



Mekong Migration Network (MMN)

## Burma/Myanmar Civil Society Organization Country Visit to Thailand



Image: Project participants in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

### Overview

- Purpose: For representatives from Burma/Myanmar civil society organizations (CSOs) to gain a better understanding of cross-border labour migration issues and responses from migrant communities and CSOs operating in Thailand.
- Date: 23-26 November 2016
- Location: Chiang Mai, Thailand
- Coordinating Organization: Mekong Migration Network (MMN)
- Host Organizations: MAP Foundation, Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN), Workers Solidarity Association (WSA), and Empower Foundation

- Participating Organizations: 88 Generation Peace and Open Society, Foundation for Education and Development (FED), Sex Workers in Myanmar Network (SWIM), Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar (CTUM), Let's Help Each Other (LHEO), Civil and Political Rights Campaign Group (CPRC), Human Rights Defenders and Promoters (HRDP)

### Introduction

The Mekong Migration Network (MMN) is a network of regional and national civil society and research organizations from across the Greater Mekong Sub-region. The network was established in 2003 to act as a platform for member organizations to exchange information and conduct cross-border projects advocating for the protection of migrants. MMN carries out activities in the areas of information monitoring, research, capacity building, and advocacy.

The Burma/Myanmar civil society organization (CSO) country visit to Thailand followed MMN's Myanmar National Training on Responses to Labour Migration, which was held from 29 August to 2 September 2016. 22 individuals from 18 organizations across Burma/Myanmar participated in the 5-day national training, including representatives of 88 Generation Peace and Open Society, Foundation for Education and Development (FED), Joint Action Committee for Burma Affairs (JACBA), Northern Shan State Baptist Convention (NSSBC), WE Generation Network, Tavoyan Women's Union (TWU), Karen Baptist Convention (KBC), Sex Workers in Myanmar Network (SWIM), Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar (CTUM), Let's Help Each Other (LHEO), Civil and Political Rights Campaign Group (CPRC), Human Rights Defenders and Promoters (HRDP), Action Labour Rights (ALR), Rakhine Women's Union, Mawk Kon, Agriculture and Farmers Federation of Myanmar (AFFM-IUM), and Myanmar Industrial Craft and Services (MICS).

Some participants of the training had the opportunity of visiting Chiang Mai, Thailand, from 23 to 26 November 2016. Seven participants took part in the visit representing: 88 Generation Peace and Open Society, Federation for Education and Development (FED), Sex Workers in Myanmar Network (SWIM), Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar (CTUM), Let's Help Each Other (LHEO), Civil and Political Rights Campaign Group (CPRC), and Human Rights Defenders and Promoters (HRDP). During the visit, participants engaged with like-minded organizations and migrant workers to learn more about labour migration and available supports to migrants in a destination country.

### Day 1: Learning about the Mekong Migration Network and MAP Foundation

#### **Mekong Migration Network**

On 23 November, project participants were welcomed at the Mekong Migration Network (MMN) office by the MMN Secretariat. Ms. Omsin Boonlert, MMN Advocacy and Research Officer, explained the history and structure of MMN. She then described some of MMN's

ongoing projects across the Mekong Sub-region. Ms. Omsin Boonlert explained that MMN's activities focus primarily on advocacy, information monitoring, capacity building, and research.

## **MAP Foundation**

On 23 November, project participants also travelled to the MAP Foundation office where they had the opportunity of visiting the Community Radio station and learning about MAP's projects. Mr. Brahm Press, MAP Foundation Director, explained MAP's motto: "no human being is illegal." He said that people find themselves in situations of illegality, but people themselves are not illegal. He added that MAP staff believe that everyone is born with rights, independently from documents.

Mrs. Mai Mai of MAP Foundation talked to participants about some of MAP's programmes, including: Rights for All (a programme on migrant children safety); Women Exchange Get Together (a platform for women to talk about issues, such as living wage); Safe School (a programme that teaches children what to do when disasters happen); Sexual and Reproductive Rights for Adolescents; and Crisis Support (a helpline to request translators in crisis situations and information on how to reach Burma/Myanmar safely).

Mr. Harn, coordinator of MAP's multimedia programme, explained how the MAP Community Radio was born. In 2007, MAP bought FM frequencies, which they used to broadcast programmes three days per week. Since the FM radius is only 30 kilometres, programmes are now being broadcasted over the Internet and smartphone applications. Shan is the main language of broadcasting and some programmes are now in Thai. Mr. Harn explained how the radio is also a way to disseminate reliable information and dispel rumors. He said that MAP believes that information is key to empowerment. Some people have used the radio to find lost documentation or to tell family members where they are. The radio also offers call-in services. Through the web analytics it is possible to monitor where people are listening from.

In the evening, project participants had the opportunity of visiting a community of migrants living just outside the city of Chiang Mai. Participants observed MAP employees facilitating a training on HIV and TB prevention and had the opportunity to ask migrants questions about their daily lives, working conditions, and the process of migrating to Thailand. The visit was highly interactive and involved participants and migrants exchanging views on politics and the rule of law. Migrants shared concerns about their children's education in Thailand and how they will not be able to access education after they have reached a certain grade in high school.



Image: Participants visiting a migrant community facilitated by MAP Foundation.

## Day 2: Engaging with CSOs working with migrant women in Chiang Mai

### **Shan Women's Action Network**

The Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN) is an MMN partner organization based in Chiang Mai, Thailand. SWAN – a feminist, community-based, independent organization – promotes gender equality and women's empowerment by providing educational and documentation support to Shan women in Thailand and Burma/Myanmar. On the second day of the country visit, delegates from Burma/Myanmar visited the SWAN head office to learn about SWAN's programmes and to exchange information and personal experiences. During the visit, SWAN staff made a presentation about their ongoing programmes. SWAN has four main programmes, which focus on education, women's empowerment, information dissemination and documentation, and women's well being. Participants found SWAN's use of multimedia to disseminate information and documentation to be very interesting, along with SWAN's other programmes that work directly with women migrant workers.



Image: Participants engaging in discussion with SWAN representatives at the SWAN office in Chiang Mai.

### **Empower Foundation and the Can Do Bar**

On 24 November, project participants visited Empower Foundation's Can Do Bar run by sex workers. Ms. Liz Hilton, an Empower Foundation Chiang Mai coordinator, described the history of the organization and how the bar is run. Since 2009, the Can Do Bar has provided a safe space for sex workers to work. Ms. Liz Hilton explained that the Can Do Bar is the only bar in Chiang Mai that follows the rules by the book. Apart from the bar, the organization offers English and Japanese classes run by volunteers as well as legal advice to sex workers.

Ms. Liz Hilton pointed out that women have other jobs apart from sex work and in many cases they financially support their entire family. Most sex workers in Chiang Mai are migrants from Burma/Myanmar. Generally, migrants find it better to work as a sex worker in Thailand rather than in Burma/Myanmar because it is safer and it pays better. Migrant sex workers send around USD 300 million in remittances from Thailand every year.

Ms. Liz Hilton explained that the biggest problems for sex workers are the extortion by police and stigma associated with this kind of work. She also explained that in Thailand it is illegal to buy or sell sex, however over the last 60 years no customers have reportedly been arrested for buying sex, whereas sex workers have been arrested many times over. Empower advocates that sex work should be considered the same as any other field of work thus providing workers with the same labour rights.





Image: Sex workers and Empower Foundation members putting on a karaoke show at the Can Do Bar.

Day 3: Taking part in events for International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women at Chiang Mai University and Mae Taeng Elephant Camp

**Women's Study Centre, Chiang Mai University**

In the morning of the third day of the Thailand country visit, participants took part in an “International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women” event held at Chiang Mai University’s (CMU’s) Women’s Study Center. At the event, participants heard from various Thai scholars and activists about the urgent need to amend laws on gender-sensitive issues. The event provided participants with the opportunity to learn about academic perspectives regarding gender issues, as well as from activists working on the ground.



Image: Participants at the Women’s Study Center at Chiang Mai University (CMU).

**Mae Taeng Elephant Camp**

In the evening, project participants travelled two hours from Chiang Mai to Mae Taeng Elephant Camp. At the camp, they met migrant workers originally from Kayah State in Burma/Myanmar. During the previous days, participants met with migrants who engage in construction, wood carving, and domestic work. At the Mae Taeng Elephant Camp, they learned that migrants employed in elephant camps in northern Thailand engage in very different kinds of work, such as working as a ‘mahout’ (someone who trains and tends to elephants). Participants also learned about the work of ‘long-neck’ Karen people who reside around the elephant camps to profit from the tourism industry. Their livelihood is dependent on visitors purchasing handmade products from their markets. Participants gained an understanding of the various informal channels people from Burma/Myanmar use to migrate to Thailand. For many, these channels range from walking many days through the jungle to riding on motorbikes and trucks. In previous years, an ‘International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women Day’ event took place in Chiang Mai and migrants who are based outside of the city cannot join. This year, however, women activists wanted to bring the event to migrants living outside of the city who previously did not have the opportunity to attend. MAP Foundation’s (MAP’s) Women Exchange Program and the Women’s League of Burma (WLB)

organized the event at Mae Taeng Elephant Camp. The event commenced with fun games involving migrant workers and participants. MAP and WLB representatives presented information on the purpose of International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women Day and the reasoning behind hosting this year's event at the elephant camp. The event provided a space for local migrant women to ask questions about domestic and sexual violence laws in Burma/Myanmar, which were answered not only by the event organizers but also by country-visit participants. More than 100 people attended the event.

#### Day 4: Meeting with Workers Solidarity Association and concluding with an evaluation session

##### **Workers Solidarity Association**

At the last meeting of the Thailand Country Visit, Burma/Myanmar CSO representatives met with members of Workers Solidarity Association (WSA). WSA is comprised of migrant workers who work to spread awareness of migrant and labour rights among fellow migrants in Chiang Mai. The organization operates on a voluntary basis and currently has between 400 to 500 active members. These individuals are also members of Thai trade unions – in Thailand, migrant workers are not allowed to form their own labour unions. WSA members coordinate with other organizations, such as MAP Foundation, to do outreach and raise awareness about migrant workers' rights in Thailand. WSA members and country visit participants exchanged contact information and discussed possible areas for future collaboration on migrant issues.



Image: Participants engaging in discussion with members of Workers Solidarity Association (WSA).



## **Evaluation Session**

On the last day of the visit, participants engaged in an evaluation session about the country visit facilitated by MMN staff members. Participants expressed that the visit instilled in them a deeper understanding of the situation of migrants from Burma/Myanmar working in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Participants conveyed that NGOs operating in Chiang Mai are better than those operating in Burma/Myanmar in terms of providing information on migrant rights, labour rights, and health care to migrants. From the visit, participants learned that Thailand's universal health care system applies to migrant workers, however in reality many migrants are unable to access it. From meetings with migrant workers participants learned that many migrants are concerned about the future of their children's education and that there is a weak system in place to provide pre-departure trainings to potential migrant workers on safe labour migration. Moreover, they learned that there are no programmes in Burma/Myanmar to support the reintegration of migrant worker returnees and their children. Moving forward, participants expressed their interest in working with MMN to share information about the history of migration with local public schools in Burma/Myanmar, particularly in schools located outside of Yangon.

## Appendix A

### Burma/Myanmar CSO Country Visit to Thailand

#### Agenda

Date: 23-26 November 2016

Location: Chiang Mai, Thailand

Coordinating Organization: Mekong Migration Network (MMN)

22 November 2016		
Time	Agenda	Logistics
	Participants arrive in Chiang Mai; check in at the hotel	Holiday Garden Hotel
	Free evening	
23 November 2016		
8:30	Leave the hotel	Meet in the hotel lobby; travel by songthaew
9:00-12:00	Visit Mekong Migration Network (MMN) Office <i>*Overview of MMN, country visit organizations, and overall situation of migrants in Chiang Mai and Thailand</i>	MMN Office
12:00-13:00	Lunch	
14:00-16:00	Visit MAP Foundation	MAP Foundation Office
17:30-20:00	Visit migrant community arranged by MAP Foundation	Travel by songthaew
24 November 2016		
10:00-12:00	Visit Shan Women's Action Network (SWAN)	Meet in the hotel lobby; travel by songthaew
13:30-14:30	Wrap-up meeting	MMN Office
15:00-17:00	Visit Empower Foundation	Empower Foundation Office
18:30-20:00	Solidarity dinner at Can Do Bar	Empower Foundation Office
25 November 2016		
09:00-12:00	Attend International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women event at the Women's Study Center, Chiang Mai University	Chiang Mai University
15:00	Travel to Mae Taeng Elephant Camp	MAP Foundation Office
17:00-20:30	Attend International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women event at Mae	Mae Taeng Elephant Camp

	Taeng Elephant Camp organized by MAP Foundation and Women's League of Burma	
<b>26 November 2016</b>		
9:30-11:00	Meeting with Workers Solidarity Association (WSA)	Hotel
13:00-15:00	Wrap-up and evaluation session	MMN Office
16:00	Free evening	
<b>27 November 2016</b>		
12:00	Participants' departure; travel from hotel to airport	