

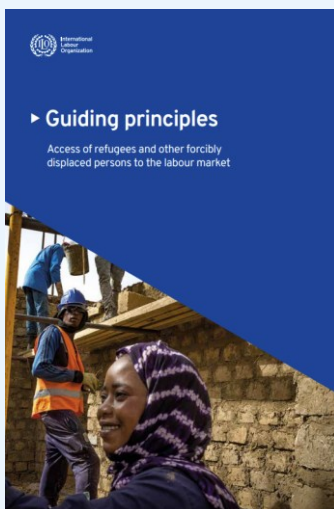
► Labour market inclusion for refugees and other forcibly displaced persons

Thailand: Governance frameworks for inclusive access to labour markets

October 2026

The ILO Guiding Principles on the Access of Refugees and Other Forcibly Displaced Persons to the Labour Market, adopted in 2016 by a tripartite technical meeting, provide a basis for the formulation of policy responses and national tripartite dialogue applicable to responses to forced displacement.

The Guiding Principles on the Access of Refugees and other Forcibly Displaced Persons to the Labour Market



The Guiding Principles (GPs) support efforts to improve labour market functioning and ensure the protection of nationals, as well as refugees and other forcibly displaced persons (FDPs), in accessing decent work. The GPs are a set of voluntary, non-binding principles rooted in relevant international labour standards and universal human rights instruments, and inspired by good practices implemented in the field.

The Guiding Principles are structured around six core pillars:

- **A. Governance frameworks on access to labour markets;**
- B. Economic and employment policies for inclusive labour markets;
- C. Labour rights and equality of opportunity and treatment;
- D. Partnership, coordination and coherence;
- E. Voluntary repatriation and reintegration of returnees; and
- F. Additional pathways for labour mobility.

This knowledge brief focuses on section A of the GPs, with specific emphasis on Principle 14 concerning national policies for formal and decent work to support self-reliance of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. It highlights a case study from Thailand, where governance frameworks to grant access to work permits have been enacted, alongside promotion of fair recruitment through direct hiring via job matching events and the strengthening of information provision to both refugees and employers. These measures foster refugee self-reliance and uphold durable, long-term solutions by enabling economic self-reliance, reducing dependency on humanitarian assistance and responding to labour market needs.

Unpacking the Guiding Principles

What does Section A on Governance frameworks on access to labour markets mean in practice?

Guiding Principle 14 – National policies and action plans to foster opportunities for formal and decent work that support self-reliance for refugees and other forcibly displaced persons should at a minimum include measures to:

- (a) guide employers' and workers' organizations and other stakeholders, including employment agencies, on the access of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons to labour markets;
- (b) examine work opportunities available for refugees and other forcibly displaced persons, based on reliable information concerning the impact of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons on labour markets, and the needs of the existing labour force and employers;
- (c) consider removing or relaxing refugee encampment policies and other restrictions that may hinder access to decent work opportunities, lead to acts of employment-related discrimination or lead to irregular employment;
- (d) ensure, where access to work is subject to specific legal criteria or requirements, such as work permits, employment authorization for employers or quotas, that these conditions are in accordance with fundamental principles and rights at work and with applicable international labour standards, humanitarian principles and obligations under international law, including human rights law and refugee law, as applicable, including the principle of equality of opportunity and treatment in the labour market; and
- (e) identify and eliminate, where applicable, inconsistencies in legal, policy and administrative practice related to implementation of applicable international labour standards and human rights norms.

Case study: Granting labour market access and mobility to support self-reliance for refugees in Thailand

Key points



Refugee workers from Myanmar prepare for work by putting on safety equipment, Thailand, 8 June 2026 © UNHCR

Key issue:

- The establishment of governance frameworks and national policies that enable Myanmar displaced persons, or refugees, access to decent work and fill labour market gaps, while promoting alignment with international labour standards and streamlining legal, policy and administrative practice.

Key takeaways:

- Thailand is transitioning from four decades of policies related to displaced persons' residence in temporary shelters, to policies granting access to the labour market. This shift demonstrates how easing restrictions on refugee mobility and enabling work permit access can support self-reliance while addressing national labour shortages amid declining humanitarian funding.
- Thailand is enabling fair recruitment and strengthening labour market access through direct hiring via job placement events as the primary employment modality, reducing refugees' exposure to recruitment-related abuses and risks, including debt.
- The promotion of access to government-run Migrant Worker Assistance Centres, alongside skills profiling and labour market mapping, recognizes that governance frameworks on labour market access must be linked to employment and skilling strategies to ensure decent work – in alignment with sections B and C of the GPs.

1. Profile of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons

For over four decades, Thailand has provided refuge in nine temporary shelters along the Thai-Myanmar border to mainly Karen and Karenni people displaced from Myanmar. As of late 2024, Thailand hosted approximately 81,000 verified Myanmar displaced persons, or refugees, from Myanmar¹ in border camps, with women and children comprising over 60 per cent. 1 in 5 is under the age of 18 and more than 57 percent are of working age (more than 45,600 people).² This refugee population is distinctive in that it has remained in protracted displacement for decades, with most people living in organized border shelters rather than in urban settings or dispersed communities.

2. Major developments: Towards inclusive labour markets

Thailand's refugee camps – officially referred to as 'temporary shelters' and initially established as emergency measures – have evolved into long-term, parallel systems providing basic services and assistance. Amid declining humanitarian funding and increased labour market gaps partly related to some migrants returning to Cambodia in 2025, Thailand has begun to shift its approach to refugee assistance.³ The Royal Thai Cabinet Resolution of 26 August 2025⁴ marked a turning point, granting displaced persons from Myanmar the right to apply for one-year work permits, renewable annually, as of 1 October 2025. National labour shortages, including in construction, manufacturing, agriculture and services, are occurring in a context of a rapidly aging national population.⁵ Further, the integration into the labour market provides an alternative to humanitarian housing and services in camps.

This new Resolution applies to close to 60 per cent of the population, of whom around 12 per cent are holding or in the application process for a work permit as of June 2026. To further support refugees' transition from decades in closed, camp-based settings ('temporary shelters') to formal employment, standard operating procedures (SOPs) are being refined to improve clarity on work permit applications, while initiating new access to identity cards for registered refugees to enable legal recognition and access to key rights.⁶

To mitigate protection risks as refugees enter the labour market – particularly exposure to exploitative recruitment practices, high fees, and indebtedness – direct hiring through job matching events has emerged as the primary recruitment channel, lowering the risk of exploitative recruitment practices. The Ministry of Interior coordinates and oversees job matching events in camps, coordinating employers visiting on specific days. Online and digital hiring platforms are currently being explored, especially for refugees based in remote camps. Importantly, while recruitment fees and related costs are not regulated and must be negotiated by each employer who directly hires a refugee worker, the Royal Ordinance on the Employment of Foreign Workers does state that wage deductions for foreign workers should not be greater than 10 per cent of a workers' wage per month for this type of cost.⁷

¹ This population is referred to as 'Myanmar displaced persons' in Thailand.

² UNHCR (2026) [Towards Sustainable Solutions for Refugees in Thailand](#), Sustainable Solutions Thailand June 2026 Appeal.

³ UNHCR (2026) [Towards Sustainable Solutions for Refugees in Thailand](#), Sustainable Solutions Thailand June 2026 Appeal.

⁴ See press release of the Thai Government Public Relations Department, 27 August 2025: [UNHCR Commends Thai Government for Allowing Myanmar Refugees to Work Legally in Thailand](#).

⁵ "JSCIB presses Thai government as labour shortage crisis hits economy", *The Nation*, 25 May 2026.

⁶ UNHCR (2026) [Towards Sustainable Solutions for Refugees in Thailand](#), Sustainable Solutions Thailand June 2026 Appeal.

⁷ Royal Ordinance Concerning the Management of Employment of Foreign Workers, B.E. 2560 (2017), English translation available at: ILO National Legislative Database (NATLEX), 2017, <https://natlex.ilo.org/dyn/natlex2/natlex2/files/download/107728/THA107728%20Eng.pdf>.

Box 1: ILO guidance on fair recruitment and national legislative developments for fair recruitment of migrant workers in Thailand

The [ILO General principles and operational guidelines for fair recruitment, 2016 and the Definition of recruitment fees and related costs, 2018](#), promote a comprehensive approach to realizing fair recruitment through the development, implementation and enforcement of laws and policies aiming to regulate the recruitment industry and protect workers' rights. Importantly, the definition of recruitment fees and related costs recognizes the principle that **workers shall not be charged directly or indirectly, in whole or in part, any fees or related costs for their recruitment**. Recruitment fees are defined as "any fees or costs incurred in the recruitment process in order for workers to secure employment or placement, regardless of the manner, timing or location of their imposition or collection".⁸

This guidance is developed within the framework of the [Fair Recruitment Initiative](#), which seeks to prevent human trafficking, protect the rights of all workers, including migrant workers, from abusive and fraudulent recruitment and placement practices, reduce the costs of labour migration, and enhance its development benefits. In line with the [Fair Recruitment Initiative Strategy 2026-30](#), **it also responds to the intersecting vulnerabilities of refugees and displaced persons** by building knowledge and capacity on how to achieve fair recruitment in forced displacement contexts, while promoting national and local ownership and strengthening mechanisms that uphold fair recruitment.

The Royal Thai Government has made important advancements on fair recruitment for migrant workers. Recognizing that migration is a risk factor for exploitation in the recruitment process, the Royal Thai Government adopted the Royal Ordinance on Employment of Foreign Workers, which prohibits licensed recruitment agencies from charging money to migrant workers who migrate through Memoranda of Understanding with neighbouring countries (section 42) (although employers may deduct certain costs from wages at up to 10 percent (section 49)); and establishes licensing requirements for recruitment agencies.

3. Outcomes and key lessons

Thailand's policy shift demonstrates that adapting frameworks governing access to the labour market can be beneficial both for refugees and host economies. For refugees it enables economic self-reliance, reduces dependence on humanitarian aid, and promotes dignity. For the labour market, it can help address labour shortages, support economic growth, and contribute to local economic development.

The ILO and other actors have been undertaking efforts since the 2025 policy announcement to strengthen information provision to both refugees and employers and improve labour market access and job matching to fully implement the new policy. Coordinated with the Department of Employment, under the Ministry of Labour, orientation sessions have been developed to provide information and guidance on work authorization procedures, hiring processes, and labour rights at work, supported by refugee camp committees,⁹ civil society organizations, and UN agencies. Recognizing that governance frameworks on access to the labour market need to be linked to employment and skilling strategies (see sections B and C of the Guiding Principles), stakeholders are planning complementary training on Thai language and cultural orientation, and other soft and vocational skills. In parallel, the Ministry of Labour has expanded access to its Migrant Worker Assistance Centers (MWACs), which provide documentation-related services, referrals on labour grievance mechanisms, and other employment-related services. Complementing this, ILO's trade union and CSO-run Migrant Worker Resource Centres (MRCs) are providing legal aid, outreach and training on labour rights to refugee workers in both the camps and workplace destinations.

Skills profiling initiatives, labour market mapping, and analysis of socio-economic contributions are also being launched by UNHCR, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to improve labour market matching and accurate

⁸ ILO (2019) General principles and operational guidelines for fair recruitment and definition of recruitment fees and related costs.

⁹ Refugee camp committees are representative bodies established within the Thai temporary shelters for displaced persons from Myanmar. They typically help liaise between camp residents, humanitarian actors and the authorities, and support the day-to-day coordination of camp affairs, including service delivery, communication and, increasingly, preparations related to livelihoods and work opportunities.

socio-economic information about implementation of the policy shift. Refugee camp committees play an important role as a bridge between the government and the refugee community – facilitating communication, sharing job opportunity information, and supporting skills profiling and worker registration – while private-sector networks will be leveraged to advocate for employment opportunities.¹⁰

These emerging experiences point to several key lessons:

- **First**, adapting governance frameworks on access to the labour market to promote refugee self-reliance succeeds when policies advance integration into national systems, rather than through parallel aid systems, delivering shared gains for refugees and host communities while addressing labour shortages in key sectors.
- **Second**, linking governance frameworks on labour market access to employment and skilling strategies is essential for effective implementation, requiring coordinated efforts to provide orientation on work authorization procedures, hiring processes, and labour rights at work. This must be demand-based and combined with access to vocational and language training, strengthened labour protections – including orientation sessions, and accessible grievance mechanisms (see sections B and C of the Guiding Principles).
- **Third**, engaging refugee camp committees as formal representative structures is critical for facilitating communication and sharing information on employment pathways, while leveraging private-sector engagement and guidance for employers on fair recruitment aims to promote access to decent work.
- **Fourth**, lessons and good practices from migrant worker protection should be systematically incorporated, given some parallels in protection risks and decent work deficits for non-national groups. In addition, aligning refugee labour market access measures with migrant worker safeguards helps ensure policy coherence, strengthens prevention of exploitation, and supports access to decent work. At the same time, the highest attention to and maintenance of the right to non-*refoulement* for refugees is a significant differentiating factor, requiring specialized protection.

4. Actionable steps : Roadmap based on experience from Thailand

- **Establish a clear governance framework to allow access to work:** The Royal Thai Cabinet Resolution of 26 August 2025 created the legal and policy basis for displaced persons from Myanmar in the nine temporary shelters to apply for renewable one-year work permits from 1 October 2025, marking a shift from required residence in temporary shelters and dependence on humanitarian assistance toward self-reliance and labour market inclusion.
- **Promote fair recruitment through direct hiring:** Thailand has prioritized direct hiring through job placement events as the main recruitment modality, thereby reducing refugees' reliance on intermediaries and exposure to recruitment-related debt and abusive practices.
- **Strengthen implementation for decent work outcomes:** Efforts underway focus on improving information provision to both refugees and employers, including guidance on work authorization procedures, hiring processes and labour rights at work, alongside skills profiling, labour market mapping, and pre-departure/job-readiness support. These measures are important to link labour market access to actual employment opportunities and decent work outcomes.

5. Way forward

While access to employment for refugees is expanding in Thailand, administrative and operational barriers slow uptake and limit scale. As of June 2026 12 per cent of working age refugees are in work or in the process to enter work, and while this represents a faster rate of uptake than is the norm in similar refugee contexts globally, there is expectation from the government and some refugees that this could move faster. A critical priority is to streamline legal, policy, and administrative practice to enhance employer hiring and subsequent applications for work permits, health insurance and camp exit passes, as stipulated under the Royal Thai Cabinet Resolution of 26 August 2025. At the same time, stronger links to national labour protection systems, complaint and grievance mechanisms, support through workers' organizations and financial inclusion services are needed to support safe and sustained labour market participation. Further efforts could also be made to enhance compliance with Thai labour laws through inspections and enforcement.

¹⁰ UNHCR (2026) [Towards Sustainable Solutions for Refugees in Thailand](#), Sustainable Solutions Thailand June 2026 Appeal.

Practical and administrative challenges in issuing work permits include difficulties and delays in filing online work permit applications. Mobility restrictions currently mean that refugees cannot leave the camps to seek work, but only once they have a job offer. Another challenge is that family members cannot accompany refugees. Further, refugees do not always receive information on job placement events, and these occur mainly in the most transport-accessible camps, leaving remote shelters with less access to job placements. There is also a need to ensure that women, those over 35 years of age, and refugees with disabilities have equal access to information and employment opportunities.

Primarily employers seeking workers for low-paid, elementary occupations have sought refugee workers, however some refugees possess medium- or high- skill sets. Finding employment to match and not wasting talent will also be important for both refugee workers and the Thai economy. Further, standard contracts would aid mutual employer and worker understanding of agreed terms and working conditions, especially setting out agreed wages, who is paying recruitment-related costs, and what the timing and rate of any deductions are.

The current refinement of the SOPs on employment pathways presents an opportunity to address these structural and administrative barriers. Continued outreach to employers in sectors facing labour shortages, improved connectivity with remote camps, and clearer information on job opportunities and rights are essential. Strengthening skills development, job matching and fair recruitment – for example through the provision of standard job descriptions and strengthening the quality of worker and employer discussions at the job matching stage – will be key. Recognizing that refugees do not represent a homogenous group, targeted support is needed to reach out to different groups of people, including women with caregiving responsibilities, persons with disabilities, and others with specific needs. Given that refugees are being recruited into low-paid jobs in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, agriculture and services, specific attention should also be paid to preventing risk of trafficking in persons, forced labour, and other forms of exploitation. Monitoring, both on work permit uptake and on working conditions, should limit exposure to exploitative practices and promote access to decent work for all.

Contact details

International Labour Organization
Route des Morillons 4
CH-1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland

Labour Migration Branch (MIGRANT)
ilo.org/labourmigration
T: +41 22 799 6111
E: migrant@ilo.org