



Mekong Migration Network (MMN)

Mekong Migration Network (MMN) & Meiji Gakuin University Symposium

Beyond “Tolerance”:

Working hand-in-hand to promote the social inclusion of migrants and their families

22 July 2016, Kanagawa, Japan

On 22 July 2016, the Mekong Migration Network (MMN) in collaboration with the Faculty of International Studies at Meiji Gakuin University in Kanagawa, Japan organized a symposium entitled: “Beyond ‘Tolerance’: Working hand-in-hand to promote the social inclusion of migrants and their families.”

Over 40 people, including representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), self-help groups, universities, and research institutes, attended the symposium. The symposium began with an introduction to MMN’s project and by welcoming participants representing the Faculty of International Studies at Meiji Gakuin University. The first session of the symposium involved presentations by three of MMN’s project partners on issues related to labour migration in the Mekong Sub-region and Japan in the era of globalization. The session was followed by presentations from representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs) working on migration issues in Japan.

The opening session commenced with a presentation by Mr. Brahm Press, Director of MAP Foundation, entitled: “Supply chains: How products reaching your table are made using exploited labour.” Mr. Press highlighted the current trends of the global market in which goods and investments are moving across borders more easily while cheap labour and base production remain grounded in less developed countries. He remarked on how labour rights violations often happen in poorer countries that are involved in subcontracting processes and located at the bottom of the global supply chain. Mr. Press pointed out that labour rights violations, such as underpaid wages and unsafe working conditions, occur in part as a result of lead firms failing to assume responsibility for regulating and enforcing labour practices and rights. Instead, this responsibility is devolved to suppliers in poorer countries where there are often weak monitoring and enforcement mechanisms in place and corruption among authorities. Mr. Press stressed the need to protect the freedom of association of workers, review subcontracting practices, promote national and international standards, acknowledge the role of consumers in finding solutions, and raise awareness of these needs amongst Japanese companies and their supply chains at both global and regional levels.

Following Mr. Press, Mr. Sokchar Mom, Program Manager of Legal Support for Children and Women (LSCW) from Cambodia, presented a case study on migration in the Mekong Sub-region titled: “Cambodian migration to Thailand: A case study of the seafood industry.” Mr. Mom provided a brief overview of labour migration from Cambodia highlighting major push factors, including urban-centric economic growth and low employment opportunities, and major pull factors, including higher wages and

demand for migrant labour, incentivizing labour migration to destination countries, particularly neighbouring Thailand. Mr. Mom then presented a case study of Cambodian migrants working on fishing boats in Thailand – an industry that targets young, uneducated migrant men from poor communities. Migrant workers’ social networks and brokers are the major channels used by many Cambodians to migrate for employment in the fishing industry. The main destination countries they migrate to are Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Mr. Mom emphasized that Cambodian migrants working in fishing boats often experience poor working and living conditions, including long working hours, an inadequate supply of food, poor hygiene, physical and mental abuse, unpaid and underpaid wages, restrictions on movement, arbitrary arrest and deportation, no access to legal services, and death. These poor working and living conditions also impact migrants’ families and communities.

The next speaker from MMN was Ms. Thet Thet Aung, Head of the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society’s Labour Department in Burma/Myanmar, who presented on: “Myanmar migration to Japan: The Technical Intern Training Program in practice.” Ms. Thet Thet Aung described how unemployment, low wages, conflict, and natural disasters remain the main reasons why people from Burma/Myanmar are choosing to leave their homes and seek employment abroad. Japan has become a major destination country for migrants from Burma/Myanmar with the introduction of the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP). Under the TITP, migrants’ anticipate that they will earn higher incomes to support their families, and gain technical skills and experience from working and living aboard. However, in reality many migrant workers experience the complexities and time-consuming nature of the recruitment process, are overcharged for recruitment fees in their country of origin, and lack labour rights protections, including protections ensuring the legal right to minimum wage and access to remedies for labour abuses, in the destination country. Ms. Thet Thet Aung urged both the governments of Myanmar and Japan to provide effective protection mechanisms to migrants. She recommended that the Government of Myanmar reduce the processing time and that the Government of Japan consider creating employment opportunities for migrant workers opposed to internship positions.

Ms. Hisano Niikura representing the House for Women Saalaa presented on: “Social inclusion in Japan: The challenges of assisting migrants in Japan.” Ms. Niikura described the House for Women Saalaa’s program that provides assistance to migrant women who have faced domestic violence through a hotline service and shelter. Ms. Niikura began her presentation with an overview of migration to Japan focusing on migrant women, namely those who have migrated to work in the sex tourism industry, for marriage, to partake in international study programs, and those who are trafficked. Ms. Niikura addressed the key factors of domestic violence, which include language and cultural barriers, visa restrictions, and isolation from families and communities. She emphasized that migrant women often experience cycles of social exclusion. For example, a married migrant woman may be physically abused by her husband and seek assistance from a shelter. She may experience discrimination within her community for being a single mother and have difficulty changing her job or finding a new job. She may also experience a lack of respect from her children for being a migrant. Ms. Niikura recommends that migrant women should be empowered and that local communities should work to improve the social inclusion of migrants.

The final speaker, Ms. Truong Thi Thuy Trang, presented on: “The social inclusion and experiences of Vietnamese refugees in Japan.” Ms. Trang described the history of refugees in Japan, highlighting the history of Vietnamese refugees. Vietnamese refugees in Japan experience cultural differences, such as differences in livelihoods, food, and names in relation to their Japanese neighbours, and challenges to inclusion, including difficulties finding jobs and accommodation, discrimination, and restrictions on their

immigration status, especially for second-generation Vietnamese refugees. In order to promote the social inclusion of Vietnamese refugees in Japan, Ms. Trang started introducing the Vietnamese culture to local communities through schools in Kanagawa prefecture. She described her visits to several schools and classrooms with students from different grades. However, she noted that regardless of introducing the Vietnamese culture to students, promoting the social inclusion of Vietnamese refugees in Japan remained a major challenge.

During a question and answer period, participants discussed international standards and mechanisms related to labour migration and shared their concerns about implementing these standards and mechanisms at a national level. In addition, participants expressed the importance of addressing refugee issues and suggested that the Japanese government review policies in order to support more refugees.