

## **Managing Labor Migration in Southeast Asia**

*By Professor Philip Martin, University of California-Davis*

Managing migration — the movement of people over national borders — is a global issue often spotlighted by tragedies, as when a ship overloaded with migrants sinks. The number of migrants worldwide has doubled in the past 25 years, reaching 200 million in 2005. Half these migrants are workers.

Today, if the world's migrants were collected in one place this “migrant nation” would be the world's fifth largest, (behind China, India, the USA and Indonesia, and larger than Brazil, Russia and Pakistan).

A migrant is defined by the United Nations as a person outside her country of birth or citizenship for 12 months or longer, regardless of their reason or legal status.

Migrants from the Philippines and Indonesia head for Malaysia and Singapore while Burmese, Cambodians and Laotians move to Thailand and Thais and Vietnamese move to Taiwan.

Still far more people want to become international migrants. The incentives are rising because of increasing demographic and economic inequalities between countries, just as revolutions in communications and transportation make it easier to cross national borders. These inequalities are hard to reduce quickly, and governments are reluctant to limit their exposure to globalization. Their remaining policy option for managing migration is to adjust the rights of migrants.

We need alternative management options.

Most countries do not anticipate and plan for immigration. Inertia, plus government regulations and border patrols, are the major forms of migration control. The five major immigrant receiving countries--US (one million immigrants a year), Canada (250,000), Australia (100,000), Israel (50,000), and New Zealand (35,000) — anticipate 1.4 million immigrants a year.

### **Sex, Money, and Migration**

People argue whether there is too much or too little migration. But migration is a response to differences, and as sex and money differentials rise and communications, transportation and rights revolutions continue, migration will become easier and so is expected to increase. Consider these points:

- Uneven population growth. In 1800 Europe had 20 per cent of the world's one billion residents and Africa had 8 percent, meaning Africa had a third as many people as Europe. By 2005 Africa had more people than Europe (905 million and 730 million respectively). By 2050—if current trends continue— Europe will have just 660 million of the world's nine billion residents and Africa will have increased to two billion. Will Africans respond by emigrating?

- Increased economic inequality. In 2004 worldwide GDP was \$40 trillion, an average of US\$6,300 per person a year. But in the 25 highest-income countries (home to 900 million people) the average GDP is \$32,000 per person. That's 21 times more than the poorest 165 countries, where GDP averages \$1,500 a year. Will people migrate to bridge a 22-1 income difference?
- Revolutions in communications, transportation, and rights make cross-border migration and staying abroad easier. Will rich countries try to manage migration by changing the thing easiest for their governments to adjust — the rights of non-citizens? One example would be by restricting asylum.

## Challenges for south east Asia

Asia has 60 percent of the world's people, most in the three population giants, China, India, and Indonesia. Southeast Asia's 560 million people are equivalent to the population of Latin America.

Historically, migrants left southeast Asia for opportunity, as when Filipinos migrated to the US and Canada to settle, to Middle East oil exporters to work temporarily as maids and laborers, and to Hong Kong, Malaysia, and other southeast Asian countries to fill similar jobs. The richest country in south east Asia, Singapore, has the highest share of migrants: a third of workers are foreigners. The Singapore government encourages the entry of professionals but charges monthly levies or taxes to limit unskilled migrants and domestic helpers.

Malaysia has two million migrants in a labour force of 10 million, with Indonesians dominating among construction and plantation workers. The government uses a levy system similar to Singapore's, but finds it difficult to prevent illegal migration and employment, leading to periodic sweeps that send tens of thousands of Indonesians home.

Thailand is south east Asia's third largest migrant destination, with perhaps two million Burmese, Cambodian, and Laotian workers. It has attempted to develop a longer-term policy for managing migrants. Employers can hire legal migrants if they pay registration fees equivalent to a month's salary, but enforcement is uneven, giving employers and migrants incentives to remain outside the legal guest worker system.

The truth is that migrant labour cannot be turned on and off like a water tap. Governments such as Thailand's would be wise to recognize that their economy's dependence on migrants is likely to persist for the next decade. They should develop the socio-economic justification for migrants, and work with employers and unions to develop co-operative mechanisms to manage labor migration and protect migrants.

(782 words)

This article is based on a lecture given to the International Labour Organization in Bangkok on Friday March 24<sup>th</sup> 2006. Professor Martin is the co-author of a new book, *Managing Labour Migration in the Twenty-First Century* (Yale University Press, February 2006),<sup>1</sup> with Manolo Abella, former Director of the ILO's international migration programme and Christiane Kuptsch, ILO International Institute for Labour Studies. He is also the editor of Migration News. <http://migration.ucdavis.edu/>