

# FAIR RECRUITMENT FOR MEKONG MIGRANT WORKERS:

## EXAMINING PROGRESS AND GAPS ALONG MIGRATION CORRIDORS TO THAILAND AND JAPAN

NOVEMBER 2026

Mekong Migration Network (MMN)

***Fair Recruitment for Mekong Migrant Workers:***

***Examining Progress and Gaps Along Migration Corridors to Thailand and Japan***

Mekong Migration Network

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Secretariat in Thailand: P.O. Box 195, Chiang Mai University, Chiang Mai 50202, Thailand

Secretariat in Hong Kong: Asian Migrant Centre, c/o Kowloon Union Church, 4 Jordan Road, Kowloon, Hong Kong

Email: info@mekongmigration.org

Website: www.mekongmigration.org

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# List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| ALMAC | Association of Labour Migration Agencies of Cambodia |
| CDI | Centre for Development and Integration |
| COC | Code of Conduct |
| COLAB | Center for Overseas Labor |
| COVID-19 | Coronavirus Disease 2019 |
| CSO | Civil Society Organisations |
| DOLAB | Department for Overseas Labour |
| ESC | Employment Service Centre |
| ESD | Employment for Skill Development |
| FED | Foundation for Education and Development |
| FERI | Fair and Ethical Recruitment Initiative |
| FES | Fund for Overseas Employment |
| FLC | Future Light Centre |
| GMS | Greater Mekong Subregion |
| ILO | International Labour Organization |
| IOM | International Organization for Migration |
| ISA | Immigration Services Agency |
| JICA | Japan International Cooperation Agency |
| JICWELS | Japan International Corporation of Welfare Services |
| JLPT | Japanese Language Proficiency Test |
| JP-MIRAI | Japan Platform for Migrant Workers towards a Responsible and Inclusive Society |
| JPY | Japanese yen |
| Law. No. 69 | Law on Vietnamese Guest Workers Going to Work Abroad Under Contract |
| LSCW | Legal Support for Children and Women |
| MMK | Myanmar Kyat |
| MMN | Mekong Migration Network |
| MOC | Memorandum of Cooperation |
| MOEAF | Myanmar Overseas Employment Agencies Foundation |

| | |
|---|---|
| MOHA | Ministry of Home Affairs, Vietnam |
| MLVT | Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, Cambodia |
| MOU | Memorandum of Understanding |
| MRC | Migrant Resource Centre |
| MWRN | Migrant Workers Rights Network |
| NSO | National Statistics Office |
| OCWC | Overseas Cambodian Workers Card |
| OTIT | Organization for Technical Intern Trainees |
| PDO | Pre-Departure Orientation |
| PDT | Pre-Departure Training |
| PJ Passport | Passport for Job |
| RTF | Raks Thai Foundation |
| SSW | Specified Skilled Workers |
| THB | Thai baht |
| TITP | Technical Intern Training Program |
| TVET | Technical and Vocational Education and Training |
| UN | United Nations |
| USD | US dollars |
| VAMAS | Vietnam Association of Manpower Supply, Vietnam |
| VND | Vietnamese dong |

# Executive Summary

Formal labour migration remains an important source of employment, income and skills development for workers across the Greater Mekong Subregion. However, many migrant workers continue to incur excessive recruitment fees and other migration-related costs, while experiencing limited access to accurate, rights-based information. Although governments across the region have introduced reforms to strengthen oversight of recruitment practices and improve information provision, significant gaps remain.

This collaborative study, conducted by the Mekong Migration Network (MMN) with support from Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, focuses on two interrelated challenges affecting migrant workers using formal labour migration channels from Myanmar to Thailand and from Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam to Japan: (1) the financial burden of recruitment fees and related costs, and (2) access to rights-based information at the pre-departure stage. These issues are examined in light of recent policy developments and industry initiatives aimed at reducing recruitment costs, through fee caps and use of the zero-recruitment-fee models, as well as efforts to improve Pre-Departure Orientation (PDO) and Pre-Departure Training (PDT).

The study finds that although legal frameworks regulating recruitment fees have improved in many countries, weak enforcement and limited awareness among migrants means that they continue to shoulder substantial financial burdens. Excessive fees, opaque cost structures, administrative barriers, and the continued involvement of informal brokers remain common problems. The study found that many migrants lack access to accurate and practical information regarding their rights, working conditions, and support services in destination countries. While several promising initiatives were identified that shift recruitment costs away from workers, including attempts to implement the zero-recruitment-fee model, stronger cooperation among governments, employers, recruitment agencies, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), trade unions, and migrant communities will be required to achieve meaningful progress.

## Methodology

Between April and October 2026, MMN and its research partners conducted a qualitative study focusing on formal labour migration pathways from Myanmar to Thailand and from Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam to Japan. The research combined a desk review with interviews involving 14 key informants representing governments, recruitment agencies, recruitment agency associations, UN agencies and CSOs. To supplement the findings regarding formal labour migration from Myanmar to Thailand, MMN also conducted a small-scale survey of 14 Myanmar migrant workers residing in Thailand.

## Key Findings

### *Recruitment Fees and Related Costs Remain a Major Burden*

Across all the labour migration corridors examined, workers continue to incur significant recruitment-related expenses despite the introduction of regulatory frameworks governing the recruitment industry.

In Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam, legal caps on recruitment fees and related costs have been established. However, implementation remains uneven, and migrants often lack sufficient information to verify whether fees charged comply with regulations. Many continue to incur substantial debt to finance their migration. For example, a 22-year-old Myanmar migrant worker employed at a tuna processing factory in Phang Nga stated:

> *"I paid between MMK 5 and 6 million [USD 2,381-2,856] to migrate to Thailand. To finance these expenses, I borrowed MMK 3 million [USD 1,502] from a relative and continue to repay approximately USD 285 each month."*

The study found that the underlying causes behind persistently high fees and costs differ slightly between countries of origin. In Cambodia, concerns remain regarding both the level at which fee caps are set and the lack of transparency surrounding recruitment costs. In Myanmar, ongoing political and economic instability has severely weakened monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, while the rising demand for overseas employment among the population has reduced incentives for compliance. In Vietnam, regulatory frameworks and monitoring systems are comparatively stronger, yet the continued involvement of brokers limits their effectiveness.

Particularly concerning is the situation facing migrant workers from Myanmar. In addition to paying recruitment fees, workers must navigate complex and often burdensome administrative requirements, including obtaining special migrant worker cards, passports and authorisation to leave the country.

As one key informant remarked:

> *"The processing of these documents is not only time-consuming but unpredictable, generating additional delays and expenses beyond those inherent in the recruitment process."*

These administrative hurdles are in addition to new policies related to forced remittances, double taxation, and military conscription, which create strong incentives to pursue irregular migration pathways, despite the risks and dangers involved.

***Progress Towards the Zero-Recruitment-Fee Model Remains Limited but Promising***

The study identified several examples of initiatives consistent with the zero-recruitment-fee model. The partnership between the Migrant Workers Rights Network and the seafood company, the Thai Union Group, provides one notable example of good practice, demonstrating that pressure from supply chains, international buyers and importing markets can encourage employers to absorb a greater share of recruitment costs.

A similar approach can be seen in the partnership between Vietnam's Centre for Overseas Labour and the Osaka Medical Care Association, a Japanese supervising organisation. This initiative trains and deploys elderly care workers while reducing workers' upfront migration costs. Also noteworthy is the Fair and Ethical Recruitment Initiative, through which some employers and recruitment agencies involved in migration to Japan have adopted recruitment practices that reduce the financial burden on workers.

Nevertheless, implementation remains challenging. Determining which costs should be borne by employers is often contentious, while recruitment systems across all countries of origin examined continue to operate on the assumption that workers should bear the costs of securing overseas employment. While the zero-recruitment-fee model has the potential to reduce migrant indebtedness and increase transparency, wider adoption will require greater commitment from governments, employers and recruitment industry stakeholders.

***Access to Rights-Based Information Remains Uneven***

The study found important shortcomings in the provision of rights-based information across all of the migration corridors examined.

Government-run PDO frequently provides information that is insufficiently tailored to specific destination countries. This issue is particularly evident in Myanmar, where existing programmes do not address destination-specific information needs. Migrants surveyed for this research also reported feeling uncomfortable asking questions or actively participating during the large-scale PDO events organised by Myanmar's military-backed authorities. As one migrant worker explained:

> *"I had to research the information myself. The Ministry's briefing was largely ineffective because there were just too many people."*

The quality of recruitment agency-led Pre-Departure Training (PDT) also varies considerably. While some agencies invest substantial resources in preparing workers and maintaining support after deployment, others provide only minimal information beyond procedural requirements. As a result, migrants' access to accurate information often depends on the individual agency handling their recruitment.

In Cambodia, stakeholders generally viewed the content of government-provided PDO positively, although many considered the duration of the orientation event inadequate. Vietnam follows a different approach, relying primarily on standardised training materials delivered through recruitment agencies rather than government-run PDO programmes.

Across all countries of origin, CSOs, and Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) play a critical role in filling information gaps. As a key informant remarked:

> *"MRCs play a key role in making migration support services more accessible to prospective and current migrant workers."*

However, the demand for information from CSOs and MRCs greatly exceeds the capacity of these organisations to respond.

***Information Gaps Persist in Critical Areas***

Significant shortcomings were identified in relation to information dissemination on reproductive health and maternity rights. Evidence gathered during the research suggests that migrant workers in Japan frequently receive incomplete or inaccurate information regarding family planning, pregnancy, maternity protection and related rights. Even when workers are aware of their legal entitlements, workplace environments may not always support them in exercising those rights. One Cambodian migrant worker stated,

*"The recruitment agency told me that female migrant workers cannot get pregnant while working in Japan otherwise they will be deported to Cambodia".*

These findings highlight the importance of ensuring that rights-based information extends beyond basic employment conditions and includes broader issues affecting migrants' well-being and dignity.

***Good Practices Demonstrate Pathways for Reform***

Despite persistent challenges, the study identified several promising examples of good practice. Some recruitment agencies have developed comprehensive training programmes that extend beyond immediate job placement. These agencies emphasise human resource development, career planning, financial literacy and long-term skills acquisition. Several have also worked closely with employers to design destination-specific curricula that better prepare workers for integration into workplaces and communities.

The study also highlights the important role that CSOs and trade unions can play in monitoring recruitment practices, documenting labour rights violations and supporting the implementation of fair recruitment initiatives. Together, these examples demonstrate that meaningful improvements are possible when recruitment is approached as a long-term investment in workers' development rather than simply a mechanism for labour supply.

## Conclusions

The findings indicate that law and policy reforms alone are insufficient to reduce migrants' financial burdens or improve access to rights-based information. While all three countries of origin examined have taken steps to regulate recruitment fees, enforcement remains inconsistent and many workers continue to incur substantial debts. At the same time, information provided through official channels often fails to adequately prepare migrants for the realities of living and working abroad.

The study also demonstrates that reducing the financial burdens faced by migrants requires sustained political will to address the structural factors that drive migrant indebtedness, including opaque recruitment processes, weak oversight mechanisms and reliance on informal intermediaries.

At the same time, promising examples of processes based on the zero-recruitment-fee model, innovative training programmes and multi-stakeholder collaboration suggest that practical pathways for reform already exist. Expanding and institutionalising these initiatives should be a priority for governments, employers, recruitment agencies and CSOs seeking to reduce the financial burden of labour migration on workers.

## Priority Recommendations

To advance fair recruitment and improve migrant protection, MMN calls upon stakeholders to prioritise the following actions:

- Strengthen enforcement of existing regulations governing recruitment fees and related costs;

- Improve transparency by requiring a clear breakdown of all recruitment costs and expenses charged to workers;
- Reduce administrative and bureaucratic hurdles that increase the cost and complexity of regular migration pathways for workers;
- Explore practical ways toward wider adoption of the zero-recruitment-fee model taking on board the lessons learned from existing initiatives;
- Improve the quality, duration and destination-specific relevance of PDO and PDT programmes;
- Expand access to accurate information relating to labour rights, reproductive health, maternity protection and available support services;
- Support the role of CSOs, MRCs, and trade unions in information dissemination; and
- Encourage recruitment agencies and employers to adopt long-term approaches that emphasise career development, ethical recruitment and migrant well-being.

By addressing both the financial and informational barriers faced by migrant workers, governments and other stakeholders can help ensure that labour migration contributes more effectively to decent work, sustainable development and the protection of migrant workers' rights.



A migrant worker from Myanmar performs quality control at a garment factory in Ishikawa Prefecture, Japan.

Photo: MMN

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Background

High migration costs and limited access to information remain major problems for migrant workers across Asia. Whether using formal pathways or irregular routes, workers face a range of migration-related costs and expenses. Excessive recruitment fees and payments to intermediaries are particularly problematic as they can amount to months or even years of earnings, leaving migrants heavily indebted and vulnerable to exploitation. While these problems are not new, international pressure and growing evidence of their harmful impact have seen the issue climb the policy agenda in many Asian countries.[1] One commonly proposed solution for migrants using formal pathways is the "zero-recruitment-fee" model,[2] which shifts recruitment costs on to employers, mirroring the practice used to hire more highly paid professionals. This is an approach grounded in the International Labour Organization's (ILO), *Private Employment Agencies Convention*, 1997 (ILO Convention No. 181), which stipulates that "Workers (including jobseekers) shall not be charged directly or indirectly, in whole or in part, any fees or related costs for their recruitment".[3]

1 See ILO "Global Study on Recruitment Fees and Related Costs", 2024, accessible at https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/Global_report_master_combinated_web.pdf.

2 The "zero-recruitment-fee and related costs" model is also known as the "employer pays principle". See the webpage of the Institute for Human Rights and Business, "The Employer Pays Principle", accessible at https://www.ihrb.org/projects/employer-pays-principle.

3 See ILO Convention No. 181, art. 7 accessible at https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/nrmlx_en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C181. The Convention has been ratified by Japan, however Thailand along with the major countries of origin in the Mekong sub-region, including Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar, have yet to do so.

As a sub-regional network of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), the Mekong Migration Network (MMN) has long advocated for measures to reduce recruitment fees, along with greater commitment among stakeholders to support the zero-recruitment-fee model.[4] With support from Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung, this study builds on MMN's prior work by examining two interrelated challenges: the ongoing financial burdens migrants face stemming from excessive recruitment fees and related costs, and their continuing lack of access to accurate rights-based information. In addition, the study assesses the efficacy of recently introduced legislation in countries of origin to regulate recruitment fees, identifies policy gaps, and analyses the challenges involved in providing accurate information to migrants across selected migration corridors. Given the rapidly aging populations in many destination countries, the study also touches on these issues from the perspective of migrant care workers to Japan.

## 1.2 Research Design and Methodology

### 1.2.1 Research Objectives and Questions

The study aims to strengthen the protection of migrant workers' rights by contributing to the following long-term objectives:

i) Reducing the financial burden on migrants at the recruitment stage through:

- Lower overall recruitment fees and other migration-related costs;
- Greater transparency in recruitment fee structures;
- Fairer more affordable financing options; and
- Stronger employer commitment to cover recruitment-related costs.

ii) Improving rights-based information dissemination at the pre-departure stage through:

- Ensuring that prospective migrants receive accurate and timely information prior to departure; and
- Providing clear guidance on labour rights, social protection, and available redress mechanisms.

iii) Enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of Pre-Departure Training (PDT) for migrant care workers through:

- Identifying gaps in existing training programs; and
- Streamlining training curricula to eliminate less relevant modules and reduce unnecessary costs.

With the above objectives in mind, the specific research questions guiding our study are as follows:

4 For example, see MMN, "Who Pays? Recruitment Fees for Migrant Workers from Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar to Japan", June 2024, accessible at https://mekongmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Briefer_Advocacy-English-1.pdf.

1. How can the financial burden on migrants at the pre-departure stage be reduced?
    - What regulations and enforcement mechanisms exist regarding recruitment fees and related costs in countries of origin?
    - What financing options are currently available for migrants to cover these costs?
    - What are the experiences of migrants in paying and financing these costs?
    - How effective are current efforts to reduce or eliminate recruitment-related costs on migrant workers at the pre-departure stage, and what are the gaps that remain?
2. How can rights-based information dissemination be improved at the pre-departure stage?
    - What types of rights-based information do migrants currently receive? Who provides this information and how is it disseminated?
    - What gaps and challenges exist?
3. With particular attention to Japan's care work sector, what role can stakeholders play in ensuring that PDT is more accessible and less costly for migrant care workers?
    - What training is currently provided for migrant care workers to Japan and who shoulders the cost?
    - What good practices exist regarding the training of migrant care workers which can lead to improved implementation of the zero-recruitment-fee model?

### 1.2.2 Scope of the Research

Our research focuses on the labour migration corridors between Myanmar and Thailand, and from Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam to Japan. Thailand, was selected as it remains the principal destination for migrant workers within the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), particularly from neighbouring Myanmar. Japan, meanwhile, remains the primary destination for Vietnamese migrants and is a rapidly expanding destination for workers from Cambodia and Myanmar. Both destinations are also experiencing significant aging, creating an urgent need for migrant care workers. Together, they provide useful settings in which to analyse the range of policies and practices that shape the experiences of Mekong migrants.

In Thailand, our study is limited to migrants using formal migration procedures established under the recently updated bilateral Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Labour Cooperation with Myanmar.[5] While in Japan, our analysis focuses on migrants registered under the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP), and those holding Specified Skilled Workers (SSW) status. These formal pathways were selected as labour migration under these schemes depends heavily on recruitment agencies and involves structured information dissemination in countries of origin within defined legislative frameworks.

5 For details, see Government of Thailand, "Cabinet Approves Revised Thailand–Myanmar Labour MoU and Employment Agreement", 5 August 2026, accessible at https://www.thaigov.go.th/th/news/167248.

### 1.2.3 Research Methodology

To address the research questions outlined above, our study adopts a collaborative approach, employing various qualitative data collection techniques. Our methodology has been developed and implemented in close partnership with the following MMN members, all of whom have strong ties to migrant communities and who have been actively engaging with the network's work on country-of-origin issues over many years:

- In Vietnam, the Center for Development and Integration (CDI);
- In Cambodia, Legal Support for Children and Women (LSCW);
- In Thailand, the Foundation for Education and Development (FED) and Raks Thai Foundation (RTF); and
- In Myanmar, the Future Light Center (FLC).

Our collaborative approach ensures that multiple perspectives inform the research design, while also serving a capacity building function. Rooted in participatory research traditions, it seeks to empower migrant CSOs as active partners in research and jointly develop policy recommendations to tackle the challenges migrants face.[6] The specific methods employed for data collection are described in detail below.

***Desk Study***

At the study's outset, MMN's research team conducted an extensive review of relevant law, policy, media reports, articles and government publications related to the areas of enquiry in Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and Japan. This review included legislative frameworks regulating recruitment fees and monitoring mechanisms in countries of origin, industry initiatives, cases of the zero-recruitment-fee models in action, and content of Pre-Departure Orientation (PDO) and training programmes.

***Key Informant Interviews***

The MMN research team conducted in-depth interviews with a total of 14 key informants representing government agencies, individual recruitment agencies, recruitment agency associations, United Nations (UN) agencies and CSOs. Informants were selected purposefully based on their expertise, experience, or positional knowledge relevant to our research questions. Government agencies responsible for outbound migration were approached for interview to provide more detailed information on legislative frameworks and enforcement challenges. Private recruitment agencies who claim to have implemented good practices related to reducing migrants' financial burdens and enhancing PDT were also approached. In Cambodia and Vietnam, recruitment agency associations were invited to provide insights into their relevant initiatives. In Myanmar, one CSO who play a key role in promoting the zero-recruitment-fee model was included, while another CSO was invited to share its initiatives and perspectives on improving the current situation. Additionally, two UN agencies were approached to provide information on their initiatives and observations. Interviews were conducted with three stakeholders in Cambodia, six in Myanmar, and three in Vietnam. Our key informant interviews were supplemented by information received in lieu of interview by one recruitment agency in

6 Sociology Institute, "Tracing the Origins of Participatory Research Methods", 12 October 2025, accessible at https://sociology.institute/research-methodologies-methods/origins-participatory-research-methods/.

Myanmar and from presentations and discussions that took place at MMN's recent symposium on "Migration to Japan: Learning from Returnees to Improve the Migration Experience".[7] A detailed table of interviewees and interview dates can be found in the report's annex.

***Migrant Worker Survey***

Given the broader challenges in accessing reliable information on recruitment fees and PDT in Myanmar, we administered a smallscale questionnaire with 14 migrant workers from Myanmar currently residing in Thailand. This was undertaken to gain deeper insight into their perspectives and to document their experiences paying recruitment fees and receiving PDT and PDO. Participants were recruited through MMN's project partners in Samut Sakhon and Phang Nga provinces who work closely with migrant communities.

## 1.3 Research Limitations

Our research findings should be viewed in light of various limitations. First, our study intentionally excludes migrant workers using informal channels. Although such workers also face serious problems regarding excessive fees charged by brokers and lack access to reliable information, for advocacy purposes we have chosen to focus specifically on recruitment fees and predeparture information dissemination within formal pathways governed by established law and policy frameworks. Second, as, MOU workers are currently ineligible for employment in the care work sector in Thailand, formal migration for care work could only be examined in relation to Japan. Third, MMN's analysis of PDT for the care sector focuses on questions of cost obligations, reflecting ongoing discussions about reducing the financial burden placed on migrant workers. A detailed assessment of the content or gaps within the current training curriculum is therefore beyond the scope of this research. Fourth, we recognise that our study may be limited by potential selection bias, as key informants were purposively selected and survey participants were recruited through our network. The small sample size may also limit generalisability. Future studies into these issues should include larger and more diverse samples. Finally, as MMN has collectively decided not to recognise or engage with Myanmar's military-backed authorities, no interviews were conducted with de facto government stakeholders. To obtain accurate and up-to-date information, we instead relied on trusted parters to identify Myanmar recruitment agencies and other knowledgeable stakeholders for interviews.

7 See MMN webpage, "Symposium on Migration to Japan: Learning from Returnees to Improve the Migration Experience", accessible at https://mekongmigration.org/?p=24873.



Myanmar female migrant workers sort shrimp at a seafood market in Samut Sakhon, Thailand.

Photo: MMN/John Hulme

# Chapter 2: Labour Migration from Myanmar to Thailand

## 2.1 Migration Overview

Thailand remains the largest single destination for migrant workers in Southeast Asia. Estimates suggest that migrant workers now comprise more than ten percent of Thailand's total labour force.[8] Of the approximately 5.3 million migrants in Thailand, the overwhelming majority, 4.6 million people, hail from Myanmar,[9] with smaller numbers coming from Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Vietnam. These migrants mostly take on low-wage jobs that locals

8 See webpage of IOM Thailand, "Labour Migration", accessible at https://thailand.iom.int/labour-migration.

9 Estimate from 2025 cited on IOM Thailand webpage "Migration Outlook for the Country: Thailand", accessible at https://thailand.iom.int/migration-outlook-country .

are reluctant or unwilling to do. Myanmar workers, in particular, fill urgent labour gaps in key sectors of the Thai economy, notably in manufacturing, construction, agriculture, fishing, and the service sector.

Migration to neighbouring Thailand has long been a key survival strategy for the people of Myanmar. From the early 1990s to the present day, political instability, economic stagnation and armed conflict, coupled with rapid economic growth in Thailand, have fuelled large-scale cross-border movements.[10] Given the two countries long porous land border and limited access to formal migration pathways, most Myanmar migrants to Thailand rely on irregular channels to move. However, a great many subsequently formalise their status in Thailand during the periodic regularisation windows established by Thai Cabinet Resolution. Of the estimated 2.9 million Myanmar migrants in Thailand holding legal status in November 2025, around 2.7 million had regularised their stay in this way.[11]

This research, however, focuses on the relatively small sub-set of Myanmar workers who migrate using formal procedures established under the MOU Between the Governments of Thailand and Myanmar on Labour Cooperation.[12] This labour migration scheme is facilitated by the respective governments and is operationally dependent on certified recruitment agencies in Myanmar. Employment in Thailand under the scheme is ordinarily permitted for two years, extendable once up to a total of four years. In order to re-enter Thailand under MOU procedures, migrant workers must first return to Myanmar for 30 days before reapplying. However, reports at the time of writing indicate that work permits will soon be extended to five years under the updates to the MOU agreed in August 2026, which are yet to come into force.[13] It should be noted that workers using MOU procedures are restricted to manual labour and retail work. Among Myanmar MOU workers in Thailand as of November 2025, agriculture-related employment is most common, employing around 41,000 workers, followed by employment in the construction (34,000 workers), and manufacturing sectors (32,000 workers).[14]

The 2021 military coup in Myanmar has triggered a series of political, economic, and humanitarian crises that have significantly reshaped migration patterns, including the number of people using MOU procedures to move to Thailand. Current circumstances suggest that prospective migrant workers may be less willing to use this formal channel, as it requires direct dealings with the military-led authorities.[15] Recent law and policy developments in Myanmar, discussed below,

10 MMN, "Migration in the Greater Mekong Subregion Resource Book; In-depth Study: Border Economic Zones and Migration", 2013, pp. 83-85, accessible at https://mekongmigration.org/?p=11735.

11 Department of Employment, Ministry of Labour, Thailand, "Statistics of Registered Foreign Workers Remaining throughout the Kingdom", November 2025, p. 1, accessible in Thai at https://www.doe.go.th/prd/assets/upload/files/alien_th/d121667289764ab5694a2b902df645b1.pdf.

12 *Memorandum of Understanding Between the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand and the Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar on Labour Cooperation*, 24 June 2016, accessible at https://icb.mol.go.th/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2020/06/MOU-Myanmar.pdf. This MOU is shortly to be updated. See n 5 above for details.

13 See "Thailand Extends Myanmar Migrant Work Permits to Five Years", *The Irrawaddy*, 11 August 2026, accessible at https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/thailand-extends-myanmar-migrant-work-permits-to-five-years.html.

14 Department of Employment, Ministry of Labour, Thailand, "Statistics of Registered Foreign Workers Remaining Throughout the Kingdom", November 2025, at n 11 above.

15 MMN, "Neighbours in Need: Examining Thailand's Response to Mixed Migration from Post-coup Myanmar", August 2023, p 21, accessible at https://mekongmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Book_Neighbours-in-Need_EN.pdf.

appear to be discouraging the use of MOU procedures to migrate. The decline is reflected in Thai government data, which reveals that the number of MOU migrants from Myanmar has fallen to just 233,769 in November 2025,[16] down from around 351,000 in December 2022.[17]

At the same time, there has been a corresponding rise in the number of people migrating to Thailand using informal channels. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), approximately 1.5 million Myanmar nationals crossed into Thailand between January 2023 and February 2024, including a significant number with no documentation.[18] The risks associated with this type of irregular migration has intensified of late given the ongoing armed conflict. According to MMN members, those entering Thailand through informal channels face perilous journeys across conflict zones and militarised borders. The MAP Foundation has noted a conspicuous rise in the number of young people crossing into Thailand under desperate and dangerous conditions since the coup. The RTF has assisted in several cases involving women who were subjected to sexual harassment and rape while en route to Thailand.[19] At the same time, the often-exorbitant fees charged by guides and smugglers are pushing migrants deeper into debt, which in turn increases their vulnerability to further exploitation.[20]

These challenges have been created and compounded by three major policy changes implemented by Myanmar's military-backed government in recent years. First, a mandatory remittance rule introduced on 1 September 2023 requires migrant workers to remit a quarter of their foreign income through an institution regulated by the Myanmar Central Bank.[21] The scheme is implemented under the Family Remittance Management System,[22] which requires recruitment agencies to enter into agreements with the individual workers they place abroad and monitor their remittance transactions. If migrants fail to remit a quarter of their salary through official channels, as per these agreements, they risk being barred from working abroad and having their passports and Overseas Worker Identification Cards (OWIC) revoked. Some migrant workers under these agreements report receiving threatening letters from recruitment agencies stating that if they fail to make remittances their family in Myanmar will

16 Department of Employment, Ministry of Labour, Thailand, "Statistics of Registered Foreign Workers Remaining Throughout the Kingdom", November 2025, at n 11 above

17 Government of Thailand's submission to the OHCHR for the call for inputs on regularization and pathways to regularization for migrants, "Regularization of Migrants in Thailand", 2023, p. 1, accessible at https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/migration/cfis/regularization/submissions-regularization-pm-thailand.pdf.

18 IOM, "Overview of Myanmar Nationals in Thailand", 2024, p. 1, accessible at https://thailand.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1371/files/documents/2024-10/overview-of-myanmar-nationals-in-thailand-october-24.pdf.

19 See quotations in MMN statement, "Impact of Myanmar's Forced Remittance, Double Taxation & Military Conscription Policies on Migrants", 28 March 2024, accessible at https://mekongmigration.org/?p=23157.

20 See UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants, "Migrant Smuggling in Southeast Asia" March, 2024, accessible at https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glosom/Observatory/2024/SOMObservatorySEA_FullStudy_March2024.pdf.

21 The policy is formally established under *Ministry of Labour Notification No. 108/2024*, English translation accessible at https://www.linkedin.com/posts/luther-myanmar_notification-1082024-activity-7237799742678654976-wJHP; also see "Cash-Starved Junta Milks Myanmar Migrant Workers with New Remittance Rule", The Irrawaddy, 12 September 2023, accessible at https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/cash-starved-junta-milks-myanmar-migrant-workers-with-new-remittance-rule.html.

22 See "Overseas Employment: Family Remittance Management System", *Myanmar International TV*, 30 August 2026, accessible at https://www.myanmaritv.com/news/overseas-employment-family-remittance-management-system.

be investigated by the authorities.[23] In MMN's experience, migrants are distrustful of remitting money through Myanmar's banking system, as the official exchange rate used is considerably lower than the prevailing market rate.[24] Despite this distrust, the military-backed government has increasingly sought to harness remittances as a source of foreign exchange revenue. As a result, worker remittances to Myanmar rose from USD 670 million in 2022 to USD 5.6 billion in 2025, representing approximately 38 percent of total foreign exchange inflows.[25]

Second, as part of these efforts to increase foreign currency inflows, the military-led government amended the *Union Tax Law* in 2023 so that migrant workers must pay a progressive income tax on all foreign earnings.[26] This exposes low-paid migrant workers to the prospect of double taxation, as the amendment repeals domestic legal protections against dual tax liability.[27] Migrant workers who refuse to comply with tax demands also face having their passports and other documents withdrawn or may be left in a situation where they are unable to renew documents needed to maintain their immigration status in Thailand.

Finally, in April 2024 the defacto government brought the *Public Military Service Law* into force. The law specifies that men between the ages of 18 and 35, and women between 18 and 27 undergo military training and serve in the armed forces for up to 24 months. As a result, young men are now generally unable to obtain official approval to migrate abroad.[28] There have been disturbing reports of young people being abducted and sold into the military to satisfy quotas,[29] while thousands of migrant workers on temporary home visits have been trapped in Myanmar due to a ban on civilians selected for conscription leaving the country.[30]

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23 Phoe Tar, "Regime Threatens Families of Overseas Workers Who Send Cash Via Unofficial Channels", *The Irrawaddy*, 4, September 2026, accessible at https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/regime-threatens-families-of-overseas-workers-who-send-cash-via-unofficial-channels.html.

24 See Ibid., and MMN statement at n 19 above.

25 See "Myanmar Junta's Forced Remittance Rules Pull in $5.6 Billion", *Bloomberg*, 14 May 2026, accessible at https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-05-14/myanmar-junta-s-forced-remittance-rules-pull-in-5-6-billion.

26 ILO, "TRIANGLE in ASEAN Quarterly Briefing Note: Myanmar, July-September 2023", 2023, p. 2, accessible at https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/genericdocument/wcms_735107.pdf.

27 In accordance with s 31 (a)(iv) of The *Union Tax Law*, No.18/2023, income tax was originally exempted from "income from the head salary earned in the foreign currency of a citizen residing abroad". See VDB/Loi, "Amendment to the Union Tax Law 2023: Income Tax on Salary Income Received by Non-resident Myanmar Citizens in Foreign Countries", 5, October 2023, accessible at https://www.vdb-loi.com/mm_publications/amendment-to-the-union-tax-law-2023-income-tax-on-salary-income-received-by-non-resident-myanmar-citizens-in-foreign-countries/.

28 See "Myanmar Clamps Down on Young Men Going Abroad for Work, *Nikkei Asia*, 11 February 2025, accessible at https://asia.nikkei.com/spotlight/myanmar-crisis/myanmar-clamps-down-on-young-men-going-abroad-for-work. Also see MMN statement at n 19 above.

29 Gavin Butler and BBC Burmese, "Young Men Live in Fear of Being Snatched Off the Streets and Sold to Myanmar's Army", *BBC*, 10 October 2026, accessible at https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c680zlny0gk4o.

30 Yu Phyu Han, "Over 40,000 Migrant Workers Caught in Myanmar Junta's Conscription Trap", *The Irrawaddy*, 10 March 2025, accessible at https://www.irrawaddy.com/business/over-40000-migrant-workers-caught-in-myanmar-juntas-conscription-trap.html

## 2.2 Recruitment Fees and Related Costs for MOU Migrant Workers

Against this backdrop, the costs associated with recruitment under MOU procedures have emerged as a critical factor in shaping migrant decision-making, particularly at a time when prospective Myanmar migrants face heightened economic uncertainty and physical danger due to the ongoing civil war. The sub-section below begins by outlining the regulatory frameworks governing recruitment fees and related costs, before examining the gaps and challenges identified by our migrant survey and key informant interviews. Finally, this section introduces a case study, elaborating on good practice efforts to implement the zero-recruitment-fee model within the MOU framework.

### 2.2.1 Regulatory Frameworks

#### Myanmar

The recruitment of workers in Myanmar under MOU procedures is subject to a range of legal, regulatory, and voluntary governance regimes, including national laws, bilateral agreements, and recruitment agency Codes of Conduct (CoCs). Together, these instruments establish rules concerning recruitment fees and related costs, transparency, contractual responsibilities, and pre-departure requirements.

The *Law Relating to Overseas Employment* regulates recruitment fees by authorising the Overseas Employment Central Committee to set cost limits.[31] Workers must pay only the prescribed fee, and licensed Service Agents may only charge approved amounts.[32] Charging fees in excess of these limits is a criminal offence.[33]

The *Rules and Regulations for License Holders of Overseas Employment Agencies* further regulates recruitment costs. Under Article 7, agencies are required to explain the structure of recruitment-related costs to workers, while Article 14 sets a ceiling of no more than four times a worker's monthly salary for recruitment fees, unless otherwise specified by ministerial regulations.[34] Separately, destination-specific legal caps also apply. For Thailand, the maximum recruitment fee is set at THB 10,000 (approximately USD 300) and charged on the Myanmar side. On the Thai side, the cap is THB 5,390 (USD 160) if the employer is registered under the Social Security Fund scheme, or THB 7,600 (USD 226) if the employer is not registered.[35]

In terms of industry self-governance within the recruitment sector, the CoC of the Myanmar Overseas Employment Agencies Association, formerly known as the Myanmar Overseas Employment Agencies Federation (MOEAF), provides non-legally binding standards for its

31 See *Law Relating to Overseas Employment*, 1999, s. 6(g), accessible at https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Law-Relating-to-Overseas-Employment.pdf.

32 Ibid., s. 23 and s. 25(k).

33 Ibid., s. 27.

34 See MMN, "The Handbook for Civil Society Organisations and Trade Unions in Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam for assisting Migrants Deployed to Japan", June 2024, p. 58, accessible at https://mekongmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/MMN_CSO-Handbook.pdf.

35 Ibid.



Migrant workers from seafood processing factories in Samut Sakhon, Thailand, travel home by bus after finishing work.

Photo: MMN/John Hulme

members. To be compliant, agencies must explain migration procedures, costs and timelines in languages understood by workers, provide detailed cost breakdowns and receipts to migrants, and refrain from charging any additional fees. The CoC encourages recruitment costs to be borne by employers rather than workers and requires transportation costs to be itemised and charged at a reasonable market rate.[36]

The CoC provisions are in addition to the general commitments set out in the MOU between the *Governments of Thailand and Myanmar on Labour Cooperation*,[37] and its implementing *Agreement on the Employment of Workers*.[38] The latter agreement provides that migrant workers should receive information on their rights, obligations, and employment conditions in Thailand, and be provided with free PDO on key matters, including information on employment contracts and working conditions.[39]

36 See MOEAF, "Code of Conduct for the Members of Myanmar Overseas Employment Agencies Federation", developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and ILO TRIANGLE in ASEAN, Part 1: Minimum Standards, (B) Recruitment Process, pp. 10–11, accessible at https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40asia/%40ro-bangkok/%40ilo-yangon/documents/genericdocument/wcms_622961.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

37 See MOU at n 12 above.

38 Agreement on the Employment of Workers between Myanmar and Thailand, 2016, accessible in Thai at https://www.doe.go.th/prd/assets/upload/files/alien_th/5c8e30bac503e516b41e8e0fb55525c6.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

39 Ibid., art 9.

In addition to the recruitment procedures specified under the MOU framework, workers are subject to stringent administrative controls before being allowed to leave Myanmar. These are subject to frequent change, and at the time of writing include a legal requirement to obtain an OWIC and effective from 14 January 2026, authorisation to leave the country from the Ministry of Labour.[40] Applications for this permission must be submitted at least five days before the intended departure date, creating an additional administrative stage before actual departure.[41]

In February 2026, the Ministry of the President's Office announced that from 1 March 2026 approved overseas workers are to be charged a fee of MMK 5,600 (USD 2.7) for the OWIC.[42] In addition to raising revenue, the new fee institutionalises financial tracking as it must be paid personally by the worker into a designated government bank account. By eliminating agency-led collective processing and requiring personal banking transactions the military-led government is using the OWIC charge to create an official financial record that integrates the migrant worker directly into its revenue collection apparatus. To travel for work overseas, Myanmar nationals must also hold a Passport for Job (PJ passport), which are stamped to limit their use to travel to Thailand only since September 2025.[43]

### Thailand

In Thailand, recruitment-related costs for MOU workers are primarily regulated by the *Royal Ordinance Concerning the Management of Employment of Foreign Workers* B.E. 2560 (2017).[44] This legislation prohibits licensed entities involved in bringing foreign workers into Thailand from demanding or receiving money or other benefits from migrant workers, except for prescribed service fees or costs charged to employers at rates determined by the Director-General.[45] It also establishes procedures for employers bringing workers into Thailand under MOU agreements,[46] and prohibits them from demanding or receiving money or other benefits from migrant workers in connection with bringing them to work in Thailand. However, the law allows employers to recover certain expenses paid in advance on behalf of workers, such as fees for passports, health examinations and work permits. Any wage deductions for such costs must not exceed 10 percent of the worker's monthly wages.[47]

40 See "OWIC Holders Requires Ministry's Approval to go Abroad", *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, 14 January 2026, accessible at https://www.gnlm.com.mm/owic-holders-requires-ministrys-approval-to-go-abroad/.

41 "PJ Workers Must Apply for Departure Permission 5 Days in Advance Starting Today", *Myanmar Labour News,* 17 March 2025, accessible at https://myanmarlabournews.com/en/posts/pj-workers-must-apply-for-departure-permission-5-days-in-advance-starting-today-1.

42 Ministry of the President's Office, Ministry of Labour, Myanmar, "Public Notice: Instructions for Depositing OWIC Fee", 10 February 2026, accessible at https://presoffministry.gov.mm/en/node/25014.

43 Myo Pyae, "Junta Suddenly Restricts Myanmar Migrants' Passports to 'Thailand Only'", *The Irrawaddy*, 28 September 2025, accessible at https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/junta-suddenly-restricts-myanmar-migrants-passports-to-thailand-only.html.

44 *Royal Ordinance Concerning the Management of Employment of Foreign Workers* B.E. 2560 (2017), English translation accessible at https://natlex.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/natlex2/files/download/107728/THA107728%20Eng.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

45 Ibid., s. 42.

46 Ibid., s. 46.

47 Ibid., s. 49.

### 2.2.2 Migrant Worker Perspectives on Recruitment

While several studies have examined issues surrounding recruitment fees and the associated costs incurred by Myanmar migrants moving to Thailand under MOU procedures,[48] relatively little attention has been paid to these issues in the post-coup context. First-hand accounts from migrant workers regarding the fees and costs incurred in formal MOU labour migration to Thailand since its resumption in 2022 remain limited. This type of evidence is particularly important as experience from other crisis-affected contexts suggests that the costs associated with obtaining passports and other migration-related documentation frequently increase during periods of political instability, economic crisis, and heightened emigration.[49]

To address this evidence gap, MMN conducted a small-scale survey drawing on the experiences of 14 Myanmar migrant workers who recently migrated to Thailand using MOU procedures. Among the participants, three female migrant workers were employed in a fish canning factory, and four male migrant workers were working in factories making fish balls in Samut Sakhon province. Six other participants (four female and two male) were employed elsewhere in the seafood industry, while one male migrant worker was employed in the construction industry in Pang Nga province. The ages of participants ranged from 21 to 40 years old. Eleven of them arrived in Thailand in 2024, while the other three arrived between 2022 and 2023.

#### Samut Sakhon

As illustrated in Table 2.1, the actual amounts paid by migrant worker participants in Samut Sakhon varied considerably. For example, service fees ranged from MMK 3.5 million (USD 1,667) to MMK 6.5 million (USD 3,095).

**Table 2.1: Recruitment Fees Paid by Myanmar Migrant Workers in Samut Sakhon**

| | Service fees | Paid to whom | Passport application fees | Paid to whom | Medical check-up | Paid to whom |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Female No. 1 | MMK 6.5 million (USD 3,095) | broker | MMK 500,000 (USD 238) | broker | MMK 50,000 (USD 2.4) | clinic |
| Female No. 2 | MMK 6.5 million (USD 3,095) | broker | MMK 500,000 (USD 238) | broker | MMK 50,000 (USD 2.4) | clinic |
| Female No. 3 | MMK 6.5 million (USD 3,095) | broker | MMK 500,000 (USD 238) | broker | MMK 50,000 (USD 2.4) | clinic |
| Male No. 1 | MMK 3.5 million (USD 1,667) | broker | MMK 500,000 (USD 238) | broker | MMK 50,000 (USD 2.4) | clinic |
| Male No. 2 | MMK 6.0 million (USD 2,857) | broker | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Male No. 3 | MMK 3.8 million (USD 1,809) | broker | MMK 200,000 (USD 95) | broker | N/A | N/A |

48 See for example, ILO, "Recruitment Fees and Related Costs: What Migrant Workers from Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Myanmar Pay to Work in Thailand", 2020, accessible at https://www.ilo.org/publications/recruitment-fees-and-related-costs-what-migrant-workers-cambodia-lao-people.

49 See for example, "Supply and Demand: The Industry of Syrian Passports", Center for Strategic and International Studies Newsletter, 20 January 2016, accessible at https://www.csis.org/analysis/supply-and-demand-industry-syrian-passports.

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male No.4 | MMK 3.8 million (USD 1,809) | broker | MMK 200,000 (USD 95) | broker | MMK 30,000 (USD 14) | clinic |

Additionally, all seven participants said that they were required to pay brokers and cover the cost of their travel to Thailand, amounting to approximately USD 570 for flights, plus a further USD 140 for bus transportation. All reported having to borrow money to finance their migration and stated that the actual migration costs surpassed the fees originally quoted by brokers. As one worker described, "initially the broker quoted me MMK 6.5 million (USD 3,095) in total. But they later asked for more and I had to borrow the money with interest. I ended up paying around MMK 8.5 million (USD 4,048) in total".[50]

### Phang Nga

The results from our survey in Phang Nga also revealed that MOU migrants typically pay far more than the legal cap on service fees, which is THB 10,000 (USD 300) on the Myanmar side, plus THB 5,390 or 7,600 on the Thailand side. One migrant worker employed in the construction sector said "I paid MMK 1.5 million (USD 751) to a recruitment agency for passport processing, supporting documentation, and contract signing, as well as MMK 1 million (USD 476) for travel to Thailand. To finance these costs, I borrowed MMK 1 million from a relative, although I was able to repay the loan after two months of work in Thailand".[51]

The survey also highlights the role of insecurity as a migration driver. The worker explained that he left Myanmar because he anticipated that the situation would deteriorate, noting that "my main reason was personal safety rather than earning money".[52] His account further suggests that broker involvement significantly increases migration costs. While he believed his direct contact with the recruitment agency helped keep his expenses relatively low, he observed that "many paid MMK 2.5-3 million (USD 1,502), because of brokers".[53] According to the participant, around 200 workers travelled through the same recruitment process.

The findings further point to concerns regarding transparency in the MOU recruitment process. A 37-year-old migrant worker employed at a seafood processing factory in Phang Nga reported paying MMK 7 million (USD 3,333) to migrate to Thailand but stated that "I did not know the breakdown or get any receipts".[54] According to the participant, the recruitment process involved "multiple layers of brokers",[55] which may explain the exceptionally high fees incurred. The financial burden was considerable, requiring her to borrow more than MMK 10 million (USD 4,761) from relatives.

A 24-year-old male respondent, also employed in Phang Nga's seafood industry, reported abandoning plans to continue his education following the onset of the pandemic and the subsequent military coup. He said, "I paid MMK 2 million (USD 952) to the agency in service

50 Quote from female Myanmar factory worker (21), Samut Sakhon, 23 Oct 2026.

51 Quote from male Myanmar construction worker (27), Phang Nga, 11 October 2026.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Quote from female Myanmar migrant worker (37), employed at a seafood processing factory, Phang Nga, 11 October 2026.

55 Ibid.

fees and separately MMK 500,000 (USD 238,1) to travel to Thailand".[56] His account highlights the perceived importance of access to information in managing migration costs. Based on his experience, he advised prospective migrants to "research recruitment options carefully online and contact agencies directly",[57] suggesting that this may reduce dependence on brokers and help avoid excessive fees.

Our survey findings suggest that the costs faced by migrants are not only excessive but also unpredictable. One 22-year-old woman employed at a tuna processing factory in Phang Nga reported paying between MMK 5 and 6 million (USD 2,381-2,856) to migrate to Thailand. To finance these expenses, she borrowed MMK 3 million (USD 1,502) from a relative and continues to repay approximately USD 285 each month. Her account highlights the opaque manner in which some fees are calculated. According to the participant, "the amount I paid depended on the fluctuation of the exchange rate each time I paid".[58]

As a result, migrants may not know the final cost of migration in advance, with fees increasing as payments are made in instalments over time. Respondents reported that charges were often calculated according to the prevailing exchange rate between the Myanmar kyat and Thai baht at the time of payment. Given the depreciation of the kyat, this practice appears to have shifted exchange-rate risk onto migrant workers, increasing costs and creating opportunities for additional charges that were neither fixed nor fully transparent at the outset of the recruitment process.

### Further Observations

Survey participants consistently reported a lack of information and transparency throughout the recruitment process. None of the 14 Myanmar workers surveyed were aware of the legal cap of 10,000 baht for service fees on the Myanmar side announced by Ministry of Labour in 2025.[59] This information gap appears to be compounded by the involvement of multiple intermediaries, including brokers and unregistered recruitment agencies, who make it difficult for prospective migrants to access reliable information and identify legitimate service providers. Reflecting this concern, one male Myanmar worker suggested that "licensed recruitment agencies should be publicised so the public will be able to know about them".[60]

Participants also highlighted considerable uncertainty regarding the fees they were required to pay. In particular, the scope of expenses covered by so-called "service fees" was often unclear. While some migrants reported that passport processing, medical examinations, and other administrative costs were included, others were required to pay these expenses separately. Travel costs to Thailand were also treated inconsistently, with some participants incurring additional charges beyond the quoted service fee. Significantly, none of the survey

56 Quote from male Myanmar migrant worker (24), employed at a seafood processing factory, Phang Nga, 11 October 2026.

57 Ibid.

58 Quote from female Myanmar migrant worker (22), employed at a tuna processing factory, Phang Nga, 11 October 2026.

59 See "Safe Migration Announces Maximum Service Fee on Sending Workers", *Global New Light of Myanmar,* 26 July 2025, accessible at https://www.gnlm.com.mm/safe-migration-announces-maximum-service-fee-on-sending-workers/.

60 Quote from male Myanmar migrant worker (40) employed at a tuna processing factory, Pang Nga province, 11 October 2026.

participants reported receiving a clear explanation of the fee structure or receipts documenting their payments, making it difficult for workers to verify whether the amounts charged were legitimate or consistent with legal requirements. As a migrant worker employed at a fish ball factory in Samut Sakhon remarked "There should be breakdowns of the fees. And agencies should be controlled. Otherwise, workers always have to pay extra".[61]

Survey participants also put forward a number of suggestions for reducing recruitment costs and improving accountability within the migration process. One 23-year-old woman working in a fish canning factory in Samut Sakhon argued that employers should bear recruitment costs rather than workers. In her view, "it would be better if [the] employer pays for the fees. In this way, the fees can be reduced".[62]

This observation highlights the potential benefits of the zero-recruitment-fee model. Employers typically possess greater bargaining power than individual workers and are therefore better positioned to negotiate with recruitment agencies, scrutinise fee structures, and challenge unnecessary or excessive charges. By contrast, prospective migrant workers often have limited information and few alternative options, leaving them vulnerable to the terms and fees imposed by agencies and intermediaries.

Participants also emphasised the need for greater awareness of complaint and redress mechanisms. One respondent noted that "there should be information about where we can complain if we face delay in migration, excessive charges of fees and other violations".[63] This suggests that workers not only face financial burdens during the recruitment process but may also lack the information necessary to challenge misconduct when it occurs.

As discussed later in this report, limited access to information during the pre-departure stage leaves many migrant workers unaware of their rights, the legal limits on recruitment fees, and the mechanisms available for reporting abuses and seeking remedies. Strengthening the dissemination of such information could therefore play an important role in enhancing transparency and accountability throughout the migration process.

### 2.2.3 Key Informant Perspectives on Recruitment

Many key informants interviewed for this study viewed the MOU recruitment process from Myanmar to Thailand as excessively costly and time-consuming. They attributed this largely to the multiple documentation and approval requirements imposed on migrant workers. For example, migrants must obtain both a PJ passport and an OWIC before applying for authorisation from the Ministry of Labour to leave Myanmar. According to informants, these requirements unnecessarily increase the cost, complexity, and length of the migration process.

As a key informant from the ILO remarked: "the processing of these documents is not only time-consuming but unpredictable, generating additional delays and expenses beyond those inherent

61 Quote from male Myanmar migrant worker (40) employed at a fish ball factory in Samut Sakhon, 23 Oct 2026.

62 Quote from female Myanmar migrant worker (23) employed in a fish canning factory in Samut Sakhon, 23 Oct 2026.

63 Ibid.

in the recruitment process".[64] The same key informant remarked that it "was not uncommon for migrant workers to have to purchase new airline tickets after missing their original flights due to delays in the approval of documentation".[65] Onerous administrative requirements not only increase the financial burden on migrant workers but also create uncertainty throughout the recruitment process. Furthermore, failure to comply with the relevant regulatory requirements can expose migrant workers to legal penalties. As a key informant from IOM observed, "the complexity, cost, and delays associated with the MOU process mean that many workers who initially intend to migrate through the official pathway often opt for irregular migration routes instead".[66]

Based on our key informant interviews, MMN learned that no systematic monitoring of recruitment fees and associated migration costs is currently taking place in Myanmar. Although the existing legal ceiling on recruitment fees is widely known among recruitment agencies, workers, and local communities, they sometimes misunderstand the ceiling as merely a reference point or, in some cases, even as a minimum fee. Furthermore, a representative of ILO informed MMN that "the increasing demand for overseas employment has weakened incentives for recruitment agencies to comply with the fee cap or lower the fees they charge".[67]

This challenge is compounded by the apparent lack of proactive enforcement mechanisms. According to observations shared by the key informant from IOM, "Myanmar's Ministry of Labour only tends to respond to issues when complaints are submitted by workers through Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs)".[68] Migrant workers do not generally lodge complaints when charged excessive recruitment fees.[69] Instead, complaints are more likely to arise when recruitment agencies fail to fulfil their obligations, such as when workers are not provided with the promised job or when they are subjected to prolonged waiting times prior to deployment.[70] Relevant legislation provides for compensation to affected workers and sanctions against recruitment agencies, including the suspension of their business operations. However, only workers who have access to MRCs are generally able to submit complaints. According to an ILO representative, MRCs operated by CSOs and trade unions provide accessible migration support through in-person services, hotlines, and social media platforms".[71] As noted in the previous section, migrant workers are frequently unaware of complaint resolution mechanisms available to them. In the absence of support from an active MRC, many are unlikely to know where to turn to seek redress.

Several key informants noted that prior to the 2021 military coup, the adoption of a zero-recruitment-fee model had received a degree of support from within the Myanmar authorities. Although no specific policy measures were put in place, one recruitment agency interviewed recalled that "our applications and requests were given priority by the then Ministry of Labour

64 MMN Key Informant Interview with a representative of ILO, 22 June 2026, online.

65 Ibid.

66 MMN Key Informant Interview with representatives of IOM, 17 August 2026, online.

67 MMN Key Informant Interview with a representative of ILO, 22 June 2026, online.

68 MMN Key Informant Interview with representatives of IOM, 17 August 2026, online.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 MMN Key Informant Interview with a representative of ILO, 22 June 2026, online.

because our agency practiced zero-cost recruitment".[72] In addition, the representative from IOM recalled their experiences conducting a mandatory two-day training on ethical recruitment to newly licenced recruitment agencies. They said that, "to date, more than 600 agencies have participated in the training. However, despite these efforts, under the current circumstances, only a small number of agencies continue to practice the zero-cost recruitment model. Instead, migrant workers are frequently charged high recruitment fees that often exceed legal limits".[73]

### 2.2.4 Good Practices for Easing the Financial Burdens on Migrants

The widespread public concern generated following the 2014 *Guardian* report exposing poor working conditions, trafficking, and modern slavery in Thailand's fisheries sector has increased pressure on employers and industry stakeholders to improve protections for migrant workers.[74] It is in this context that the Migrant Workers Rights Network (MWRN), a membership-based organisation for workers from Myanmar in Thailand,[75] has played a key role in monitoring and supporting the zero-recruitment-fee model launched by the Thai Union Group, one of Thailand's major seafood exporters. The paragraphs below draw on key informant interviews with representatives from MWRN and a Yangon-based recruitment agency. They provide details of how this initiative can ease the financial burden on Myanmar migrants, while discussing some of the problems of implementing the zero-recruitment-fee model for MOU migrants to Thailand.[76]

#### Zero-Recruitment-Fee Model in Thailand's Seafood Sector

In 2016, MWRN began supporting the implementation of the employer-pays recruitment model adopted by the multinational seafood company, the Thai Union Group. Under its ethical recruitment guidelines, Thai Union has progressively committed to paying recruitment fees and a range of related costs frequently incurred by migrant workers, including documentation, travel and food expenses.[77] MWRN has played an active role monitoring participating recruitment agencies in Myanmar to ensure compliance with ethical recruitment standards. This includes interviews with migrant workers to verify that no unauthorised fees are charged. MWRN explained that they also deliver a two-day PDT to migrants before deployment, covering workers' rights, employment contracts, Thai laws, health, and workplace health and safety. Approximately 30,000 Myanmar workers migrated to Thailand under this model before COVID-19 travel restrictions were imposed in March 2020.[78]

72 MMN Key Informant Interview with a representative of a recruitment agency in Yangon, 6 August 2026, online.

73 MMN Key Informant Interview with representatives of IOM, 17 August 2026, online.

74 See Kate Hodal and Chris Kelly, "Trafficked into Slavery on Thai Trawlers to Catch Food for Prawns", *The Guardian*, 10 June 2014, accessible at https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/jun/10/-sp-migrant-workers-new-life-enslaved-thai-fishing.

75 MWRN was founded by migrant workers in Samut Sakhon, Thailand, in 2009, and their office in Myanmar was opened in 2013. For further details see MWRN Facebook page accessible at https://www.facebook.com/mwrnorg/.

76 See MMN Key Informant Interviews with a representative of MWRN, 30 July 2026, online and with a representative of a recruitment agency in Yangon, 6 August 2026, online.

77 See Thai Union, "Thai Union Group: Ethical Recruitment Guideline – Thailand", 1 March 2024, pp. 5-6, accessible at https://www.thaiunion.com/uploads/20240229-tu-ethical-recruitment-guidelines-thailand.pdf.

78 MMN Key Informant Interview with a representative of MWRN, 30 July 2026, online.

When cross-border migration resumed in 2022, the model evolved into a zero-fee model, under which employers cover all recruitment and migration-related costs, including the journey from workers' homes in Myanmar to their workplaces in Thailand. Around 15,000 workers have already migrated to Thailand under this arrangement, although numbers have since declined due to migration restrictions imposed by Myanmar's military authorities.[79]

MWRN'S long-standing efforts to address labour exploitation in Thailand's seafood sector, has seen it become a trusted third-party monitor for employers' associations and companies, including the Thai Union Group. In this capacity it helps ensure recruitment agencies comply with ethical recruitment standards. However, interviews conducted for this research suggest that translating these standards into practice remains challenging. A recruitment agency representative familiar with the situation explained that "implementing the zero-fee model presents various challenges, including resistance from competing agencies".[80] They noted that they receive smaller recruitment fees than many of their competitors because "the recruitment fee covered by Thai employers is set at only around USD 50 per worker".[81] These lower profit margins make it more difficult for agencies to sustain a zero-fee recruitment model.

Both MWRN and the recruitment agency interviewed emphasised the need for more systematic efforts to promote ethical recruitment practices, including the wider adoption of the zero-fee recruitment model.

## 2.3 Information Dissemination at the Pre-departure Stage

### 2.3.1 Information Dissemination by Agencies, the Ministry and CSOs

Myanmar's 2014 *Rules and Regulations for License Holders of Overseas Employment Agencies* require recruitment agencies to provide PDT covering the terms and conditions within employment contracts, migrants' rights and responsibilities, information on protection mechanisms, labour law, and relevant information concerning the cultural, working and living conditions to be expected in the destination country.[82] The bilateral *Agreement on the Employment of Workers between Myanmar and Thailand* requires that PDO be provided free of charge, including an explanation of employment contracts and working conditions.[83]

However, it should be noted that there is presently no standardised curriculum for PDT. As a result, recruitment agencies develop and deliver their own programmes, leading to considerable variation in both content and quality. A recruitment agency interviewed for this research explained its approach: "We place particular emphasis on ensuring workers receive accurate information about the nature of their new jobs, expected remuneration, and working

79 Ibid.

80 MMN Key Informant Interview with a representative of a recruitment agency in Yangon, 6 August 2026, online.

81 Ibid.

82 For discussion, see MMN, "Navigating Social Security Systems: The Roles of Mekong Countries of Origin in Supporting Migrant Workers in Thailand and Japan", 2024, p. 87, accessible at https://mekongmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Book_Navigating-Social-Security-Systems-1.pdf.

83 See the Agreement on the Employment of Workers, at n 38 above.

conditions". According to the agency, "this is intended to minimise expectation gaps and reduce the likelihood of disputes or dissatisfaction following arrival in the destination country".[84]

This training is provided in addition to the compulsory PDO that all outbound migrant workers must complete to receive their OWIC before leaving Myanmar. The state-run programme covers a range of topics, including cultural norms as well as relevant laws and regulations in destination countries.[85] However, its scope is limited by its design, which is standardised for all prospective migrants, regardless of their destination. As a result, country-specific information is covered only in general terms.

The ILO and IOM previously provided technical support for the development of the PDO curriculum. However, the programme is now delivered exclusively by the Ministry of Labour. Consequently, neither the curriculum nor the quality of its delivery is currently subject to external review or independent assessment. It should be noted that MOU migrant workers bound for Thailand are not required to take the PDO, instead, they must go to a centre to sign their employment contracts. The experiences of migrants attending these sessions are discussed in section 2.3.2 below.

### Migrant Resource Centres

Given the limitations of both PDOs and PDTs in Myanmar, MRCs play a crucial role in terms of information dissemination. There are currently 14 MRCs operating across the country. Some are managed by CSOs and trade unions with the support of the ILO, [86] while others have been established by the IOM. Some operate as fixed-site MRCs, whereas others provide services through outreach-based mobile units. Although the services offered vary between centres, MRCs generally provide migrant workers and their families with information, counselling, and referral services. By doing so, they help fill important information and support gaps.

According to an ILO representative interviewed for this study, "MRCs play a key role in making migration support services more accessible to prospective and current migrant workers".[87] This support is delivered through a range of channels, including "in-person services, hotlines, and social media platforms". [88] The representative explained that MRCs provide information and counselling on migration pathways, legal requirements, financial literacy, and administrative procedures. They also offer practical assistance with processes such as passport applications and the use of digital payment systems.

In ethnic states, MRC staff may also provide language support and accompany workers to government offices.[89] Our key informant from ILO explained that "MRCs also operate grievance and legal aid mechanisms, documenting cases ranging from missing migrants to broker fraud,

84 MMN Key Informant Interview with a representative of a recruitment agency in Yangon, 6 August 2026, online.

85 See MMN, "Navigating Social Security Systems", p. 87, at n 82 above.

86 The location of those operated by ILO are detailed in ILO, "Empowering Migrant Workers: Lessons Learned from ILO Migrant Worker Resource Centres in the ASEAN Region", 2025, p. 3, accessible at https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/202511/ilo%20-%20Empowering%20Migrant%20Workers%20A4%202025-10-31%20web.pdf.

87 MMN Key Informant Interview with a representative of ILO, 22 June 2026, online.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.

and linking victims with legal or cross-border support".[90] Furthermore, they conduct community outreach on safe migration and fraud prevention, helping reduce migrants' reliance on informal brokers.[91] Their face-to-face, community-based approach helps build trust in their services and the information they deliver. [92]

In addition, the ILO intends to collaborate with private Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions and CSOs that operate skills training centres.[93] Although these centres will not function as full MRCs, they will provide migration-related information, counselling services, and referrals alongside skills development activities.[94]

### 2.3.2 Migrant Worker and Key Informant Perspectives

Our survey of migrants revealed that the PDO conducted by the Ministry of Labour is unpopular with workers. The briefing is delivered collectively for all destination countries, with sessions often attended by as many as 1,000 participants, limiting opportunities for meaningful engagement. Many migrants reported that they did not feel comfortable asking questions or participating in such large events. As one migrant worker explained, "I had to research the information myself. The Ministry's briefing was largely ineffective because there were just too many people".[95]

Although migrants deployed to Thailand under the MOU are not required to attend PDO, they must, nevertheless, visit a government briefing centre to sign their employment contracts. During these ceremonies, officials explain details of the contract to groups of between 100 and 200 workers at a time. They also provide migrants with an opportunity to raise any concerns. However, the key informant from the ILO interviewed for this study felt that this is not done in an appropriate setting. They explained that "officials publicly ask the crowd of workers if anyone was overcharged by agencies. This public announcement acts as a 'smart' way to prevent workers from later filing complaints, as the authorities can claim everyone confirmed that they had paid legal fees".[96] This practice may discourage workers from raising concerns and can limit the effectiveness of the briefing as a mechanism for identifying recruitment-related grievances.

Several participants in our study who received PDT from their recruitment agencies reported that these briefings typically lasted one day or less. Concerns were also raised regarding the emphasis of the training content. According to our key informant representative from ILO, the sessions "tend to focus heavily on the workers' strict duties, how to operate machines, and the financial penalties they must pay back to the agency if they fail to complete their multi-year contract". In the representative's view "it is designed to protect the business, not the worker".[97]

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

92 See, ILO, "Empowering Migrant Workers", p. 15, at n 86 above.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid., p. 22.

95 Quote from male Myanmar migrant worker (27) employed in the construction sector, Pang Nga province, 11 October, 2026.

96 MMN Key Informant Interview with a representative of ILO, 22 June 2026, online.

97 Ibid.

Migrant workers who participated in our survey also expressed dissatisfaction with the information they received regarding their contracts and conditions of employment during PDT. Several respondents reported discrepancies between the terms presented before departure and the realities they encountered after arriving in Thailand. For example, a female migrant worker employed in a canned fish factory in Samut Sakhon stated that "the work specified on my contract and the work I'm doing now is different".[98] Similarly, a male migrant worker employed at a fish ball factory reported that he had been misinformed about employment-related costs: "I was told that, I don't need to pay for the room, water and electricity. But, now I have to pay for everything".[99] These accounts suggest that PDT may not be providing workers with accurate or comprehensive information about their employment terms and conditions.

A key informant representing a CSO expressed concern that migrant workers are often not adequately informed about where to seek assistance or whom to contact when they encounter problems. While acknowledging that she was uncertain whether recruitment agencies provide specific PDT for workers bound for Thailand or Japan, she suggested that some agencies may view such training as "unnecessary or too time-consuming". As she observed, agencies are "business entities that seek to minimise the time, money, and effort they invest in worker preparation".[100] She further noted that "if agencies were genuinely committed to providing effective PDT, they could collaborate with MRCs and other organisations with expertise in migrant worker support".[101]

### 2.3.3 Good Practices for Delivering Rights-based Information

In the current Myanmar context, where formal mechanisms for addressing grievances are largely ineffective and PDO and PDT frequently fall short of migrants' needs, CSOs and MRCs have become critical sources of information, guidance, and support. The FLC, a Yangon-based CSO, is one such organisation. Through its migrant information and training activities, their work offers an example of good practice in delivering rights-based information that is accessible, relevant, and responsive to migrants' needs. This section presents a case study of FLC's approach and the factors that contribute to its effectiveness.

#### Future Light Centre

Although the FLC is based in Yangon, it also operates MRCs in several other locations. These centres provide services, including counselling, legal aid referrals, information on safe migration, and training for prospective migrant workers. Their counselling service is wide-ranging and has been accessed by prospective migrants, migrants in destination countries, migrant returnees and family members of migrants mainly through social media. The FLC also helps prospective migrant workers connect with reliable recruitment agencies, including agencies practicing the zero-recruitment-fee model.[102]

98 Quote from female Myanmar factory worker (21), Samut Sakhon, 23 Oct 2026.

99 Quote from male Myanmar migrant worker (40) employed at a fish ball factory in Samut Sakhon, 23 Oct 2026.

100 MMN Key Informant Interview with a representative of FLC, 12 October, 2026, online.

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid.

FLC offers two types of training. The first is "safe migration training", which is intended for a general audience and covers broad migration-related topics. The second is PDT, which is designed for individuals who have already decided to migrate. Training topics are selected based on the types of cases commonly handled by FLC, with the aim of addressing the problems and risks most frequently encountered by migrant workers.

Safe migration training typically lasts half a day. It covers topics such as available migration channels, the requirements associated with each channel, the role of recruitment agencies, and potential migration-related risks. PDT is delivered over a full day and provides more detailed, destination-specific information. Topics include labour laws and regulations, social protection schemes, workers' rights and responsibilities, and available sources of support in cases of labour rights violations or other workplace problems.

FLC employs a range of participatory training methods, including role-playing exercises and case studies, to encourage discussion and active engagement among participants. Presentations




Migrant workers arrive for their evening shift, while others leave the seafood processing factory after finishing work.

Photo: MMN/John Hulme

and short films are also used to reinforce key messages and improve information retention. In addition to training sessions conducted at its offices and MRCs, the organisation conducts outreach activities in local communities. Community volunteers are recruited to identify prospective migrant workers and coordinate training sessions with local residents. This community-based approach helps extend FLC's reach beyond its physical locations. An additional advantage of these training programmes is that they allow FLC to establish relationships with participants before they depart. By maintaining contact after deployment, the organisation is able to provide timely advice and support should migrants encounter problems abroad.

Despite proactively promoting its services through community outreach, CSO networks, and former service users, FLC faces significant challenges in reaching prospective migrant workers. In some instances, it must compete with brokers who persuade migrants to use certain recruitment agencies based on misleading or inaccurate information. Accessing prospective migrants in conflict-affected areas presents an even greater challenge, as these regions are often difficult to reach. In response, FLC has recently introduced online training programmes to expand its outreach and improve access to information for migrants in remote conflict-ridden areas.

To improve the provision of rights-based information, FLC emphasised the need for stronger collaboration among MRCs and CSOs. They also highlighted the importance of enhancing cross-border coordination to facilitate the timely sharing of policy updates, emerging issues, and possible intervention strategies.

## 2.4 Conclusions

Building on MMN's prior work, this chapter has examined two interrelated issues: the regulation of recruitment fees, and migrant workers' access to rights-based information within the context of the Myanmar-Thailand MOU migration process. The analysis has highlighted a range of policy gaps and practical challenges that affect migrants both before departure and once deployed in Thailand. Drawing on key informant interviews, migrant worker surveys, and desk research, the following conclusions can be drawn.

In Myanmar, although laws and regulations exist to govern the activities of recruitment agencies, there is currently no effective system for enforcing them. As a result, the legal cap on recruitment fees is neither widely known nor consistently applied. The ongoing conflict and related economic crisis have further weakened incentives for agencies to comply with fee regulations, as large numbers of workers remain eager to leave the country despite the costs involved. In addition to excessive recruitment fees and related expenses, migrants also face administrative burdens, including requirements to obtain an OWIC and exit approval. Together, these factors increase both the cost and complexity of regular migration through the MOU pathway. Combined with concerns over forced remittances, double taxation, and age-based restrictions linked to military conscription, these obstacles create strong incentives for prospective migrants to pursue irregular migration channels.

Against this backdrop, a few examples of good practice emerge, notably the zero-recruitment-fee model practiced by the Thai Union Group in coordination with the MWRN. This case study of ethical recruitment in Thailand's fisheries sector, demonstrates that pressure from within supply chains and from consuming countries can be a key driving force behind the shift toward the employer-pay model. Moreover, CSOs and trade unions have an important role to play in the implementation of the zero-recruitment-fee model by serving as third-party monitors, drawing on their experience in documenting labour rights issues.

In relation to information dissemination at the pre-departure stage, the findings also point to significant shortcomings in the provision of rights-based information. Analysis of relevant law and policy frameworks, together with evidence from key informant interviews and migrant worker surveys, suggests that government-run PDO sessions provide limited value to out-bound migrants, largely because they are not tailored to the specific conditions and risks associated with different destination countries. The quality of PDT delivered by recruitment agencies is similarly uneven. While some agencies make genuine efforts to prepare workers and reduce expectation gaps, others provide only limited or inadequate information. In this context, CSOs and MRCs have become an essential source of accurate and practical information for prospective migrants. However, the scale of outward migration from Myanmar far exceeds the capacity of these organisations to meet demand. Strengthening access to reliable rights-based information will therefore require broader collaboration among employers, CSOs, trade unions, international organisations, and other stakeholders in destination countries. Innovative and scalable approaches are needed to ensure that migrant workers are better informed, better protected, and better equipped to exercise their rights throughout the migration process.

Japanese language lesson

Thinh Long Investment and Trading Group Joint Stock Company

Photo: MMN




# Chapter 3: Labour Migration from Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam to Japan

## 3.1 Migration Overview

### 3.1.1 Migration Overview in Japan

In 2016, Japan become the world's first super-aged society.[103] To satisfy the growing labour shortages caused by demographic decline, a recent survey indicated that the number of migrant workers needs to quadruple by 2040 in order to sustain Japan's economic growth.[104] As a

103 Japan's working-age population (15–64-year-old) first began to decline in 1995. For further information, see the World Bank webpage entitled "Population Ages 15—64, total — Japan", 2022, accessible at https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.1564.TO?locations=JP.

104 JICA, "2030/40年の外国人との共生社会の実現に向けた取り組み調査・研究報告書 [Survey and research on initiatives towards the realisation of an intercultural society in 2030/40]", March 2022, p. 19, accessible in Japanese at https://www.jica.go.jp/jica-ri/ja/publication/booksandreports/20220331_01.html.

consequence, in January 2026, the Japanese government has announced plans to recruit 1.23 million migrant workers under its existing SSW scheme and forthcoming Employment for Skill Development (ESD) scheme by the end of 2028.[105]

To address sector-specific labour demands, the Japanese government has progressively introduced ever larger numbers of temporary migrant workers into the domestic labour force. This is reflected in overall population data. As of December 2025, the number of foreign residents reached 4.12 million, accounting for approximately 3.4 percent of the total population.[106] Of this total, approximately 2.6 million are migrants who are active in the labour market.[107] Within this group, 23.6 percent are from Vietnam, 16.8 percent from China, 10.1 percent from the Philippines, 9.2 percent from Nepal, and 8.9 percent from Indonesia.[108] This working population includes highly skilled professionals, engineers, TITP workers, SSWs, foreign students with permission to work for a limited number of hours, *Nikkeijin* (Latin Americans of Japanese descent) and the spouses of Japanese nationals resident in Japan.[109]

### *Labour Migration Policy in Japan*

Many migrant workers in Japan reside under the terms of the TITP or SSW scheme. Today, Japan hosts approximately 456,000 TITP workers and 390,000 SSWs, the majority of whom come from countries in Southeast Asia.[110] The subsections below briefly outline these two labour migration schemes, along with the new ESD scheme that is due to replace the TITP in 2027.

#### Technical Intern Trainee Programme

The TITP was established in 1993 with the stated aim of transferring "skills, technologies, or knowledge to developing and other regions, and to promote international cooperation by contributing to the development of human resources who can play roles in the economic development of those developing regions".[111]

105 See "外国人材、上限123万人　政府が運用方針決定［Capping the number of foreign workers to be recruited by 2028 is set at 1.23 million]", *JIJI.COM*, 23 January, 2026, accessible in Japanese at https://www.jiji.com/jc/article?k=20260123005236&g=pol.

106 Immigration Services Agency, "令和7年12月末現在における在留外国人数について［Number of foreign residents as of the end of December 2025]", accessible in Japanese at https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/publications/press/13_00062.html?hl=en; As of August 2025, the total population in Japan was approximately 123 million. See the Statistics Bureau website, entitled "人口推計令和7年8月現在［Population estimates, August 2025], accessible in Japanese at https://www.stat.go.jp/data/jinsui/new.html.

107 Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, "外国人雇用状況の届出状況まとめ（令和7年10月末時点）[Statistics on migrants employed in Japan as of October 2025]", 30 January 2026, accessible in Japanese at https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/newpage_68794.html.

108 Ibid., p.6.

109 Ibid., p.7.

110 As of December 2025, the total number of TITP workers stood at 456,618, while the number of SSW workers was 390,296. See Immigration Services Agency, "令和7年12月末現在における在留外国人数について［Number of foreign residents as of the end of December 2025]", at n 106 above.

111 See JITCO webpage, "What is the Technical Intern Training Programme?", accessible at https://www.jitco.or.jp/en/regulation/index.html.

While the primary stated goal of the TITP is to facilitate the transfer of skills to migrant workers, the programme has been widely criticised for its poor labour rights record and its repurposing by Japanese companies to bring in low-wage workers from overseas. Following a full-scale government review of the TITP in June 2024, the National Diet, Japan's legislature, amended the *Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act*,[112] with provisions that establish a new labour migration mechanism. The new ESD scheme, discussed below, is due to be implemented in 2027,[113] and will assist migrant workers obtain industry skills and knowledge over three years, after which they are eligible to apply for temporary residence under the SSW scheme, elaborated on below.

The TITP is typically a five-year programme comprising three different levels based on a migrant's specific skills, with each level corresponding to a specific status of residence. As of December 2025, there were 189,756 TITP workers from Vietnam, comprising 41.6 percent of the total number of TITP workers.[114] The second largest group is from Indonesia (124,967, 27.4 percent), followed by the Philippines (42,289, 9.3 percent), Myanmar (35,669, 7.8 percent) and China (22,583, 4.9 percent).[115]

Specified Skilled Workers

The SSW residence status was created in 2018 to fill labour gaps in specified employment sectors. There are two types of SSW status: SSW (i) and (ii). Migrant workers with SSW (i) status are temporary labour migrants and are entitled to stay and work in Japan for a maximum of five years. Following this period, subject to passing an examination, they may apply for SSW (ii) status. SSW (ii) workers are permitted to indefinitely renew their residency, live in Japan with dependents, and eventually apply for permanent residency.[116]

Before migrating to Japan, SSW applicants must pass an examination to demonstrate Japanese language proficiency and industry-specific skills. Those already in Japan under a different migration scheme, such as under the TITP or as students, are also eligible to apply for SSW residential status. While TITP workers are required to migrate through licensed recruitment agencies, SSWs can prepare for examinations, sit the exams, and search for job vacancies on their own. This migration process was introduced because TITP workers have typically been charged high recruitment fees by agencies in their countries of origin. However, as discussed in later sections, in practice a large proportion of SSWs also rely on recruitment agencies.

112 The amended Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act is accessible (in Japanese) at https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/03_00163.html?hl=en.

113 "Japan Enacts Legislation on Foreign Worker Training", The Japan Times, 14 June 2024, accessible at https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/politics-government/20240614-191943/. The basic policy for the new scheme was approved by the cabinet on 11 March 2025. See, "Japan OKs Policy for Replacement of Troubled Foreign Trainee Scheme", Kyodo News, 11 March 2025, accessible at https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2025/03/0a8233d6185d-japan-oks-policy-for-replacement-of-troubled-foreign-trainee-scheme.html?phrase=coronavirus&words=.

114 Immigration Services Agency, "令和7年12月末現在における在留外国人数について [Number of foreign residents as of the end of December 2025]", at n 106 above.

115 Ibid.

116 As of December 2025, there were only 7,955 SSW (ii), while there are 382,341 SSW(i). See Ministry of Justice, "特定技能1号在留外国人数 [Statistics on Specified Skilled Workers (i)]", and "特定技能2号在留外国人数 [Statistics on Specified Skilled Workers (i)]", December 2025, accessible in Japanese at https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/applications/ssw/nyuukokukanri07_00215.html?hl=en.




Migrant returnees from Japan shared their experiences and challenges.

MMN Migrant Exchange Forum,

9 November, Phnom Penh

As of December 2025, 164,352 SSW workers came from Vietnam, which comprised 42.1 percent of the total population of migrant workers participating in the scheme.[117] The second largest group were from Indonesia (86,955, 22.3 percent), followed by Myanmar (44,523, 11.4 percent) and the Philippines (35,862, 9.2 percent).[118]

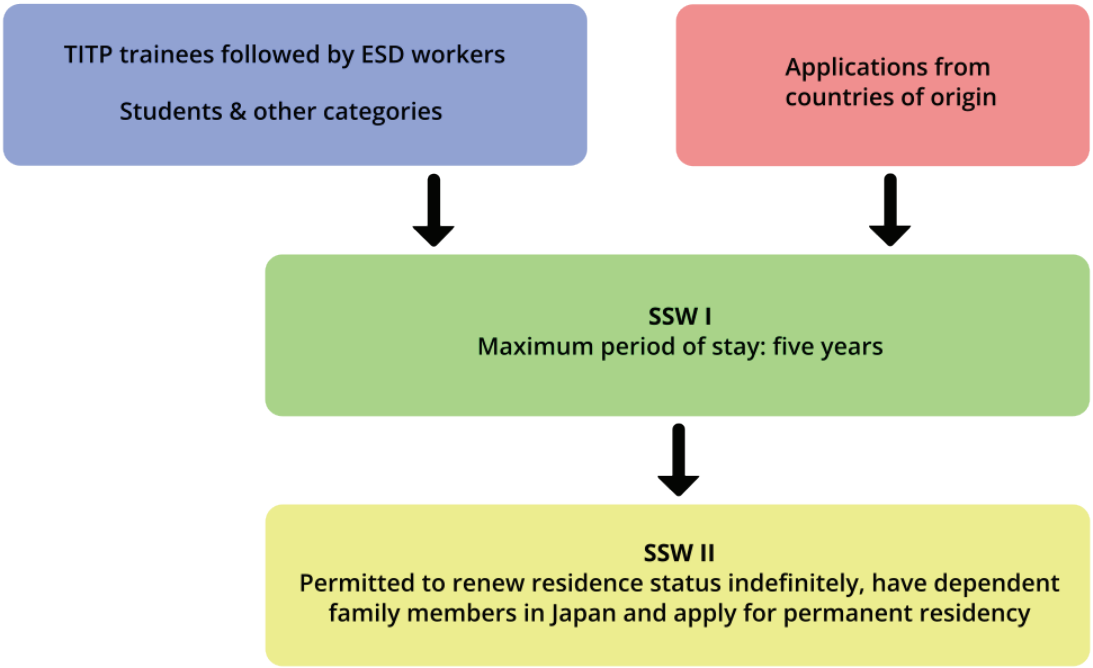
Employment for Skill Development

The new ESD work permit scheme has been developed in response to major issues identified with the TITP. Figure 3.1 shows the immigration status pathway for the different residence schemes. The main differences between the TITP and ESD are summarised in Table 3.1.

117 See Ministry of Justice, "特定技能1号在留外国人数 [Statistics on Specified Skilled Workers (i)]", December 2025, Ibid.

118 Ibid.

## Figure 3.1: Immigration Status Pathway for Different Residence Schemes




## Table 3.1: Main Differences Between TITP and ESD[119]

| | TITP | ESD |
|---|---|---|
| **Objectives** | International cooperation through skills transfer | Skills development and securing labour for the Japanese economy |
| **Maximum Period of Stay** | 5 years | 3 years |
| **Utilising skills upon return** | Required. | Not required. |
| **Japanese language skills requirement** | None at entry | JLPT N5 level (beginner level) at entry |
| **Legal cap on recruitment fees** | None | Recruitment fees should not exceed the equivalent of two months' salary to be earned in Japan. |
| **Job transfer** | Not permitted | Permitted within the same industry under certain conditions. |

119 Information drawn from the webpage of the Ministry of Justice, "Employment for Skill Development", accessible at https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/applications/index_00005.html?hl=en; and the Immigration Services Agency and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare,"育成就労制度の関係省令等について[Related ministerial ordinances on Employment for Skill Development]", accessible in Japanese at https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/content/001451331.pdf.




Prospective migrant workers attend a pre-departure training session in Yangon, Myanmar.

Photo: MMN

### 3.1.2 Labour Migration from Cambodia to Japan

Of Cambodia's total population of 17.8 million,[120] more than 1.3 million have migrated abroad.[121] Most move to Thailand for work, although this number is declining in light of recent border tensions.[122] Other popular destinations for Cambodian migrant workers include South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia and Japan. Labour migration to Japan is facilitated under the respective bilateral Memoranda of Cooperation (MOC) for migration under the TITP,[123] and SSW.[124] As of December 2025, there were 14,182 Cambodian workers residing in Japan under TITP. Approximately 30 percent of whom were employed in the construction sector, 20 percent in agriculture, 15.4 percent in food manufacturing, and 10.8 percent in the

120 See World Bank Group, "Population, Cambodia", 2024, accessible at https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=KH.

121 Som Sotheary, "Ministry Says Over 1.3 Million Cambodians are Working Abroad", *Khmer Times*, 4 January 2024, accessible at https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501417625/ministry-says-over-1-3-million-cambodians-are-working-abroad/.

122 Vincent Tan, "How Cambodian Worker Exodus Exposes Thailand's Fragile Labour Model", *South China Morning Post,* 16 August 2026, accessible at https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/economics/article/3364128/how-cambodian-worker-exodus-exposes-thailands-fragile-labour-model

123 *Memorandum of Cooperation on the Technical Intern Training Programme between the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan and the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training of Cambodia*, 2017, accessible at http://www.moj.go.jp/content/001229407.pdf.

124 *Memorandum of Cooperation between the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare and the National Police Agency of Japan and the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training of the Kingdom of Cambodia on a Basic Framework for Information Partnership for Proper Operation of the System Pertaining to Foreign Human Resources with the Status of Residence of "Specified Skilled Worker"*, 2019, accessible at https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000460250.pdf. While the SSW residential status was created with the option for companies in Japan to directly hire workers from their countries of origin, the MOC states that workers in Cambodia must use the services of a recruitment agency to migrate to Japan.

garment industry.[125] Among the 8,500 Cambodian migrant workers residing in Japan under the SSW scheme, 3,804 were employed in agriculture, 1,723 in construction, and 1,654 in food manufacturing.[126]

Cambodian workers seeking employment as TITP and SSW workers in Japan typically do so through licensed private recruitment agencies, which play a central role in the recruitment, pre-departure preparation, and deployment process. The legal framework to regulate private recruitment agencies and oversee the recruitment and deployment of Cambodian migrant workers abroad has been established through *Sub-Decree No. 190 on the Management of the Sending of Cambodian Workers Abroad through Private Recruitment Agencies*, several specific regulations, and Cambodian labour law.[127]As of June 2026, there were 117 recruitment agencies approved to deploy migrant workers to Japan.[128] The Association of Labour Migration Agencies of Cambodia (ALMAC), a nationwide association of recruitment agencies, has also established a CoC to regulate the practice of its members.[129]

### 3.1.3 Labour Migration from Myanmar to Japan

Japan is an emerging labour market for migrant workers from Myanmar. The number of Myanmar migrant workers increased by 42.5 percent in 2025 compared with the previous year. This represented the highest growth rate among all foreign worker nationalities in Japan.[130] The number is expected to grow further, as Japan is an increasingly popular destination country for work and study among Myanmar young people.[131] The increase in the number of Myanmar migrants in Japan can be attributed, in part, to the ongoing unrest in their country of origin and the Japanese government's immigration policy response. In May 2021, the Japanese government introduced humanitarian measures allowing eligible Myanmar nationals in Japan to switch to a "Designated Activities" status of residence.

As of December 2025, there were 182,567 Myanmar nationals in Japan, including 35,669 TITP

125 See OTIT, "令和6年業務統計 [Annual Report 2024]", accessible in Japanese at https://www.otit.go.jp/system/research/statictics/2024/index.html.

126 Ministry of Justice, "特定技能1号在留外国人数 [Statistics on Specified Skilled Workers (i)] ", and "特定技能2号在留外国人数 [Statistics on Specified Skilled Workers (i)]", at n 116 above.

127 *Sub-Decree No. 190 on the Management of the Sending of Cambodian Workers Abroad through Private Recruitment Agencies Access,* 2011, accessible at https://mekongmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/sub-degree-190-migration-managment-1.pdf; A list of relevant Cambodian regulations can be found on the MMN webpage, "Key Policies and Agreements", accessible at https://mekongmigration.org/?page_id=1112; The Cambodian Labour Law can be found on the webpage of the Government of Cambodia, accessible at https://cdc.gov.kh/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/THE-LABOR-LAW-OF-CAMBODIA_970313-.pdf.

128 The list of approved recruitment agencies is periodically updated on the OTIT's website. See OTIT, accessible (in Japanese) at https://www.otit.go.jp/upload/docs/260210_KHM.pdf.

129 See ALMAC (formerly Association of Cambodia Recruitment Agencies), "Code of Conduct for Cambodian Private Recruitment Agencies", 2 January 2020, accessible at https://www.ilo.org/publications/code-conduct-cambodian-private-recruitment-agencies.

130 See Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, "外国人雇用状況の届出状況まとめ（令和7年10月末時点）[Statistics on migrants employed in Japan as of October 2025]", 30 January 2026, accessible in Japanese at https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/newpage_68794.html.

131 See Koji Nozawa, "Myanmar Workers Head to Japan as Turmoil Deepens at Home", Nikkei Asia, 20 May 2025, accessible at https://asia.nikkei.com/spotlight/japan-immigration/myanmar-workers-head-to-japan-as-turmoil-deepens-at-home.



A class room for language lessons at the Ha Tinh Ha Tinh Employment Service Centre

Photo: CDI

workers and 44,523 SSWs.[132] Female workers have long outnumbered male workers, with approximately 57,000 female workers and 22,000 male workers registered under the TITP and SSW schemes as of December 2025.[133] The food and beverages manufacturing industry (26 percent) was the most common employment sector among Myanmar TITP workers, followed by construction (19 percent), and nursing care (16.4 percent).[134] Among Myanmar SSWs, as of December 2025, nursing care was the most popular sector (44.5 percent), followed by the food and beverages manufacturing industry (33.8 percent).[135] The number of nursing care workers, in particular, increased significantly from 410 in 2021 to 19,803 in 2025.[136]

In 2018, the governments of Myanmar and Japan signed an MOC regarding migration under the TITP,[137] on similar terms as the Japanese agreement with Cambodia. As of June 2026, there were 542 recruitment agencies deploying migrant workers to Japan.[138] The MOC regarding labour migration under the SSW scheme was concluded in 2019. It is notable in that it does not require Myanmar workers to use the service of recruitment agencies to apply for work under the SSW scheme.[139]

132 See Immigration Services Agency, "令和7年12月末現在における在留外国人数について [Number of foreign residents as of the end of December 2025]", at n 106 above.

133 Ibid.

134 See OTIT, "令和6年業務統計 [Annual Report 2024]", at n 125 above.

135 See Ministry of Justice, "Statistics on Specified Skilled Workers (i)", June 2023, at n 116 above.

136 Ibid.

137 *Memorandum of Cooperation on the Technical Intern Training Program between the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan and the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population of Myanmar*, 2018, accessible at https://www.mhlw.go.jp/file/06-Seisakuj ouhou-11800000-Shokugyounouryokukaihatsukyoku/0000205715.pdf.

138 The list of approved recruitment agencies is periodically updated by OTIT. See OTIT website, accessible in Japanese at https://www.otit.go.jp/soushutsu_kikan_list/.

139 *Memorandum of Cooperation between the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare and the National Police Agency of Japan and the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar on a Basic Framework for Information Partnership for Proper Operation of the System Pertaining to Foreign Human Resources with the Status of Residence of "Specified Skilled Worker"*, 2019, accessible at https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/content/930004217.pdf.

### 3.1.4 Labour Migration from Vietnam to Japan

From January to May 2026, 53,159 Vietnamese workers migrated abroad through formal labour migration programmes.[140] Japan remained the primary destination attracting 24,030 workers, followed by Taiwan (21,104), South Korea (3,217) and various European countries.[141] Vietnamese migrants remit between USD 6.5-7 billion each year, making a significant contribution to household incomes and the national economy.[142]

Japan has long been the top destination for Vietnamese workers. However, its status is under threat given the continued depreciation of the yen and the steady growth of wages in Vietnam driven by domestic economic growth.[143] Additionally, Taiwan is attracting growing numbers of Vietnamese workers due to its comparatively lower entry requirements, including less demanding language proficiency standards. In Vietnam, the Department of Overseas Labour (DOLAB) under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) is responsible for administering outbound labour migration, including overseeing recruitment agencies and establishing the PDT curriculum.[144]

The governments of Vietnam and Japan signed an MOC regarding labour migration under the TITP in 2017.[145] Of the Vietnamese migrants working in Japan, TITP workers are most commonly employed in the food and beverage manufacturing (27.4 percent), followed by construction (19 percent), and machines and metal manufacturing (13.7 percent).[146] According to the MOC regarding migration under the SSW scheme concluded in 2019, Japan only admits those who migrate through an approved recruitment agency.[147] Among the Vietnamese SSW workers, the food and beverage manufacturing is also the most common employer (34.8 percent), followed by industrial machinery manufacturing (20.2 percent) and construction (19.3 percent).[148]

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140 "Vietnam Sends Over 53,100 workers Abroad in Five Months", *Vietnam Plus*, 3 June 2026, accessible at https://en.vietnamplus.vn/vietnam-sends-over-53100-workers-abroad-in-five-months-post343949.vnp.

141 Ibid.

142 Minh Nga, "Vietnamese Workers Abroad Send $7B Home Annually", *VnExpress*, 31 October, 2025, accessible at https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnamese-workers-abroad-send-7b-home-annually-4958305.html.

143 Ngoc Ngan, "Japan Scrambles to Keep Vietnamese Workers", *Vn Express*, 11 January 2026, accessible at https://e.vnexpress.net/news/business/companies/japan-scrambles-to-keep-vietnamese-workers-5003880.html.

144 DOLAB was previously under the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), but following a 2024 restructuring of government agencies, it has been placed under MOHA. See *Decision No. 119/QĐ-BNV of 1 March 2025* accessible at https://moha.gov.vn/tin-tuc/co-cau-to-chuc-cua-cuc-quan-ly-lao-dong-ngoai-nuoc--oid56940; and, "Ministries, State Agencies to Undergo Mergers in National Apparatus Overhaul", *Viet Nam News*, 1 December 2024, accessible at https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/1688137/ministries-state-agencies-to-undergo-mergers-in-national-apparatus-overhaul.html.

145 *The Memorandum of Cooperation on the Technical Intern Training Programme between the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan and the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs of Vietnam*, 2017, accessible at https://www.scribd.com/document/965469512/Vietnam-Japan-MoU-Labor-Export-for-International-Trade.

146 OTIT, "令和6年業務統計 [Annual Report 2024]", at n 125 above.

147 *Memorandum of Cooperation between the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare and the National Police Agency of Japan and the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs of Vietnam on a Basic Framework for Information Partnership for Proper Operation of the System Pertaining to Foreign Human Resources with the Status of Residence of "Specified Skilled Worker"*, 2019, accessible at https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/content/930004304.pdf.

148 Ministry of Justice, June 2025, "特定技能1号在留外国人数 [Statistics on Specified Skilled Workers (i)] ", and "特定技能2号在留外国人数 [Statistics on Specified Skilled Workers (i)]" at n 116 above.

As of June 2026, 454 recruitment agencies were licensed to deploy workers to Japan.[149] The Vietnam Association of Manpower Supply (VAMAS), the nationwide association of licensed private recruitment agencies, works towards ethical recruitment through promoting its own CoC, which was last revised in 2018.[150] A representative of VAMAS interviewed for this research explained that as of August 2026, the association had 135 members, but had plans to further expand membership.[151] They explained that the narrowing wage differential between Japan and Vietnam has prompted Vietnamese workers to consider the broader benefits of working in Japan beyond the opportunity to accumulate savings.[152] Consequently, recruitment agencies that rely solely on financial incentives and fail to provide adequate career guidance and development planning may encounter growing challenges in attracting prospective workers.[153]

## 3.2 Recruitment Fees and Related Costs for TITP workers and SSWs

### 3.2.1 Regulatory Frameworks

#### Cambodia

***Legal caps on recruitment fees and monitoring mechanisms***

In 2024, Cambodia established legal limits on recruitment fees. The ceilings, fixed at USD 5,000 for TITP placements and USD 3,500 for SSW placements, were developed through consultations and subsequently agreed by the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MLVT), trade unions, and recruitment agencies. According to information published on MLVT's mobile application, MLVT Services, through which 66 recruitment agencies disclose their recruitment fees, half of the agencies charge TITP workers the maximum permitted fee of USD 5,000, while the remainder charge between USD 3,000 and USD 4,950.[154] For SSW workers, approximately 30 percent of agencies charge USD 3,000, while the rest charge less than USD 2,500.[155]

Two mechanisms are in place to monitor the compliance of recruitment agencies with applicable regulations.[156] The first is a system of inspections conducted by the MLVT. Prior to an inspection, recruitment agencies are required to complete a self-assessment using an MLVT-provided checklist. Following submission of the self-assessment, an MLVT inspection team conducts on-

149 The list of approved recruitment agencies is periodically updated by the OTIT. See OTIT website, accessible in Japanese at https://www.otit.go.jp/upload/docs/260331_VNM.pdf.

150 For details see IOM, "VAMAS Launches Revised Code of Conduct to Promote Ethical Recruitment of Migrant Workers in Viet Nam", 24 April 2018, accessible at https://www.iom.int/news/vamas-launches-revised-code-conduct-promote-ethical-recruitment-migrant-workers-viet-nam .

151 MMN Key Informant Interview with a representative of VAMAS, 19 August 2026, Hanoi, Vietnam.

152 Ibid.

153 Ibid.

154 MLVT Services mobile application, recruitment fee disclosures by licensed recruitment agencies, accessed August 2026.

155 Ibid.

156 The information in this paragraph was obtained by the LSCW in the course of their work.




Training room used to demonstrate elderly care

Thinh Long Investment and Trading Group Joint Stock Company

Photo: MMN

site visits to verify the information provided and assess compliance. Where minor shortcomings or non-compliance issues are identified, inspectors typically provide recommendations and guidance to support corrective action. In cases of more serious violations, the MLVT may impose enforcement measures, including formal warnings and financial penalties.

The second mechanism consists of random interviews with outbound migrant workers conducted by the MLVT during PDOs. These interviews serve as an additional means of verifying compliance and identifying potential concerns related to recruitment practices. In parallel, the MLVT promotes transparency by encouraging recruitment agencies to disclose recruitment fee information through its mobile application. Workers who believe they have been charged excessive fees may raise concerns or submit complaints through the MLVT hotline, which is accessible both in Cambodia and from Japan.

***Guidance on fee instalments and availability of low-interest rate loans***

To reduce the upfront financial burden on prospective migrant workers, the MLVT has introduced two supplementary measures. The first requires recruitment agencies to collect recruitment fees in three stages prior to departure: 20 percent upon a worker's successful completion of the job interview process, 50 percent upon issuance of the Certificate of Eligibility for Japan, and the remaining balance one week before departure.[157]

The second measure concerns the provision of low-interest loans for prospective migrant workers. To facilitate access to affordable financing, the MLVT has entered into agreements with several banks to offer preferential loan products for migration-related expenses. Under these arrangements, prospective migrant workers may access loans at interest rates as low as 8 percent per annum.[158]

157 These arrangements have been agreed between the MLVT and ALMAC.

158 Ibid.

### *Industry initiatives*

Alongside government efforts, an industry-led initiative coordinated by ALMAC is promoting the progressive reduction of recruitment fees and migration-related costs borne by workers. Article 3.1 of ALMAC's CoC stipulates that recruitment fees and related costs should be charged only where they serve the interests of migrant workers and commits member agencies to work towards a "zero-fee to migrant workers" model.[159] To support implementation of the CoC, ALMAC has established a multi-stakeholder monitoring mechanism to assess member agencies' compliance. The monitoring committee comprises representatives from the MLVT, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, ALMAC, and LSCW.[160] Furthermore, although the number remains limited at present, interviews are conducted with workers to reflect their feedback in the monitoring process.[161]

ALMAC also encourages member agencies to adopt direct recruitment practices. In an interview, a representative of Kei Kei Cambodia Human Resource, a recruitment agency based in Phnom Penh, explained that the company recruits workers primarily from neighbouring provinces, enabling it to engage directly with local communities and avoid the use of brokers.[162] According to the representative, this close engagement helps ensure that prospective workers and their families have a clear understanding of the costs associated with migration. The representative further noted that the agency seeks to recruit only workers who can reasonably afford these costs, which, in its view, reduces the risk of excessive indebtedness and financial hardship after migration.[163]

## Myanmar

### *Legal cap on recruitment fees and monitoring mechanism*

As discussed in Chapter 2, Myanmar's Ministry of Labour has established legal caps on recruitment fees for migration to selected destination countries. For migration to Japan, the maximum recruitment fee is set at USD 2,800 under the TITP and USD 1,500 under the SSW scheme.[164] In addition, a fee cap of USD 1,600 applies to workers who change employers through a different recruitment agency after completing three years of employment in Japan, while a lower fee of USD 200 applies to workers who remigrate to their former employer through the same agency.[165] Under the MOC for SSWs, governing the SSW scheme, Myanmar workers are not required to use the services of a recruitment agency. In practice, however, most SSW migrants continue to do so, owing to a combination of practical, legal, and institutional factors.

159 See ALMAC, "Code of Conduct for Cambodian Private Recruitment Agencies", at n 129 above.

160 See MMN webpage, "Symposium on Migration to Japan: Learning from Returnees to Improve the Migration Experience", at n 7 above.

161 Ibid.

162 MMN Key Informant Interview with a representative of Kei Kei Cambodia Human Resource, 1 July 2026, Phom Penh.

163 Ibid.

164 See the Myanmar Ministry of Labour's Safe Migration Facebook post, "Updated Recruitment Service Fees by Destination Country", July, 2025, accessible from https://www.facebook.com/p/Safe-Migration-100079738492611/.

165 Ibid.



Vietnamese returnees report back on their group discussion, MMN Migrant Exchange Forum, 6 November 2025, Ha Tinh, Vietnam

## Vietnam

### *Legal cap on recruitment fees and monitoring mechanism*

In Vietnam, service fees, charged to migrant workers by recruitment agencies, are capped at a maximum of one month's salary for every 12 months of work, or three months' salary for contracts lasting 36 months, with further half-month salary charges for each subsequent year.[166] Other associated costs are set out in various legal instruments. Table 3.2 below provides a summary of the regulations on these costs. It should be noted that some of the regulations have recently shifted from a single nationwide pricing mechanism to economic-technical norms, or to approaches that reflect price gaps across the country based on actual local costs.

### Table 3.2: Regulation of Recruitment Fees and Associated Costs

| Costs | Regulations |
|---|---|
| **Service Fees** | Capped at one months' salary per year worked (Article 23 of Law 69) |
| **Travel Expenses** | TITP – Japanese employers are responsible for covering the cost of a single round-trip flight between Vietnam and Japan<br><br>SSW – Japanese employers are responsible for covering the cost of a flight from Vietnam to Japan. *(Circular No. 09/2026/TT-BNV, Appendix II)*[167] |

166 See *Law No.69/2020/QH14 on Vietnamese Workers Going to Workd Abroad Under Contract*, 2020, accessible at https://vanban.chinhphu.vn/default.aspx?pageid=27160&docid=202610.

167 See *Circular No. 09/2026/TT-BNV of the Ministry of Home Affairs: Amending and Supplementing a Number of Articles*

| | |
|---|---|
| **Fund for Overseas Employment Support** | A one-off contribution of VND100,000 (USD 3.8) is payable. *(Article 8, Decision No. 34/2025/QĐ-TTg).*[168] |
| **Skills and Language Training** | *Circular No. 09/2023/TT-BLĐTBXH* (Appendix V),[169] provides the economic-technical norms for Japanese language training including time allocation for theories/ practices/tests, but not actual fees. Separately, *Circular No. 09/2026/TT-BNV* stipulates the responsibilities of Japanese employers (Appendix II).[170]<br>TITP:<br>*For caregiving trainees: Japanese employers cover the full entrusted training cost for Japanese language training up to N4 level, with a minimum of JPY 100,000/ person.<br>*For trainees in other occupations: Japanese employers cover entrusted training costs at a minimum of JPY 15,000/person (160 periods).<br>SSW:<br>*Japanese employers shall cover training costs required on the Japan side, including at least JPY 50,000/person for language training and JPY 50,000/person for vocational skills training. |
| **Health Check** | No ceiling, however, the Ministry of Health regulates pricing methods and principles, while public hospitals determine specific fees within approved pricing limits. As operational costs and provincial pricing decisions vary, health examination fees differ by locality and hospital. |
| **Retirement and Survivorship Allowance Fund (Contribution to the Vietnam's Social Security)** | *Law No. 41/2024/QH15* (Law on Social Insurance 2024) stipulates as follows:[171]<br>*Monthly contribution rate: 22 percent of salary used as the basis for mandatory social insurance contributions to the retirement and survivorship fund;<br>*Workers may choose the salary basis, with a minimum equal to the reference level and a maximum of 20 times the reference level. (Current reference level: VND 2.34 million (88.9 USD)/month) |
| **Passport** | Passport issuance fee: VND 200,000 (USD 7.6).[172] |
| **Criminal Record Check** | Cost of obtaining a police clearance certificate: VND 200,000 (USD 7.6)[173] |
| **Visa** | Visa application fee for Japan: 1,030,000 VND (USD40)[174] |

*of Circular No. 21/2021/TT-BLDTBXH dated December 15, 2021 of the Minister of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs Detailing a Number of Articles of the Law on Vietnamese Workers Working Abroad Under Contracts,* 15 May 2026, accessible at https://vanban.chinhphu.vn/?pageid=27160&docid=218201&classid=1.

168 See *Decision No. 34/2025/QD-TTg of the Prime Minister: On the Overseas Employment Support Fund*, 15 September, 2025, accessible in Vietnamese at https://vanban.chinhphu.vn/?pageid=27160&docid=215367.

169 See *Circular No. 09/2023/TT-BLDTBXH Promulgating Economic-technical Norms on Foreign Language Training for Vietnamese Workers Working Abroad Under Contracts*, 29 September 2023, accessible in Vietnamese at https://congbao.chinhphu.vn/van-ban/thong-tu-so-09-2023-tt-bldtbxh-40241.htm.

170 See *Circular No. 09/2026/TT-BNV*, at n 167 above.

171 See *Law on Social Security (No. 41/2024/QH15)*, 2024, accessible at https://vanban.chinhphu.vn/?pageid=27160&docid=211199.

172 See *Circular 28/2026/TT-BTC Rates and Collection of Charges and Fees Related to Exit From, Entry Into, Transit Through and Residence in Vietnam*, 2026 accessible at https://english.luatvietnam.vn/circular-no-28-2026-tt-btc-dated-march-27-2026-of-the-ministry-of-finance-providing-the-rates-and-the-collection-and-remittance-of-charges-and-fees-430424-doc1.html.

173 See *Circular No. 16/2025/TT-BTC: Regulations on Collection Rates, Fee Collection Regimes, Payment, Management, and Use of Fees for Providing Judicial Record Information*, 2025, accessible at https://english.luatvietnam.vn/thue/circular-16-2025-tt-btc-charges-for-providing-information-on-judicial-records-398599-d1.html.

174 See webpage of the Japanese Embassy in Vietnam, "Visa Application Fee for Japan: 1,030,000 VND (For Applications Processed from 1 April 2026, to 31 March 2027)", accessible at https://www.vn.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_ja/VN_VisaFee.html.

At the time of writing, *Law No. 69 on Vietnamese Workers Going to Work Abroad under Contract (Law No. 69)*, was under review so that amendments can be made to modernise management systems, enhance transparency, and improve the effectiveness of oversight.[175] Specifically, proposed amendments include the decentralisation of management, the advancement of digital transformation and the addition of a definition of "direct recruitment" to provide a clearer legal basis for inspection and enforcement.[176] Furthermore, DOLAB plans to negotiate with the respective destination countries to share recruitment and training costs, thereby moving toward an employer-pay model.[177]

With regard to monitoring, recruitment agencies are required to submit weekly reports on the amount of money they collect from workers, as well as a breakdown of fees charged.[178] Furthermore, regular and unannounced inspections are conducted, to assess the agencies legal status, relevant contracts, financial transactions, worker recruitment, PDT and other matters.[179] More recently, the *Law on Inspection 2025* specifies methods of inspections including direct visits, and online and remote inspection of electronic data.[180]

In 2026, DOLAB publicly announced several administrative sanctions against overseas employment service companies on its website. The reported violations included breaches of worker contract requirements, the charging of excessive service fees, and failures to comply with pre-departure obligations. According to MOHA, DOLAB imposed seven administrative sanctions during the first six months of 2026, resulting in total fines of VND 635 million.[181] During the same period, DOLAB received and processed 43 complaints, petitions, and reports relating to overseas labour activities, including matters involving both licensed and unlicensed agencies.[182]

### *DOLAB-JICA platform for job vacancies*

To address concerns regarding the involvement of intermediaries in overseas recruitment, DOLAB and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) launched an online platform in

175 See "Draft Explanatory Memorandum for the Law Amending and Supplementing a Number of Articles of Law 69", accessible in Vietnamese at https://moha.gov.vn//Upload/e36b26c0-29da-4af1-916a-a57298d332f901.%20DU%20THAO%20TO%20TRINH%2004.6.2026.pdf.

176 Ibid.

177 See *Prime Minister's Decision No. 1511/QĐ-TTg, Approving Vietnam's 2026–2035 Plan for Implementing the UN Global Compact for Migration (GCM), replacing Decision No. 402/QĐ-TTg dated 20 March 2020*, 8 August 2026, accessible in Vietnamese at https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Quyen-dan-su/Quyet-dinh-1511-QD-TTg-2026-trien-khai-Thoa-thuan-toan-cau-ve-Di-cu-hop-phap-cua-Lien-hop-quoc-718805.aspx

178 See MMN, "Navigating Social Security Systems", p. 73, at n 82 above.

179 See *Document No. 2424/LĐTBXH-QLLĐNN, Guidelines for Inspection and Audit of Activities related to Sending Vietnamese Workers to Work abroad for a Limited Period*, 2000, accessible in Vietnamese at https://thuvienphapluat.vn/cong-van/Van-hoa-Xa-hoi/Cong-van-2424-LDTBXH-QLLDNN-huong-dan-cong-tac-kiem-tra-thanh-tra-hoat-dong-dua-lao-dong-Viet-Nam-di-lam-viec-co-thoi-han-o-nuoc-ngoai-46756.aspx?dll=true.

180 See *Law on Inspection 2025*, accessible in Vietnamese at https://english.luatvietnam.vn/law-no-84-2025-qh15-on-inspection-dated-june-25-2025-of-the-national-assembly-404441-doc1.html.

181 See MOHA webpage, "Summary of the Work on Sending Vietnamese Workers Abroad Under Contract in 2026", 19 June 2026, accessible in Vietnamese at https://moha.gov.vn/tin-tuc/so-ket-cong-tac-dua-nguoi-lao-dong-viet-nam-di-lam-viec-o-nuoc-ngoai-theo-hop-dong-nam-2026---id19518.

182 Ibid.

July 2025 that enables prospective migrants to access job opportunities directly, without relying on brokers. By January 2026, the platform had attracted more than 8,000 registered users and listed approximately 1,400 job vacancies.[183]

### *Financial support schemes for prospective migrants*

To facilitate overseas employment opportunities for Vietnamese workers, the government has introduced several measures aimed at reducing the financial costs associated with labour migration. First, under recent legislation, eligible migrant workers may receive support for PDT fees, meals and accommodation during training, and domestic travel expenses incurred when travelling from their place of residence to training centres, among other forms of assistance.[184] Beneficiaries include ethnic minorities, members of low-income households, and individuals who have completed military service. Second, prospective migrant workers may access a preferential loan scheme, which offers loans at an annual interest rate of a little under 8 percent, or 6.24 percent for ethnic minorities and low-income households in designated areas.[185]

A recruitment agency in Hanoi interviewed by MMN for this study reported that a significant proportion of its clients are recruited from three provinces where ethnic minority candidates are eligible for low-interest loans.[186] The agency's representative explained that these loans cover migration-related expenses, including service fees, medical examination costs, passport fees, and other associated charges, enabling prospective migrants to undertake overseas employment without substantial upfront financial outlays.[187] Loans of up to VND 100 million (approximately USD 3,800) can be obtained without collateral or a guarantor. According to the agency, migrants typically begin repayments after deployment, making instalments every six months. Each repayment generally amounts to approximately VND 15-16 million (USD 570-610), while average monthly earnings are around VND 20 million (USD 770).[188] As a result, the repayment burden is relatively modest, requiring migrants to set aside less than one month's salary over a six-month period. The agency therefore considered access to preferential loans to be an important factor in reducing financial barriers to overseas employment and limiting financial pressure on migrant workers.[189]

183 Kenichi Shihido, "移住労働者の高額な費用負担の軽減にむけて [Reducing the recruitment fees borne by migrant workers]", Asia-Pacific Human Rights Information Centre Newsletter, March 2026, accessible in Japanese at https://www.hurights.or.jp/archives/newsletter/section4/2026/03/post-202050.html.

184 For details see Chapter VI of *Decree No. 338/2025/NĐ-CP* dated 25 December 2025 Guiding the Employment Law on Employment Support Policies, accessible in Vietnamese at https://vanban.chinhphu.vn/?pageid=27160&docid=216288.

185 Detailed provisions on loan amounts, collateral requirements, loan terms, interest rates, loan application dossiers, and lending procedures are provided under Chapter III of Decree No. 338/2025/NĐ-CP Ibid. According to the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies, as of September 2025, there were 22,066 migrant borrowers. See Nhân Dân, "Policy Credit for Workers Going to Work Abroad Under Contract.", 3 November 2025, accessible at https://nhandan.vn/tin-dung-chinh-sach-cho-lao-dong-di-lam-viec-o-nuoc-ngoai-theo-hop-dong-post920185.html.

186 MMN Key Informant Interview with a representative of Thinh Long Investment and Trading Group Joint Stock Company, 14 August 2026, Hanoi, Vietnam.

187 Ibid.

188 Ibid.

189 Ibid.

### *Industry initiatives*

VAMAS has developed a comprehensive CoC, and accompanying monitoring mechanism.[190] With respect to recruitment fees, Article 4 of the CoC requires recruitment agencies to provide workers with full disclosure of all relevant costs and information, and to issue receipts for all payments received.[191] To enhance transparency and reduce recruitment costs, member agencies are required to recruit workers directly.[192] Where partnerships are necessary, agencies are encouraged to work with local authorities, vocational schools, and Employment Service Centres (ESCs), rather than relying on labour brokers.[193]

## Japan

### *Capping recruitment fees under the ESD scheme*

High migration costs and limited transparency in fee structures have long been concerns in labour migration to Japan. To address these issues, the new ESD scheme, scheduled to begin in 2027, introduces a legal cap on recruitment fees for the first time. Under the scheme, recruitment fees, including any payments made by migrant workers or their family members to recruitment agencies or their agents during the recruitment process, must not exceed the equivalent of two months' salary in Japan.[194] Any amount above this limit must be covered by the Japanese employer.[195] Employers will also be required to disclose the total recruitment fees paid by migrant workers when submitting training plan applications.[196] If fees are later found to have exceeded the legal ceiling, the training programme will be cancelled, the company's name will be publicly disclosed, and the employer will be barred from recruiting migrant workers for five years.[197] While the effectiveness of these measures remains to be seen, they represent a significant step towards improving transparency and reducing financial burdens on migrant workers.

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190 See VAMAS, "Code of Conduct" 2018, accessible at https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-hanoi/documents/projectdocumentation/wcms_626512.pdf.

191 Ibid. Article 4. 4. 6.

192 Information drawn from the VAMAS's presentation at the MMN symposium on Migration to Japan: Learning from Returnees to Improve the Migration Experience, Phnom Penh, 2-3 July 2026.

193 Ibid.

194 See Immigration Service Agency, "育成就労制度運用要領 [The Operational Guidelines for the Employment for Skill Development Programme]", August 2026, Chapter 4, pp. 118-119, and "育成就労計画認定申請書 [Training plan application form]", accessible in Japanese at https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/applications/nyuukokukanri07_00002.html.

195 See Immigration Service Agency, "外国人の育成就労の適正な実施及び育成就労外国人の保護に関する法律施行規則 [Operational Regulations for the Proper Implementation of Employment for Skill Development and the Protection of Migrant Workers in Skill Development Employment]", 30 September 2025, art 21, and "The Guideline for the Employment for Skill Development Programme", Chapter 4, p. 119, accessible in Japanese at https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/content/001449371.pdf.

196 See Immigration Service Agency "The Operational Regulations for the Proper Implementation of Employment for Skill Development and the Protection of Migrant Workers in Skill Development Employment", Chapter 2, Section 1, Article 8-14, at n.194 above.

197 See Immigration Service Agency, "The Operational Guideline for the Employment for Skill Development Programme", Chapter 4, p. 239, at n. 194 above.

To prepare for life in Japan, prospective migrant workers learn basic cooking and cleaning skills during pre-departure training.

Kei Kei Cambodia Human Resource, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Photo: MMN





### *Policy measures to expand the recruitment of migrant care workers*

Japan's elderly care sector faces a severe labour shortage, with an estimated 570,000 additional care workers needed by 2040.[198] To attract workers, the government has introduced measures to improve working conditions, strengthen training, and expand the recruitment of migrant care workers.[199] The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare has also launched various initiatives to support care facilities in recruiting and integrating migrant workers. The main programmes are outlined below.

*Subsidy for provincial governments to facilitate job matching*[200]

A subsidy is provided to support provincial governments in facilitating job matching between elderly care facilities and foreign students in Japan, as well as prospective SSW candidates in countries of origin.

*Subsidy for elderly care facilities to cover costs related to employing migrant care workers*

National and provincial governments provide subsidies to elderly care facilities to cover language training fees, preparatory lessons for national examinations, accommodation costs, and expenses for purchasing furniture and electrical appliances.[201]

198 See Ministry of Health, Welfare and Labour, "第9期介護保険事業計画に基づく介護職員の必要数について [Estimation of elderly care workforce needs under the 9th Long-Term Care Insurance Service Plan 2024-2026]", accessible in Japanese at https://www.mhlw.go.jp/content/12004000/001274765.pdf.

199 Ibid.

200 See Ministry of Health, Welfare and Labour, "外国人介護人材の受入れの現状と今後の方向性について [Current status and future outlook for the recruitment of foreign care workers]", March 2025, p. 29, accessible in Japanese at https://www.mhlw.go.jp/content/12000000/001478533.pdf.

201 Detailed information on available subsidies in each prefecture can be found on the webpage of Japan JICWELS, "都道府県からのご案内(2025年度 [Support programme implemented by prefectural governments for migrant care workers and care facilities 2025]", available in Japanese at https://jicwels.or.jp/fcw/?page_id=20436.

Additionally, there are online guidebooks in 11 languages and on-site/online seminars to promote accurate information on the working life of migrant care workers in Japan.[202] For migrants to prepare for their examinations for certified care worker status, a range of online materials are available free of charge. Textbooks for the SSW care-work examination are produced in 14 languages.[203] Furthermore, to ensure the smooth settlement of migrant care workers in Japan, capacity building seminars for elderly care facility staff on the recruitment and training of migrant care workers are conducted,[204] and a nationwide free consultation service is run by Japan International Corporation of Welfare Services (JICWELS) in 11 languages.[205] JICWELS also organises sharing sessions for migrant care workers across Japan.[206]

Besides the Ministry's efforts, prefectural governments have recently begun introducing initiatives to support local industries to recruit migrant workers, including in the elderly care sector. Examples of such initiatives are listed in Table 3.3.

**Table 3.3: Examples of Prefectural Government Support Initiatives for Elderly Care Facilities to Employ Migrant Care Workers**[207]

| **1. Establishing one-stop centres for the employment of migrant care workers** |
|---|
| *Common roles of one-stop centres:<br>Consultation for migrant care workers via phone, LINE and/or Facebook; care worker certification exam preparation course; on-site consultation visits to care facilities; survey. |
| **2. Subsidy for training fees** |
| Subsidies are provided to elderly care facilities that employ migrant care workers, not to the workers themselves.<br>*PDT on nursing care skills and Japanese language with a subsidy rate of up to half the fees (Nagano prefecture)<br>*Post-arrival Japanese language training fees and nursing skill training fees for SSW care workers, with a subsidy rate of up to half the fees (Tokyo)<br>*Course fees for migrant worker studying at elderly care training facilities<br>JPY 50,000 per worker, per month for course fees; JPY200,000 per worker for admission fee; preparatory study fee for the national examination for certified care workers. (Tokyo) |

202 See webpage of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Labour, "外国人介護人材の受入れについて[Recruitment of migrant care workers]", accessible in Japanese at https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/newpage_28131.html.

203 Ibid.

204 Ministry of Health, Welfare and Labour, "外国人介護人材の受入れの現状と今後の方向性について[Current status and future outlook for the recruitment of foreign care workers]", pp. 30-32 above; The webpage of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Labour, "外国人介護人材の受入れについて[Recruitment of migrant care workers]", above.

205 The information on the hotline is available at https://jicwels.or.jp/fcw/?page_id=85.

206 The webpage of JICWELS, accessible at https://jicwels.or.jp/fcw/?page_id=15731.

207 Information is taken from NTT DATA 経営研究所[NTT DATA Research Institute], "海外現地と自治体等の連携による外国人介護人材確保策に係る調査研究事業[Research project on securing migrant care workers through collaboration between local governments and overseas counterparts]", March 2025, accessible in Japanese at https://www.nttdata-strategy.com/services/lifevalue/docs/r06_add3_01jigyohokokusho.pdf, and JICWELS, "都道府県からのご案内(2025年度)[Support Programme Implemented by Prefectural Governments for Migrant Care Workers and Care Facilities 2025]", above. Additionally, detailed information specific to prefectures are taken from Yamagata prefecture, accessible in Japanese at https://www.pref.yamagata.jp/090002/kenfuku/koreisha/jigyosha/gaikokujin_center.html; Nagano prefecture, accessible in Japanese at https://www.pref.nagano.lg.jp/kaigo-shien/jinzai/gaikokuzinhounitimae.htm; Tokyo, accessible in Japanese at https://www.fukushi.metro.tokyo.lg.jp/documents/d/fukushi/2025-06-23-093638-672; Kanagawa prefecture, accessible in Japanese at https://www.pref.kanagawa.jp/docs/n7j/cnt/f535601/gaikokujinkaigo.html.

| 3. Subsidy for enhanced communication at elderly care facilities (Kanagawa prefecture) |
|---|
| *Online meetings before departure |
| *Producing manuals in migrants' languages |
| *Introducing translation machines |
| *Training for Japanese workers to gain a deeper understanding of other cultures |
| **4. Support for migrant care workers to live in Japan** |
| *Subsidy for housing and for furniture/electronic appliances |
| *Mental health care services (Kanagawa prefecture) |
| *Cultural exchange programme (Kanagawa prefecture) |
| **5. Recruitment of migrant care workers** |
| *Chiba prefecture concluded an MOU with MOLISA, Vietnam, and directly work with Japanese language schools in Vietnam to assist Vietnamese students to study nursing care work in Chiba. |
| *Shiga prefecture has established the International Nursing and Care Workforce Center, which supports recruitment in countries of origin and facilitates job matching for students, TITP workers and SSWs. |
| *Fukui prefecture works with high schools and a foundation in Thailand to support Thai students to come to work in Fukui. PDT is outsourced by the prefecture. Additionally, the prefecture supports job transfers to help ensure that migrant care workers remain within the region rather than relocating to major urban areas. |

## 3.2.2 Observations and Gaps

### Cambodia

Many Cambodian workers take out loans to cover their migration costs and spend years repaying them. Returnees shared with MMN that they were unable to complete repayment while working in Japan and continued to pay back their loans even after returning to Cambodia.[208] According to a survey conducted by Japan's Immigration Services Agency in 2022, 80 percent of respondents from Cambodia took out loans to cover their costs, believing it would take two or more years to pay off their debts.[209]

One TITP returnee shared with MMN that they paid USD 4,700 in recruitment fees, while an SSW returnee said they paid USD 2,500.[210] In both cases, the amounts were below the legal ceiling chargeable by recruitment agencies. However, a common concern raised by both workers was the lack of transparency regarding the composition of these fees. Although the recruitment agencies explained that the charges were related to documentation and processing costs, neither worker received a detailed breakdown of the individual fee components. Migrant workers are not consistently provided with such breakdowns, even though recruitment agencies are required to specify their fees and explain them clearly to migrant workers in accordance with *the Directive on Recruiting, Training, Sending and Managing Technical Intern Trainees and Specified Skilled Workers to work in Japan*, issued in 2019.

208 See the MMN webpage, "Migrant Exchange Forums with Cambodian and Vietnamese Migrant Workers Deployed to Japan", accessible at https://mekongmigration.org/?p=24674.

209 See Immigration Service Agency, "技能実習生の支払い費用に関する実態調査の結果について」(Result of the survey concerning recruitment fees paid by trainees", July 2022, accessible in Japanese at https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/content/001377469.pdf

210 Follow up interviews were conducted in August 2026 with two returnee participants of the MMN Migrant Exchange Forum.

The above TITP returnee financed their recruitment fees through a bank loan, while the SSW returnee borrowed the money from a relative. These cases suggest that compliance with legal fee ceilings does not necessarily mean that recruitment fees are affordable or reasonable, particularly when workers must incur debt to pay them.

As mentioned earlier, monitoring mechanisms consist of self-assessments conducted by recruitment agencies and onsite inspections by the MLVT. However, their practical effectiveness has been questioned, as serious violations and the imposition of strict sanctions are rarely reported. One potential gap is the absence of a systematic mechanism for independently verifying the information reported by recruitment agencies. For example, the MLVT could conduct random or sample-based follow-up calls or interviews with workers after deployment to verify whether the actual fees and costs paid by workers correspond to the amounts reported by recruitment agencies. Such worker-level verification could help identify unauthorised additional charges and other discrepancies.

While low-interest loans to cover migration cost were recently introduced, in reality this financing option is inaccessible to many prospective migrants.[211] Many rural families already carry significant debt, which disqualifies them from accessing such loans.[212] In Cambodia, microfinance has been widespread in rural areas, and the heavy reliance on microfinance has deepened financial insecurity rather than alleviating it.[213]

### Myanmar

According to the Immigration Services Agency, around half of all their survey respondents from Myanmar took out loans, and around 40 percent of them thought it would take two years or more to pay off.[214] Furthermore, 36 percent of the total number of respondents from Myanmar did not know the breakdown of the fees paid to their recruitment agencies.

As mentioned in Section 3.1, the MOC on SSW does not oblige migrant workers to use the services of recruitment agencies. However, in practice, a large proportion of migrants from Myanmar rely on recruitment agencies to facilitate their training, job matching, and administrative procedures. Consequently, previous MMN research found that Myanmar SSWs typically pay recruitment agencies amounts comparable to those paid by TITP workers.[215]

In December 2025, a high-profile case emerged in which the director of a licensed recruitment agency was arrested after allegedly collecting nearly MMK 20 million per person from

211 As pointed out by a CSO representative at the MMN Migrant Exchange Forum, Phnom Penh, 9-10 November 2025.

212 Ibid.

213 For further information see Bylandar Maryann, "The Trade-offs of Legal Status: Safe Migration, Documentation, and Debt in Southeast Asia", University of Hawai'i Press, 2024.

214 Immigration Service Agency, Ministry of Justice, "「技能実習生の支払い費用に関する実態調査の結果について」(Result of the survey concerning recruitment fees paid by trainees), at n 209 above.

215 See MMN, "Navigating Social Security Systems", p. 71, at n 82 above. One TITP worker interviewed by MMN reported paying around USD 2,780 in recruitment fees and document processing, while two SSWs reported paying around USD 2,100 to recruitment agencies for processing their visa. All of them separately paid for training, health check-ups, passport applications, and also living costs during trainings.

approximately 700 migrant workers by falsely promising employment opportunities in Japan.[216] However, the victims were instead taken to Thailand and subsequently abandoned. Although the agency's license was revoked, the victims have yet to be compensated for the expenses they incurred. In this case, as many as 700 migrants were involved, prompting the authorities to investigate the matter and impose strict sanctions. However, in cases involving only a small number of migrants, such misconduct may go undetected.

### Vietnam

Vietnam has long been recognised as one of the countries of origin where migrant workers pay the highest recruitment fees and related costs. According to an IOM report, the amount reached as high as USD 13,300 for migration to Japan before 2016.[217] Following the implementation of *Law No. 69*, since January 2022 the amount has gradually declined, with some agencies reportedly charging as little as USD 2, 000 to USD 3,500.[218] A 2025 survey by the National Statistics Office (NSO) revealed that on average USD 5,420 was paid in recruitment fees. [219] Stricter enforcement of the recruitment fee cap under *Law No. 69* has compelled many agencies to reduce their charges. In addition, declining interest among Vietnamese workers in employment opportunities in Japan has further contributed to downward pressure on recruitment fees.

While this trend is welcomed, fundamental issues remain. At a recent MMN forum, it emerged that the fees paid by returnees varied widely, ranging from 3,600 USD to more than 8,400 USD. Some participants said that it took them between 1.5 and 2 years to repay the loans they had taken. According to the NSO survey cited above, 53.8 per cent of Vietnamese migrants to Japan relied on borrowing to cover migration-related costs, with the average amount borrowed VND 113 million (USD 4,370).[220] Seven percent of returned migrants participated in the survey remained indebted. [221] The following sentiments were shared by Vietnamese migrants with MMN by during a recent migrant exchange forum.[222]

A group of Vietnamese migrant returnees said that one of the hardest parts of working in Japan was having to repay recruitment debts. They said it took them between one and half and two years to pay them off, while their contracts lasted just three years. A female Vietnamese

216 See *Democratic Voice of Burma*, "ဂျပန်ပို့မည်ဆိုပြီးငွေလိမ်လည်သည့် အဂျင်စီ တာဝန်ရှိသူကို ဖမ်းဆီးစစ်ဆေးနေ [Agency Official Detained and Interrogated for Japan Employment Scam]", 17 December 2025, accessible in Burmese at https://burmese.dvb.no/post/737871.

217 IOM, "Vulnerabilities and Risks of Exploitation Encountered by Vietnamese Migrant Workers: A Qualitative Study of Returnees' Labour Migration Experiences", 2021, pp. 17–18, accessible at https://mbhr.iom.int/en/resources/research/vulnerabilities-and-risks-exploitation-encountered-vietnamese-migrant-workers.

218 Trung Nam, "XUẤT KHẨU LAO ĐỘNG: Đừng để mức phí cản trở [Labor Export: Don't let fees be a barrier.])", 21 May 2025, accessible in Vietnamese at https://tuoitre.vn/nld/xuat-khau-lao-dong-dung-de-muc-phi-can-tro-196250520211627495.htm.

219 National Statistics Office, Vietnam, "IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS REPORT of costs borne by Vietnamese workers employed abroad: statistical sustainable development goal indicator 10.7.1", August 2026, p.39. accessible at https://www.nso.gov.vn/wp-content/uploads/2026/09/In-depth-analysis-report-of-costs-borne-by-Vietnamese-workers-for-employment-abroad.pdf.

220 National Statistics Office, Vietnam, "In-dept Analysis Report of Costs Borne by Vietnamese Workers Employed Abroad: statistical sustainable development goal indicator 10.7.1", August 2026, p.76, above.

221 Ibid., p.77.

222 These views were shared during an MMN Migrant Exchange Forum in November 2025. For details, see MMN webpage, "Migrant Exchange Forums with Cambodian and Vietnamese Migrant Workers Deployed to Japan", at n 208 above.

returnee said that she expected to save a significant amount after three years working in Japan. Instead, almost one year's income went towards repaying her recruitment debts. She lamented, "I had hoped to return home with enough money to start my own business, but I brought back much less than I had expected".[223] A male returnee who participated in the forum said that in addition to the USD 6,500 paid in recruitment fees, during PDT he had to cover food and living expenses in Hanoi. He said, "in the end, I spent nearly USD 8,000 in total. I had to carefully calculate every expense. It was very stressful because everything was so uncertain".[224]

Drawing on its long-standing engagement with migrant workers, CDI has consistently observed that high recruitment fees can significantly undermine the benefits of labour migration. Key consequences include debt-related stress, reduced savings, increased risks of irregular migration, weakened bargaining power, heightened vulnerability to exploitation, and a diminished return on migrants' investment in overseas employment.[225] However, CDI also observed that migration often benefited workers in terms of language acquisition, cultural experiences, skills development, and broader personal growth, but only when they are free from debt pressures.[226]

The persistence of such debt suggests that, despite recent reforms and efforts to regulate recruitment costs, important implementation challenges remain. Although reporting and inspection mechanisms are in place, DOLAB faces difficulties in monitoring all recruitment-related transactions, particularly where agencies collect payments without issuing invoices.[227] These enforcement gaps can make it difficult to detect and address overcharging practices. Another key challenge is the continued involvement of informal brokers. According to VAMAS, recruitment agencies often rely on brokers to quickly source workers and meet recruitment deadlines, particularly because DOLAB approval procedures can delay recruitment.[228] The involvement of such intermediaries can reduce transparency and create additional opportunities for unofficial fees to be charged to prospective migrants. However, direct recruitment also presents challenges, as workers often place greater trust in informal brokers, while recruitment at the commune level typically requires administrative approvals that can slow the process. In addition, local training centres, which serve as a major source of recruits for agencies, frequently charge a range of fees and exert considerable influence over labour supply despite the lack of standardised training requirements.

## Japan

### *Concerns regarding the newly introduced cap on recruitment fees*

The introduction of a legal ceiling on recruitment fees and related costs has been widely welcomed; however, concerns remain regarding its feasibility. First, the ceiling of "equivalent to two months' salary" may be reasonable for some countries of origin but not for others. For

223 Ibid.

224 Interviewed by CDI in 2023.

225 Information drawn from the CDI's presentation at the MMN symposium on Migration to Japan: Learning from Returnees to Improve the Migration Experience, Phnom Penh, 2-3 July 2026.

226 Ibid.

227 See MMN, "Navigating Social Security Systems", p. 73, at n 82 above.

228 MMN Key Informant Interview with a representative of VAMAS, 19 August 2026, Hanoi, Vietnam.




Medical supplies used to train migrant elderly care workers

Thinh Long Investment and Trading Group Joint Stock Company

Photo: MMN

example, the Philippines prohibits fees for migration to Japan, and allowing agencies to charge fees equivalent to two months' salary might be interpreted as undermining their efforts to promote the zero-fee model. In Cambodia, by contrast, the current ceiling is more than the "two months' salary" benchmark. It is likely that many agencies will struggle to sustain their business if restricted to the lower amount. Japan's unilateral decision on pre-departure costs may have various unforeseen consequences.

Second, even though Japanese law requires employers to cover any excess amounts, it remains difficult to monitor agencies attempts at double-charging both employers and workers. Establishing a cross-border monitoring mechanism is therefore essential, and agencies should be further required to disclose information related to fees. As a key informant interviewed for this study noted, "the introduction of a new legal fee cap must be widely communicated and made visible to both recruitment agencies and migrant workers, so that they are aware that stakeholders in destination countries are closely monitoring recruitment practices in countries of origin".[229]

### *Impact of policy measures to expand the recruitment of migrant care workers*

Unfortunately, very little publicly available data is available on the proportion of Japanese care facilities that cover migrant workers' recruitment fees and other pre-departure costs. However, a number of existing support schemes indicate that many care facilities incur significant recruitment-related costs, with the assistance of subsidies from the national/prefectural

229 MMN Key Informant Interview with a representative of ILO, 22 June, 2026, online.

governments. In addition to the gradual reduction in the amount of fees borne by workers, it is likely that there is greater cost transparency alongside an increase in the share of costs shouldered by employers.

The elderly care sector differs from many other industries that employ migrant workers in that it has an established professional qualification system and career pathway, which are uncommon in most sectors relying on migrant labour. Migrant care workers are eligible to take the Certified Care Worker examination, and those who obtain the qualification can renew their "Care Worker" residence status indefinitely. In the long term, they may also become eligible to apply for permanent residency. Furthermore, given the public welfare nature of elderly care services, both the national and prefectural governments are able to allocate budgets to support the recruitment, employment, and retention of migrant workers, a level of public support that is uncommon in most other sectors. Systematic data collection and evaluation of the impacts of these policy measures are therefore needed. The findings of which could provide valuable lessons for the development of migrant worker policies in other industries.

### 3.2.3 Good Practices for Easing the Financial Burdens on Migrants

Despite the challenges outlined above, a number of promising initiatives have emerged to reduce the financial costs borne by migrant workers and promote fairer recruitment practices. These initiatives demonstrate that lowering migration-related expenses is achievable through effective collaboration among governments, recruitment agencies, employers, and other stakeholders. This section highlights three examples that illustrate different approaches to this objective. The first is a partnership between Vietnam's Centre for Overseas Labour (COLAB) and a Japanese supervising organisation to train and deploy elderly care workers while reducing workers' upfront costs. The second is the Fair and Ethical Recruitment Initiative (FERI), established by stakeholders in Japan, which has developed a practical mechanism for implementing the zero-recruitment-fee model. The third example is a Myanmar recruitment agency that has proactively engaged Japanese employers across a range of industries to cover all or part of workers' pre-departure expenses. In promoting this cost-sharing model, the agency emphasises not only its benefits for workers but also the business advantages it offers employers, including improved recruitment outcomes and worker retention.

#### COLAB-Osaka Medical Care Association Partnership

Since 2019, Vietnam's COLAB, under Vietnam's Ministry of Home Affairs, has collaborated with the Osaka Medical Care Association to train and deploy Vietnamese elderly care workers to Japan.[230] The programme provides a structured pathway for prospective migrants to acquire both professional caregiving skills and Japanese language proficiency while reducing the financial barriers typically associated with overseas employment. Participants undertake a ten-month intensive training programme at the Vietnam Industrial and Trade College in Hanoi, comprising nursing care training and Japanese language study. Upon completion, successful

230 The information in this section is drawn from the Application Guideline 2025 on the webpage of COLAB, accessible in Vietnamese at https://colab.moha.gov.vn/tin-tuc/4185/Tuyen-sinh-tham-gia-Chuong-trinh-thuc-tap-sinh-ho-ly-Nhat-Ban-nam-2025.aspx.

candidates are deployed to Japan under the TITP for a three-year placement at facilities affiliated with the Osaka Medical Care Association. In 2025, the programme recruited 30 participants.[231]

A notable feature of the programme is the extent to which costs are shared with, or covered by, the Japanese partner organisation. The Osaka Medical Care Association covers Japanese language tuition fees, health examination costs, language examination fees, visa application fees, and international airfare to Japan. Participants are responsible only for the nursing training fee, which is approximately USD 76 per month, as well as their living expenses during the training period in Vietnam.[232] The programme also provides incentives aimed at supporting workers' longer-term career development and reintegration. Upon successful completion of the three-year placement, participants receive return airfare support and a reintegration grant of JPY 200,000.[233] In addition, workers who wish to further their professional qualifications may continue their studies towards a college-level nursing qualification at the Vietnam Industrial and Trade College.

This partnership demonstrates how collaboration between public institutions in countries of origin and destination can significantly reduce migrants' upfront costs while enhancing their skills and employment prospects. By shifting a substantial share of pre-departure expenses away from workers, the programme offers a practical example of how overseas employment opportunities can be made more accessible without compromising the quality of training or recruitment outcomes.

### FERI (Japan-Vietnam)

FERI is a unique effort to promote fair recruitment established under the Japan Platform for Migrant Workers towards a Responsible and Inclusive Society (JP-MIRAI).[234] Founded in 2020, JP-MIRAI brings together businesses, lawyers, academics, CSOs, and local governments who are committed to improving the situation of migrant workers in Japan. In July 2023, DOLAB, VAMAS, JICA, the ILO, and JP-MIRAI agreed to collaborate on advancing the zero-recruitment-fee model through FERI. The initiative encourages employers to assume the recruitment-related costs borne by migrant workers. FERI supports participating employers through technical guidance and practical tools for implementing employer-pay recruitment models. Employers that meet FERI's standards are recognised through a certification system. By creating a common framework and offering public recognition, the initiative seeks to encourage wider adoption of recruitment practices that eliminate or substantially reduce the financial burden on workers.

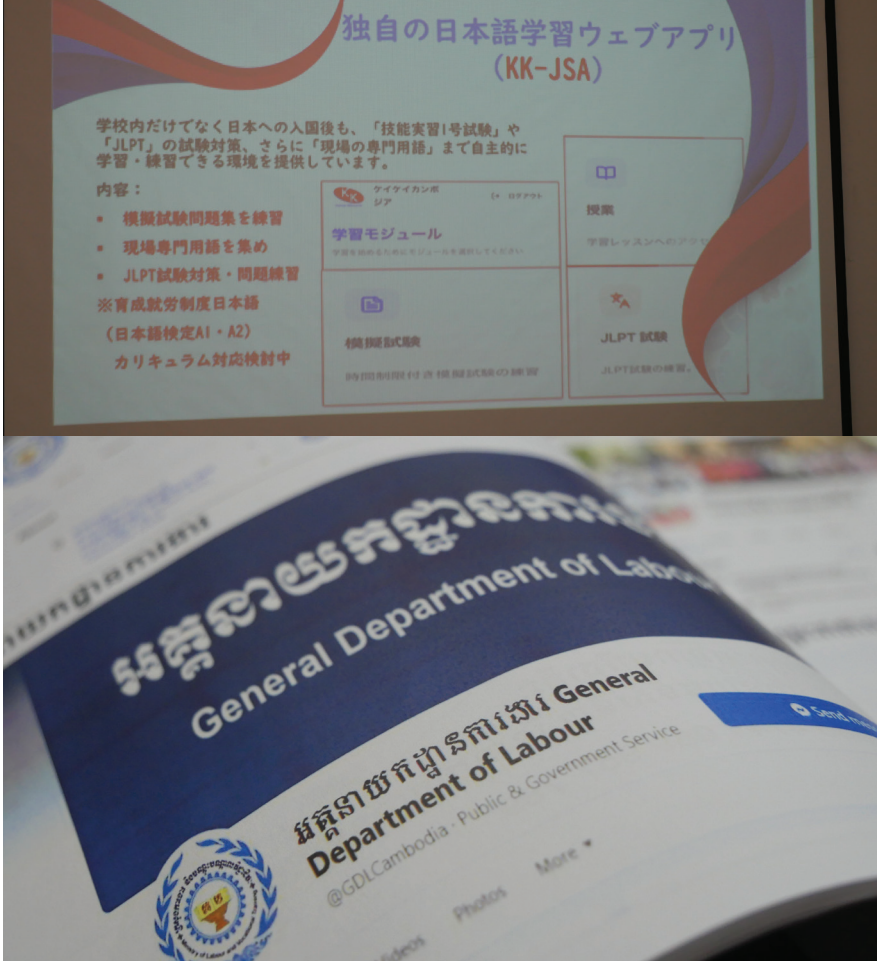
Early experience suggests that such approaches can also generate benefits for employers. According to JP-MIRAI, a FERI-registered recruitment agency in Nepal experienced a tenfold increase in applications after adopting the model. The larger applicant pool enabled the participating Japanese employer to recruit more competitive candidates, including workers with stronger Japanese language skills.

231 Ibid.

232 Ibid.

233 Ibid.

234 See The webpage of JP-MIRAI, accessible at https://jp-mirai.org/?lang=en. Information in this subsection was drawn from the presentation by the JP-MIRAI at the MMN symposium on Migration to Japan: Learning from Returnees to Improve the Migration Experience, Phnom Penh, 2-3 July 2026.




The original web-based application for studying Japanese and the text books used to teach prospective migrants about the laws and regulations relevant to working and living in Japan.

Kei Kei Cambodia Human Resource, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Photo: MMN

FERI demonstrates how multi-stakeholder collaboration can help translate the employer-pay principle into practical recruitment systems. By aligning the interests of governments, employers, recruitment agencies, and worker advocates, the initiative offers a promising model for reducing migrant indebtedness while supporting more sustainable and ethical labour migration pathways.

***Thinh Long Investment and Trading Group Joint Stock Company***

Thinh Long is one of the recruitment agencies in Vietnam registered under FERI.[235] In a key informant interview for this research project, a representative of the company explained to MMN that FERI works in the mutual interest of their company and clients. Given that many prospective migrants are from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, the transparency and cost-reduction measures under the employer-pays model are extremely helpful. Under FERI, all initial recruitment-related expenses for workers, including passport fees, health examination fees, criminal record certificates, and visa application fees can be advanced.

The representative explained that they joined FERI after participating in fair recruitment training run by the ILO. They decided to join in the hope of connecting with Japanese employers willing to cover recruitment costs. They said that they have worked with some employers who are willing to cover part of these expenses, however none have assumed the full cost. The agency representative noted that implementing the employer-pay model remains challenging because many Japanese employers have access to alternative sources of migrant workers so can avoid the expenses involved. The model also carries risks for them as the recruitment costs must be advanced upfront and may not be recovered if workers withdraw before departure. Despite

235 MMN Key Informant Interview with a representative of Thinh Long Investment and Trading Group Joint Stock Company, 14 August 2026, Hanoi, Vietnam.

these challenges, the representative remains optimistic: "In my view, broader participation in FERI, with employers covering all recruitment costs, could help revitalise the market. Workers would no longer have to bear recruitment expenses, making overseas employment more accessible and creating greater motivation for them to pursue opportunities abroad".[236]

#### A Recruitment Agency in Myanmar's Cost-Sharing Model

A further noteworthy example of good practice is the cost-sharing model adopted by a recruitment agency in Myanmar who participated in our study.[237] The agency deploys TITP workers and SSWs to various sectors in Japan, including nursing care, food manufacturing, agriculture, and construction. To reduce the financial burden placed on migrant workers and support sustainable recruitment, it negotiates with employers to cover part of the recruitment costs, with cost-sharing arrangements agreed individually. According to the agency, employers facing labour shortages are willing to adopt this approach because it attracts better-qualified candidates, improves retention, and supports long-term skill development. The agency also noted that debt-free workers are able to have healthier employer relationships and that cost-sharing negotiations enhance transparency. To promote the employer-pay model, it recommends demonstrating its benefits through indicators such as lower recruitment costs and worker indebtedness, higher retention rates, and increased remittances.

The examples presented in this section demonstrate that reducing the financial burden on migrant workers is both achievable and beneficial for all stakeholders involved. Whether through public-private partnerships, such as the COLAB programme, multi-stakeholder initiatives like FERI, or recruitment agencies working with employers to share recruitment costs, these approaches show that migration can be made more accessible without compromising recruitment outcomes. Importantly, they illustrate that lowering or eliminating worker-paid recruitment fees not only reduces indebtedness and financial vulnerability but can also enhance the quality of recruitment by attracting a larger and more competitive pool of candidates. While challenges remain in scaling these models, the experiences highlighted above provide valuable lessons for governments, employers, and recruitment agencies seeking to promote fairer and more sustainable labour migration.

## 3.3 Information Dissemination at the Pre-departure Stage

### 3.3.1 Information Dissemination by Recruitment Agencies and Governments

#### Cambodia

PDT is primarily regulated by *Sub-decree 190 and Prakas No. 46.*[238] Under this legislation, recruitment agencies must cooperate with the MLVT and provide training that meets official

236 Ibid.

237 This section is based on the MMN Key Informant Interview conducted in writing format with a recruitment agency in Yangon who wished to remain anonymous, Myanmar, September 2026.

238 See S*ub-Decree No. 190* at n 127 above, and, Prakas No. 46 on Recruitment Process and Pre-Departure Orientation Training, 2013, accessible at https://mekongmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Prakas-046-13-on-Recruitment-Process.PDOS_.English.pdf.

standards. PDT aims to help migrant workers understand the working and living conditions in destination countries, details of their employment contracts, labour regulations in destination countries, entitled benefits, and available support services. Under *Prakas No. 253 on Promulgation of Minimum Standards of Job Placement Services Abroad Contract*, recruitment agencies are obliged to provide accurate information regarding overseas employment opportunities, including any relevant challenges.[239]

The MLVT also conducts a five-hour PDO immediately before departure. The programme covers: (1) preparedness, living conditions, and immigration procedures; (2) labour laws and social protection in Japan; (3) wages and remittances; (4) safety and support services; and (5) reintegration assistance, including employment and skills-development opportunities. The content is periodically updated with support from the Japanese Embassy in Cambodia to address emerging challenges faced by Cambodian workers in Japan.[240] Key challenges identified include limited training time and difficulties in comprehension among workers with limited educational backgrounds.[241] Despite these constraints, the MLVT reports positive outcomes, including fewer cases of workers leaving jobs without formally terminating contracts, reduced health risks, and more access to support services.[242]

### Myanmar

As described in the previous chapter, Myanmar currently has no standard PDT or PDO curricula focusing on migration to Japan. Recruitment agencies are left to develop their own curriculum, which has inconsistent outcomes. A recruitment agency in Yangon interviewed for this research told MMN that it regularly updates its training topics to address issues commonly faced by workers in Japan.[243] The agency in question has representatives stationed in Japan to support workers, while tutors based in their Yangon office maintain regular communication with them to provide timely assistance.[244] As a result, common issues and challenges are systematically shared within the agency and serve as valuable resources for the PDT of prospective workers.[245] The agency also responded proactively to the challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and the military coup in Myanmar.[246] Due to disruptions in access to formal schooling, some prospective migrants have limited foundational academic skills.[247] To help bridge these gaps and ensure that candidates are adequately prepared for work and life in Japan, the agency has extended the duration of its PDT program from ten months to one year.[248]

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239 See *Prakas No. 253 on Promulgation of Minimum Standards of Job Placement Services Abroad Contract*, 2013, art 4, accessible at https://mekongmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Prakas-253-on-use-of-employ-contract.Engl_.pdf.

240 See MMN webpage, "Symposium on Migration to Japan: Learning from Returnees to Improve the Migration Experience", at n.7 above.

241 Ibid.

242 Ibid.

243 MMN Key Informant Interview with representatives of J-SAT., Co. Ltd., Yangon, Myanmar, 31 August 2026, online.

244 Ibid.

245 Ibid.

246 Ibid.

247 Ibid.

248 Ibid.

### Vietnam

Recruitment agencies in Vietnam are required to deliver 74 PDT sessions, including 54 theory sessions and 20 practical sessions. These sessions cover a range of topics stipulated in Appendix XII of *Circular No. 21/2021/TT-BLĐTBXH* and *Circular No. 09/2026/TT-BNV*.[249] These topics include Vietnamese traditions and culture, laws in Vietnam and destination countries, employment contracts, culture, traditions, and manners in destination countries, communication, transportation, banking and shopping in destination countries, and the prevention of trafficking, forced labour, and sexual abuse.

The training material for Vietnamese workers going abroad has been developed by DOLAB for individual destination countries separately and distributed through their website. However, it should be noted that the information on Japan is not up-to-date.[250] Separately, the Fund for Overseas Employment (FES) publishes a "Handbook for Vietnamese Going to Work Abroad", which covers information relevant to specific stages of the migration cycle and includes tips on how to find reliable information on working abroad, how to handle situations when overseas work or working conditions differ from those stipulated in the employment contract, as well as other relevant issues. The FES also publishes materials with the following titles to assist migrant workers: "Vietnamese Cultural Identity and General Regulations for Vietnamese Workers Working Abroad", and "Necessary Knowledge Training Documents for Vietnamese Workers Working in Japan".[251] Additionally, "Technical Intern Trainee Handbook" published by OTIT, Japan, is commonly used by recruitment agencies. [252]

A recruitment agency in Hanoi told MMN in an interview for this study that it follows the DOLAB-prescribed curriculum but places particular emphasis on helping workers respond to problems and access support services.[253] In addition to mandatory topics, their training addresses common migration challenges, including cultural differences, Japanese laws and regulations, residence status requirements, and visa renewal procedures.[254] It also covers pregnancy, childbirth, and reproductive health, with the agency having provided support to workers who became pregnant and gave birth in the past.[255] To better serve prospective migrants from ethnic minority groups, the agency adapts training materials and incorporates active-learning approaches to improve understanding.[256]

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249 See *Circular No. 21/2021/TT-BLDTBXH, Detailing a Number of Articles of the Law on Vietnamese Guest Workers,* 15 December 2021, accessible at https://congbao.chinhphu.vn/van-ban/thong-tu-so-21-2021-tt-bldtbxh-36486.htm; and, *Circular No. 09/2026/TT-BNV, Amendments to Circular No. 21/2021/TT-BLDTBXH,* 15 May 2026, accessible at https://vanban.chinhphu.vn/?pageid=27160&docid=218201&classid=1.

250 The DOLAB webpage, "Training Materials for Vietnamese Workers Going Abroad", accessible at https://dolab.moha.gov.vn/Documents/DocumentIndex.aspx?LIST_ID=1206&MENU_ID=1044,1046,1102&DOC_ID=1587; training materials for Japan are accessible at https://dolab.moha.gov.vn/Uploads/FileType/20137123357949.pdf.

251 See FES, "Bản sắc văn hóa Việt Nam và các quy định chung đối với NLD đi làm việc tại nước ngoài", "Tài liệu bối đường KTCT đánh cho lao động Việt Nam đi làm việc tại Đài Loan", "Tài liệu bối đường KTCT đánh cho thực tập sinh lao động Việt Nam đi thực tập kỹ nàng tại Nhật Bản".

252 Organisation for Technical Intern Training, Japan, "Technical Intern Trainee Handbook", periodically updated and the latest version was released in March 2026 in nine languages, accessible at https://www.otit.go.jp/trainee/ja/howto/handbook/.

253 MMN Key Informant Interview with a representative of Thinh Long Investment and Trading Group Joint Stock Company, 14 August 2026, Hanoi, Vietnam.

254 Ibid.

255 Ibid.

256 Ibid.

Although Vietnam does not have a formal government-run PDO programme, ESCs provide information and support to migrant workers before departure and upon return. The Ha Tinh ESC, located in a province with high levels of overseas labour migration, plays a key role in informing local communities and linking prospective workers to relevant services. In addition to language and vocational training, the centre provides information on overseas job opportunities, migration costs, recruitment procedures, employment conditions, and destination-country culture and regulations.[257] It also offers counselling services, including access to official information, referrals to reputable recruitment agencies, assistance with documentation, and guidance on potential migration risks.[258]

### 3.3.2 Observations and Gaps

#### Cambodia

MMN has observed significant information gaps among Cambodian migrant workers. These gaps relate to employment conditions, workers' rights, available support mechanisms, and social protection schemes in Japan. For example, one Cambodian worker said that, "I was supposed to work in assembling electrical products in Japan, but was assigned to do packing and distribution of final products".[259]

Another worker who experienced unfair termination was unaware of the support available to her: "I expected to work for two years in Japan, but I had to come back after one year. I didn't know where to seek help".[260] MMN also documented cases in which inaccurate information was provided by recruitment agencies. One prospective worker stated: "The recruitment agency told me that female migrant workers cannot get pregnant while working in Japan otherwise they will be deported to Cambodia".[261]

With regard to the PDO delivered by the MLVT, Cambodian workers shared that they did not receive any information on Japan's insurance schemes, and suggested devoting more time for orientation and providing more information on how migrants are supported once in Japan.[262] As mentioned earlier, the PDO delivered by MLVT is very brief and does not adequately cover all the necessary information. This is particularly challenging for many workers with limited educational backgrounds, as the current format may not effectively support their understanding. Regarding reproductive rights, the MLVT has been making efforts to counter misinformation and informs workers of their rights during the PDO.[263] Workers are also informed that they have the option to return to Cambodia to give birth if they choose to do so.[264]

257 See MMN webpage, "Symposium on Migration to Japan: Learning from Returnees to Improve the Migration Experience", at n 7 above.

258 Ibid.

259 Quote taken from the Migrant Exchange Forum, 9 November 2025.

260 Quote taken from the Migrant Exchange Forum, 9 November 2025.

261 See MMN, "Navigating Social Security Systems" p. 81, at n 82 above.

262 Ibid., p. 91.

263 See MMN webpage, "Symposium on Migration to Japan: Learning from Returnees to Improve the Migration Experience", at n 7 above.

264 Ibid.

Concerning PDT conducted by recruitment agencies, there is currently no standard training curriculum. As a result, recruitment agencies develop their own individual curricula to teach prospective migrant workers. A recruitment agency in Phnom Penh told MMN that it "reinforces key information throughout the recruitment and PDT process to improve workers' understanding and retention".[265] For example, it repeatedly explains issues such as tax deductions and workers' compensation in Japan to help workers understand their rights and benefits. The agency also emphasised the importance of post-deployment communication, particularly to support workers in accessing benefits in case of workplace accidents. In addition, the PDT plays an active role in countering misinformation on social media by providing accurate information and directing workers to reliable sources throughout the migration process.

ALMAC has expressed support for the development of a standardised PDT curriculum for Japan, drawing on its experience participating in the development of training curricula for migration to Thailand.[266] Since several recruitment agencies have developed effective practices and innovative approaches, including the examples described above, these experiences and good practices could serve as valuable inputs in the development of a standardised curriculum.

### Myanmar

MMN's previous research found that many Myanmar migrant workers deployed to Japan rely on Facebook and other social networking platforms as their primary sources of information on work and life in Japan. While the PDT offered by recruitment agencies generally focuses on Japanese language acquisition and vocational skills development, it typically provides minimal information on workers' rights and relevant laws in Japan.

The importance of providing migrants with information on their rights and avenues for seeking assistance was underscored by an incident in August 2026, when six Myanmar SSWs employed at a vegetable farm in Hokkaido sought help from a local labour union after experiencing ongoing abuse and sexual harassment in the workplace. Although these workers were able to access support through the union, many similar cases likely go unreported or remain undetected, as Myanmar migrants are frequently unaware of where and how to seek assistance when facing labour rights violations or other forms of exploitation.

The challenge lies not only in how information is delivered but also in the context in which migrants make decisions. In Myanmar, many prospective migrants prioritise leaving the country quickly, often paying less attention to information on working conditions, taxation, and social protection. Limited understanding of Japan's migration pathways further complicates informed decision-making. In particular, the special visa status available to some Myanmar nationals has gained popularity despite offering fewer labour protections than the TITP and SSW schemes. Strengthening information dissemination and counselling services is therefore essential to help migrants understand and choose the most appropriate migration pathway.

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265 MMN Key Informant Interview with a representative of Kei Kei Cambodia Human Resource, 1 July 2026, Phom Penh.

266 See MMN webpage, "Symposium on Migration to Japan: Learning from Returnees to Improve the Migration Experience", at n.7 above.

An MRC informed MMN that it provides prospective migrants with accurate and comprehensive information on both the TITP and SSW pathways to Japan.[267] This enables potential migrants to better understand the differences between the two schemes and make informed decisions based on their individual circumstances and future plans. The MRC also advises prospective migrants to use only licensed recruitment agencies, rather than language schools, which are not authorised to deploy workers to Japan under the MOCs governing the TITP and SSW programmes between the governments of Myanmar and Japan.

While CSOs and MRCs play an important role in disseminating accurate, rights-based information, their outreach remains limited and does not reach all prospective migrants. Consequently, greater emphasis should be placed on the provision of workers' rights education through formal migration channels, including recruitment agencies and relevant government ministries, to ensure that all migrants have access to essential information before departure.

### Vietnam

Vietnamese workers have encountered information gaps similar to Cambodian workers deployed to Japan. These information gaps relate to employment conditions, workers' rights, available support mechanisms, and social protection schemes in Japan. A male migrant returnee to Vietnam said that he was not given clear information about the work he would do: "I expected to work in shipbuilding in Japan, but actually was sent into metal pressing. Very dangerous work".[268] This kind of situation was not uncommon. Another returnee said: "I expected to work inside a factory, but actually had to work outside. I could not change work for the whole five years". [269] Another worker said that they were misinformed about the payment of overtime: "The employer did not pay the overtime rate wages. But I had to accept, because it was hard to change jobs".[270]

One Vietnamese worker made a concrete suggestion to prevent such misunderstandings: "I'd like to have something that I can keep after the training, like a document, so that I can better remember the information. I'd also like to have a question-and-answer session so that I can understand how to handle these issues once I get there".[271]

A recruitment agency visited by MMN in Hanoi stated that the high quality of its training contributes to its competitiveness and that it developed its own curriculum to address challenges faced by its workers in Japan. [272] Moreover, there are some recruitment agencies that collaborate with law firms to disseminate information on Vietnamese and Japanese laws. One law firm in Hanoi told MMN that it provides prospective migrants with legal information in order to help prevent migrants from engaging in any illicit activities after their deployment to Japan.[273] It is noted that while some agencies provide good quality training, others are not motivated in

267 See MMN, "Navigating Social Security Systems", p. 84, at n 82 above.

268 Quote from a migrant worker during the MMN Migrant Exchange Forum, November 2025.

269 Ibid.

270 Quote from a male Vietnamese migrant returnee who worked in construction in Japan. Ibid.

271 See MMN, "Navigating Social Security Systems", p. 90, at n 82 above.

272 Ibid, p. 89.

273 Ibid.




A Cambodian returnee shared the challenges of migrating to Japan, MMN Migrant Exchange Forum, 9 November 2025, Phnom Penh

Photo: MMN

this regard.[274] DOLAB conducts unannounced inspections to check if agencies deliver trainings according to the curriculum stipulated in Circulars. However, due to the limited number of staff and the increasing number of recruitment agencies, inspections are carried out infrequently.[275]

Aside from stakeholders in Vietnam, Japanese employers have become increasingly involved in PDT. As Japan faces growing challenges in attracting migrant workers, some companies have taken a more direct role in recruitment and training rather than relying solely on recruitment agencies in Vietnam. Below are several leading examples.

Since 2019, MOS Burger has implemented the "Vietnam Kazoku" ("Kazoku" meaning family in Japanese) initiative, partnering with a Vietnamese college and a recruitment agency to prepare prospective workers for the SSW examination.[276] The program combines exam preparation with training on company philosophy, work ethics, safety and hygiene, hospitality, and cooking skills.

In January 2026, Yamato Transport Co., Ltd. launched PDT in Vietnam for former TITP workers who are to be recruited under the SSW scheme.[277] The program included truck driver license training and Japanese-language instruction. In Japan, staff at the receiving branch are trained in multicultural workplace management and relevant immigration and labour regulations.

274 Ibid.

275 Ibid.

276 Information drawn from the webpage of MOS Burger, "「ベトナムカゾク」の皆さんが活躍中[Members of 'Vietnam Kazoku' are doing great!]", 18 December 2024, accessible in Japanese at https://www.mos.jp/mori/katsuyaku/article_20241218/.

277 Information drawn from the webpage of Yamato Transport Co., Ltd., "特定技能制度を活用し、企業間輸送を担うベトナム人中型トラックドライバーを3名採用 [Three Vietnamese SSW(i) were recruited as cargo truck drivers]", 3 February 2026, accessible in Japanese at https://www.yamato-hd.co.jp/news/2025/newsrelease_20260203_1.html.

In 2016, Yoshinoya Holdings Co. Ltd established its Global Human Resource Office to strengthen migrant worker recruitment and management.[278] At its Vietnam office, candidates receive practical Japanese-language and restaurant skills training, while all full-time employees in Japan complete multicultural workplace management courses.

These examples demonstrate that migrant worker recruitment is increasingly treated as a core business strategy supported by structured training systems. Notably, companies such as Yamato Transport and Yoshinoya invest in both migrant workers and Japanese employees to strengthen their capacity to work in multicultural teams, and ensure their understanding of relevant immigration and labour regulations, thereby reducing the risk of workplace issues affecting migrant workers.

### 3.3.3 Good Practices for Delivering Rights-Based Information

Given the wide-ranging challenges described above, many recruitment agencies make efforts to deliver useful information and minimise expectation gaps. In this section, two recruitment agencies' initiatives are presented. The two agencies share a mission in common, which is to contribute towards human resource development in their countries.

***Kei Kei Cambodia Human Resource***

Based in Phnom Penh, Kei Kei Cambodia Human Resource, has deployed Cambodian workers to Japan's construction sector since 2013. It has also deployed smaller numbers of workers to agriculture, fisheries, and plastic moulding industries. The agency's mission is to contribute to human resource development in Cambodia through the migration experiences of young Cambodians in Japan. [279]

Their pre-departure information dissemination is comprehensive and designed to minimise expectation gaps, maintain workers' motivation to gain new experiences, and prepare them mentally for migration. Key initiatives include:

- In-person job interviews: Interviews are conducted face-to-face rather than online. Once workers pass the interview, their families are invited to meet the Japanese employers to foster mutual understanding. Job responsibilities, salaries, and benefits are thoroughly explained until both workers and their families fully understand them.
- Dormitory-based preparation: The dormitory is used to simulate life in Japan. Workers learn practical skills such as cleaning and cooking, while also receiving education on nutrition, healthcare, and physical fitness.
- Maintaining motivation to learn Japanese: To reduce financial burdens, the Japanese language course lasts only five months, although the content could be delivered over a one-year period. The agency believes that without clear goals, workers may struggle to keep up with their studies.

278 See "「日本人と外国人に違いはない」吉野家ホールディングスの海外人材の活躍推進　10年の歩み [Japanese and foreign employees are treated equally - Yoshinoya Holdings' ten-year journey in promoting global talent]", KJ Times, November 2025, accessible in Japanese at https://kjtimes.jp/knowhow/life/otonari_001/.

279 Information for this section gathered through MMN Key Informant Interview with a representative of Kei Kei Cambodia Human Resource, 1 July 2026, Phom Penh.

Japanese language lessons continue for three months after workers arrive in Japan. This period is often when workers face challenges related to communication, lifestyle differences, and climate differences, making timely support through language classes particularly effective. In addition, the agency maintains regular communication with workers at least twice a month to enable timely intervention when issues arise.

The agency has also developed a web-based application to help workers prepare for the skills examination required after one year of employment. The agency believes that workers who fail the examination may be more likely to rely on inaccurate information from social media and potentially leave formal migration schemes.

***J-SAT., Co. Ltd.***

J-SAT, a Myanmar recruitment agency with extensive experience in domestic and overseas placement, customises its PDT to support workers' successful integration at work and long-term career development in Japan.[280] Currently, J-SAT partners with the Fukui Prefectural Government in Japan to deploy approximately 20 elderly care workers annually. As is common in many rural prefectures, migrant care workers often relocate to larger cities after arriving in Japan in search of new employment opportunities. To improve worker retention in rural areas, the agency developed specialised training on the local dialect and familiarises prospective migrants with local life, attractions, and recreational activities through insights shared by experienced Myanmar workers. For SSW recruits, it incorporates employer-specific training into pre-departure programmes to facilitate a smooth transition to work.

Career planning is also a crucial component of the agency's PDT. Discussions on future career development are incorporated into the curriculum. After workers begin their employment in Japan, J-SAT staff based in Japan provide ongoing career counselling. Since many migrants wish to remain in Japan for a longer period, the staff offer information on skill examinations and alternative residence statuses, such as SSW (ii) and the care worker residence status, while also providing guidance on how to prepare for these examinations.

J-SAT says that they are genuinely committed to contributing to human resource development in Myanmar, and therefore partners only with Japanese employers that understand and support this mission. Another distinctive feature of its pre-departure process is that job interviews are conducted only after prospective migrants have studied Japanese for six months. During this six-month period, J-SAT provides information on different residence statuses and job opportunities in Japan, enabling informed career choices and better preparation for work abroad. These measures support both successful labour migration and the long-term professional development of migrant workers.

280 This section is based on MMN Key Informant Interview with representatives of J-SAT., Co. Ltd., Yangon, 31 August 2026, online.

## 3.4 Conclusions

Drawing on MMN's extensive key informant interviews, surveys and desk research, this chapter has explored existing regulatory frameworks and the gaps related to recruitment fees and information dissemination at the pre-departure stage for Japan-bound migrants. The main issues MMN identified are summarised below.

Across the three countries of origin surveyed, all have established legal caps on recruitment fees and related costs. However, migrants still face substantial financial burdens and spend years paying off debts. The factors behind this problem are slightly different among the three countries. In Cambodia, the level in which the legal cap has been set is questionable, while migrants are not able to verify their fees as no detailed breakdown is provided. In Myanmar, given the unstable political situation, no monitoring system is currently in place, and financial burdens are increasing as the demand for emigration mounts. Vietnam in contrast has established a functioning regulatory framework and monitoring system for recruitment agencies. However, the persistent involvement of brokers continues to undermine the effectiveness of policies.

In Cambodia and Vietnam, governments and recruitment agency associations have made concerted efforts to reduce the role of informal brokers in the recruitment process. While these efforts are expected to curb the involvement of unregulated intermediaries, a thorough review of existing recruitment procedures is needed to identify the structural gaps and incentives that allow them to continue operating. In addition, both countries have introduced low-interest rate loans for prospective migrants. While they are widely accessed in Vietnam, crafting a recruitment process that does not create debts for migrants should be prioritised.

On the Japan side, the introduction of a legal ceiling on recruitment fees and related costs under the new ESD scheme is to be welcomed but also runs the risk of creating confusion and unforeseen consequences in countries of origin. A recruitment agency in Myanmar shared with MMN that the new fee-ceiling will have significant implications for the day-to-day operations of recruitment agencies.[281] Nevertheless, over the long term, the initiative is likely to contribute to greater cost transparency and provide substantial savings to migrant workers.[282]

This chapter has detailed various initiatives regarding the implementation of an employer-pays model. These examples demonstrate that implementation is far from straightforward. The process of identifying exactly which expenses should be shouldered by employers can be problematic. Nevertheless, the process of moving towards the model contributes to increased transparency in cost structures. In order to expand use of the employer-pay model, it is suggested that the benefits for employers be promoted. As our study has illustrated, if only a limited number of recruitment agencies implement the employer-pay model, employers may simply shift their business to agencies that do not charge employers. Countries of origin therefore need to work collectively to promote the employer-pay model and avoid a "race to the bottom" scenario.

281 MMN Key Informant Interview (in writing) with a recruitment agency in Yangon, Myanmar, September 2026.

282 Ibid.

With respect to the elderly care sector, the lack of publicly available data on the proportion of Japanese care facilities that cover migrant workers' pre-departure costs made it difficult to ascertain the extent in which the zero-recruitment-fee model is used. Nevertheless, existing support schemes suggest that many care facilities incur substantial recruitment-related expenses, supported in part by subsidies from national and prefectural governments. Alongside efforts to reduce the financial burden placed on workers, it is likely that greater cost transparency has emerged as employers have assumed a larger share of recruitment costs. Systematic data collection and rigorous evaluation of these policy measures are therefore needed to assess their effectiveness and to generate evidence-based insights for the development of migrant worker policies in other industries.

Turning to rights-based information dissemination at the pre-departure stage, the three origin countries examined exhibit different approaches. Cambodia and Myanmar operate government-mandated PDO, whereas Vietnam does not provide a government-run PDO but instead uses a standard training manual for Japan that guides recruitment agencies' PDT. While Cambodia's PDO curriculum is generally well designed, its duration is widely regarded as insufficient. In Myanmar, by contrast, PDO provision is not adequately tailored to the specific requirements of destination countries. In all three countries, recruitment agencies are legally required to provide PDT, however, the quality and comprehensiveness of training vary considerably across agencies. Although some agencies demonstrate a strong commitment to preparing migrant workers, others provide only limited support. These findings underscore the importance of strengthening quality assurance and monitoring mechanisms to ensure that all prospective migrant workers receive accurate, comprehensive, and rights-based information prior to departure.

This is particularly important regarding information dissemination on reproductive rights, as migrant workers in Japan often receive misinformation on matters relating to family planning, maternity care and abortion. Even if they receive accurate information, workplaces are often unsupportive when a migrant employees try to exercise maternity rights. Migrant workers in Japan are generally expected to prioritise employment over family formation during their period of stay, although this expectation is at odds with the demographic reality that many migrants are at a life stage when decisions regarding marriage and childbearing are commonly made. Furthermore, children born to TITP workers in Japan are not consistently granted stable residential status. In addition to promoting accurate information, various other challenges need to be addressed to ensure migrants' reproductive rights.

Notwithstanding the undoubted problems that remain, MMN observed several promising initiatives among the recruitment agencies interviewed for this study. Agencies that provide high-quality training are typically driven by a broader commitment to human resource development in their countries of origin. Rather than focusing solely on the placement and dispatch of workers, these agencies incorporate career planning from the pre-departure stage and continue to support migrants after deployment. In some cases, they have developed their own training curricula tailored to the needs of specific employers and destination communities, thereby facilitating migrants' adaptation and long-term career development.

Japanese vocabulary , Thinh Long Investment and Trading Group Joint Stock Company

Photo: MMN




# Chapter 4: Conclusions and Recommendations

## 4.1 Conclusions

Building on MMN's prior work, this study has further examined two related challenges: the ongoing financial burdens migrants face stemming from excessive recruitment fees and related costs, and their continuing lack of access to accurate rights-based information. In addition, it assessed the efficacy of recently introduced legislation in countries of origin to regulate recruitment fees, identified policy gaps, and analysed the challenges involved in providing accurate information to migrants across selected migration corridors. While labour migration corridor-specific findings are summarised in Chapters 2 and 3, this concluding chapter highlights lessons that can be learned from the good practices identified, discuss similarities and differences regarding migration to Thailand and Japan, and identify potential areas for future research.

### 4.1.1 Lessons Learned from Attempts to Implement the Zero-Recruitment-Fee Model

The study has observed a growing number of employers adopting the zero-recruitment-fee model. This gradual shift suggests that supply chain pressure may be a key driver to wider implementation. The case of MWRN demonstrates that CSOs and trade unions can contribute by serving as both advocates and third-party monitors. At the same time, challenges identified by recruitment agencies, such as the one in Yangon, indicate the need for more systematic support to help recruitment agencies comply with zero-fee requirements. Such support could include stronger government assistance in countries of origin and training opportunities provided by international organisations. To further expand implementation of the zero-recruitment-fee model, stakeholders should actively promote its benefits to employers. These employer benefits include greater access to a qualified workforce, cost transparency, reduced recruitment expenses, and improved worker retention rates. However, the experience of a recruitment agency in Hanoi highlights a key challenge: when only a small number of agencies adopt the model, employers may simply shift their hiring to agencies that continue charging workers. This problem presents a space for recruitment agency associations to intervene to establish a level playing field across the recruitment industry.

### 4.1.2 Good Practices for Delivering Rights-Based Information

Rights-based information should be communicated in a clear, accessible, and practical manner to ensure that migrant workers not only understand their rights and available protection mechanisms but are also able to access appropriate support when needed. As the case studies on Kei Kei Cambodian Human Resource and J-SAT illustrate, effective information provision extends beyond raising awareness and includes facilitating access to remedies and support services. Expectation gaps can be reduced through repeated and reinforced messaging, as well as by involving migrants' family members in the orientation process.

The experiences of J-SAT, Vietnam's COLAB, and the Japanese enterprises discussed in Section 3.3.2 further indicates that skills training is most effective when curricula are tailored to the specific needs of employers, occupations, and destination-country labour markets. Closer collaboration between recruitment agencies and employers in the design and delivery of training programmes can enhance both the relevance and effectiveness of pre-departure preparation. In addition, career planning should begin before departure and be supported through continuous career development initiatives throughout migrants' employment abroad. Such an approach not only improves migrants' long-term employment prospects but also contributes to human resource development and skills transfer in countries of origin.

Finally, the case of Myanmar highlights the important role CSOs have to play in delivering high-quality training and orientation programmes. Through their experience in case management, rights advocacy, and community outreach, CSOs possess practical expertise and strong engagement capacities that can complement government-led PDOs and recruitment agency-led PDTs. Greater institutional integration of CSOs into pre-departure training systems could therefore enhance both the quality and the rights-based orientation of migrant worker preparation programmes.

### 4.1.3 Comparisons and Common Policy Objectives

While this study did not intend to compare patterns of labour migration to Thailand and Japan, it is worth highlighting several key similarities and differences between two of Asia's most significant migration corridors. Before doing so, it should be recognised that a great many of the people using formal labour migration pathways to migrate to Thailand and Japan are compelled to move due to fear, insecurity, and economic hardship. Efforts by stakeholders and the international community more generally should focus on fostering peace and creating stable livelihood opportunities in countries of origin, so that migration becomes an option rather than a necessity for survival.

Regarding the destination countries examined in this study, it is important to recognise that their historical and geographical migration contexts differ significantly. Thailand shares long land borders with its neighbouring countries, and many ethnic groups have lived on both sides of these borders for generations. In contrast, Japan is an island nation, making it far more difficult for migrants to enter in an irregular fashion. Nevertheless, both destinations have rapidly aging populations, creating an urgent need to develop fairer and more rights-based migration governance mechanisms to attract migrant workers.

Second, migration to Japan occurs predominantly through formal channels. This contrasts starkly with Thailand where only a relatively small proportion enter through the MOU framework. Nevertheless, strengthening regular migration pathways that safeguard the rights of migrants remains an important policy objective in both destination countries. In this regard, Japan's measures allowing certain Myanmar workers to maintain lawful status even when passport renewal or other documentation requirements cannot be met offer a potentially useful point of reference. Similar arrangements in Thailand could help reduce migrants' dependence on document renewal processes that impose significant financial and administrative burdens due to engagement with Myanmar's military-backed authorities.

Third, and relatedly, the post-coup context in Myanmar has significantly increased the financial and administrative burdens associated with the pre-departure procedures. Weakening regulatory oversight, the growing involvement of brokers, and requirements such as OWIC certification and departure approvals have undermined the effectiveness of recruitment governance mechanisms established prior to 2021. In light of these developments, destination countries should not assume that existing migration frameworks provide adequate safeguards. Rather, they should actively assess emerging risks and implement measures to protect migrants from excessive costs, exploitation, and loss of legal protections, thereby preventing further deterioration of migration governance standards.

Finally, further research is needed on the expansion of the zero-recruitment-fee model in Japan's elderly care sector. Evaluating the factors that facilitate the model's adoption, as well as its effects on recruitment costs and worker protection, could generate valuable lessons for other sectors employing migrant workers. Such research may also be relevant for Thailand, where elderly care work is not currently included within the MOU migration framework. As demand for care workers continues to grow across the region, Japan's experience may offer useful insights into how dedicated migration pathways for care workers can be developed while minimising recruitment-related financial burdens and strengthening worker protections.

## 4.2 Recommendations

**MMN calls on relevant authorities within the governments of Cambodia and Vietnam to:**

1. **Strengthen regulation and oversight of the recruitment sector** by enhancing the licensing, monitoring, and enforcement of recruitment agencies to prevent excessive recruitment fees, deceptive practices, and substandard services;
2. **Develop and implement measures to support recruitment agencies in transitioning to the employer-pay model**, including technical assistance, capacity-building, and clear implementation guidelines to advance fair recruitment and reduce the financial burden on migrant workers;
3. **Reduce administrative barriers to labour migration** by streamlining procedures and improving access to essential services, ensuring that prospective migrant workers can obtain passports, medical certificates, skills assessments, and other required documentation without excessive bureaucracy, cost, or travel burdens;
4. **Improve the quality of information provided to prospective migrant workers** by regularly updating pre-departure training curricula in consultation with migrant workers, CSOs, employers, and other relevant stakeholders.

**MMN calls on the relevant authorities in Myanmar to:**

1. **Eliminate forced remittance requirements and the double taxation of migrant workers.** Such measures increase the financial burden on migrant workers, discourage the use of regular migration channels, and may drive workers toward irregular migration pathways. They can also contribute to situations of indebtedness that heighten workers' vulnerability to exploitation, debt bondage, and forced labour;
2. **Simplify procedures for regular outbound labour migration** and eliminate excessive administrative requirements that make it extremely difficult for migrant workers to access legal migration channels, pushing many towards irregular migration pathways.

**MMN calls on relevant stakeholders in Thailand and Japan to:**

1. **Reduce the complexity of migration and immigration procedures** by adopting flexible documentation and renewal requirements and lowering administrative fees that place undue burdens on migrant workers. *For migrant workers from Myanmar, destination countries should not make regular status contingent on documents that many workers are unable to obtain or renew due to circumstances beyond their control*;
2. **Strengthen cooperation with countries of origin to harmonise regulations on recruitment fees and related costs**, and establish cross-border monitoring mechanisms to prevent excessive fee charging, fraud, and exploitation;
3. **Promote the wider adoption of the employer-pay model** by strengthening corporate accountability for recruitment costs within supply chains, demonstrating its benefits to employers, and providing technical support to facilitate implementation;

4. **Strengthen employer involvement in pre-departure training** to support migrant workers' smooth integration into the workplace, and enhance frontline staff's understanding of immigration and labour regulations to prevent workplace accidents, labour disputes, and other forms of harm affecting migrant workers;
5. **Strengthen employer due diligence in recruitment processes** by encouraging direct engagement with prospective migrant workers after selection to verify recruitment practices and detect fraud, deception, or unethical fee-charging; and
6. **Support and permit organising and unionising of migrant workers**. Stronger presence of organised migrant communities will serve as a vehicle in disseminating critical information about migration policies and migrants' rights, and facilitating migrants' access to remedy in case of extortion and exploitation in the recruitment and migration processes.

**MMN calls on recruitment agencies in countries of origin to:**

1. **Ensure transparency in recruitment costs and comply with fee regulations** by clearly disclosing all recruitment fees and related charges to prospective migrant workers and ensuring that fees do not exceed government-established caps;
2. **Share good practices and lessons learned from implementing the zero-recruitment-fee model**, and develop a collective roadmap for its wider adoption across the recruitment sector;
3. **Improve the quality of pre-departure orientations by properly training facilitators and partnering with civil society organisations** to ensure that prospective migrant workers receive accurate and comprehensive information on their rights and where to seek support and remedies when needed;
4. **Expand collaboration with employers in countries of destination in developing pre-departure training curricula** to ensure that prospective migrant workers receive practical and relevant information for successful workplace integration; and
5. **Include career planning and financial literacy in pre-departure training, and provide continued career counselling after deployment** to help migrant workers maximise the long-term benefits of migration and achieve their future goals.

**MMN calls on recruitment agency associations to:**

1. **Actively promote and monitor compliance with codes of conduct among member agencies**, and regularly update the codes to align with national and international policy developments;
2. **Document and disseminate evidence on the benefits of the zero-recruitment fee model** for employers and recruitment agencies, including improved transparency, reduced recruitment-related risks, access to qualified workers, and higher retention rates; and
3. **Organise regular training and peer-learning opportunities for member agencies** to improve the quality of pre-departure training, strengthen ethical recruitment practices, and share good practices.

**In solidarity, MMN calls on trade unions, civil society organisations, and Migrant Resource Centres to:**

1. **Strengthen information dissemination on recruitment fees, migration-related costs, and labour rights** to ensure that migrant workers can make informed decisions and identify abusive practices;
2. **Enhance legal aid and case support services** for migrant workers who experience fraudulent recruitment, excessive fee-charging, deception, exploitation, or other rights violations; and
3. **Strengthen organising and collective representation efforts among migrant workers** by providing technical support, leadership development, and capacity-building to migrant worker groups, organisations, and unions.

# ANNEX: List of Key Informant Interviews

| Affiliation | Date(s) of interviews |
|---|---|
| Cambodia | |
| Association of Labour Migration Agencies of Cambodia*1 | 2 July 2026 |
| Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training*2 | 2 July 2026 |
| Kei Kei Cambodia Human Resource | 1 July 2026 |
| Myanmar | |
| International Organisation for Migration | 17 August 2026 |
| An international development corporation agency | 19 August 2026 |
| Migrant Workers Rights Network | 31 July 2026 |
| J-SAT., Co. Ltd. | 31 August 2026 |
| Recruitment agency | 6 August 2026 |
| Recruitment agency*3 | 11 September 2026 |
| Future Lights Centre | 12 October 2026 |
| Vietnam | |
| Ha Tinh Employment Service Centre*4 | 2 July 2026 |
| Thinh Long Investment and Trading Group Joint Stock Company | 14 August 2026 |
| Vietnam Association of Manpower Supply*5 | 2 July and 19 August 2026 |
| Other | |
| International Labour Organisation | 22 June 2026 |

*1,2, 4 and 5-Information drawn from the presentations during the MMN symposium on Migration to Japan: Learning from Returnees to Improve the Migration Experience, Phnom Penh, 2-3 July 2026.

*3 -Information was provided as response to the MMN information request letter, instead of an interview.



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The Mekong Migration Network (MMN) is a sub-regional network of migrant support NGOs, migrant grassroots groups and research institutes working together to promote and protect the rights of all migrants in the Greater Mekong Subregion.
Homepage: www. mekongmigration.org
Email: info@mekongmigration.org

**MMN Secretariat Hong Kong Office**
c/o Asian Migrant Centre
4 Jordan Road, Jordan, Kowloon, Hong Kong
Tel: +852-23120031

**MMN Secretariat Chiang Mai Office**
156/118 Moo 10, Canal Rd, T.Suthep,
A. Muang Chiang Mai 50200, Thailand
Tel: +66(0)53283259