

# Migration and agriculture

Migration dynamics, patterns and impacts from the CHIME research project



Farming at Pin Long, Shan State. © Ko Oo 2017

## Highlights

- ▶ The relationship between agricultural land ownership and migration is complex and region-specific.
- ▶ Households site economic factors as the major driver motivating agricultural workers and small farmers to leave their villages. Aspiration for non-farm, modern and less physically demanding employment was also frequently expressed.
- ▶ Migrants often move away from agricultural employment through migration, but agriculture remains an important employment sector for internal migrants – particularly from Mandalay.
- ▶ The CHIME study found that 20% of remittance receiving households use remittances to invest in rural productive activities, but the use of remittances in productive activities is particularly low in Rakhine.
- ▶ Migration is changing rural demographics – bringing about economic and social impacts in agriculture-based rural communities.

## About the CHIME project

This briefing paper is based on research conducted as part of the “Capitalising Human Mobility for Poverty Alleviation and Inclusive Development for Myanmar” (CHIME) project.

The project was implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the University of Sussex, Metta Development Foundation, and the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population of the Government of Myanmar.

Financial support for the research was provided by the Livelihoods and Food Security Fund (LIFT).

The research was conducted in four regions/states – Ayeyarwady, Mandalay, Rakhine and Shan – in spring/summer 2017. Using mixed methods consisting of household surveys, qualitative interviews, and community discussions, CHIME explored the complex relationships between migration, poverty and development.

The total sample covered in the quantitative household survey (3,116 rural households) is regionally representative for Mandalay and Ayeyarwady but not for Shan or Rakhine due to varying degrees of access to sampled villages.

## Background

Agriculture accounts for 26 per cent of Myanmar's GDP and employs almost half of the country's workforce.<sup>1</sup> It is the primary source of livelihood for most people living in rural areas.<sup>2</sup> Migration for work is also common in Myanmar and growing even more so: the country's rapid growth in recent years has coincided with a marked increase in both internal and international migration. Migration is tightly linked to agricultural work: many migrants move from rural to urban areas and from agriculture to other employment sectors. This trend is coinciding with a general transition in Myanmar's economy away from agriculture and towards industry and services.

This briefing paper draws on findings from the CHIME research project to look at how agricultural work drives migration, and how migration affects the agricultural sector. It identifies opportunities for policymakers to help make agriculture and migration promote sustainable, equitable development.

## Patterns and drivers of migration

**The relationship between land ownership and migration is complex and region-specific.** The CHIME study demonstrated that patterns of land ownership, agricultural work, and migration are not uniform across

Myanmar and that both land ownership and landlessness can correlate with migration. Some regions have high levels of land ownership, while others have lower levels of land ownership and more agricultural wage workers. For some migrants, seasonal migration is a means to earn money outside of agricultural season. For others, migration offers a way to leave agricultural work for other employment sectors.

**Economic factors are a major driver of migration, pushing agricultural workers and small farmers out of their villages.** Agriculture can be an unreliable and unstable source of income which generates low earnings for workers and owners of small farms. Migrants interviewed for the CHIME study cited a desire to escape from the poverty, indebtedness, and bonded labour associated with agriculture as one of the main reasons behind their decision to migrate.

**Migrants often move away from agricultural employment through migration, but agriculture remains an important employment sector for internal migrants from Mandalay.** The CHIME study found that before migrating, 63 per cent of surveyed migrants worked in agriculture, fishing, and forestry, but once at their destination, the employment sectors of migrants became much more diverse, with only 18 per cent working in agriculture, fishing, and forestry after migrating.



Farm workers in Myaung Mya, Ayeyarwady Region (L) and Nyaung-U, Mandalay Region (R). © Ko Oo 2017

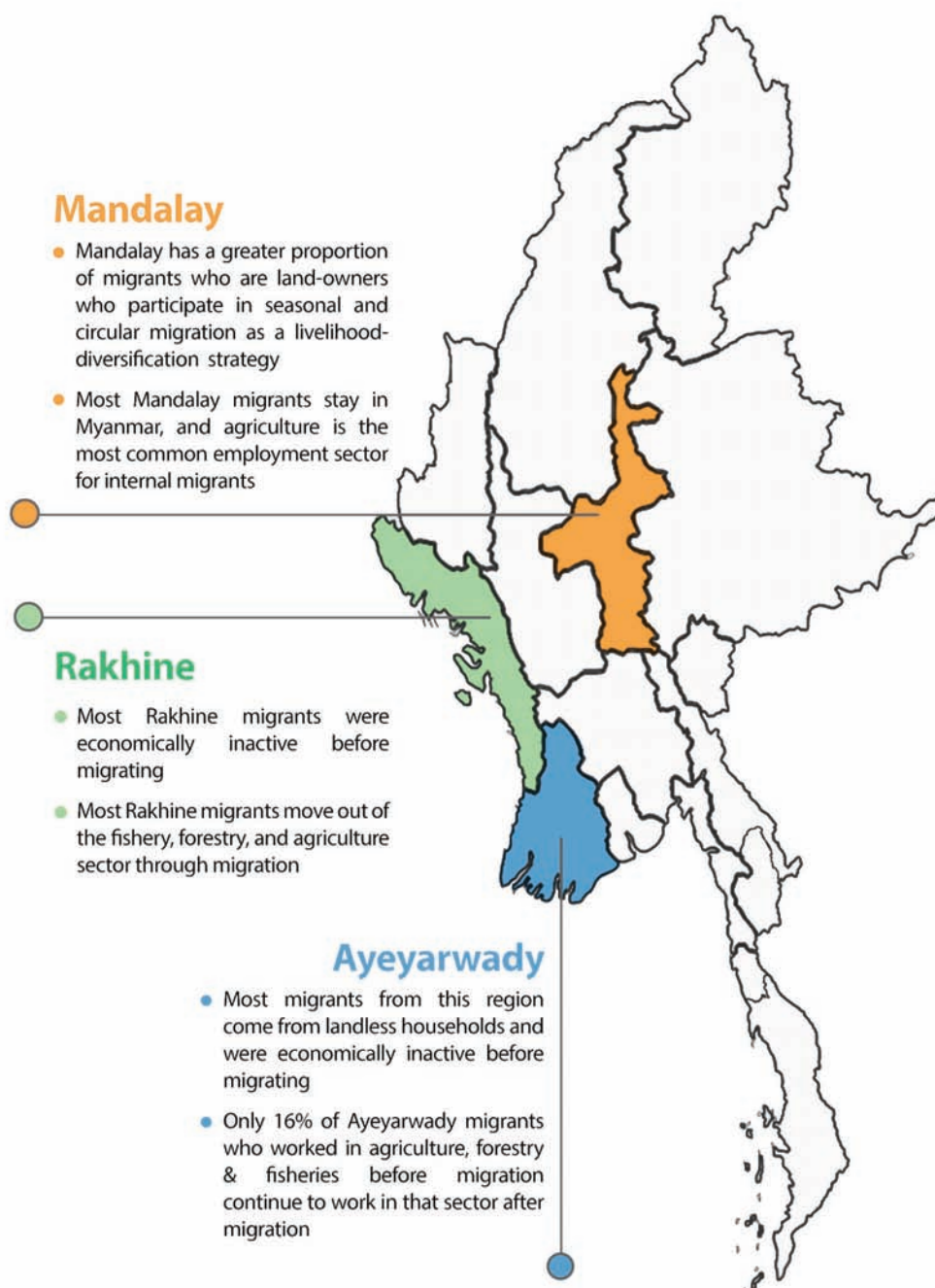
*We would like to thank Dr. Benjamin Belton of Michigan State University for his review and comments on this brief.*

<sup>1</sup> World Bank Indicators, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> World Bank. Myanmar: Analysis of Farm Production Economics. 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Longitudinal studies monitoring change in rural livelihoods such as the World Bank led *Livelihoods and Social Change in Rural Myanmar: Qualitative Social and Economic Monitoring of Livelihoods (QSEM)* series has shown that Myanmar migration has increased both internationally and internally.





Overall, migrants were less likely to stay in the agriculture sector after migrating than workers in any other sector. Nonetheless, the study found that agriculture remains the most common employment sector for 22 per cent of internal migrants from Mandalay. The study also found that some migrants who participate in seasonal and circular migration practices spin out of their routines and end up in other employment sectors,, sometimes migrating abroad where they become longer-term migrants.

**The majority of poorer rural households interviewed in the qualitative research cited debt as their main reason for sending their family member to migrate.**

Qualitative interviews with landless households showed migrants trapped in cycles of bonded agricultural labour in which workers received cash advances during the non-harvest season in exchange for guaranteed labour during the planting or harvesting seasons. This highly uneven system led to exploitative labour practices, and interviewees saw migration as a way to escape this cycle of chronic indebtedness. Similarly, owners of small farms found themselves trapped in cycles of poverty and indebtedness. Often, they had to borrow money during the non-harvest season or as a result of crop failure or other disasters and were unable to pay it back.

**Some migrants and their families cited an aspiration for better lifestyles and less physically-demanding work as a factor in their decision to migrate.** Agricultural work in Myanmar is often non-mechanised and physically demanding. Interviewees said they wanted to escape from the physical difficulties of farming and working under the sun. Others associated other benefits with urban living and non-agricultural work, including access to modern amenities and opportunities for education and advancement. It is important not to overlook the importance of such social factors.

## Impacts

### **Migration is changing rural demographics.**

The CHIME study found that migrants in Myanmar are predominantly young and involve both male and female, and the majority are

leaving rural areas, either for domestic urban areas or for other countries. This trend is already affecting the demographics of rural areas, and as migration becomes more common the demographics can be expected to change further. This will likely impact on agriculture, since young people, who are likely to be most fit for physically-demanding agricultural work, are most likely to migrate.

Many families surveyed for the CHIME study stated that out-migration had led to a loss of population in their communities. While land-owners spoke about labour shortages for agricultural work, migrant households focused instead on the difficulties of carrying out village social activities. Some reported that migration had led to a shift in gender roles, as women took on more responsibility or leadership positions when men migrated out of the village.

### **Box 1: From debt and dishonour to peace of mind**

Saw Thet\*, a 52 year old woman from Ayeyarwady with eight children, owed several people money and had to sell portions of her land to pay back her debts. Apart from monetary debts, she also owed some farmers labour during the peak season, which she had promised against borrowings. Saw Thet mentions that those people to whom she owed labour came to argue with her. She described an arduous and difficult period in her life:

*"People came from here and there to ask money from us, and I don't even want to talk about how much I cried. I had to apologise to this person and that person. We were in so much trouble because all of these people wouldn't give us a pass. People came from this farm and that farm to fight with me, so I was crying a lot. We were in debt for about 12 acres, so when the crops were ripe, people came and called us to harvest their farms and blamed us for not being able to render work for them, but we were already in the middle of harvesting another farm. Everything turned out to be okay when two of my daughters went to work in Yangon. We didn't have to worry about transplanting rice or harvesting anymore. Our mind is at peace now, but before I was almost going crazy. I have to let my other children go to school despite our difficulties, because if they are not educated they will get in trouble. That's why we have to think of ways to send them to school."*



Processing cheroote leaves in Ho Pong, Shan State. © Ko Oo 2017



**The CHIME study found that 20 per cent of remittance-receiving households use remittances to invest in rural productive activities.**

66 per cent of economically active migrants regularly sent remittances to their families at home. The most common item on which families spent remittances was food. This was consistent across all surveyed states/regions and applied to families with international or internal migrants.

The study found that remittance-receiving households of internal migrants (22%) are slightly more likely to use remittances in productive activities than households with international migrants (17%).

Remittance-receiving families in Mandalay and Ayeyarwady were much more likely to use remittances for productive purposes. Between 18-29 per cent of remittance receiving households with internal or international migrants in these regions used remittances for productive activities, compared to 3-13 per cent of remittance-receiving households in Rakhine.

While the CHIME study did not capture the relationship between migration, local wages and mechanisation, a number of studies have highlighted these links – concluding that rural labor shortages and increases in real wage rates act as major drivers of mechanisation.<sup>4</sup>



Harvesting cherootee leaves, Ho Pong, Shan State. © Ko Oo 2017

## Box 2: A mother's pride in her daughter's modern work environment

Nilar Aung, a 46-year-old mother with three daughters working at factories in Yangon, describes how proud she felt that they were living an urban lifestyle and supporting the family financially. She describes the difference between her daughters' urban life and the parents' rural life, even though she has never visited them to see how they actually live.

*"They can live there smartly and neatly. Here, we have to work in the muddy fields to earn ourselves a meal. There, they can find a meal wearing their slippers, flapping on the way. Their slippers are flapping! Here, we have to struggle in the mud."*

4. See, for example, Michigan State University, Center for Economic and Social Development, and the International Food Policy Research Institute. *Agricultural Mechanization and Structural Transformation in Myanmar's Ayeyarwady Delta*. 2016; Belton, B., Filipski, M., Hu, C., Oo, A.T. and Htun, A. *Rural Transformation in Central Myanmar: Results from the Rural Economy and Agriculture Dry Zone Community Survey*. 2017.

\*All names in this brief have been changed to protect respondents' identities.



Selling pineapples on a street of Hsi Hseng, Shan State. © Ko Oo 2017

This brief is based on CHIME research conducted by Dr. Priya Deshingkar, Dr. Julie Litchfield and Dr. Wen-Ching Ting.



## From evidence to action: what can we learn from CHIME's findings?

1. The CHIME study found that the biggest motivation of people to migrate out of rural areas is related to the low-paying, unstable, unreliable and physically taxing conditions of agricultural work. For agricultural employment to continue to attract rural youths, wages, predictability and decent work aspects of agricultural work will need to be addressed.
2. As the current trends of youth migration out of rural areas continue, the demographics of rural areas will continue to be skewed towards elder population and children. There is a need for the agricultural sector to adapt to these changing demographics, through adaptation strategies such as the mechanisation of agricultural work, crop diversification, and the promotion of farming practices which are suitable to the remaining working population.
3. Remittances, already an important source of income for families in rural areas, can be part of this strategy for advancing farm modernisation, increased agricultural productivity and more decent work conditions in agriculture. The study found that only 20 per cent of remittance-receiving households use remittances in productive activities. There is a need to create an enabling environment and support families in their efforts to increase the use of remittances in rural farm and non-farm investment.



Fishing near Myaung Mya, Ayeyarwady Region. © Ko Oo 2017

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

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

For more information about the CHIME study, please email [iomyangon@iom.int](mailto:iomyangon@iom.int)

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