MIGRANT EXCHANGE FORUMS
IN CAMBODIA AND VIETNAM

NOVEMBER 2025

Mekong Migration Network (MMN)

Executive Summary

Japan is implementing major immigration policy reform to address a sharp decline in its labour force. In 2019, the government introduced the two-tier Specified Skilled Workers (SSW) scheme and is currently in the process of developing a new labour migration framework to replace the soon-to-be abolished Technical Intern Training Programme (TITP). Although labour rights abuses of migrant workers under these schemes are well documented, effective solutions remain elusive. This is due in part to the multitude of stakeholders involved in the labour migration process, each with their own priorities and interests. These include recruitment agencies, employers, supervising organisations, and the governments of both Japan and migrant countries of origin. Consequently, the voices of migrant workers are often marginalised.

To remedy this problem, the Mekong Migration Network (MMN), as part of the Toyota Foundation funded project "Migrant Returnees' Exchange: Building a Forum for Sharing Experiences in Southeast Asian Countries of Origin", convened four migrant exchange forums in Vietnam and Cambodia in November 2025. The series of events brought together migrant returnees and prospective migrant workers to Japan. The specific aim was to generate insight and reflection from returnees that can meaningfully inform policy development. At the same time, the forums offered prospective migrants an opportunity to learn directly from the lived experiences of returnees, helping them make more informed decisions about migration.

While the returnees who participated in our Migrant Exchange Forums in both Vietnam and Cambodia generally held positive views about their time spent working in Japan, they raised several foundational issues which are detailed below.

The Information Gap

Migrant returnees often reported significant differences between the information they received before their departure and the realities of living and working in Japan. Many described misunderstandings regarding of the nature of their intended work, expected income, tax obligations, and the availability of overtime to supplement their earnings.

> *"I expected to work in shipbuilding, but actually I was sent to work in metal pressing. It was very dangerous work."*
>
> **— Vietnamese male migrant returnee**

> *"I expected to work for two years in Japan, but I had to come back after a year. I didn't know where to seek help."*
>
> **— Cambodian female migrant returnee**

High Recruitment Fees and Related Costs

Our forums confirmed that the financial burden arising from high recruitment fees and related migration costs remains a pressing issue for migrant workers. In Vietnam, returnees reported paying fees, ranging from USD 3,600 to more than USD 8,400. In Cambodia, participants described fees as "prohibitively expensive", often requiring them to take out substantial high-interest loans.

> *"Even after returning to Cambodia, I am still paying back the loans."*
>
> **— Cambodian female migrant returnee**

Migrant returnees discuss challenges faced during migration to Japan, Ha Tinh, Vietnam, Nov 2026

Temporary Migration, Financial Insecurity and a Lack of Job Mobility

A number of returnees mentioned that they were unable to earn as much as they had anticipated in Japan. This was largely due to the weak yen and a lack of paid overtime opportunities. Others were frustrated with the temporary migration policies that compel them to leave Japan having developed their vocational skills. These concerns were compounded by the financial insecurity created by high migration costs. In addition, several returnees said that they wished they could have changed employers in Japan, and regretted that this is only permitted in exceptional circumstances.

> *"I expected to work inside, but actually I was made to work outside on construction sites. I could not change my employer for the whole five years."*
>
> **— Vietnamese male migrant returnee**

Employment Prospects Upon Return

Only a few returnees said that they were able to secure jobs that utilised the skills they had gained from living and working in Japan. Most experienced difficulties finding suitable employment upon return and ended up taking positions unrelated to their prior work experience. In Vietnam, many returnees who participated in our forums were unemployed, and were preparing to re-migrate to other destination countries.

> *"I expected to find a job in Vietnam that utilised the skills I had learned in Japan. However, no suitable employment was available. I'm looking for another migration opportunity, and am now studying Korean."*
>
> **— Vietnamese male returnee**

Highlights from the Migrant Exchange Forums

MMN's Migrant Exchange Forums provided a platform where returnees could share their migration experiences, raise issues to inform policy development, and connect with prospective migrant workers to Japan. A range of participatory methods were used to create an environment that encouraged open and energetic exchange among participants. Highlights from our four Migrant Exchange Forums are presented below:

Ha Tinh, Vietnam (6-7 November 2025)

In Vietnam, our Migrant Exchange Forum was organised in collaboration with MMN member, the Center for Development and Integration (CDI), and Ha Tinh's Employment Service Centre (ESC). Ha Tinh is situated in Vietnam's North Central Coast region and was selected because of the relatively high proportion of its residents who migrate abroad for work, including to Japan. The local ESC plays a crucial role providing information to locals on employment opportunities and benefits, including advice and guidance on overseas employment.

Shortly before the Migrant Exchange Forum took place, MMN organised a half-day briefing to update ESC staff on law and policy developments affecting migrant workers in Japan. The session aimed to strengthen their capacity to assist prospective migrants seeking work in Japan. The briefing included an online presentation delivered by Professor Wako Asato of Kyoto University's Graduate School of Letters, which outlined details of Japan's new Skills Development Employment scheme, which is due to be launched in 2027.

Migrant Returnees Forum, 6 November 2025

The first day of the event proper brought together 17 migrant returnees (three female, 14 male) who had been TITP workers in Japan between 2019 and 2025. They were employed in various sectors, including manufacturing (eight participants), construction (three), fishing (one) and agriculture (one). Many said that their time in Japan had taught them valuable work and life skills, including punctuality, a strong work ethic, independence, cultural adaptability and language skills. However, several participants dwelt on the fact that despite this professional and personal development they were unable to secure employment upon return to Vietnam.

Prospective Migrant Workers Forum, 7 November 2025

On the following day, 16 prospective migrant workers (three female, 13 male) participated, joined by eight returnees from the previous day's event. About half of the prospective migrants had already secured employment in Japan, while the remainder were still deciding on their destination country. During group discussions, prospective migrants asked returnees detailed questions about each stage of the migration process, while returnees shared their experiences and gave practical advice. In addition, Mr. Thế Anh Trần, a migrant returnee, delivered an online presentation about his experience starting a business after returning to Vietnam.

Phnom Penh, Cambodia (9-10 November 2025)

In Cambodia, our Migrant Exchange Forum was organised in collaboration with Legal Support for Children and Women (LSCW), a longstanding MMN member based in Phnom Penh.

Migrant Returnees Forum, 9 November 2025

Sixteen returnees (eight female, eight male) participated in the event. Most had migrated to Japan under the TITP, and returned to Cambodia between 2013 and 2024. They were employed across a range of sectors, including agriculture, construction, food packaging, steel production, and in garment manufacturing. Only one of the returnees currently resides in Phnom Penh, while the others had returned to live in their home provinces. When asked whether their migration experiences in Japan had matched their expectations, many reported feeling that they had not gained enough Japanese language or technical skills, or earned the amount of money they had expected.

Prospective Migrant Workers Forum, 10 November 2025

On the following day, thirty-one prospective migrant workers (11 female, 20 male) attended the workshop alongside four returnees. Most of the prospective migrant workers had already secured employment as TITP workers and were scheduled to be deployed in early 2026. Mr. Kenta Ando, First Secretary of the Japanese Embassy in Cambodia, was invited to brief the participants on Japan's policies, regulations, and entitlements relevant to TITP workers. Since the participants were soon to be deployed to Japan, they raised many practical questions, including how to apply for sick leave, how to continue studying Japanese while working, and where to seek assistance in the event of an earthquake.

Prospective Migrants' Small Group Discussion, Cambodia

Migrant Voices: Key Issues and Challenges

Information Dissemination Prior to Departure

Expectations Gaps

During the Migrant Exchange Forums, several participants reflected on the gap between their expectations prior to departure and the realities they encountered in Japan.

> *"I expected to work in construction in Japan, but that was only a small part of my work. I also expected to work for a big company, but found myself employed by a small company. I was not able to change jobs for the whole three years."*
>
> **— Vietnamese male migrant returnee**

> *"I was supposed to work in assembling electrical products in Japan, but was assigned to do the packing and distribution of final products. At the beginning I was surprised, but later I understood that it is a part of the whole process of work there."*
>
> **— Cambodian male returnee**

Knowledge Gaps in Addressing Employment-Related Problems

Some participants shared details about the difficulties they encountered while working in Japan. They explained that it was often challenging to access reliable information or to find appropriate assistance when problems arose.

> *"My employer didn't pay the proper overtime rate, but I had to accept it because changing jobs was difficult."*
>
> **— Vietnamese male migrant returnee (construction)**

Changing Employers & Language Barriers

Several returnees reported that they had wanted to change employers while working in Japan. Managing multiple migration corridors makes it difficult for local agencies to develop in-depth expertise on Japan's specific policies and regulations, hence often unable to provide accurate advice to prospective migrants before departure. Furthermore, in Cambodia, a number of participants stated that the Japanese language training they had received before departure was insufficient.

> *"There are no benefits if you do not speak up to claim them - but many cannot as they have difficulties communicating in Japanese."*
>
> **— Vietnamese male migrant returnee**

Recruitment Fees and Financing

In Vietnam, migrant returnees paid fees ranging from 3,600 USD to more than 8,400 USD. In Cambodia, many returnees said that fees were prohibitively expensive, often requiring them to take out substantial loans. Repayment typically took between two and three years, dragging on long after returning home.

> *"Even after returning to Cambodia, I still pay back the loans for my migration fees."*
>
> **— Cambodian male and female migrant returnees**

CASE STUDY: CAREER PLANNING BEFORE DEPARTURE

Mr. Thế Anh Trần migrated to Japan as a TITP worker in the construction sector. His work was physically demanding and carried a constant risk of injury. He suffered a broken tooth when an iron bar struck him in the face, and had to wait until the end of his shift before being allowed to go to the hospital. As is often the case for migrants in construction, his employer did not allow him to claim labour accident benefits.

When Mr. Anh returned to Vietnam, he did not have a clear career plan. At first, he worked at a recruitment agency and later started his own business. When his business failed, he chose to learn from his mistakes, analyse business opportunities, and develop IT skills. Today, he runs an online Japanese language teaching service alongside a publishing business. He stated:

> *"Going to Japan is not escaping from Vietnam. You need to have a goal before you go. You will be at a loss if you only look for money. Going to Japan won't change your life. How you learn, how you absorb new experiences may change your life…"*
>
> **— Mr. Thế Anh Trần**

Conclusion

The migrant returnees who participated in MMN's Migrant Exchange Forums generally shared positive experiences regarding personal growth and work ethic. However, their testimonies highlighted significant structural challenges embedded within the current migration frameworks:

- Persistent information gaps regarding job types, salaries, taxes, and support channels.
- The heavy financial burden created by excessive recruitment fees and high-interest financing.
- Systemic restrictions on job mobility, including limitations on changing employers or taking secondary jobs.
- Severe difficulties securing suitable employment utilizing their skills upon return.

Prioritizing the issues identified through the forums would be an important step toward building fairer, more sustainable, and more mutually beneficial labour migration systems between Japan and Mekong countries of origin.

This summary of discussion during Migrant Exchange Forums in Cambodia and Vietnam was prepared by MMN. Photos courtesy of MMN.

Mekong Migration Network (MMN)

Founded in 2003, the Mekong Migration Network (MMN) is a sub-regional network of civil society organisations and research institutes working towards the protection and promotion of the rights of migrants and their families in the Greater Mekong Sub-region. MMN's areas of joint action include collaborative research, advocacy, capacity building and networking. MMN members operate in both countries of origin and destination, have unique expertise in the field, and are in close contact with migrant workers at a grassroots level. For more information on MMN, please visit MMN's webpage at: www.mekongmigration.org