



Travellers at Kyaukpadaung, Mandalay Region. © Ko Oo 2017

# Migration and urbanisation

Migration dynamics,  
patterns and impacts  
from the CHIME  
research project

## Highlights

- ▶ Internal migration patterns reveal the strong pull of Yangon with most internal migrants either moving within their state of origin, or to Yangon.
- ▶ The study highlights the enormous significance of social drivers on rural to urban migration and their close relationship with economic drivers. Aspirations for more modern lifestyles were based on (and reinforced) binary distinctions between, for example, modern and agricultural, or urban and rural.
- ▶ Intermediaries, who may be families, friends or brokers, are useful to those migrants with limited exposure to urban areas or without the knowledge to approach employers. Because of patterns of migration through social networks, urban labour markets tend to be differentiated and segmented along 'village' or 'ethnic' lines.
- ▶ Qualitative interviews show the difficulties that urban migrants face and how this creates situations of precarity. Migrants face many challenges on arrival in cities, including finding affordable accommodation and stable employment.

## 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 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

With almost half of the labour force working in agriculture,<sup>1</sup> Myanmar remains a predominately rural country. However, the proportion of the population living in urban areas is increasing each year and is expected to do so at ever-faster rates of change.<sup>2</sup> In 2014, at the time of the last census, 70 per cent of Myanmar's enumerated population were residing in rural areas and 30 per cent in urban areas.<sup>3</sup>

Yangon is Myanmar's most urbanised region and accounts for about 35 per cent of the country's urban population.<sup>4</sup> In 2014, there were 5.2 million people living in the former capital but it is projected that Yangon will become a 10 million person megacity by 2040.<sup>5</sup> Although in part a question of natural increase, migration is an important contributor to urbanisation in Myanmar as rural populations seek new lives and livelihoods in cities. This mirrors global trends toward the redistribution of population from rural to urban areas.<sup>6</sup>

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## Patterns of migration

**CHIME data suggest a relatively small incidence of return migration**, highlighting the strong net outmigration experience of people from rural Myanmar in recent years. The CHIME household survey found only 164 returned migrants, a small number compared to the 1,555 current migrants identified.

**Internal migration patterns reveal the strong pull of Yangon with most internal migrants either moving within their state of origin, or to Yangon** where they are absorbed into the city's industrial zones and workplaces. Of the 857 internal migrants in the study, 36 per cent were located in Yangon. However, there are regional differences, most notably, the dominance of Yangon as a destination for internal migrants from Ayeyarwady.

**Most internal migrants are found either in the same region/state as origin or in Yangon** (Table 1). Ayeyarwady was the only region where a majority of internal migrants (65%) moved from their region to Yangon. This is most likely due to the geographical proximity of Yangon to Ayeyarwady. CHIME quantitative data suggest that migrants' destinations are determined by a combination of available opportunities and proximity to home,



Scenes from daily life. Lashio, Shan State. © Ko Oo 2017

<sup>1</sup> World Bank Indicators (2017).

<sup>2</sup> Department of Population (2015) The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census, p. 6

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 5

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 6

<sup>5</sup> Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) (2013) The Project for the Strategic Urban Development Plan of Greater Yangon, Final Report 1, Part-II The Master Plan.

<sup>6</sup> Skeldon (2018) Migration Research Series No. 54, p. 4

although there are patterns of destination that cannot be explained by either and are more likely to be determined by social networks.

**The destination of migrants also varied between villages because of established social networks linking particular localities of origin and destination.** In Mandalay, for example, villages seemed to have two or three main migration destinations, mostly related to existing social networks, multi-locational family ties and/or the recruitment patterns of brokers. In one village, social networks had created streams of rural-urban migration as new migrants moved to Yangon and Bago to work in teashops previously established by migrants from the village. Where social networks do not already exist, brokerage practices may also influence migrants' destinations, as demonstrated by the example in Box 1. Overall, intermediaries, be they social connections or brokers, are vital to introduce migrants to urban labour markets. Once at destination, migrants often encourage other people at origin to join them, consolidating those existing connections and fostering patterns of village migration.

#### Box 1: Connecting rural migrants to urban markets

Thaw Zin\*, a 26-year-old man migrated to Yangon and worked in an ice factory. His mother was approached by a woman from a neighbouring village whose brother owned the factory in Yangon. The employer had sent the woman to recruit workers. The respondent had no prior knowledge of the woman or any kinship bond with her but as he put it: "They were in need of workers and here we were in need of work, so the jobless ones went with

them to Yangon". After his mother informed him about this job opportunity, he went with the woman to work in Yangon and also introduced his siblings to the same factory afterwards. When asked how he evaluated the experience of migrating through a broker he stressed how the broker was instrumental in connecting him to the urban labour market:

*"I was happy to be accompanied by her to a place where I knew nobody. I arrived there safe and sound. I did not face any difficulties. The job was good as well. Being given food is also convenient. We could order the food we wanted to eat. Food and accommodation were provided."*

### Aspiration and escape

**CHIME research highlights the enormous significance of social drivers and their close relationship with economic drivers.** Closely linked to migration as a strategy for escaping rural poverty, were people's aspirations for a better life, less physically demanding employment, education, modern lifestyles, and opportunities to prove their worth. Younger generations spoke of a desire to "not work under the sun" or "in the mud" and of aspirations for fashionable clothes and hairstyles.

**Aspirations for more modern lifestyles, which were also expressed by older generations for their children, were based on (and reinforced) binary distinctions** between, for example, modern and agricultural, or urban and rural. The older generation feel that given

**Table 1 Share of Internal Destinations of Migrants by Region/State of Origin**

	Origin			
	Ayeyarwady	Mandalay	Rakhine	Shan (limited areas)
Within state/region of origin	23%	43%	46%	66%
Yangon	65%	28%	46%	13%
Other	12%	29%	18%	21%

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

their level of education, modern lifestyles – which they associate with urban lives and livelihoods – are more appropriate for their children than physically demanding work “under the sun”. The desire to change job/work circumstances, specifically, away from physically demanding and low-status work in rural areas, illustrates how economic and social drivers intertwine and that rural-urban migration is about more than money and remittances. One 49-year-old father in Ayeyarwady region, for example, advised his daughter “not to chase money only but to pursue education and general knowledge”.

**Parents of urban migrants spoke proudly of their urban children who they saw as having acquired new attitudes and social skills** that they believe will help them adjust to modern living. A variety of changes were mentioned such as becoming more open-minded, polite and understanding, as well as having more sympathy for other people in need. Some said migrants also learned better social communication skills and became more active. In some cases, lighter skin,<sup>7</sup> new clothes and hairstyles came to symbolise these modern outlooks and skills (see Box 2).

### **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 field to have 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.”*

**Parents were pleased that their children no longer had to participate in physically demanding rural labour.** As Mya Win, a 53-year-old mother from Mandalay, remarked:

*“I'm glad that they have to learn a new profession and as a parent I'm happy for them. They don't have to work on the farm anymore and as a mechanic they can always change the company they work for. They have already passed the age of 18 and 20 so they are able to decide by themselves concerning what they want with their life [...] we cannot decide for them.”*

**They were also pleased to see their children dressing smartly and using modern appliances – things they associated with urban living.** In addition to benefits brought about by remittances, these urban attributes can help to improve a household's standing within the village. However, there were sometimes tensions around the changes brought about by migration, especially with fathers who did not approve of younger women having short hair, dyed hair, short skirts or fancy shirts.

### **Box 3: Exposure to noxious chemicals**

The case of Shwe Zin a 27-year-old female migrant from Rakhine State who works at a slipper-making factory in Yangon illustrates the dangerous conditions that factory workers face. Shwe Zin's job is to apply glue in the manufacturing process. She says the fumes from the glue and paints are extremely strong and make her sick. Once she took two days off, and two days' wages, totalling MMK 36,000, were deducted from her salary. Moreover, the factory has a rule that employees have to complete a certain minimum number of slippers in order to get a bonus.

*“My team leader told me that I would get a wage deduction, but I had no choice. The smell of the glue and the paint are too strong there. They say the chemical smell can cause infertility in young people. We have to cover our noses all the time. Our clothes are tattered and torn from being stained with glue. They deduct from our wages for irregular attendance. We have a production reward. If we can make the required number of slippers in a day, we receive 2,000 extra. If we cannot, no one receives the extra payment.”*

Shwe Zin explained that she has to make a contribution towards the government social security system for factory employees every month but obtains the social security card only six months later.

<sup>7</sup>White skin' conveyed that they work indoors and were different from working 'under the sun'.

As she can't afford private medical treatment, she buys medicines from a pharmacy instead of visiting a doctor. When asked if she has any health insurance, Shwe Zin mentions that the factory claimed they would compensate workers for any work-related accidents at the factory. Two months prior to the interview, a female co-worker at the factory was injured and Shwe Zin suspects that the injured worker was dismissed without compensation.

## Urban employment

**Internal migration towards the large cities has increased at a steady rate,**<sup>8</sup> including among young women who have started migrating in large numbers for work in Yangon's garment industry and small-scale manufacturing. Industrial zones in Yangon have created plenty of job opportunities for women whose families are struggling to manage with their land or rural employment. Other jobs typical in urban locations include work in guesthouses, eateries, or construction projects.

**Intermediaries, who can be families, friends or brokers, are useful for those migrants with limited exposure to urban areas or without the knowledge to approach employers** (see Box 1).<sup>9</sup> Interviews reveal that after migrants settle down, they themselves may take on facilitating/brokerage functions by assisting relatives or other villagers to migrate and obtain jobs in the city, resulting in a clustering of migrants from the same or nearby villages in particular factories or destinations. CHIME data show that those women and girls who have migrated to Yangon's garment industry are now recruiting their sisters/peers from their villages. As a result, more young females are gradually migrating from their villages to the city. In urban areas, these patterns of migration are producing highly differentiated labour markets segmented along 'village' or 'ethnic' lines.

**Qualitative interviews show the difficulties that urban migrants face and how this creates situations of precarity.** One of the most common challenges is to secure stable earnings. In-depth interviews showed that vulnerability often emerged as a result of irregular working days and employers' practices of withholding pay. Additionally, migrants may also find themselves trapped in bonded labour agreements, dangerous, or discriminatory work environments. The example of a slipper factory worker from Rakhine illustrates some of these risks and highlights a lack of social protection provided to migrant workers in cities like Yangon (Box 3). In this case, the worker was not only denied earnings and compensation but was unable to access social security to pay for medical treatment, despite contributing to the government social security system for factory employees each month. Employers are keen to receive cheap labour but reluctant to provide them with decent jobs or secure living conditions.

## Housing and living conditions

**Another pressing difficulty for new migrants is finding affordable urban accommodation.**

Housing poverty is a well-recognised phenomenon among rural-urban migrants.<sup>10</sup> Where migrants stay with members of their wider kinship network, they are protected against some kinds of risks. However, such arrangements can also introduce other risks, for example, exploitative working patterns and isolation from wider opportunities in urban areas. Furthermore, staying with members of kin networks is rarely a long-term solution, as the example in Box 4 illustrates. In situations where finding accommodation is difficult, migrants may also be more likely to accept precarious jobs, which often come with offers of accommodation.

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

<sup>8</sup> See Department of Immigration (2016) Thematic Report on Migration and Urbanization, Census Report Volume 4-D.

<sup>9</sup> Chapter 4 of the CHIME report explores the risks migrants face when using brokers.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Wang et al (2010) Housing Migrant Workers in Rapidly Urbanizing Regions: A Study of the Chinese Model in Shenzhen. *Housing Studies*, 25(1), 83-100.

#### Box 4: Difficulty finding affordable accommodation

Ei Chaw is a 27-year-old female migrant from a poor family in Rakhine that has fallen on hard times. Three of her four siblings have migrated to Yangon because of the desperate situation of the parents.

After arriving in Yangon, Ei Chaw remains unemployed for a month. During this time, she moves three times because she cannot afford to continue paying the rent. She then gets a job and finds a new place to stay; she pays MMK 70,000 as rent in advance. She borrows the money from her aunt to make the payment.

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

1. The evidence highlights the need to improve living conditions for migrants in urban areas and to better support new migrants to transition into cities. Migrants' difficulties in finding affordable accommodation points to the need for cheap, migrant-friendly housing in the city. It also points to the need to improve migrants' access to government services and other services in urban areas, and ensure that services are sensitive to migrants' needs.
2. Improving working standards will help reduce the incidence of migration failure and increase opportunities for safe and gainful migration that is beneficial to migrants and their families. ILO's efforts to develop a nationally defined "social protection floor for all" would help migrants who fall into situations of precarity as a result of employment practices or illness and often fall through the gaps in existing social protection programmes. At the same time, since there will still be times when things go wrong, there is also a need to improve support for migrants in distress situations and mechanisms for exploited migrants to seek redress from work and non-work situations.
3. The research illustrates how rural livelihoods and communities are inextricably bound up with urban economies. Rural out-migration is transforming rural areas, as well as cities, in both positive and negative ways. Future interventions should work to reduce the negative shocks of rural transformation resulting from out-migration, while nurturing the beneficial impacts of migration. In doing so, interventions will have to consider migration holistically, rather than focusing separately on rural, urban (and international) migration and acknowledge the role of trans-locational families in both urban and rural contexts.
4. While the CHIME research highlighted the strong trend of migration to Yangon, it also revealed notable intra-regional rural to urban migration. This suggests that developing other urban centres beyond Yangon would positively affect migrants' living conditions and provide impetus to the economies of other major cities and towns leading to more balanced economic development.
5. While migration is a significant element in the formation of urban landscape, it does not currently have a recognised place in urban planning. It is in the interest of both migrants and cities to put inclusive urban policies in place for basic services and socioeconomic inclusion of migrants.

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](mailto:iomyangon@iom.int)

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