Internal labour migration study in the dry zone, Shan state and the southeast of Myanmar

Amina Maharjan and Theingi Myint
International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, Kathmandu, Nepal, 1Department of Agricultural Economics, Yezin Agricultural University, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar

Abstract: This study focuses on internal labor migration and its impact on livelihood, socio-political atmosphere in the dry zone, Shan state and the Southeast of Myanmar. Internal labor migration is an important livelihood strategy amongst the rural populations to increase their income and livelihood security. The major reason for internal migration is the lack of year-round and sufficient income opportunities in the destination locations. Moreover, the wage difference, the lack of availability of off-farm work and seasonality of agriculture sector are the cause of internal migration. Among the internal migration stream, intra-state migration is very high in Shan and Mon state. In the dry zone both intra- and inter state migration is popular.

Key words: Internal labour migration, dry zone, Shan state, southeast Myanmar.

Introduction

Migration of people for labour is gaining importance globally, as the remittances migrants send home to their families account for a significant share of the overall household income, particularly so for poor households. In 2013, a total of 232 million people migrated from their places of origin globally, a 33% increase from 2000 (UN, 2013). The remittances sent home by international migrant workers from developing countries are estimated to be 404 billion USD in 2013 (World Bank, 2014). Though there is data available for international migration, statistics and information on internal migration is very limited. However, it is well known that migration within the country is one of the most common coping strategies adopted by poor households to stabilize their livelihoods and to adapt to climate, social, political and economic changes. Internal migration generally refers to mobility of people from their origin areas (departure area) to a new place (destination area) for work purpose but remaining in-country.

Myanmar is the second largest country in the Southeast Asia and is rich in natural resources including arable land, forests, minerals, natural gas, and fresh water and marine resources. Myanmar’s population is estimated at over 55 million and is largely rural, still reliant on primarily agrarian economy, contributing about 36% to the gross domestic product of the country and accounting for 60-70% employment (http://www.themimu.info/country-overview). Long-standing conflicts and decades of martial law and rule have setback the development of this once prosperous Southeast Asian country. After 30 years, a population census was carried out in 2014. The little information gathered through certain surveys (such as Fertility and Reproductive Health Survey) reveal that internal migration in Myanmar is very high and that the predominant migration pattern is rural-rural rather than rural-urban (Nyi, 2013).

The study covers different internal migration modalities in Myanmar, including: (i) Internal labour migration profiles (who migrates, how and where to, sectors of employment, skills on demand) and patterns (permanent, temporary, seasonal/circular) in selected sample targeted areas, (ii) Mapping of stake holders per institutions involved in the migration cycle and legal and institutional frameworks existing in migration management, and (iii) Major reasons for migration and most significant impacts on the livelihoods of households and communities in the origin and destination areas.

Materials and Methods

Study sites: The study focuses on selected sample townships in the Dry Zone, Shan State and Southeast Myanmar. This is the triangle where HELVETAS is currently working and foresees future projects. Some general population features of the States/Region selected for the study are given in Table1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/Region</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>% of total population</th>
<th>Urban (%)</th>
<th>Population density</th>
<th>Household size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magway</td>
<td>3,912,711</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nay Pyi Taw*</td>
<td>1,158,367</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandalay*</td>
<td>6,145,588</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon</td>
<td>2,050,282</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shan</td>
<td>5,815,384</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DoP, 2014

In each Region/State, 1-2 townships were chosen for the field visits. In each field site, apart from collecting general internal migration data and patterns, some specific information was collected from identified sectors where involvement of internal migrants is high. Selected States/Region and townships with relevant labour sector for the field visit are given in Table 2.

Methodology: In order to first value and secondly complement existing and planned migration related studies in Myanmar, a comprehensive desk review and preliminary exchanges with different development and research agents involved with migration were carried out. This also aimed to help compare and verify findings to date wherever possible. However, there was very limited number of studies/secondary information available for such comparisons. Two days of introductory interviews helped in forming some general impressions as well as identifying additional organizations and persons to contact in the field visit.

Table 1. Some general features of the selected study states/regions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/Region</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>% of total population</th>
<th>Urban (%)</th>
<th>Population density</th>
<th>Household size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Magway</td>
<td>3,912,711</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nay Pyi Taw*</td>
<td>1,158,367</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandalay*</td>
<td>6,145,588</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon</td>
<td>2,050,282</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shan</td>
<td>5,815,384</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DoP, 2014

In each Region/State, 1-2 townships were chosen for the field visits. In each field site, apart from collecting general internal migration data and patterns, some specific information was collected from identified sectors where involvement of internal migrants is high. Selected States/Region and townships with relevant labour sector for the field visit are given in Table 2.

Methodology: In order to first value and secondly complement existing and planned migration related studies in Myanmar, a comprehensive desk review and preliminary exchanges with different development and research agents involved with migration were carried out. This also aimed to help compare and verify findings to date wherever possible. However, there was very limited number of studies/secondary information available for such comparisons. Two days of introductory interviews helped in forming some general impressions as well as identifying additional organizations and persons to contact in the field visit.
The field visits involved rapid and intensive two-week expedition to the selected study sites, where a number of various stakeholders were interviewed. These included migrants in origin and destination areas, including migrants’ families in origin areas, labour agents (who facilitate migration process), township officials, and private sector employing migrants, farmers, civil society and other key informants. As there was no quantitative data collection and as the study is based on the “expert opinion”, the findings of the study are of qualitative value; including several case studies. However, in order to ensure consistency of the findings, same information was collected by interviewing different stakeholders involved in a given sector. Interaction with various stakeholders was facilitated by one-to-one interview, discussion in small groups of varied stakeholders, or focus group discussion with the groups of migrant labourers. The study team is aware of several quantitative studies with direct or indirect information on internal migration being planned by organizations such as World Bank, ILO migration mapping, ILO labour force survey etc. These planned surveys may fill existing gaps in the data on migration in Myanmar. It is hoped that the present report will be useful to planned research to provide preliminary ideas on internal migration patterns and impacts.

**Results and Discussion**

**Reasons and Gender of Migration**

**Reasons for migration:** The most commonly cited reason for migration is income generation, mostly through employment – year-round employment opportunity, better paying employment opportunity, and employment with possibility of gaining additional skills. From the Dry Zone, most migrants reported lack of sufficient employment in the local community as the major reason for migration. Landless/near-landless households find it easier and preferable to migrate with their entire family or leaving just 1-2 members behind to look after the farm and livestock back home. Such migrants are mostly temporary or permanent, depending on opportunities and family. For them, migration is a livelihood and survival strategy to reduce the number of mouths to be fed. Households with some land holding are mostly involved in seasonal labour migration with only 1-2 members working in the destination, while the remaining household members stay back. Depending on the labour needs on the family farm, these migrants also usually visit their native village during the peak season.

Still a slightly better-off rural families with access to more and secured land are involved in internal migration to non-farm better paid formal sectors such as working in the private sector, public jobs, non-government organizations etc. Migration is no more a survival strategy, but an opportunity to further skills development and better career prospects. The most households in Patheingyi Township in Mandalay region, with huge land holdings are employed in salaried jobs in Mandalay city, thus creating demand for migrant labour for their paddy fields.

During the field visits, various other reasons for migration were noted. Development interventions and infrastructure construction has also resulted in migration, which could be both internal and international. For example, in Gokye village, Saytoketaya township, Magway region, due to construction of a dam, the entire village had to be relocated. As a direct result of this relocation, 70 persons from the village of 87 households migrated to Thailand and many more migrated internally.

**Gender in migration:** In internal migration, both men and women migrate, while international migration is mostly male dominated. Most internal seasonal male migrants are either single or, when married, the distance to the origin village is not very huge, so that they can regularly visit home. Similarly, most female seasonal migrants are single and migrate to nearby areas or as dependent of the spouse or family members. The sector of work has a clear gender division with women being higher demanded in tea plantations and other agriculture work, garment factories and as domestic help; whereas men are much preferred in rubber plantations (as tappers), mines, and the construction sector. The pay in these sectors certainly differs, but it is not clear if there is gender discrimination in the payment.

**Findings by study areas and sectors**

**Southeast (Mon State):** In Mon State, most internal seasonal migrants were from within Mon State, while migrants from outside are mostly year-round temporary (with or without family) in nature. Most of the migrants in the study sites had temporary settlements – Mawlamyine (65%), Mudon (70%) and Kyaikmaraw (73%). The migration pattern depends on the sector which, in turn, depends on the origin of the migrant workers. While migrants from the Delta region are mostly involved in fisheries and rubber plantation, migrants from the Dry Zone are involved in construction work, brick factory, and to some extent on rubber plantation. Some migrants have also found work in various factories in the area such as water purification plants, chilli factory, tyre factory etc. Work in brick factories is seasonal in nature, lasting for 4 months from November to February. Work in construction, factories, rubber plantations is more permanent in nature. However, even migrant workers in brick factories might not necessarily be seasonal as they might stay in the area and find work elsewhere during the off-season – road construction, paddy fields etc. High demand is reported of female migrant workers from the Delta region in the Karaoke Bars, popularly known as “KTV”. The wages in various sectors in Mon state were more attractive than in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/Region</th>
<th>Townships</th>
<th>Sectors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mon State</td>
<td>Mawlamyine, Mudon, Kyaikmaraw</td>
<td>Rubber plantation, fisheries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magway</td>
<td>Magway, Minhla</td>
<td>Oil seeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nay Pyi Taw</td>
<td>ZayYarThiRi, Nay Pyi Taw</td>
<td>Restaurant, construction &amp; farm households</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandalay</td>
<td>Mandalay, Patheingyi</td>
<td>Paddy, dairy, off farm work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shan State</td>
<td>Pin Laung</td>
<td>Tea plantation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Study States/Region and townships
other regions for labour. A major constraint is to retain the migrant labour in rubber farm. In rubber sector, with the fluctuating prices of rubber, migrant labours are losing attraction to work in the sector. In addition, the seasonality of the rubber tapping limits the earning potential of migrant workers in this sector. Thus, removing these two barriers would be important to overcome the labour shortage problem faced by the rubber sector as well as to improve the livelihoods of the rubber sector migrant workers.

Fish sector also attracts a lot of migrant labour but mostly from the Delta region, Yangon and Mon State. Migrant workers from Yangon and Mon state work in Northern Mon state (e.g. Paung township), however, those from the Delta region work in Southern Mon (e.g. Ye township). This is because of the similarity in fishing technologies used at the origin and destination for the migrant labourers, thus making work more familiar. Kyaikto Township is a major source area for migrant workers in the fishery sector. Since decreasing fish catches in the last 8 years, fishing is continued throughout the year, including the rainy season. Therefore, most migrants come with family and are permanent or long-term settlers. However, some of the Mon State internal migrants are individual migrants with their families remaining back home.

**Shan State:** Shan State attracts a lot of migrants from the Dry Zone to work in mines, tea plantations, sugarcane farms, etc. Labour force from Shan State itself is attracted to international migration to China, Thailand and Malaysia. This also creates an additional demand for migrant labour to replace the lost labour in the various on- and off-farm sectors in Shan State. As the Shan language is very similar to the Thai language, Thailand is a preferred destination for migrants from South and East Shan. It is reported that half of the youth population from Pin Laung Township in South Shan has migrated to Thailand to work in construction, factories, and – for females – as domestic workers. On the other hand, due to closer geographical proximity and high demand and wages in China, labour from North Shan migrates in large numbers to China. It is reported that about 60 persons of the age group of 18-30 years leave daily from Namhsan Township to work in China; similar trends are also reported in Mongton Township.

Hence, Shan State is both a destination and transit place for the migrants from the Dry Zone. Dry Zone migrants find work in the tea and sugarcane plantations but they also use it as a transit point for migrating to China and Thailand. Most migration from Shan State is either intra-State or international/cross-border. Intra-State migration is made from one village to another to work as seasonal labour migrants or to the urban centres. Seasonal migration to neighbouring villages to work in tea and other crops is reported in the townships of Pin Luang, Pindaya, and Pangwuar. Migration to urban and peri-urban centers is reported in all townships.

**Dry Zone (Magway and Mandalay regions):** The preferred destination areas for internal labour migrants from the Dry Zone are: (i) Yangon, Nay Pyi Taw and Mandalay, for work in industrial zones, tea shops, restaurants, construction and petty trading, (ii) Shan State and Southeast to work in tea, sugarcane and rubber plantations, mines; (iii) North Kachin State for work in gold and jade mines, (iv) central Dry Zone for crude oil. While work in the agriculture sector and crude oil extraction is seasonal in nature. Seasonal migration is high in the case of intra-State/region migration, whereas inter-region migration in the Dry Zone is more temporary in nature.

In Magway region, crude oil extraction attracts many internal migrants from the region and from neighbouring townships in Mandalay region. Minhla Township, a study site famous for crude oil extraction, attracts seasonal migrants from both Magway and Mandalay. Work is seasonal in nature from January to April. Workers return home during off-season to work in their farms. Most migrants are males of 18-50 years of age.

There is also an increase in international migration to China, Thailand, Malaysia, though it is still much lower compared to the Southeast or Shan State. However, some townships report very high international migration (Kyaupadaung, Natogyi in Mandalay region), while others have less (Pathaingyi, Tada U in Mandalay region).

**Stakeholder mapping and legal and institutional frameworks migration in Myanmar**

**Stakeholders and migration organization:**

**Informal: social networks:** Internal migration is mostly organized relying on social networks and traditional trade/labour routes. With the traditional routes proving to be less attractive, there is more dependence on social networks in deciding when and where to move and in finding jobs. Social networks can be family, relatives, friends, neighbors – the services of whom are mostly free of cost.

**Formal: labour brokers:** However, there are also cases where persons arranging the migration of labourers from origin to destination areas – also called labour brokers/agents – are paid either in cash or in kind. An example of such an internal seasonal labour migration arrangement between Pathaingyi Township and Tada U Township in Mandalay region was found.

**Other stakeholders:** There are very few organization, both government and non-government, working on internal migration management. Most organizations and activities focusing on internal migration are involved with Internally Displaced People (IDPs), but little on labour migrants.

**Legal and institutional framework for migration in Myanmar:** There is no specific legal or institutional framework yet to regulate/manage internal migration in Myanmar. However, other legal and institutional frameworks have some influence on internal migration. Permanent migrants also find it much easier to find work and settle in destination locations, if they are registered with the local authorities. During discussion with international organizations in Yangon, it was reported that there are incidences of human trafficking in internal migration as well; however during interview with various stakeholders this could not be verified.

The Department of Population, Ministry of Immigration and Population, is the apex body in migration management. As an initiative to integrate more closely
with the other ASEAN economies, steps have been taken up to address migration of labour force within these countries. Myanmar and Thailand have signed a MoU to promote more documented migration in order to protect the rights of Myanmar migrant workers in the Thailand. Many international organizations such as IOM, ILO, World Bank, World Vision International etc. and many donors are involved in migration management in Myanmar, particularly in anti-trafficking programs, health programs etc.

**Impact on livelihood of households and communities**

As migration is a livelihood strategy adopted by the households to improve their overall socio-economic situation, it in turn impacts all aspects of the life of families and communities.

**Economic assets:** As lack of year-round and sufficient livelihood opportunities is the major reason for people to migrate for work purpose, migration has positive impacts on the household economic situation. However, the extent of this improvement depends on the type of migration, skills and the sector of employment. Not all migrations are made for household income maximization but also for risk diversification. So internal migration has not only improved household incomes but also reduced the risks faced by farm households due to extreme weather conditions or price fluctuations in the farm sector.

**Access to income:** As construction is not mechanized in Myanmar, it is highly labour intensive. For many poor rural migrants, this provides one of the best options of employment in the urban areas in absence of any off-farm vacation and technical skills. As can be seen from the wages comparison, generally the highest wages are earned by unskilled migrant workers in construction work. While an unskilled worker earns 4000-4500 Kyat per day, a mason or carpenter earns 6000 Kyat per day. In the agriculture sector, wages range between 2000-5000 Kyat per day. However, 5000 Kyat is earned only for a short duration in a year and only in few areas. In most cases the wages are 2000-3000 Kyat per day. When the earnings are low, it is almost exclusively used for household consumption, which is the case in most seasonal migration case. However, when migration is temporary in nature and migrants come from medium income households, some saving is used for investing in small enterprises in native villages. Skills learnt in destination locations are also transferred to home villages.

**Access to labour:** Internal migration solves the problem of un-/under-employment as well as creates labour shortages. In general, farming in Myanmar is highly labour intensive, as there is little mechanization. Thus, labour migration impacts labour availability which, in turn, impacts wages, agriculture production and crop yields and value. As seen in Kyaukpadaung Township, the labour shortage has increased the wages in agriculture work. In almost all the sites visited, agriculture wages vary between the lean and peak season, due to the seasonality of labour demand in this sector. As agriculture is the major economic sector in rural Myanmar, and the internal migrants are mostly farmers or landless farm labours, the impact of internal seasonal labour migration is high in agriculture sector.

**Access to land:** Access to land is a major factor on the decision to migrate internally as well as internationally. And migration, in turn, has an impact on access to land for migrant households. For the poor with little or no land, internal migration is a survival strategy. The small incomes from the internal migration are hardly sufficient to actually purchase a piece of land, but it helps in paying off debts, thus reducing the loss of land to money lenders in the village. Hence, internal migration does help indirectly in the access to land situation of certain vulnerable households. International migration has sufficient returns to actually lead to the purchase of land at the origin place or nearby urban centers.

**Access to services**

**Education and skills development:** Generally, in interviews with migrant workers, it is reported that migration has improved access to education of their children, as against the general belief that internal seasonal migration hampers education of children. For example, children of rubber plantation workers are believed to be lacking access to schooling. While studying the impact of migration on education, it is important to do a comparative situation analysis not only between the migrant and non-migrant population, but also the situation of migrants in their origin and destination locations.

**Access to health:** It is generally believed that migration exposes the migrant population to high risks of diseases such as malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, etc. due to mobility and work environment. For example, work in forests and plantations are considered high risk occupations for malaria infection (IOM, 2013); thus, working in mines and rubber would expose migrants to such risks. It is particularly so in rubber plantations, as most work is done during night time. An IOM study (2013) on access to public health by mobile and migrant population conducted in all the 10 townships in Mon state indicates that migrants had access to public health facilities within 15-30 minutes by car with the costs between 500-8000 Kyat. During interview with migrant workers, it was reported that remittances help them to better cope with medical treatment of ill household members. So, migration seems also to have a positive impact on the health of their family members.

**Social assets**

**Household/family:** Interviews with the migration-related households and migrants reveal that internal migration has not caused tangible threats in family harmony. As mostly young men and women migrate and as a household head is rarely involved in internal migration, the hierarchy and the decision-making structure within the family remains mostly the same.

**Society/community:** Impact of migration on social harmony/social hierarchy varies between the destination and origin location and the type of migration and remittance earned. In Mon State, immigration is reported to have increased social tension. Migrants are blamed for increase in crime rates in the area (stealing, robbery); and local people generally report feeling unsafe around migrant settlements. This has resulted in some conflicts between the migrants and local communities, resulting in fatalities. Such conflicts were reported in Ye, Kyaikmaraw...
and Thanbyuzayat townships. The armed group together with villagers had tracked the migrant group and killed them. Such severe incidences are rare, but many incidences of migrants taking advance money for the work and then absconding were reported. Even children of migrant workers are reported to be discriminated in the school. No such strong negative feelings were expressed in Shan State.

**Gendered impact of migration:** As migration is not gender neutral, it is expected that migration would have impact on the gender situation in source communities. However, interviews with migrants did not reveal any such significant impacts. Overall, it is agreed that women are slowly taking a lead in farming but no reports were made on drastic changes in gender division of labour (changes in traditional male and female roles in society or farming) or decision-making as a result of migration. This could be because, unlike international migration, migrants involved in internal migration retain much stronger ties with their families left behind.

**Conclusion**

Internal migration is an important livelihood strategy undertaken by smallholder and landless rural populations to increase their income and employment security and options. The major reason for internal migration is the lack of year-round and sufficient income opportunities in the source locations and the demand for the labour in destination locations. However, there is a gradual trend in internal migration to progress from seasonal to year round temporary migration and permanent migration, and eventually to international migration.

More than wage difference, the lack of availability of off-farm work and seasonality of agriculture sector is the major cause of internal migration. Among the various sectors in which internal migrants are found working, construction sector provides higher wages for unskilled rural population. However, this sector also entails higher risks of work site accident, which when coupled of lack of health insurance, makes it more riskier option.

Internal migration is generally a survival strategy rather than wealth accumulation strategy. The earning capacity is much higher in international migration compared to internal migration, when migration is successful. While a successful international migration can lead to accumulation of land, small business, a successful internal migration is still limited to bridging gaps in consumption demands of the household members. However, there is some evidence suggesting that even the small savings from internal migration can be invested in SMEs provided there are favorable conditions (household members willing and skilled enough to look after the enterprises).

Internal migration takes place based on the existing social networks. Some of the migration routes are traditional such as from Dry Zone to Shan State to work in the tea plantations and to the mines in Southeast Myanmar. However, with the changes in prices of the crops, these traditional routes are losing its attraction and new route and sector are emerging such as construction. Among the internal migration steam, intra-state migration is very high in Shan and Mon state. In the Dry Zone both intra and inter-state migration is popular. Intra-state migration is more seasonal in nature and inter-state migration temporary or permanent in nature. One interesting finding is the organization of youth in some source communities for migration purpose which could also provide a good base for development interventions focused on youth.

**Acknowledgement:** Authors wish to thank HELVETAS MYANMAR for financial support of the study. This report is based on Internal Labour Migration Study in the Dry Zone, Shan State and the Southeast of Myanmar, published by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation in Myanmar in February 2015. HELVETAS Myanmar is not responsible for any discrepancies or views expressed. For the full report, please visit: [https://www.myanmar.helvetas.org/en/projects/studies/](https://www.myanmar.helvetas.org/en/projects/studies/)

**References**


