



FLOW MONITORING SURVEYS: INSIGHTS INTO THE PROFILES AND VULNERABILITIES OF LAO MIGRANTS TO THAILAND

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION (IOM)
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Picture 1 - Lao Migrants Waiting at a Bus Stop

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Labour migration is a key demographic trend influencing and shaping the growth of many countries in Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand. Thailand's steady economic growth in recent decades has sparked an increase in labour demand, resulting in a continued influx of low-skilled migrant workers from neighbouring Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) and Myanmar. Thailand is the most popular destination for Lao nationals residing abroad, with a steady increase in migration over the years. The number of Lao nationals in Thailand almost doubled in under three years, from 122,437 in 2014 to 223,827 in 2017. Although migration from Lao People's Democratic Republic to Thailand has a long-standing history, migrants still face several challenges. Due to the precarity of jobs acquired (predominantly low-skilled, without proper legal status and limited in-country support networks) migrants are often exposed to heightened risks and vulnerabilities compared to local populations.

In order to gain a better understanding of the migration patterns and the nature of flows from Lao People's Democratic Republic to Thailand – with a particular focus on possible vulnerabilities – IOM initiated a survey exercise in July 2019 in Vientiane Capital, utilizing the Flow Monitoring component of IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM). Flow Monitoring is a tool designed to track movement flows, and the overall situation at key points of origin, transit and destination. It is an optimal tool to provide a more detailed understanding of the migration situation at the Thai-Lao border. With special consideration to the experience of migrant workers, IOM aimed to gain a deeper understanding of migrants' profiles, drivers of migration, level of preparedness for migration, as well as associated vulnerabilities and return intentions. This research activity was part of a larger regional activity that collected DTM data across various countries in Southeast Asia. It built upon the pre-established Flow Monitoring Registry and Flow Monitoring Survey activities along the Thai-Myanmar border in Tak province, Thailand, from June 2018 until May 2019 as well as the Flow Monitoring activities along the Thai-Cambodia border, from March 2019 until September 2019.

From mid-July to mid-August 2019, a total of 401 Lao nationals (152 female) were surveyed in Vientiane Capital, all of whom identified as migrant workers. The 401 migrant workers were categorized in two different migrant groups. The first group was comprised of outgoing migrants, leaving Lao People's Democratic Republic for employment in Thailand (n=249) and the second group were incoming migrants, returning from employment in Thailand (n=152). Two different survey tools were designed to capture the most accurate information possible for both target groups. The findings serve to identify migration patterns as well as common challenges and vulnerabilities and can be used to better inform policy and programming for the protection and assistance of migrant workers.

The results indicate that migration between Lao People's Democratic Republic and Thailand is cyclical; many migrants that had previously worked in Thailand continue to return to Thailand for further employment. The main findings of the report show that the information levels and expectations of outgoing migrants are for the most part in line with the experiences and impressions of returning migrants. The brief summaries per thematic area below provide a distillation of findings from the data collected:

Migrant Profiles

The sex breakdown of Lao nationals migrating to Thailand indicates fewer female migrant workers in this data collection exercise than in previous studies, with just over a third of female respondents. The average age of respondents is 28 years old, and the largest proportion of migrants (three quarters) can be placed in the age group of 16 to 30 years. In line with other studies, this research showed that Lao nationals interviewed in Vientiane were more likely to be single. Respondents that have completed one form of secondary education (lower and upper) make up more than half the sample. With regards to place of origin, the data revealed that both outgoing and returning migrants originate from Vientiane Capital, Champasack and Savannakhet and that they predominately belong to the Lao Loum ethnic group. The main destinations in Thailand are Bangkok, Udon Thani and Chon Buri and migrants prefer to stay on average over a year in Thailand.

Drivers of Migration

The data shows that the most common forms of previous employment in Lao People's Democratic Republic for both outgoing and returning migrants was unpaid family work as well as daily wage labour, predominately in the agriculture/forestry sector. Reasons for coming to Thailand were primarily associated with finding employment for themselves and in some cases with their spouse finding employment or with a workplace transfer. In terms of migration history of the sample population, it was found that most respondents had previously migrated to Thailand for employment at least once. Respondents stated that they preferred to migrate to Thailand over other countries in the region due to easy access to the job market as well as due to the geographical proximity to Thailand. Higher incomes and the presence of family/ friends in Thailand were also cited.

Pre-migration Arrangements and Preparations

The majority of Lao migrant workers indicated already having a job lined up when they arrived in Thailand, which was primarily identified with support from relatives or friends in Thailand. The top three sectors of employment for both outgoing and returning migrants were the hospitality/service sector, manufacturing and construction. On average migrants spent USD 360 on their journey costs. The data shows that travel to provinces such as Bangkok, Samut Sakhon or Chon Buri is more expensive than travel to provinces bordering Lao People's Democratic Republic, such as Nong Khai and Udon Thani. Most migrants relied on multiple sources to finance their journeys such as savings and wage deductions agreed with their employers in Thailand. Most migrants reported that they received some form of support in preparing their journeys. For those that did receive support with migration preparations, outgoing migrants mostly relied on licensed agencies, family and friends in Thailand as well as their employer in Thailand. Returning migrants often relied on their employer in Thailand as well as their family and friends in Lao People's Democratic Republic, followed by family and friends in Thailand. Support was mainly given with arranging documentation, planning for transportation as well as employment and/or securing accommodation.

Migrant Vulnerabilities

The largest share of respondents ranked their ability to speak and understand Thai at the middle of a 5-point scale, between 2 and 4. The same applies for Thai reading ability, although the proportion that ranked themselves on the lowest level (1) is larger than for speaking and understanding Thai. Both outgoing and returning migrants indicated entering Thailand on travel documents for overseas migrant workers as well as on passports with no visa (Lao nationals can enter Thailand without a visa for a period of 14 days). Depending on the employment sectors different documents types were favoured. Migrants working in the

hotel/service industry often reported working without work visas while in the manufacturing and construction industry migrants were more likely to use travel document for overseas migrant workers. The data collected on returning migrants showed that on average migrants earned 456 THB per day, which is closely aligned to the average amount outgoing migrants expected to receive. For all main destination provinces and employment sectors migrants reported on average to be paid above the provincial minimum wage. With respect to problems experienced at the workplace, the data shows that the most common problems cited were psychological stress, long working hours, verbal abuse and irregular payments.

Return

Migrants cited a number of reasons for return to Lao People's Democratic Republic with the most common being end of visa/work permit, to visit family/friends or family pressure for them to return. Roughly one third of the sample did not expect to face any challenges upon return, however approximately half of the respondents were afraid of not finding a job or housing, as well as experiencing negative reactions from the community and/or family and friends at home. Of those that did not return just to visit family or friends, more than three quarters expressed their desire to migrate again, exclusively back to Thailand to resume working in their old jobs or because of the possibility of receiving higher wages. Overall, Lao nationals seemed to have benefitted financially from migration, with almost two thirds stating that their savings had increased through migration. Over 90 per cent indicated that their general financial situation had improved through migration to Thailand.



Picture 2 - A Public Bus Going from Vientiane Center to the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Labour migration plays a key role within the Southeast Asian context, particularly between Thailand and its neighbouring countries (Harkins, Lindgren, & Suravoranon, 2017). For a number of reasons, including its continuous economic growth over the past few decades and the consequent need for labour, Thailand has sustained a steady flow of low-skilled workers from neighbouring countries (Harkins, Lindgren, & Suravoranon, 2017; IOM, 2013). As the United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand (UNTWGM) (2019) reports, the actual number of migrants residing in Thailand is difficult to determine as many may have entered Thailand irregularly and joined informal sectors of employment, resulting in a continued lack of reliable official data and records that can be applied to the development of evidence-based policy and programming.

With over 220,000 Lao nationals residing in Thailand, Lao People's Democratic Republic, along with Myanmar and Cambodia, is one of the main migrants sending countries to Thailand (UNTWGM, 2019; UNDESA, 2018). The contemporary patterns of migration from Lao People's Democratic Republic to Thailand started during the 1980s and has been increasing ever since. With a very young population in Lao People's Democratic Republic, of which 69 per cent are of working age, and an ageing population on the Thai side, different demographic and socio-economic factors are contributing to migration trends. With a young population, Lao People's Democratic Republic has the capacity to supply a high number of people into its labour market. However, employment opportunities within the country are often limited and payments are considered relatively low especially in rural areas (IOM, 2016).

Considering the continuous cross-border movements between Thailand and its neighbours, several memorandums of understanding (MoUs) on labour migration have been signed between ASEAN countries and beyond, and various measures and amnesties have been introduced to support the regularization of migrants. Nevertheless, the associated costs and lengthy processes required to take part in regular migration channels continue to drive migrants to resort to irregular migration channels (Chantavanich, Middleton, & Ito, 2013). In general, migrants from Lao People's Democratic Republic are able to enter Thailand without much difficulty. International border checkpoints along the Thai-Lao border allow Lao nationals to enter Thailand on a passport without a special visa for up to 30 days (ASEAN visa exemption), or using a border pass which allows them entry for 3 days

As already indicated, although migration between Thailand and Lao People's Democratic Republic is by no means a new phenomenon, there continues to be a dearth of reliable data that can be used for the development of evidence-based policy and programming. To fill some of the current information gaps, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) established a Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) Flow Monitoring data collection exercise under the Asia Regional Migration Program funded by the United States Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM). The data collection tools, and strategy implemented are based on the DTM global methodology, and the Flow Monitoring component was adapted to the migration context of the two countries. The data will not only help to better understand the flows of migrants coming from Lao People's Democratic Republic to Thailand, but also to understand migrants' vulnerabilities during their journey and upon arrival. The information collected contributes to the provision of a more comprehensive profile of the migrant population arriving from Lao People's Democratic Republic to Thailand, which can be used by IOM, governments and other humanitarian actors for improved advocacy and protection of this population, as well as for the delivery of more targeted assistance.

The Flow Monitoring Survey was designed to collect information on five diverse thematic areas including: Lao migrants' profiles, drivers of migration, pre-migration preparations and arrangements, vulnerabilities en route and upon arrival, as well as reasons for return and associated challenges. Following a brief explanation of the activity's methodology and the data collection phase, this report will follow the same structure as the flow monitoring survey by providing a short literature review for each of the five key thematic areas before analyzing the primary data collected by thematic area.

METHODOLOGY

Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM)

The Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) is a set of tools and methodologies, which enable systematic and regular primary data collection, analysis and dissemination of population movements, human mobility and forced migration (both internal and cross-border). DTM was first conceptualized in 2004 and has since been adapted for implementation in over 70 countries, including many in Asia, such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Mongolia. In 2018 alone, DTM tracked over 40 million individuals (internally displaced persons, returnees and migrants) across a broad range of contexts. DTM operations are collaborative exercises. IOM engages with national authorities and humanitarian partners to ensure wide coverage and access, as well as to enhance the usefulness and relevance of data and trust in the results. Although originally designed to serve the humanitarian community during crises, DTM has been increasingly implemented in non-crisis contexts. As in the context of labour migration at the Thai-Lao border, DTM has in some cases been used not only as a tool to track the movements of a mobile population, but also to receive better and more detailed information on the said population. The activity that is being implemented at the Thai-Lao border in Vientiane capital is referred to as Flow Monitoring. The Flow Monitoring module was designed to track movement flows and the overall situation at key points of origin, transit and destination. The activities at the Thai-Lao border build upon the Flow Monitoring activities established at the Thai-Myanmar border in Tak province, Thailand, in June 2018 as well as at the Thai-Cambodia border in March 2019.

Geographical Location

With 1,800 kilometres of the Mekong river forming a natural border between Lao People's Democratic Republic and Thailand, maintaining oversight of the movement of people and goods is difficult (Barney, 2012). Thailand and Lao People's Democratic Republic share several international border check points¹. Champasack, Vientiane Capital, and Savannakhet are three locations that share a direct border with Thailand and are connected through Friendship Bridges. Phouxay (2010) further indicates that alongside regular border checkpoints, migration from Lao People's Democratic Republic to Thailand can also occur via irregular and customary channels, such as by boat across the Mekong river.

DTM Flow Monitoring activities were rolled out in and around Vientiane capital as it is one the main Thai-Lao Friendship bridges that connects Thailand and Lao People's Democratic Republic. More specifically the data collection activity in Vientiane capital took place around the Morning Market Bus Station in the center of Vientiane capital as well as on the bus that runs from the Morning Market Bus Station to the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge.

As previously stated, there are several routes and crossing points between Lao People's Democratic Republic and Thailand. Due to limited resources as well as the volume of the migration movements between the two countries, IOM Flow Monitoring activities do not aim to capture the whole migrant population crossing the border between the two countries but takes a representative sample of this population using the crossing points in the specified area.

¹ At the time of writing, Lao People's Democratic Republic has a total of 27 international checkpoints of which six connect with Thailand.

Flow Monitoring Survey Set-up

The Flow Monitoring Survey (FMS) enhances the overall understanding of current migration flows and trends between Thailand and Lao People’s Democratic Republic, the underlying root causes of these movements and the vulnerabilities experienced during the migration process. The Flow Monitoring Surveys implemented at select border crossing points are designed to collect and compile structured data to answer the following questions:

Figure 1 - Research Questions

- 1) What are the socio-demographic profiles of Lao migrants going to and returning from Thailand?
- 2) What personal factors drive Lao nationals to migrate to Thailand?
- 3) Which factors attract Lao nationals to migrate to Thailand?
- 4) How is the journey from Lao People’s Democratic Republic and stay in Thailand organized/arranged?
- 5) What expectations/knowledge do Lao migrants have about life/work in Thailand?
- 6) How do Lao migrants finance their journeys?
- 7) What challenges and vulnerabilities do Lao nationals face during their journey to Thailand, as well as once they arrive in the country?
- 8) What are Lao nationals’ levels of knowledge about their rights and obligations as migrants in Thailand?
- 9) What kind of support networks do Lao workers know about or have access to in Thailand?
- 10) What are the reasons for return and do Lao migrants expect to face challenges upon return? (Tool 2)

The ten questions correspond to five thematic areas that were used as the foundation to design the survey. The literature review and data analysis in the second and third part of this report will follow the structure of these five thematic areas.

Figure 2 - Thematic Areas



Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection was conducted using two different survey tools designed to capture the most accurate information possible about the two different target groups, namely the outgoing and returning Lao migrant workers (see Table 1).

Table 1 - DTM Survey Tools

Tool	Target Population	Definition
FMS Tool 1	Lao migrants that are crossing the border from Lao People's Democratic Republic into Thailand	Lao nationals that are leaving Lao People's Democratic Republic with the intention to work, irrespective of whether they go to Thailand for daily work or intend to stay longer. Work is defined as taking up employment from an employer, i.e. self-employment is not considered working in this survey.
FMS Tool 2	Lao migrants that are returning from Thailand to Lao People's Democratic Republic	Lao nationals that are going back/ returning to Lao People's Democratic Republic after having worked for at least one day in Thailand. Work is defined as taking up employment from an employer, i.e. self-employment is not considered working in this survey.

The study consists of a quantitative, close-ended survey of Lao migrants crossing the border into Thailand for employment purposes or returning to Lao People's Democratic Republic following their labour migration experience. The DTM methodology was designed with the support of IOM's Global DTM Support team in Geneva, as well as with support from IOM's Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok. The survey was developed jointly by IOM Thailand's Migrant Assistance and Counter-Trafficking Unit and DTM colleagues in IOM's Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. Additional inputs were provided by IOM's Migrant Protection and Assistance Division in Geneva as well as the IOM Lao People's Democratic Republic country mission.

All data was collected by enumerators, recruited by IOM Lao People's Democratic Republic, over a time period of one month from mid-July to mid-August 2019. In order to establish a positive relationship and sense of trust with the local population, as well as to avoid difficulties due to language barriers between respondents and interviewers, IOM only recruited local border residents who knew both the area and the target population well. All enumerators were Lao nationals.

Respondents were selected on a random basis based on the enumerators' judgement of if those migrants could fall under the category of migrant workers. With the help of some screening questions the enumerators were able to identify migrant workers travelling for labour purposes to and from Thailand.

All enumerators were trained for two days on the survey content, the location set-up and reporting/monitoring procedures. The survey data was collected using the KoboCollect application installed on tablets. The KoboCollect application is connected to the DTM server in Geneva, and it automatically uploads completed surveys to the system. This allows for an efficient process whereby daily data entries and target compliances can be monitored in real time. The data was analyzed using both the SPSS statistics program and Microsoft Excel. The results are primarily based on cross-tabulations, in addition to some t-/chi-tests.

Data Limitations

Regarding data collected using Tool 2 (returning Lao migrants), the sample size is rather small (n=152). Particularly when referring to sub-samples of this population, the sample sizes can become even smaller and results may not be representative. The report will point out this potential bias whenever relevant to the interpretation of data findings. For numeric variables such as remittances, wages and the cost of migration, large outliers were removed from the analysis to avoid skewing results. In some cases, this might lead to slight inaccuracies in the results, especially when taking the mean of these numeric variables. In order to keep this bias to a minimum, we present different range brackets for remittances, wages and journey costs. The data collected should also not be regarded as representative of all Lao migrants travelling to Thailand or returning to Lao People's Democratic Republic as the data collection activity only provides information on those Lao nationals that enter or exit through selected data collection points in Vientiane. This data cannot provide any information on migrants who were using other entry and exit locations in Lao People's Democratic Republic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before analyzing the data collected during DTM activities in Vientiane Capital, this section explores existing literature on the key thematic areas in this study to identify existing data gaps on Lao migrant workers in Thailand. The first section summarizes existing research on the profile of Lao migrant workers in Thailand. The drivers of migration, as well as the preparations and arrangements that migrants make before leaving Lao People's Democratic Republic will be explored in sections two and three. The last two sections will investigate research that has been conducted on the vulnerabilities migrant workers face in Thailand and throughout their employment experience, as well as their return intentions and the challenges associated with return to Lao People's Democratic Republic. Finally, the review will conclude with a short section on data gaps and how the DTM FMS-data aims to address these gaps.



Picture 3 - DTM Enumerator Entering Data on her Tablet

Current Trends in Labour Migration from Lao People's Democratic Republic to Thailand

Thematic Area 1 – Migrant Profiles

In 2017, approximately 1.3 million Lao nationals resided abroad, around 54 per cent of them female (UNDESA, 2018). Thailand is the most common destination for Lao nationals with the number of migrants increasing steadily and almost doubling in under three years – from 122,437 in 2014 to 223,827 in 2017 (UNTWG, 2019). Among the migrants registered in 2017 and referred to in the UNTWG's Thailand Migration Report (2019), 78,197 Lao nationals came to Thailand under the MOU process, 76,141 migrants completed the national verification (NV)² process and 69,489 migrants registered at One Stop Service Centres³. However, these numbers do not include irregular migrants who might enter and work in Thailand without proper documentation and/or might not register at all. UNODC (2013) estimated that around 44,000 migrants are smuggled from Lao People's Democratic Republic to Thailand annually.

2 National verification (NV) process refers to a process of registering irregular migrant workers with a view to granting them work permits in Thailand (UNTWG, 2019).

3 One Stop Service Centres provide temporary legal status for irregular migrants while they apply for National Verification

The survey to assess potential changes in Lao migration patterns to Thailand (n=1,209) conducted by IOM (2016) indicated that 78 per cent of migrants were aged between 19 to 35 years. In terms of marital status, 48.2 per cent reported to be single, 47.2 per cent were married, and the remaining 3.7 per cent were divorced. Among those who were married, 72.7 per cent indicated having children, of which 58.2 per cent had left their children in Lao People's Democratic Republic and 34.1 per cent reported to have travelled with their children to Thailand. According to the same IOM study, Lao migrants to Thailand originated mostly from rural areas and covered all three main ethnic groups of Lao People's Democratic Republic: namely Lao Loum, Lao Soong and Lao Theung. IOM's (2016) study found that the most common places of origin for migrants are the bordering provinces of Champasack (33.2%), Vientiane Capital (21.8%), and Savannakhet (10.3%). This might be explained by the proximity of border provinces to Thailand.

According to the Lao labour force survey conducted by the Lao Statistics Bureau (2018), the total population of Lao People's Democratic Republic in 2017 was 6.9 million. Of this number, 4.8 million were identified as being of working age (15 years and above) which is equivalent to 69 per cent of the total population. The labour force survey indicated that about two-thirds of the working age population have completed some level of schooling, while 20 per cent never attended school and only 5.9 per cent hold a tertiary degree or higher. This corresponds with the survey conducted by IOM (2016) which reported that 74 per cent of Lao migrants had some level of schooling, while 11.4 per cent never attended school or held any kind of formal education. The share of uneducated migrant workers was even higher in the UN-ACT (2018) study on regular and irregular Lao migrants in which 20 per cent of the regular and 31 per cent of the irregular migrants reported not having completed any kind of formal education.

Thematic Area 2 – Drivers of Migration

Drivers of migration from Lao People's Democratic Republic to Thailand are a combination of different factors ranging from the macro to micro level. As mentioned in the previous section, according to the Lao Statistics Bureau (2018), Lao People's Democratic Republic has a relatively young population and a growing labour force. Lao People's Democratic Republic's demographic composition in 2017 included a working age population (15 years and older) of 69 per cent, with 30 per cent being younger than 15 years (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2018). With a young population, Lao People's Democratic Republic has the capacity to supply a high number of workers into its labour market. However, employment opportunities within the country are often limited and payments are considered relatively low especially in rural areas (IOM, 2016). Conversely, the population in Thailand is ageing. Thai workers tend to migrate to other countries for work and are unwilling to take low-skilled jobs, particularly in their own country (UNTWG, 2019). This creates a labour shortage in Thailand, allowing migrant workers from Lao People's Democratic Republic to take those jobs and contribute to driving Thailand's economic development (UNTWG, 2019).

In addition to the differences in the demographic structure between the two countries, unequal socio-economic development is another contributing factor explaining why Lao migrants choose Thailand as their destination (UNTWG, 2019; Harkins, Lindgren, & Suravoranon, 2017; IOM, 2016). Higher wages and job opportunities available in Thailand attract Lao migrants (IOM, 2016). According to the Lao Prime Minister's Office Notification No.560 dated 14 April 2018, the current minimum wage of Lao workers is LAK 1,100,000 per month (USD 126) which translates into approximately USD 6.3 per day. In Thailand it is much higher ranging from THB 303 to 330 per day (USD 10.2 – USD 11)⁴, depending on the province in Thailand (Chicarelli, 2018). The difference in wages encourages Lao workers to work in Thailand. The IOM (2016) study revealed that the main economic factors for migration to Thailand were to obtain better incomes (56.5%) at the place of destination and the lack of job opportunities in the place of origin (30.6%). Other driving factors include encouragement from family and friends, aiming for better experiences and knowledge, and improving living conditions.

4 Exchange rate USD 1 = 8704 LAK; USD 1 = THB 30 as of 12 August 2019

Some literature also draws attention to the influence of socio-cultural factors and individual agency in the migration of young Lao migrants to Thailand. As Barney (2012) states “cross- border labour migration is not simply- or not always- a rational economic process” (p.64). In his research he gives the example of Lao youth in Sivilay village, Khammone province who migrated to Thailand even though they could earn equal or even higher incomes in their village. Barney claimed that local agriculture work seemed far less appealing to rural youth in comparison to urban life in Thailand. This was also found in the research conducted by Phouxay and Tollefsen (2011) on the feminization of Lao rural female migration to the garment factories in Vientiane Capital. Phouxay and Tollefsen claimed that rural females migrate to the city to avoid heavy agriculture work in the field, and to experience the freedom and independence of city life. The non-monetary factors and cultural aspects mentioned help to explain why migrants choose to migrate to cities despite good living conditions at home. A UN-ACT (2015) study on Lao migrant workers being deported from Thailand found that 77.4 of male and 81.4 per cent of female Lao migrants rated their quality of life before migrating as ‘fair to good’. Another UN-ACT (2018) study also reported that regular migrants ranked their quality of life in Lao People’s Democratic Republic on average at 2.8 (on a scale between 1 and 5) and irregular migrants at 3.1. In sum, migration to Thailand results from a combination of factors ranging from demographic, economic, cultural and social factors to the individual agency of migrants.

Thematic Area 3 – Pre-migration Preparations and Arrangements

Lao migrants can cross the border into Thailand through formal and informal crossing points, both with and without official documentation. The expansion of infrastructure such as roads and bridges that connect Lao People’s Democratic Republic to Thailand have facilitated easy movement between the two countries and made it harder to regulate migration (Barney, 2012).

A recent study by IOM and ILO on the risks and rewards of migration in South-East Asia by Harkins, Lindgren, & Suravoranon (2017) showed that the majority of Lao migrants that migrated to Thailand had done so independently (51%) or with the help of family and friends (44%). Less than 4 per cent of migrants reported using formal channels such as licensed government agencies or direct recruitment from employers. Informal brokers were not commonly used. The study also found that Lao migrants tend to use formal migration channels less often than migrants from Viet Nam, Cambodia and Myanmar, who used licensed recruitment agencies in 52 per cent, 26 per cent and 10 per cent of cases. Similarly, the study by IOM (2016) assessing potential changes of Lao migration patterns to Thailand (n=1,209) revealed that the majority of Lao migrants migrated individually (21.3%) or with friends and family (42.9%), while only 22.4 per cent used the formal MOU channels and 13 per cent used brokers. Both studies identify that regular and irregular migrants from Lao People’s Democratic Republic depended less on intermediaries to facilitate their border crossing than nationals from other countries in the Greater Mekong Sub-Region. An important reason for this could be the ability that most Lao nationals have with the Thai language, as well as the longstanding and strong social networks between Lao and Thai people, especially in north-eastern Thailand, making the need for intermediaries less necessary (UN-ACT, 2015). Verité’s (2019) study confirmed that social networks – especially friends and family who had migrated to Thailand before – were important sources of information pre-departure on life and working conditions in Thailand.

Several studies highlight the disadvantages associated with formal migration, including long wait times, high costs and complex documentation procedures (Verité, 2019). The average cost for migrating to Thailand from Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Cambodia, Myanmar and Viet Nam is 251 USD (Harkins, Lindgren, & Suravoranon, 2017). In Lao People’s Democratic Republic, several studies explore the cost for migration of Lao nationals to Thailand. IOM (2016) found that most Lao workers using MOU channels spent more than THB 5,000 and more than one third (36.4%) remained in debt after migrating to Thailand.

Verité (2019) research on the recruitment process of Lao migrants to Thailand found even higher costs, with formal recruitment fees for licensed agencies going up to THB 24,000. Wait times were of around 40

days for the process to be completed. If jobseekers want to migrate through the formal MOU process, the only way is to approach licensed agencies. On the other hand, the study by UN-ACT (2015) found that the average cost of migration for irregular migrants was THB 2,827 which is almost 10 times less compared to the recruitment fee for regular migration as reported in Verité’s study.

Because of the high financial cost of regular migration, along with long wait times and complex procedures, migrants often opt for irregular channels, even though there is an element of risk, as it offers more flexibility, is quicker and carries fewer costs (Verité, 2019; UN-ACT, 2015). The main sources used to finance migration include personal savings, borrowing from family and friends, wage deductions arranged with employers in Thailand or selling property and belongings (Harkins, Lindgren, & Suravoranon, 2017; IOM, 2016). Some of these payment methods such as borrowing money or arranging wage deductions are often assumed to increase vulnerability as they expose migrants to the risk of indebtedness and/or exploitation.

Thematic Area 4 – Migrant Vulnerabilities

A UNODC report summarises the vulnerability of irregular migrants in the following way:

“Irregular migrants from Cambodia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Myanmar are particularly vulnerable to deception, coercion, violence, exploitation and trafficking due to a number of factors, including their irregular status, fear of deportation, lack of knowledge of their rights and of the laws applicable to them, language barriers and limited access to authorities and people outside their workplace. These vulnerabilities and the risks of exploitation are amplified for women, children and persons with special needs” (UNODC, 2017, p.196-197)

The lack of knowledge about rights and legal entitlements increases the vulnerability of both regular and irregular migrants. Since migrant workers often lack knowledge about the rights and benefits they are entitled to receive, they may be less likely to seek remedy for unfair treatment such as not being paid proper wages or overtime, and enduring long working hours and poor work conditions (Harkins, Lindgren, & Suravoranon, 2017). When migrants agree to verbal agreements with their employers instead of entering into written contracts, this can also prevent them from accessing legal protection, social welfare and healthcare, and make them easy targets for exploitation (UNTWG, 2019).

The UN-ACT (2015) study on Lao migrants being deported from Thailand suggests that around 70 per cent



Picture 4 - DTM Interview with a Lao Migrant at a Bus Station in Vientiane

of male workers and 55 per cent of female workers worked seven days a week. In terms of working hours, 33 per cent of female workers worked 12 hours or more per day, compared to 15 per cent of male workers. The domestic work sector, which is often female dominated, has the longest working hours. Although workers from the UN-ACT study reported long working hours, 85 per cent of male and 95 per cent of female workers ranked their working conditions as 'fair to good'. Also, 90 per cent of both male and female respondents rated their relationships with employers as 'positive' (UN-ACT, 2015).

Regarding the vulnerabilities associated with language barriers, migrants who are unable to communicate and understand the language of their destination country are more vulnerable. This is due to the difficulties associated with claiming rights, and potential challenges in understanding employment terms. Compared to other migrants from neighbouring countries, Lao migrants tend to have a better understanding of the Thai language due to its similarity to the Lao language, hence providing Lao migrants with the ability to negotiate with employers and better understand their employment conditions. As a result of this language proficiency, UN-ACT (2015) revealed that 33 per cent of Lao workers were employed in the service sector, compared to only 3 per cent of Cambodian migrant workers.

The UN-ACT (2015) research also showed that Lao migrant workers, on average, earned twice as much as Cambodian workers (THB 7,000 versus THB 3,344 per month) and were also more likely to receive their salaries on time. The wage difference can be attributed to Lao migrants understanding Thai, which enables them to choose from a wide range of jobs and be preferred by employers over migrants who don't speak Thai (UN-ACT, 2015). However, this study has a rather small sample and should not be generalised to represent the overall experiences of Lao migrants in Thailand. It can, however, be a good example to highlight how language can play an important role in mitigating migrants' vulnerabilities. The UN-ACT (2018) study reports similar findings, however also hints at the difference between regular and irregular migrants: "The mean monthly salary after deductions among the regular migrant workers was THB 6,667, whereas the irregular migrant workers' 'actual salary' averaged THB 6,864. The former was 3.8 times higher than the regular migrant workers' mean income in the Lao People's Democratic Republic prior to migrating" (p. 73).

The number of Lao migrants in Thailand irregularly remains unclear, but some suggest it to be higher than the number of regular migrants (UNODC, 2017). According to UNODC (2017) (2013), labour trafficking and labour exploitation are common occurrences particularly for irregular migrants. Often, traffickers deceive migrants about their salary, type of work, working conditions and benefits. In some cases, smugglers and traffickers control the freedom and movement of the migrants, withholding personal documents and imposing threats towards them and their families (UNODC, 2013; UNODC, 2017).

Thematic Area 5 – Return

There are similar findings across the various studies on migrants returning back to Lao People's Democratic Republic. Most Lao migrants reported returning to Lao People's Democratic Republic voluntarily. In Harkins, Lindgren, and Suravoranon's (2017) study, 96 per cent of Lao migrants returned to Lao People's Democratic Republic voluntarily due to family obligations (42%) and homesickness (40%). In contrast, a small percentage (4%) of migrants returned home involuntarily due to deportation, exploitation, end of visa/ work permit or lost job opportunities. This was echoed in IOM's study (2016) which found that 80.4 per cent of returning migrants cited their reason for return as joining family and friends back home. Among those returning home, there were a number who reported that they were considering migrating to Thailand again. UN-ACT (2015) found that 25 per cent of female deportees indicated being eager to migrate to Thailand soon after leaving the Lao immigration office, compared to only 7.6 per cent of male respondents. Ninety per cent of the male respondents reported the intention to return to their place of origin. Harkins, Lindgren, and Suravoranon (2017) stated that after returning to Lao People's Democratic Republic, more than half of the Lao migrants had found work in the agricultural sector (59%) and 18 per cent remained unemployed. In terms of savings before and after migration, almost half of the Lao migrants (48%) reported that their savings had increased

after returning home. Another 38 per cent reported there was no change and their savings had remained the same, while 14 per cent had less savings than before migration (Harkins, Lindgren & Suravoranon, 2017).

Data Gaps

Of the existing research that explores the topic of labour migration from Lao People's Democratic Republic to Thailand, many sources emphasize macro level factors such as the impact of socio-economic dynamics and policies affecting migration. Conversely, some explore this issue on a micro scale and focus on the social perspective. UNODC, for example, is more likely to research aspects related to human trafficking and vulnerabilities associated with cross border migration. IOM tends to look at the broader picture and cover many areas - flow of migrants, drivers of migration, risk associated with the journey, vulnerabilities and return. However, literature related exclusively to labour migration from Lao People's Democratic Republic to Thailand remains largely limited. Previous studies obtained data from migrants who had lived in Thailand and already returned to Lao People's Democratic Republic or from Lao nationals who planned to migrate. This study will collect data from Lao migrants who are on their journey – on their way to go to Thailand or returning from their migration experience, using international border checkpoints (the Friendship Bridge) in Vientiane. As a result, it will explore the preparation and expectations of migrants prior to migration, as well as their experiences and challenges after migration. This study will focus on those who are migrating for longer periods as well as those who are crossing the border for daily or seasonal employment. The five thematic areas covered by this study aim to fill certain knowledge gaps and provide a comprehensive understanding of Lao labour migration to Thailand.

DATA ANALYSIS

In the period between 17 July and 16 August 2019 IOM Lao People's Democratic Republic collected a total of 401 surveys with two questionnaire tools designed using the DTM Flow Monitoring component and adapted to fit the context of Lao People's Democratic Republic. To capture the migrant population traveling from Lao People's Democratic Republic to Thailand, at the beginning of the Tool 1 survey migrants were asked if they intended to stay in Thailand or if they had plans to travel further. The results show that all migrants surveyed under Tool 1 reported that they intended to stay in Thailand.

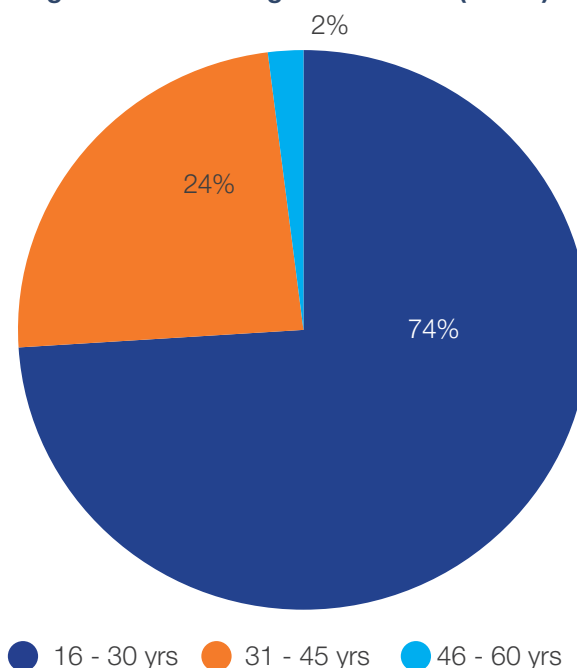
In total, 249 surveys were collected with Tool 1 (Outgoing Lao nationals) and 152 surveys with Tool 2 (Returning Lao nationals). The analysis section below follows the same structure as the literature review and provides an analysis of data by thematic area. Whenever possible the study also establishes relationships and cross tabulations between the different thematic areas.

Thematic Area 1 – Migrant Profiles

Socio-demographic Profiles

As the study is interested in capturing the movement of Lao nationals migrating to and from Thailand, the survey included a question ensuring that only migrants of Lao origin were included in the sample. All respondents identified themselves as being Lao nationals. The sex distribution of the sample consists of 152 female respondents (38%) and 249 male respondents (62%). The sex distribution in the two sample populations (outgoing and returning migrants) is almost identical. The share of female respondents for returning migrants was 39.5 per cent in comparison to 37 per cent of outgoing migrants. For the whole sample the average age is 28 years old. Returning migrants were slightly older with an average age of 29 years old in comparison to an average age of 27.5 for the outgoing sample. For both groups, most of the respondents are between the ages of 16 and 30 (78% for outgoing migrants and 68% for returning migrants). The share of 46 to 60 year-old respondents is larger for returning migrants (3% versus 0.5%). In line with previous research on Lao migrant workers, the data shows that a larger share of all respondents reported to be single (54% single versus 41.5% married). A total of 3.5 per cent reported to be divorced or separated and 0.5 per cent were engaged to be married. It was found that females were slightly more likely to be married than their male counterparts (45.5% vs. 39%).

Figure 3 - Overall Age Breakdown (n=401)



● 16 - 30 yrs ● 31 - 45 yrs ● 46 - 60 yrs

Roughly 39 per cent of the migrants also reported having children. Over 90 per cent cited only one location when asked where the children were located at the time of interview. The large majority (80%) reported that at least one of their children was still living in Lao People’s Democratic Republic. Roughly 20 per cent also reported that their children were living in Thailand and 6 per cent reported that their child/children were travelling with them to or from Thailand.

Figure 4 - Location of Children (n=156)

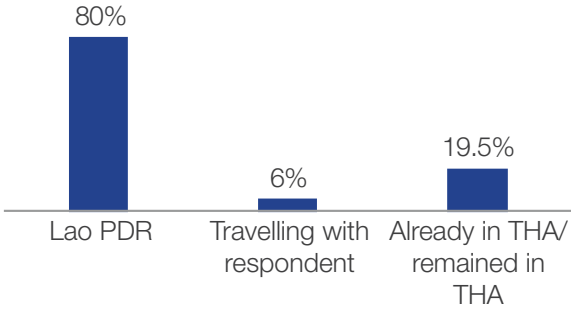
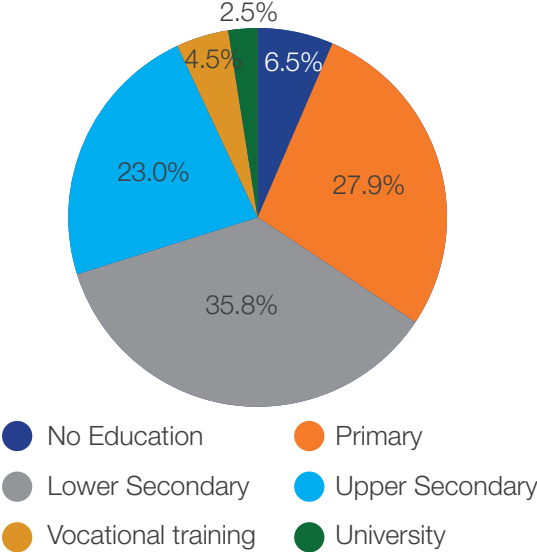


Figure 5 - Overall Level of Education (n=401)



The data shows similar education levels for both outgoing and returning migrants. The largest share reported to have completed lower secondary education (36%), followed by respondents with primary education (28%) and upper secondary education (23%). Additionally, 4.5 per cent had completed vocational training and 2.5 per cent had completed a university degree. Only 6.5 per cent (26 respondents) had not completed any formal education. The data shows that the male sample had a larger share of uneducated respondents (8% versus 4%).

Provinces of Origin

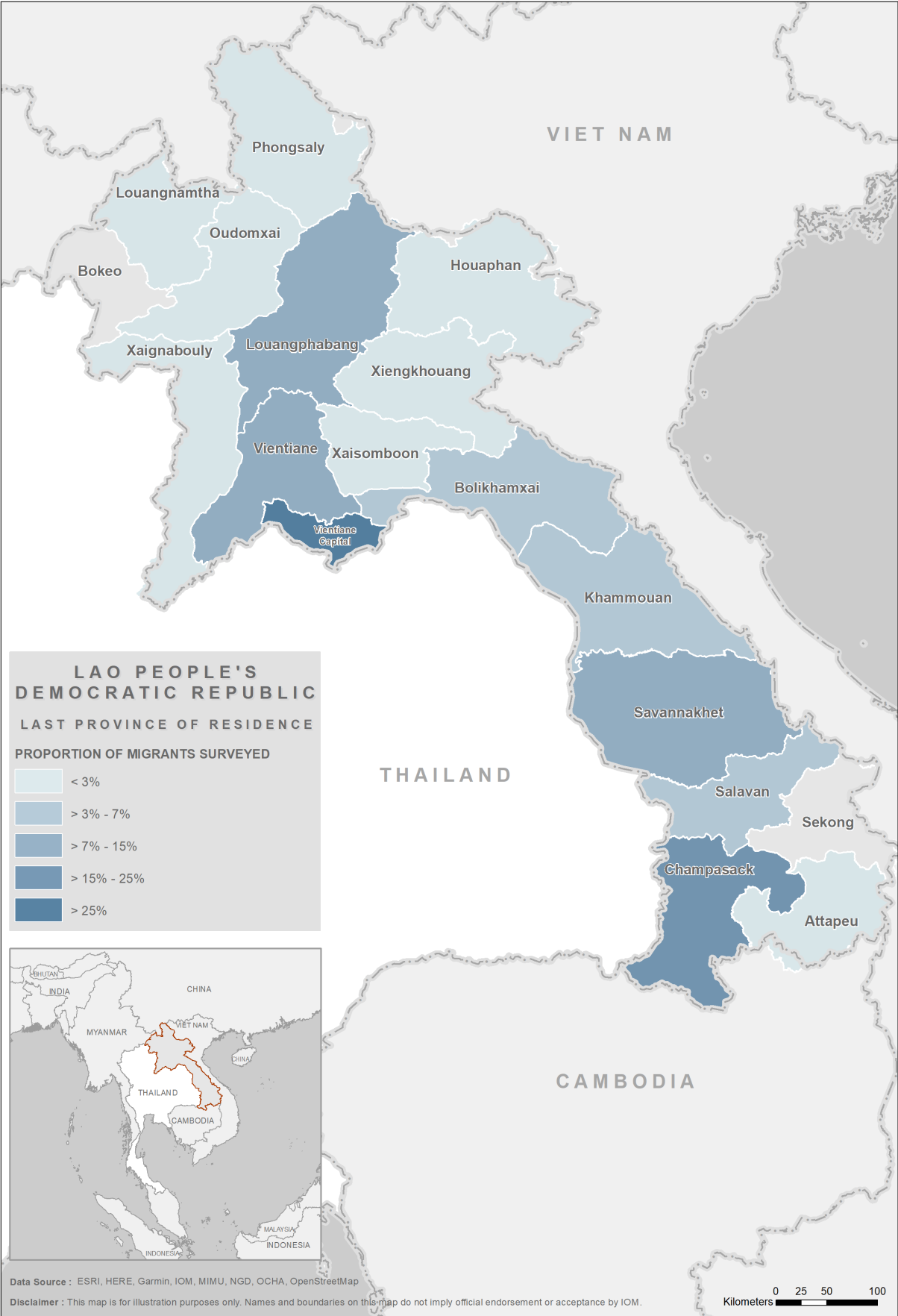
All respondents cited Lao People’s Democratic Republic as their last place of residence prior to their migration. Vientiane Capital (28%), Champasack (19%) and Savannakhet (14%) were the three provinces most often named of provinces of origin (see Table 2 and Map 1).

Table 2 - Provinces of Origin

Origin Location – Total (n=401)		
Province	#	%
1. Vientiane Capital	112	27.93%
2. Champasack	76	18.95%
3. Savannakhet	56	13.97%
4. Vientiane Province	32	7.98%
5. Luang Prabang	32	7.98%
6. Bolikhamxay	21	5.24%
7. Khammuane	18	4.49%
8. Saravane	14	3.49%
9. Other	40	9.98%

In terms of ethnic origins, the majority of the sample identified as being Lao Loum (89%), 7 per cent identified as Khamou, and the remaining 4 per cent identified as Tai, Hmong, Phouthay and Ta-oy.

Map 1 - Provinces of Origin in Lao People's Democratic Republic



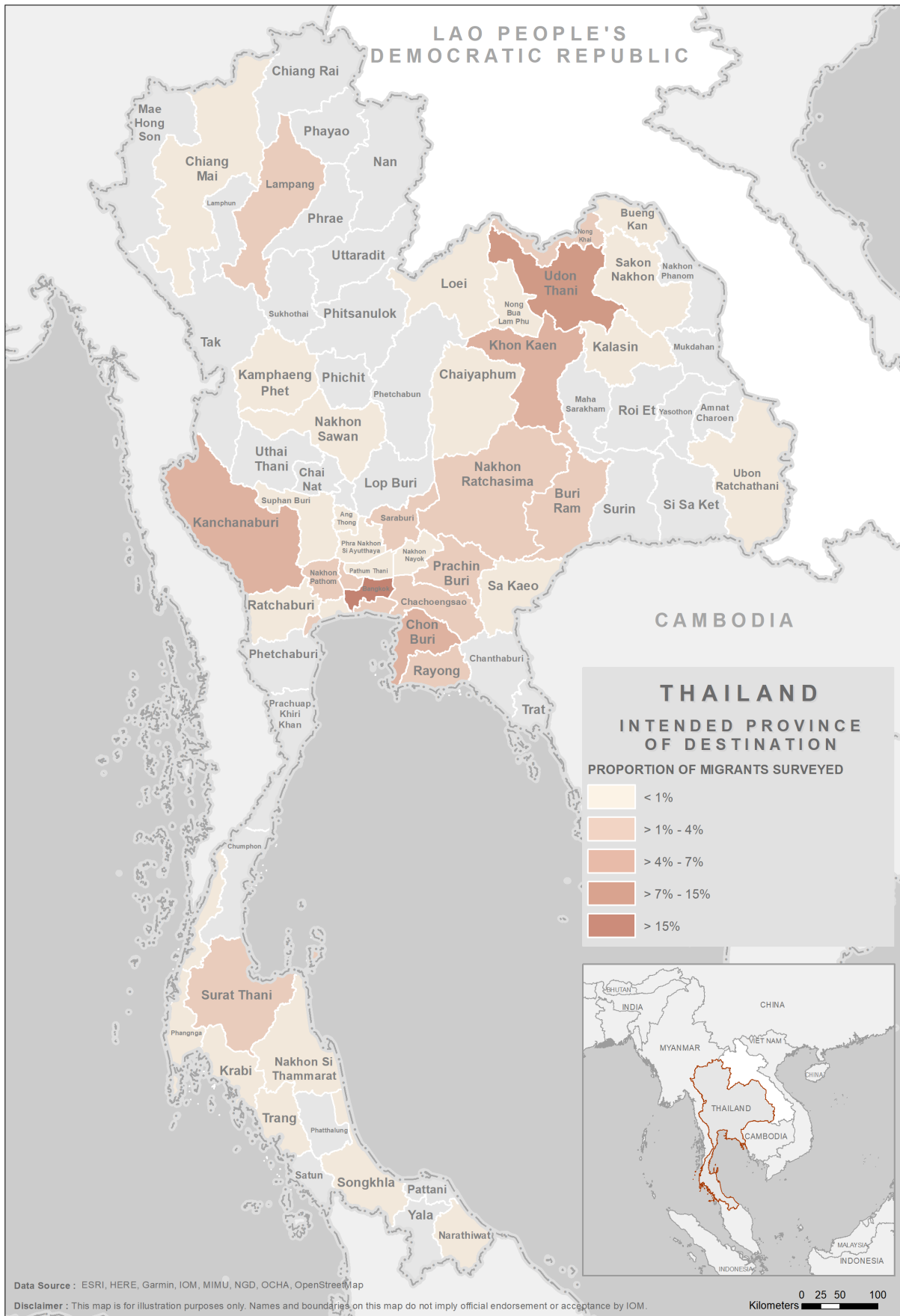
Provinces of Destination

In order to establish a comprehensive profile of Lao nationals migrating to Thailand, it is also important to identify their intended provinces of destination within Thailand. Knowing their destinations can provide valuable information on migration patterns, ultimately allowing for more targeted programmatic interventions. While outgoing migrants were asked about their intended province of destination in Thailand, returning migrants were asked which provinces they had lived in during their last migration experience. For both samples most of the respondents intended to go (outgoing migrants, 19%) or went (returning migrants, 20%) to Bangkok. The second most popular destination was Udon Thani, a province not far from Vientiane capital (12% for outgoing and 10.5% for returning migrants). Another 7 per cent of the outgoing sample and 9 per cent of the returning sample cited Chon Buri as their destination in Thailand. The neighbouring province of Nong Khai was also a relatively common destination for returning migrants (12%), however was cited less often by outgoing migrants (3.5%).

Table 3 - Provinces of Destination by Population Group

Intended Province of Destination – Outgoing Migrants (n=249)			Province of Destination – Returning Migrants (n=152)		
Province	#	%	Province	#	%
Bangkok	48	19.28%	Bangkok	31	20.39%
Udon Thani	30	12.05%	Nong Khai	18	11.84%
Chon Buri	17	6.83%	Udon Thani	16	10.53%
Kanchanaburi	15	6.2%	Samut Sakhon	15	9.87%
Khon Kaen	11	4.42%	Chon Buri	14	9.21%
Rayong	9	3.61%	Trang	10	6.58%
Nong Khai	9	3.61%	Khon Kaen	9	5.92%
Nakhon Ratchasima	8	3.21%	Surat Thani	7	4.61%
Samut Songkhram	7	2.81%	Rayong	4	2.63%
Other	95	38.18%	Other	28	18.42%

Map 2 - Intended Provinces of Destination (Outgoing Migrants)

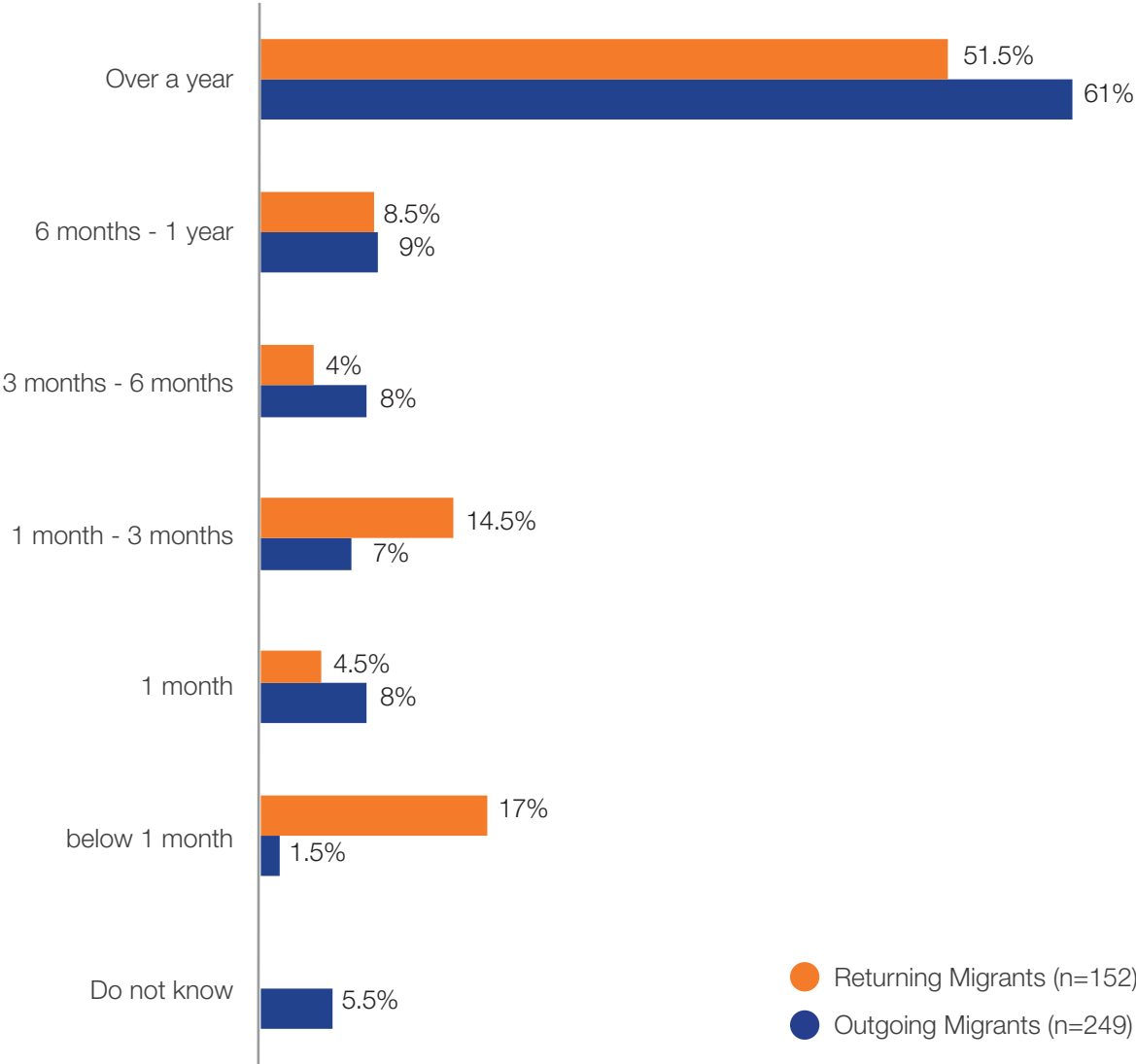


Duration of Stay

The survey for incoming migrants found that the expected or planned duration of stay in Thailand for the majority of respondents (61%) was more than a year. Roughly 9 per cent indicated that they intended to stay in Thailand for six months to one year, while 8 per cent intended to stay between three and six months and 8 per cent intended to stay for one month. Almost six per cent of respondents were not sure of their intended duration of stay and below 2 per cent of respondents wanted to migrate for period of less than a month.

Comparing these findings with the data from the return sample, the majority (51.5%) also left Lao People’s Democratic Republic over a year ago, however, 17 per cent left between two and three weeks ago. Another 14.5 per cent left Lao People’s Democratic Republic between two and three months prior to the survey. The share of those that left between six months and one year ago is 8.5 per cent. The return sample was further asked about their intended duration of stay. It was found that only 14.5 per cent (22 respondents) reported that their intended and actual duration of stay in Thailand did not match.

Figure 6 - Expected Duration of Stay in Thailand (Outgoing Migrants) vs Actual Duration of Stay in Thailand (Returning Migrants) n=401



Thematic Area 2 – Drivers of Migration

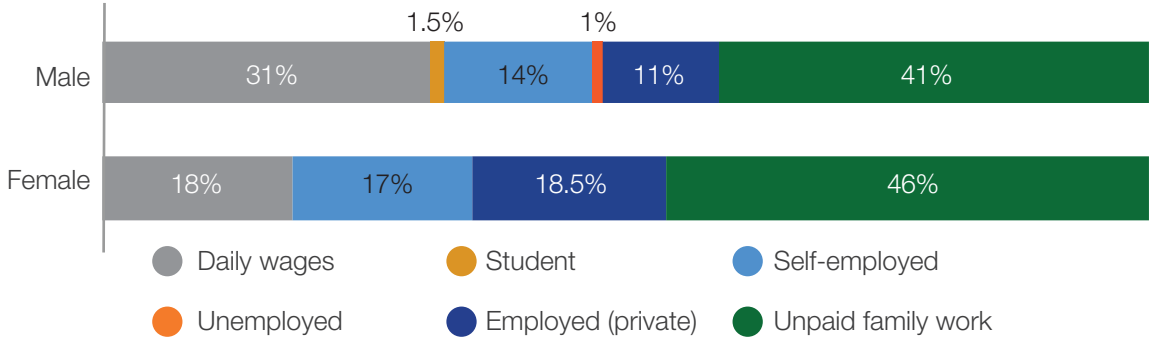
Although previous literature discusses ‘push and pull factors’ for migration from Lao People’s Democratic Republic, this analysis takes a more holistic approach to the process to shed additional light on why Lao migrants choose Thailand as their primary destination over other countries in the region.

Previous employment

The data reveals that the majority of respondents reported that prior to migration they were engaged in unpaid family work (43%). Unpaid family work can mean several things, such as helping in a family owned business, working on a family member’s farm, or taking care of children. However, none of the respondents categorized this kind of work as unemployment. Additionally, some respondents were engaged in daily wage labour (26%) or were self-employed (15%) and one per cent reported to be unemployed prior to migration.

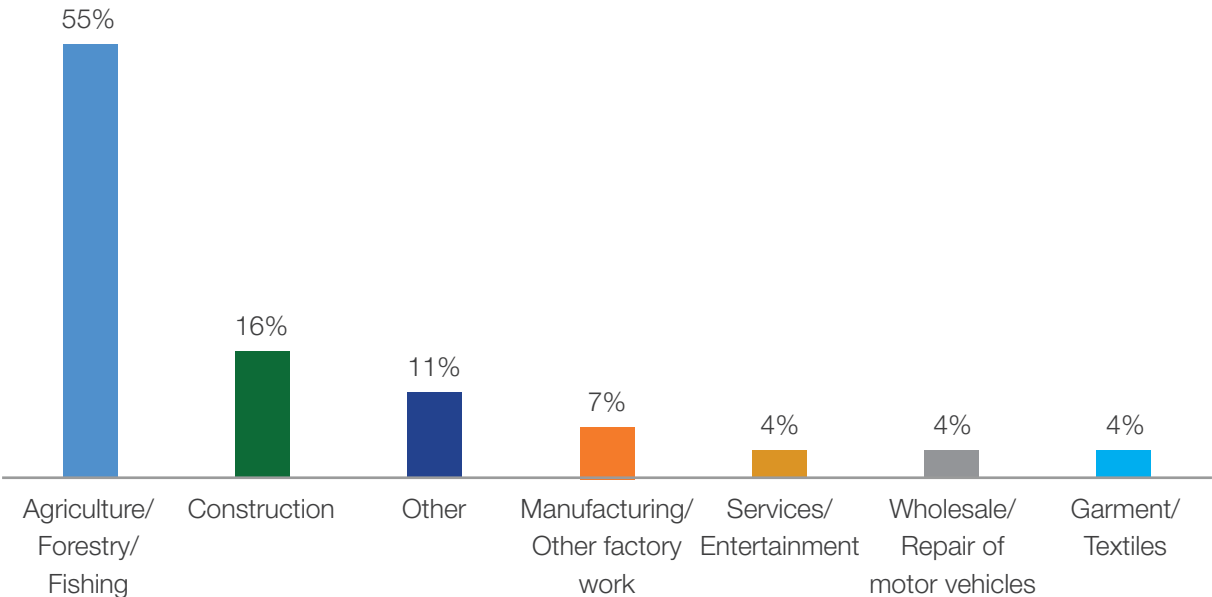
A higher proportion of female respondents indicated being privately employed than male respondents (18.5% versus 11%). Similarly, unpaid family work was higher for females than males (46% versus 41%). Male respondents were more likely to be working under daily wage employment conditions (31% versus 18%).

Figure 7 - Status of Employment before Migration by Sex



Prior to their migration, respondents were most commonly employed in the agricultural sector (55%), the construction sector (16%) and the manufacturing sector (7%). The proportions vary depending on the sample population. Returning migrants were more likely to be employed in the agricultural sector (57% versus 53%) whereas outgoing migrants were more likely to be employed in the construction industry (19% versus 10.5%).

Figure 8 - Overall Sectors of Employment before Migration (n=401)

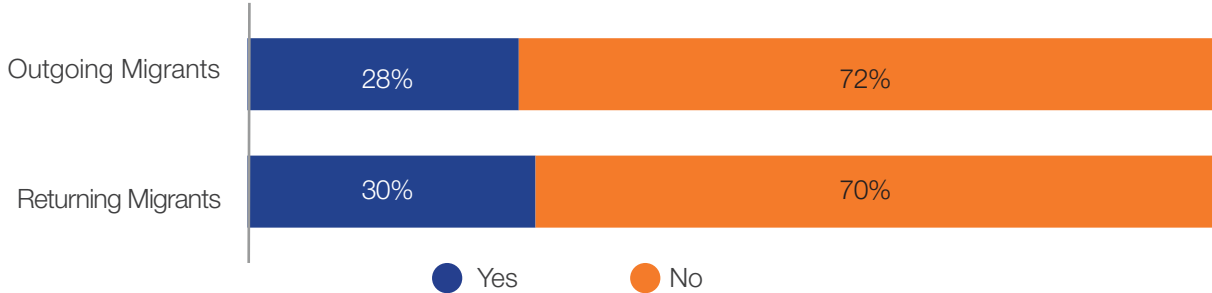


Reasons for Migration

Some respondents cited multiple reasons for migration, however, for the majority of both groups employment was the main reason for migrating to Thailand (89% for outgoing migrants, 93% for returning migrants and 90% overall). Other reasons cited for migration included their spouse’s employment (6%), a workplace transfer⁵ (5%) and visiting family/ friends (4%).

Of the 10 per cent that did not state employment or a workplace transfer as their reason for leaving Lao People’s Democratic Republic, they were asked if they either planned to work in Thailand during their stay (outgoing migrants) or if they had worked during their stay in Thailand (returning migrants). All respondents confirmed that they planned to work or that they did work during their stay in Thailand.

Figure 9 - First Migration to Thailand for Employment by Population Group



To better understand the migration patterns of the sample population, the respondents were asked if this was their first experience of migrating to Thailand for work. Of the outflow sample, 70 per cent reported that they had previously migrated and 72 per cent of the returnee sample reported they had previously migrated. For those that had previously worked in Thailand, the main sectors of employment were manufacturing (25%), the hotel/accommodation/food service industry (22%), agriculture/forestry (21.5%) and construction (16%).

When asked why they preferred to migrate to Thailand over another country in the region, the most common reasons given included easy access to the Thai job market (52%), the geographical proximity of Thailand (40%), higher incomes (38%) as well as having friends (16%) and family (14%) in Thailand.

Respondents were also asked how they obtained their information about life in Thailand. The majority (76%) cited family and friends in Thailand as their main source of information, followed by social media (20%), their own experiences (19%), recruitment agencies (11.5%) as well as people that previous lived in Thailand (8%) and family/friends in Lao People’s Democratic Republic (6.5%). Looking at the sex distribution, the data shows that female respondents are more likely to rely on family and friends in Thailand than male respondents (86% versus 70%). Female respondents also more often used social media as their source of information (25% versus 16.5%). Male respondents, however, more often reported to rely on their own experiences (20.5% versus 16.5%) or on information from recruitment agencies (14% versus 8%).

5 A workplace transfer means that the job was relocated to Thailand, e.g. because the business, or services moved there.



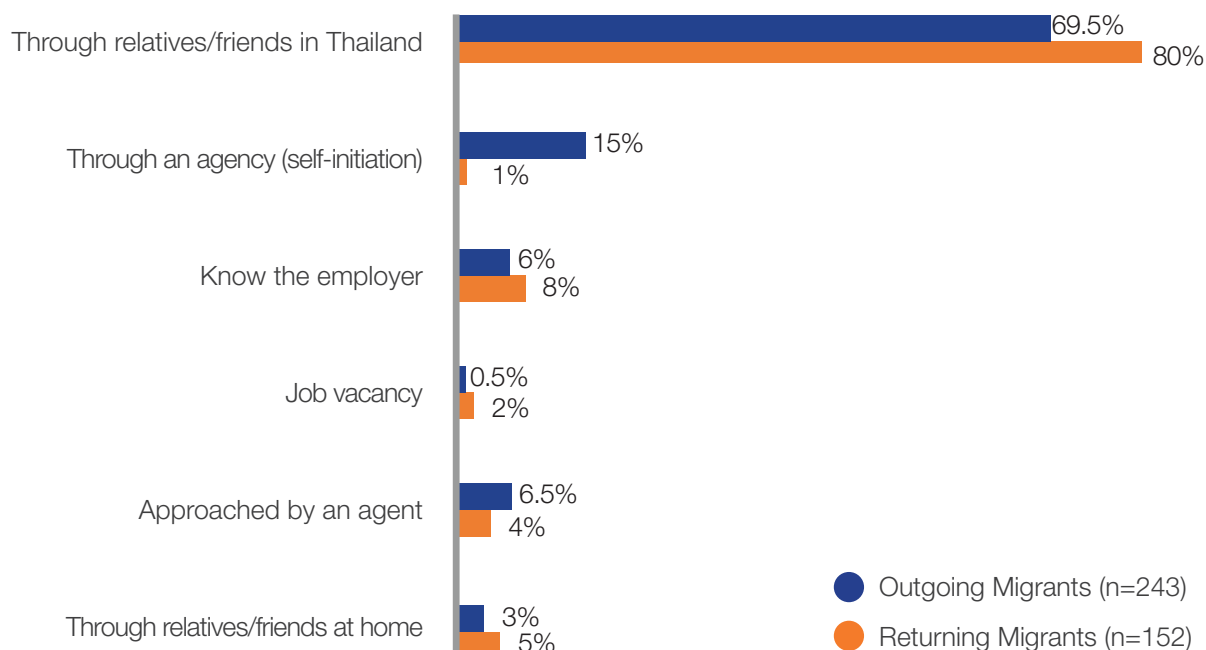
Picture 5 - Interview with a Lao Migrant on the Bus to the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge, close to Vientiane Capital

Thematic Area 3 – Pre-migration Preparations and Arrangements

Employment Arrangements

Understanding migrants’ preparations and arrangements prior to migration is crucial to identifying potential vulnerabilities that could emerge from the lack of informed decision making. Respondents were asked if they had a job in place before they started their journey to Thailand. For both population groups, the overwhelming majority reported to have a job already lined up before leaving Lao People’s Democratic Republic (97% for outgoing migrants and 99% for returning migrants). The majority of both samples (70% for outgoing migrants, 80% for returning migrants, and 73.5% in total) cited the help of family and friends in Thailand in securing a job. For outgoing migrants, agencies played a role for 15 per cent of respondents. For returning migrants, 8 per cent indicated having found their job through knowing the employer (see Figure 10).

Figure 10 - How Employment was Obtained by Population Group (n=395)



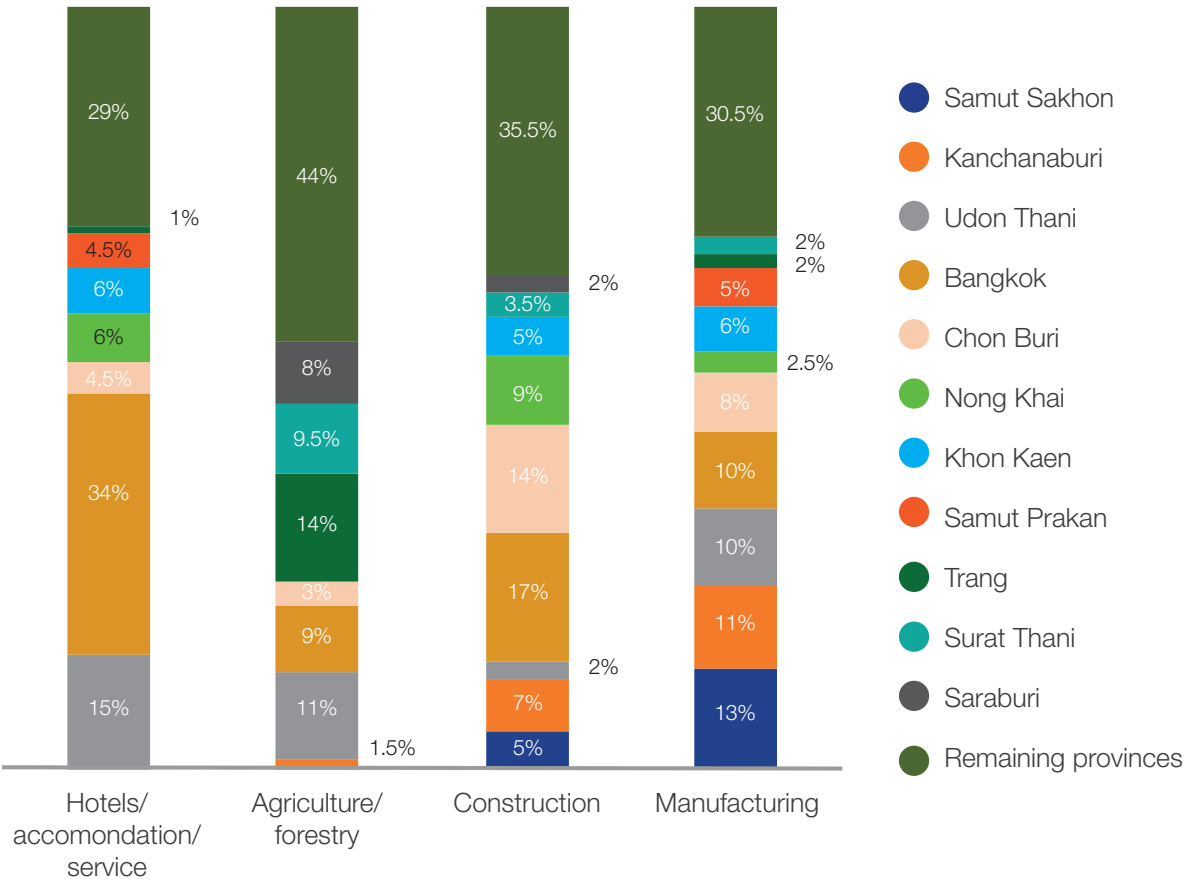
The respondents were further asked about the sector of employment for their jobs in Thailand. In both samples, the four main sectors of employment were manufacturing/other factory work, the hotel/accommodation/food service sector, agriculture/forestry or construction work. The proportions are similar for the first two employment sectors, however, vary for the agricultural and construction sectors (see Table 4).

Table 4 - Main Sectors of Employment in Thailand by Population Group

Tool 1 – Outgoing Migrants (n=249)			Tool 2 – Returning Migrants (n=152)			Total (n=401)		
Sector	#	%	Sector	#	%	Sector	#	%
1. Hotels/ accommodation/ food services	55	22.63%	1. Manufacturing	37	24.34%	1. Manufacturing	91	23.04%
2. Manufacturing	54	22.22%	2. Hotels/ accommodation/ food services	33	21.71%	2. Hotels/ accommodation/ food services	88	22.28%
3. Construction	42	17.28%	3. Agriculture/ forestry	30	19.74%	3. Agriculture/ forestry	63	15.95%
4. Agriculture/ forestry	33	13.58%	4. Construction	14	9.21%	4. Construction	56	14.18%
5. Repair of motor vehicles	18	7.41%	5. Repair of motor vehicles	12	7.89%	5. Repair of motor vehicles	30	7.59%
6. Wholesale retail/ trade	14	5.76%	6. Wholesale retail/ trade	8	5.26%	6. Wholesale retail/ trade	22	5.57%
7. Other	27	11.11%	7. Other	18	11.84%	7. Other	45	11.39%

Comparing the four primary sectors of employment with the province of destination in Thailand shows that Bangkok, Udon Thani and Chon Buri are destinations for all four main employment sectors. The exact breakdown for employment sectors by province is outlined in Figure 11.

Figure 11 - Top 4 Sectors of Employment by Province of Destination (n=401)

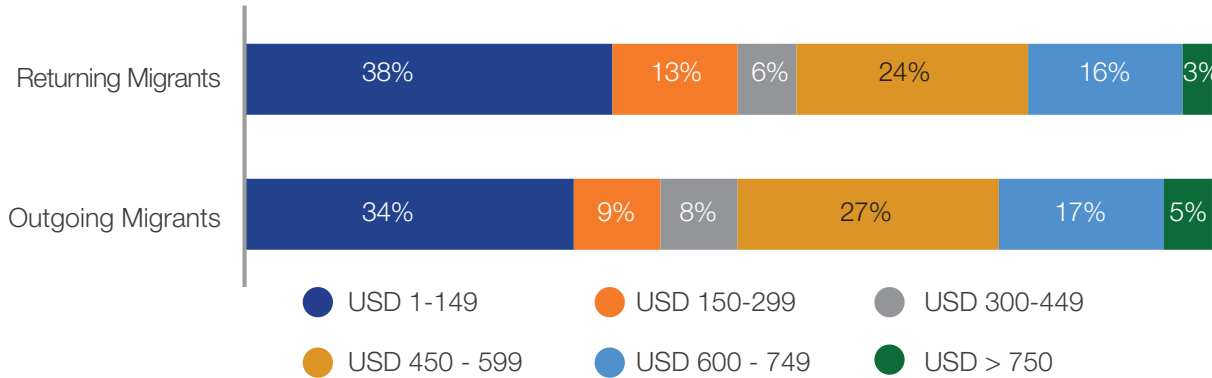


Migration Costs

Migrants were also asked about the cost of their journeys and sources to finance migration. On average, migrants spent 360 USD for their migration (USD 371 for outgoing and USD 340 for returning migrants). In other Flow Monitoring Survey research returning migrants usually spent more on their journey than outgoing migrants because outgoing migrants had not yet reached their final destination. Looking at the documentation status of Lao respondents, however, a potential explanation for the discrepancy could be attributed to the large share of outgoing respondents travelling to Thailand with work permits related to the MoU process, requiring high documentation costs to be paid before the start of the journey.

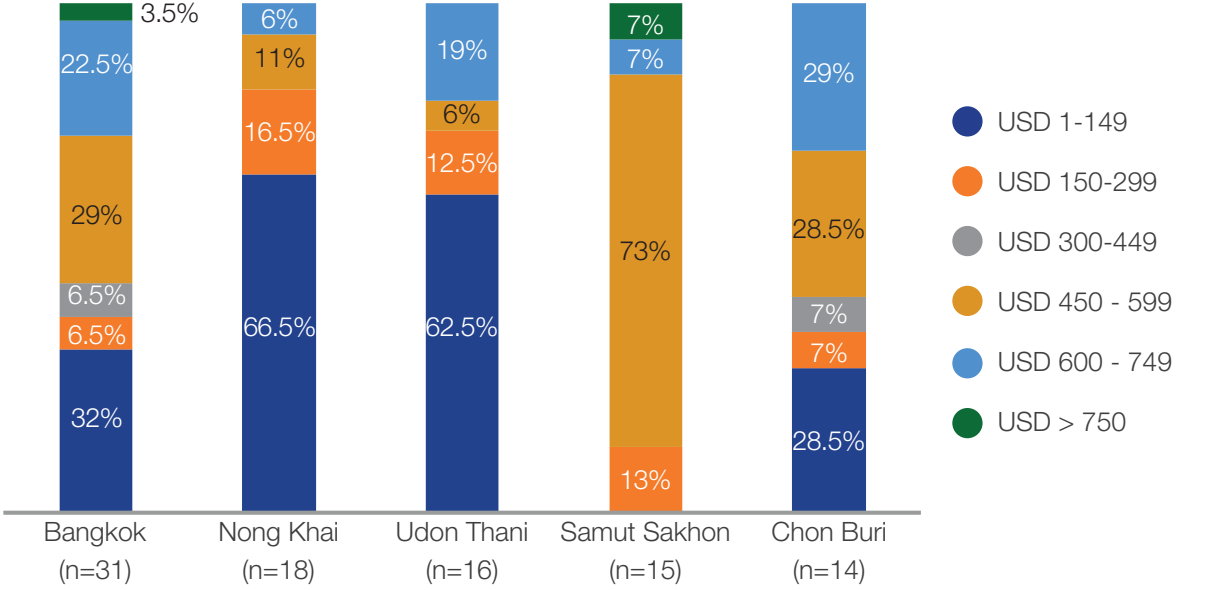
Breaking the costs into different cost brackets, the data shows that there is no clear pattern in the migration costs. The largest shares are paying amounts in the lowest cost bracket (USD 1-149) or in the cost bracket between USD 450 and 599 (see Figure 12).

Figure 12 - Migration Costs by Population Group (n=401)



Migrants going through regular channels are assumed, from previous research, to incur higher migration costs. Furthermore, migrants that travel to neighbouring provinces are known to pay less than migrants that travel to provinces further into Thailand. This is confirmed by the data, which shows that migrants returning from provinces further from the border reported higher migration costs. Conversely, migration to border provinces such as Nong Khai or Udon Thani, is associated with lower costs (see Figure 13)⁶.

Figure 13 - Overall Migration Cost by Province of Destination (Returning Migrants) n=152

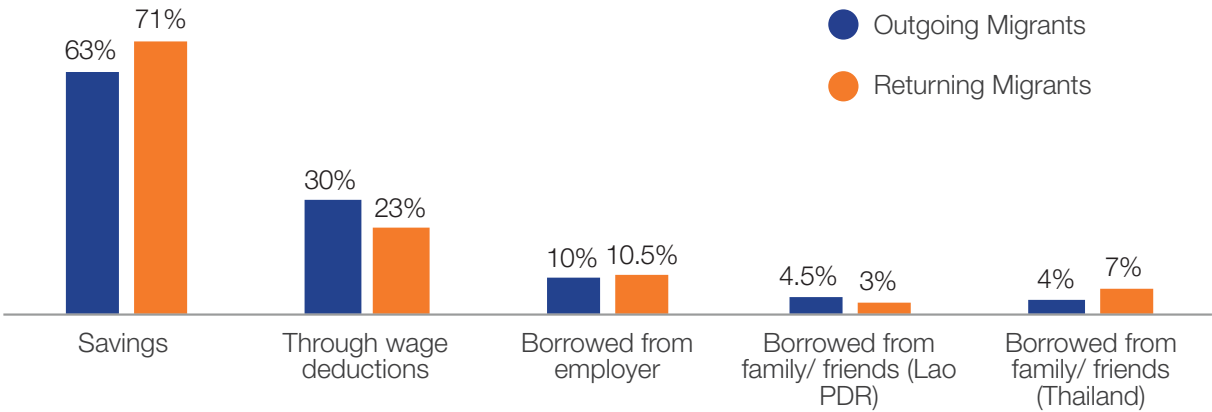


⁶ Due to the small sample size of returning migrants, the subsamples for each destination location are very small and results should not be over interpreted

In terms of documentation status, those migrants travelling on a ‘travel document for overseas migrant workers’⁷ (connected to the MoU) were most likely to be paying costs over USD 450 (88%). In the case of migrants travelling on passports with no visas⁸, 64 per cent paid amounts in the lowest cost bracket (USD 1-149) and 21 per cent paid amounts in the second lowest bracket (USD 150-299). This data also supports previous research indicating that migration through the formal MoU process is especially costly.

If migration costs are overly high, this can lead migrants to enter into debt, which can result in increased vulnerabilities. Migrants were therefore asked how they financed their journeys. For both samples, the most common source of funding was financial savings. However, some migrants reported to have agreed wage deductions with employers in Thailand or to have borrowed money directly from their employer (see Figure 14)⁹.

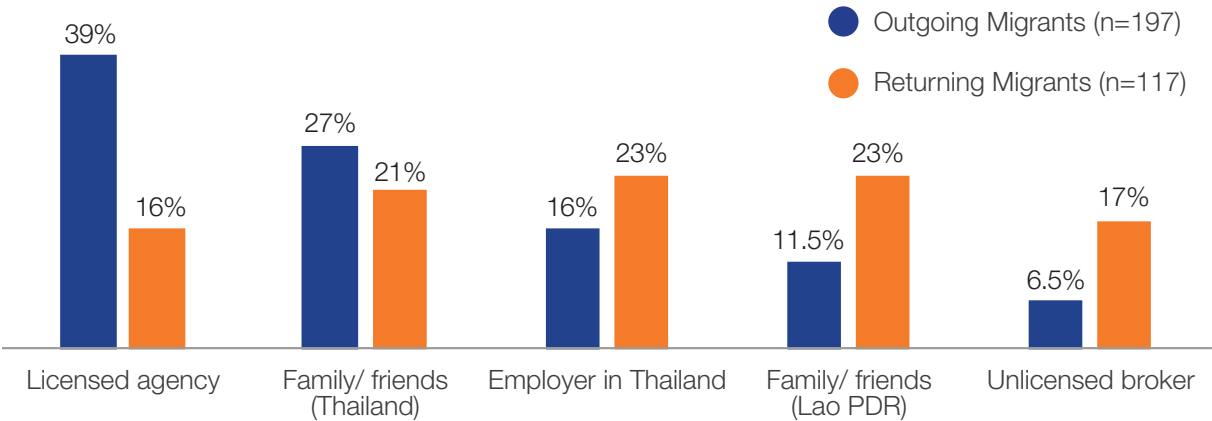
Figure 14 - Main Sources to Finance the Migration Journey by Population Group (n=401)



Support Mechanisms

Gaining insight on support mechanisms used by migrants can shed light onto migration dynamics and help promote a better understanding of the reliance on brokers and other support networks. In the case of both outgoing and returning migrants, the majority reported to have received some form of support in migrating (79% for outgoing migrants and 77% for returning migrants). The actors involved differed by population group. Outgoing migrants received support primarily from licensed agencies (39%), family/friends in Thailand (27%) and their employer in Thailand (16%). Returning migrants received support mainly from their employer in Thailand (23%) as well as family/friends at home in Lao People’s Democratic Republic (23%). Another 21 per cent reported help from family and friends in Thailand and 17 per cent relied on unlicensed brokers.

Figure 15 - Actors Involved in Migration Preparation by Population Group (n=314)

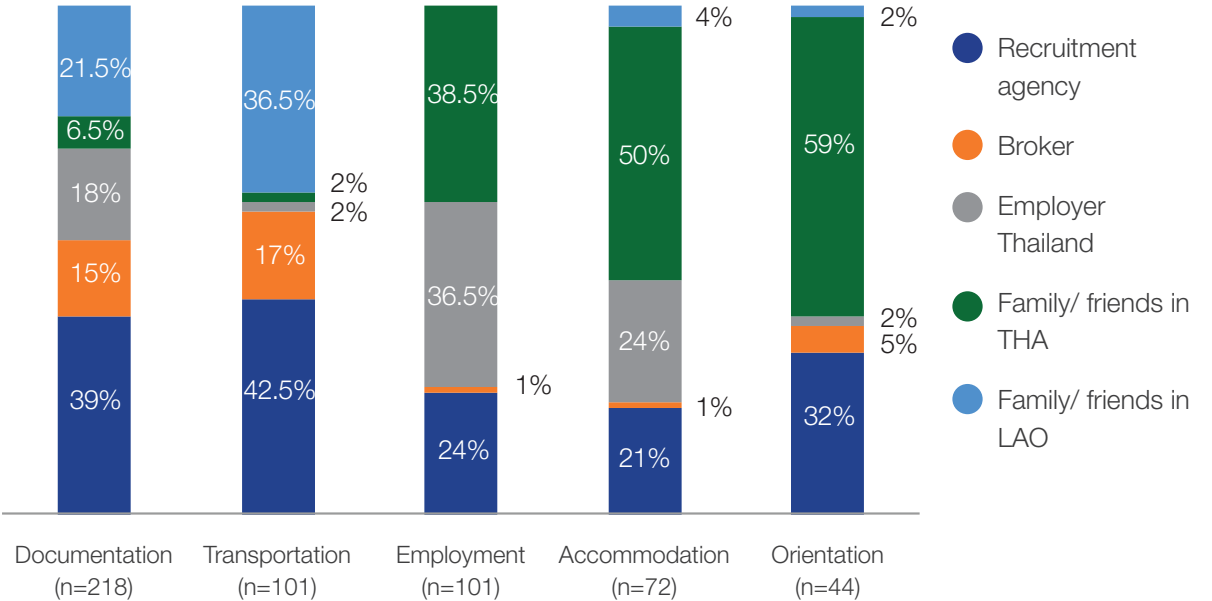


7 Travel documents for overseas migrant workers are issued by the Lao government for Lao migrant workers to work abroad
 8 Lao nationals can cross into Thailand for a period of 14 days without a visa
 9 As respondents were able to name several sources, the total exceeds 100%

Support was mainly provided in form of assistance with documentation (69.5%), transportation (33%), employment (33%) as well as accommodation (23%) and orientation information (14%). Roughly 77 per cent of migrants that received support indicated that they had only relied on one actor in their migration preparations.

Looking at the different types of support and the actors involved, the data shows that documentation and transportation were commonly arranged by recruitment agencies, employment by family and friends in Thailand as well as employers in Thailand, and accommodation and orientation by family and friends in Thailand (see Figure 16).

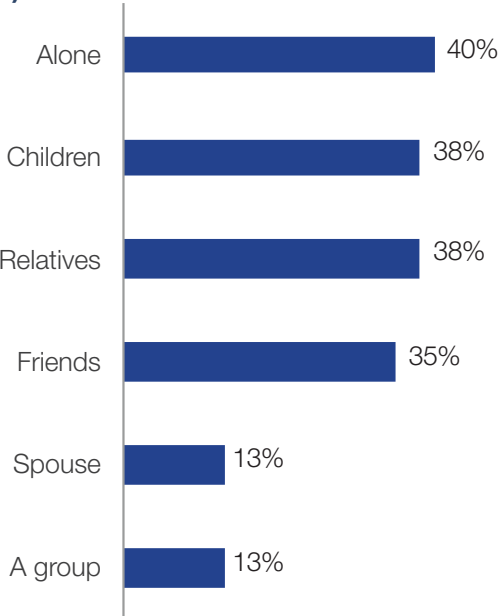
Figure 16 - Type of Support by Associated Actor (n=314)



The Journey

In terms of migration journeys, respondents were asked details about their journey, such as how they crossed the border between Thailand and Lao People’s Democratic Republic and with whom they travelled. Many respondents travelled with one or more persons, however, 40 per cent also reported to have travelled alone. There is no significant difference between male and female respondents travelling alone (43% for females and 39% for males). The respondents commonly travelled with their children (38%), other relatives (38%), friends (35%), a group of fellow workers (13%) and/or their spouse (13%). Almost all respondents entered Thailand through an international border crossing point (99%) and one per cent (3 respondents) reported crossing at a traditional checkpoint¹⁰.

Figure 17 - Travelling Alone or with Company (n=401)



10 This should not be taken as representative of the overall pattern of migration to Thailand, since data collection was only conducted with migrants that were about to cross the official international Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge or had just returned through it.

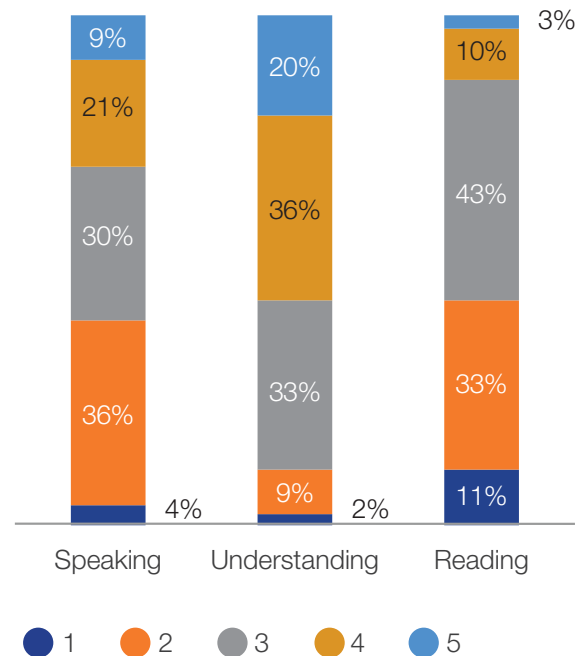


Picture 6 - While Migrants Wait for the Bus to the Friendship Bridge, DTM Enumerators are conducting the FMS

Thematic Area 4 – Migrant Vulnerabilities

Migrants can become vulnerable at different points of their migration experience for a variety of reasons and circumstances. This study uses several proxies and indicators to explore the vulnerabilities of Lao migrant workers in more detail. One of the indicators considered is language, and in this case, the ability for Lao migrants to communicate in Thai. In comparison to other migrant groups in Thailand, Lao nationals are presumed to be able to communicate in Thai best because of the shared linguistic similarities between Thai and Lao. Respondents were asked to rank their ability to speak, understand and read Thai from a scale of 1 to 5¹¹. The data shows that the largest share in both sample populations ranked their speaking ability between 2 and 4 (87% for outgoing and 86% for returning migrants). For understanding the Thai language, 22.5 per cent of outgoing and 16.5 per cent of returning migrants even ranked their ability at level five. In terms of Thai reading ability, levels two and three were the most common in both sample groups (see Figure 18). The subsample of returning migrants were also asked if their Thai language skills had improved during their stay. Results show that 53 per cent of the return sample reported that their Thai had improved “a bit”, while 45 per cent reported “a lot” and for 2 per cent their Thai language skills had not improved at all.

Figure 18 - Thai Speaking/Understanding/Reading Levels (n=401)

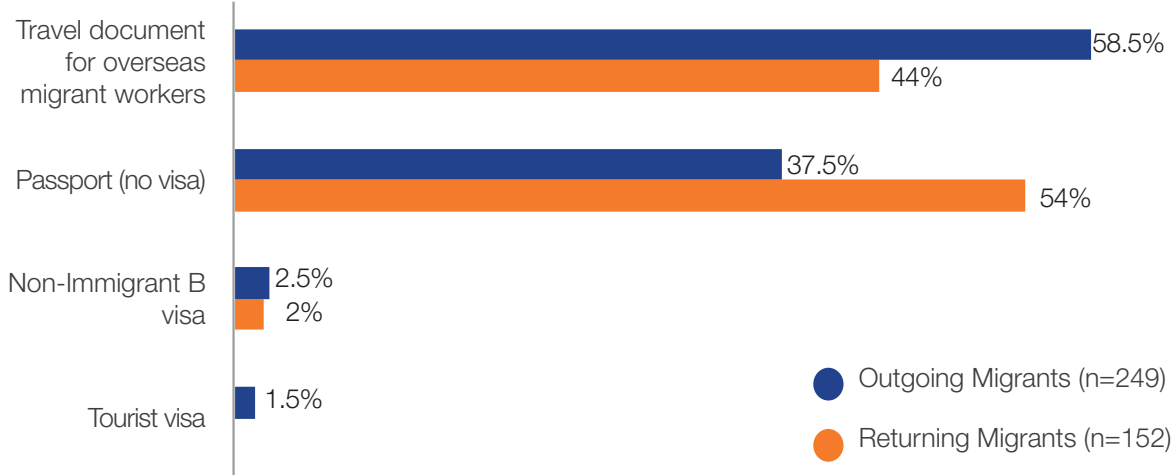


11 5 being the highest level of ability

Documentation Status

A second indicator used in the survey to assess Lao workers' vulnerability is their access to legal status in Thailand. Outgoing migrants commonly reported using travel documents for overseas migrant workers to enter Thailand (58.5%) as well as passports without visas (37%). However, 53 per cent of returning migrants reported entering Thailand on their passports without a visa and 43 per cent entered on travel documents for overseas migrant workers. It should be noted that Lao nationals are not legally entitled to work in Thailand when they enter on a passport without appropriate visas or documentation. However, none of the migrants explicitly reported entering Thailand without proper documentation or work permits.

Figure 19 - Document Status by Population Group (n=401)

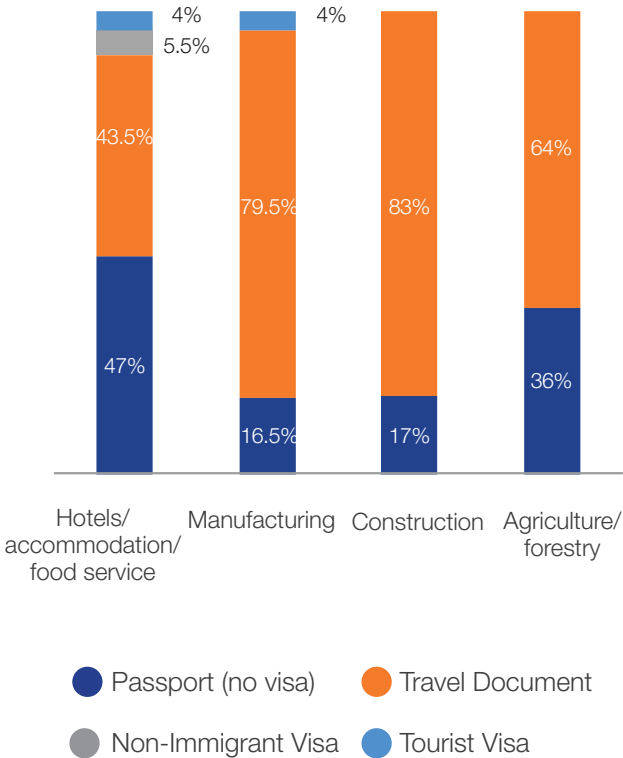


The data also shows that the documentation type varied by sector of employment. Migrants working in the hotel/ accommodation/food service industry commonly reported entering Thailand on their passports without a visa or work permit (47%). For the other sectors of employment, the majority reported entering Thailand with travel documents for overseas migrant workers (see Figure 20).

Migrants were also asked if they held an employment contract. Sixty-two per cent of respondents reported not having a contract. Of the remaining 38 per cent, 35.5 per cent reported holding an MoU contract and 2.5 per cent had a contract but not in connection with the MoU.

Of the 38 per cent (154 respondents) that had a contract, 99 per cent had seen their contracts. All respondents who had seen their contracts also reported that they signed their contract themselves and 93.5 per cent reported that they signed the contract in a language that they understood.

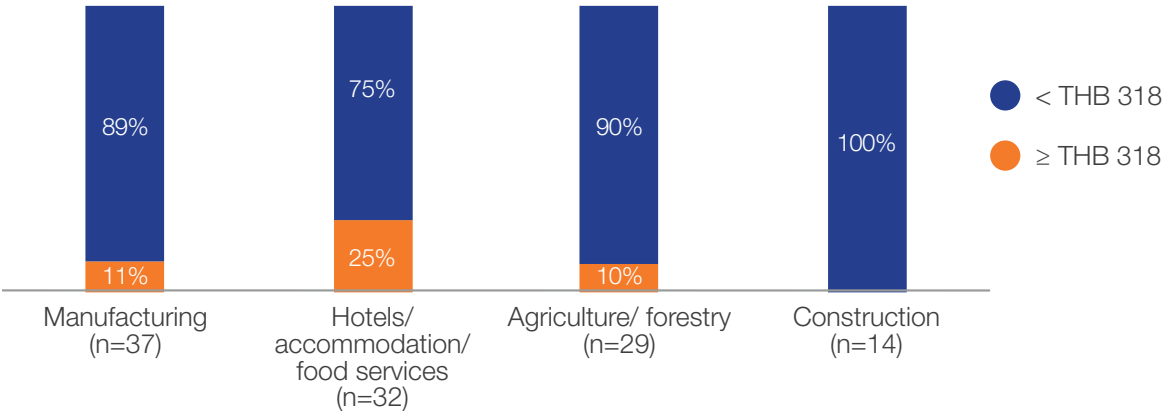
Figure 20 - Documentation Status by Employment Sector



Wages and working hours

Salary conditions can also be indicators of potential vulnerability or exploitation. Respondents were asked if they knew what their daily wages would be before starting employment. Most of both the sample populations (91% of outgoing and 95% of returning migrants) reported that they knew their wages prior to migration. The data shows that on average, outgoing migrants expected to be paid THB 415 per day and returning migrants had on average been paid THB 456. The average calculation does not provide too much information since wages have to be considered in relation to other factors and variables to draw any significant conclusions. Looking at the main provinces of return (Bangkok, Nong Khai, Udon Thani, Samut Sakhon and Chon Buri) and the respective provincial minimum wages, the results show that all migrants reported to have been paid above provincial minimum wage. The results should not be overinterpreted since the subsamples of each province of destination for returning migrants are relatively small. The same applies to subsamples for sectors of employment - while they predominantly seem, on average, to be paying above the median minimum wage of THB 318, the sample sizes are too small to draw any definitive conclusions (see Figure 21).

Figure 21 - Median Minimum Wage by Sector of Employment (Returning Migrants) n=147



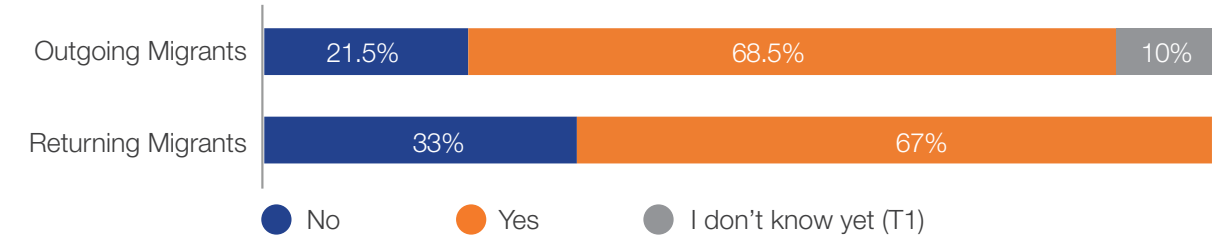
The return sample were also asked if their actual wages aligned with expected wages. Ninety-three per cent reported that they did. One per cent stated that their actual wages were lower, four per cent reported that they were higher, and two percent did not want to answer the question.

With regard to working hours, 55 per cent of returning migrants reported working eight hours a day. However, 43 per cent also reported working times above eight hours, with 20 percent working over ten hours a day and 16 per cent over 12 hours a day.

Remittances

With regard to remittances, 69 per cent of outgoing migrants expressed the intention to send remittances and 67 per cent of the return sample reported having sent remittances. On average, outgoing migrants expected to remit around USD 138 in the first six months (i.e. USD 23 per month) while returning migrants reportedly remitted roughly USD 148 per month. There also appears to be a positive relationship between sending remittances home and having children in Lao People’s Democratic Republic. Only 53.5 per cent of those respondents that did not have children remitted money during their stay in Thailand, while 69 per cent of those that had children in Lao People’s Democratic Republic reported that they regularly sent money home. As indicated before, however, given that the subsample of returning migrants is relatively small, these results should not be over-interpreted.

Figure 22 - Remittance Sending by Population Group (n=401)

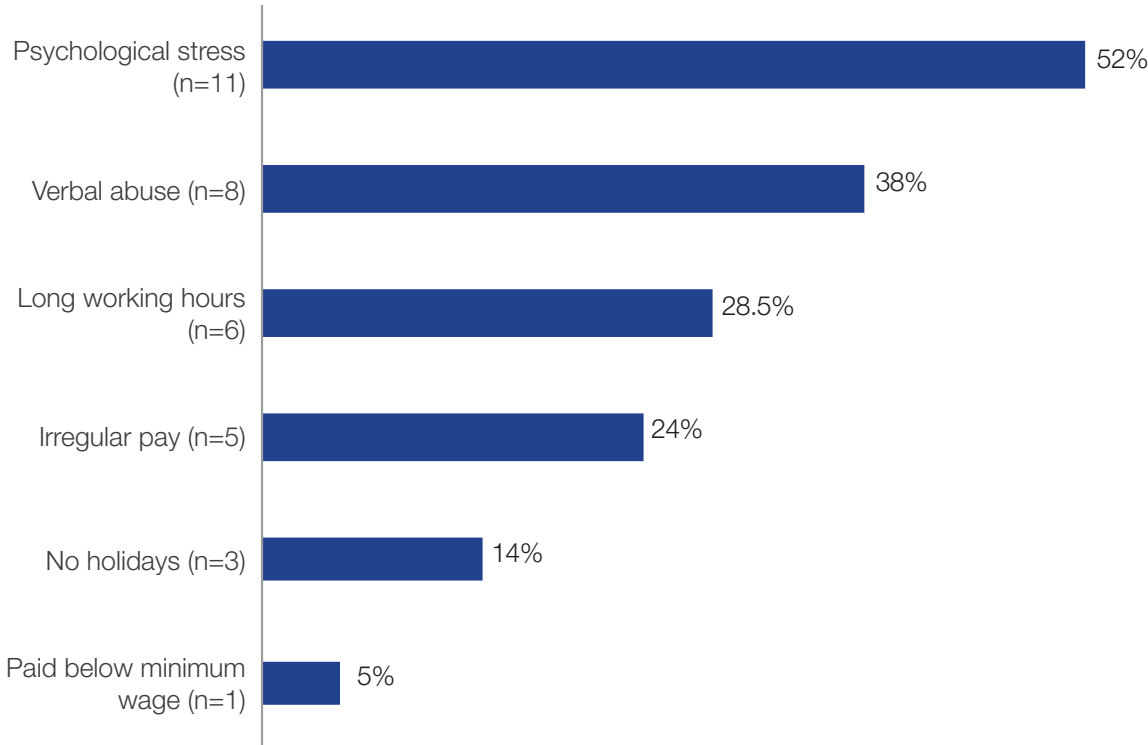


Problems Encountered en Route and in Thailand

To better understand migrant workers' vulnerabilities, the respondents were asked if they had faced any problems during their journey to Thailand (or journey so far, for outgoing migrants) and/or problems at the workplace. Outgoing migrants were asked about their expectations of problems at the workplace. The data shows that most respondents in both samples did not face any challenges during their journey. Only 4.5 per cent of outgoing migrants reported problems. The proportion of returning migrants reporting challenges during their journey is also relatively small at only 3 per cent (5 respondents).

When looking at workplace challenges, roughly 12 per cent of outgoing migrants expected to face problems on arrival in Thailand and 14 per cent of returning migrants reported that they did. Problems experienced broadly corresponded with those anticipated and included psychological stress, long working hours, irregular pay, having no holidays and experiencing verbal abuse.

Figure 23 – Problems Experienced at the Workplace in Thailand by Returning Migrants (n=21)



To overcome these challenges, a proper and comprehensive support system needs to be in place. Migrants were asked if they knew of any support mechanisms in case of problems in Thailand. In both population groups roughly two thirds confirmed that they were aware of support systems (72.5% for outgoing migrants and 75% for returning migrants). When asked about available support mechanisms, the largest share cited their family and friends in Thailand (51%), the Thai police (23.5%), Lao authorities (17%) as well as family/friends in Lao People's Democratic Republic (14%). The return sample who indicated being aware of support mechanisms were asked if they had made use of the support mechanism and if they had received the supported needed. Roughly 51 per cent confirmed that they had received the support they needed, one per cent said they didn't and 41 per cent said they received partial support. The sex distribution shows that male respondents appear more likely to have received the support they needed than female respondents (59% versus 39%).

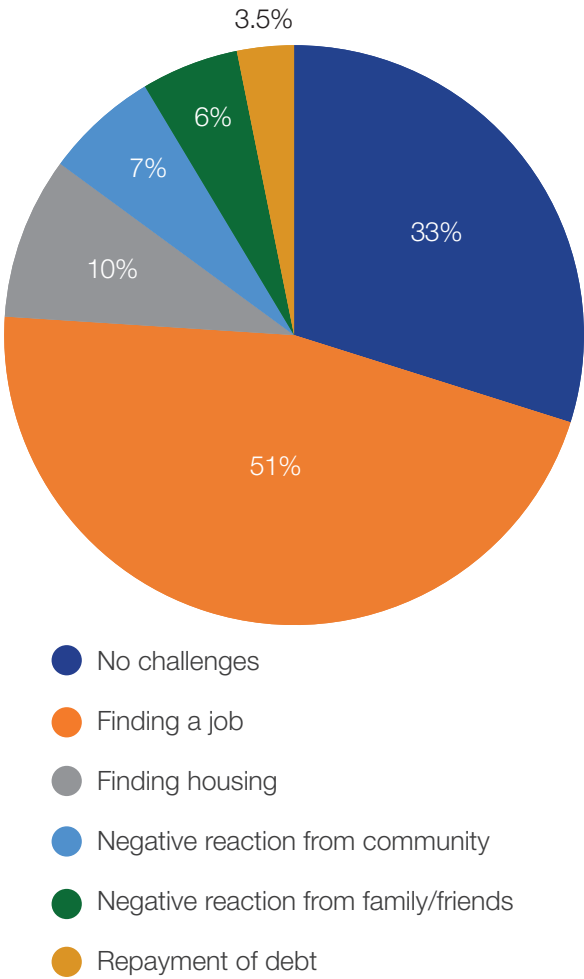
Thematic Area 5 – Return

Questions for thematic area five were only included in the survey tool for returning migrants. When they were asked the reason for their return, the most commonly cited response was to “visit family and friends in Lao People’s Democratic Republic” (45%). This group of returnees reported that their return was only for a short period of time. For the remaining 55 per cent that intended to return for a longer period, reasons given included the end of a work permit or visa, as well as family pressure to return. Of this group, 33 per cent reported that they did not expect to encounter any problems upon return. However, 51 per cent expected problems with finding a job, 10 per cent worried about finding housing and seven per cent cited being afraid of negative reactions from the community (see Figure 24¹²).

As previous research has shown, many migrants migrate to Thailand several times throughout their lives. The migrant workers who were not in Lao People’s Democratic Republic just to visit family/ friends were therefore asked if they intended to migrate again and, if so, would Thailand be their destination country. The data shows that 82 per cent have the intention to migrate again. Without exception this group of migrants wanted to return to Thailand, with 95.5 per cent saying this would be to resume working in their old jobs. Another 15 per cent also mentioned that their reason for wanting to return to Thailand can be attributed to the higher wages in Thailand, 11.5 per cent stated that it would be to rejoin family/friends in Thailand and seven per cent also cited better employment conditions as their reason.

As migrants can sometimes incur debt during their migration experience, by failing to anticipate certain costs or by expecting to earn more money than they end up being able to, the survey also included a few simple questions on the respondents’ financial situation upon return. Sixty per cent of respondents reported that their savings had increased after migration. Twenty per cent stated that their savings had largely remained the same, 14 per cent said they had decreased and 6 per cent did not feel comfortable answering the question. With regard to their general financial situation, 93 per cent reported that it had improved through migration, 4.5 per cent stated that it remained the same and for 0.5 per cent (1 respondent) their general financial situation had worsened. Two per cent did not want to answer this question.

Figure 24 – Challenges Expected upon Return



12 Respondents were able to report more than one challenge; therefore, the percentages exceed 100%

CONCLUSION

The results of this study are useful in providing empirical data to confirm or challenge anecdotal knowledge or preconceptions about cross border movements and labour migration between Thailand and Lao People's Democratic Republic.

The data collection activity in Vientiane capital took place around the Morning Market Bus Station in the center of Vientiane capital as well as on the bus that runs from the Morning Market Bus Station to the Thai-Lao Friendship bridge for a period of one month. A total of 401 Lao migrants were surveyed, all of whom identified as Lao migrant workers. In total, 249 interviews were conducted with outgoing migrant workers and 152 with returning migrants.

This section will briefly summarize the main findings for each thematic area.

Migrant Profiles

The sex breakdown of Lao nationals migrating to Thailand indicates fewer female migrant workers in this data collection exercise than in previous studies, with just over a third of female respondents. The average age of respondents is 28 years old, and the largest proportion of migrants (three quarters) can be placed in the age group of 16 to 30 years. In line with other studies, this research showed that Lao nationals interviewed in Vientiane were more likely to be single. Respondents that have completed one form of secondary education (lower and upper) make up more than half the sample. With regards to place of origin, the data revealed that both outgoing and returning migrants originate from Vientiane Capital, Champasack and Savannakhet and that they predominately belong to the Lao Loum ethnic group. The main destinations in Thailand are Bangkok, Udon Thani and Chon Buri and migrants prefer to stay on average over a year in Thailand.

Drivers of Migration

The data shows that the most common forms of previous employment in Lao People's Democratic Republic for both outgoing and returning migrants was unpaid family work as well as daily wage labour, predominately in the agriculture/forestry sector. Reasons for coming to Thailand were primarily associated with finding employment for themselves and in some cases with their spouse finding employment or with a workplace transfer. In terms of migration history of the sample population, it was found that most respondents had previously migrated to Thailand for employment at least once. Respondents stated that they preferred to migrate to Thailand over other countries in the region due to easy access to the job market as well as due to the geographical proximity to Thailand. Higher incomes and the presence of family/ friends in Thailand were also cited.

Pre-migration Arrangements and Preparations

The majority of Lao migrant workers indicated already having a job lined up when they arrived in Thailand, which was primarily identified with support from relatives or friends in Thailand. The top three sectors of employment for both outgoing and returning migrants were the hospitality/service sector, manufacturing and construction. On average migrants spent USD 360 on their journey costs. The data shows that travel to provinces such as Bangkok, Samut Sakhon or Chon Buri is more expensive than travel to provinces

bordering Lao People's Democratic Republic, such as Nong Khai and Udon Thani. Most migrants relied on multiple sources to finance their journeys such as savings and wage deductions agreed with their employers in Thailand. Most migrants reported that they received some form of support in preparing their journeys. For those that did receive support with migration preparations, outgoing migrants mostly relied on licensed agencies, family and friends in Thailand as well as their employer in Thailand. Returning migrants often relied on their employer in Thailand as well as their family and friends in Lao People's Democratic Republic, followed by family and friends in Thailand. Support was mainly given with arranging documentation, planning for transportation as well as employment and/or securing accommodation.

Migrant Vulnerabilities

The largest share of respondents ranked their ability to speak and understand Thai at the middle of a 5-point scale, between 2 and 4. The same applies for Thai reading ability, although the proportion that ranked themselves on the lowest level (1) is larger than for speaking and understanding Thai. Both outgoing and returning migrants indicated entering Thailand on travel documents for overseas migrant workers as well as on passports with no visa (Lao nationals can enter Thailand without a visa for a period of 14 days). Depending on the employment sectors different documents types were favoured. Migrants working in the hotel/service industry often reported working without work visas while in the manufacturing and construction industry migrants were more likely to use travel document for overseas migrant workers. The data collected on returning migrants showed that on average migrants earned 456 THB per day, which is closely aligned to the average amount outgoing migrants expected to receive. For all main destination provinces and employment sectors migrants reported on average to be paid above the provincial minimum wage. With respect to problems experienced at the workplace, the data shows that the most common problems cited were psychological stress, long working hours, verbal abuse and irregular payments.

Return

Migrants cited a number of reasons for return to Lao People's Democratic Republic with the most common being end of visa/work permit, to visit family/friends or family pressure for them to return. Roughly one third of the sample did not expect to face any challenges upon return, however approximately half of the respondents were afraid of not finding a job or housing, as well as experiencing negative reactions from the community and/or family and friends at home. Of those that did not return just to visit family or friends, more than three quarters expressed their desire to migrate again, exclusively back to Thailand to resume working in their old jobs or because of the possibility of receiving higher wages. Overall, Lao nationals seemed to have benefitted financially from migration, with almost two thirds stating that their savings had increased through migration. Over 90 per cent indicated that their general financial situation had improved through migration to Thailand.

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