



Mekong Migration Network



# SURVIVING THE PANDEMIC:

## To Stay or Go?

A Study into the Decision-making of  
Mekong Migrants

### About The Mekong Migration Network

The Mekong Migration Network (MMN), founded in 2003, is a sub-regional network of migrant support NGOs, migrant grassroots groups, and research institutes. The central goal of MMN is to promote the welfare, well-being, dignity, and human rights of migrants in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), and to build mutual support and solidarity among migrants and advocates within the sub-region. The full report and translations of the executive summary in Thai and Burmese are available on the MMN Webpage ([www.mekongmigration.org](http://www.mekongmigration.org)) along with all our previous publications.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & RECOMMENDATIONS

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The Covid-19 pandemic is having an unprecedented impact on the lives of people around the world. Migrants in the GMS are severely affected given their limited access to social protection, lack of job security, and precarious immigration status. Throughout the pandemic, MMN has urged governments to take robust action to protect the rights, welfare and livelihoods of migrants.

As part of our evidence-based advocacy, the collaborative research introduced here seeks a better understanding of how individual migrants survive the Covid-19 pandemic through the choices they make and to feed this knowledge back into the policy discourse. Focusing on migrant workers from Cambodia and Myanmar in Thailand and recent returnees of those nationalities, the study examines how various factors, including longstanding labour

migration issues and inadequate social protection, shape decisions to either remain in Thailand or return to countries of origin. It provides a textured account of the decisions made by migrants amid the wave of redundancies and border closures, as well as thoughts on how their decision-making can inform policy as we move through the pandemic era.



*A closed border gate between Thailand and Myanmar, Mae Sot, November 2020. (Photo: MMN/John Hulme)*

## METHODOLOGY

Our research took a mixed-methods approach, combining desk study with semi-structured interviews. The desk study reviewed relevant law and policy, together with literature relating to the impact of the early pandemic on migrants in Thailand and returnees in Cambodia and Myanmar. MMN and our project partners interviewed 62 migrants, including family members and returnees, along with 14 key informants, encompassing representatives of governments, CSOs, and recruitment agency associations from across Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar.

Given the Covid-19-related restrictions in place at the time of our fieldwork in October and November 2020, our methods were adapted to minimise risk. The health and safety of our researchers and respondents remained our overriding concern throughout. Thus, to eliminate or limit as far as possible the risk of transmitting Covid-19, MMN

researchers adopted a stringent fieldwork protocol. Thankfully, the relatively low infection rates in Thailand and Cambodia at the time of our fieldwork allowed research interviews to proceed in-person with appropriate precautions. However, due to a second wave of infections in Myanmar, all interviews in that country were conducted remotely.

Purposive sampling was used to ensure that a diverse range of voices were reflected, with respondents grouped to ascertain how decision-making changed over time as borders closed. Given the relatively small sample size, our fieldwork focused on deepening our understanding of individual migrant decision-making at this time of crisis. The accounts elicited enabled us to identify through content analysis key determinants in migrant decisions to either remain in Thailand or return to countries of origin.

# FINDINGS

Analysis of our interview data revealed six major decisions to either remain in Thailand or return to countries of origin early in the pandemic. These were: (1) the influence of family ties; (2) the push and pull of work and money concerns; (3) the provision of social protection and other support; (4) the imposition of border closures; (5) access to reliable information; and (6) personal and public health concerns.

## Most respondents emphasised the primacy of family ties, along with work and money considerations:

***“I have family here, so I don’t even think of going back.”***

[Female, Myanmar migrant factory worker, interviewed in Mae Sot]

***“I consulted with my family. Because of Covid-19, they wanted me to return... They were worried about me.”***

[Female, Myanmar returnee, interviewed by telephone in Myanmar]

***“The work gradually decreased day by day. That’s why I decided to return home.”***

[Female, Cambodian returnee, interviewed in Cambodia]

***“I’ve taken a loan of 25,000 baht (USD 830), with interest at a rate of 2,500 baht (USD 83) every 15 days. At first, when I heard about the impending border closures my husband and I thought of returning home as Myanmar had not yet been affected. However, I realised I couldn’t as I had such a large debt to pay back.”***

[Female, Myanmar migrant, unemployed at time of interview in Samut Prakarn]

***“I have to borrow money to send to my dependents in Myanmar, even though I have no job at the moment.”***

[Female, Myanmar migrant beauty salon worker, interviewed in Phang Nga]

## Our analysis indicated that factors were often intertwined and that persuasive individual factors, such as employment status, were not always a reliable indicator of decisions made:

***“I’m happy to stay in Thailand even though I’ve no income. Food costs in Thailand are lower than Myanmar and it is easier to find a job.”***

[Male, Myanmar migrant day labourer, interviewed in Mae Sot]



A returning migrant receives a temperature check while crossing the border at the Second Friendship Bridge, Mae Sot, November 2020. (Photo: MMN/John Hulme)

***“Even though I’ve been unemployed for several months, I can’t return as I don’t want to burden my parents.”***

[Male, Myanmar migrant day labourer, interviewed in Mae Sot]

**Decisions were typically a mix of personal circumstances and wider structural realities. As this respondent who had recently been made redundant remarked:**

***“I want to leave Thailand to take care of my family, but can’t because of the border closures.”***

[Female, Myanmar migrant factory worker, interviewed in Samut Prakarn]

**Our interviews also highlighted the difficulties migrants face accessing Thailand’s social protection schemes and a pattern among employers of not honouring severance pay or social security contributions. As the quotes below indicate, such issues were influential factors in migrant decisions to return to countries of origin:**

***“My employer didn’t pay me my last salary and told me not to come back, so I returned home empty handed.”***

[Female, Cambodian returnee, former migrant agricultural worker, interviewed in Cambodia]

***“If I knew that I could apply for benefits of course I would try. I lost my job. I was overwhelmed and couldn’t think of any solution, so I just returned.”***

[Female Myanmar returnee, interviewed by telephone in Myanmar]

***“I’ve never tried to claim benefits. My employer has never enrolled me and says doing so is a waste of time.”***

[Female, Myanmar migrant beauty salon worker, interviewed in Phang Nga]

**However, among the cohort of respondents who decided to remain in Thailand, we found that many cited their confidence in the Thai healthcare system as a reason for staying put:**

***“In Thailand, they have better disease control systems.”***

[Female, Myanmar migrant factory worker, interviewed in Samut Prakarn]

***“All of my family members agreed that I should stay in Thailand. Mainly because Thailand has better healthcare services and support.”***

[Female, Myanmar migrant sea food processing worker, interviewed in Phang Nga]

**Our interviews also highlighted that migrants’ access to reliable information was limited and that embassies and consulates could improve information dissemination to their migrant nationals:**

***“The Thai government should provide us with more information about border openings.”***

[Male, Myanmar migrant, unemployed at time of interview in Samut Prakarn]

***“I did not receive any information or support from the Embassy... I felt abandoned... I have not received any information about the border closures from the Embassy.”***

[Female, Cambodian migrant housewife, interviewed in Samut Prakarn]

***“I wasn’t sure what was true and what was false... I think it’d be better if we could get up-to-date information from our Embassy.”***

[Female, Myanmar returnee, interviewed by phone in Myanmar]

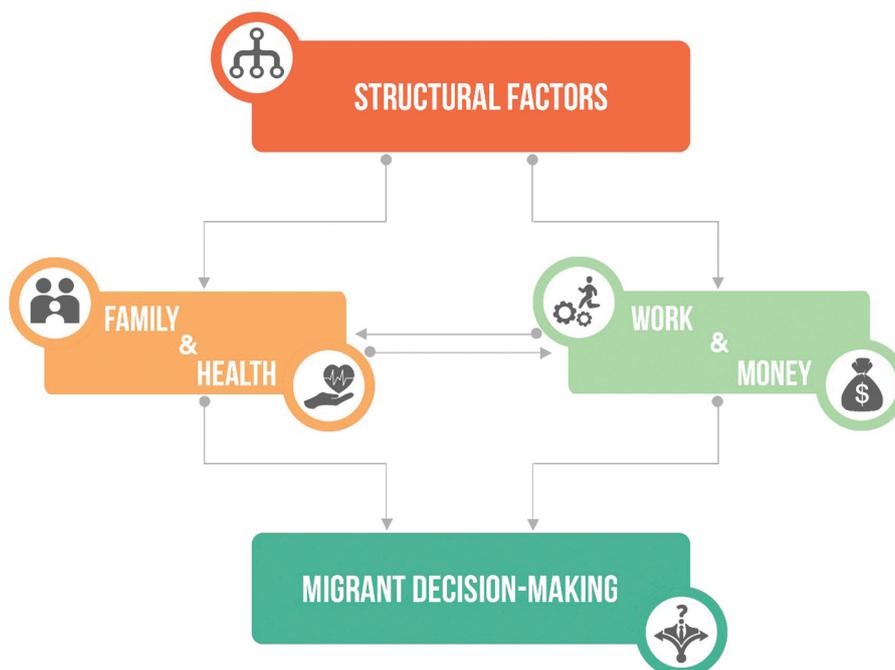
# CONCLUSIONS

From our findings we were able to draw a number of conclusions with policy implications: First, migrants tend to be active resilient decision-makers. Amid the public anxiety of the pandemic, our study indicates that migrants generally respond pragmatically, both as individuals and family units, having carefully weighed the options open to them.

Second, the Covid-19 crisis has exposed pre-existing problems with the provision of social protection to migrant workers. With minimal access to Thailand's social security system and exclusion from special assistance programs, many migrants were compelled by economic necessity to return to their countries of origin through rapidly closing border and against public health guidance. Those who remained recounted being left to fend for themselves, surviving through occasional day labour, high interest loans, mutual support initiatives, and the assistance of CSOs.

Third, strikingly, many of those who chose to remain in Thailand for family reasons, remarked on their children's strong sense of belonging and feelings of being settled in Thailand. This was particularly the case among migrants with young families. Such sentiments are significant as they run contrary to official narratives which characterise migrants as temporary residents, a portrayal often used to justify their exclusion from various rights and benefits. The law and policy landscape should respond to the reality of migrants' more nuanced relationship with Thailand.

Fourth, migrants make decisions through the prism of an imperfect information environment. More, therefore, needs to be done by the authorities to make official information more easily accessible. In particular, the lack of official information in migrant languages has serious implications for migrant decision-making during the Covid-19 crisis.



Micro and Macro Factors Impacting Migrant Decision-making

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THAILAND

Based on our study of migrant decision-making amid the Covid-19 pandemic, MMN calls on the Royal Thai Government to make the following changes to its social protection schemes and Covid-19-related responses:

## Social Protection

1. Ensure relevant ministries and departments coordinate in the delivery of a tailored social protection package that helps all migrants mitigate the health and economic impacts of the pandemic;
2. Expand the provision of affordable healthcare by reducing or waiving enrolment fees payable to the Migrant Health Insurance Scheme, and ensure that the application process is accessible to all migrants;
3. Urgently reform the social security system by amending the Royal Decree Categorizing Employees in Accordance with Section 4 of the Social Security Act B.E. 2533, to make it more inclusive to migrants and Thai workers by removing the statutory exclusion of workers in the informal economy and in temporary or seasonal work;

*Migrant workers taking a rest at a construction site, Chiang Mai, November 2020.  
(Photo: MMN/John Hulme)*



4. Make the social security system more migrant-friendly by streamlining the enrolment and claims processes, including provisions to facilitate greater exportability of due benefits, providing information in migrant languages, and offering interpretation for Social Security Office services;
5. Improve transparency by implementing an online platform to allow workers to monitor their social security status and contribution record. Such a platform would boost trust and confidence in the system among both migrant and Thai workers;
6. Strengthen enforcement against employers who fail to register or defraud workers of their social security contributions. In so doing, make full use of existing powers within Title 6 of the Social Security Act, B.E. 2533, to investigate and prosecute employers in breach of their obligations;
7. Make it easier for migrants to open bank accounts and utilise borrowing and remittance

services. This would improve the efficiency of social protection interventions and assist migrants and their family members survive the pandemic;

### **Migrant Labour Rights Protection**

8. Ensure employers honour severance pay obligations in accordance with the Labour Protection Act B.E. 2541, and prosecute those who fail to pay as per the penalties prescribed in the Act;
9. Strengthen enforcement action against employers who confiscate migrants' passports and work permits in accordance with the Royal Ordinance of the Management of Foreign Workers B.E. 2560. In so doing, adopt a flexible approach to allow migrants to change their jobs in such cases;
10. Reduce the cost of renewing work permits and visas, and provide timely information regarding immigration policies in languages migrants understand;



*Migrant dockworkers loading cement onto a cargo ship, Ranong, November 2020. (Photo: MMN/John Hulme)*



Seafood factory workers rushing to get on to a crowded bus, Ranong, November 2020. (Photo: MMN/John Hulme)



## Covid-19 Specific Measures

11. Ensure all migrants, regardless of their immigration status, can access free public healthcare in relation to the diagnosis, treatment and vaccination for Covid-19; and in such circumstances, publicly announce that the immigration status of migrants will not be checked and that all personal data will be treated in the strictest of confidence with an undertaking that immigration enforcement action will not be pursued against migrant Covid-19 patients. To encourage uptake, conduct a targeted vaccination programme through health workers and CSOs trusted by migrant communities;
12. Where quarantine is deemed necessary, ensure that all migrants are accommodated free of charge, in safe, well-ventilated, and hygienic quarantine facilities with adequate food and drink provided;
13. To avoid situations where migrants are compelled to return to their countries of origin or deterred from accessing healthcare, amnesty policies should grant migrants the right to work and be affordable and as inclusive as possible;
14. Step up labour and public health inspections and strictly enforce Covid-19 safety measures in the workplace. In so doing ensure that employers provide their workers, free of charge, with protective equipment such as proper masks and alcohol-gel. Provide a toll-free number for migrants to call if they fear that their employer is in breach of Covid-19 safety measures;
15. Mount a coordinated public information campaign targeting migrants to inform them of important matters relating to the Covid-19 pandemic in appropriate migrant languages. Such information should include preventative measures to stop the spread of Covid-19, what to do and how to contact the health authorities in the event of falling ill, updates on travel restrictions and border closures, how to social distance and self-isolate, quarantine requirements, and relief measures available for migrants in case of sudden loss of income; and
16. Make information available in real time on media commonly used by migrants, such as Facebook, the migrant language press, and in places commonly frequented by migrants such as at the border and government offices that routinely deal with migrants. Being able to access information in real time about the Covid-19 situation and any restrictions in place makes it possible for migrants to make well-informed decisions.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

To support informed migrant decision-making and decisions once made, MMN also calls on relevant stakeholders in countries of origin to actively reach out to their nationals in Thailand, and closely coordinate with the relevant Thai authorities and CSOs to ensure that timely support is provided to all those who are in urgent need. In particular, MMN urges:

## Access to Information

17. The relevant authorities to provide up-to-date information in coordination with their Thai counterparts;
18. Policy makers to urgently move forward with establishing a mechanism for the portability of social security;
19. Diplomatic missions to enhance the support provided to their migrant nationals during this time of crisis;
20. Recruitment agencies to provide prospective migrants with accurate information about future migration opportunities and refund those whose employment has been indefinitely postponed;

## Return, Reintegration and Re-migration

21. The relevant authorities to ensure that all migrant returnees are accommodated free of charge, in safe, well-ventilated, and hygienic quarantine facilities with adequate food and drink provided;
22. Relevant authorities and CSOs to provide social assistance and livelihood support for migrant returnees;
23. Policy makers to relax documentation requirements to ensure that all migrant returnees have access to public healthcare, and that they can benefit from social protection programmes including cash relief measures; and
24. Recruitment agencies to work towards a zero-recruitment fee model where employers pay the necessary costs, and provide up-to-date information to prospective migrants.

The Mekong Migration Network (MMN) is a subregional network of migrant support NGOs, migrant grassroots groups, and research institutes working together to promote and protect rights of all migrants in the GMS.

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