

My Loc, Viet Nam: - No one in Tran Thi Thanh's family was thrilled when the 43-year-old grandmother acquired her first-ever passport. Hardly a tourist, the farmer's wife intended to use it to find work in Taiwan, cleaning someone else's home.

The passport may have been a ticket to an unimaginable income and a chance to build savings for the first time in their lives, but the family also feared the consequences.

"We have to sacrifice many things, such as our happiness, of sharing everything, being together," explained Tran Thi Thanh. "Our kids stay at home instead of going to school, or if they go to the school, they might not have good marks." She has four children and her youngest daughter, aged 16, was still at school.

She was also concerned about the effect on her marriage. "Without the wife at home a husband often gets bored and goes out more. Some even drink alcohol just to relax," she said. Stories of being cheated and robbed when living abroad also troubled her.

The choice between financial safety and familial sacrifice is one that millions of people in Asia-Pacific face. In the Philippines, for example, around 1.3 million leave to work abroad each year, largely because of the lack of local options.

In Thanh's My Loc commune more than 600 farmers leave periodically to find work in Thailand, typically in cities where they are poorly paid for working long hours as street vendors, in restaurants or as domestic and construction workers. Increasingly, more are crossing their national borders. Tran Thi Thanh's youngest son is currently cleaning cars in Thailand. In 2010, around 86,500 Vietnamese went overseas for work, up from 79,000 in 2007.

Labour migration, and related issues like rights, skills and employment opportunities will be among the topics discussed at the ILO's forthcoming Asia Pacific Regional Meeting, which will be held in Kyoto, Japan from 4-7 December 2011. The meeting, which is held only once every four years, will bring together Governments, employers and workers' representatives from about 45 countries in the region, to discuss current work-related issues. It will be the first time such policy-makers have met since the global financial and employment crisis began, in 2008.

From their front porch in Ha Tinh province the family weighed the reality of their fluctuating seasonal income as farmers. Ha Tinh is one of Viet Nam's poorest areas, noted for its harsh conditions - floods, storms, bad soil, very cold winters and extreme summer heat. The Thanh family initially resigned themselves to the sacrifice in favour of the high earnings rumoured to be had overseas. The money would allow them to stop borrowing at high interest rates for home repairs, medical bills or other unexpected expenses, during the three or four months each year when their farm produced no income.

But Tran Thi Thanh's friends thought differently. They too weren't happy with her leaving the community. And now, they felt, there were other options.

The women, including Tran Thi Thanh, had just finished a 55-day training course that taught them to weave bamboo stems into lampshades. Her friends were convinced it could provide additional income for each of them during the quiet period when the harvest was finished. They had earned while they trained but now there was the prospect of a contract to produce lampshades that would sell in IKEA stores worldwide.

At around US\$50 a month the earnings would be considerably less than Tran Thi Thanh's Taiwan option - which dangled the prospect of US\$200 to US\$250 a month - but it would be enough to supplement the farming income and would bring the non-cash benefit of staying together. So when Tran Thi Thanh came to return the weaving materials she'd been given to weave, her friends refused to accept them.

The women's opportunity to increase their incomes from home materialized through a

community-based programme called Training for Rural Economic Empowerment, or TREE. TREE was launched by the International Labour Organization (ILO) a decade ago and has already helped more than 40,000 people, in countries including Bangladesh, Madagascar, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Timor-Leste.

The TREE programme in Vietnam is part of the European Union-funded Labour Market Project that the ILO and Viet Nam's Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs are using to create better economic conditions and decent work opportunities, and increase the employability of poor farmers and disadvantaged groups

(such as rural women, youth, indigenous people and people with disabilities). All of Vietnam's 63 provinces are now considering introducing TREE.

The programme builds on the well-known idea of community-based skills training but includes elements designed to bring in socially-excluded individuals and communities, particularly those who can't reach formal vocational training programmes for geographical, social or other reasons.

Villagers work with TREE project staff to decide which livelihood schemes are the most viable. Skills are taught and follow-up support is provided to help the trainees form business groups or entrepreneurial enterprises. This includes training on managing a business or business group, micro-financing and access to markets.

Among the target groups are farmers whose development is limited by the seasonal nature of their income – like Tran Thi Thanh's . It also reaches out to women, especially in Muslim communities where females are typically kept at home, away from education or employment. The training is taken to them and the new skills can be used in home work - bamboo or rattan weaving, knitting, machine embroidery, tailoring, headscarf dyeing, hairdressing and boat building.

TREE “started as a way to empower the poor and disadvantaged in society with skills and employment,” said Carmela Torres, an ILO Skills and Employability Specialist. But now, as well as addressing security and poverty issues, “it is also about empowering women to contribute to society and to work with their husbands”.

In Vietnam, the TREE training has encouraged more than 100 villagers from the Tran's province to return home from working as migrants abroad.

“I know US\$50 per month is not a high number, but we can do the work at any time of the day or year, such as in our spare time or at night time,” said Tran Thi Thanh, whose business group consists of 38 women and 8 men. “Many people can do this job, even the old, the disabled... and we do it together at our homes. ... If two to three people in a family make lampshades together, the [income] will increase”.

To Thanh, who considers herself an “old women [who] should not work far from home”, the TREE training offers more than additional income. “Seeing the lampshades made with my own hands turn into the beautiful final products, exported to the IKEA company and distributed to European countries, I am very proud. I love the bamboo-weaving craft and hope to help develop it into a traditional craft of my village so that our village women don't have to go and earn a living far away from our families”.