

Role Of NORKA In Skill Development And Employment Opportunities For Non-Resident Keralites

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Abstract

NORKA (Non-Resident Keralites Affairs) is a department of the Government of Kerala, established in 1996 as the first dedicated state agency in India to address the grievances of Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs) and strengthen their relationship with Kerala's government. Its field agency, NORKA Roots, set up in 2002, serves as the nodal organization for NRKs, offering welfare programs, skill development, employment assistance, and rehabilitation support for both emigrants and returnees. NORKA promotes the utilization of the global Keralite diaspora's resources and expertise for Kerala's development, acts as a conduit for investment, and sustains comprehensive support and services to empower NRKs worldwide. The Non-Resident Keralites' Affairs (NORKA) Department of the Government of Kerala plays a pivotal role in addressing the concerns of the vast diaspora and return migrants from Kerala. This article explores the role of NORKA in skill development and employment opportunities for Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs), analyzing its initiatives, policies, and impacts. It highlights the relevance of NORKA in bridging the skills gap, reintegrating return migrants, and creating sustainable employment prospects. The article also presents case studies, identifies challenges, and provides recommendations for strengthening NORKA's role in empowering NRKs.

Keywords:NORKA, Skill Development, Employment Opportunities, Non-Resident Keralites, Migration, Kerala Economy

INTRODUCTION

Kerala, often referred to as 'God's Own Country,' is known not only for its natural beauty and cultural heritage but also for its large expatriate population. Millions of Keralites live and work abroad, particularly in the Gulf countries. These Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs) contribute significantly to the state's economy through remittances. However, globalization, economic shifts, and technological advancements have created new challenges, including the need for continuous skill development and sustainable employment for NRKs. In this context, the Non-Resident Keralites' Affairs Department (NORKA), established in 1996, has emerged as a crucial institution addressing the welfare and skill needs of this diaspora population. NORKA serves as a single-window agency created to fulfill the Kerala Government's assurance to its expatriate community and institutionalize the support system for Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs). The department, established on December 6, 1996, is the first of its kind in India and maintains a robust administrative presence to strengthen the bond between Kerala and its diaspora, both abroad and elsewhere in India. NORKA Roots was launched in 2002 as the field agency to act as a counsel and an interface, implementing welfare schemes, channeling resources, and providing key services to NRKs. Within the Kerala House, New Delhi, two wings—the NORKA Cell and the NRK Development Office—work relentlessly to liaise with central government agencies, embassies, Malayalee associations, and support attestation, visa stamping, and recruitment services for Keralites outside the state and country. During crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, NORKA-Roots played a critical role by facilitating online registration for stranded Keralites wanting to return home and coordinating with various authorities to provide timely assistance. Key schemes include insurance cards, ambulance services, and grievance redressal mechanisms, making the department a vital lifeline and resource hub for the global Keralite community.

1. Key Historical Milestones and Examples of NORKA

1.1 1996 – Formation of NORKA

The Department of Non-Resident Keralites' Affairs (NORKA) was established in 1996 by the Government of Kerala, making it the first state in India to create a dedicated institution for its diaspora. This was a strategic move, considering that more than two million Keralites were working abroad—primarily in the Gulf countries—contributing significantly to Kerala's economy through remittances. Until then, issues faced by Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs) were dealt with in a fragmented manner, often leaving migrants and their families helpless. NORKA's creation institutionalized a single-window mechanism for redressing grievances, providing welfare support, and strengthening the emotional, social, and cultural ties between Kerala and its global diaspora. The establishment itself was a recognition of the migrant community's vital role in Kerala's development trajectory.

1.2 Early Mandates and Activities

In its early years, NORKA's mandates were shaped by the immediate and practical needs of migrants. Among the key areas of intervention were:

1. **Tracing Missing Keralites Abroad** – Many migrants, especially in the Gulf, faced situations of exploitation, abandonment, or loss of contact with families. NORKA acted as a nodal agency, liaising with Indian embassies and foreign governments to trace missing individuals and arrange their safe return.
2. **Securing Compensation for Victims** – Migrants often faced workplace accidents, sudden deaths, or unfair dismissals. NORKA intervened to ensure that compensation due to victims or their families was released in a timely manner, reducing their economic vulnerability.
3. **Addressing Harassment and Exploitation** – Instances of exploitation by employers and unauthorized recruitment agents were common in the 1990s. NORKA worked closely with the Protector of Emigrants and the Ministry of External Affairs to curb malpractice and provide grievance redressal.
4. **Facilitating Travel and Connectivity** – The demand for increased flights between Kerala and Gulf countries was a pressing issue. NORKA actively lobbied with the Ministry of Civil Aviation and airlines to improve flight connectivity, reducing travel hardships for migrants.
5. **Educational Support for NRKs' Children** – Many children of expatriates faced challenges in securing admissions in Kerala schools and colleges. NORKA launched initiatives to streamline educational opportunities, recognizing the importance of smooth reintegration of migrant families. These early mandates demonstrated NORKA's role as a **protector and facilitator**, setting the foundation for future expansion into skill development and employment creation.

1.3 2001 – Establishment of NORKA Cell in Delhi

By the early 2000s, Kerala recognized the need for a permanent liaison mechanism with the central government and foreign missions. In 2001, the state set up the NORKA Cell in New Delhi. This cell performed several critical functions:

- **Diplomatic Coordination:** It served as a bridge between Kerala and Indian embassies abroad, enabling smoother handling of migrant issues.
- **Consular Support:** The cell assisted with repatriation during crises and disasters.
- **Document Authentication:** It became a hub for the verification and attestation of educational and personal documents, an essential requirement for overseas employment.
- **Policy Advocacy:** The cell lobbied with central ministries for favorable migration policies, making Kerala's concerns more visible at the national level.

The creation of the Delhi Cell was a turning point in institutionalizing Kerala's migrant diplomacy.

1.4. 2002 – Creation of NORKA Roots

In 2002, the government dissolved the Non-Resident Keralites' Welfare Agency (NORKWA) and created NORKA Roots, a specialized field agency, to implement welfare schemes more efficiently. This transformation marked NORKA's shift from being just an advisory department to a proactive service provider.

NORKA Roots was entrusted with:

- Implementing welfare and insurance schemes for migrants.
- Offering legal and counseling services to stranded workers abroad.
- Acting as a licensed recruitment agency, ensuring ethical overseas recruitment.
- Coordinating crisis interventions during international conflicts or natural disasters.

Case Example: During the **COVID-19** pandemic (2020–21), NORKA Roots played a historic role in repatriating thousands of stranded Keralites. Through its digital registration portal and coordination with the Government of India's *Vande Bharat Mission*, NORKA facilitated chartered flights, quarantine arrangements, and post-return reintegration support. This intervention was hailed as a model of diaspora crisis management.

1.5 Cultural and Social Initiatives

Recognizing that diaspora welfare goes beyond economics, NORKA invested in cultural preservation and social integration. Major initiatives included:

- **Heritage Villages:** Programs designed to help elderly parents of NRKs engage in community life and cultural activities.
- **Promotion of Malayalam:** Language courses and cultural exchange programs aimed at children of expatriates, to keep them connected to Kerala's heritage.
- **Cultural Exchanges:** Organizing art, literature, and cultural festivals in partnership with NRK associations worldwide.
- **Employment-Mapping Databases:** Collection of data on skills, professions, and employment needs of Keralites abroad to better align state policies with labor market realities.

These initiatives reflected NORKA's vision of holistic diaspora engagement, balancing welfare, cultural identity, and economic contribution.

Evolution into a Comprehensive System

Over the years, NORKA evolved into a comprehensive support and empowerment system for migrants. Today, its services include:

- **Certificate Attestation & Verification** – Ensuring authenticity of documents for overseas employment.
- **Legal & Grievance Redressal** – Offering counseling, dispute settlement, and legal aid to migrants facing exploitation.
- **Insurance & Financial Support** – Providing accident and death insurance schemes, along with financial assistance for victims of abuse.
- **Skill Development & Reintegration** – Running training programs to equip migrants with internationally relevant skills and supporting their reintegration into Kerala's economy after return.

Through this evolution, NORKA has become a **benchmark model** in India for state-led diaspora engagement, inspiring similar initiatives in states like Andhra Pradesh, Punjab, and Tamil Nadu.

Institutional Setup and Objectives of NORKA

The Department of Non-Resident Keralites' Affairs (NORKA) was created by the Government of Kerala in 1996 to act as a nodal body for managing the affairs of the diaspora. Over time, the department evolved into a structured organization with clearly defined wings and field offices, designed to address both administrative and welfare concerns of Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs). The institutional setup is divided into headquarters, field agencies, and liaison cells.

1. Headquarters (Thiruvananthapuram)

- The NORKA headquarters functions as the policy-making and oversight body.
- It sets strategic directions, formulates welfare schemes, coordinates with the state and central governments, and liaises with international bodies.
- The department is headed by the Principal Secretary / Director, supported by senior officers overseeing various functional divisions like skill development, grievance redressal, finance, and overseas coordination.

2. Field Agency: NORKA Roots

- **NORKA Roots** is the operational arm of the department, tasked with implementing welfare programs, providing legal and administrative support, and serving as the first point of contact for returnees.

- It maintains regional offices in each district to handle local grievances, assist in reintegration, and facilitate skill development programs.

- Functions include:

- Monitoring and evaluating welfare schemes.
- Conducting skill training programs and reintegration workshops.
- Coordinating with recruitment agencies and employment providers.
- Liaising with banks, microfinance institutions, and self-help groups for entrepreneurship support.

3. **Liaison Cells**

- **NORKA Cell in Delhi** serves as a bridge with central ministries, Indian embassies, and consulates abroad.

- Tasks include:

- Coordination of repatriation efforts.
- Authentication of certificates and other documents.
- Policy advocacy with the central government.

4. **Specialized Units**

Over the years, NORKA has also created specialized units to address targeted needs:

- **Skill Development Wing:** Implements skill training programs, language courses, and pre-departure orientation for overseas employment.

- **Reintegration Wing:** Manages returnee welfare, entrepreneurship guidance, and employment mapping.

- **Legal and Grievance Redressal Wing:** Offers counseling, dispute resolution, and legal aid for migrants facing exploitation.

- **Research & Data Wing:** Maintains databases of diaspora professionals, employment trends, and remittance patterns to inform policy.

5. **Governance and Oversight**

- NORKA is directly under the **Government of Kerala's Department of Personnel and Administrative Reforms**, ensuring administrative accountability.

- Policies and schemes are periodically reviewed by advisory boards consisting of **government officials, diaspora representatives, and civil society experts**.

- Regular audits, impact assessments, and feedback mechanisms ensure transparency and efficiency in service delivery.

Objectives of NORKA

The overarching mission of NORKA is to protect, support, and empower Non-Resident Keralites, while leveraging their potential for Kerala's socio-economic development. The key objectives are:

1. **Protection of Migrants' Rights**

- Safeguard NRKs against exploitation by employers, recruitment agents, or foreign governments.

- Ensure access to legal remedies, compensation, and grievance redressal.

- Provide insurance schemes and emergency financial assistance for migrant workers.

2. **Facilitation of Skill Development**

- Identify skill gaps among emigrants and provide targeted training programs.

- Offer technical, vocational, and language training aligned with international labor market needs.

- Enhance employability and competitiveness of NRKs, both overseas and upon return.

3. **Support for Employment and Entrepreneurship**

- Enable self-employment through programs like NDPREM (NORKA Department Project for Return Emigrants).

- Offer financial support, mentorship, and access to microfinance institutions.

- Facilitate placements in domestic and international labor markets.

4. **Reintegration of Returnees**

- Assist returnees in adapting socially, culturally, and economically to Kerala after working abroad.

- Provide career guidance, reintegration training, and placement assistance.

- Monitor and evaluate reintegration programs for effectiveness.

5. **Cultural Preservation and Diaspora Engagement**

- Promote Malayalam language, heritage, and cultural identity among NRKs.

- Strengthen emotional and social ties between the diaspora and Kerala.

- Encourage diaspora participation in state development programs through investment and expertise.

6. **Research, Policy Formulation, and Advocacy**

- Conduct studies on migration patterns, employment trends, and remittance flows.

- Advise the state government on policies that impact NRKs.

- Develop evidence-based strategies for diaspora engagement, skill development, and crisis management.

Skill Development Initiatives of NORKA

Skill development has emerged as a **core mandate of NORKA**, aimed at enhancing employability, bridging skill gaps, and empowering Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs) to succeed both abroad and in Kerala. Recognizing the changing demands of global labor markets, NORKA has developed comprehensive training programs spanning technical, vocational, soft, and language skills. These initiatives target both prospective migrants and returnees.

Objectives of Skill Development Programs

1. **Enhance Employability** – Equip migrants with globally recognized skills for high-demand professions in sectors like healthcare, construction, IT, and hospitality.

2. **Bridge Skill Gaps** – Address mismatch between skills acquired in Kerala and the requirements of overseas employers.

3. **Facilitate Reintegration** – Help returnees adapt to domestic labor markets by upgrading technical and soft skills.

4. **Promote Entrepreneurship** – Develop managerial, marketing, and technical competencies for NRKs starting small enterprises in Kerala.

Major Skill Development Programs

1. **Skill Up gradation and Reintegration Training (SURT)**

- Duration: Typically 1–3 months.

- Focus: Technical skills, IT applications, soft skills, workplace communication, financial literacy, and vocational competencies.

- Objective: Prepare returnees for domestic employment or overseas assignments and improve adaptability in diverse work environments.

2. **NORKA Institute of Foreign Languages (NIFL)**

- Provides language training critical for international employment:

- German, French, Arabic, and other foreign languages.

- English proficiency courses and test preparation (IELTS, OET) for healthcare professionals.

- Supports placement assistance with overseas employers, particularly in healthcare and hospitality sectors.

- Includes cultural orientation to ease transition to foreign work environments.

3. **NDPREM – NORKA Department Project for Return Emigrants**

- Financial aid and subsidies to promote self-employment and entrepreneurship.

- Target sectors: Agriculture, fisheries, small industries, IT, and service enterprises.
- Includes skill training relevant to chosen business domains, ensuring technical proficiency alongside financial support.

4. Pre-Departure Orientation Programs

- Targeted at prospective migrants before leaving Kerala.
- Modules include:
 - Country-specific work culture and regulations.
 - Occupational safety and labor rights.
 - Financial planning, remittance management, and social adaptation.

5. Sector-Specific Training Programs

- Collaboration with industry bodies and private training institutes.
- Focus areas include:
 - Healthcare: Nurses, caregivers, paramedics.
 - IT & Technology: Software development, digital skills.
 - Construction & Engineering: Safety training, technical certifications.
 - Hospitality & Tourism: Culinary skills, customer service, and hotel management.

Implementation Mechanisms

- **District-Level NORKA Centers** – Conduct training programs locally to improve accessibility for returnees and prospective emigrants.
- **Public-Private Partnerships (PPP)** – Engage specialized institutes and industry partners for certified, high-quality training.
- **Online and Digital Learning Modules** – Especially relevant during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing migrants to continue training remotely.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation** – Assessment through tests, practical assignments, and placement tracking to ensure effectiveness and relevance of training.

Impact and Outcomes

1. Enhanced Employability

- Thousands of NRKs have successfully secured overseas employment after completing language and technical training.
- Healthcare professionals trained at NIFL have found placements in hospitals in Germany, the UK, and the Gulf.

2. Successful Reintegration

- Returnees entering domestic labor markets report higher employability due to SURT programs and sector-specific skill development.

3. Entrepreneurship Development

- NDPREM-trained returnees have started small businesses in Kerala, creating local jobs and diversifying the state economy.

4. Global Competitiveness

- By aligning training with international labor standards, NORKA ensures that Keralites remain competitive globally and adapt quickly to changing work environments.

Employment Facilitation and Reintegration of Return Migrants

The **reintegration of return migrants** has become a central focus of NORKA, recognizing that migration is not only about overseas employment but also about **smooth adaptation back into Kerala's economy and society**. NORKA facilitates this process through a combination of employment services, entrepreneurship support, training, and social integration programs.

Objectives of Employment Facilitation and Reintegration

1. **Ensure Sustainable Livelihoods** – Provide returnees with opportunities to earn a stable income within Kerala.
2. **Leverage Skills Acquired Abroad** – Translate overseas work experience into productive employment or entrepreneurship.

3. **Support Social and Cultural Reintegration** – Help returnees adjust socially and culturally to life back in Kerala.

4. **Encourage Self-Employment and Entrepreneurship** – Promote small businesses to stimulate local economic development.

Key Initiatives

1. **NDPREM – NORKA Department Project for Return Emigrants**

- Provides financial aid, interest subsidies, and capital support for entrepreneurial ventures.

- Target sectors: agriculture, fisheries, small-scale industries, IT, and services.

- Objective: Encourage returnees to create self-employment opportunities that also generate jobs for others.

2. **Placement Support Programs**

- NORKA organizes job fairs, placement drives, and employer tie-ups to match returnees with employment opportunities in Kerala.

- Collaborates with private companies, cooperatives, and public sector units to absorb skilled returnees.

- Maintains a database of returnees' skills and qualifications, helping employers identify suitable candidates.

3. **Counseling and Career Guidance**

- Prepares returnees for reintegration through career counseling sessions, workshops, and guidance on domestic labor market trends.

- Includes support for resume building, interview preparation, and business planning for those entering entrepreneurship.

4. **Skill Translation and Recognition**

- Facilitates Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for skills and certifications obtained abroad.

- Ensures that returnees' international experience is recognized by local employers, improving employability.

5. **Entrepreneurship Workshops**

- NORKA conducts workshops on financial literacy, business planning, marketing strategies, and regulatory compliance.

- Offers mentoring support through tie-ups with industry experts and local business incubators.

6. **Financial and Legal Support**

- Provides access to microfinance, subsidized loans, and legal aid for resolving disputes arising from employment abroad.

- Assists returnees in navigating bureaucratic processes such as licensing, registration, and tax compliance for starting businesses.

Impact of Employment Facilitation Programs

1. **Employment Generation**

- Thousands of returnees have been absorbed into local labor markets through placement drives, government schemes, and private sector tie-ups.

2. **Entrepreneurship Development**

- NDPREM has supported numerous returnees in establishing micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), contributing to local economic growth.

3. **Social Reintegration**

- Returnees benefit from counseling and community engagement programs, reducing **social isolation** and improving emotional well-being.

4. **Utilization of Overseas Skills**

- Technical and managerial skills gained abroad are effectively harnessed in local industries, improving productivity and innovation.

Case Examples

1. Healthcare Professionals

Returnee nurses trained abroad were provided placement in Kerala hospitals through NORKA's liaison with healthcare institutions. This ensured that their internationally acquired skills were fully utilized domestically.

2. Entrepreneurial Ventures

Returnees who received NDPREM funding established small businesses such as fisheries units, organic farms, IT service firms, and tourism-related ventures. These businesses not only provide employment to the owners but also generate job opportunities for local youth.

3. Crisis Response and Reintegration

During the COVID-19 pandemic, NORKA facilitated the reintegration of thousands of stranded NRKs, helping them secure temporary employment, skill training, and financial assistance upon returning to Kerala.

NORKA Roots and Its Global Impact

NORKA Roots, established in 2002 as the field agency of the Department of Non-Resident Keralites' Affairs (NORKA), is the operational backbone of Kerala's diaspora governance framework. Unlike the policy-oriented NORKA headquarters, NORKA Roots functions as the primary interface between Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs) and the state government, addressing welfare, skill development, employment, and reintegration. Over the years, its influence has expanded beyond domestic operations to have a notable global impact.

Mandate of NORKA Roots

1. Implement Welfare Schemes

- Provide financial assistance, insurance, and rehabilitation services to NRKs and returnees.
- Support vulnerable groups, including women migrants, distressed workers, and victims of overseas exploitation.

2. Facilitate Employment and Reintegration

- Offer skill development, job placement, and entrepreneurship support to returnees.
- Recognize skills acquired abroad and align them with domestic employment opportunities.

3. Serve as Liaison with Central and International Bodies

- Coordinate with Indian embassies, consulates, and international organizations for the welfare of Keralites abroad.
- Monitor recruitment practices, employment contracts, and adherence to labor laws internationally.

4. Crisis Management

- Act as a first responder during international emergencies, natural disasters, or geopolitical conflicts affecting NRKs

Operational Framework of NORKA

NORKA Roots operates through a multi-tiered structure designed to ensure accessibility and responsiveness:

1. Headquarters at Thiruvananthapuram

- Strategic planning, policy implementation, monitoring, and coordination.
- Oversight of welfare schemes, digital platforms, and data management.

2. District-Level Offices

- Each district office manages returnee welfare, skill training, and local employment facilitation.
- Maintains close interaction with local communities and businesses to ensure smooth reintegration.

3. Liaison Cells Abroad

- Although NORKA Roots itself does not maintain foreign offices, it collaborates with Indian embassies and consulates to track migrants, authenticate documents, and facilitate services globally.

4. Digital Platforms

- Online registration portals, grievance redressal systems, and skill mapping tools allow NRKs to access services remotely.
- Especially effective during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where stranded Keralites were digitally registered and repatriated efficiently.

Global Engagement and Programs

1. Recruitment and Certification

- NORKA Roots ensures licensed and ethical recruitment practices for Keralites seeking employment abroad.
- Coordinates with recruitment agencies, international employers, and certification bodies to match skills with global demand.

2. Crisis Management and Repatriation

- During events such as political unrest or health emergencies, NORKA Roots coordinates evacuation flights, financial support, and reintegration programs.
- Example: During the COVID-19 lockdowns, thousands of stranded Keralites in the Gulf and other countries were repatriated safely through NORKA Roots' coordinated effort.

3. Skill Mapping and Diaspora Data Management

- Maintains global employment databases of Keralites, including skill sets, professions, and locations.
- This database informs both Kerala's policy initiatives and international labor market engagement.

4. International Collaboration

- Works with NGOs, diaspora organizations, and foreign institutions to ensure migrants' rights and welfare.
- Promotes partnerships for skill development programs, knowledge exchange, and cultural integration abroad.

Impact on Global Diaspora

1. Enhanced Protection and Welfare

- NRKs receive timely support in legal disputes, wage recoveries, and emergency situations.
- Insurance schemes and financial assistance mitigate the risks of overseas employment.

2. Increased Employability

- Skill development and certification programs align NRKs with global labor market requirements.
- Healthcare, construction, IT, and hospitality sectors benefit from well-trained Keralite professionals abroad.

3. Strengthened Diaspora-State Relations

- NORKA Roots acts as a bridge between Keralites abroad and the Kerala government, fostering trust and engagement.
- Encourages diaspora participation in investment, cultural exchanges, and development initiatives in Kerala.

4. Crisis Response Excellence

- Global recognition for efficient handling of emergencies, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, sets NORKA Roots apart as a model for other states and countries.

Case Studies of Success Stories

The initiatives of NORKA and its field agency NORKA Roots have transformed the lives of countless NRKs. By combining skill development, employment facilitation, and reintegration support, these

programs have created **measurable socio-economic impact**. The following case studies illustrate the effectiveness of NORKA's interventions:

Case Study 1: Healthcare Professionals in Germany

- **Background:** Many Keralite nurses and allied healthcare professionals aspired to work in Germany but lacked language proficiency and specific certifications.
- **Intervention:** NORKA Roots, through the NORKA Institute of Foreign Languages (NIFL), provided German language training, professional orientation, and certification support for overseas employment.
- **Outcome:** Over 200 nurses secured placements in hospitals across Germany. They not only earned international salaries but also contributed to high-quality healthcare services abroad.
- **Impact:** This success strengthened Kerala's reputation as a provider of skilled healthcare professionals and encouraged further participation in overseas programs.

Case Study 2: Gulf Returnees and Entrepreneurship in Kerala

- **Background:** Returnees from Gulf countries often had savings but lacked guidance to establish sustainable businesses in Kerala.
- **Intervention:** NDPREM (NORKA Department Project for Return Emigrants) offered financial aid, entrepreneurship training, and mentorship. Returnees received skill-oriented workshops covering business planning, marketing, and financial management.
- **Outcome:** Returnees established small businesses in IT services, agribusiness, and tourism. For instance:
 - A Gulf returnee started an organic farming venture, employing local youth and supplying regional markets.
 - Another initiated an IT solutions company, integrating skills acquired abroad with local demand.

- **Impact:** These ventures generated self-employment for the entrepreneurs and jobs for local communities, fostering economic development in Kerala.

Case Study 3: COVID-19 Repatriation and Reintegration

- **Background:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of Keralites were stranded abroad due to lockdowns and flight cancellations. Many were in distress, facing uncertainty regarding health, employment, and repatriation.
- **Intervention:** NORKA Roots created a digital registration portal for stranded NRKs, coordinated with Indian embassies, arranged chartered flights, and facilitated quarantine and reintegration services in Kerala.
- **Outcome:** Over 50,000 Keralites were safely repatriated. Many were provided with temporary employment, skill development programs, and financial support upon return.
- **Impact:** This initiative not only ensured the safety of Keralites abroad but also demonstrated efficient digital governance and crisis management capabilities of NORKA Roots.

Case Study 4: Women Returnees Empowerment

- **Background:** Women returnees, especially those who worked as domestic workers abroad, faced unique challenges such as social reintegration and limited employment opportunities.
- **Intervention:** NORKA Roots implemented women-focused skill training programs, including tailoring, IT skills, and small-scale entrepreneurship workshops. Financial support was provided for business startups.
- **Outcome:** Women returnees successfully launched micro-enterprises, such as catering services, boutique tailoring units, and daycare centers.
- **Impact:** Empowered women became financially independent, contributing to household income, and serving as role models for other women in the diaspora community.

Case Study 5: IT Professionals Returning from Abroad

- **Background:** Kerala's IT professionals returning from countries like the UAE, the US, and Europe often struggled with matching overseas experience to domestic opportunities.

- **Intervention:** NORKA Roots facilitated placement support, skill recognition programs, and networking with local companies. Training programs in emerging technologies like cloud computing, data analytics, and AI were also offered.

- **Outcome:** Many returnees secured positions in Kerala-based IT firms or launched start-ups leveraging international experience.

- **Impact:** This strengthened the knowledge economy in Kerala, introduced innovative practices, and reduced brain drain.

Through these interventions, NORKA has set benchmarks for diaspora engagement, showing how targeted government programs can transform migration challenges into opportunities for socio-economic development.

Challenges and Policy Gaps

Despite its considerable achievements, NORKA faces several structural, operational, and policy-related challenges in effectively addressing the needs of Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs). Identifying these gaps is crucial for enhancing the efficiency, impact, and global reach of its programs.

1. Resource and Funding Constraints

- **Limited Budget Allocation**

NORKA relies primarily on state government funding, which may not be sufficient to scale programs to meet the growing demand of NRKs, especially in times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Dependency on External Partnerships**

For specialized training and overseas engagement, NORKA often depends on private institutions, NGOs, and central government support, which can create delays and inconsistencies in program implementation.

2. Skill Mismatch and Rapid Technological Change

- **Evolving Global Labor Market**

The demand for new-age skills in IT, AI, healthcare, and renewable energy often outpaces the training programs offered by NORKA.

- **Limited Customization**

Current skill development initiatives may not fully account for **industry-specific standards** in destination countries, leading to underutilization of trained manpower.

3. Challenges in Reintegration of Returnees

- **Economic Saturation**

High numbers of returnees during crises can saturate local labor markets, making employment placement challenging.

- **Underemployment**

Skilled returnees sometimes accept jobs **below their qualification level**, resulting in skill wastage and economic dissatisfaction.

- **Lack of Structured Reintegration Programs**

While counseling and pre-departure programs exist, comprehensive long-term reintegration frameworks that include mentorship, monitoring, and follow-up support are limited.

4. Limited Outreach to Vulnerable and Remote Communities

- **Geographical Barriers**

Many rural districts in Kerala have limited access to NORKA's district offices, reducing program reach for potential migrants and returnees.

- **Marginalized Groups**

Women migrants, domestic workers, and low-income NRKs may face challenges in accessing skill development, legal aid, and financial support due to social, cultural, or logistical barriers.

5. Digital Divide and Technology Dependence

- **Access to Online Services**

While digital platforms for registration, training, and grievance redressal have improved efficiency, not all NRKs have access to or familiarity with technology.

- **Cybersecurity Concerns**

Increasing digitalization raises risks related to data privacy and security, particularly for sensitive migrant information.

6. Policy Gaps in International Coordination

- **Limited Presence Abroad**

NORKA Roots primarily coordinates with Indian embassies and consulates rather than maintaining independent overseas offices, which can reduce responsiveness in regions with high migrant populations.

- **Inconsistent International Collaboration**

Coordination with foreign governments and international NGOs sometimes lacks consistency, leading to delays in crisis management and legal support.

- **Regulatory Challenges**

Policies governing overseas recruitment, labor protection, and migrant rights may not always align with destination countries' legal frameworks, limiting the effectiveness of NORKA's interventions.

7. Monitoring and Evaluation Limitations

- **Data Gaps**

While NORKA maintains databases of NRKs and returnees, longitudinal tracking of career progression and reintegration success is limited.

- **Impact Assessment**

Formal evaluations of skill development programs and employment initiatives are not conducted systematically, making it difficult to measure program effectiveness and ROI (Return on Investment).

Recommendations to Address Challenges

1. Increased Funding and Resource Allocation

- Establish a dedicated NRK Development Fund with contributions from the diaspora and public-private partnerships.

2. Adaptive Skill Development Programs

- Regularly update training modules to align with global labor market trends and industry-specific certifications.

3. Structured Reintegration Programs

- Implement mentorship, follow-up counseling, and placement tracking for returnees.

4. Enhanced Outreach to Vulnerable Groups

- Mobile skill development units and remote counseling can reach rural and marginalized communities.

5. Strengthened Digital Infrastructure

- Expand online portals while improving cybersecurity, tech literacy, and remote accessibility.

6. Improved International Coordination

- Formalize partnerships with foreign governments and international agencies to streamline legal aid, recruitment, and crisis response.

7. Systematic Monitoring and Evaluation

- Introduce key performance indicators (KPIs), longitudinal studies, and third-party assessments to measure program impact.

Comparative Perspectives with Other States and Countries

The Kerala model of diaspora engagement through **NORKA** and **NORKA Roots** is often cited as a benchmark in India. However, comparing it with other states and countries provides insights into both its strengths and areas for potential improvement.

1. Comparison with Other Indian States

a. Andhra Pradesh and Telangana

- Both states have departments dedicated to Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), primarily focusing on investment promotion and grievance redressal.

- Unlike NORKA, these states have less emphasis on skill development and reintegration programs for returnees.

- Their welfare initiatives are more financially oriented, such as investment facilitation schemes and repatriation support, but do not provide comprehensive training or pre-departure orientation.

b. Punjab

- Punjab's NRI Cell focuses on maintaining cultural ties and attracting diaspora investments, especially in real estate and agriculture.

- Skill development and reintegration programs are limited and not systematically organized.

- Punjab relies more on diaspora philanthropy and cultural initiatives than on structured employment facilitation programs.

c. Tamil Nadu

- Tamil Nadu has a Department of Overseas Indians, which offers some welfare schemes, scholarships, and investment facilitation.

- Skill development initiatives exist but are smaller in scale compared to NORKA's programs like SURT and NDPREM.

KeyInsight:

Kerala stands out among Indian states due to its holistic approach, combining welfare, skill development, employment facilitation, reintegration, and cultural engagement, whereas other states primarily focus on financial or cultural ties.

2. Comparison with International Models

a. Philippines – Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA)

- OWWA is a government agency managing the welfare of Filipino migrant workers.

- **Strengths:** Comprehensive insurance, welfare programs, and legal aid for overseas workers.

- **Limitations:** Less focus on skill development and reintegration programs for returnees compared to NORKA.

- **Key Learning:** Kerala's model integrates skill development and reintegration, which is comparatively stronger than the Philippine model.

b. Mexico – Institute for Mexicans Abroad (IME)

- IME focuses on connecting the Mexican diaspora with the home country through cultural programs, investments, and civic engagement.

- **Strengths:** Diaspora engagement is highly structured and widespread.

- **Limitations:** Employment and skill facilitation are minimal.

- **Key Learning:** NORKA's focus on skill-building and employment is a distinguishing factor.

c. Ireland – Emigrant Support Programs

- Ireland maintains emigrant support networks providing guidance, cultural ties, and investment facilitation.

- **Strengths:** Strong engagement with highly skilled professionals abroad.

- **Limitations:** Programs are mostly advisory; active reintegration schemes are limited.

- **Key Learning:** Kerala's combination of practical reintegration, skill training, and employment facilitation is more extensive.

3. Comparative Strengths of NORKA

1. Holistic Diaspora Approach

- Combines welfare, employment, skill development, cultural preservation, and reintegration, unlike most other states or countries.

2. Crisis Response Capacity

- Demonstrated effectiveness during COVID-19 and other emergencies, coordinating repatriation, legal aid, and reintegration support.

3. Integration of Skill Development with Employment

- Programs like SURT and NDPREM ensure that skills acquired abroad or in training programs translate into practical employment opportunities or entrepreneurial ventures.

4. Digital and Data-Driven Governance

- Online portals, skill databases, and diaspora tracking allow efficient service delivery and policy planning.

4. Comparative Gaps and Lessons

- **GlobalBestPractices:**

Countries like the Philippines and Ireland have robust insurance and welfare mechanisms; Kerala could expand insurance coverage and social security schemes for migrants.

- **Scalability:**

NORKA is largely Kerala-focused, whereas countries like Mexico and the Philippines have national-level programs, enabling greater reach and diaspora participation.

- **InvestmentPromotion:**

While NORKA focuses on employment and reintegration, other states and countries emphasize which could be strengthened in Kerala for larger economic impact.

Recommendations for Strengthening NORKA's Role

Despite its significant achievements, NORKA faces operational, policy, and structural challenges that need to be addressed to maximize its impact on Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs). The following recommendations aim to **strengthen NORKA's role** in diaspora welfare, skill development, employment facilitation, and global engagement.

1. Expand Skill Development Programs

- **AlignTrainingwithGlobalMarketNeeds**

Regularly update and diversify skill development programs to include emerging sectors such as **AI, robotics, renewable energy, digital marketing, healthcare technology, and green construction**.

- **CertificationandAccreditation**

Ensure that skill training programs are internationally recognized, enabling NRKs to access employment opportunities abroad seamlessly.

- **TailoredTrainingforVulnerableGroups**

Design specialized programs for women, domestic workers, and youth from rural areas to enhance their employability and social empowerment.

2. Strengthen Reintegration and Employment Facilitation

- **StructuredReintegrationFramework**

Develop long-term programs including **mentorship, career counseling**, placement tracking, and financial guidance to support returnees effectively.

- **EntrepreneurshipEcosystem**

Expand initiatives like NDPREM to include business incubation, access to venture capital, and mentorship for returnees launching enterprises.

- **JobMatchingPlatforms**

Create a digital employment portal linking returnees with domestic and international employers, leveraging skill databases for efficient job matching.

3. Enhance Welfare and Protection Mechanisms

- **InsuranceandSocialSecurity**

Introduce comprehensive insurance schemes covering health, unemployment, and work-related accidents for NRKs.

- **LegalAidandGrievanceRedressal**

Strengthen mechanisms to resolve disputes with employers, recruitment agencies, or foreign authorities efficiently.

- **CrisisPreparedness**

Build rapid-response teams to manage emergencies abroad, including health crises, natural disasters, or geopolitical conflicts.

4. Increase Digitalization and Data-Driven Governance

- **Digital Platforms for NRKs**

Expand online portals for registration, grievance redressal, skill development, and employment opportunities.

- **Advanced Data Analytics**

Use **AI and big data** to analyze migration trends, skill gaps, and employment patterns, enabling informed policy-making.

- **Remote Training Programs**

Develop online skill training modules to reach NRKs in remote locations or during emergencies.

5. Foster International Collaboration

- **Global Liaison Offices**

Establish **regional liaison centers** in countries with high Keralite populations to facilitate rapid support and engagement.

- **Partnerships with International Organizations**

Collaborate with **ILO, UNDP, foreign governments, and NGOs** to ensure compliance with labor standards and promote skill certification.

- **Diaspora Investment Programs**

Encourage NRKs to invest in Kerala's infrastructure, MSMEs, and startups, linking diaspora wealth with local development.

6. Improve Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms

- **Performance Metrics**

Implement Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to measure program effectiveness, skill placement rates, and reintegration success.

- **Impact Assessment Studies**

Conduct regular third-party evaluations to identify gaps and assess the socio-economic impact of NORKA initiatives.

- **Feedback Mechanisms**

Engage NRKs through surveys, digital feedback platforms, and focus groups to continuously improve services.

7. Promote Cultural and Social Integration

- **Cultural Orientation Programs**

Provide pre-departure and reintegration programs emphasizing cultural adaptation, language, and community engagement.

- **Heritage and Diaspora Programs**

Encourage NRKs to participate in Kerala's cultural, educational, and philanthropic initiatives to strengthen emotional ties.

CONCLUSION

The Department of Non-Resident Keralites' Affairs (NORKA) and its operational arm, NORKA Roots, have emerged as pioneering models of diaspora engagement and governance. Since its establishment in 1996, NORKA has evolved into a comprehensive support system for Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs), addressing the full spectrum of migrant needs, from welfare and skill development to employment facilitation, reintegration, and cultural preservation.

Kerala's approach stands out for its holistic and integrated framework, combining:

1. **Skill Development Initiatives** – Programs such as SURT, NIFL, and sector-specific training ensure that NRKs acquire globally competitive skills for both overseas employment and domestic reintegration.

2. **Employment Facilitation and Reintegration** – NDPREM and structured placement support enable returnees to translate overseas experience into sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurial ventures in Kerala.

- In conclusion, NORKA exemplifies how a state-led, holistic, and proactive approach can transform migration challenges into opportunities for human capital development, economic growth, and cultural continuity. As Kerala continues to refine and expand NORKA's initiatives, it sets an inspiring example for other Indian states and countries seeking to harness the potential of their diaspora for national and regional development.

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