



Regular and irregular migrant workers in North Central Viet Nam: Findings from household surveys

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Since the inception of the *doi moi* economic reforms in the 1980s, Viet Nam's national socio-economic development plans have included labour migration as a policy mechanism to increase employment and reduce poverty.

One of the major contributing factors to the growth in official labour migration flows from Viet Nam has been the licensing of both state-owned and private recruitment agencies to send migrant workers abroad and this continues to be the primary legal means of facilitating overseas migration. Today there are an estimated 500,000 Vietnamese workers living abroad, with over 106,000 workers moving overseas in 2014 alone, according to the Department of Overseas Labour, Ministry of Invalids and Social Affairs.

The means by which Vietnamese workers migrate has become more varied and complex as the number of people moving abroad has increased and the destinations in which they are employed have multiplied. An increasing number of Vietnamese workers are now employed through "independent" or "irregular" means. "Independent" migrants are recruited outside the parameters of memoranda of understanding (MoUs) on labour migration between governments and without using a recruitment agency. Some "irregular" workers also undertake employment in the absence of a valid work permit, overstaying their visa or breaching visa conditions in order to gain employment.

Household surveys of migrant workers

To obtain a better understanding of the characteristics of regular and irregular migrant workers, in 2013 two household surveys were conducted by the Department of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs (DoLISA) in Thanh Hoa and Ha Tinh, supplemented by qualitative interviews with migrant workers. The results of this research provide a timely and invaluable insight into a sector of the Vietnamese economy that has remained largely opaque as a result of a lack of reliable data.

Survey Methodology

The surveys were carried out by DoLISAs in cooperation with the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Tripartite Action to Protect Migrant Workers within and from the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS TRIANGLE project).

Methodological inconsistencies between the surveys, including the fact that responses were not recorded for all questions, restrict the degree of analysis that can be completed. Notwithstanding this, the large sample size and certain commonalities between the surveys allows for high level conclusions to be reached.

The GMS TRIANGLE project team undertook field research in 2014 to supplement the surveys, designed to elicit qualitative information on the experiences and motivations of irregular migrant workers. Information collated as part of this field research was obtained from a total of 14 irregular workers: four men and two women from Thanh Hoa Province (Ha Trung and Nhu Thanh districts), five men and two women from Ha Tinh province (Thach Ha and Can Loc districts) and one man from Nghe An (interviewed in Bangkok).

Migrants in North Central Viet Nam: A profile

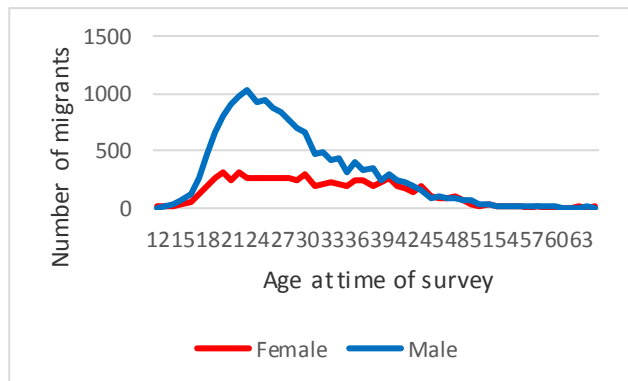
The surveys recorded details of gender and age for 23,047 migrants, of whom approximately 30 per cent were women and 70 per cent were men. This corresponds roughly with the gender breakdown from official administrative data on regular migration.

Workers aged between 20 and 29 years were most likely to migrate abroad, constituting 49 per cent of the total group. Falling within this age bracket were 38 per cent of all women and 54 per cent of men (see Figure 1). In general, the age of female workers was

¹ This policy brief was prepared by Kristin Letts and Nguyen Thi Mai Thuy.

more evenly distributed across the 20 to 40 year age bracket, whereas the clear majority of men workers migrated in their twenties.

Figure 1: Migrant workers by age and gender

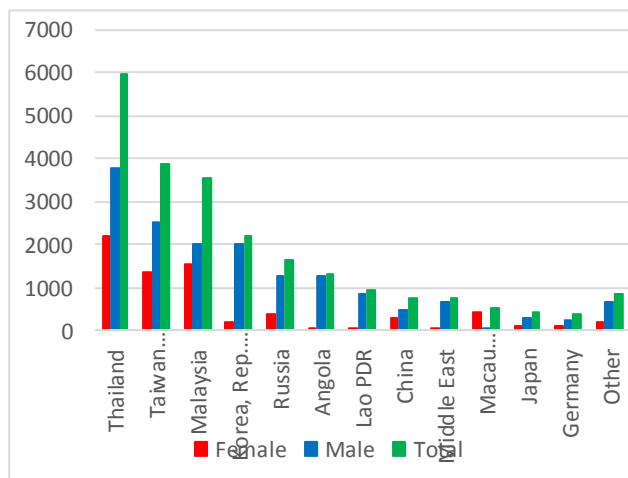


Source: Household survey results

Destination economies

Survey results shows that the most popular destination for migrant workers is Thailand with almost one in three women (2,184) and one in four men (3,788) migrating there (Figure 2)².

Figure 2: Destination economies by number of migrants



Source: household survey results

For women migrants other popular destinations included Malaysia and Taiwan (China) where around one in five women workers migrated to each destination respectively. Women commonly performed roles as domestic workers (approximately 25 per cent of all women workers) worked in textiles (approximately 12 per cent of all women workers), or undertook factory work (approximately 12 per cent).

For men migrants Taiwan (China) (approximately 15 per cent of all men workers), Malaysia (approximately

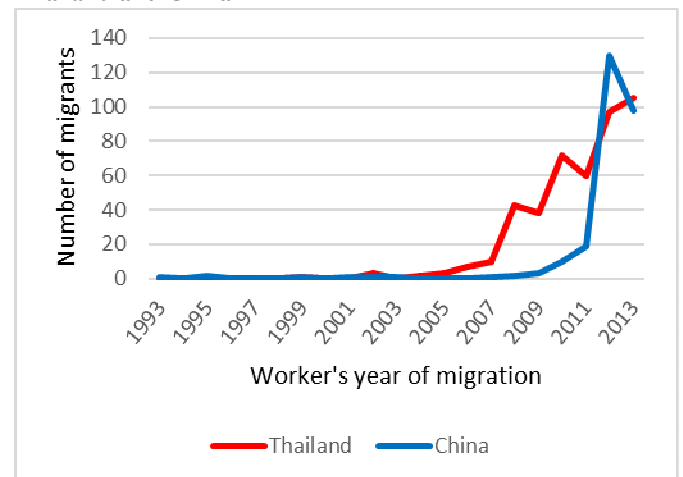
12 per cent) and the Republic of Korea (approximately 12 per cent), were also popular destinations. Jobs commonly performed abroad included construction (approximately 19 per cent of all men workers), factory work (approximately 16 per cent) and work as electricians (approximately 6 per cent).

Destinations where no MoUs are in place

Since 1992 Viet Nam has signed over 20 MoUs with destination countries and territories, yet survey responses indicate that workers travel to over 60 destinations to undertake a range of occupations, suggesting many are doing so independently, and potentially irregularly. This includes travel to African nations (notably Angola – 1,337 workers) and a number of European countries (the most popular being Germany – 368 workers). The latter sits within the context of an estimated 18,000³ Vietnamese irregular migrants who travel to the European Union each year, at times facilitated by smugglers.

Within the region, workers are travelling in considerable numbers to destinations where no MoUs are in place, for example Thailand (6,108, including workers for whom gender was not recorded) and China (777). The lack of a formal framework governing migration between the survey provinces and Thailand or China is of particular note given the growth in migrant workers travelling to these countries (albeit from a very low base in the case of China) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Thanh Hoa survey: Growth in migration to Thailand and China



Source: household survey results

While not affecting the survey provinces, it is notable that there have been provincial-level discussions on

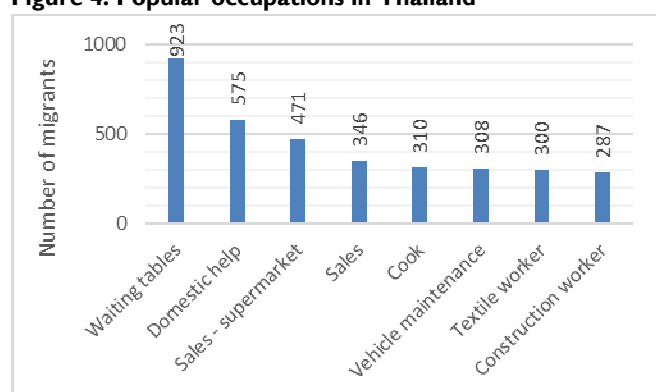
² Responses that did not include an answer to the gender question have been removed: these make up approximately two per cent of the sample.

³ Transnational organized crime in East Asia and the Pacific: A threat assessment (Bangkok, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2013)

cross border migration between Viet Nam and China, including on 25 April 2015 when representatives from four northern Vietnamese provinces and Guangxi province, China, met to discuss increased cooperation on a range of issues. The survey results suggest that the necessity for such discourse, including at a localized level, are likely to increase.

Migration to Thailand is more established than with most other destinations with 25.8 per cent of migrants having worked there. Vietnamese migrants are primarily working in restaurants (16 per cent) and domestic work (10 per cent), however, the diversity of vocations should be noted (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Popular occupations in Thailand



Source: household survey results

The field research indicates that overland routes through Lao People's Democratic Republic, for example through Lao Pao or via Thakhek into Mukdahan and onto Bangkok, are the primary means of entering Thailand. Key motivations for workers migrating to Thailand include the relative ease with which migration can be facilitated and patterns of chain migration from local communities.

The Governments of Viet Nam and Thailand are considering establishing an MoU covering labour migration that offers an opportunity to address issues facing workers moving to Thailand and has the potential to change the dynamic of migration flows between the countries.

Progressing this framework would also build on work undertaken at both a domestic and regional level. This includes the ILO's recent assessment of labour migration MoUs with Thailand,⁴ which serves as a useful reference for the current negotiations. It noted that these MoUs have had limited success in reaching their objectives and makes recommendations to assist

the development of a comprehensive framework to support regular migration. Further, there is potential to consider how existing provincial support services, in particular in existing migrant worker resource centres (MRCs), could be utilized and strengthened to support the new arrangements.

In the field: Experiences of irregular migrants

During the field research, workers who had migrated to Thailand and China were targeted for interview, given the prevalence of irregular migration to these countries. The common experiences of workers interviewed have been represented in the following case study.

Case Study: Pieceworker in Thailand

Ngu*, 34, has been living in Thailand for ten years. He was a fisherman in Thach Hai Commune in Ha Tinh but decided to move abroad to obtain a stable income.

Ngu heard from friends that migrating through irregular channels was easier and as a person with disability, knew he could not obtain employment through a recruitment agency. He chose Thailand as it was a cheap destination. Ngu could afford the costs of migration of VND1.5 million (US\$70.50) from his savings. Ngu waited 15 days for his passport and then migrated through Lao People's Democratic Republic to Bangkok. Ngu had received vocational training in sewing and arranged a job as a pieceworker in a garment factory upon his arrival.

Ngu did not sign a written contract but has a good relationship with his employer. He is paid twice a month, initially earning THB5,000 per month (\$153) that increased to THB15,000 per month (\$458) due to his skills and experience. Ngu uses a one month visa-exemption stamp to enter Thailand and renews the stamps by making a run to the Cambodian border crossing each month at a cost of THB700-800 (\$21-24).

Ngu would prefer to migrate legally as long as it does not reduce his wages. Ngu worries that if he has any problems in Thailand his legal status will make them difficult to resolve.

*Name of worker has been changed.

Source: field research

⁴ Review of the effectiveness of the MoUs in managing labour migration between Thailand and neighbouring countries (Bangkok, ILO, 2015).

Conclusion

The dearth of information concerning irregular migrants has meant that no clear institutional mandate has yet been established to provide this cohort with support services that ensure their interests are protected while working overseas and on return. Rectifying this has the potential to directly support the objective of Government policy to use labour migration as a strategy to reduce poverty, noting the development of a comprehensive framework of protection policies that includes irregular migrants will only become more important as the number of Vietnamese migrants continues to rise.

Given the growing number of Vietnamese workers travelling to Thailand and China, there is a strong impetus for Viet Nam to negotiate robust labour migration agreements, in consultation with representative workers' and employers' organizations, in order to regularize migration and protect its workers. Negotiations with Thailand are currently underway; such agreements should not only protect the rights of migrant workers, but ensure low recruitment costs so that regular migration is a cost effective option.

The survey results provide a basis for developing educational information regarding employment rights, avenues for recourse and consular assistance in destinations popular with independent and irregular migrants. Information dissemination should be targeted in communes and districts from which irregular workers are known to migrate.

On a methodological note, it is critical that any future research be conducted in a consistent manner that allows for meaningful comparable analysis across provinces thereby helping to identify the means by which irregular migrants facilitate their move abroad; gauge their understanding of the options for regular migration and determine how their experiences differ from regular migrants.

Recommendations

- 1) Strengthen the institutional framework, including through legislative reform, to better support independent and irregular Vietnamese migrants.
- 2) Develop formal bilateral agreements or MoUs with key destination economies, especially Thailand, which protect the interests of Vietnamese migrant workers, are gender-

responsive and ensure workers can access low cost migration options.

- 3) In the absence of, or to complement, formal bilateral arrangements develop appropriate outreach mechanisms, leveraging MRC support services, to reduce the incidence of exploitation and ensure that independent and irregular Vietnamese men and women migrant workers have adequate access to government assistance.
- 4) Target provinces, districts and communes where there is evidence of significant irregular or independent migration flows for dissemination of information regarding migration issues, including legal channels for migration.
- 5) Develop appropriate, gender-responsive policies to ensure that vulnerable groups, in particular female workers and ethnic minorities, are not exploited in destination economies.
- 6) Initiate further gender disaggregated research to understand workers' reasons and motivations for choosing to migrate irregularly.
- 7) Initiate research to evaluate the effectiveness of labour migration for poverty reduction within Viet Nam, including the differential impact of highly skilled, rather than low-skilled, migration.

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