

A Comparative Picture of Migration in Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand: Summary



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Economic hardships, family dynamics, lack of arable land, and drought are among the factors behind work migration in Southeast Asia. SERC researchers spoke to more than 900 people in five countries to learn why people migrate, often illegally, and what happens when they do. What can be done to reduce the risk of exploitation and make trans-border work migration safer?

Between September and December 2008, SERC research teams fanned out over Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand to study the many impacts of migration. Our researchers met more than 4,500 people who were migrants themselves or family members benefitting directly from having a relative abroad. Investigators conducted discussions with community leaders, young people who had returned from migration, those who had migrated and those for whom migration was a likely possibility.

While there were differences in the hundreds of stories told by interviewees, SERC researchers found there were many similarities as to why young people migrated, what dangers they faced crossing borders and working illegally, and what they experienced as returnees to their village. What emerged was a picture of choices, or rather a lack of choices, facing young people in the rural areas of Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam. To hear them tell it, they were driven or lured away from their villages, out of necessity or boredom, to seek employment in the booming urban centers of Thailand.

Often the decision to migrate was a choice of the bright lights of the city over the darkness and boredom of village life. Many of the interviewees could be categorized as trafficked persons due to their traveling/working without legal documents, being minors, traveling under the guidance of a broker and or working under exploitative conditions. However, it was clear that the overwhelming majority of young people interviewed had chosen to migrate, knowing the circumstances. Coercion was largely absent from the sizeable sample, though peer pressure and family pressure was powerful influences. Brokers, though readily and easily demonized, provided an important service, for which migrants were willing to pay because viable alternatives were lacking. Migration was a normal aspect of people's life in villages.

Many similarities in trends and patterns were observed, particularly in the source countries of Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. A distinct lack of working opportunities was the overriding reason for seeking employment abroad, though political instability and the vicissitudes of nature also played their part. There was also strong motivation to follow the example of others who had returned from successful migration/s. Relatives and friends who had returned from abroad displayed material things coveted by villagers including mobile phones, motorbikes, TVs and VCRs, fashionable clothes, and in some cases a new house or shop. These and other

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trophies of migration encouraged others to do the same, to earn and show off the success and solvency that flowed from a sojourn abroad.

Successful migration provided the purchasing power needed to obtain the consumer goods that are increasingly and tantalizingly within the reach of a growing number of people. No longer luxury items, motorbikes and mobile phones had become basic requirements for teenagers and obtaining them was motivation enough for some to migrate. For others, migration became a rite of passage. For many of the young people interviewed, the prospect of working on the land year after year was not an attractive option. Farming held neither the promise of financial gain nor the promise of personal independence that working abroad appeared to offer. On the other hand, migrants spoke highly of their ability to make lifestyle choices abroad that they could not make in the village.

Condemned by the world community, human trafficking is an illegal trade that generates an estimated annual profit of \$32 billion (International Labor Organization), A Global Alliance Against Forced Labor, 2005) yet the village leaders SERC met were largely ignorant of the moral, ethnic and legal issues involved. In general, the same can be said for those who were considering migration as a source of information or support. Notable too, was the lack of penetration of local and international organizations at the village level to help prevent unsafe migration. There also was a lack of organizational support for those individuals considering migration. In light of this void, information about migration and trafficking was passed from one wave of migrants to the next.

The survey conducted by SERC researchers revealed that the majority of migrants traveled abroad illegally, thus creating conditions for exploitation. Most were under the age of 18 at the age of the first migration. Encouragingly, however, it seemed that an increasing number of migrants were employing self-protection strategies.

The overwhelming majority of young people surveyed migrated to Thailand, where a dynamic economy generated an insatiable demand for unskilled labor. Although no two respondent's experiences abroad were identical, on balance, the majority of migrants had a largely positive experience to recount. Certainly, there were reports of long working hours and harsh working conditions along with discrimination, late payment, physical abuse and restrictions on freedom of movement. Female migrants faced an added set of circumstances including abuse from fellow migrants and sexual assault, which could lead to unwanted pregnancy. The many negative aspects of migration were no deterrent to repeat many as part and parcel of the migration experience saw migrations and indeed them.

SERC's research began with an extensive review of literature on migration/trafficking prior to the period of fieldwork. This was followed by a half year of ongoing analysis in the light of information collected. In all, the study represents almost one year of analytical work.

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Outlined in succinct form on a country-by-country basis, the main findings throw further light on the phenomenon of migration Southeast Asia by identifying the main issues and emerging trends. These findings may be of interest to organizations involved in education, employment, women's issues, migration and trafficking

LAOS – Bridges and highways lead to a desire for more cash

Formally known as the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Laos is uniquely landlocked and surrounded by five other countries: China, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand. Government-driven World Bank-funded programs to link these countries by highways and bridges are bringing social change to Laos, a country of six million people that remains one of the poorest in the region. Bridges that have sprung across the Mekong River and improved highways linking Laos with its neighbors have cut traveling time and brought the outside world closer to once-remote communities. Improved communications with neighboring countries have heightened the desire for a higher standard of living and a hunger for consumer goods. Because traditional village life does not provide the means for young Lao to achieve their desires, migration often is seen as the best way to get ahead.

SERC researchers interviewed more than 700 Lao in eight districts of Savannakhet province and Mukdahan city in neighboring Thailand. Of the migrants interviewed who returned to their village (returnees), the average age at first migration was 16.6 years of age. Eighty-two percent of females were younger than 18 at the time of first migration, which confirmed the findings of the 2003 ILO survey. Females younger than 18 were on average 14.7 years old. Fifty eight-percent of returnees already had siblings living abroad. This high proportion illustrates the importance of migration in the life of the returnees' families and suggests a high level of economic impact.

The uniformly low level of educational achievement throughout Laos does little to prepare those who aspire to a career other than farming. Primary school education was the upper limit for over three-quarters of returnees and 13 percent received no formal education at all. The school-leaving age of returnees was 12.9 years on average, with females dropping out earlier and in greater numbers than males. Literacy levels in Laos are also low and some 20 percent of returnees said that they were unable to read Lao. It was noted that the number of returnees with any degree of vocational training amounted to just 2 percent of the sample. The paucity of education means that many young Lao reach working age with few skills to offer, and are thus suited only for unskilled jobs.

Neighboring Thailand serves as a magnet for unskilled, uneducated citizens of Laos and there is a seemingly endless demand for them. Migrants from Laos have an advantage over migrants from other countries in that they understand the Thai language, which has many similarities with Lao, and they are familiar with Thai culture, as families in Laos spend a great deal of time watching Thai television. Because of the cultural similarities between Laos and Thailand migrants from Laos face less culture shock than migrants from other source countries.

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Lao respondents gave varied reasons for migrating. Primary among them were food insecurity, insufficient land for farming, a paucity of job opportunities, and personal family problems. The death of a parent seemed to play an important role in the decision to migrate, with 17 percent of returnees acknowledging a deceased father and 6 percent a deceased mother at the time of first migration. The family's economic situation was the single most important factor, although two times as many female returnees as males (78 percent versus 38 percent) said that this was the main reason to migrate. Such a notable difference may be due to a greater sense of familial duty in the part of females. Males more often cited personal reasons to migrate. Boredom in the village between harvests also was an important factor in the decision to migrate.

To some degree, the cycles of the harvest dictated a seasonal migration pattern described by returnees from Laos.

It was common among Lao interviewees to know someone working abroad – a relative, sibling or friend, and information about migration – both positive and negative – came largely through those contacts. Returnees' stories were not always believed as it was felt they may have exaggerated their success or did not want to lose face by admitting they engaged in lowly or dishonorable work, e.g. as a sex provider. Many migrants remained ignorant of their destination, which underlies their reliance on a friend, relative or broker to lead them across the border to their eventual workplace. Television reports, village authorities and various organizations played a fairly negligible role in informing interviewees of legal requirements and conversely the risks of migration. Practically none of the returnees had asked village authorities for permission to leave the village to travel abroad. This is understandable given that the majority were under 18 years of age and ineligible for a passport at the time. Going against village customs, which could result in a fine, and breaking national laws were just two of the hoops that migrants were prepared to jump through in order to gain work in Thailand.

Before their first migration, over 65 percent of returnees discussed the decision to migrate with their parents, which highlights the degree to which migration was a family issue. The fact that families allowed sons and daughters as young as 14 to migrate to Thailand is dramatic evidence of this.

Even though they were likely to know someone who had migrated before them, Lao interviewees were less likely to have detailed knowledge of documentation issues and the potential dangers inherent in migrating to another country, often illegally. And although they had heard stories from those who had gone abroad, many traveled 'blind,' unsure of where they were going or what work and conditions awaited them. Many said hiring a broker made their trip to Thailand easy.

Early Lao returnees said they had been unconvinced of the advantages of paying for a passport and having to wait for it to be processed. At the time of their first migration, the \$140 fee for a passport prohibitive, they said, and for the same price, they could engage a broker to provide passage and a job. Among the first wave of migrants, 65 percent of those interviewed were

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under 18 years of age and therefore ineligible to obtain a passport. More recently the age at which an individual can obtain a passport has been reduced to 12, and the fee lowered to \$25. These developments have served to increase legal migration, particularly among women. It should be noted that a passport allows holders to travel to Thailand legally but it is not a work permit.

There was ambiguity among the respondents regarding the advantages of obtaining a passport. The reason most often cited for traveling with a passport was personal safety. However workers who traveled on a passport still faced the threat of deportation from Thailand if they did not possess a valid work permit. The flip side of having a passport or national identity card on them card was that migrants caught working illegally could easily be identified, deported and blacklisted from returning to Thailand.

For many the risks and dangers of clandestine, illegal travel were a reality. It was common for migrants from Laos to cross the Mekong at night, hide in safe houses and travel on back roads to avoid police. The majority of interviewees chose to travel with a friend or relative. Young, poorly educated, and female Lao migrants opted more frequently to travel with a broker. For migrants who were willing to pay a fee, brokers took care of the travel arrangements. More importantly, brokers found jobs for migrants and sometimes advanced the money they needed to make the trip, money that would be reimbursed from the migrant's first wages. Although brokers are sometimes portrayed as shady, disreputable characters, interviewees in this sample were not forced by brokers to migrate illegally. Brokers simply provided a service for which there was a demand, given the difficulty or impossibility for most to obtain a passport. Those migrants who traveled to a bordering province had less need for a broker than those who traveled deeper into Thailand.

The variety of jobs undertaken by Lao migrants shows their versatility. Women and girls were mainly employed as domestic servants, waitresses and shop assistants although some worked in factories. Men and boys were employed in construction work and farming though, also some found more skilled work as carpenters, mechanics, tailors and welders. Equal numbers of men and women were employed in factories. They earned wages that ranged between 1,500 baht (US \$44) per month to 10,000 baht (US\$ 294) per month, with an average of 4,000 baht (US\$120). Even the lowest wage would be acceptable by Lao standards while the higher salary range was a significant improvement over their earning power at home.

Returnees had a more positive view of migration than non-migrants.

Sixty percent of returnees said that they had no problem in Thailand, and over 40 percent said their employer treated them like family. One-third said they earned a lot of money. A quarter of them said that they were happy in Thailand. Respondents viewed the experience they gained as a positive factor. Many spoke of the ease of finding jobs, even without official documents. The most common complaint among returnees was that they worked long hours without sufficient rest. Among their other complaints were low or unpaid wages, fraud on the part of

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brokers and employers, and the excessive cost of living, which meant it, was difficult to send money home.

On the other hand, the research team observed the relative freedom enjoyed by young migrants. i.e., they were free from the watchful eyes of their parents and family, the authority of the village chief and the gossip of their community. This independence spurred some migrants to enjoy their new lifestyle to the maximum. Just one example of this was sexual freedom that was unimaginable within the confines of the village. As a result it was inevitable that some migrants became more self-centred and less inclined to send money home. For some, achieving this kind of freedom was the motivation to leave their village in the first place

Female respondents described more negative experiences than males, particularly with regard to emotional wellbeing and access to adequate health services. Females were more likely than males to marry while abroad. By marrying young women gained personal security and a shield against the unwanted advances of other males. Another difficulty mentioned by females more than males was the frequent inability to call home, due to the lack of a phone signal in the village. More than a third of returnees said they did not possess a mobile phone at the time of first migration. In 2005, more than 95 percent of the population in the areas where the research took place did not possess a mobile phone.

Male migrants complained more of the hardships of their work, which may be due to occupational hazards, particularly in the construction field. Trouble with the police and deportation were rarely reported although the fear of getting into trouble was ever-present for migrants without a passport or work permit. Severe abuse such as being sold, forced to work without pay or denied freedom of movement, were not unknown among Lao returnees but the vast majority was not abused. Returnees suggested that victims of such abuse were often naïve and partly responsible for their fate. Over 85 percent of returnees claimed they did not know any migrants who had experienced trouble. The majority of returnees said they dealt with any problems they encountered by themselves or they received help from their employer in disputes with the police. The number of returnees who were aware they could get information about safe migration from NGOs and other organizations was negligible.

The importance of migration is highlighted by the fact that more than 20 percent of returnees' families and 10 percent of migrants' families claimed that remittances from abroad were their main source of income. Families with someone abroad had more material possessions, such as televisions, mobile phones, radios, tractors, shops and cash, than families without someone abroad. Returnees were considered successful if they showed off goods purchased with money from Thailand.

Significantly, 49 percent of returnees faced unemployment upon returning to the village and, with few options available to them, 89 percent had returned to farming within a year. In many cases, a single migration was not sufficient and returnees engaged in repeat migrations.

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MYANMAR – Better-educated villagers are joining the exodus

Although it is difficult to verify with reliable data, Myanmar is often described as the poorest of the Southeast Asian countries in per capita terms. Certainly economic concerns were widely cited by Myanmar respondents as their main motivation for migrating in search of work. The desire to escape from the harsh socio-political realities of life in Myanmar was a further motivation. Yet another factor furthering migration is that there are already large communities of people from Myanmar living in provinces of Thailand bordering their country.

SERC interviewed a total of 370 respondents in six provinces of Myanmar and 338 respondents in Thailand. Seventy-six percent of respondents migrated to Thailand where there was an abundance of work for poorly educated Myanmar citizens, including those below the age of 18. Around 20 percent of returnees, made up of those with a higher level of education, migrated to work in Singapore or Malaysia.

In contrast to respondents from Laos for example, non-migrants interviewed by SERC had more knowledge about migration than previous returnees had when they migrated three to four years earlier. This was a positive indication that information supplied by organizations concerned with safe migration was penetrating into the villages.

As in Laos, migrants said their main reasons for migration were a lack of job opportunities and low family income. Twenty-two percent of non-migrants and 40 percent of returnees interviewed by SERC researchers were unemployed at the time of their interview, pointing to the chronic unemployment situation in Myanmar.

As was the case with migrants from other source countries, Myanmar returnees cited the death of a parent was a factor in their decision to migrate.

Like Lao migrants, many who left Myanmar to work in Thailand were poorly educated and lacked vocational skills. Sixteen percent of Myanmar returnees said they had dropped out of school prior to their first migration. Over a quarter (29 percent) of returnees had no schooling or had failed to complete their primary education. However, 9 percent of Myanmar returnees had studied at university level, a higher percentage than found in any other source country. This suggests a lack of opportunity for even the better educated in Myanmar. Some respondents dropped out of school for several months and chose to work abroad in order to be able to pay school fees and thus continue their education.

Myanmar migrants interviewed in Thailand generally had a lower level of education than the non-migrants and returnees interviewed in Myanmar. Similarly, migrants in Thailand were younger than returnees had been at the time of first migration. Male migrants were 17.3 years of age at first migration and females were 18 years of age. The current group was younger compared to the returnees who had migrated two to three years earlier, with males averaging 18.7 years and females 18.9 years. These differences may reflect a change in trend whereby

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younger and less educated people in Myanmar are opting to solve their problems by working in Thailand.

On the whole, respondents who migrated were influenced by positive information they received regarding their ability to earn money abroad. While talk of harsh working conditions, discrimination and restricted freedom of movement did not prevent them going, negative information may have influenced their behavior. Those respondents who perceived more negative information about migration tended to travel more often with relatives (17 percent) than respondents who perceived migration in a more positive light, (6 percent.) Nevertheless, the level of information received prior to migrating was low, with over half the returnees reporting that they were not well informed before they left the village. Over half (56 percent) admitted that they did not know the location of their job. Of returnees interviewed more than half (52 percent) said that they had done nothing to prepare for their migration.

A total of 75 percent of Myanmar migrants traveled to Thailand without legal documents. For starters, Myanmar law prohibits males under the age of 18 and females under the age of 25 from traveling abroad without a legal guardian. That alone put young people in a position of having no choice but to migrate illegally.

At \$240, the cost of a passport was prohibitively expensive for the vast majority whose lack of money was one of the motivating factors in the first place. Researchers found that 10 percent of returnees traveled with a work permit and 3 percent with a border pass. Twenty-eight percent of returnees said they had traveled with a broker whose services were cheaper than a passport and also included provision of a job.

The law that Myanmar law prohibited young women from traveling abroad without a legal guardian made females under 25 more susceptible to offers from brokers who promised to provide accompanied travel and paying jobs. A significant number of respondents – 14 percent – was comprised of members of ethnic groups who did not speak Burmese, which made them even more reliant on brokers.

The majority of returnees and the non-migrants interviewed by SERC said they had friends or relatives working abroad. About 59 percent of non-migrants said they had friends abroad; 39 percent had relatives abroad; and 34 percent had siblings abroad.

It was common (53 percent) for parents or relatives to pay the costs for a young family member to migrate as something of a family investment. This is not surprising when the vast majority (71 percent) of respondents cited economic necessity and specifically the need to repay debts (25 percent) as the main reasons for migrating.

It is apparent that Thai authorities took a pragmatic approach to migrants from Myanmar whose low-cost, unskilled labor was necessary to Thailand's economy. Employers of Myanmar migrants were able to obtain work permits that could be issued at the workplace. Myanmar migrants were permitted to stay and work in neighboring Thai provinces although curfews were

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in place. The migrants who were most vulnerable and risked arrest were those who traveled beyond a neighboring province to Bangkok.

Of those Myanmar returnees who worked in Thailand, 40 percent went to Bangkok. The majority of males were engaged in factory work (36 percent) and construction (20 percent). Females also worked in factories (11 percent) although they were more often employed as maids (30 percent). Seven women acknowledged that they were employed in sex work or massage parlors. All of the current migrants interviewed by SERC were working in neighboring provinces; males were predominantly employed in factories (20 percent) or farming (28 percent) and females were employed in factories (22 percent) or as shop workers.

Discrimination and problems with police seemed to be a constant factor in the Myanmar migrants' lives. Females seemed to have a worse experience abroad with 29 percent describing their experience abroad as bad or very bad, whereas 15 percent of males described their experience in such negative terms. Among the complaints, heard more from females than males, were being cheated and subjected to bad working conditions, lack of rest and lack of freedom of movement. About a quarter (24 percent) of returnees said they had no problems abroad. In general, respondents solved their problems by running away from the workplace or returning home. Migrants were unaware of alternatives and did not know of any organizations or NGOs that might have been able to help them.

In retrospect, respondents said overwhelmingly that they needed more information about migration, and help in obtaining documents. Asked how to avoid the risks posed by migration, non-migrants wanted development of income-generating activities in their village (11 percent) to lessen the attraction of migration. Others suggested that learning Thai language would ensure a less stressful and less problematic migration. Respondents did not see community leaders and organizations concerned with safe migration as important sources of information. Rather they said they would continue to rely on information gained first-hand or obtained from relatives and friends.

In many cases, one migration by a family member was not sufficient to solve family problems. In late 2008, when these interviews were conducted, the day-labor salary in Myanmar was less than half that in Thailand (\$2 versus \$5). Respondents in Myanmar reported that the three main sources of current family income were farming (32 percent), small-scale trading (29 percent), and remittances from abroad (29 percent). The fact that over a quarter of respondents said their families relied on remittances underscores the importance of migration to their livelihood.

While there was little economic improvement in village life between the returnees' first migration two or three years earlier and the current migration, there was a change in the mode of travel. The second time 10 percent fewer returnees traveled with a legal document. This may have been due to a lack of money or because it was deemed unnecessary. There also was a slight drop in the number of returnees using a broker. The most notable change was the

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significant increase in the number of returnees who chose to travel with a friend. This figure increased from a quarter at the time of the first migration to over half of the returnees. There was a logical increase too in the number of returnees who could speak Thai, and this jumped from one-third of returnees to over half again between the two migrations. It could be concluded that the second or subsequent migrations posed less of a challenge and the migrants were better equipped to travel and find work independently.

CAMBODIA – Language adds to problems of Khmer migrants

Wedged among Vietnam, Laos and Thailand, Cambodia is busy rebuilding its economy after decades of civil war and widespread suffering under radical regimes. SERC met more than 900 people in five districts of three provinces in Cambodia, and Sakeo Province in Thailand. A total of 903 people were interviewed. As was the case with the other source countries the main motivation for young Cambodians to migrate to Thailand was economic necessity brought about by the lack of opportunities for work in the village. In addition, drought had exacerbated the economic hardships, making the decision to migrate to Thailand that much easier.

The average age of returnees at the time of the first migration was 18.7 years for males and 20.1 years for females. There was a variation in the age of Cambodian migrants interviewed in Thailand at the time of their first migration: males migrated on average at the age of 20.6 and females migrated at the age of 17.8. It seemed that females were migrating at a younger age compared to the female returnees who had migrated four years previously. However, it may be that younger migrants were more likely to be found in a neighboring Thai province while older Cambodian migrants might have been found in Bangkok and other parts of Thailand, after having gained experience in border regions.

SERC discovered that in both returnees and migrants at time of their first migration there were children as young as 10 years old, suggesting that safe-migration education programs and anti-trafficking information must also target the very young.

The education level of Cambodian migrants was extremely low. Ninety-two percent of migrants and nearly as many returnees (89 percent) failed to complete upper secondary school. Fully 20 percent of Cambodian returnees had no schooling at all, and of these, two-thirds were female, a reflection of the overall lack of education among females. Rural families were far more interested in having young girls at home where they could cook, clean, care for younger siblings and work in the fields, rather than have them obtain a basic education.

However, as a whole, respondents did not find the lack of education a disadvantage or an impediment to finding employment in Thailand.

Over 70 percent of respondents came from farm families. The survey area had recently experienced a period of drought. Along with other natural disasters, droughts motivate many young people to migrate. In interviews with SERC, respondents cited food shortages, insufficient land for farming and unpaid debts as reasons to migrate. A quarter of respondents

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described their family's lack of land as their main reason. It was noted that those respondents without land or with insufficient land tended to have more siblings abroad than those with land. As was the case with both Laos and Myanmar, returnees cited the death of a parent as a motivating factor in migrating. Over a fifth (22 percent) of non-migrants interviewed by SERC were unemployed at the time, which clearly illustrated the chronic lack of jobs in the villages. More often than not, even those who were employed had jobs they considered poorly paid. The attraction of migrating was clear when one considers that day laborers in Thailand earned more than twice what laborers in Cambodia earned (\$5 per day versus \$2 per day).

The responses of non-migrants demonstrated just how important migration was to the socio-economic culture of the survey area. Eighty-eight percent of non-migrants identified migration as an option for young people in their village and fully 83 percent knew someone actually working abroad. Over half the non-migrants who reported having a sibling abroad also expressed a desire to migrate. Respondents recognized that migration could mean a new house, a motorbike or relief from debts. However, a quarter of non-migrants said they saw no improvement in the lives of returnees' families, and had even seen their debt-load increase. If for example, a migrant worker was homesick or deported and returned home before paying off the broker, the returnee would still be saddled with the broker's fee.

In general, returnees and migrants had more positive information about migration than non-migrants, who showed a greater degree of ignorance about migration. The most positive aspect of migration for returnees and migrants was the ability to earn money. Returnees exerted influence over would-be migrants, and the conversations they held were overwhelmingly about finding jobs and earning money. Of the returnees and migrants interviewed by SERC very few (7 percent) recalled talking of the risks of exploitation prior to migrating. Half of the returnees said that they had travelled without knowing their destination or what work they would be doing. Consequently, a high percentage (63 percent) of returnees said they had travelled with a broker. The heavy reliance on brokers was due in part to the fact that only 1 percent of respondents could speak Thai. Significantly more under-age respondents (39 percent) were unaware where they were going to work compared to respondents over 18 years of age, (19 percent). This suggests that the youngest migrants were the least informed, and most dependent on others, whether a relative or a broker, for the safety and wellbeing.

Given the heavy reliance on the broker, it was not surprising that 30 percent of returnees said brokers were the primary source of information about migration. Only 3 percent of non-migrants considered brokers a useful information source. This suggests that brokers only recruited from among those who expressed a desire to leave their village. Significantly more migrants than returnees received information from relatives. As there was a gap of four years between the time of first migration for returnees and migrants this may indicate that migrants took their information more from relatives who had previously migrated than from other sources. For all respondents interviewed, village authorities and NGOs played an almost negligible role as sources of information regarding migration.

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SERC saw encouraging signs of an increase in levels of awareness regarding the advantages of traveling with legal documents. Among non-migrants 70 percent recognized the advantage of traveling legally, which was a higher rate than among returnees at the time of first departure. However, the \$130-\$140 cost of a passport – the equivalent of two or three months of local wages – was prohibitive for most villagers. Passports were only available in Phnom Penh and therefore difficult to get for people living far from the capital. The vast majority of respondents (95 percent) traveled to Thailand without legal travel documents (passport, border pass, day pass), which made them illegal migrants and put them at risk of prosecution, deportation or abuse at the hands of police. Twenty-seven percent of those who traveled without legal documents were children, and therefore ineligible for a passport.

Three quarters of returnees (75 percent) discussed migration with their parents prior to their departure. This tells us that migration was very much a family issue. Nine percent of returnees had not discussed their migration with anyone.

Over half (55 percent) of returnees who traveled with a broker described their first migration experience as bad. The border crossing was an intimidating experience for a third (34 percent) of returnees, for fear of arrest. A considerable number of returnees (32 percent) described hiding from, running from or escaping from police during their first migration. Among the common complaints were long trips of three or four days to reach their workplace and traveling in overcrowded vehicles.

Forty-five percent of first-time Cambodian migrants were employed in farming and 40 percent in construction. Cambodian generally do not speak or understand Thai, which limits the type of work they can do in Thailand. The experience abroad appeared to be harder for females than males. Sixty-two percent of females said that their first migration experience was bad compared to 42 percent of males. Females felt more discriminated against than males, claimed to have been cheated or deceived more often than males and had less freedom of movement. The greater freedom of movement enjoyed by males may explain why 20 percent of male respondents were deported, compared to 6 percent of females. More under-age respondents (17 percent) said they faced discrimination than respondents 18 years and older (7 percent).

The majority of returnees were unaware of any organization that could help them if they found themselves in trouble. With problems with the Thai language, respondents tended to turn to each other for support and help. The police seemed to be less of a source of help to Cambodian respondents than to Lao respondents, though this may be due to the difficulties Cambodian respondents faced with the language. It should be noted that the Thai police are responsible for rescuing victims of trafficking and exploitation.

The majority of non-migrants (60%) felt the village authorities to be ineffective with regard to informing or advising young people on migration. Advice was of an informal, non-official nature. Pre-departure education, practical assistance obtaining legal documents and information and advice regarding trafficking from NGOs were all ideas promoted among

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respondents to encourage safer migration. Returnees, however, often found themselves once again unemployed upon returning to the village, meaning that a second migration was a real possibility.

VIETNAM – Internal and external migrants search for opportunity

Rapid growth over two decades has created a burgeoning economy and a construction boom that spurs internal migration from the countryside to the cities of Vietnam, especially Ho Chi Minh City in the south. At the same time, Vietnam is a source country although the pattern and nature of Vietnamese migration to Thailand differed significantly from the other source countries in the SERC survey.

A total of 798 people were interviewed in four provinces of Vietnam. In addition, migrants working in Ho Chi Minh City were also interviewed. Forty-four percent of respondents were from ethnic groups other than the majority group, the Kinh. All of them spoke Vietnamese.

Among the main reasons given by respondents for migrating were lack of family income, land shortages and limited job opportunities in their village. One significant difference between respondents' background in Vietnam compared to other source countries was the level of education; 52 percent of returnees had finished lower secondary education and 33 percent had finished upper secondary school. Similarly high education levels were found among migrants and non-migrants interviewed. However, the respondents' vocational training was almost negligible, which limited them to unskilled labor.

The majority of respondents came from farming backgrounds, and farming provided the families' main source of income. As was the case with migrants from the other source countries, the death of a parent, more usually a father, prompted migration. This was the case for 10 percent of returnees and 8 percent of migrants, emphasizing yet again the economic dislocation that parental bereavement can bring to a family in Southeast Asia.

Compared to those of other source countries, the conditions of migration were fundamentally different in that internal migrants traveled legally without the need for a broker in most cases. It is not surprising therefore that two-thirds of returnees and migrants had positive information about migration. Migrating to work in another part of the country was accomplished without clandestine travel, without fear of arrest, and largely without stress. In addition, many migrants knew in advance where they would go and what type of work they would do. A high proportion of non-migrants (59 percent) said they had no information about how to migrate to another province.

Most information regarding migration came from family circles and from friends. Village authorities played a minor role in providing information. Organizations involved in migration and anti-trafficking efforts had a negligible influence as far as respondents in this survey were concerned. After becoming more widespread and commonplace in the villages, television

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played a bigger role in disseminating information to recent migrants than it had at the time of returnees' first migration.

Four factors underscore how commonplace migration was among the communities of the survey area. Firstly, the majority of respondents knew someone -- a relative, friend or a person from the village -- who was working in another province. Secondly, when non-migrants were asked what young people did when they finished school, 77 percent said that young people went to another province to work. Thirdly, the overwhelming majority (91 percent) of returnees had discussed their migration with their parents -- a figure much higher than in the other source countries. Fourthly, although 20 percent of returnees were under 18 at the time of their first departure, 80 percent of them had authorization from village authorities to do so, which is considered a necessity in Vietnam.

Unlike respondents in other source countries, many more respondents in Vietnam traveled to their work destination alone. For them it was a simple matter of boarding a bus. When leaving to work in Thailand, respondents traveled with relatives or friends.

Despite the generally higher level of education among Vietnamese respondents, most of them found themselves in unskilled jobs such as factory work or construction work. Others found themselves doing restaurant work, selling food or packing goods. There was no significant difference between the types of jobs done by male or female respondents.

Even those internal migrants, who traveled legally and easily in their own country, encountered many of the negative aspects of migration common to respondent from the other source countries. This was particularly true for migrants in Ho Chi Minh City. A quarter of respondents said they experienced unsatisfactory practices such as child labor, exhausting working hours, insufficient rest, uncomfortable and overcrowded living conditions, and discrimination. A significant number reported they were not given any treatment when sick.

Obviously language was not a problem for Vietnamese internal migrants, and due to their legal status, they enjoyed greater freedom of movement compared to respondents of the other source countries. Nominally, Vietnamese internal migrants had the backing of Trade Unions and had the right to strike in the face of exploitation by their employers. However, like respondents from the other source countries, many Vietnamese respondents said that they had to solve their own problems as they received little practical support from any quarter.

Interviews with village leaders revealed that they recognized their limitations in aiding young people with problems when abroad or when in Ho Chi Minh. Respondents spoke of the need for vocational training prior to leaving the village. In addition, many voiced the need for a third party with legal expertise to intervene in work disputes with the employer. The survey team identified the need of females for information on reproductive health and contraception.

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THAILAND – Booming economy acts as magnet for migrant workers

With its overheated economy and unending building boom, Thailand was the destination country for the majority of migrants from Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar and to a lesser extent, Vietnam. The SERC survey team visited 76 communities in six provinces of Thailand and interviewed a total of 538 migrants.

The team learned that 41 percent of migrants from Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia were under 18 at the time of first migration, and of them the average age was just under 15 – an age vulnerable to exploitation. Almost half (46 percent) of the migrant respondents had either no schooling or had failed to complete primary education.

More married couples and families from Myanmar migrated than from the other countries. This might be due to the Myanmar law that prohibits women under 25 from travelling without a legal guardian. Twelve percent of migrants from Myanmar had at least one parent in Thailand.

Before departing from their villages, migrants from the three main source countries shared an almost equally positive view of migration, with around two-thirds claiming positive information/knowledge about migration. Non-migrants (people who had never migrated) in all three countries had a higher level of negative information than either migrants or returnees. This may suggest that information campaigns mounted by nongovernmental organizations are beginning to have an impact. Awareness of negative information indicated that some villagers were adopting a more realistic vision of migration and were less attracted by the lure of working abroad.

There was a notable difference in the number of Lao migrants traveling with a passport compared to migrants from the other countries; over a third (35 percent) of Lao migrants had a passport compared to only 6 percent of migrants from Cambodia and 5 percent from Myanmar. This reflected the change in Lao law in the intervening years since returnees first migrated four and five years ago, which made it easier to get a passport. In addition, in Laos the cost of a passport (\$20) was considerably cheaper than in Cambodia and Myanmar where it was in excess of \$100. Easier access to affordable passports may well have encouraged passport use and also encouraged children to drop out of school to pursue work abroad. Parents may have been more willing to give their consent to travel believing their children would be at less risk, although holding a passport does not guarantee a safe travel and work experience.

More than half the respondents from the three source countries had a border pass, which entitled them to stay in a bordering province for a week. As most of the migrants were working in a province adjoining the border, many did not see the need for a broker.

Thai authorities in Mukdahan Province bordering Savannakhet, Laos, and Ranong Province bordering Thar Chielek, Myanmar, have adopted a pragmatic approach that recognizes the reality of cross-border migration and enables Thailand to benefit from the cheap pool of labor. Lao laborers are allowed to enter Thailand at harvest time and on special festive occasions. Day

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laborers from Myanmar are allowed to enter without a pass in the Thai towns of Mae Sod and Mae Sae. In Mae Sod, Myanmar migrants make up 70 percent of the population. Thai authorities there have adopted a curfew and strict rules prohibiting gambling and drunkenness.

Lao migrants were mainly employed in farming (36 percent), shops (22 percent) and restaurant service (12 percent). Migrants from Myanmar were employed in factories (17 percent), farming (18 percent), animal husbandry (26 percent) and shops (12 percent). More than half the Cambodian migrants (54 percent) were employed in garment factories, shoemaking or laundry. There was no shortage of work for migrants in jobs that Thais did not want.

Only 3 percent of Lao migrants described their experience working in Thailand as bad compared to about 6 percent of migrants from Myanmar and a significantly higher 28 percent of Cambodian migrants. The different experience of many Cambodian migrants compared to migrants of the other source countries may lie in the nature of the work they did, and in fact, 35 percent of Cambodian migrants described their working conditions as bad, whereas 8 percent of migrants from Myanmar and none of the migrants from Laos made the same complaint. Over half (54 percent) of Cambodian migrants were employed in garment factories and common complaints included insufficient rest days and lack of access to health care.

Data collected by SERC researchers suggested that migrants experienced fewer problems than returnees had. They reported fewer instances of trouble with police, fewer deportations and fewer instances of being cheated or deceived. However, interviews with both migrants and community authorities in Thailand revealed another picture of harsh realities for many, a picture which did not fully emerge from the quantitative data. A significant number of young women migrants were working in brothels, and women who had contracted sexually transmitted infections were deported rather than treated, ostensibly to limit the spread of the infection in Thailand. Interviews also brought to light the presence of child beggars among the migrants and beatings by Thai employers that seemed to be commonplace for Cambodians, much more so than for Lao and Myanmar migrants. At the time of the survey there were border clashes between Thai and Cambodian troops and this may have generated a greater degree of xenophobia and discrimination. Tensions between different migrant national groups were also reported.

As was the case with returnees, migrants suggested the need for a third party to negotiate with employers and police in the case of dispute. In addition, many migrants suggested the need for vocational training prior to departure, as their lack of skills meant they qualified to do only the hardest, most dangerous and dirtiest work.

Vietnamese migrants had a very different experience in Thailand. Nearly all travelled with a passport, sometimes as part of an organized tour for outbound travel (and not returning). They typically headed to long-established Vietnamese communities where they worked in restaurants and market stalls.

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Migration for work has become a way of life for thousands of poorly educated, largely unskilled villagers in Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam. They leave home for a variety of reasons most often related to family difficulties, lack of land for agriculture and a general lack of employment opportunities in their region. Migrants of all ages often travel without legal travel documents, sometimes dependent on paid brokers, to find work in Thailand that may involve dirty, dangerous or poor living and working conditions without access to health care. Among their numbers are children as young as 10 and adolescents, and single females, who are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. While some migrants return home with money to pay for a new house or shop or consumer goods, others return only to find they are still faced with economic hardships that lead them to migrate again. Reliable information is generally unavailable to villagers in advance of their departure and they leave home without adequate understanding of travel requirements, employment opportunities and the risks of traveling and living abroad. Few migrants knew of any organization they could contact for information, advice or advocacy abroad. While there have been some gains in passport use and awareness of the risks, migration for work in the five countries surveyed remains a dangerous way of life.