



International
Labour
Organization

GMS TRIANGLE Project Enhancing the Role of Labour Attachés in the Protection of Migrant Workers

Tripartite Action to Protect the Rights of Migrant Workers within and from the Greater Mekong Subregion from Labour Exploitation (the GMS TRIANGLE project) is a five-year project that aims to strengthen the formulation and implementation of recruitment and labour protection policies and practices. The project is supported by the Australian Government, and 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 capacity of stakeholders and providing services to migrant workers. These goals are interdependent, with policy advocacy and capacity building activities driven by the voices, needs and experiences of workers, employers and service providers.

The role of labour attachés

The Asia-Pacific region is host to around 25 per cent of the world's migrant workers, with many concentrated in South-East Asia and particularly the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). While labour migration offers increased economic opportunities to a significant proportion of migrant workers, many workers – particularly those in low-skilled occupations – are vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and forced labour. Combating labour abuses and exploitation, and reducing the risks involved in migration, requires coordination between countries of origin and destination, and one effective intervention is the appointment of labour attachés.



Representatives from the Thai Ministry of Labour participate in the capacity building workshop for labour attachés in Bangkok, June 2014 © ILO

Labour attachés are typically officials from the labour ministry, appointed to provide support to migrant workers in the destination country. The important role they play is noted in the ILO Multilateral Framework on Labour Migration, which calls for effective information and support from consular services in countries of destination, wherever possible. Activities undertaken by labour attachés vary but can include seeking out employment opportunities and vetting potential employers; assisting in labour disputes, including compensation claims and legal assistance; monitoring, or coordinating with local authorities to monitor, the working conditions of migrant workers in the host country; and supporting and/or facilitating the repatriation of workers. Labour attachés can also

be important actors in policy formation and review, including the adoption of MOUs between countries of origin and destination.¹

Labour Attachés in GMS TRIANGLE countries

In recent years, more labour attachés have been deployed from countries in the Mekong Subregion; however, there is still progress to be made in ensuring that migrant workers are able to access

¹ OECD-IOM-ILO. 2006. *Handbook on Establishing Effective Labour Migration Politics in Countries of Origin & Destination* (Vienna).



Australian Government
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade



specialised support at their consulates or embassies on labour rights and protections while working abroad.

- Myanmar is a major labour sending country in the region, with a 2013 trial census estimating up to 14 per cent of the Myanmar population are living abroad. Labour attachés have been appointed in five countries, including Thailand and Malaysia.
- From Cambodia, to date, no labour attachés have been appointed, although consular and embassy officials provide some support and plans are underway to appoint labour attachés in Malaysia, Thailand and the Republic of Korea.
- The Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic has recently appointed a labour attaché in Thailand, as the main country of destination.
- Viet Nam has an estimated 500,000 contract-based workers abroad, with most migrating to East Asia. There are Labour Management Sections headed by a labour attaché in key embassies and consulates across nine countries and territories, including Malaysia.

ILO TRIANGLE projects' activities with labour attachés

The GMS TRIANGLE project and ASEAN TRIANGLE project² are both providing support to the role of labour attachés in protecting and promoting the rights of migrant workers, with a focus on fostering networks between attachés and consular officials in key destination countries, and building the capacity of labour attachés to deal with the challenges they face in responding to the needs of migrant workers.

- Since 2013, the projects have supported a **series of consultations** with labour attachés and consular officials from 12 countries sending workers to Malaysia. The objectives of the consultations are to provide them with a better understanding of Malaysia's laws and procedures, and to improve cooperation with the Government and social partners. The trainings and consultations covered recruitment regulation, complaint channels, trafficking in persons, and the Comprehensive Settlement of Foreign Workers (6P) programme. The gathering of labour attachés also allows information on case management and other issues to be shared among themselves. The consultations are hosted at the Malaysian Bar Council and chaired by the Head of the Sub-Committee on Migrants, Refugees and Immigration Affairs. Further consultations are planned in Malaysia in 2014, including on proposed new legislation, and on assisting migrant workers that have suffered injuries, illness and death while abroad.
- Because of the demonstrated value of the initiative in Malaysia, the projects have replicated the **consultations with labour attachés in Thailand**. The first meeting was held in June 2014, and will continue to be convened regularly to provide a better understanding of laws and procedures, and improve cooperation among themselves and with government and social partners.
- The ASEAN TRIANGLE project is developing **training materials for labour attachés**, covering methods for managing migration, negotiation and dispute management skills, and training in public engagement to raise awareness of issues affecting migrant workers.
- An **Operations Manual for Labour Attaches** and consular officials in Myanmar embassies abroad will be developed, along with a regional training program, which will be adapted from the regional version and organized by the ASEAN TRIANGLE project.

² The ILO's Tripartite Action for the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers in the ASEAN Region (ASEAN TRIANGLE) project, funded by the Government of Canada