

## **GMS TRIANGLE: Migrant Worker Resource Centres (MRCs) and the provision of support services**

**The Tripartite Action to Protect the Rights of Migrant Workers (the GMS TRIANGLE project)** aims to strengthen the formulation and implementation of recruitment and labour protection policies and practices, to ensure safe migration that results in decent work. The project is operational in six countries: Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam. In each country, tripartite constituents (government, workers' and employers' organizations) are engaged in each of the GMS TRIANGLE project objectives: strengthening policy and legislation, building the capacity of stakeholders and providing services to migrant workers.

### **Rationale for MRCs**

In countries of origin and destination, the GMS TRIANGLE project is supporting the provision of services, primarily through MRCs, in areas with a large migrant population. In some places, services to migrants and potential migrants and their families were previously unavailable, and in others, a focus has been on enhancing the quality of services.

Studies into the living and working conditions of low-skilled migrants in the region reveal indicators of abuse commonly associated with labour exploitation are widespread. Factors in determining labour exploitation include excessive recruitment fees, deception about wages, type of work and legal status; withheld wages; withheld passports or identity documents; physical confinement; substandard working conditions, and threats of denunciation to the authorities.

Irregular migration and lack of awareness contributes to the vulnerability of low skilled workers. Many do not migrate through legal channels, for a number of reasons, including the relatively higher costs, time and complexity. Many migrants and potential migrants are unaware of the practical and legal processes involved in moving to another country, and



*A survey of potential migrants in three provinces of Lao People's Democratic Republic found that 90 per cent of respondents planned to rely on friends and family in migrating abroad.*

*ILO GMS TRIANGLE Baseline Survey, 2011.*

*In Savannakhet province in Lao People's Democratic Republic, an estimated seven per cent of the working age population have migrated, and only a small fraction have gone through legal channels.*

*Provincial Department of Labour and Social Welfare, 2013.*

have a limited understanding of their rights at work and how to protect those rights.

Migrants' vulnerability is compounded by limited access to reliable information and support services. They tend to rely on acquaintances or brokers for information, and do not know where to seek help, cannot reach services, or are reluctant to approach the authorities for assistance. In countries of destination, migrants face the additional challenge of language barriers and fears about discrimination from authorities or retaliation from employers.

*In surveys of migrants in Malaysia and Thailand, 19 per cent and 11 per cent of respondents respectively did not file a complaint because they did not know where to complain; 24 per cent and 23 per cent did not complain because they did not want to cause trouble.*

ILO GMS TRIANGLE Baseline Survey, 2011.

In addition to the primary objective of delivery of much-needed information and counselling services, a secondary objective of the MRCs is their link with the other objectives of the GMS TRIANGLE project. Information collected from MRCs feeds into the policy advocacy process and helps to identify training and tools that are required in order to better implement existing laws.

### **Models of MRCs**

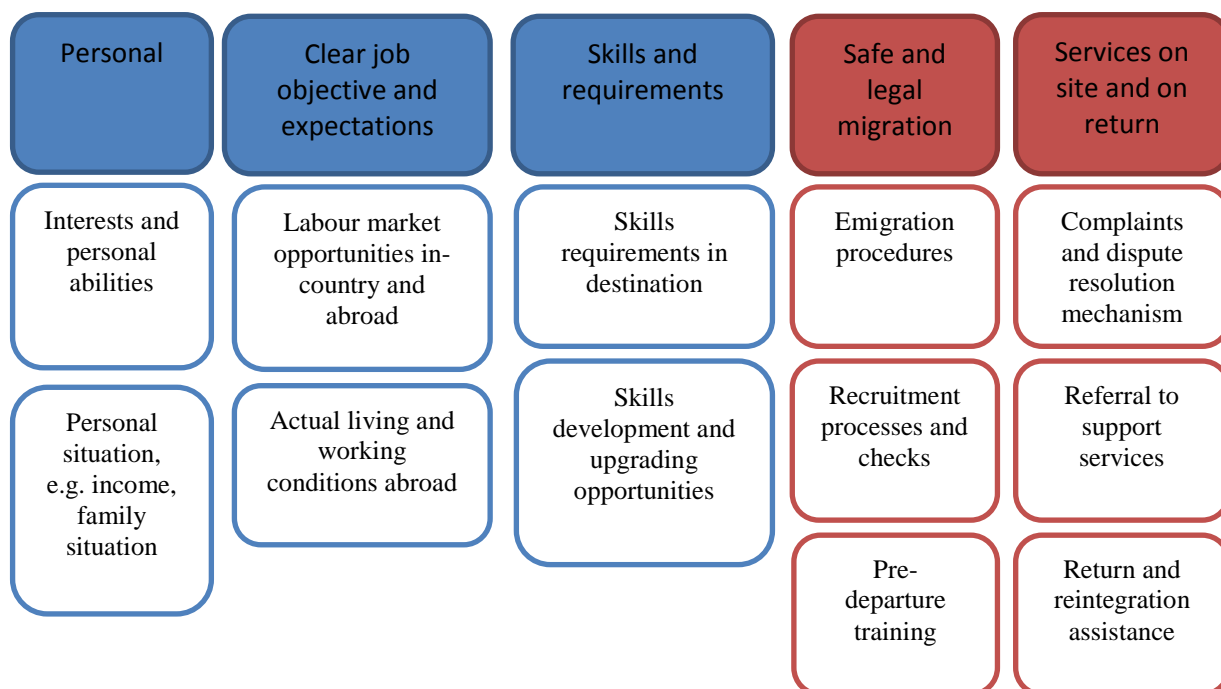
In 23 locations in six countries, the project has partnered with Governments, trade unions and civil society organizations to provide support to women and men migrants, potential migrants and their family members.

In Malaysia and Thailand, the MRCs are run by trade unions (2) and CSOs (6). In the four countries of origin, most of the MRCs (10) are linked to government-run job centres. MRCs are also implemented by trade unions in Cambodia and Lao People's Democratic Republic (2), and by CSOs in Cambodia and Myanmar (2). In Phnom Penh, the government authority responsible for labour migration also runs an MRC, that both provides assistance to migrants and potential migrants and supports the provincial authorities and other service providers in the country in carrying out their duties.

Giving advice on overseas job opportunities is a natural extension of the core work of the existing employment services. For example, in Thanh Hoa province in Viet Nam, 20 per cent of job seekers visiting the Employment Service Centre were interested in overseas job opportunities.

The following diagram illustrates how 'employability dimensions' that employment services address can be adapted to respond to the needs of potential migrant workers. These employability dimensions are: personal; clear objectives and expectations; skills and requirements; and job search skills and ability to maintain a job. The first three of these dimensions are equally applicable to the guidance provided at job centres as well as MRCs. Additional dimensions have been added to consider the specific needs of migrants.

## Employability dimensions



### **Services provided**

MRCs serve as a focal point for migrants and potential migrants to obtain accurate information and counselling on safe migration and rights at work, countering misleading information provided by some unscrupulous brokers, agencies and employers. Counseling is provided at the MRC, through outreach activities, online and over the phone. Information is also disseminated through broadcasts on local radio and television, job fairs, and seminars on safe migration in schools, vocational training centres and in the community. In Viet Nam, the MRCs also store copies of contracts and passport information of migrants, as a record in case of problems in the destination workplace.

Migrants can receive assistance in settling grievances at the MRC. Some cases have been pursued through the legal system. In countries of origin, most complaints received relate to non-deployment, non-fulfilment of contract terms, and family members who have lost contact with migrants in destination countries. In countries of destination, the MRCs usually provide support in the recovery of unpaid wages and in accessing compensation for accidents suffered at work. Support at both ends of the migration process is a key feature of the MRC model in this regional project. Several cases raised by service providers in Cambodia or Viet Nam have been resolved through consultation with service providers in Thailand and Malaysia.

MRC staff also work with local authorities to prevent and resolve problems. In Cambodia, district and commune officials have received training on safe and legal migration processes, and provide this information to their communities and refer potential migrants to the local MRC. In Thailand, migrant community leaders are being trained to provide their peers with information and assistance. In Thailand and Malaysia, migrants are being organized as part of existing trade unions, and also forming their own networks. In November 2013, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between Thai and Cambodian trade unions that includes enhanced cooperation in organizing migrant workers and resolving rights abuses.



### **MRC operations manual and tools**

For MRCs in countries of origin, the GMS TRIANGLE project has developed and delivered training on an Operations Manual tailored to the specific needs of each country, following an adaptation and pilot testing period. It is intended to be applicable beyond the implementing partners of the GMS TRIANGLE project, by other government agencies and service providers, within and outside the sub-region. The Manual aims to include all information needed to establish and successfully run an MRC or deliver MRC services in an existing service centre, including guidance on:

- establishing an MRC;
- MRC services
- frequently asked questions;
- MRC management;
- communications plan; and
- templates and tools.

The MRCs and service providers in countries of destination also have access to a number of other training materials that have been developed by the ILO or the implementing partners themselves, including:

- Para-legal training for migrant peer leaders (Human Rights and Development Foundation, Thailand);
- Training-of-Trainers manual on labour protection and rights of migrant workers (TACDB, Thailand);
- Organizing for Justice (MAP Foundation, Thailand);
- Financial literacy training (ILO);
- Organizing domestic workers (ILO); and
- Migrant Women’s Empowerment Programme (ILO)

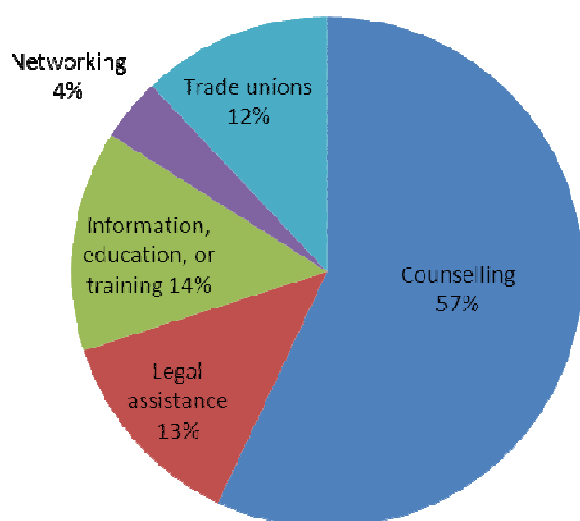
### **Results of MRC services**

After just over two years of operation (June 2013), 21,177 migrants have benefited from assistance delivered through MRCs and similar support services. Of the beneficiaries for

whom sex-disaggregated data has been collected, 42 per cent are women. In terms of the type of support received:

- 10,692 women and men in Cambodia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Viet Nam have received counselling, information, education or training on safe migration and rights at work.
- 4,324 migrants in Malaysia and Thailand have received counselling, information, education or training on safe migration and rights at work.
- 3,517 migrants in Cambodia, Malaysia and Thailand have received legal assistance.
- 2,644 migrants in Malaysia and Thailand have joined trade unions, or participated in migrant networks or associations.

### Breakdown of MRC service provision (CLIENT)



The project is exploring various means to measure the impact of MRC support services, including an ‘endline survey’ to identify any attributable changes in knowledge of safe migration, rights at work and support services. Some MRCs in Cambodia have already started following up with beneficiaries to directly assess the impact of counselling services. Of those contacted in Battambang, 60 per cent decided not to work in Thailand because they felt it was risky; and 40 per cent migrated – 24 per cent (18) through legal channels and 16 per cent (12) through irregular channels. It is anticipated that this type of follow up with beneficiaries will be carried out systematically by MRCs in the future, in order to support results-based management of MRC services.

### **Sustainability**

The project has taken several measures to increase the likelihood of the sustainability of the MRCs:

- Technical support to Governments is consistent with national agendas and provides them with different models for support services.
- Where MRCs are located within job centres, providing additional services to job seekers interested in working overseas is a logical extension of their existing functions.
- The trade union partners that are running MRCs in Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Malaysia and Thailand are contributing their own staff time and office space, demonstrating their commitment to the provision of support services.
- Materials have been developed by service providers or localized and tested, before being finalized with inputs from the MRC managers and staff to ensure applicability in the local context.
- Capacity of the staff at MRCs has been consistently reinforced, not only in terms of service delivery, but also through providing guidance and coaching on project

management skills such as how to document beneficiaries and write progress reports for donors.

### The way forward

The GMS TRIANGLE project is continually looking for ways to improve the services offered through MRCs to ensure they meet the needs of migrant workers. Some of the anticipated activities for the future include:

- Building better links between MRCs in origin and destination to increase cases of end-to-end support.
- Working with returned migrants to provide guidance to would-be migrants and intending migrants, through counseling, outreach and pre-employment/pre-departure training.
- Greater dialogue among MRC partners and central government on policy gaps and implementation; and sharing of good practices and lessons learned.
- Two-way conversation (at national level) on gaps in laws and/or application of existing laws (exists in some countries, e.g. Cambodia Project Advisory Committee meeting; Thailand TRIANGLE Network Meeting) – and sharing good practices and lessons learned and promoting replication.
- Developing stronger information management systems at the MRCs to allow for improved monitoring and evaluation.
- Strengthening messaging around the actual / ultimate costs (included lost wages and non-financial costs) of irregular migration.
- Developing criteria for the selection of recruitment agencies that MRCs can refer workers to.

### Location of MRCs



**Cambodia:** Prey Veng; Kampong Cham; Battambang; Phnom Penh

**Lao People's Democratic Republic:** Champasack; Savannakhet; Xaiyaboury

**Malaysia:** Johor; Kuala Lumpur/Selangor; Penang

**Myanmar:** Dawei (Tanintharyi); Kyaing Tong (Shan State); Mandalay

**Thailand:** Bangkok; Chiang Mai; Mae Sot; Rayong; Samut Prakan

**Viet Nam:** Bac Ninh; Ha Tinh; Phu Tho; Quang Ngai; Thanh Hoa