

## Weaving the Threads of Migration, Sustainable Development and the Pandemic

### International Migration and COVID-19

The ongoing coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is posing unprecedented health and socioeconomic challenges for all governments. Mobility restrictions are affecting many migrant populations, particularly migrant workers and children. The crisis is hitting hard these vulnerable groups, with its health, economic and social consequences.

On Thursday 17 December 2020, the International Conference “Weaving the Threads of Migration, Sustainable Development and the Pandemic” was held to commemorate International Migrants’ Day. Updated information and data on COVID-19 was shared, and academic cooperation and networking with international, regional and national organizations, governments, civil society organizations and academic partners were enhanced.

Our networks from Chulalongkorn University, which include the Asian Research Center for Migration (ARCM) at the Institute of Asian Studies (IAS), College of Population Studies (CPS), CU-CollLaR, Social Research Institute (CUSRI), International Labour Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM) and United Nations Children’s Fund Thailand (UNICEF), have jointly prepared this policy brief to provide recommendations for a comprehensive policy response to the effects of the pandemic on migrants and children. Recommendations are articulated around four themes:

- 1) Management of recruitment and employment of migrant workers during and after COVID-19

- 2) Legal, social protection, intervention and remedies for migrant children and children belonging to ethnic groups
- 3) Information and communication provided to migrant workers
- 4) Good practices on pandemic and labour migration management

### Theme 1: Management of recruitment and employment of migrant workers during and after COVID-19

#### Overview

Close to 1 million migrant workers from Myanmar currently have or are in the process of registering for regular migration status in Thailand, and are at risk of losing their regular status in 2021. Ensuring that all migrant workers residing in Thailand can extend their work and stay permits without having to return to their country of origin is critical. More flexible timelines and procedures for migrant workers who have lost employment or are seeking employment to find or change employers will also be important to ensure they can safely remain in Thailand. **To do so, the Royal Thai Government could:**

- Offer options for irregular migrants, regardless of their employment status, to regularize their stay through new registration windows, such as the measures successfully implemented under the Cabinet Resolution dated 29 December 2020, allowing irregular migrant workers to register online with the Department of Employment from 15 January to 13 February 2021.

- **Consider ways to reduce or eliminate worker-borne costs associated with registration**, including through employer or government subsidies to cover the costs of additional COVID-19 screening requirements. The United Nations Migration Network Working Group, a network of UN agencies chaired by IOM and aimed to ensure effective, timely and coordinated system-wide support to Member States in implementing the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, which Thailand joined the International Community in adopting, can support the Government to identify ways to remove costs, as these are a barrier to the regularization of migrant workers, particularly of the most vulnerable.

### Recruitment

- **Simplify existing bilateral agreements between Thailand and neighbouring countries** (Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar) to decrease cost and time and increase safety and accessibility, thus encouraging migrants to engage in regular migration after the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Promote information sharing** among neighbouring governments by increasing cooperation with relevant authorities in neighbouring countries to share non-sensitive information on irregular crossings. Promote multi-stakeholder consultative dialogue between private, public and civil society actors to effectively develop inclusive labour migration policy, thus improving border control and mitigating unethical recruitment risks.
- **Ensure that fees related to recruitment and redeployment, including additional costs for COVID-19 testing, quarantine and health insurance, are not charged to migrant workers**, in accordance with the ILO General Principles and Operational Guidelines for Fair Recruitment. Migrant workers who paid recruitment fees should therefore be reimbursed by employers.

### Employment

- **Encourage job retention, alternative employment, and job creation for women and men migrant workers.** Increase flexibility for migrant workers to legally change employers and jobs when in Thailand, without losing their immigration status, through easy contract, visa, work

permit and other documentation renewal or extension processes, without or at minimal cost.

- **In collaboration with employers, develop, enact and regulate improved living and working conditions and hygiene standards for migrant workers.** To reduce migrant workers' exposure to COVID-19 infection in the workplace and in employer-provided accommodation, physical distancing, frequent handwashing and access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) should be facilitated. To do so, a study of the laws and practices amongst countries in the Asia-Pacific region on employer-provided accommodation could be undertaken, to create comparable standards; tripartite consultations to develop regional guidelines could also be held.
- **Enhance wages**, extending minimum wage provisions to all migrant workers in all sectors, and support freedom of association and collective bargaining to benefit both migrant workers and governments.
- **Increase private sector knowledge of national frameworks governing the rights of migrant workers** in Thailand and promote a culture of legal compliance among Thai businesses to ensure that employers uphold their responsibilities towards migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- **Strengthen the employability of migrant workers** by ensuring they have access to re-skilling and up-skilling programmes – introducing meaningful use of technology and contributing to the digital economy and future of work in the “new normal”, with due consideration to the needs and realities of women migrant workers. Ensure access to public employment programmes, job placements and skills certification and recognition, especially for migrants returning to Thailand.

### Access to Grievance Systems

- **Ensure effective complaint mechanisms for migrant workers** in languages they understand, especially during and in the aftermath of COVID-19, to strengthen migrant workers' protection, especially for wage protection and rights violations from recruitment agencies and employers. Protection of all migrant workers, including those in the domestic workforce and informal and irregular sector needs to be focused on.

## Access to Social Services

- **Expand labour and social protection laws** to ensure universal health and social coverage for men and women migrant workers irrespective of their sector of employment, especially during and in the aftermath of COVID-19. Develop bilateral agreements on the portability of social protection for migrant workers between ASEAN Member States.
- **Ensure all migrant workers have access to health care, social protection and essential services** (including free COVID-19 testing, treatment and vaccination, with translation services and forms in migrant worker languages), regardless of their immigration status.

## Access to Emergency Relief

- **Ensure access of all migrant workers in all sectors to COVID-19 social protection and emergency relief measures, income support and unemployment benefits.** Migrants should not be prevented access due to status, legal or other documentation requirements, language, culture or other barriers.
- **Establish referral networks with key ministries in collaboration with workers' organizations, civil society organizations and migrant communities for immediate health assistance, protection needs, and distribution of immediate emergency relief items** such as food, PPE, hygiene items, other basic needs, and information on the pandemic, to ensure that these reach the most vulnerable migrant populations. Special efforts should be made to reach migrants, irregular migrants, domestic migrant workers, and migrants employed in the informal sector.
- **Ensure the availability and accessibility to low- or no-cost remittance services,** including digital services, during crises. If migration costs are being borne by workers and there have been financial services for migration costs, the financial sector should consider the rescheduling of, or moratorium on, loan repayments and debt from migration.
- **Adopt emergency preparedness plans for migrant workers at company, embassy, national, bilateral and regional levels.** Emergency preparedness plans should be gender-responsive and developed through tripartite-discussion and social dialogue to ensure a cohesive and responsive whole-of-society approach.

## Return and Reintegration

- **Assist, in collaboration with employers, return and reintegration to countries of origin during crises.** Ensure that gender-responsive quarantine facilities are available, free of cost, and have adequate safety measures. Governments and employers are to facilitate the voluntary return of migrants during crises. Setting up of contingency funds to cover repatriation costs should also be considered at national level.

## Other

- **Consider a moratorium on arrests and detention of migrant workers,** or at least, alternative options to detention. If detention takes place, ensure infection prevention and control measures are in place, as well as adequate facilities for isolation and quarantine, and maintain gender-responsive measures within these facilities.

## Theme 2: Legal, social protection, intervention and remedies for migrant children and children belonging to ethnic groups

During the COVID-19 pandemic, children, especially children along the border, living on the streets and from minority groups, have faced difficulties similar to those of adults, yet worsened by physical and mental vulnerabilities. The pandemic has affected access to education and children's psycho-social, health and nutritional well-being. The recommendations for the Royal Thai Government are as follows:

- **Increase remote learning opportunities and capacities for teachers and students,** especially those lacking technological skills or having insufficient equipment.
- **Develop a new curriculum model** to enable remote learning and adjust existing curriculum to promote local knowledge and skills that increase children's resilience and capability to cope with changes, risks and uncertainties.
- **Carry out supplementary activities** to fill in the gap of inadequate teaching time.
- **Promote other forms of education,** including through non-formal and learning centres to

keep children, especially migrant and vulnerable groups, in a safe and inclusive environment.

- **Ensure student mapping and inclusive education** to prevent school dropouts and children being left out of education system.
- **Increase teachers and parents' motivation and employment opportunities** so they continue supporting children's education.
- **Increase awareness and access to information** for migrant students, parents and communities on existing education opportunities.
- **Increase teacher-parent collaboration and community protection** to prevent children from engaging in risky activities and discrimination outside school.
- **Prioritize critical measures to prevent violence, exploitation and abuse** of children who live in areas under mobility restriction, and or socioeconomically disadvantaged.
- **Set up and/or increase response services** for children in nutrition and immunization programmes.

### Theme 3: Information and communication provided to migrant workers

- **Raise awareness via campaigns and media targeting the general public** to increase recognition of the contribution of women and men migrant workers to Thailand's economy and to combat discrimination, stigma and hate speech targeting migrant workers, therefore improving social cohesion.
- **Provide, in collaboration with employers, timely and accurate information to migrant workers**, in languages they understand, through accessible and appropriate channels, and in a gender-responsive manner, on policies related to their migration status, employment rights and conditions, access to health care and remedy, and labour, health and safety policies.
- **Engage migrant worker peer leaders** to combat the sharing of wrong or deceiving information on government regulations among migrant worker communities.

- **Engage border communities** through awareness raising to combat disinformation propagated by smugglers and traffickers the exploit migrants' vulnerabilities especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when most regular and safe migration options are unavailable.

### Theme 4: Good practices on pandemic and labour migration management

**Case One:** Singapore and management of migrant workers during the COVID-19 outbreak

In April–May 2020, an alarming outbreak of COVID-19 took place in migrant communities in Singapore. A total of 54,505 out of the 58,320 who tested positive for COVID-19 were migrant workers living in dormitories (out of a total of over 320,000 migrant workers living in Singapore). At the peak of the outbreak in April 2020, more than 1,000 new daily cases were being detected in the dormitories. The Government of Singapore acted swiftly and aggressively to stabilize the situation. By August 2020, all migrant workers living in dormitories had been tested for COVID-19 at least once. Almost all of them have since been cleared to resume work safely. In December 2020, an outbreak of COVID-19 was detected in Samutsakorn province in Thailand 12,130 workers of the roughly 240,000 migrant workers in the province, tested positive (as of February 2021). Efficient management to contain COVID-19 outbreaks in migrant communities is required in countries with a high number of migrant workers.

Singapore's government good practices against COVID-19 in migrant communities included the swift decision to contain the outbreak, active testing of migrant workers, quickly identifying potential new cases, provision of medical support at the dormitories, and ensuring access to health clinics nationwide, disinfection of dormitories, and systematic tests of all migrant workers living in dormitories to better follow up and control of the disease.

**Recommendations for governments in countries with a significant number of migrant populations:**

- Countries with a high number of migrant workers should consider **the vulnerability of workers who live in crowded areas**, and where social distancing is impossible.

- Preventive measures to contain outbreak need **swift action, such as systematic free or cost- sharing (with employers) testing and quarantine** at the workplace and dormitories.
- **Protective responses** require provision of medical support and access to public health care for migrant workers.
- **Attention must be paid to asymptomatic workers** to control the disease and prevent new outbreaks.

**Case Two:** Cities safe from human trafficking and modern slavery

Cities where migrants from diverse places of origin live can be safe cities, with no slavery or human trafficking, through stakeholder awareness and resilience. Examples

are from four cities including Nan Province in Thailand, Nottingham in the United Kingdom, Maputo in Mozambique, and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil (<https://globalcitiesfreeofslavery.org>). In the reevaluation of the theories of change related to modern slavery and human trafficking, issues of resilience, place and COVID- 19 intersect, and four recommendations emerge:

- **Recognize women who are vulnerable** during pandemics, especially those working in informal sectors.
- **Emphasize the role of strategic communication** in creating safe cities and strengthening community resilience against human trafficking.
- **Develop and examine existing legal tools** on trafficking and on protection of trafficked persons from prosecution.