



Young women in Ho Pong, Shan State. © Ko Oo 2017

Executive summary

Capitalising Human Mobility for Poverty Alleviation and Inclusive Mobility in Myanmar (CHIME) study

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, Myanmar has experienced a marked increase in migration, coinciding with a period of rapid economic growth.¹ Internal and international migrants already represent 26 per cent of Myanmar's total population.² These migrants primarily work in low-skilled occupations and come from poor rural households. By migrating, they seek to improve long-term prospects for themselves and their families. Their migration is driven by interconnected structural and social factors, including rural poverty, lack of viable employment opportunities, earning differences between origin and destination, aspirations for modern work and/or a modern lifestyle, the desire to break away from chronic indebtedness, and environmental changes and conflict.

While migration is a crucial part of development, its ability to reduce poverty at the household level is contingent upon the effective management of the multiple risks and hardships faced by migrant households. Over the long term, the benefits of migration can offset hardships and downward slides into poverty by increasing the earnings of migrants and opening up new opportunities to them and their families. However, there is a need for policymaking to

better align with and support the long-term aspirations of migrants and their families and acknowledge the contribution they make to Myanmar's development.

The “Capitalising Human Mobility for Poverty Alleviation and Inclusive Development for Myanmar” (CHIME) study aims to address the knowledge gap on labour migration and its relationship with poverty and development in four areas in Myanmar: Ayeyarwady Region, Mandalay Region, Rakhine State and Shan State. CHIME employed a mixed-methods design, including a quantitative household survey covering a total of randomly sampled 3,116 households from 172 enumerated areas (EAs)³ and qualitative in-depth interviews of 192 individuals who were purposely sampled from lower-economic strata households, collected in two rounds in 2017. The quantitative samples were intended to be representative of rural households in each of the four identified states/regions, and the findings are regionally representative for Ayeyarwady and Mandalay regions. The study cannot claim to be representative of Rakhine and Shan States due to various limitations to accessing sampled villages.⁴

The CHIME project was implemented by a consortium composed of the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population; the University of Sussex; Metta Development Foundation; and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Financial support was provided by the Livelihoods and Food Security Fund (LIFT). The findings of the study are summarised as follows:

2. Migration patterns and characteristics of migrants

The household survey identified growing levels of out-migration from rural households in all surveyed regions and states, with approximately a quarter of all households surveyed having at least one migrant. Among surveyed regions and states, Mandalay had the highest percentage of households with migrants (36 per cent of all households surveyed), followed by Rakhine (26 per cent), Shan (21 per cent)⁵, and Ayeyarwady (19 per cent).

The survey found that **migrants were young – generally in their 20s** – compared to the wider population. They were likely to be leaving parents behind, but less likely to have started a family. Correspondingly, the survey suggested that heads of households were less likely to migrate than their younger family members, such as sons, daughters and grandchildren. These patterns, regarding age and migration, were consistent across the areas of origin, and supported the study's observation that **work is the primary reason for migration**.

Overall, the survey found that individuals who had completed a primary education were more than twice as likely to migrate, either internally or internationally, compared to individuals who had not completed a primary education. This pattern was consistent across the areas of origin. Interesting patterns also emerged in comparing levels of education among internal and international migrants. International migrants were more likely than internal migrants to have either middle or high school education. This trend was most prominent in Mandalay and Ayeyarwady. However, individuals with the highest level of education (i.e. higher education) were far more likely to migrate internally than to migrate internationally or remain at home.

Migrant destinations were many and varied across the surveyed regions. The majority (74 per cent) of migrants during the study period were internal and migrated within Myanmar, although migrants from Rakhine were migrating both internally and internationally in almost equal numbers. **Men were nearly four times as likely to migrate internationally than women** (79 per cent men and 21 per cent women), **while almost equal numbers of women and men were found to be migrating internally** (52 per cent and 48 per cent women). It is important to note that the Census data shows a greater degree of female migration in both international and internal migration nationally (61 per cent men and 39 per cent women, and 47 per cent men and 53 per cent women respectively), the surveyed states and regions combined have relatively high incidence of male migration.



Scenes from daily life. Nuang U, Mandalay Region. © Ko Oo 2017.

Thailand, Malaysia and China were the most popular international destinations, although there were regional variations in the share of migrants in destinations. Most internal migrants moved either within their state or region of origin (between 43 per cent to 66 per cent), except for migrants from Ayeyarwady, the majority of whom (65 per cent) migrated to Yangon Region, the second most popular destination for internal migrants from all other surveyed states or regions. Overall, **41 per cent of internal migrants captured in this study migrated within their regions/states of origin, while 37 per cent migrated to Yangon.**

The study also found that **there was a low incidence of return** and that there were ten times as many current migrants as return migrants, highlighting a trend towards strong net out-migration from rural Myanmar in recent years. The survey data on returns showed that most returnees were returning from internal destinations and most internal returnees, if not all, were returning from locations within their own region/state. Nevertheless, **returnee data shows the persistence of traditional seasonal migration patterns – particularly in Mandalay,** where the majority of returnees were located. Personal reasons for return were most frequently cited by return migrants in the other surveyed areas.

3. Drivers of migration

The most frequently cited reason for migration among both men and women was to seek improvement in employment or income. Almost 50 per cent of all household responses included work- and income-related motives for migrating, while 14 per cent of responses included family-

-related motives. Again, both men and women cited family reasons, including marriage and reuniting with a family member at destination. The appeal of new lifestyles in urban areas was also a reason given by 10 per cent of respondents.

The study highlights the enormous significance of social drivers and how closely they are intertwined with economic drivers, including a desire to change work/job circumstances, specifically, away from physically demanding and low-status work in rural areas. Phrases often heard during the qualitative interviews were a desire to “not to work under the sun” or “in the mud” and aspirations to “wear fashionable clothes and hairstyles.” Changing the social status of the family back home was also a driver for migration because getting into initial debt to finance migration – and later receiving remittances – is perceived as being more respectable than the humiliation of borrowing from a local moneylender.

4. Enabling factors of migration

While there were multiple reasons for men and women to choose to migrate, **the ability to migrate is significantly dependent on access to information, the presence and action of facilitators of migration, and available migration financing options.** Many respondents reported more than one source of information. Family and friends at home and at destination were common sources of information about migration, much of which related to the job search, reflecting the importance of migrant networks in Myanmar.



Household interview in Myaung Mya, Ayeyarwady Region. © Ko Oo 2017

Almost a third of men and a quarter of women in the study reportedly used brokers or recruitment agencies to migrate internationally. The proportion was even higher among migrants from Mandalay and, to a lesser extent, Rakhine. There were various ways in which brokers facilitated migration. Common scenarios included family members having already identified the migrant's destination and occupation, but needing the help of a broker to facilitate the process. Other scenarios saw migrants completely dependent on brokers for everything – from arranging travel and lodging to eventual job placement. Some brokers and recruitment agencies also covered upfront costs of workers' migration, recouping them through wages migrants received at destination. These costs in particular, placed irregular migrants in precarious situations where they had little means of redress in case of deception and exploitation.

In contrast, **few internal migrants migrated with the help of brokers and recruitment agencies.** Instead, they took advantage of personal networks at origin and destination. The survey found very few incidents of migration without any form of facilitation.

5. Costs and financing of migration

The upfront costs associated with international migration are significantly higher than those associated with internal migration. Noting that the study could not yield comprehensive data from the sampled households on the cost of migration,⁶ the reported figures show that the mean cost of international migration was 1,403,371 Kyat and 157,733 Kyat for internal migration. Family and relatives are the most important sources of migration financing: 38 per cent of international migrants and 56 per cent of internal migrants relied on family and relatives in their places of origin, with others relying on family and relatives at destination to a lesser extent. International migrants were proportionately more likely to use loans – from relatives, friends and brokers – than internal migrants, reflecting the higher costs of migrating across national borders. When migrants borrowed money to finance their international migration, families were the most common source of loans, followed by friends and brokers.

Loans played hardly any role in financing internal migration. However, it is important to note that households may be taking up loans not to finance migration, but to finance daily expenses both for the migrants and their families until the income through migration is established.

6. Employment patterns

Migration allows members of rural households to move from unstable employment or unemployment into stable employment.⁷ The survey found that the majority of the population covered in the study were not in employment prior to migration. The percentage who were economically active prior to migration varied from region to region: 56, 37 and 35 per cent of migrants from Mandalay, Rakhine and Ayeyarwady, respectively, were economically active prior to migration. About half of people who were economically inactive were in school before migrating; others were engaging in unpaid family businesses or unable to find work.

At destination, the majority of migrants moved into regularly paid employment, with only 7 to 13 per cent of migrants from Ayeyarwady, Mandalay and Shan holding casual and/or irregularly paid jobs. The figure rose to 26 per cent of both internal and international migrants from Rakhine.

Migration contributes significantly to sectoral mobility. While around 62 per cent of all migrants were employed in agriculture, fisheries and forestry prior to migrating, only 13 per cent continued to work in this sector at destination, while the rest were in a variety of other employment sectors, including general services, accommodation and food services, and manufacturing. There were differences in sectors employing mostly internal migrants versus international migrants and gender variations – for instance, men were much more likely to be working in construction than women in both internal and international migration, while women were more concentrated in accommodation and food services especially in international migration, and manufacturing in internal migration.

7. Remittance patterns

Over 50% of all migrants and 66% of economically active migrants sent remittances home in the 12 months prior to the survey. Overall, women were just as likely as men to remit.

International migrants from Rakhine were much less likely to remit than international migrants from other surveyed regions. This may be linked

to the aforementioned fact that they were more likely to be in casual and precarious work than international migrants from other regions.

82% of households with international migrants received remittances through banks and other formal financial institutions. This finding contrasts with those of other studies, which found informal international remittance transfers, commonly known as hundi, to be highly prevalent. This may be explained in terms of limited availability of hundi infrastructure in the regions where the study was conducted, and that the migrants may use hundi when they remit the money home, but the hundi then transfer the amount through banks for the families to pick up from bank branches.

The survey also found that only 41 per cent of internal migrants remitted money through formal remittance channels, with roughly half using informal means, such as sending money through friends and relatives, or giving it directly to their families during visits. No respondents reported receiving remittances via mobile phone transfer, which may reflect limitations in the penetration of technology and services in the surveyed areas.

8. Migration and household welfare

The relationship between migration and household welfare outcomes is complex.⁸ The survey data did not find evidence of any direct relationship between changes in poverty rankings and households having migrants (or, in the cases they do, the destination of those migrants). This is not very surprising since there are many channels through which migration may affect the welfare of the origin households. Migration is risky and benefits for the origin household, which are not guaranteed, may take time to accrue.

The study nonetheless produced limited evidence of migration impacting positively on the welfare of migrants' families back home. Having an international migrant who sent remittances to the household back home was associated with improvements in subjective poverty and asset ownership, although on average households with an internal migrant who sent remittances did not appear to be better-off than households not receiving remittances.

The study also showed that remittances were used for a variety of purposes. The most common use of remittances was the purchase of

food, which was one of the three main uses of remittances for more than half of migrant-sending households, especially those with internal migrants. Household asset⁹ purchase was another common use of international remittances in Mandalay and Rakhine, although much less so for internal migrant remittances; education, however, was found to be a common use of internal remittances. In Mandalay and Ayeyarwady, but much less so in Rakhine, remittances were also used for agricultural production.

9. Gender relations and opportunities for women

Gender norms appear to be shifting due to migration, as well as wider changes in society. While it is difficult to say whether migration has resulted in a transformation in gender roles or the division of labour and assets within households, it is clear that **migration has opened up new opportunities for women.** Young female migrants' opportunities are not only work-related. Younger generations of women migrating to cities have new opportunities for employment in factories and services, albeit opportunities that often require migrants to tolerate precarious and/or dangerous working conditions. However, through migration, young female migrants also experience new opportunities for education, personal growth, dressing and lifestyle. Meanwhile, at home, their social status within the family also changes. The interviews showed families articulating pride in their daughters' achievements and respecting their contribution to the household as formal income earners.

10. Spatial dynamics of livelihoods strategies and spread-out families

The study paints a picture of multilocal or spread-out families¹⁰ where migrants and family members are not only working towards shared goals for the household as a unit, but also pursuing individual strategies for self-development, which is especially the case for members of the younger generation who may aspire to move away from traditional occupations available in rural areas. Striking in the accounts of migrants and their families was how migrant siblings supported each other and other members of the family back home, going beyond the support dynamics between parents and migrant children that is often assumed in household models of migration and remittances. Equally striking was the sense of obligation children feel towards their parents, where migration was seen as a way of supporting parents in times of difficulty or old age.

11. Impacts on community life

Migration appears to be having both positive and negative impacts at the community level.

On the one hand, the study found migrants investing in community infrastructure and contributing to social occasions and events at origin. In some cases, migrants had also set up low-interest loan facilities for villagers who wished to start businesses or were helping to fund those with medical needs.

On the other hand, some interviews showed how migration had adversely impacted on social events and village life when so many adults are away. In some cases, tasks previously performed by adult males were transferred to young boys; in others, women took up traditionally male roles and responsibilities. Whether or not this had structural impacts on their social status or other aspects of their well-being are not clear and would need to be investigated further.

A small number of migrants' family members back home mentioned the difficulties arising from labour shortages in agricultural work. Nonetheless, from the perspective of migrants' families back home, impacts on the labour allocation for social events appeared to be of greater concern as it had increased the burden of the remaining villagers.

12. Stages of the migration cycle

The impacts of migration in the short term are almost always a combination of labour depletion and heavy expenditure. This often comes at a time when the family had already suffered setbacks: shocks such as serious illness or injury of a breadwinner, and heavy debts to cover, for example, education costs, can trigger migration in the first place. For the migrants themselves, the initial period is fraught with uncertainty and risk.

These initial disadvantages, costs and risks are gradually replaced with more prosperity for the migrant and his/her family. The significance of sibling-based and filial piety-based social capital and financial support in managing risks and lifting other family members out of poverty is evident. Taking into account the changes that occur in migrants' experiences over a long period of time, the study suggests **it is important to understand how impacts and outcomes occur at various stages of the migration cycle.**

13. The CHIME findings in context

The CHIME study shows that Myanmar has a highly mobile population in the four regions studied and provides a richly textured account of the variations in the drivers and outcomes of migration. The research highlights the complex link between poverty and migration, in which migration may be perceived as the only way out of interlocking problems of debt and extreme poverty, but at the same time migration can lead to further borrowing and debts that are incurred to finance it. In the long term the benefits of migration can offset these initial hardships and downward slides into poverty by increasing the earnings of migrants and opening up new opportunities for them and their families. **It is these long-term goals that migrants have in mind when they migrate and there is a need for policy to move to be aligned with people's aspirations.**

While it is certainly true that economic and infrastructure gaps between migrant source areas and destinations combined with extreme weather events, a lack of social security, extreme poverty and the inability to cope with shocks as well as accumulating debts can precipitate the decision to migrate, it must be recognised that these are inextricably tied to aspirations for a better life, further education and modern lifestyles, especially for younger people. Migration is facilitated by improved communications, road networks and transport facilities, transnational ties as well as social networks and brokers. As Myanmar continues to develop, and as more opportunities open up in urban areas as well as neighbouring countries, migration is likely to grow. It is imperative that steps are taken to address mobility in such a way that the positive impacts are supported and magnified where possible while risks and vulnerabilities are reduced.

The CHIME study is available in the following formats in English and Myanmar:

- Full report
- Regional briefs (Ayeyarwady, Mandalay, Rakhine)
- Thematic briefs (Gender, Agriculture, Urbanisation, Poverty and Indebtedness, Remittances, Social Impacts)

For more information about the CHIME study, please email iomyangon@iom.int



Interview in Kyaukse Township, Mandalay Region. © Ko Oo 2017

Endnotes

1. Myanmar Department of Population (DOP), *Myanmar Population and Housing Census 2014* (DOP, Nay Pyi Taw, 2015); DOP, *Myanmar Population and Housing Census 2014* (DOP, Nay Pyi Taw, 2016); United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), "International Migrant Stock: By destination and origin", dataset, available from: www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates17.shtml UN DESA (accessed 28 May 2018; and World Bank, *Livelihoods and Social Change in Rural Myanmar: QSEM Series Round Five Report* (World Bank, Yangon, 2016).
2. Of the total 51,486,253 persons identified by the Myanmar Population and Housing Census in 2014 (including both enumerated and non-enumerated population), it counted 9,391,126 internal migrants and estimated 4.25 million international migrants.
3. Randomly sampled enumerated areas were generated by the Department of Population using the Census Master Sampling Frame.
4. Of 860 households (HHs) in 43 EAs targeted in each surveyed region and state, the following were the actual coverage of the sample rural HHs and EAs (Ayeyarwady - 860 HHs in 43 EAs, Mandalay - 840 HHs in 43 EAs, Rakhine - 779 HHs in 39 EAs, and Shan - 340 HHs in 18 EAs). In case of Shan State, the accessed EAs were concentrated in Taunggyi District, Kengtung Township and Tachileik township where the access was granted, so the findings are reflective only of these specific areas.
5. Since the data collection in Shan State was only conducted in very specific areas where the survey was allowed (see endnote 4), the findings from Shan State should be interpreted as findings from specific areas in Eastern and Southern Shan.
6. The limitation of data collected on migration cost is that the household members reporting on the cost may not know the full extent of the actual cost incurred and vague recall.
7. The study defined stable employment as employment with regularity in work and income, and unstable employment as meaning otherwise.
8. In this study, welfare outcomes were analysed as single combined welfare index using principal component analysis of three kinds of indexes: self-reported poverty measure in six value levels, asset ownership of 29 pre-identified asset items, and living conditions based on 10 indicators including the types of materials used for different parts of dwellings, types of fuel, water, latrine, and access to electricity.
9. Such as electronic appliances, furniture and transportation items.
10. Various terms have been used to describe families/households split across locations, including "transnational families and stretched families.

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