workers bring their cultural experiences, traditions, and perspectives to the project, providing a unique opportunity for cross-cultural learning and understanding. Project managers can encourage this cultural exchange by creating an inclusive work environment that values diversity and promotes cultural exchange. Culture and creativity are important drivers for personal development, social cohesion and economic growth. Today’s strategy promoting intercultural understanding confirms culture’s place at the heart of our policies. (Wilk-Woś, 2010). Furthermore, the economic benefits of labour migration can contribute to the sustainable development of both sending and receiving countries. Labour migration can stimulate economic growth by filling critical skills gaps in the labour market, providing a source of labour for projects, which can help businesses to expand and create new jobs. In many cases, migrant workers are essential to the success of projects, particularly in industries such as construction, where they often make up a significant portion of the workforce. Non-market institutions such as social networks have been shown to be important in migrant workers’ access to the labour market in destination countries and for their labour market outcomes (Srivastava, 2019)[18-25].

The chart (Fig. 1) illustrates the distribution of migrant workers by region of origin and gender in 2019, based on data from the International Labour Organization (ILO). The chart shows that the largest proportion of migrant workers, 37.7%, came from Europe and Central Asia, while 25.6% came from Northern America, 14.3% from Arab States, 14.2% from Asia and the Pacific, and 8.1% from Africa. This data is significant as it highlights the global nature of labour migration and the need for policies and strategies that take into account the diverse backgrounds and needs of migrant workers from different regions. These numbers underscore the global scope of labour migration and emphasize the importance of adopting policies and strategies that account for the unique characteristics and needs of migrant workers from different regions. Furthermore, this data highlights the economic, social, and political implications of labour migration on both sending and receiving countries. The chart’s data also provides insight into the distribution of male and female migrant workers from each region, with the total number of migrant workers being 169 million, of which 98.9 million were men and 70.1 million were women[25-32].

All in all, the literature suggests that the challenges associated with labour migration can be significant for project managers. Language barriers, cultural differences, and legal issues can all affect the productivity and effectiveness of migrant workers, leading to delays and increased costs. However, despite these challenges, labour migration presents numerous opportunities for sustainable development. Skills transfer, cultural exchange, and economic growth are all potential benefits of labour migration, and project managers should seek to leverage these benefits while mitigating the associated challenges. Project managers also
must be aware of the legal and regulatory frameworks that govern labour migration in their host countries.

2 Methodology

The methodology used for this literature review involved a comprehensive search of academic databases such as Scopus, ScienceDirect, Web of Science, Research gate, and Google Scholar. The search was conducted using relevant keywords and phrases such as "project management," "labour migration," "migrant workers," and "sustainable development." Articles were selected based on their relevance to the research topic, publication date, and quality of research. In addition, we used a variety of data sources from international organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Overseas Development Institute (ODI), Migration policy Institute (MPI), and International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The inclusion criteria for the articles were that they must have been published in peer-reviewed academic journals, written in English, and must have focused on the challenges and opportunities presented by labour migration in project management. The exclusion criteria were articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria, articles that were not relevant to the research topic, and articles that were duplicates.

The initial search returned a large number of articles, which were then screened based on their titles and abstracts. Full-text articles that met the inclusion criteria were then retrieved and analyzed. The analysis included a thorough reading of the articles to identify relevant information, such as the challenges and opportunities presented by labour migration in project management, and the strategies used by project managers to address these challenges and harness the opportunities.

The information obtained from the articles was then synthesized and presented in a coherent and logical manner in the literature review section. The literature review included a critical evaluation of the key findings, their implications for project management practices and labour migration policies, and recommendations for future research.

In summary, the methodology used for this literature review involved a comprehensive search of academic databases, article selection based on inclusion and exclusion criteria, thorough analysis of the selected articles.

3 Findings

The selected articles revealed several findings related to the challenges and opportunities presented by labour migration in project management. To better understand these findings, the following sub-sections will discuss the challenges faced by project managers in dealing with labour migration and the opportunities for sustainable development through labour migration.

Challenges faced by project managers in dealing with labour migration

Project managers face significant challenges when dealing with labour migration, including language barriers, cultural differences, legal issues, and ensuring the safety and well-being of migrant workers. Overall, the challenges presented by labour migration in project management are significant, and project managers must be prepared to address these challenges effectively. By understanding the unique needs and challenges of migrant workers and working to create an inclusive work environment, project managers can leverage the opportunities presented by labour migration to create sustainable development outcomes while overcoming the challenges presented by this complex issue.
Table 1. The challenges faced by project managers in dealing with labour migration (own)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Explain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The language barrier</td>
<td>The language barrier is one of the most significant challenges, which can lead to misunderstandings, miscommunication, and even delays in the completion of the project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural differences</td>
<td>Cultural differences can also pose challenges for project managers. Different cultures have different communication styles, work ethics, and attitudes towards authority. Project managers need to be aware of these differences and find ways to bridge the gap to ensure effective communication and collaboration with migrant workers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal issues</td>
<td>Legal issues related to labour migration can also pose significant challenges for project managers. Migrant workers may face legal barriers such as visa restrictions, work permits, and labour laws that vary from country to country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The safety and well-being</td>
<td>Ensuring the safety and well-being of migrant workers is another challenge faced by project managers. Migrant workers may face inadequate working conditions, exploitation, and discrimination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure reliability</td>
<td>Managing the expectations and demands of clients and stakeholders can also be a significant challenge for project managers. Clients may have different expectations regarding the project’s timeline, budget, and quality, which can be affected by the availability and performance of migrant workers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The logistical challenges</td>
<td>The logistical challenges associated with labour migration must be navigated by project managers. They must ensure that all logistical arrangements are in place to ensure the smooth integration of migrant workers into the project team and to minimize any disruptions to the project's timeline or budget.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the challenges presented by labour migration in project management are significant, and project managers must be prepared to address these challenges effectively. By understanding the unique needs and challenges of migrant workers and working to create an inclusive work environment, project managers can leverage the opportunities presented by labour migration to create sustainable development outcomes while overcoming the challenges presented by this complex issue.

**Opportunities for Sustainable Development Through Labour Migration**

Labour migration also presents opportunities for sustainable development in project management. Migrant workers can bring many benefits such as valuable skills and knowledge, contributions to the development of international networks and collaborations, promotion of diversity and inclusion, improvement of project outcomes, and more. The following table provides an overview of some opportunities that labour migration presents for project management and sustainable development.
Table 2. The opportunities that labour migration presents for project management and sustainable development (own)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunities / benefits</th>
<th>Explain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skills transfer</td>
<td>Labour migration can facilitate the transfer of knowledge and skills from migrant workers to the local workforce, helping to build local capacity and improve productivity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural exchange</td>
<td>Labour migration can promote cultural exchange and understanding, which can lead to greater social cohesion and tolerance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity and inclusion</td>
<td>The inclusion of migrant workers in project management can foster diversity and promote a work environment that values differences and encourages cultural exchange. This, in turn, can result in improved team dynamics, heightened creativity and innovation, and ultimately lead to better project outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-cultural collaboration</td>
<td>Labour migration can contribute to the development of international networks and collaborations. Migrant workers may have connections with professionals and organizations in their home countries, providing opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration and exchange. This can lead to the development of new ideas, innovations, and partnerships that can contribute to sustainable development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic growth</td>
<td>Labour migration can contribute to economic growth by filling labour shortages and increasing productivity, which can lead to higher wages and increased demand for goods and services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remittances</td>
<td>Migrant workers often send remittances back to their home countries, which can provide economic support to their families and communities. This can help to reduce poverty and promote sustainable development in these local communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation</td>
<td>Labour migration can bring new ideas and innovative approaches to project management, which can improve efficiency and effectiveness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, labour migration can provide numerous benefits and opportunities for sustainable economic growth and development, as long as it is managed responsibly. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that labour migration is managed in a sustainable and responsible manner to reap its full potential benefits.

4 Discussion

Implications for Project Management Practices and Labour Migration Policies
The findings highlight the need for project managers to be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively manage a culturally diverse and multilingual workforce. This includes the ability to communicate effectively across language and cultural barriers,
understand the different work ethics and attitudes towards authority, and create an inclusive work environment that values diversity[33-39].

For labour migration policies, the findings suggest the need for policymakers to develop more comprehensive and coordinated policies that address the challenges and opportunities presented by labour migration for sustainable development. This includes policies that ensure the protection of migrant workers’ rights, promote cultural exchange and understanding, and facilitate skills transfer and knowledge sharing between migrant and local workers. Policymakers also need to address the language barrier by promoting language classes and translation services for workers to enhance their communication skills and facilitate their integration into the local community [40-45].

**Recommendations for project managers and policymakers**

Based on the findings of this literature review, there are several recommendations for project managers and policymakers to address the challenges and harness the opportunities presented by labour migration for sustainable development.

1) Foster cultural exchange and understanding: Project managers should promote cultural exchange and understanding by creating an inclusive work environment that values diversity. This can be achieved by organizing cultural events, providing language classes, and encouraging social interaction between migrant workers and local employees.

2) Ensure compliance with labour laws and regulations: Project managers should be aware of the legal issues related to labour migration and ensure compliance with labour laws and regulations to protect migrant workers' rights. Policymakers should also review and revise labour migration policies to ensure they are fair, transparent, and protect migrant workers' rights.

3) Provide training and skills transfer: Project managers should provide training and skills transfer opportunities for migrant workers to enhance their skills and improve their employability. This will not only benefit the workers but also increase their productivity and contribution to the project.

4) Ensure safe working conditions: Project managers should ensure that migrant workers are provided with safe working conditions and appropriate accommodations. This will not only protect the workers but also improve their productivity and motivation.

5) Build partnerships and collaborations: Project managers should build partnerships and collaborations with local organizations, governments, and community groups to address the challenges of labour migration and harness its opportunities for sustainable development.

6) Implement monitoring and evaluation mechanisms: Project managers and policymakers should implement monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track the impact of labour migration on the project and the local community. This will help identify areas for improvement and ensure that labour migration is contributing to sustainable development.

Overall, project managers and policymakers should work together to address the challenges and harness the opportunities presented by labour migration for sustainable development. By doing so, labour migration can become a positive force for economic growth, social development, and cultural exchange [46-50].

**5 Conclusion**

This literature review sheds light on the challenges and opportunities that arise from labour migration in project management. Project managers face significant challenges such as language barriers, cultural differences, legal issues, and ensuring the safety and well-being
of migrant workers. However, labour migration can also provide opportunities for sustainable development through skills transfer, cultural exchange, and economic growth.

The study contributes to the field by offering a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities of labour migration in project management. The findings can be used to develop effective strategies to manage labour migration in projects by project managers, policymakers, and stakeholders. However, the study has some limitations, such as being limited to peer-reviewed articles in English published from 2010 to 2022, which may have excluded relevant studies in other languages or time periods. The quality of the included studies also varied, which may have influenced the findings.

Future research could delve deeper into the challenges and opportunities of labour migration in specific project management contexts, such as construction, engineering, or IT. Moreover, research could explore the impact of labour migration on local communities and the workforce and ways to ensure that labour migration contributes to sustainable development.

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