



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

**Swiss Agency for Development
and Cooperation SDC**

Migration

Swiss Cooperation Programme Middle East

Migration as a benefit, not a
problem

Swiss Cooperation Programme Middle East:

Switzerland works in the region focusing on four key themes:

- Protection & Migration
- Education & Income
- Conflict Prevention & Peace Promotion
- Water and Sanitation

Switzerland implements projects directly or works with Partner Organisations to implement projects, funds the UN to work on the key themes and sends Swiss Experts to Advise the UN.

With this programme Switzerland contributes to decent work opportunities for migrants and refugees in the Middle East which is one of the largest migrant hosting regions globally due to economic demands and displacement from conflict. It aims to reduce the risks of exploitation, unethical recruitment, exploitative and dangerous working conditions, sexual and physical abuse and the non-payment of wages to ensure migration is beneficial and safe for migrant workers and their home and destination countries

The world's economies need mobile workers to keep afloat. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the global number of migrant workers stands at around 164 million. Globalisation has facilitated people's movements to find employment elsewhere due to economic benefits, limited job opportunities and gender discrimination at home, or family reunions. Under its global programme "Migration and Development", the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) aims to improve the protection of migrant workers and their families and increase the benefits of economic migration for them and their countries of origin.

Migration to the Middle East including the Gulf States of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates has provided countless jobs and generated billions of dollars in remittances for migrant workers and their families. The SDC's Regional Advisor for Migration & Development, Simone Troller, is based in Jordan which hosts around one million migrant workers. We caught up with her to find out more about the SDC's efforts to improve the framework conditions for migrant workers in the region

Switzerland has contributed to ensure that migrants and refugees in the Middle East enjoy decent working conditions for almost ten years. What exactly does the Swiss project entail?

Simone Troller: We look at labour migration from a development perspective and aim to improve the working and living conditions for migrant workers in the region. In Lebanon and Jordan we also support refugees. Our projects consider migration as potentially beneficial for migrants who mainly originate from poverty-affected areas in south-eastern Asia and increasingly from the African continent. However, there are a lot of risks and traps they can fall into. As a donor country, we do not implement our own projects but deliver through our partners or contractors who we keep in close contact with. Amongst them are the ILO, the Gemeinschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the Danish Development Agency (Danida), the Institute for Human Rights and Business, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) as well as small non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and companies.

So, it's basically a Protection engagement for the migrant workers in the Middle East and the Gulf States where 35 million international migrants were recorded in 2019.

S.T.: Yes, Protection is a major part of our work, but there is also an economic element as we aim to improve remittance services and digital technologies for the migrants to send and save money and stay in touch with their friends and families. We support social entrepreneurs to come up with innovative solutions and services that benefit migrants and refugees.

Can you elaborate on this?

S.T.: Most of the migrant workers prefer receiving their salaries in cash as they send most of their earnings to their families via money transfer agencies. They usually do not save anything or plan for their lives after migration which often forces them to re-migrate once they are back home. The digitisation element of our projects entails more than just being able to send money home conveniently. It provides migrant workers with financial education to help them plan for the future. Working with the private sector can be refreshing as they consider migrants and refugees to be their clients.

Are you a one-woman show?

S.T.: I have a national colleague, and together we cover the Gulf States as well as Jordan and Lebanon where we work with traditional SDC partners such as international and local NGOs. In the Gulf States, we focus more on policy work and engage with the private sector.

Has your policy work in the Gulf States borne fruit?

S.T.: Qatar, which has two million migrant workers making up 95 percent of its labour force, passed a few significant laws last year. For example, migrants can now change jobs without permission from their employers, and a minimum wage irrespective of their nationalities has been introduced. These are ground-breaking changes which are highly relevant for the entire region as we will most likely see more positive dynamics to follow.

You are based in Amman, but a lot of your work is in the Gulf. How do you keep in touch with what's happening over there?

S.T.: Before COVID-19, I travelled almost every

other week. Switzerland takes part in regional policy discussions such as the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, a forum for dialogue and cooperation between Asian countries of labour origin and destination. We also have frequent bilateral meetings with governments and other partners in the Gulf. Since COVID-19-related travel restrictions were introduced, our meetings have been mainly online or were postponed.

The Swiss support seems to be mainly on a policy level with lots of negotiations and advocacy work. How about keeping in touch with the migrants who benefit from your work?

S.T.: We and our partners have access to migrant workers which is very important as we need to know what's happening on the ground. When I go to the Gulf to attend a high-level meeting, for example, I start my work when I get into the taxi at the airport. The drivers are usually migrants who can fill me in on their situations and experiences. Access to domestic workers is harder, and I usually only meet them when I visit our partners' projects

What do these meetings usually look like?

S.T.: Sometimes I'm impressed, sometimes I'm disheartened. During one of my visits to a Swiss-supported garment factory in Jordan, for example, I came across some simple drawings. I was shocked to realise that the drawings were at the level of my 13-year-old daughter. This made me realise how fragile these women are, which is not surprising as most of them had never been abroad before and were thrown into a foreign environment where they have to work extremely hard. On the other hand, it is beautiful to see how they gradually gain confidence through earning their own salaries and



feel empowered as they have more control over their own lives.

What are the main projects you and your team manage?

S.T.: The ILO project is probably our flagship in the region. It aims at reforming the frameworks governing labour migration and working conditions for migrant workers, including domestic workers. We started the project with a focus on migrants from Asia but have expanded to Africa as migration patterns are changing. As most of the countries we work in lack trade unions, we help set up informal groups that allow workers to meet, exchange with one another, articulate concerns or common interests and create spaces to empower themselves. In Lebanon and Jordan, Switzerland supports NGOs that provide legal aid in cases of exploitation and create opportunities to learn new skills. We also

support refugees in Jordan and Lebanon by working on improving the working conditions for them to make a living without risking their health or well-being.

What are the main challenges in your work?

S.T.: Trying to change the legal framework takes an enormous amount of time and can be quite taxing. It's difficult to change a system that benefits so many people spanning from the migrants' home countries where recruitment agencies make a profit to the destination countries where migrants are often exploited by the employers. This is due to class or nationality and a system that allows employers to have power over workers. So, it is not surprising that any changes are met with a lot of resistance

How is Switzerland's support viewed by the governments of the countries you work in?

S.T.: Most donors in Lebanon and Jordan focus on supporting refugees and often do not have migrant workers on their radar. That's where Switzerland stands out as we are one of the few donors viewing labour migration as a potentially beneficial development issue. In Jordan and Lebanon, it is important to emphasise that we care about nationals, Syrian refugees and migrant workers alike as they face similar challenges and often compete for the same jobs, which is not the case in the Gulf States

At 23 percent, the unemployment rate in Jordan is unprecedentedly high. Why don't the Jordanians take on jobs in agriculture, for example?

S.T.: We financed a study in Jordan which looked at migrants, locals and refugees and at the

employers' perspectives. One interesting finding was that Jordanians are not generally against working in agriculture or construction, but they have clear expectations when it comes to working conditions, working hours and wages. These expectations are reasonable and in line with Jordanian law. So, it's not the lack of labour laws but the lack of enforcement mechanisms, which is an area we need to tackle. Our key message to the government is that if they want to reduce the number of migrant workers and increase the share of Jordanians, they will have to improve their working conditions. Otherwise they will not find Jordanians who are willing to take on these jobs. Even though it is not easy to convey, the message is clear: unless you start treating migrants better, you are not going to solve the problem.

This sounds like a tremendous task as you are not only trying to change the system but also society. Would you have an example for a success story?

S.T.: It is not up to us to change the system, it is up to the governments and societies, and they increasingly know that this is the only way forward. This, however, is an opportunity for Switzerland to support a change which is beneficial to the migrant workers, the host countries as well as their countries of origin. In Jordan and Lebanon we support social media campaigns targeting young people. It's very interesting to see that a new generation, who often spend more time with their domestic workers than with their parents, speak up in an effort to get rid of exploitive systems. Some of our partners work closely with this young generation and we have seen encouraging signs that attitudes are shifting.

Simone Troller has worked in the development and policy sector for 20 years. In 2014, she joined the SDC headquarters in Bern and moved to her current job in Amman in 2017. Before her assignments with the SDC, Simone worked for the United Nations, the OSCE and Human Rights Watch and has lived in Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Ukraine, the Fiji Islands, Brussels and Geneva. She studied foreign literature and linguistics at the University of Fribourg and continued her studies in the US and the Russian Federation before she completed a post-graduate degree in development studies at the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich.



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

**Swiss Agency for Development
and Cooperation SDC**