

# ASEAN Migration Outlook

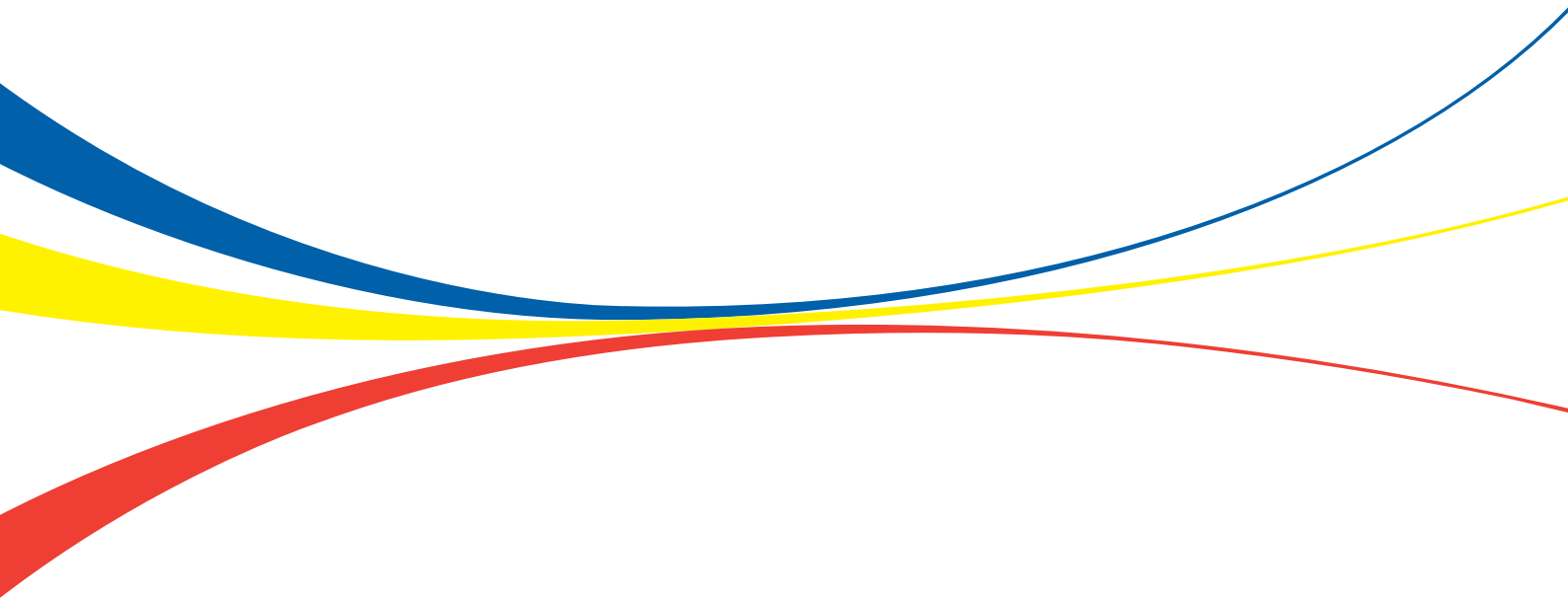


one vision  
one identity  
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# ASEAN Migration Outlook



The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established on 8 August 1967. The Member States are Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam.

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The map in this publication is only indicative and is not drawn to scale.



## FOREWORD

The safe and orderly migration of workers within and beyond the region is a key component of realising an ASEAN Community that is politically cohesive, economically integrated, and socially responsible. Although the COVID-19 pandemic initially resulted in job losses as well as the return of migrant workers to their home countries, ASEAN is once again witnessing their redeployment as our recovery efforts gain momentum.

Against this backdrop, the ASEAN Secretariat is pleased to present the first edition of the *ASEAN Migration Outlook*. This publication comes at a critical juncture, as it draws on the lessons learnt from the pandemic, highlights the prospects for rehabilitating labour migration to enhance our preparedness for future shocks, as well as underscores the importance of building resilience amidst unprecedented changes brought about by factors such as demographic shifts and the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Moreover, the perspectives offered in the Outlook are expected to foster safe and dignified return of migrant workers, especially by exploring the effectiveness of procedures during times of crises as well as safety standards during their journeys.

I commend the ASEAN Committee on the Implementation of the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers (ACMW) for their continued leadership in advancing the promotion and protection of the rights of migrant workers in our region. I also appreciate the Government of Australia for their strong support in realising this endeavour, through The Asia Foundation (TAF) as our implementing partner, which marks another milestone and serves to strengthen the implementation of the ASEAN-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.

As we continue our commitment towards recovering from the pandemic, I am confident that the findings and recommendations of the Outlook will complement our policies and programmes towards building a stronger and more inclusive ASEAN Community where no one is left behind.

**H.E. DATO LIM JOCK HOI**  
Secretary-General of ASEAN



## FOREWORD

The pioneering ASEAN Migration Outlook aims to contribute towards the implementation of the ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers, and to provide an analysis of recent developments in migration movement and policies in ASEAN Member States as well as to forecast future trends of migration in the region.

Recognising the disruptions in labour migration movement and well-being, safety and health of migrant workers caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the 1<sup>st</sup> edition focused on the effective implementation of the return and reintegration mechanisms in crisis situations including health pandemic. The Outlook was written while efforts to contain the pandemic were on-going in the ASEAN region.

This ASEAN Migration Outlook provides useful inspiring practices and recommendations for improvement of the current return and reintegration procedures in the region to be effective and responsive to the immediate needs of migrant workers in time of crisis. I hope that this Outlook will support the realisation and implementation of the ASEAN Guidelines on Effective Return and Reintegration of Migrant Workers which was adopted by the 26<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Labour Ministers Meeting (ALMM) on 28 October 2020.

The 1<sup>st</sup> edition of the ASEAN Migration Outlook was developed under the coordination of the ASEAN Secretariat and guidance of the ASEAN Committee on the Implementation of the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers (ACMW) with the support of the Australian Government through the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP) Implementation Project which is being implemented by The Asia Foundation (TAF).

I wish to thank ASEAN Members States, the ASEAN Secretariat, and partners who have contributed significantly towards the finalisation and endorsement of this 1<sup>st</sup> edition of the ASEAN Migration Outlook. Only through continued collaboration, we can implement the recommendations of the Outlook and pave the way to the development of the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the ASEAN Migration Outlook.

**H.E. DR. IDA FAUZIYAH**

Minister of Manpower of the Republic of Indonesia

Chair of the ASEAN Labour Ministers Meeting (ALMM) for 2020-2022



## FOREWORD

Migration is part of our human history. Labour migration contributes to the economic development of countries across the world. Statistics show that migrant workers are an integral part of the workforce in the ASEAN region. There are over 9 million working-age international migrants in ASEAN countries, with the large majority intra-ASEAN migrants. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the region observed the upward trend of intra-ASEAN migration from 1.5 million in 1990 to 7.1 million in 2020, evidence of the region's increasing reliance on migrant workers in the past decade.

The outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020 and its protracted impact have intensified several existing challenges, including in labour migration governance. The pandemic has directly and indirectly affected the lives and work situation of migrant workers in the ASEAN region. In many cases, migrant workers were forced to return to their home countries, often at short notice. While we are yet to fully understand the scale and impact of returns, the pandemic has highlighted the importance for ASEAN Member States, individually and collectively, of having systems in place to facilitate the safe return and reintegration of migrant workers to their home communities, particularly in times of crisis.

With borders across the region re-opening and economic activity resuming as we emerge from the pandemic, the risk of labour exploitation and trafficking in persons will likely increase. To ensure a robust and inclusive socio-economic recovery, ASEAN has adopted the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework in November 2020, which identifies regional priorities for action including social protection, skills development, labour policies, and employment protection. In this context, and during this critical time of recovery, Australia remains committed and ready to support ASEAN's road to recovery.

The Australian Government commends the initiative of the ASEAN Secretariat, and the leadership of ASEAN Committee on the Implementation of the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers (ACMW), to develop the pioneering ASEAN Migration Outlook. The focus of the first edition on return and reintegration of migrant workers in crisis situations is highly relevant as the region looks to recover from the pandemic.

The Australian Government is pleased to be a close partner of ASEAN in promoting and protecting the rights of migrant workers. For over a decade, we have supported the efforts of ASEAN in promoting safe and fair labour migration in the region. In addition, the Australian Government has been collaborating with ASEAN to combat trafficking in persons and to fulfill the commitments under the *ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children* (ACTIP).

Our support to the development of this first edition of the ASEAN Migration Outlook is a demonstration of Australia's continued commitment to working with ASEAN. We are delighted that this

edition complements the ASEAN Guidelines on Effective Return and Reintegration of Migrant Workers developed by ACMW with support from Australia.

With ASEAN and Australia now in a new chapter of cooperation under our Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, the Australian Government looks forward to continuing this important work together to help underpin security and stability of our shared region.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'W' followed by a long horizontal line and a small flourish at the end.

**H.E. Will Nankervis**  
Australian Ambassador to ASEAN  
Australian Mission to ASEAN



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACTIP	ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AFC	Asian Financial Crisis
AFML	ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour
AMS	ASEAN Member States
ASCC	ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEAN-ACT	ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking
AVRR	Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration
BMZ	Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development
BP2MI	Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Agency
CLMVT	Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Viet Nam and Thailand
CSO	Civil society organisation
DBP	Development Bank of the Philippines
DESBUMI	Village that Cares for Migrant Workers
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DOLE	Department of Labor and Employment
GDP	Gross domestic product
GFC	Global Financial Crisis
GIZ	German Corporation for International Cooperation
GMDAC	Global Migration Data Analysis Centre
HRD Korea	Human Resource Development Korea
IDR	Indonesian rupiah (currency)
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISSA	International Social Security Association
KOICA	Korea International Cooperation Agency
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LBP	Land Bank of the Philippines
LFS	Labour Force Survey
MCO	Movement Control Order
MGI	Migration Governance Indicators
MOLISA	Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs

MoLSW	Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare
MoSA	Ministry of Social Affairs
MOU	Memorandum of understanding
MPOA	Malaysian Palm Oil Association
MRC	Migrant resource centre
MYR	Malaysian ringgit (currency)
NEA	National Employment Agency
NGO	Nongovernmental organisation
NRCO	National Reintegration Center for Overseas Filipino Workers
OASIS	Overseas Filipino Workers' Assistance Information System
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFW	Overseas Filipino worker
OFW-EDLP	OFW - Enterprise Development and Loan Programme
OWWA	Overseas Workers Welfare Association
PHP	Philippine peso (currency)
POEA	Philippine Overseas Employment Administration
PPE	Personal protective equipment
SBMI	Serikat Buruh Migran Indonesia
SMEs	Small and medium-size enterprise
SOCISO	Social Security Organisation (Malaysia)
SOP	Standard operating procedure
SRRT	Surveillance and Rapid Response Teams
TAF	Trade Association and Chamber
THB	Thai baht (currency)
UMFCCI	Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNTWG	United Nations Technical Working Group
US\$	United States dollar (currency)
WTO	World Trade Organization

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This Outlook provides a situational analysis of the return home of migrant workers because of crisis situations – primarily the COVID-19 pandemic – and the economic and social costs of their return and reintegration. The Outlook aims to inform the implementation of the ASEAN Guidelines on Effective Return and Reintegration of Migrant Workers.

The Outlook received support from the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade through the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP) Implementation Project (AIP). The Asia Foundation was the implementing partner.

This Outlook was developed and made possible through the technical expertise and knowledge shared by many individuals and organisations, whom we wish to thank:

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has ravaged labour migration in Southeast Asia since early 2020, upending a system that steadily intensified over the past four decades. As one country after another restricted travel and adopted lock-down measures in efforts to protect their populations, their economies suffered. The pandemic caused major economic setbacks and many employers were forced to lay-off workers. Migrant workers were among the first to be laid off from jobs, especially in agriculture and fisheries, construction, labour-intensive manufactures, and households. Most of these workers had originated from neighbouring countries and crossed borders using non-formal channels. Since the beginning of the pandemic, well over 2 million migrant workers have lost their jobs. Many, forced to return to their home countries, abandoned hopes of recovering unpaid wages and their large investment in migration. Many migrant workers also had an increased risk of catching COVID-19, likely because of their employment conditions, cramped housing, and reluctance or inability to access health services. Governments of the countries of origin and the countries of employment, strained by unprecedented public support demands, faced significant challenges in organising the migrant workers' safe return and reintegration.

This report on the region's reintegration programmes draws on a wide variety of sources, collecting information that will help ASEAN Member States (AMS) prepare for future emergencies. The report relies on a desk review and analysis of literature and data from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), International Labour Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM), Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Bank, academic research, news reports, and government websites. It also draws on findings from original survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook and key informant interviews conducted with labour ministry officials, independent researchers, and experts from international organisations, migrant resource centres (MRC), and civil society organisations (CSOs).

Cross-border movements of labour have supported the rapid economic advances of the entire ASEAN region. Foreign workers have helped modulate the impact of aging populations and filled spaces vacated by national workers as they move up the occupational ladder. Post-pandemic migration, especially if organised along regular (official) channels, will help speed AMS' economic recovery. Cooperation between and among the AMS to lower workers' costs to migrate for employment, organise mutually beneficial movements of labour, and fill gaps that remain in migrant workers' access to social security protections is key to faster and more equitable economic recoveries for AMS.

Chapter 1 provides a bird's-eye view of the impact of COVID-19 on the global and ASEAN economies. While some AMS were more severely affected than others, the consequences of the pandemic on migrant workers' jobs and incomes were significant everywhere, forcing returns and raising poverty rates, especially in origin countries. Among the worst-affected were migrant workers who faced greater risks



of disease due to the nature of their jobs, and those who were the first to lose their jobs and forced to return to their home countries, where they faced even bleaker economic prospects. Although the region has experienced previous severe economic shocks, including the Asian Financial Crisis of the late 1990s, and the Global Financial Crisis of 2008-2009, which resulted in migrant worker displacement, but the setbacks in employment and incomes were not universally experienced in AMS and proved short-lived, unlike the current crisis. As the COVID-19 pandemic begins to be contained within AMS and signs of economic recovery emerge, labour migration is projected to regain momentum. Underlying structural forces, such as population ageing and wide income disparities, are expected to stimulate cross-border labour migration, but the channels migrants take will depend on the policies pursued by AMS.

Chapter 2 discusses some of the challenges faced by AMS national authorities in organising the return, repatriation, and reintegration of migrant workers. During the COVID-19 period, more than 1 million workers returned to the Philippines, and 200,000 or more to each of Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), Indonesia, and Viet Nam. There was also a noticeable drop in the number of alien temporary work permits issued by Thailand, in the non-citizen population in Malaysia, and in the stock of foreign workers in Singapore. Overseas deployment from sending countries, such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand, also declined. The pandemic's impact on migration also appears in negative remittances growth for 2020 in almost all AMS with data. The crisis placed migrant workers at an increased risk of COVID infection, due to their living conditions in their host country, as mentioned earlier, and due to exposures when they travelled to their country of origin. Although there are no official figures yet, observers fear that migrants face an increased risk of trafficking, since most who migrate while pandemic containment measures are in place do so through clandestine channels because of officially closed borders.

It was tremendously difficult for AMS national authorities to help migrant workers because of limited information, including data on migrant workers' identities, employers, work and residence locations, employment and immigration status, and access to testing and health services. Many migrant workers are known to be undocumented or in irregular situations and are likely to avoid contact with the authorities. The travel restrictions imposed in all AMS added to the complication of planning and organising repatriation across land borders or by air and raised repatriation costs. There were many cases of workers refusing repatriation because they still had unsettled wage claims, while many employers had shut down their business and were no longer willing to settle claims. Workers who lost their jobs sometimes also lost housing accommodations provided by their now-former employers. The return and repatriation of women migrant workers, especially those in domestic service, posed additional challenges with expired work visas or where the women's employers refused to release them from their employment contracts. In general, most migrant workers, especially those in irregular situations, completely depend on their social networks for money because few migrant workers are entitled to cash transfers or any social security benefits from their host governments. The 2020-2021 pandemic experience clearly shows that there is a critical need for all AMS governments to create contingency plans for similar emergencies in



the future. At the same time, the gravity of the challenges can be attenuated by enabling migrant workers to access or enrol in social security programmes in their host country. Finally, many problems could be reduced if host countries promoted job retention schemes for all workers through fiscal and other policies.

The amount and types of support to migrant workers during COVID-19 differed in scale and scope across countries. Almost all sending countries provided repatriation support, including, for some, food, lodging, and free personal protective equipment (PPE) during quarantine after arrival. Others included cash transfers, free COVID-testing, and psychosocial counselling. MRCs in the Mekong provided migrants with food packs, PPE, local transportation, and referral to other government or civil society services. Some sending countries also provided online livelihood and skills training and job placement services to returning workers. In destination countries, support for migrant workers included visa or work permit extensions, temporary waiving of foreign worker levies, improved standards for migrant worker accommodations, free wi-fi and SIM cards, assistance in sending remittances during movement restrictions, and psychosocial counselling.

Some conclusions can be drawn about what interventions are important during emergencies and how to prepare for interventions. During the pandemic, it became clear that public resources are necessary, and public resources for migrant returnees are not always prioritised. This underscores the importance of contingency planning for future crises, whether at the national, bilateral, or regional level. Contingency plans and funds should address repatriation costs, including local transportation, testing and treatment, PPE, and quarantine requirements. Information about migrants and their families is essential for reintegration programmes, but may not be accessible to national authorities. It is important to recognise that not all needs can be met with money, and some returnees, especially those with traumatic experiences, will need psychological support before they can successfully reintegrate into the local community. MRCs fill important gaps in social protection and provide job searching assistance to returnees. It is also necessary to make the general public more aware of migrants' problems and concerns, a challenge often neglected in national reintegration programmes. Finally, an important lesson is the value of sharing experiences among countries, including sharing information on successful projects as well as failures.

Chapter 3 addresses what the pandemic has revealed about the return and reintegration programmes put into action by the national authorities. This report identified the many programmes carried out by AMS countries and outlines a number of lessons that should be applied to future responses. There is a wide gap among AMS in terms of the number and scale of reintegration programmes, particularly government-led efforts, rather than donor-agency initiated. Indonesia and the Philippines had a long list of reintegration programmes, but that was not true for the other sending countries. Types of support included organising returnees into communities; psychosocial counselling for returnees, especially victims of trafficking; skills and business training; job placement; and business loans and grants. Overall, only about half the sending countries in the region codified reintegration into law or policy. In most AMS, there is no regular government funding for reintegration programmes. Only a few countries had widespread multi-stakeholder participation.

In most countries, reintegration programmes do not cover the whole gamut of holistic reintegration policies, which include community integration, psychosocial support, and employment support. There is little data collection and monitoring of returnees, and, even in countries with many programmes, there is almost no impact evaluation of their effectiveness. In comparison with good practices in other regions, such as the European Union, ASEAN-region destination country participation in return and reintegration programmes appears to be lacking.

Finally, Chapter 4 presents conclusions and recommendations for regional and national action. One recommendation is for AMS to adopt policies that will motivate workers to migrate through regular channels, especially by reducing the cost of migrating through regular channels to a minimum. Since there are already many migrants in an irregular situation, countries should offer opportunities to regularise their immigration status. Another recommendation is to adopt an ASEAN Protocol on Return and Reintegration. A third recommendation is to promote agreements among the sending and receiving states that will enable migrant workers to access essential benefits by becoming contributing members of social security systems or of social insurance schemes. A fourth recommendation is to establish a digitised system for collecting, processing, and sharing information. There are five recommendations for national action: assess the impact of reintegration policies and programmes, establish a contingency plan and fund for emergencies, provide regular funding for MRCs, document and share experiences on what programmes contribute best to reintegration, and tailor reintegration schemes for the specific needs of women returnees who have very different needs than their male counterparts.

# INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

For the past several decades, the movement of people within ASEAN Member States (AMS) and beyond has grown, facilitated by advancements in communications, transportation, technology, and social networking. This report analyses the movement of migrant workers between their country of origin, or home country and sending state, and their destination country, or receiving state and host country, where the migrant worker is employed. The ILO estimates that migrant workers represent 4.7 percent of the global labour force and is comprised of 164 million workers, nearly half of which are women. In the Southeast Asia and the Pacific region, migrant workers are estimated at 11.6 million or 3.3 percent of all workers. According to the World Bank, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region originates 8 percent of the world's migrants and hosts 4 percent of the world's migrants. The majority of migrant workers are less-educated individuals who work in lower-skilled occupations in the region's main destination countries, Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand.

Migration is a complex and multi-directional process: it can be short-term, permanent, circular, or result in a return to the country of origin. Following their return home, migrant workers must reintegrate into their families, communities, and local economies. Governments adopt policies and programmes to support safe return and effective reintegration, including migrant workers' access to employment. Complementing return assistance with reintegration support programmes improves returnees' inclusion or re-inclusion in their societies and allows them to contribute to their home communities. Return migration to origin countries in any given period can be substantial, and, in the absence of comprehensive support services, return migrant workers can experience various challenges, including reabsorption in an already economically distressed community, psychosocial stress, livelihood and economic difficulties. The lack of adequate reintegration policies constitutes a loss for migrant workers, their communities, and society as a whole.

It is crucial for ASEAN to ensure a safe and orderly migration to realise a politically cohesive, economically integrated, and socially responsible ASEAN Community. Safe and orderly migration contributes to many opportunities for the people of ASEAN. AMS' current migration instruments focus primarily on sending states' responsibilities. These include the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers (Articles 13 and 16); ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers (Articles 26 and 28); and ASEAN Guidelines on Effective Return and Reintegration of Migrant Workers. The ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP) also committed to alleviate factors that make migrant workers vulnerable to trafficking.

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically exposed many governments' limited ability to address threats to their people's health and welfare. Many governments underestimated the magnitude of the threat and hoped to contain it through travel restrictions, as some did during the 2003 SARS epidemic, only to later realise these measures were bound to fail. The COVID-19 virus spread rapidly throughout every

corner of the world, causing confusion and panic. As hospital and health services began to be overwhelmed, governments reacted by locking down their countries, requiring citizens to stay at home, closing ports and highways, cutting supply lines, and halting operation of all except vital industries. The development and arrival of new vaccines has restored some normalcy, and economies have begun to recover, but new variants of the virus remain a threat.

The measures taken by most governments to contain the spread of COVID-19 have led to unprecedented economic collapse and the loss of livelihoods for many millions of workers. Among those worst affected have been migrant workers, only a few of whom were entitled to any form of social protection, with many being in irregular situations and unable to access even the most basic public services.<sup>1</sup> In the ASEAN region, the growth of intra-regional labour migration, came to a halt as country after country introduced border restrictions, travel bans, and lockdown measures. Many migrant workers had to leave their jobs before they could complete their contracts, or, more importantly, before they could recover their investment in migration. Some were not able to receive payment for earned wages. Most had to make dire choices of whether to return to their home countries where job prospects were even bleaker or to stay abroad and take their chances riding out the pandemic. The ASEAN region, however, is not new to such crisis; it experienced various wide-scale public health emergencies, economic crises, and natural disasters in past decades. While each crisis is unique in scale and impact, there are several lessons that can be learned from past responses which will help AMS realise safe and orderly migration during future crises.

According to the ILO (2020a), migrant workers were often excluded from national COVID-19 policy responses, such as wage subsidies, unemployment benefits, or social security and social protection measures. In some cases, travel restrictions trapped migrants in destination countries with few options to return home. Laid-off migrant workers not only lost income but were also at risk of expiring visas or work permits. Meanwhile, large numbers of returning migrant workers may have unintentionally raised disease transmission in areas with less capacity to provide testing, isolation, and treatment. The pandemic also caused protracted internal displacement as migrants become trapped in a cycle of displacement within their own countries. Furthermore, the pandemic may have increased the vulnerabilities and risks of exploitation among migrant workers – particularly women – including human trafficking and abuse, due to their loss of income, lack of access to social protection and information, and their reliance on clandestine movement due to border closures.

Hence, COVID-19 response measures stalled travel globally, hindered the implementation of return procedures, and posed serious obstacles for reintegration assistance in the countries of origin. Governments must increase efforts to ensure migrant workers across AMS can safely and orderly return, both internal and across borders, to their communities.

The 13<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour (AFML) held in 2020 provided insights for better preparedness and response to future crises, such as pandemics,

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<sup>1</sup> For recent surveys of migrant worker access to social protections, see ILO (2020b) and ILO (2021a)

economic shocks, or natural disasters. The AFML recommended strengthening migrant workers' return and reintegration programmes with adequate resources (Recommendation No. 7) (ASEAN, 2020). This was further reinforced in the ASEAN Rapid Assessment on the Impacts of COVID-19 on the Livelihoods Across ASEAN, which recommended the identification of agencies across AMS which can coordinate the process, funding, and health protocols at border crossings (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020a). The Rapid Assessment also recognised the importance of facilitating livelihood recovery and income generation for the poor and vulnerable, including informal and migrant workers in the medium- to long-term with improved coordination across social welfare, labour, health, and immigration ministries.

This pioneering ASEAN Migration Outlook aims to analyse recent migration movements and policies in AMS and to forecast future migration trends in the region. The Outlook will focus on how ASEAN can help policymakers strategize policies to ensure safe, orderly and dignified return of its workers in the region. While each edition of the Outlook will cover specific aspects of migration in the region, this first edition surveys the implementation of return and reintegration mechanisms in crisis situations, including pandemics.

In view of the pandemic situation, which precluded this report's authors traveling to AMS to observe the operation of various return and reintegration measures, the work has largely drawn on:

- a. Desk review of policies and measures adopted by AMS (and countries outside ASEAN) to contain the spread of the virus, provide assistance to families and businesses, respond to needs for safer housing, care for those who fall ill, subsidize the consumption of food and basic needs of those who lose their jobs (including migrants), prioritise migrant returnees in jobs created by public infrastructure projects, organise the seclusion and repatriation of migrant workers who lost their jobs, grant amnesties and register undocumented migrant workers, etc.
- b. Collection and analysis of economic and other pertinent data on the impact of the pandemic and similar crises on the economies of AMS, particularly the impact on incomes and employment, labour migration outflows, and return. Data were collected from individual country sources and from multilateral organisations, such as the World Bank, ILO, IOM, ADB, and the OECD.
- c. Case studies that document lessons on challenges encountered by host governments in dealing with migrants who lost their jobs, and challenges faced by origin governments to mobilise resources for stranded migrant workers, organise their return, and reabsorb them into employment at home or in other countries. The case studies include useful experiences from outside the region.
- d. Surveys and interviews conducted with government officials, migrant resource centre personnel, and civil society organisation staff to validate collected data and information and to get official data and information where available on return migration, numbers and profiles of displaced and returned migrant workers, problems encountered by migrants during the pandemic, policy responses during the pandemic, reintegration and return programmes for migrant workers, and national or local laws and policies that affect return and reintegration.

The pandemic crisis has underscored the importance of the right to return and returning stranded migrants to their countries of origin, taking into consideration necessary protective measures for the health and safety of those workers. Likewise, countries should strengthen support for reintegration, focusing on more rights-based, gender-responsive, child-sensitive, and disability-inclusive programmes. Therefore, an Outlook to guide ASEAN on effective return and reintegration initiatives is necessary. This edition of the Outlook highlights a forward-looking approach to inter-acting challenges, flexible and contextually pertinent solutions, and accountable policy implementation that AMS can use to improve current return and reintegration procedures.

The first edition of the Outlook will support the realisation and implementation of the ASEAN Guidelines on Effective Return and Reintegration of Migrant Workers, which were adopted by the 26<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Labour Ministers Meeting on 28 October 2020. The Guidelines elaborated on a set of principles for designing policies, institutional mechanisms, programmes, and services for sustainable return and reintegration of migrant workers that are in line with international and ILO standards and ASEAN Consensus principles. To increase the effectiveness of ASEAN's initiatives, this edition of the Outlook addresses the following:

1. Provides an analysis of ASEAN's experience with return migration, especially migration caused by various crises, including pandemics, and forecasts the economic and social costs of return and reintegration.
2. Examines the challenges to ensuring effective return of migrant workers, especially those stranded internally and across borders. This examination includes the risk of human trafficking during times of emergency.
3. Examines the initiatives that support sustainable reintegration of migrant workers, especially their access to labour markets, both at home and abroad, and the extent of businesses and private sector involvement in employment absorption.
4. Offers recommendations for future national or regional initiatives to enable safe and dignified return during crisis situations, including procedures and safety standards for migrant workers during journeys.

### ***Data gaps***

The desk-review methodology imposes some limitations on the Outlook report. Because migration-related data differs by AMS in its scope, detail, and frequency, it was not always possible to construct readily comparable tables. In addition, AMS government officials, preoccupied with many concerns during the pandemic, were not always able to submit detailed survey responses or participate in online interviews.

This report was written while the ASEAN region was still struggling to contain the spread of COVID-19 variants, and completed before AMS national authorities could fully account for the pandemic's consequences. Although some countries have begun to make data on labour forces and employment available, none provided information about migrant worker returnees. While international organisations such as those cited here have attempted to bridge these gaps, they, too, lack information



about returnees and how they and their families have fared since their return. There are official reports on returnees who passed through regular channels, but almost no information about those who unofficial routes. Information about the number of returnees is patchy, at best, and confusing since many migrant workers appear to have returned and later re-migrated.

This report describes the programmes put into action by the governments of origin countries in response to their nationals' loss of employment and displacement in countries of employment, but it cannot evaluate the success of such programmes. Only a few surveys report on the profile of returnees and fewer still indicate whether these programmes made a difference to the condition of returnees and their families. Many questions await future answers: How are migrants' families managing without remittances? How many migrant workers suffer psychological effects from losing their jobs? How many have found employment in their country of origin because of placement services put at their disposal, because of new skills they acquired through training programmes, or because of soft loans they were able to tap? How much are they able to earn? How many have decided to leave the labour force, and how many are still trying to re-migrate?

Despite vast data gaps, this report brings together all available information to shed light on how migrant workers fared when the pandemic struck the region. Moreover, the report provides useful insights into their specific vulnerability to the consequences of a pandemic and recommends national- and regional-level measures that should be considered to protect migrant workers during future crises or emergencies.







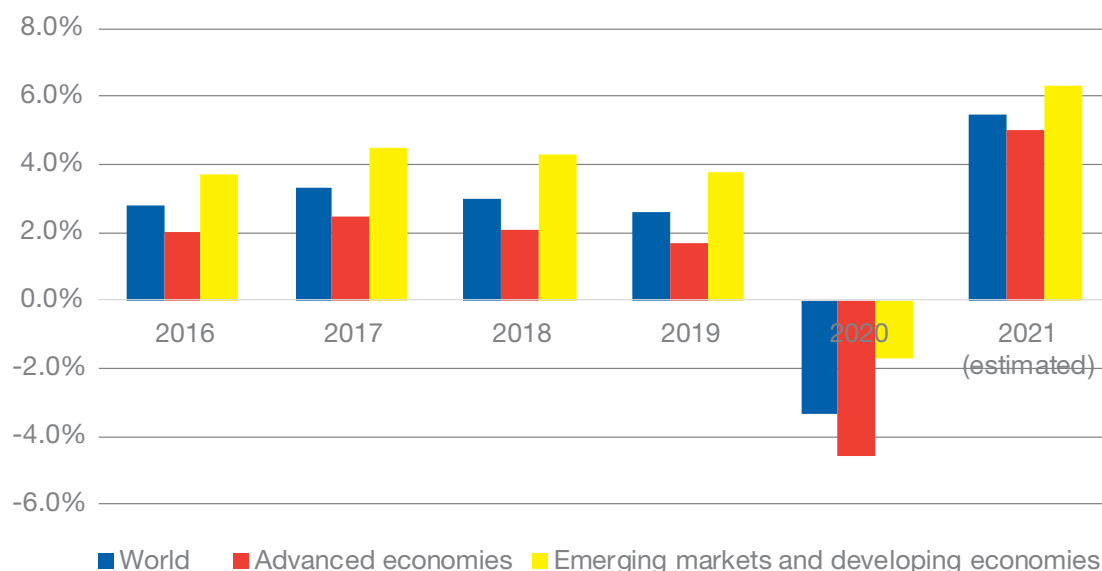
# 1. IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC AND ECONOMIC CRISES ON THE RETURN OF MIGRANT WORKERS IN ASEAN

## 1.1. Damage to the Global Economy Caused by COVID-19

COVID-19 disrupted economic growth across the world as countries introduced emergency measures to stop its spread, curtailing production and disrupting global supply lines. According to World Bank data, global GDP shrunk by 3.4 percent in 2020, with major economies like Japan and Germany shrinking by 4.6 percent, France by 7.9 percent, and the UK by 9.7 percent (Figure 1.1).<sup>2</sup> The decline of emerging and developing East Asia and the Pacific was 1.2 percent (excluding China, the decline was 3.7 percent). Since then, advanced economies have experienced remarkable recovery, particularly the United States: In 2021, the global economy grew an estimated 5.5 percent. These estimates, however, mask the uneven recovery of developing regions where only small proportions of the populations have been vaccinated. The World Bank estimates that, globally, about 97 million additional people were in extreme poverty in 2021 compared to pre-pandemic numbers (World Bank, 2022a). Employment around the world remains below pre-pandemic levels because of travel and immigration restrictions, curfews and lockdown measures, withdrawal of women from the labour force due to childcare requirements, and fears of infection. According to the ILO, globally, the equivalent of 310 million full-time jobs (based on 40-hour work weeks) were lost in 2020 and another 151 million full-time jobs were lost in 2021 (ILOSTAT, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Global GDP was estimated at US\$84.54 trillion in 2020 (World Bank, 2021).

**Figure 1.1.** GDP growth before and during the COVID-19 pandemic



**Source:** World Bank (2019; 2019b; 2020; 2020a; 2021; 2021b; 2022)

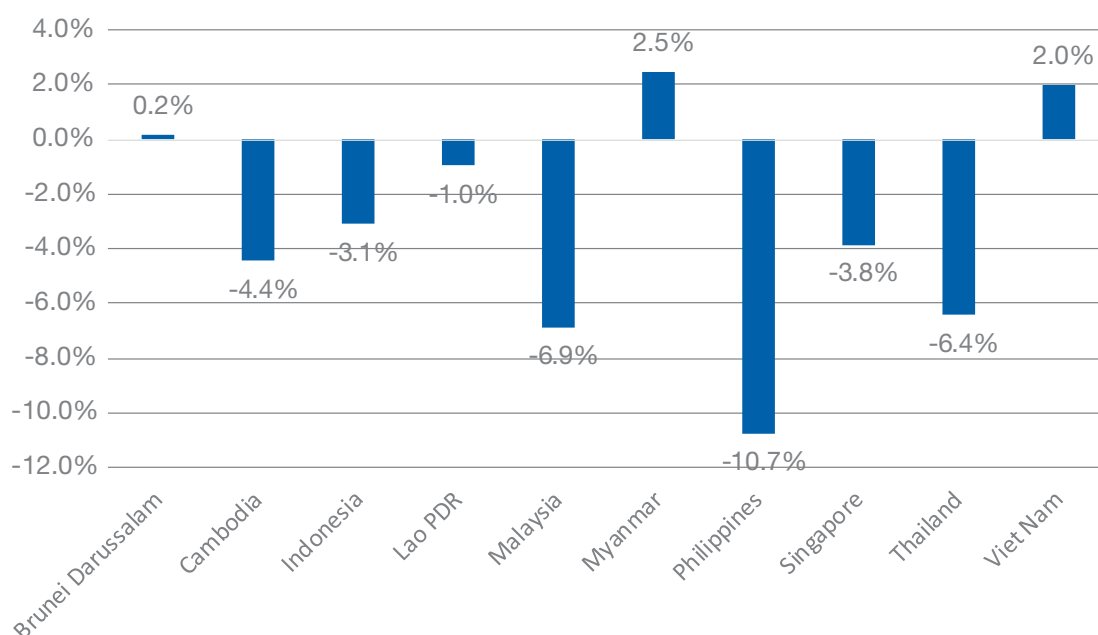
Lockdowns caused a decline in industrial production in all countries, most severely affecting the poorest countries. Most countries saw an improvement to their industrial production by mid-2020, but the impact of the pandemic and associated travel restrictions on global trade and tourism remains severe (Kamin, 2021). The World Trade Organization (WTO) reported that, in 2020, world merchandise trade dropped by as much as 5.3 percent, with the most severe drops in the Middle East (especially oil exports), North America (8.6 percent), and Europe (7.9 percent). Disruptions in global supply lines forced the slowdown or closure of many manufacturers everywhere, as amply dramatised by the automobile industry's production nosedive when COVID-19 outbreaks in semiconductor producing countries led to chip shortages across the globe (Blanco, 2021). Travel and transport services declined by as much as 80 percent in 2020 and have only slightly improved since then (WTO, 2021).

## 1.2. Impact of COVID-19 on ASEAN Member States

Across all AMS, lockdowns, business closures, and travel restrictions upended production in many sectors, causing layoffs and the loss of income for many. AMS saw a 3.6 percent drop in combined output in 2020, meaning ASEAN fared slightly worse than the world average. Some individual countries suffered steeper declines, including the Philippines (9.6 percent), Thailand (6.1 percent), Malaysia (5.6 percent), and Singapore (4.1 percent). Seven out of 10 AMS experienced a drop in per capita GDP in 2020, and, where countries experienced positive per capita GDP, it was much lower than pre-pandemic growth (Figure 1.2). Apart from the Philippines – which suffered the worst economic decline in 2020 among the AMS – the most affected AMS were the three largest migrant worker-receiving countries in the region:

Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. In these three countries, per capita GDP fell between 4 percent to 7 percent.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1.2.** Per capita GDP growth in 2020



**Source:** World Bank (2022a)

It is also noteworthy that in two of these major destination countries – Thailand and Malaysia – the most-affected sectors were also ones heavily reliant on migrant workers. In Thailand, affected sectors include manufacturing, construction, agriculture, fishing, seafood processing, domestic work, and hospitality (United Nations Thematic Working Group, 2019; ILO, 2020). In Malaysia, migrant workers were, in 2019, especially prevalent in manufacturing (705,000), construction (435,000), services (306,000), plantation (282,000), agriculture (160,000), and domestic work (127,000) (Wahab, 2020a; Theng, Noor and Khalidi, 2020).

The construction sector in Malaysia crashed in the second quarter of 2020 and did not experience growth again until the second quarter of 2021, before suffering negative growth again the next quarter after a COVID-19 resurgence. Accommodation and dining establishments which includes many tourism-related jobs, fared even worse. Furthermore, wholesale trade and related activities in Malaysia have not recovered to pre-pandemic levels, even after growing in the first two quarters of 2021. In Thailand, the construction sector avoided a massive output decline similar to Malaysia's, although it did decline in the first quarter of 2020. However, manufacturing, accommodation, and wholesale trade in Thailand all suffered large contractions due to travel restrictions, supply chain disruptions, and weak aggregate demand, and, despite some recovery in the second quarter of 2021, remain well below pre-pandemic levels (Table 1.1).

<sup>3</sup> The Philippine economy was hit hardest because of the length and severity of the movement restrictions imposed in the country (Olanday and Rigby, 2020).

**Table 1.1.** GDP and sectoral gross value added growth by sector in Malaysia and Thailand pre- and during COVID (in percentage-points)

	GDP	Construction	Manufacturing	Accommodation and Food Storage	Wholesale, Repair of Vehicles & Household Goods
<b>Malaysia</b>					
2019q1	4.7	0.6	4.1	6.4	5.2
2019q2	5.0	1.1	4.3	6.7	4.9
2019q3	4.5	-1.4	3.6	6.6	6.3
2019q4	3.7	1.3	3.0	6.9	6.0
2020q1	0.7	-7.9	1.4	-4.2	3.4
2020q2	-17.2	-44.5	-18.3	-78.9	-20.5
2020q3	-2.7	-12.4	3.3	-54.0	-4.3
2020q4	-3.4	-13.9	3.0	-61.2	-0.8
2021q1	-0.5	-10.4	6.6	-59.1	0.6
2021q2	16.1	40.3	26.6	45.9	19.4
2021q3	-4.5	-20.6	-0.8	-52.0	-3.5
<b>Thailand</b>					
2019q1	2.8	2.9	0.0	7.1	5.8
2019q2	2.4	3.3	0.1	5.9	4.1
2019q3	2.7	2.5	-0.6	9.0	4.0
2019q4	1.3	-3.1	-2.2	9.3	3.9
2020q1	-2.1	-9.3	-2.4	-23.3	3.6
2020q2	-12.1	7.5	-14.7	-49.9	-10.9
2020q3	-6.4	10.8	-5.3	-39.3	-6.1
2020q4	-4.2	-0.3	-0.7	-35.2	-3.1
2021q1	-2.6	12.7	1.0	-35.5	-2.2
2021q2	7.6	3.9	16.9	14.6	5.5
2021q3	-0.3	-4.1	-1.4	-18.7	3.3

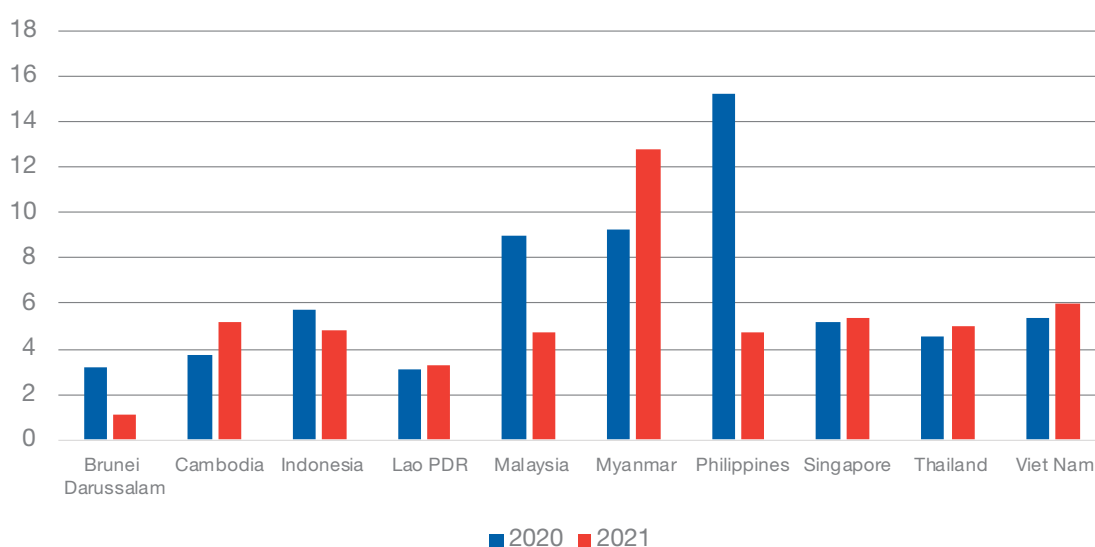
**Source:** Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council (Thailand) (2022); Department of Statistics (Malaysia) (2022)

Construction activities had to be halted in most AMS, setting back major infrastructure projects; this had severe consequences on internal and external trade and communications. Because AMS are well integrated in the global economy, the decline in global demand for goods and services forced the closure of labour-intensive manufactures and services, such as apparel and tourism. In Myanmar, as early as the end of March 2020, more than 25,000 of the 700,000 garment industry workers were laid off, and observers expected that half of the industry workers would lose their jobs. With the economic impacts of the situation in Myanmar in 2021 piling on top of the pandemic effects, the overall employment situation in the country is likely much worse than anticipated (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2020). In the first half of 2021, the ILO estimates that 14 percent of working hours were lost, equivalent to at least 2.2 million full-time workers (ILO, 2021b). In the ASEAN region, the unemployment rate rose from 2.5 percent in 2019 to 3.1 percent in 2020. The ILO estimates that average working hours declined in all AMS in

2020 and 2021, and, for approximately half of AMS, working hours lost were higher in 2021 compared to 2020 (Figure 1.3). The disruptions in global supply chains because of travel and transport restrictions hit some AMS particularly hard because of supply needs from other countries.

Despite these tremendous job losses, many countries also experienced labour shortages due to previously unprecedented demand for certain products, such as rubber gloves in Malaysia and for fishery products in Thailand. The return of migrant workers to their home countries contributed to significant labour shortages (Lee and David, 2021; Sriring and Staporncharnchai, 2021).<sup>4</sup> COVID-related movement restrictions caused many workers to withdraw from the labour force (especially women) and labour force participation rates declined in most countries.<sup>5</sup> This was the case for Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Viet Nam (Figure 1.4). According to the ILO (2021c), female employment in AMS in 2020 was 3.9 percent lower than the expected level, which is markedly less than the 2.7 percent figure for male employment.<sup>6</sup> The impact of the pandemic on employment is evident in lower labour force participation, lower working hours, and higher unemployment rates in most countries (Figure 1.5).

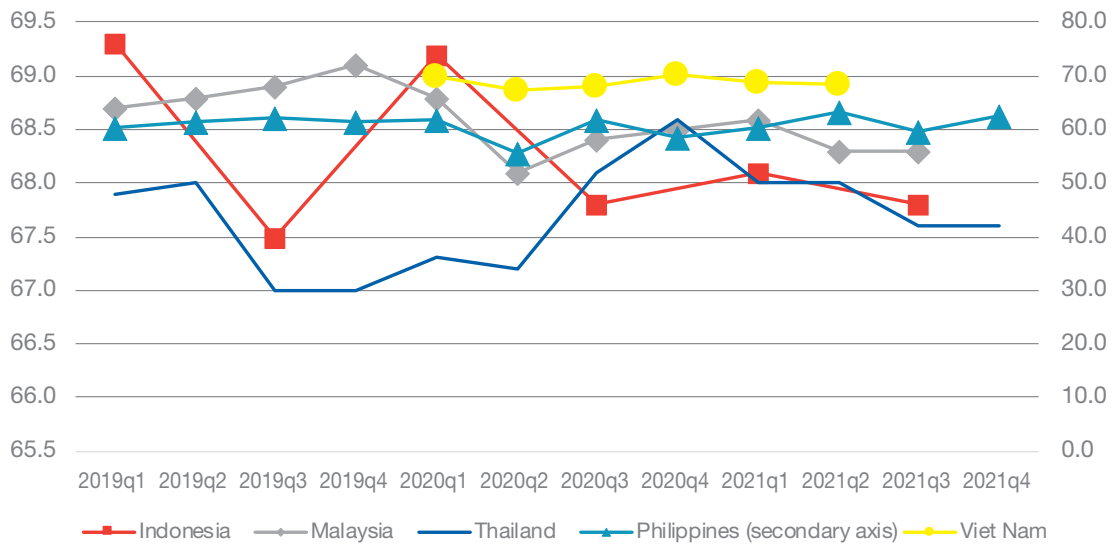
**Figure 1.3.** Decline in weekly working hours compared to 2019 (percent)



Source: ILO (2022a)

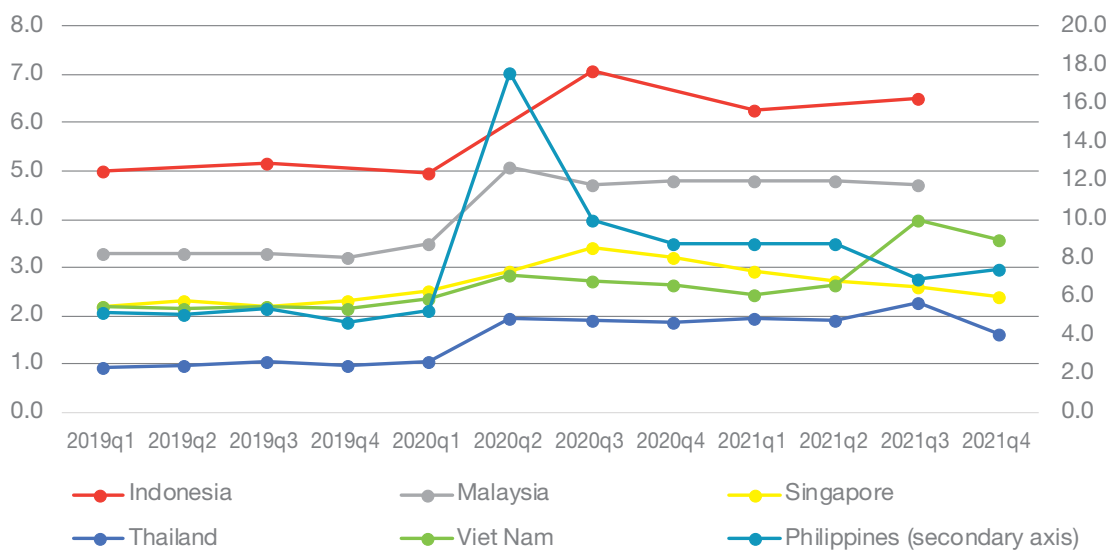
- 4 There are of course long-standing reasons for the labour shortages in these sectors, which accounts for their high reliance for migrant workers, including poor working conditions, that is prone to abuse, and lack of attractiveness for local workers (Looi, 2020; Ng, 2020; ILO, 2015).
- 5 McKinsey Global Institute (2020) estimates that at the beginning of the pandemic, women accounted for more than half of total job losses from COVID-19 though they made up only two-fifths of the global labour force. This is because they are overrepresented in sectors hardest hit by the pandemic: accommodation and food services; retail and wholesale trade; and other services, such as arts, recreation, and public administration.
- 6 This is equivalent to saying there is greater increase in unemployment or inactivity for women compared to men. According to the report, one reason is the increase in unpaid care responsibilities for women as schools closed (ILO, 2021c).

**Figure 1.4.** Labour force participation rate in selected ASEAN Member States



**Source:** Philippine Statistics Authority (2022); Central Bureau of Statistics (Indonesia) (2022); Department of Statistics (Malaysia) (2022); National Statistics Office (Thailand) (2022); General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (2022)

**Figure 1.5.** Unemployment rate in selected ASEAN Member States



**Source:** Philippine Statistics Authority (2022); Central Bureau of Statistics (Indonesia) (2022); Department of Statistics (Malaysia) (2022); National Statistics Office (Thailand) (2022); General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (2022)

Devastating job losses resulted in an increased share of impoverished ASEAN populations. According to the ADB (2022), the pandemic increased the number of AMS peoples in extreme poverty by 5.4 million in 2020 and by 4.7 million people in 2021 (Asian Development Bank, 2022a). In Indonesia, the Finance Ministry estimated that, as early as March 2020, the poverty rate had risen to 9.78 percent, with up to 1.28 million additional people classified as poor (*The Jakarta Post*, 2020). Increases in food prices are partly responsible for rising poverty in many countries. The Philippine Statistical Authority reported

that, despite a slight increase in average family incomes, the percentage of households classified as poor rose from 21.1 percent in 2018 to 23.7 percent by mid-2021 (National Economic Development Authority, 2021). In Myanmar, where a third of the population was already considered near poor, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimated that COVID-19 would increase the poverty rate by a minimum of 6 percentage points and up to 11 percentage points (given a poverty threshold of US\$5.50 per day) (United Nations Development Programme, 2021).

### **1.3. Fall in Global Migration in 2020**

Although data on COVID and migration remain limited, global migration monitoring agencies report that the pandemic profoundly affected human mobility. Global migration fell in 2020 after years of growth, with United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) estimating that global migrant stock fell by about 2 million, a decrease of approximately 27 percent in expected growth between mid-2019 and mid-2020 (Black, 2021). In addition, the IOM (2020) estimated that more than 3 million migrants, including seasonal workers and international students, became stranded and unable to return to their countries of origin due to COVID travel restrictions. Many countries also reported a significant decline in irregular migration in 2020. For example, the number of illegal border crossings detected along the European Union's external borders fell by 13 percent in 2020 compared to 2019, representing the lowest such number recorded since 2013 (Frontex, 2021a). However, in the European Union in 2021, illegal border crossings have surpassed pre-pandemic levels (Frontex, 2021b). In ASEAN, anecdotal evidence suggests an increase in illegal border crossings after official border closures, especially in Thailand and Malaysia.<sup>7</sup>

### **1.4. Impact on Migration in ASEAN**

Migrants represent a significant part of the population in most AMS. Of the estimated 9.2 million international migrants of working age living in ASEAN's net destination countries – Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand – approximately 7.1 million came from other AMS (Table 1.2). The two AMS with the highest shares of migrants – Brunei Darussalam and Singapore – had approximately 2.2 million migrants. In 2019, Singapore had a migrant stock of approximately 2.1 million migrant workers, representing 37.1 percent of the population, of whom 56.1 percent were women. Brunei Darussalam had an estimated migrant stock of 111,000, representing 25.5 percent of the total population, and, among them, 43.4 percent were women. Migrants, including undocumented migrants, represented 5.2 percent of Thailand's total population and 15 percent of Malaysia's.

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<sup>7</sup> Based on survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook interviews with MRC staff.



**Table 1.2.** International migrant stock in ASEAN Member States by country of destination, 2000-2019

Country	International migrant stock as a percentage of the total population			Total migrant stock (000)	Share of women in total migrant stock	Working-age migrant stock (000)	Share of women in working-age migrant stock	Net migration (000)
	2000	2010	2019	2019	2019	2019	2019	2019
Brunei Darussalam	28.9	25.9	25.5	111	43.4%	105	43.1%	64
Cambodia	1.2	0.6	0.5	79	46.1%	73	45.9%	-1 019
Indonesia	0.1	0.1	0.1	353	41.8%	317	41.5%	-4 180
Lao PDR	0.4	0.5	0.7	48	35.6%	44	34.2%	-1 299
Malaysia	6.3	8.6	10.7	3 430	38.9%	3 111	37.9%	1 741
Myanmar	0.2	0.2	0.1	76	45.2%	65	43.7%	-3 623
Philippines	0.4	0.2	0.2	219	48.2%	167	46.6%	-5 159
Singapore	33.6	42.2	37.1	2 156	55.9%	1 980	56.1%	1 815
Thailand	2.0	4.8	5.2	3 635	49.8%	3 234	49.4%	2 615
Viet Nam	0.1	0.1	0.1	76	42.1%	67	40.5%	-2 608

**Notes:** Blue font indicates that a country is a net destination country of international migrants.

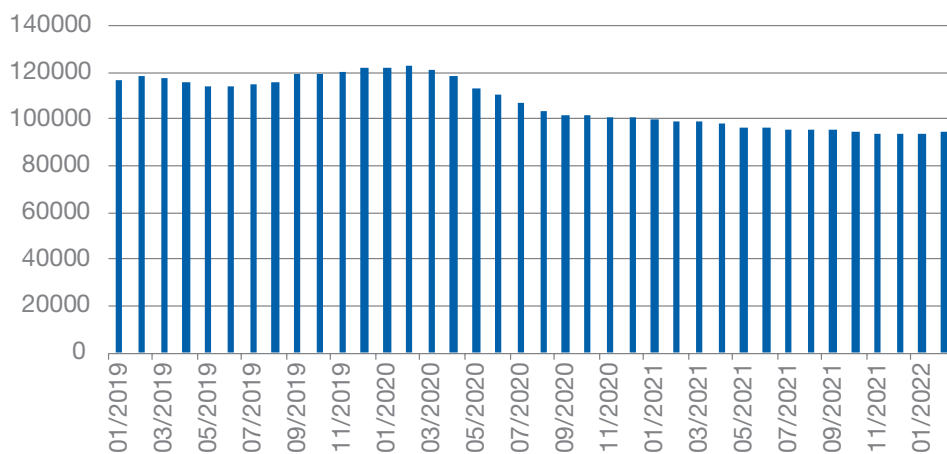
**Source:** UNDESA (2019) in ILO (2022).

Migrant workers made up 38 percent of the employed population in Singapore, 37 percent in Brunei Darussalam, 15 percent in Malaysia, and 3 percent in Thailand. Almost 90 percent of AMS' employed migrants work in the services and industry sectors. Women represent 65.7 percent of migrants working in the services sector, which includes domestic work, and 26.8 percent of migrants working in the industry sector.

COVID-19 caused a decline in migrant workers in ASEAN destination countries. Temporary work permits issued to foreign workers in Thailand declined after the onset of the pandemic (Figure 1.6). Foreign workers in Malaysia also dropped after the temporary suspension of employment passes (Figure 1.7). Singapore has also experienced decreased numbers of migrant workers (Figure 1.8) (ILO, 2021d).

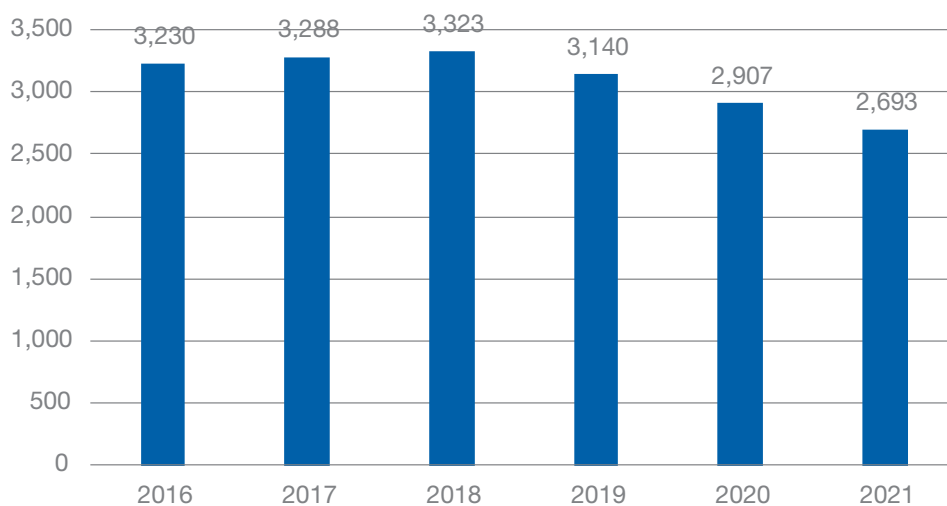


**Figure 1.6.** Alien temporary work permits, Thailand



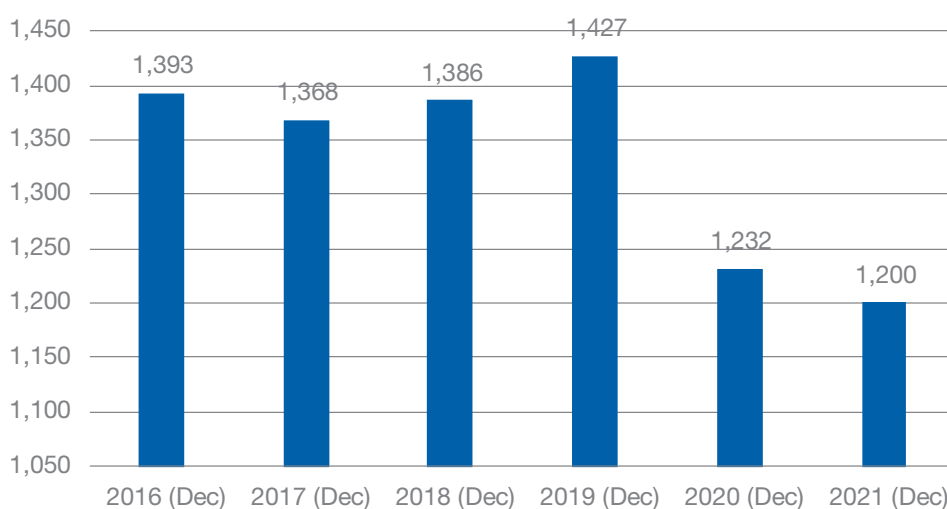
Source: Department of Employment, Thailand (2022)

**Figure 1.7.** Non-citizen population in Malaysia (in thousands)



Source: Department of Statistics, Malaysia (2022). Figure for 2021 is an estimate.

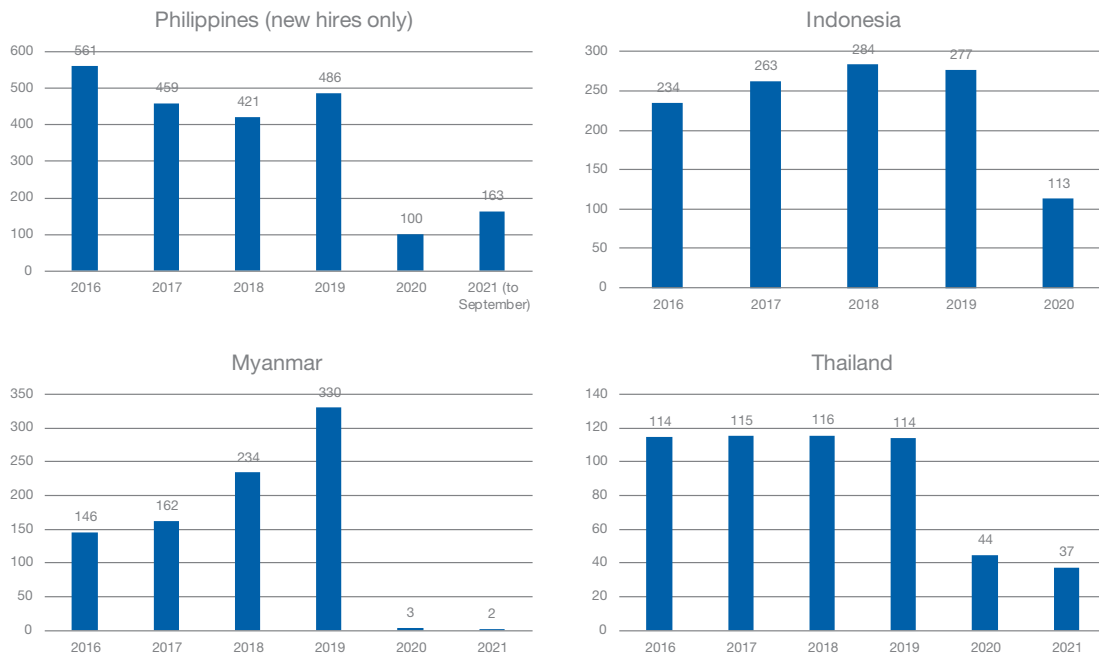
**Figure 1.8.** Singapore foreign workforce stock (in thousands)



Source: Compilation by Manpower Research & Statistics Department (Ministry of Manpower, Singapore, 2022).

The pandemic resulted in severe declines in the deployment of migrant workers to all destinations from four origin countries of ASEAN from 2016 to 2020 or 2021 (Figure 1.9a).

**Figure 1.9a. Overseas worker deployment pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19**



**Source:** Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (2022); Indonesia Migrant Worker Protection Agency (2022); Ministry of Planning and Finance (Myanmar) (2022); Bank of Thailand (2022)

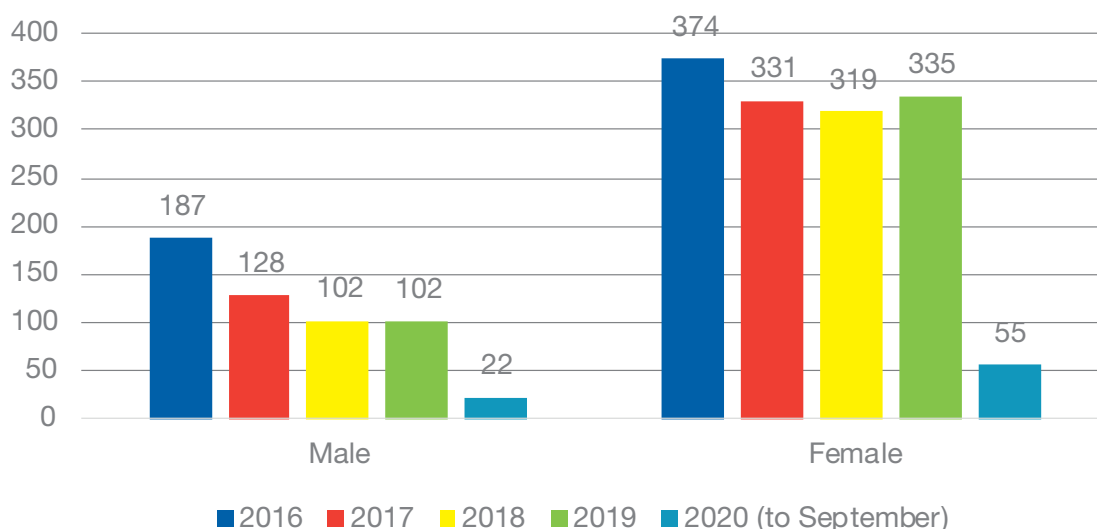
The Philippines experienced a sharp decline in the deployment of migrant workers, with merely 100,318 newly hired Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) deployed in 2020, a 79.4 percent decrease from 2019. In 2021, from January to September, deployment of new hires was only 163,160, just 46 percent of the 2019 level for the same period. Total deployment (new hires and rehires) in 2020 from the Philippines reached 550,000, a 74.5 percent decline from the previous year.<sup>8</sup> Among those who found jobs abroad in 2020 were 217,223 seafarers, most of whom were hired to work on oil tankers and cargo vessels. Indonesia also experienced a decrease in deployment numbers; in 2020, only 40.9 percent of 2019 levels were deployed. In Myanmar, officially recorded deployment in 2020 was 0.9 percent of the 2019 level, and, in 2021, deployment was less than half a percent of the 2019 level. In Viet Nam, the total deployment of migrant workers during the first three quarters of 2020 was 41 percent of deployment in 2019. In Thailand, deployment in 2020 and 2021 was, respectively, 39 percent and 32.8 percent of the 2019 level.

No gender-segregated deployment data is available, except for the Philippines up to October 2020, where women migrants experienced a significantly larger

<sup>8</sup> The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) defines a rehire as a worker who was rehired by the same employer after finishing his/her contract and who is returning to the same employer, regardless of a change in jobsite. A new hire is a worker who is hired by a new employer.

decline in 2020 in absolute numbers and as a percentage of 2019 deployment (Figure 1.9b).<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 1.9b.** Deployment of Overseas Foreign Workers by sex, new hires only (in thousands)



Source: Philippine Statistics Authority (2022)

### 1.5. Migrant Workers More at Risk of COVID-19 Infection

COVID-19 infection among migrants appears to be higher than among non-migrant groups (Hintermeier et al., 2020). Migrant workers are disproportionately exposed to COVID-19 because of the nature of their work and their living conditions. Many migrant workers performed essential services, including jobs in healthcare, selected manufacturing, transportation, logistics, construction, and maintenance, which continued during periods of movement restrictions (OECD, ADBI and ILO, 2021). Many migrant workers also have less access to personal protective equipment and testing and treatment facilities (OECD, ADBI and ILO, 2021). The lack of access was especially true for undocumented migrants.

Additionally, migrant workers employed in plantations far away from urban centres had limited access to information and testing. High rates of infection were also linked to overcrowded housing conditions, including shared facilities and sleeping areas, which increase the risk of transmission (ASEAN MP, 2021). Many workers in processing or assembly plants worked in conditions where physical distancing was rarely observed.

In Malaysia, out of 2,188 positive cases recorded nationwide on 25 November 2020, 1,511 were foreign workers employed by Top Glove Corporation Bhd., one of the world's largest personal protective equipment (PPE) manufacturers (*The Straits Times*, 2020; Ngui, 2020). Many other migrant workers were employed as delivery agents, public transport drivers, or restaurant waiters, and are in constant contact with the general public. Infection risk is also higher

<sup>9</sup> Keeping in mind that for 2020 the figures are only up to October of the year.

in crowded dormitories, such as the living situations of seasonal farm workers on plantations or foreign construction workers. Most migrants work long hours in order to safeguard their jobs and have limited access to vaccination centres during their off-hours or because of their migration status.

Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore all experienced high rates of COVID-19 cases and deaths in migrant worker communities. In Singapore, 47 percent of the migrant worker population was infected with COVID-19 during the first nine months of the pandemic (Illmer, 2020). 47 percent of the Singapore's 323,000 migrant workers living in dormitories tested positive for COVID-19 antibodies. In December 2020, 55,000 of Singapore's 58,000 reported COVID-19 cases were discovered in migrant worker dorms. Men who lived in dormitories, some of which slept 20 to a room, were later quarantined for eight months in an effort to lessen transmission.

In Thailand, by the end of July 2021, at least 14 percent of infections were among migrant workers from Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar. COVID-19 cases among migrant workers were three times higher (24 per 1,000 persons) compared to Thai nationals (7 per 1,000 persons) (Rajatanavin et al., 2021). Active surveillance in migrant communities only began when asymptomatic infections among migrant workers in a wholesale seafood market in Samut Sakhorn triggered a massive second wave of infections. In a single day, Thailand detected more than 500 COVID-19 cases, 90 percent of which were migrant workers.

Quarantine facility conditions for returning migrants may have also contributed to the spread of COVID-19, such as Cambodian workers who were quarantined for 21 days or more upon their return. In Myanmar, quarantine facilities for returning migrants from Thailand were quickly overwhelmed, prompting the authorities to request the Thai Government to quarantine migrant workers on Thailand's side of the border.

## **1.6. Migrants' Lower Access to Health Services**

The majority of ASEAN migrant workers are not able to enrol in their home country's national social security system or that of the host country (Olivier, 2018; Ong and Bista, 2015). In some countries, such systems cover only part of the workforce, and migrant workers are often not employed in covered sectors. Moreover, compliance with social security laws is poorly enforced. Even when migrant workers are employed in sectors covered by social security laws, irregular migrant workers are usually disqualified from receiving benefits due to their undocumented status. Even if migrant workers are already members of social security in their country of origin, they may not be able to transfer their accrued contributions or entitlements to their host country's systems. Additionally, migrant workers are sometimes excluded from health insurance or only have access to less beneficial schemes, such as in Thailand and Malaysia (Olivier, 2018).

The pandemic has weakened health systems in almost all countries as demand for healthcare quickly outstripped capacity. Migrant workers were among the most adversely affected, especially those in irregular situations, because they may lack access to health services, live far away from hospitals and health centres, or may simply not be aware of health services available to them. Other factors sometimes worsened their situation. For example, in Malaysia, immigration enforcement drives deterred some migrant workers from registering for the COVID-19 vaccine. However, a walk-in vaccine programme beginning in August 2021 in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, and public-private partnership, eventually helped vaccinate migrant-dominant sectors. In Thailand, registration for vaccinations was available on mobile applications and websites only in Thai language, hindering some migrant workers from accessing the vaccines (Charoensuthipan, 2021).

Following the adoption of 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, the IOM developed a set of Migration Governance Indicators (MGI) in partnership with the Economic Intelligence Unit (IOM GMDAC, 2021). MGI surveys conducted between 2018 and 2020 in 51 countries before the COVID-19 pandemic discovered the following statistics about variations in government-funded health services available to migrant workers (Migration Data Portal, 2021; Milan and Cunnoosamy, 2020).<sup>10</sup>

- Half of the countries provide equal access to healthcare, contingent on migratory status.
- One-third provide the same access to healthcare to both citizens and migrants, regardless of their migratory status.
- 12 percent of the countries allow migrants to access only some health services, including emergency healthcare.
- In most cases, there are no limitations for healthcare paid privately or by insurance.
- Nearly half of the countries claim they include irregular migrants in their vaccination programmes, but only about 38 percent included them in practice.

According to the MGI assessment, 55 of the countries do not have specific measures to assist migrants before, during, and after crises, and, in 84 countries, such measures mainly pertain to internal displacement, refugee movements, and humanitarian assistance. One in five countries partially assist migrants in terms of strategies that include all vulnerable communities. Some countries do temporarily relax immigration requirements, allowing migrants whose country of origin has been affected by a crisis to remain in the destination country beyond the usual time limit. Most of these countries offer assistance to their nationals abroad in times of crisis, such as emergency travel documents and repatriation. However, these support measures only

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<sup>10</sup> A separate United Nations (2019) inquiry found that 68 percent of governments have specific measures to provide assistance to citizens residing abroad in countries in crisis or post-crisis situations, but 2 percent have none. The enquiry collected data on 111 countries between late 2018 and early 2019 and, found that more than three quarters (86 percent) of governments provide essential and emergency healthcare to all non-nationals, regardless of their migratory status, while 8 percent indicate that they provide such services only to those whose status is regular.

apply during broadly defined ‘humanitarian crises’ and often only if the country of origin has consulates in the receiving country.

### 1.7. Loss of Jobs and Return of Migrant Workers in ASEAN Member States

The return and socio-economic dislocation of migrant workers in ASEAN due to the COVID-19 pandemic was significant, with more than 2.4 million returning to six AMS of origin in the months following the first outbreaks (Table 1.3). A proper evaluation requires the consideration of the number of returnees, their occupations or jobs they lost, foregone incomes and remittances, re-employment at home upon return, and remigration.

**Table 1.3.** Migrant worker returnees to ASEAN Member States from all regions

AMS	Returnees	From start of pandemic to:
Cambodia	260,000	Dec 2021
Indonesia	250,000	(February-2022) formal channels only
Lao PDR	227,702	Jan 2022
Myanmar		
Philippines	1,169,000	Sep 2021
Viet Nam	200,000+	Jan 2022

**Source:** Survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook (2022); Do et al., 2022

The Philippines reported that 1.169 million OFWs have been repatriated from all over the world since the pandemic began until September 2021 (Sarao, 2021). Although some of these migrant workers may have returned after completing their contracts, it is likely that the majority returned prematurely due to COVID-19. A survey of returned OFWs found that 67 percent returned due to the COVID-19 crisis, 23 percent said they were planning to return to the Philippines regardless of COVID-19, and 10 percent did not want to answer the question (IOM, 2021a).

In Lao PDR, 227,702 migrant workers returned since the pandemic began (Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, 2022). Of these, 158,753 (80,135 women) returned in 2020, 65,710 (32,302 women) in 2021, and 3,239 (1,676 women) in January 2022. The number of ASEAN nationals working and living in the region who were displaced by the pandemic has yet to be counted, but it is already clear that job-losses are enormous. UNDESA estimates that there were 4.5 million Indonesians outside the country in 2019. In the early stages of the pandemic, Indonesia reported that 180,000 Indonesian migrant workers had returned through formal channels (IOM Indonesia, 2021). In addition, many Indonesian migrant workers who worked in Malaysia without proper documentation likely returned via informal channels.

Approximately 2.3 million documented and undocumented Burmese workers were employed in Thailand before the pandemic. When the first wave of COVID-19 hit Thailand in March 2020, the government announced border closures, which sparked a panic among migrant workers. As many as 200,000

Burmese workers rushed to the borders to return home, largely due to fears about healthcare access and employment status. When the second wave hit Thailand in December 2020, Thai authorities quarantined more than 40,000 Burmese workers in their dormitories to prevent the spread of the virus. The provincial government worked closely with hospitals and health workers to arrange for medical testing and healthcare for migrant workers in the country, regardless of their status (Pross, 2021).

In 2019, over 1 million Cambodians were outside the country; among them, approximately 719,000 Cambodians worked in Thailand. About 40 percent of them were employed in construction, 17 percent in manufacturing, and 16 percent on farms (ILO, 2020c). By the end of 2021, approximately 260,000 migrant workers had returned to Cambodia from abroad, mostly from Thailand.<sup>11</sup> Lao PDR reported that, by mid-2021, 140,000 migrant workers had returned home from Thailand, slightly less than half the 259,000 Lao migrant workers in Thailand in 2019.

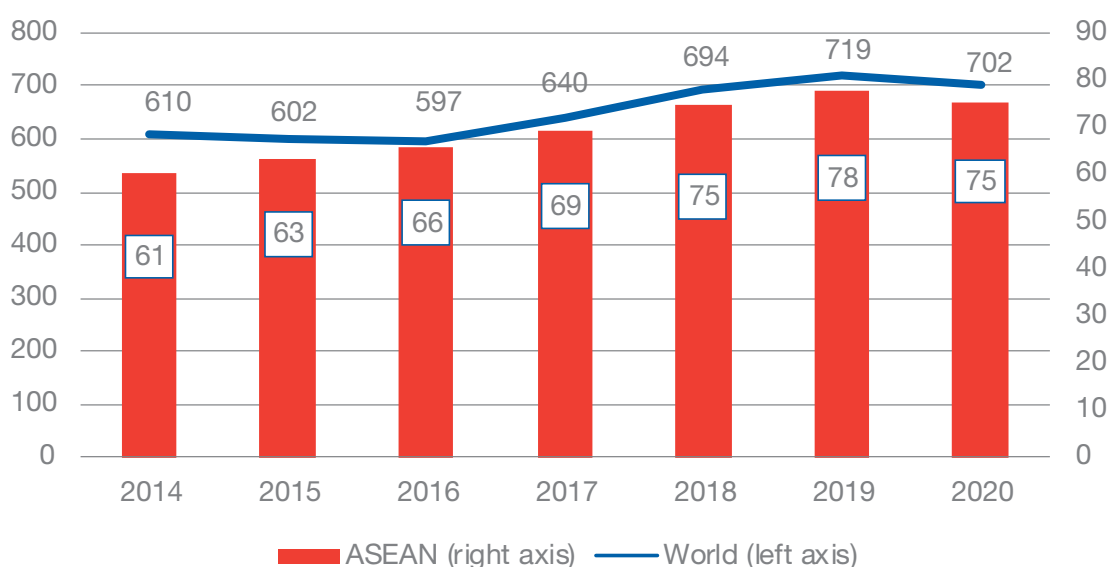
### 1.8. Falling Incomes of Migrants' Families

Global migrant remittance inflows declined by 2.4 percent in 2020 due to the economic crisis induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, after growing an average of 3.4 percent the previous five years (World Bank and KNOMAD, 2021). The fall in remittances is largely because of job losses and a decrease in wages. In ASEAN, migrant remittance inflows fell an even sharper 3.6 percent, after growing an average of 5.2 percent the previous five years (Figure 1.10). Migrant remittance inflows fell in 2020 for seven of the eight AMS with available data (there was no data for Brunei Darussalam and Singapore), with Viet Nam being the only country that managed positive growth, although much lower than usual (Table 1.4). According to the IOM (2021b), underdeveloped digital banking, travel bans, and insufficient alternatives for the underbanked contributed to the falls in remittances in Cambodia, Indonesia, and Myanmar (IOM, 2021b). The Philippines and Thailand benefited from digital solutions and a more favourable policy environment, so remittance inflows declined less than in the other countries.

The substantial fall in remittances is especially concerning in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar, where remittances play a bigger role in lower-income households, and where the loss of migrant worker jobs abroad can lead to poverty in migrants' origin-country households. In August 2020 in Cambodia, a telephone survey of 1,054 migrant returnee households revealed that two-thirds of returning migrant worker households suffered a severe drop in income. Their median income was only US\$150 a month, and more than half were in debt. As much as one-third of the returnees reported no income at all; although over 65 percent received some kind of support: 20 percent received cash support, 9 percent received food assistance, and 10 percent received healthcare services (UNFPA, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> According to National Committee for Counter Trafficking (NCCT), IOM reported that of those who returned some 20,000 tested positive for COVID-19 (Samean, 2021).



**Figure 1.10.** Migrant remittances inflows (in US\$ billion)

Source: World Bank and KNOMAD (2021)

**Table 1.4.** Growth in migrant remittance inflows

AMS	Average Annual Growth					Remittance inflows in 2020 (US\$ Million)
	2000-2004	2004-2009	2009-2014	2014-2019	2019-2020	
Cambodia	7.5%	-0.7%	50.6%	6.7%	-16.6%	1,272
Indonesia	9.4%	29.5%	4.7%	6.4%	-17.3%	9,651
Lao PDR	4.0%	115.7%	38.0%	9.5%	-10.6%	265
Malaysia	18.6%	7.1%	6.9%	0.7%	-11.2%	1,454
Myanmar	2.7%	-14.1%	102.7%	5.4%	-7.1%	2,250
Philippines	10.6%	11.7%	7.5%	4.2%	-0.7%	34,913
Thailand	-0.9%	18.6%	11.4%	4.6%	-1.2%	8,067
Viet Nam	11.5%	21.1%	14.8%	7.2%	1.2%	17,200

Source: World Bank and KNOMAD (2021)

In the Philippines, of the returning Filipino migrant workers in 2020, 55 percent earned a monthly income of between PHP20,000 and PHP50,000, and 19 percent earned between PHP5,000 and PHP20,000. Before their return, 50 percent reported remitting amounts ranging from PHP10,000 to PHP20,000 (US\$200 to US\$400) monthly. It is highly unlikely that the families of these migrant workers would have savings to rely on after they lost their jobs. Additionally, 83 percent of these workers were still unemployed after three months, resulting in a 60 percent drop in household income for 48 percent of the returned migrant workers.



### Box 1. Profile of Filipino migrant worker returnees

Key features of migrant worker returnees to the Philippines based on an IOM survey of 8,332 OFWs who returned in 2020.\*

- For 70% of returned OFWs, the pandemic resulted in work termination or nonrenewal of contracts or their employers asking them to leave, and they thus returned.
- Approximately 65% of OFW returnees were in the 25–39 age range—on average, 35 years old for women and 37 years old for men.
- OFWs returned home to relatively large-sized households of around 5.1 members, higher than the national average household size of 4.4 members. At least half of OFWs returned to households with 5 to 8 members.
- Around 45% of returnees were either from Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates. Qatar; Kuwait; and Hong Kong, China were also major sources of returns.
- 82% reported having finished at least high school. Among those with higher educational attainment, the courses taken were about marine studies (21%), information technology (14%), and food and hospitality (13%). Female OFWs who reported finishing high school were mostly employed as domestic help.
- 20% of female OFWs (and 13% of male) had to shoulder the full costs of their return journey. Women were disproportionately affected by the cost burden of returning home since they were more likely to be in the lower wage brackets than men. Female OFWs were also less likely to receive overall repatriation support than male.

**Source:** IOM. Philippines – COVID-19 Impact Assessment on Returned Overseas Filipino Workers. May 2021. <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/philippines-%E2%80%93-COVID-19-impact-assessment-returned-overseas-filipino-workers-may-2021>

\*The report cautioned that the IOM applied a non-probability sampling method for the survey.

## 1.9. Comparison with Asian Financial Crisis and Global Financial Crisis

The Asian Financial Crisis (AFC) of 1997-1999 and the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008-2009 had large impacts on the economies of destination countries in the region, and had significant impacts on labour migration flows in AMS (Box 2).

A common theme in the previous crises is that destination countries initially overestimated the number of migrant workers who needed to be repatriated. A large number of migrant workers were soon able to return to their jobs, either by shifting to informal work or waiting the financial crisis out before returning. Migration has also accelerated as economies begin to recover from this most recent crisis. This highlights the importance of a policy that extends visa permits for migrant workers during the initial stages of a crisis, rather than immediately turning to repatriation. This visa extension would give the labour market time to find a new equilibrium, including in migrant worker demand. Such a policy benefits employers, who benefit from available labour, and migrant workers, who avoid costly travel home and back.

### **Box 2. The 1997-1998 Asian Financial Crisis and the 2008-2009 Global Financial Crisis**

#### *Asian Financial Crisis (AFC)*

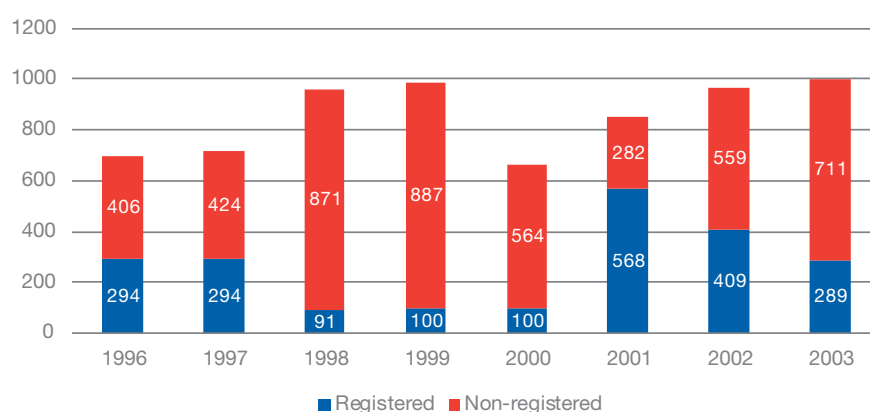
Of the AMS, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia were most affected by the AFC. Thailand's GDP fell by 2.8 percent in 1997 and again by 7.6 percent in 1998 before recovering with 4.6 percent growth in 1999. Malaysia's GDP grew in 1997 (by 7.3 percent) but declined by 7.4 percent in 1998. Indonesia's GDP fell by 13.1 percent in 1998. The economic contraction in Thailand and Malaysia, as the region's main migrant-receiving countries, especially impacted the region's labour migration flows, although to a lesser extent than expected.

Due to the economic crisis, a Thai government committee recommended the repatriation of 500,000 foreign workers, mainly from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Lao PDR (Lund and Panda, 2000). However, few migrant workers were repatriated from Thailand by 1998 (approximately 300,000 returned to Myanmar), and some estimates suggest migrant workers increased in Thailand in 1998 because of a large jump in unregistered workers (Box Figure 2.1). In Malaysia, it was initially estimated that 800,000 foreign workers would be repatriated, but only a fraction of that – mainly Indonesian workers (200,000) – were formally repatriated, although foreign worker hiring slowed over the next few years before recovering to the 1997 levels by 2004 (Box Figure 2.2) (Lund and Panda, 2000; Azizah, 2012). Instead, there was a shift of displaced

migrant workers from formal work to informal work in agriculture and services (Lund and Panda, 2000). Malaysia also attempted a redeployment policy for displaced migrant workers in the construction sector to the plantation and manufacturing sectors, which had labour shortages (Koser, 2009). This was only partially successful, however, as red tape, skills mismatch, and unattractive job offers limited job uptake, and Malaysia resorted to admitting additional migrant workers from Indonesia and Thailand (Koser, 2009). The significant but temporary impact of the AFC on labour migration is also reflected in remittance figures (Box Figure 2.3). There was a dip in remittance inflows to Indonesia in 1997, although numbers recovered in 1998. Similarly, for the Philippines, there was a dip in remittance inflows in 1998, but there was a full recovery by 1999.

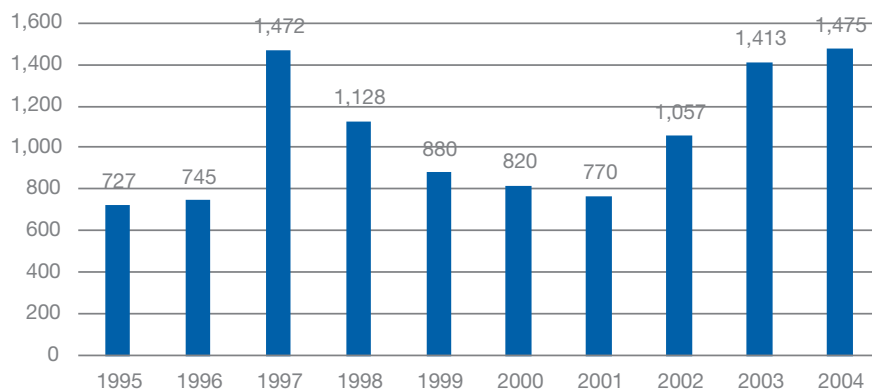
The crisis and resulting loss of employment meant those who incurred high migration costs were not able to recover their investment (Piei, Johan and Abubakar, 1999). However, migrants working outside the region who received their pay in U.S. dollars and other relatively strong currencies benefitted from the crisis (Illo, 1998). Urban populations were more adversely affected by the crisis than their rural counterparts. Knowles, Pernia and Racelis (1998) indicate that Thai urban households were more likely than rural households to be worse off in 1998, with Bangkok and the Northeast sheltering the largest proportions of affected families. This stemmed largely from the impact of unemployment and the higher costs of living. Nonetheless, rural families also experienced challenges, with decreasing farm wages and incomes when competing workers migrated back from rural or urban informal sector jobs. Farm products commanded lower prices, disproportionate to higher prices for consumption items.

**Box Figure 2.1.** Foreign workers in Thailand around the Asian Financial Crisis (in thousands)



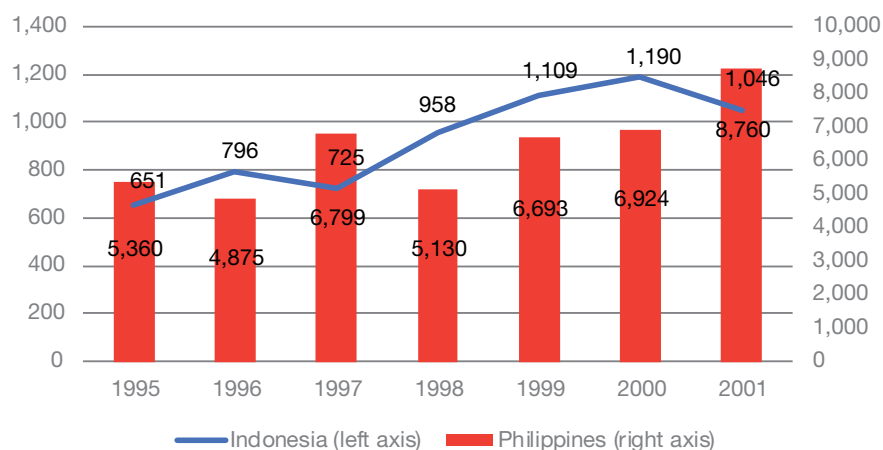
Source: Martin (2007)

**Box Figure 2.2.** Number of low-skill foreign workers in Malaysia (in thousands)



Source: Kassim (2012)

**Box Figure 2.3.** Migrant remittances inflows (\$ million)



Source: World Bank

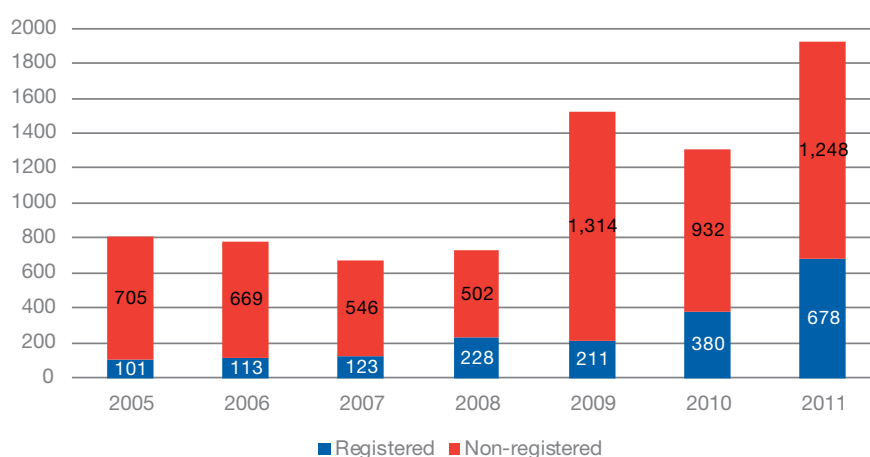
### *Global Financial Crisis (GFC)*

The 2008-2009 GFC impacted AMS, but less so than the AFC. Malaysia's economy contracted by 1.5 percent in 2009, but recovered fully by 2010, growing by 7.4 percent. Thailand's economic growth slowed to 1.7 percent in 2008 (after growing 5.4 percent in 2007) and declined by 0.7 percent in 2009, but then grew by 7.5 percent in 2010. Brunei Darussalam's economy declined by 1.9 percent in 2008 and by 1.8 percent in 2009. The other AMS managed positive, although slower, growth in 2008 and 2009 and returned to pre-crisis growth by 2010.

In response to the crisis, and to protect local workers, the Malaysian government ceased foreign work permits in the manufacturing and services sectors and reduced the duration of short-term work permits from six months

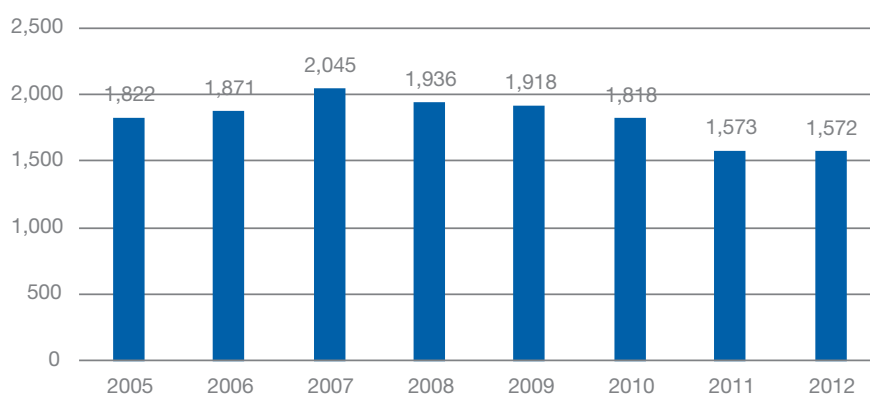
to three (Fix et al., 2009). Thailand also did not issue new work permits or renew the work permits of 500,000 foreign workers. There was no obvious impact on the stock of foreign workers in Thailand during the GFC, especially within undocumented foreign workers, among which there was an estimated increase (Box Figure 2.4). In the case of Malaysia, however, from the onset of the GFC in 2008 until 2012, there was a slow and steady decline in the number of documented foreign workers, as shown in Box Figure 2.5 (Kassim, 2012). There is no information on the number of undocumented workers in the same period. In the case of remittance inflows, there was no discernible impact for the Philippines during the GFC; Indonesia, however, experienced a slower rate of growth although remittance inflows continued to increase during the GFC (Box Figure 2.6).

**Box Figure 2.4.** Foreign workers in Thailand around Global Financial Crisis (in thousands)



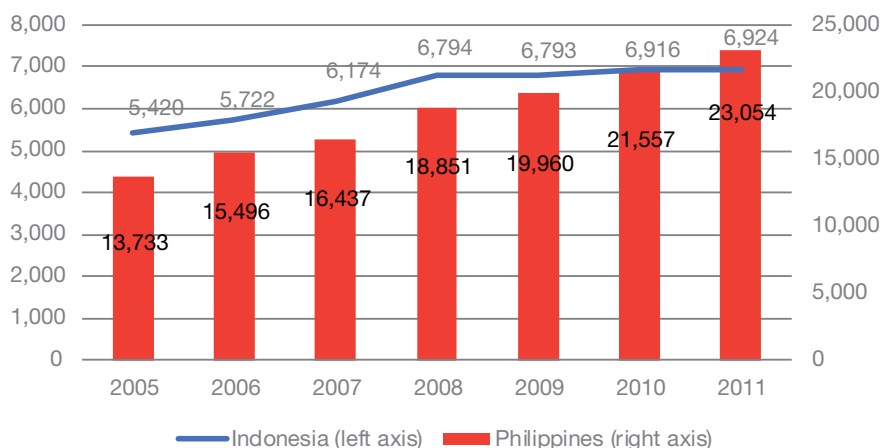
Source: Aoki (2019)

**Box Figure 2.5.** Number of low-skill foreign workers in Malaysia around Global Financial Crisis (in thousands)



Source: Kassim (2012)

**Box Figure 2.6. Migrant remittances inflows (\$ million)**



Source: World Bank (2021)

## 1.10. Economic Recovery Outlook and Prospects for ASEAN Labour Migration

Although the past two years have witnessed large job losses, massive migrant worker returns, and a sharp drop in deployment, labour migration in the region is expected to recover and possibly surpass pre-pandemic levels. The reasons are manifold: the expected strength of economic recovery in the region; the continuing wide disparity in socio-economic wellbeing between origin and destination countries in the region; demographic pressures; and sectoral or role-based gaps in the labour markets.

After the economic meltdown in 2020 and tepid growth in 2021, ASEAN, as a whole, and most individual AMS are projected to return to or close to their pre-pandemic growth levels beginning in 2022 and achieve their pre-pandemic levels of output by 2022 or 2023 (Table 1.5). ASEAN is expected to grow a little under 5 percent in 2022 and just over 5 percent in 2023, based on ADB forecasts in April 2022 (ADB, 2022b). The projected economic recovery is particularly noteworthy for Malaysia and Thailand, which attract the largest number of intra-ASEAN migrant workers. Malaysia's economy is projected to grow by 5.7 to 5.8 percent in 2022 and by 4.5 to 5.7 percent in 2023, according to 2022 World Bank and IMF forecasts. Thailand is forecasted to grow by 3.9 to 4.1 percent in 2022 and by 4.3 to 4.7 percent in 2023 (World Bank, 2022; IMF, 2022).

Strong growth in these countries is expected in sectors that are heavily reliant on migrant labour. In Malaysia, for instance, the construction sector is projected to grow by 11.5 percent in 2022, manufacturing by 4.7 percent, agriculture by 3.9 percent, wholesale and retail trade by 8.7 percent, food and beverages and accommodation by 7.3 percent, and other services by 6.1

percent (Ministry of Finance Malaysia, 2021). In 2019, these sectors already accounted for about 80 percent of total migrant workers in Malaysia (Wahab, 2020b).

In Thailand, export-oriented manufacturing is also expected to expand – by 6.2 percent in 2022, agriculture by 3.8 percent, and service exports (mainly tourism) to grow by double digits after two years of large contraction (World Bank, 2021). These sectors also employ a large proportion of women migrant workers (United Nations Thematic Working Group 2019). 57 percent of migrant workers in Thailand are in industry, 31 percent in services, and 12 percent in agriculture (ILO, 2022). There have already been reports of acute labour shortages in sectors usually reliant on migrant workers in both Thailand (food processing and construction) and Malaysia (construction, plantation, manufacturing, and fisheries) (Phoonphongphiphat, 2021; Yuvejwattana, 2021; Rodzi, 2021).

**Table 1.5.** GDP growth forecasts in selected ASEAN Member States

Country	2019	2020	2021e		2022f		2023f	
			WB	IMF	WB	IMF	WB	IMF
Malaysia	4.4	-5.6	3.3	3.5	5.8	5.7	4.5	5.7
Thailand	2.3	-6.1	1.0	1.3	3.9	4.1	4.3	4.7
Cambodia	7.1	-3.1	2.2		4.5		5.5	
Indonesia	5.0	-2.1	3.7	3.3	5.2	5.6	5.1	6.0
Lao PDR	5.5	0.5	2.2		4.5		4.8	
Philippines	6.1	-9.6	5.3	4.6	5.9	6.3	5.7	6.9
Viet Nam	7.0	2.9	2.6		5.5		6.5	

**Notes:** e – estimate; f – forecast

**Source:** World Bank (2022); IMF (2022)

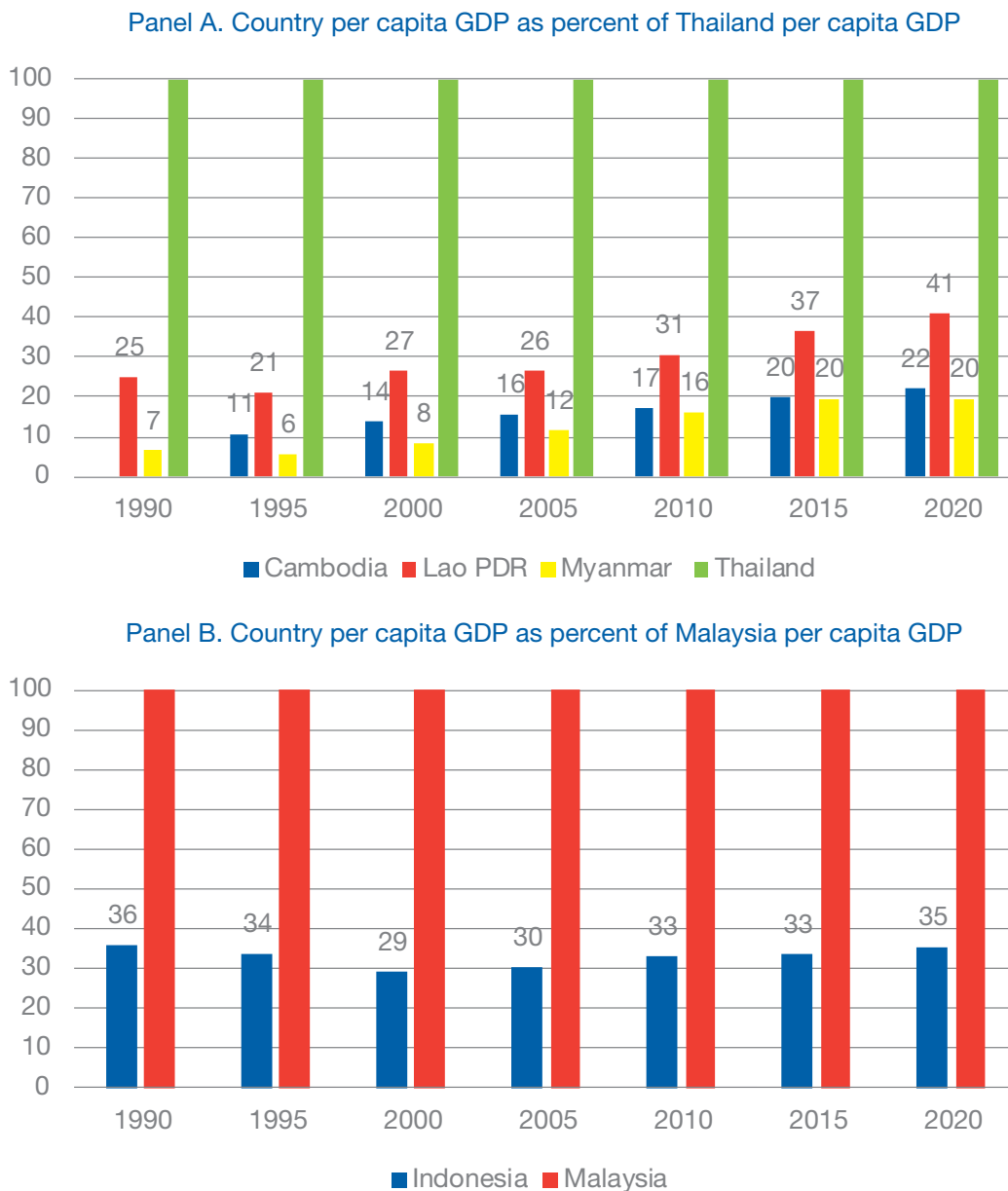
Statistical models of international migration usually take the form of gravity models. In a gravity model, the flow of migrants between countries is explained by the distance between the countries (the shorter the distance, the larger the flows), the gap in economic well-being between the countries (the larger the gap, the stronger the flows from poorer to richer countries), and the size of the population of the countries (the larger the populations, the larger the scope for movement).<sup>12</sup> Shared and porous borders are as close as countries can get in terms of physical distance, although these models define distance more broadly, also considering shared language, culture, and history. The region's two main migration corridors – Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar to Thailand, and Indonesia to Malaysia – are close both in terms of physical distance and shared culture, language, and history.<sup>13</sup> The monetary costs of migration, including recruitment, travel, and other costs, and ease of obtaining a visa are also factors that affect distance, broadly defined. The lower the costs of migration and the easier it is to obtain a visa, the larger the expected migration.

<sup>12</sup> In the same way that gravity is determined by the distance between bodies and the product of the mass between bodies. For a discussion of gravity models as a tool for migration analysis, see Ramos (2016).

<sup>13</sup> This also explains Indonesia-Brunei Darussalam and Indonesia-Singapore migration corridors, which are also large.

In addition, given the projected economic growth in both origin and destination countries in the region in the near future, it will still be many years before origin countries significantly narrow their per capita GDP gaps with destination countries. Figure 1.11 shows a comparison of origin and destination countries in the region's two main migration corridors. For example, although there have been noticeable gains in the past 30 years, the per capita GDPs of Cambodia and Myanmar remain only about a fifth of Thailand's. Given that per capita GDP correlates with the level of wages and the number of economic opportunities, this means Thailand's economic pull will continue to be strong in the short- and long-term. The same is the case for the Indonesia-Malaysia corridor, with Indonesia's per capita GDP hovering around a third of Malaysia's over the past 30 years. Migration to Malaysia will continue to be economically attractive for Indonesian workers for the foreseeable future.

**Figure 1.11.** Per capita GDP in ASEAN's main migration corridors



Source: World Bank (2022a)



Demographic factors are also important. The growth in working-age population continues to rapidly decline in Thailand and Singapore at less than one percent annual growth from 2020 onwards (Table 1.6). By 2030, according to the UN, the old-age dependency ratios (defined as the ratio of those 65 years and older to those 15 to 64 years) in Thailand and Singapore are projected to be 29.6 percent and 34.5 percent, respectively (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2019).<sup>14</sup>

**Table 1.6.** Working age population growth and old-age dependency ratio in ASEAN destination countries

	Brunei Darussalam			Malaysia		
	Working age (15+) population (WAP) ('000)	Annual growth of WAP past 5 years	Old-age dependency ratio 65+/(15-64)	Working age (15+) population (WAP) ('000)	Annual growth of WAP past 5 years	Old-age dependency ratio 65+/(15-64)
2015	315		5.7%	22,676		8.7%
2020	340	1.5%	7.7%	24,777	1.8%	10.4%
2025	360	1.2%	10.8%	26,552	1.4%	12.5%
2030	382	1.2%	14.4%	28,243	1.2%	14.7%
	Singapore			Thailand		
	Working age (15+) population (WAP) ('000)	Annual growth of WAP past 5 years	Old-age dependency ratio 65+/(15-64)	Working age (15+) population (WAP) ('000)	Annual growth of WAP past 5 years	Old-age dependency ratio 65+/(15-64)
2015	4,886		11.6%	56,364		14.8%
2020	5,131	1.0%	18.0%	58,246	0.7%	18.4%
2025	5,337	0.8%	26.0%	59,574	0.5%	23.6%
2030	5,491	0.6%	34.5%	60,332	0.3%	29.6%

**Source:** United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2019)

Other factors could also drive future intra-ASEAN migration, such as environmental and political factors. Several AMS rank high in exposure and vulnerability to extreme weather events, which are linked to climate change. From 2000 to 2019, Myanmar ranked 2<sup>nd</sup>, the Philippines 4<sup>th</sup>, Thailand 9<sup>th</sup>, Viet Nam 13<sup>th</sup>, and Cambodia 14<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries the Global Climate Risk Index, which ranks countries based on the extent to which they have are affected by climate-related extreme weather events (Eckstein, Kunzel, and Shafer, 2021). It is possible climate change can influence migration from these countries to other less vulnerable AMS. Additionally, the domestic political conflict in Myanmar increases the flow of people traveling to Thailand for employment (Duangdee, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> The ageing of the population itself suggests a potential increased reliance on foreign healthcare workers in the future.





## **2. COVID-19 COMPOUNDS CHALLENGES FOR MIGRANT WORKER RETURN AND REINTEGRATION**

### **2.1. Return, Repatriation, and Reintegration Issues Arising from the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Providing an accurate account of return and reintegration is challenging because some countries experienced large movements through informal channels. The responses of AMS countries to the survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook reflect the paucity of information on these flows: number of workers and family members, their gender and ages, their employers and places of previous employment, and migration status. This study draws on a variety of reports on foreign worker population in major host countries from newspapers, scholars, and government authorities in origin countries

Information on the reintegration of migrant returnees is equally sparse because governments mainly focus on the pandemic's health impacts and more immediate responses, including reception and quarantine centres, some cash aid, and transportation assistance to return migrant workers to their home communities. Information on reintegration programmes is generally limited to existing public training schemes, assistance to trafficking victims – including psychosocial support from nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) – and financing schemes for self-employment. There is very little information about the returnees' demographics, such as their occupations, ages, genders, how long they worked abroad, whether they expected to go back to their work abroad, whether they had any savings, and what their plans were for resettling in their home countries.



Although this study hoped to provide a region-wide account of the impact of COVID 19 on the return and reintegration of migrant workers, the uneven dimensions of labour migration among AMS inevitably resulted in greater attention to the largest host countries, namely Thailand and Malaysia, and the largest origin countries, especially Indonesia – which supplied many of the workers in Malaysia, Singapore – and the other Mekong countries, which supply Thailand with migrants. The Philippines and Viet Nam are outliers because the majority of their migrant workers went to destinations beyond the region. Many of the return and reintegration measures adopted by the Philippines and Viet Nam, however, are relevant to the issues covered in this report.

### **2.1.1. Return and Repatriation<sup>15</sup>**

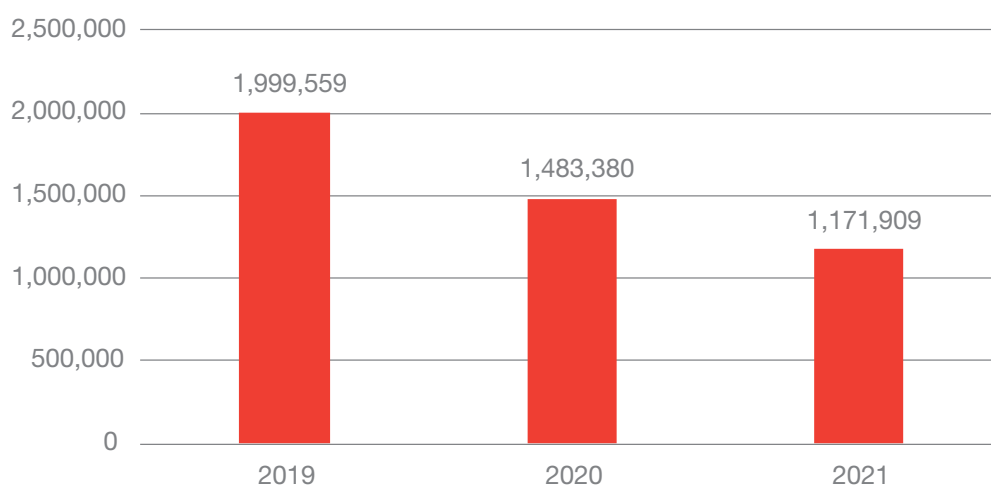
The pandemic virtually halted all foreign worker admissions and repatriations of migrant workers when lockdown measures froze most economic activities. In Malaysia, migrant workers constituted up to 24 percent of the labour force in 2019 (including 2 million undocumented migrant workers). Estimates of the number of undocumented ranged from 1 million to 3.5 million (Hwok-Aun and Leng, 2018).<sup>16</sup> 107,524 undocumented migrants had registered by 1 August 2021 in the government's so-called 'recalibration' programmes, through which undocumented migrants could either apply to return to their home countries after paying a fine or stay and work legally in identified sectors. Of the undocumented migrants who registered, 88,000 were repatriated (Lee and David, 2021). According to data from the Department of Immigration Malaysia, from 2019 to 2021, the number of registered temporary employment pass foreign workers fell by 827,650 (Figure 2.1). The number of registered foreign workers fell from 1,999,559 in 2019 to 1,483,380 in 2020 and to 1,171,909 in 2021. Of the 1,171,909 registered foreign workers in 2021, 545,089 originated from other AMS and 626,820 from elsewhere; 944,301 were men and 227,608 were women. These foreign workers were mainly employed in manufacturing, construction, and domestic service.

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15 Return refers to the migrant workers' return to their country of origin, which can be voluntary or involuntary. Repatriation is the act or process of returning migrant workers to their country of origin, usually undertaken either by the government of the origin country or the destination country.

16 The World Bank estimates that there were between 1.23 to 1.46 million undocumented migrants in Malaysia in March 2019.

**Figure 2.1.** Numbers of registered temporary employment pass foreign workers in Malaysia, 2019-2021



**Source:** Survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook

In Thailand, when the virus spread among workers in the fisheries markets in Samut Sakorn and the electronic industry in Petchburi Province, the government issued orders to freeze the movement of workers and seal the borders. This caused panic among migrant workers and, despite unpaid wages and limited savings, many returned home. Some even hired smugglers to take them to the border (Yongyuth and Sorat, 2022). As of December 2021, there were still 2,363,158 foreign workers with permits to work in Thailand. Of these, 2,163,415 (91.5 percent) were from other AMS and the rest from non-ASEAN countries. The sectors with the highest number of foreign workers were manufacturing (39.4 percent of workers), construction (24.6 percent), agriculture (14.5 percent), community/personal service (10.4 percent), and domestic work (6.7 percent). Of more than 4 million migrant workers in Thailand, between 1 million and 1.25 million are undocumented or irregular, according to a recent estimate (The Asia Foundation, 2021a).

Throughout the pandemic, persistent challenges bedevil the return of migrant workers, although some barriers are easing as countries open their borders and economic recovery and remigration begins. These challenges include the following:

- Many migrant workers are undocumented/irregular
- With travel restrictions, cost of return is often high
- Some workers still have unsettled claims or unpaid wages
- Most migrant workers are excluded from or receive only limited social protection

### 2.1.2. Large Number of Undocumented/Irregular Migrant Workers

Irregular migration is often cheaper and easier than regular migration. Many migrant workers are in an irregular situation because they entered clandestinely with the help of smugglers or entered as tourists before becoming workers. Others stayed beyond their work permit time periods, either because their employer failed to renew the work permit or because the worker left the employer who sponsored them.<sup>17</sup> The number of migrant workers in an irregular situation appears to be large in Thailand and Malaysia, and not insignificant in other AMS.

When the AMS launched their COVID-19 testing campaigns, almost all intended to include migrant workers irrespective of immigration status. However, this intention was not always followed in practice and many migrants were left out (ILO, 2021e; ILO, 2020d). Due to the fear of being sent home by the authorities or detained in camps and made to pay penalties, undocumented migrant workers tended to avoid any contact with authorities and were uninformed about pandemic health measures or services. Language barriers and inadequate communication channels also contributed to migrants' lack of access to health services. Employers were also unlikely to advise migrant workers to seek out services because of the risk of penalties for employing undocumented workers. In Malaysia, employers complained when they were required to pay for mandatory employee testing, and, in Thailand, hospitals stopped testing migrant workers after hospitals were banned from rejecting patients who tested positive even when their facilities were overwhelmed with COVID cases (ILO, 2021d).

Migrants' own country's representatives were unable to provide assistance, especially to undocumented workers because they had no records of their presence. Origin countries relied on informal networks among the migrants themselves and on social media. Some origin countries made it the legal responsibility of recruitment agencies to repatriate their recruits in emergencies, but, during the pandemic, most agencies faced financial difficulties or went bankrupt and closed operations (ILO, 2021f; Jones, Mudaliar and Piper, 2021).

A large number of documented and undocumented migrant workers were stranded in destination countries.<sup>18</sup> Origin country governments in Indonesia, Cambodia, Myanmar, and the Philippines organised relief flights to bring workers home (Moniroth, 2021; ILO, 2021e). In some cases, early in the pandemic, migrant workers were stranded in ports of entry in their home countries while waiting for permission to travel to their hometowns. In the Philippines, the government provided these

17 Whether it is poor or exploitative working conditions, non-compliance by employer with terms of employment contract, or just better opportunities.

18 An altogether different case of stranding features migrant workers who wanted to go home but were not allowed to because they were doing jobs considered essential, such as healthcare workers in Singapore (Lim and Soh, 2021).



stranded workers with temporary shelter and food and eventually local transportation.

### **2.1.3. High Cost of Return**

Migrant workers who managed to return to their home countries incurred high costs due to pre-departure testing requirements, travel restrictions, limited transport, and quarantine requirements (Return and Reintegration Platform, 2021). Those who had to fly home encountered frequent flight cancellations or delays and high fares. In the early days of the pandemic, returning Filipino migrant workers were stranded in the Manila airport holding facilities for quarantine due to inadequate testing facilities. Problems also arose in Cambodia in March 2020, when about 15,000 migrant workers returned from Thailand but the government was only able to test 35 of them – those already showing symptoms – for COVID-19 (Tum, 2020). Even more than a year later, when a resurgence of COVID-19 cases in Thailand caused renewed lockdowns, Cambodian migrant workers who returned home complained of mosquitoes, leaking roofs, and a lack of toilets in quarantine facilities (Tum, 2020).

### **2.1.4. Unsettled Claims/Unpaid Wages**

Among the challenges to effective return are unpaid or unsettled wages or other entitlements. As governments declared lockdowns and travel restrictions, thousands of establishments closed and laid off their employees. Massive dismissals resulted in unsettled claims and unpaid wages. Migrant workers were among the first to go because many mass lay-offs occurred in migrant-heavy sectors, including tourism and construction (ILO, 2021e). When the workers lost their jobs, most also lost their living accommodations. Because of their status, irregular migrants were more likely to be let go first and had fewer avenues for redress. In Thailand, hundreds of thousands of migrant workers in electronics, construction, fisheries, and plantations were laid off because of COVID-19. In the tourism industry alone, job losses ran into the many thousands as tourist arrivals declined 95 percent between 2019 and 2020.<sup>19</sup> These losses occurred before governments could establish rescue packages for industries, which would have enabled firms to settle worker obligations. In 2020, Thailand's central bank announced that THB500 billion (about US\$15 billion) would be available through commercial banks to support small and medium size enterprises (SMEs), but only THB130 billion (about US\$4 billion) was actually disbursed. The central bank placed a 2 percent cap on bank loan rates, well below market rate and accompanied by a high risk of default (Yuvejwattana and Nguyen, 2021). Therefore, only a small proportion of the funding was lent out. The government offered

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<sup>19</sup> In Thailand, tourism created 36 million jobs between 2014 and 2019, and was estimated to have generated US\$96 billion in revenue in 2019 (Saxon, Sodprasert and Sucharitakul, 2021).

amnesty to undocumented workers, which allowed them to stay in the country, but a large number, having no job or savings, had little option but to return home.

#### **2.1.5. Uneven Access of Migrant Workers to Social Protection**

The pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerability of migrant workers in ASEAN, whether formally or informally employed, because they lack access to social security or other social protections, such as unemployment insurance and healthcare. The AMS have no bilateral or multilateral reciprocal agreements to include each other's migrant workers in their respective social security systems.<sup>20</sup> At best, AMS included migrant workers in nationwide COVID-19 testing and vaccination programmes, but such efforts had mixed results because of bureaucratic and administrative requirements. In addition, when AMS governments launched cash transfer programmes for low-income families and the suddenly jobless, it was unclear if the entitlements applied to migrant workers at all and if benefits were contingent on immigration status (ILO, 2021e; ILO, 2020d). The predicament faced by migrant workers in ASEAN mirror one faced by migrants in other parts of the world, notably Latin America, where social protection inclusion is predicated on having a regular immigration status (Espinoza et al., 2021).

Migrants' sometimes informal and uncertain access to healthcare faces several barriers according to the MGI (2021), including:

- Strained healthcare system resources;
- Inadequate health services for populations in remote areas; and
- Migrants' lack of knowledge about available health services, irrespective of their immigration status.

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<sup>20</sup> There are some exceptions. In Thailand, migrant workers, whether documented or undocumented, could opt-in to a health insurance scheme by government, but in practice seldom do, possibly because of costs or a lack of proper appreciation of its benefits (Tangchareonsathien, Thwin and Patcharanarumol, 2017).

### Box 3. Extending social protections during the COVID-19 pandemic

States that extended healthcare coverage and other protections specifically to migrants and their families during the pandemic include:

*France and Spain* – Extended the residence permits of migrants and their families for an additional three months to ensure their access to healthcare.

*Portugal* – Regularised the status of non-nationals, including asylum seekers with pending applications, entitling them to healthcare, employment, social support, and housing.

*Colombia* – Entitled migrants and refugees to free medical consultations, irrespective of their immigration status.

*Singapore* – Migrant workers were given access to medical support through island-wide medical centres, mobile clinical teams and 24/7 telemedicine services. The state bore the costs of COVID-19 testing, treatment, and vaccination. In April 2022, the State introduced a mandatory primary healthcare financing scheme for migrant workers living in dormitories or from the construction, marine shipyard and process sectors, in which migrant workers paid a US\$2 co-pay for a telemedicine session and a US\$5 co-pay for each visit to medical centres; their employers covered the rest of the costs via a capitated model.

*Thailand* – Provided free treatment for the first 72 hours to non-nationals with valid work permits who contracted COVID-19.

*Qatar* – Provided free medical services, including medical check-ups and quarantine services, to migrants.

**Source:** ILO and ISSA (2020); Survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook

Unless the authorities in sending and destination countries address the problems and underlying causes of irregular movements, governments will be unable to reach migrants and assist them in returning to their country of origin. The key to combatting irregularity is to make it easier for employers and migrant workers to comply with regulations, and to motivate those in irregular situations to avail of amnesties and regularisation programmes. Contrary to its intended purpose, the imposition of a foreign worker levy has proven to be a big incentive for employers to hire undocumented workers rather than to increase employment for native workers. By hiring the undocumented, employers avoid the levy, which deprives the state of potential

revenue,<sup>21</sup> and they gain workers amenable to working for much lower than prevailing wages, which depresses national pay rates. Therefore, to protect native workers from losing jobs and income to foreigners, a well-designed policy would do away with the foreign worker levy, as Malaysia did in April 2020. It reduced the foreign worker levy by 25 percent for workers whose permits were due to expire between April and December of that year; whether the reduction is temporary or permanent remains unknown (Dzulkifly, 2020; Survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook).

#### An Undocumented Indonesian Migrant Worker in Selangor Explains His Situation

“During COVID-19, our boss didn’t allow us [undocumented workers] to work. Only those with documents [workers with valid passports and working passes] were allowed to work during the MCO [Movement Control Order]. For the past three to four months, I have been unemployed and relied very much on other friends [documented workers] who were allowed to work. In this estate, all of us are ‘pajak’ [workers who are paid based on their productivity]. If you work, then you have money. If you cannot work, it means you lose your income. During this period, I borrowed money from friends. Now I am paying them back slowly.”

Source: Andika (2020a)

### 2.1.6. The Pandemic Increased Risks Faced by Women Migrant Workers

Since many women migrant workers are in informal forms of employment, they may have less access to social protection even as they face more risks. Women migrant workers are vulnerable to violence and harassment in host countries and when traveling to their home countries; during the pandemic, they also faced dangers in COVID-19 quarantine facilities (ILO, 2020e). In addition, during the pandemic, the burden of unpaid care work increased for most women, including women migrant workers, as schools, kindergartens, creches, and other public and social services closed, usually resulting in women foregoing outside-the-home jobs and income. This extra burden and the distinctive realities of men and women need to be addressed as part of a comprehensive response to the pandemic. Furthermore, movement restrictions and lockdowns may increase the risks of domestic violence against women, including migrants, and entrapment with abusers (ILO, 2020e). Additional risks are faced by migrant domestic workers because of forced coexistence, cramped and confined living conditions, economic stress, and fears about contracting the virus (UN Women, 2020). Domestic workers generally suffer from high informality and limited access to social security – situations the pandemic worsened – and migrant domestic workers

21 In a response to the survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook, Malaysian Immigration Department Director General Khairul Dzaimie Daud said that up to US\$30 million in levy revenue was unrealised in 2021 due to the employment of undocumented workers.

are even more likely to be overburdened and deprived of paid overtime and leave during movement restrictions (ILO, 2020f; ILO, 2020e). This happened in the Middle East, where many Indonesians and Filipinos are employed as domestic workers and have labour rights limited by the ‘Kafala’ system (Aoun, 2020). The above risks and vulnerabilities are intensified for migrant women who struggle with language barriers and lack information about accessing essential services, such as healthcare, law enforcement, justice and social services, which pandemic containment measures also severely curtailed. Gender-responsive social protection should address the above and other risks and vulnerabilities and be tailored to men’s and women’s distinctive realities and needs.

## **2.2. Policy Responses in ASEAN Member States**

### **2.2.1. Repatriation Support**

Most AMS origin countries provided some degree of repatriation support to their displaced overseas workers. The Philippines provides emergency repatriation of distressed OFWs in the event of natural calamities (or political unrest) through the Overseas Workers Welfare Association (OWWA). Operational even before the pandemic, the OWWA repatriated 837,080 OFWs from the start of the pandemic to September 2021.<sup>22</sup> OWWA offered OFWs airport assistance, transportation to hotel quarantine facilities in Metro Manila, free COVID-19 tests, and transport services for the uninfected to their home province. The OWWA also provided psychosocial counselling and stress debriefing, if needed. The OFW Assistance Information System (OASIS), an online platform that collects and stores information on OFWs, facilitates the repatriation and services provision to returnees. Indonesia, Thailand, Viet Nam, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Lao PDR also provided repatriation support for displaced migrant workers.<sup>23</sup> In Lao PDR, an emergency response fund on COVID-19 in the amount of US\$55,000 was set up especially for return migrant workers. In Cambodia, returning migrant workers received free COVID tests, access to quarantine facilities at health centres – with free food, hygiene kits, referrals to hospitals, and other necessities. If returnees tested positive, they received free treatment, and if they tested negative, they were transported for free to their hometowns.<sup>24</sup> The Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Agency (BP2MI), in partnership with the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) and the IOM, offered assistance for returning migrant workers that included training on skills and starting businesses (IOM Indonesia, 2022). In 2020, Myanmar provided migrant worker returnees from Thailand with temporary

<sup>22</sup> From March to October 2020, the OWWA assisted 829,037 OFWs in traveling to their home regions and provided 801,037 OFWs (including some of the homeward bound) with free food and lodging when they were in stranded or in quarantine according to the survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook.

<sup>23</sup> Based on responses to the survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook.

<sup>24</sup> Cambodia provided COVID-19 testing and even vaccination to foreign workers in the country.

shelter, healthcare, and other necessary facilities while they waited for COVID-19 test results and dealt with movement restrictions. Malaysia provides a good example of a destination country policy that facilitates migrant worker return; it simplifies exit procedures by removing the need for an exit pass for valid passport holders.

#### **Box 4. The value of contingency planning in advance of crises**

The importance of contingency planning before emergencies occur cannot be overestimated. Among AMS, the Philippines experienced the largest returning migrant flows when COVID-19 struck: some 1.2 million Filipino overseas workers had returned by September 2021. These return flows could have easily overwhelmed the Philippines' responders, but the experience gained from previous emergencies, such as the 1990 Gulf War and other conflicts, enabled the government to quickly and efficiently repatriate workers in 2020-2021. By the time the pandemic struck, some of the necessary responses required from the national government had already found their way into laws, such as the Republic Act 8042 and Republic Act 10022, and informed programmes of the OWWA. The Philippines had developed an operations manual for crises management before 2013, which was later complemented by other support for returnees, including the Assist WELL Programme and Guidelines and Procedures in the Conduct of Medical Repatriation of Overseas Filipinos, a manual jointly developed by the Foreign Office; departments of Labour; the Foreign Office, Health; Interior; Social Welfare, and the Airport Authority (Asis, 2021). In the first months of 2020, the government chartered flights to bring home workers that had been laid off and stranded in some major destination countries. The OWWA received the returnees at airports and seaports, placed them in quarantine facilities, and organised their transportation to their hometowns.

#### **2.2.2. Expanding and Financing Social Protection**

National authorities in the AMS are fully cognizant of the need to design economic recovery programmes. Their initial stimulus strategies invariably consist of cash transfers to households, especially the poorest, and job-retention measures, such as wage subsidies and low-interest loans for formal businesses in hard hit sectors like tourism and transport. The pandemic exposed the inadequacy of such social protection systems, forcing governments to extend protection to many in informal employment. AMS followed these strategies with pump-priming spending on infrastructure and active labour market policies to re-allocate labour.



The amounts the AMS allocated to fiscal measures announced or implemented since the onset of the crisis range from 2.7 percent of GDP in Viet Nam to 18.8 percent of GDP in Thailand. Spending on social protection (health and income-support measures) comprised around 65 percent of the response in Malaysia and Viet Nam, 77 percent in Thailand, 88 percent in the Philippines, and reach 91 percent in Indonesia, where programmes targeting poor or low-income households during the pandemic included direct cash assistance, housing subsidies, free electricity for low-use consumers, and pre-employment cards which can be used to pay for training (Asian Development Bank, 2021a; KPMG, 2020). As of November 2020, the Indonesia government had allocated IDR243 trillion (about US\$17 billion) for its pandemic social protection programmes. Migrant returnees and their households are eligible for these programmes as long as they are classified as poor, usually based on a proxy means test. In the Philippines, the government introduced a large-scale social protection programme while placing the country on strict community quarantine. Under the Heal as One Programme, 18 million poor households were covered by a cash grant. They included the 4.4 million households covered under the Pantawid (4Ps) Programme which started some years ago to improve schooling and health outcomes for poor children. Like Indonesia, migrant returnee households in the Philippines are not excluded from these programmes if they are classified as poor households.<sup>25</sup> Although the country had sufficient fiscal space before the pandemic, a budget deficit quickly ballooned in 2020, reaching 7.6 percent of GDP and the government had to resort to borrowing. The Philippines' debt to GDP ratio climbed to a 16 year high of 63.1 percent in September 2020, causing concerns about a possible drop in the country's investment-grade rating (Reliefweb, 2021).

During the pandemic, AMS social protection programmes targeting poor households did not exclude migrant returnee households (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020a). For example, Cambodia's ID Poor Cash Transfer Programme and Cash-for-Work Programme cover returnees as long as their households are classified as poor or vulnerable. Only AMS programmes that target workers who lost their jobs and who must be members of the national social security system exclude migrant workers because many are not enrolled in social security systems, even in their own countries.

In Thailand, THB15,000 cash transfers were provided to returning Thai workers who lost their jobs and who were members of the Overseas Workers Fund. In the Philippines, US\$200 was provided to repatriated OFWs, whether regular or irregular; even OFWs who lost their jobs but

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<sup>25</sup> There is a provision, however, that households should only be able to benefit from one of several cash assistance programmes of government that were being implemented simultaneously. Since there is a separate cash assistance programme for returnee OFWs (described in next paragraph), if they received that one, their household will not be able to avail of the cash assistance for poor households.

remained in their destination country were eligible for this assistance.<sup>26</sup> OFWs who remained employed abroad and tested positive for COVID-19 also received US\$200 and health kits from OWWA. In addition, the Philippines provided various forms of educational assistance to OFW dependents who were repatriated, displaced, or deceased due to the pandemic.<sup>27</sup> Vietnamese returnees also received cash assistance in the form of reimbursements for expenses incurred during their journey to Viet Nam.

Thailand expanded social security for some migrant workers in the country by entitling unemployment benefits to those in the formal sector who contributed for more than six months to social security, and severance pay for those who worked with the same employer for at least four months. In November 2021, Thailand also announced it would set aside 500,000 COVID-19 vaccines for re-entering migrant workers from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Lao PDR (*Reuters*, 2021). Singapore, extended health benefits to foreign workers by bearing the costs of their COVID-19 testing, treatment, and vaccination. This healthcare support encompassed 24/7 telephone hotlines for workers' mental health during the pandemic. These included existing hotlines manned by a NGO, Migrant Workers Centre (MWC), while the State partnered with another NGO, HealthServe, for an additional 24/7 counselling helpline in August 2021 to strengthen the accessibility and capacity of mental health support for migrant workers<sup>28</sup>). For migrant workers who were unable to recover their full salaries, the Migrant Worker Assistance Fund provided support for food, housing, and *ex-gratia* assistance. Singapore also provided meals and care packs containing thermometers, hand sanitizers and masks to migrant workers.<sup>29</sup> During movement restrictions and migrant worker quarantines, Singapore provided free wi-fi or SIM cards so migrant workers could keep in touch with their families and send remittances.<sup>30</sup> The remittance support included working with banks and remittance agents to set up temporary manned remittance booths, deploying self-service kiosks, providing guidance on using e-remittance in workers' native languages, and encouraging employers to conduct remittances on their workers' behalf. In September 2021, Singapore improved standards for new migrant worker dormitories to reduce the risks of future pandemics and enhance migrant workers' living

26 Under the DOLE-OWWA AKAP and DOLE-AKAP programme.

27 These include Tabang OFW or Tertiary Education Subsidy, a one-time tertiary education support amounting to about US\$600; Educational Assistance through Scholarship in Emergencies for US\$200 a year for a maximum of four years to a college-level dependent of active OWWA members; and Project Alalay sa Pag-aaral para sa mga Anak-OFWs sa Panahon ng Pandemya, a one-time assistance of US\$400 to 1,500 qualified dependents of OWWA members during the COVID-19 pandemic.

28 Singapore Ministry of Manpower response to the survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook.

29 As of December 2020, 59 million meals and more than 410,000 care packs were provided to migrant workers.

30 As of December 2020, 300,000 data SIM cards were distributed to migrant workers and 45,000 remittances were facilitated.

conditions.<sup>31</sup> Malaysia, through the Social Security Organisation (SOCSO), also known as PERKESO, provided COVID-19 screening for migrant workers starting October 2020, with the costs borne by SOCSO and employers. Starting September 2021, Malaysia offered COVID-19 vaccinations free of charge to citizens and non-citizens, including documented and undocumented migrant workers. In June 2021, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry began the Public-Private Partnership COVID-19 Industry Immunisation Programme, which benefited migrant workers in the manufacturing sector. In May 2021, Malaysia introduced a digital platform, called Working for Workers, where workers, including migrant workers, could file labour-related complaints and access grievance mechanisms without fear of retribution.

### **2.2.3. Job Retention Measures in Destination Countries**

Many migrant workers, from hospital nurses to delivery drivers, from plantation workers to caregivers, perform essential services especially during the pandemic. It will make a lot of difference to the health and social protection of whole communities if migrant workers are allowed to keep their jobs and employers continue to meet their contractual obligations. Job retention strategies prevent a surge in unemployment and benefit lower skilled workers who have fewer options (OECD, 2020a; Aiyar and Dao, 2020). Governments should extend their visas and work and residence permits. It may be necessary to declare amnesties and make administrative procedures more flexible, as well as grant exceptions to existing immigration rules and conditions. For example, Portugal regularised the status of non-nationals, including asylum-seekers with pending applications, giving them access to certain rights and support, including healthcare, social support, employment, and housing. In addition, Portugal announced that foreign residents will have equal access to the National Health Service and treatment as regular beneficiaries.

Essential workers included migrants typically considered ‘low-skilled,’ such as crop pickers, food processors, care assistants, and cleaners in hospitals. States in the Global North sought to protect, and expand the supply of such workers during the health emergency. For example, the Italian government granted temporary legal status to migrants employed irregularly in agriculture and the care sector in spring 2020; the United Kingdom announced the automatic extension of visas of migrant doctors, nurses, and paramedics; Austria and Germany exempted migrants working on farms and in care homes from international travel bans; and the United States, while normal consular operations were suspended, permitted foreign farm workers to apply

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31 In August 2020, the Singapore Government set up a new division within the Ministry of Manpower – the Assurance, Care and Engagement Group – to provide support and take care of the well-being of migrant workers. The Group is tasked with providing assurance to migrant workers living in dormitories, making primary health services more accessible to migrant workers, and fostering stronger partnerships with Singaporeans, workers’ groups, employers, and dormitory operators.

for and receive work visas (OECD, 2020a; Anderson, Poeschel and Ruhs, 2021). Such measures were pragmatic responses to COVID-19.

Among AMS, Thailand registered irregular migrant workers from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Lao PDR so they could stay and work in Thailand for two years. As Thailand's economy recovers, business enterprises will need foreign workers to be properly documented.<sup>32</sup> Malaysia provided amnesty for irregular migrants and extended the deadline to return to their home countries (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, 2020). Later, it also offered the Labour Recalibration Programme and Return Recalibration Programme, which allowed irregular migrants to either apply to return to their home countries after paying a fine of MYR500 (US\$118) or stay and work legally (Immigration Department of Malaysia, 2021). In Singapore, levies for migrant workers (holders of S Pass and work permits) were temporarily waived to support employers and help them keep migrant workers employed. Singapore also provided financial support to migrant workers' employers through rebates or waivers of levies to help employers pay for salaries and upkeep, or help the migrant workers return home. Singapore's Ministry of Manpower set up the Displaced Workers Task Force which liaised with external partners, such as the Trade Association and Chambers (TACs) to match displaced migrant workers with new employers.<sup>33</sup>

“Taken together, the findings suggest that countries with fiscal space should maintain support for job retention until the pandemic abates markedly, helping to avoid socially costly unemployment spells and to dampen the effects on more disadvantaged worker groups. In particular, the findings suggest that the use of retention policies could be linked to the duration and intensity of the pandemic. Uncertainties about the pandemic and its path mean that the phaseout of such measures is more complicated in practice; it requires careful monitoring of the pandemic (including rollout of vaccines) and judgment of the economy's ability to weather a reduction in support. Although the model-based analysis is unable to take account of tight fiscal space constraints, the powerful effects of job retention policies in avoiding deeper and more protracted employment deterioration from the pandemic suggest that such measures should be prioritized.”

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32 An estimated 58,000 foreign workers in Thailand are still unemployed and undocumented. Under current rules, employers have to pay THB7,000 to THB8000 to obtain for a foreign recruit an employment visa, a two-year work permit, annual medical check-up, health insurance, and contribute to a guarantee fund for importing workers. This is based on an interview with Mr. Pracha Vasuprasat, migration expert in Thailand, who was citing Dr. Yongyuth Chalamwong of TDRI and Mr. Sorat Tanit for the data.

33 Singapore Ministry of Manpower response to the survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook.

#### 2.2.4. Training and Active Labour Market Policies

Long-term strategies to promote reintegration generally focus on active labour market policies, especially re-training returnees for skills in more dynamic economic sectors. As in previous crises, it is expected that returnees who possess scarce skills will easily find their way back to jobs, but other workers require new skills. A well-functioning labour market information system and periodic establishment surveys will identify what skills are in short supply in various sectors. There are often untapped employment opportunities because of asymmetries in labour market information. In Viet Nam, multinational companies that shut down when the pandemic hit their US markets found it hard to entice workers back when demand picked up again. The Export Processing Zones in the Philippines complained of various shortages even as unemployment soared in many regions. Worker re-allocation strategies involving training appear to work better for younger workers rather than older workers. Enterprises should be incentivized through tax and financial rewards to offer trainings, as well as the relaxation of certain regulations on apprenticeship programmes.

Indonesia, the Philippines, Lao PDR, and Cambodia offered livelihood and skills training programmes for migrant returnees during the pandemic. Indonesia implemented the Kartu Prakerja Programme by providing prepaid cards that beneficiaries (including returnees) can use to purchase online courses and entitle beneficiaries to cash support when they complete online training. There were limited slots under this programme, however, and returnees had to compete with other workers who lost their jobs. The Philippines offered online training on business and livelihood opportunities for OFW returnees through the OFW Reintegration through Skills and Entrepreneurship Program (OFW RISE), which is a public-private partnership between Coca-Cola Beverages Philippines, Inc., the OWWA, Technical Education and Skills Development Authority, Department of Trade and Industry, and the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE).<sup>34</sup> Programme registration is accessed through Facebook. The Philippines used information gathered through OASIS to facilitate job matching and employment. In Cambodia, the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, through technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions, offered short-term and long-term technical and vocational trainings to returning migrant workers and provided information on domestic job opportunities through the National Employment Agency, Provincial Department of Labour and Vocational Training, and provincial job centres.

<sup>34</sup> Coca-Cola is in charge of funding and developing training content and printing the training materials for distribution to the target OFW returnees. It is also tasked with partnering with microfinance institutions to facilitate the access of OFWs to credit (Department of Labor and Employment, 2020).



### Box 5. OWWA OFW RISE Programme

- Free online training targeted to returning or repatriated OFWs affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, whether land-based or sea-based.
- Targets 10,000 OFW returnees.
- Trainings include business management, business coaching, and Livelihood Assistance Program application assistance.
- Training delivered in a four-hour edutainment format that OFWs can access via their mobile devices while in quarantine or afterwards. Trainees receive a certificate of completion.

Source: Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, n.d.

Lao PDR offered a skills training programme for returnees displaced by the pandemic and provided job placement after training. As of February 2022, the programme benefited 140 male and 135 female returnees. According to the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MoLSW) of Lao PDR, however, they faced difficulties placing the trained returnees in jobs because of travel restrictions and the 10-day quarantine requirement before job start.<sup>35</sup> As a consequence, job retention rate was low. Cambodia also provided vocational training for returnees and others through government TVET institutions and disseminated job opportunities information via the National Employment Agency. To further assist returnees' employment search, Cambodia is instituting a Recognition of Prior Learning Assessment, under the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training for more than a dozen occupational programmes, including some targeted for returnees from Thailand (Occupation Mason Level 1 and Occupation Building Electric Wiring Level 1).

#### 2.2.5. Policies to Address Increased Risks of Trafficking

The pandemic increased the number of people at risk of trafficking in the ASEAN region through increased poverty rates, decreased economic opportunities, and limited labour protection. At the same time, by reducing the manpower and financial resources available for anti-trafficking initiatives, the pandemic made it more difficult to identify victims and apprehend traffickers (ASEAN-ACT, 2020). Movement restrictions and social distancing made it more difficult for frontline responders to identify potentially trafficked persons. Large budget cuts across ministries and the priority on COVID-19 testing also reduced resources available for assessing whether migrant

<sup>35</sup> MoLSW response to the survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook.



worker returnees are trafficking victims in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar (ASEAN-ACT, 2020). The closure of state borders has led to more clandestine movements, likely increasing the risks of trafficking, although there are currently no official records on this assumption.<sup>36</sup>

In Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, agencies under the Justice ministries in charge of monitoring trafficking used online platforms to continue their anti-trafficking activities via the introduction of electronic courts or e-courts (ASEAN-ACT, 2020). In Indonesia, the Supreme Court instructed all courts to prosecute cases via e-court, including Trafficking in Persons cases (Mahkamah Agung Republik Indonesia, 2020). The Philippines, and likely other AMS, moved its training course for prosecutors online for the investigation and prosecution of Trafficking-in-Persons cases.<sup>37</sup> In Singapore, under the Temporary Job Scheme, migrant workers who were victims of trafficking were allowed to seek employment in the country if they were willing and able to work. If trafficking victims wished to continue working in Singapore after their case proceedings ended, and they met work pass criteria, the Ministry of Manpower facilitated their new employment without requiring them to leave Singapore.

### 2.3. Need for Initiatives for Sustainable Reintegration

According to the IOM (2019; n.d.a), sustainable reintegration is achieved when “returnees have reached levels of economic self-sufficiency, social stability, and psychosocial well-being that make their further migration decisions a matter of choice, rather than necessity.” In past crises which led to mass return of migrant workers, there are few examples of publicly sponsored and funded reintegration schemes (Box 6). Governments have tried to develop reintegration schemes, but there are multiple challenges in creating productive jobs in economies already characterized by slow growth and high unemployment. During the pandemic, these are the conditions that characterize many of the origin and destination economies. Lockdowns, mobility restrictions, and border closures have led to a sharp decline in output and employment in all countries. With many workers out of jobs and without incomes, the demand for consumption goods has declined while investments in new or expanded businesses came to a stop. Hence, reintegration schemes must take into account these realities and should have modest objectives, including remigration through safe channels.

Governments typically respond to emergencies by expanding skills training programmes, offering low-interest loans for self-employment, and offering job-placement services, but few of these programmes generate jobs that can absorb more workers into gainful employment. More significantly, they

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36 Survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook interviews with MRCs in Myanmar, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, and Malaysia.

37 The 1<sup>st</sup> Basic E-learning Access to Trainings on Investigation and Prosecution of Trafficking-in-Persons Cases seminar was held from 26 to 30 July 2021. The seminar was conducted by the National Prosecution Service in partnership with ASEAN-ACT and the Inter Agency Council Against Trafficking in Persons (Department of Justice, Republic of the Philippines, 2021).

are not attractive to those who return from better paying jobs abroad. In previous crises, like the displacement of migrant workers during the Gulf War, the majority of returnees simply waited to find another opportunity to work abroad. There has been very little effort to track where workers end up after crises pass, which makes it difficult to design better responses for the future. The ILO, the IOM, and other international organisations and aid agencies have occasionally supported entrepreneurship schemes that encourage returnees to enter self-employment projects. Some projects were organized with local development agencies, which organised business ventures, secured permits, and provided technical support, while local banks provided low-interest loans, but these schemes quickly lose momentum, and few succeed.

A recent MPI policy brief points out that, around the world, migrants returned to communities whose resilience has already eroded because of the pandemic, lockdown measures, and decreased remittances. It argues that recovery from the COVID-19 crisis requires a more comprehensive approach, and reintegration programmes should focus on returnees and the communities, stating that, “Reintegration assistance that focuses not only on the outcomes of individuals returning but also on the economic, social and physical health of their communities and countries — in short, that emphasizes the development potential of returns and returnees — is the kind of assistance this crisis demands” (Le Coz and Newland, 2021: 11). These points align with the IOM’s long-standing approach to sustainable reintegration, which focuses on community-based and structural approaches to reintegration (IOM, 2019). The IOM also recommends designing and implementing reintegration interventions around sustainable development (Return and Reintegration Platform, 2021).

Until their economies recover, countries of origin will struggle to provide returning migrants with gainful employment. The governments of major countries of origin have already borrowed heavily in order to finance relief assistance and current threats to global economic recovery suggest that fiscal difficulties will likely increase. It is clear that palliative programmes like skills training for returnees are no substitute for real jobs in a buoyant economy. Restarting economic growth through the rapid absorption of workers, both internal and external, remains a challenge. Only the existence of favourable economic conditions will make it possible for returnees to find productive employment. Otherwise, they will again seek employment abroad and there is much evidence that they are already doing so.

As countries embark on recovery strategies, their first concern is minimising displacement and maximising employment of their own nationals. Over the long-term, this means channelling resources to economic sectors that will do well in an environment characterized by rapid technological change. The smoothness of this transition remains a significant question. In major destination countries in ASEAN, the national labour force is concentrated in semi-skilled occupations, while migrant workers occupy unskilled positions. The rapid growth of industries employing mainly unskilled or low-skilled

workers also generates a demand for semi-skilled and high-skilled workers. In major destination countries, labour migration is driven by shortages.

The return of migrant workers to their origin countries offers an opportunity to change policies and reduce the dependence of destination countries on foreign labour. The reliance on migrant workers delays the structural adjustments necessary in fast-emerging economies with small populations and ageing labour forces. The availability of cheap foreign labour leads to postponing technology development and shifting out of labour-intensive industries, but there is also evidence that the participation of foreign workers has sped up industrialisation in AMS. In Malaysia, over 700,000 foreign workers were employed in manufacturing when the pandemic struck and 435,000 were in construction. According to the Malaysian Employers Federation, 78 percent of their member companies employed foreign workers (Wahab, 2020a) Foreign workers enabled the country to rapidly modernize its infrastructure, create new cities, meet the demand for housing, exploit the country's comparative advantages in agricultural exports, like palm oil and rubber, and maintain domestic prices.

Very low rates of unemployment among national workers and rising wages provide strong evidence that foreign workers complement rather than displace native workers. Native workers increasingly work in semi-skilled occupations in the services sector while foreign workers are employed in elementary occupations in agriculture, and semi-skilled jobs in construction and manufacturing. This reflects the fundamental social transformations occurring in societies where better-educated entrants to the labour force tend to leave rural areas and seek non-manual employment in the cities.

As the spread of COVID-19 abates in the region and industries recover, labour shortages have re-emerged as a major policy issue. Although the largest destination countries, including Thailand and Malaysia, have already opened their borders, questions about the need for policy change remains as unemployment levels among nationals remain high. Should governments use immigration to reserve the jobs created for national workers? Some observers note that, in addressing these questions, governments must take account of the "...rapid technological advances in artificial intelligence, robotics, advanced data analytics, and many other breakthrough technologies that have the potential to drastically reshape global value chains, supplant entire industries, and displace many existing workers, even as they bring forth new opportunities" (Ng, 2017: 3).

## **Box 6. Migration-related policy responses in ASEAN Member States during financial crises**

The COVID-19 crisis differed from the Asian Financial Crisis (AFC) and the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), not just in terms of provenance – it began as a public health crisis before it became a global economic crisis – but in the scale and scope of its economic impact. This has had implications on migration-related responses in AMS.

### **Asian Financial Crisis (1997-1998)**

As discussed in Box 2, the AFC took a particularly heavy toll on Thailand and Malaysia (as well as the Republic of Korea). Among sending countries in the region, the economic damage was especially large in Indonesia.

#### **a) Host country responses**

##### *Return policies*

Thailand expelled 250,000 irregular migrants by July 1998 and Malaysia announced the repatriation of 200,000 laid off migrant workers in the construction sector (Koser, 2009).

##### *Sectoral redeployment of foreign workers*

Malaysia also redeployed foreign workers from construction, which suffered massive layoffs, to sectors that still reported labour shortages, including plantation and manufacturing.

##### *Increased foreign worker levy*

To reduce demand for low or semi-skilled foreign labour, an increase in foreign worker levy was either planned or implemented in Malaysia and Singapore at the height of the AFC (Koser, 2009). In the case of Malaysia, the plan faced opposition from employers.

##### *Strengthened enforcement of rules and regulations for foreign workers*

Malaysia tightened procedures for the renewal of work permits by requiring foreign workers to first secure a certificate of health from a newly established medical examination agency (Koser, 2009).

#### **b) Origin country responses**

##### *Finding new markets for overseas workers*

The Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand responded by finding alternative markets for their overseas workers. The Philippines looked for new or expanded destination markets for OFWs, especially in the Middle East, in

the wake of reduced demand in Asia. Indonesia encouraged employment abroad for workers affected by the collapsing domestic economy. Thailand, also in response to a weak domestic economy, undertook a labour export policy, developed training programmes, simplified the process, and reduced the costs for potential overseas workers (Koser, 2009).

### **Global Financial Crisis (2008-2009)**

#### **a) Receiving state responses**

##### *Freeze in work permit issuance*

Destination country responses in the region included a freeze on work permits issuance for foreign workers in Malaysia and Thailand (Abella and Ducanes, 2009). In Malaysia, the sectors affected were manufacturing and services (Tilly, 2011). Malaysia also shortened the duration of many work permits to three months from six months (Tilly, 2011). In Thailand, the government planned not to renew the work permits of half a million foreign workers (Abella and Ducanes, 2009).

##### *Repatriation of undocumented workers*

Malaysia also fast-tracked the deportation of undocumented foreigners by doing away with court proceedings and jail time and instead fining them and sending them home (Abella and Ducanes, 2009). Thailand postponed plans to register undocumented foreign workers and threatened deportation of undocumented foreign workers.

##### *National workers first policy*

Both Singapore and Malaysia instituted or encouraged a policy for laying off foreigners first in case retrenchment was unavoidable (Abella and Ducanes, 2009).

#### **b) Sending country responses**

##### *Registration and job placement*

The Philippines registered returnees that had been retrenched to match them with available local or foreign jobs and provided them entrepreneurship training. The Philippine president set aside PHP250 million from the Overseas Workers Welfare Fund for displaced migrant workers. The POEA also provided legal assistance to retrenched workers for claims against employers or recruiting agencies (Abella and Ducanes, 2009; Awad, 2009). The Philippines also explored additional or expanded markets for OFWs, such as Qatar and Japan (Awad, 2009).



# COVID-19 Vaccination Record Card

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# PASSPORT





### 3. LESSONS FROM REINTEGRATION POLICIES

#### 3.1. Sustainable Reintegration

It is still too early to identify lessons from the region's reintegration experience because policies and programmes have barely begun. Reintegration is still one of the most underdeveloped areas of labour migration policy in many AMS, with the possible exceptions of Indonesia and the Philippines. The dimensions of return since the pandemic began are now better known, but little information is available on how the returnees have fared since their return.<sup>38</sup> Besides organising the repatriation of migrant workers stranded in foreign ports, quarantining symptomatic COVID patients, and assisting their return to their home communities, most governments have left returnees to fend for themselves in terms of reintegration.

The experience of other region, however, may offer useful lessons on sustainable reintegration. A multi-country peer review project from the OECD (2020b), with support from the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ) on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), examines factors that can improve the sustainability of reintegration at the individual level and programme level in countries of destination and origin. The report examines how casework and community-based programmes can increase uptake and improve outcomes. It identifies key elements of effective individual reintegration programmes, including outreach and counselling, case management and referral, and partnerships. The report proposes how to improve programme design, evaluation, and monitoring, indicating areas where countries could cooperate more through

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<sup>38</sup> See Box 1 for results of a survey done by IOM for the OFW returnees.

programmes and in coordination with origin countries (OECD, 2020c).<sup>39</sup> Its recommendations that are relevant to AMS are below:

- a) Take initiatives that serve return migrants and possibly non-migrants.
- b) Engage sub-national levels of government in designing and implementing reintegration programmes and establish coordination mechanisms with various agencies.
- c) Empower communities of origin to develop local solutions and support grassroots initiatives benefiting returning migrants.
- d) Ensure individual reintegration assistance is compatible and contributes to existing community-based programmes and state-offered services.
- e) Select appropriate locations and contexts for promoting return to potential beneficiaries and their communities.
- f) Strengthen psychosocial support in the reintegration process before and after return.

In the midst of the pandemic, most if not all sectors of origin countries were adversely affected, with many workers losing their employment or livelihoods because of lockdowns and travel restrictions. Reintegration programmes must serve not only the return migrants but also their wider communities. This means identifying economic activities that have high backward and forward linkages to generate growth dynamics throughout the economy. Many projects do have backward and forward linkages. For example, starting a farm for high-priced salad herbs has backward linkages to suppliers of fertilizers and herbicides and forward linkages to transport companies and restaurants. Therefore, choosing projects depends on which are likely to have the widest impact on the local community. Because fiscal resources needed to build necessary infrastructure are scarce as governments grapple with the many dimensions of the economic crisis, projects require strong political commitment. In some countries, this requires legislation whereas others already have executive branches with sufficient powers to allocate the necessary resources. This political commitment requires a strong strategic vision, one that articulates the long-term advantages of the skills, motivation, and resourcefulness of returnees.

It is impossible to overemphasise the value of local solutions and supporting community initiatives. In many seaside towns in Southeast Asia, tourism projects could benefit from migrant returnees with knowledge of similar activities from abroad, such as standards of successful tourist centres, popular cuisine, attractive sports facilities, and others. Migrant returnees can raise awareness about the values of foreigners, especially when it comes to religion or to treatment of women.

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39 See OECD (2020c) and OECD (2020d). But note that the same points are also made in IOM's Reintegration Handbook found at IOM (2019).

Reintegration programmes must not neglect the psychosocial component of information campaigns. Many return migrants will likely feel disappointed over abandoning their goals overseas. Some still face debt because of the high cost of migrating. Returning migrants should receive encouragement and support from others, especially information about successful returnees. Giving returnees hope for success through profitable ventures is an important objective for reintegration programmes.

The OECD (2020c) review included multiple programme implementation recommendations, including investing in shared platforms for case management, data exchange, monitoring, and evaluation. It is important to periodically analyse and assess programmes' impacts to ensure they are coherent with other national priorities and have no negative consequences.

### **3.2. Reintegration Policies and Programmes in ASEAN Member States<sup>40</sup>**

The following describes various reintegration programmes that ASEAN governments established. These are targeted schemes, as distinct from larger macro-policies aimed at raising overall employment levels.

#### **3.2.1. Brunei Darussalam**

As a receiving country, Brunei Darussalam does not have any reintegration policies and programmes for Bruneian migrant returnees.

#### **3.2.2. Cambodia**

Cambodia has a labour migration policy for Cambodian migrant workers, first codified by the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training in 2010. This policy was a response to the rapidly growing size of Cambodian migrant workers (OECD and CDRI, 2017; Tunon and Rim, 2013). In 2014, Cambodia established a second policy on labour migration, which contained specific provisions on return and reintegration; the Policy on Labour Migration for Cambodia was last updated in 2018 (ASEAN, 2018). The policy aims to improve labour migration governance, protect and promote the rights of migrant workers, and harness labour migration for economic development. The 2018 policy's focus on return and reintegration included the following provisions:

- Collaboration with labour counsellors and labour attaches to ensure migrant workers' safe return, with wages and other benefits, in accordance with the destination countries' laws.
- Support and counselling services for migrant returnees on cultures, and the management of physical and mental being related to their hometown, prior to their reintegration into family and community.

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40 For a recent report discussing return and reintegration programmes in ASEAN, see Wickramasekara (2019).

- Cooperation between the National Employment Agency (NEA), labour counsellor and labour attaches, private recruitment agencies, and migrant workers communities to document data on migrant workers whose employment contracts ended and to register them in the NEA database to disseminate labour market information, job and employment opportunities, and employment services for local and overseas employment.
- Develop support mechanisms for migrant workers' families to communicate with migrant workers, promote remittance services, and possibly establish migrant worker family communities for information and experience sharing.
- Teach entrepreneurship and financial literacy, particularly how to maximize remittances, and provide advisory services for migrant workers and their families on establishing businesses or other investments.

A 2014 assessment concluded that there has been slow reintegration progress (OECD and CDRI, 2017). Most implementation processes for these policies are supported by donor partners and NGOs (OECD and CDRI, 2017). Policies on labour migration “have yet to be transformed into actual programmes and services that will benefit returning migrant workers in their economic and social reintegration” (Tunon and Rim, 2013: 14).

One example of donor-supported activity is the establishment of migrant resource centres (MRCs) in Cambodia. The ILO Triangle Project supported four MRCs in Cambodia (in Prey Veng, Battambang, Kampong Cham, and Kampot) and jointly manages them with government institutions, trade unions, and civil society organisations. Another MRC is supported by the ILO and UN Women, through the Safe and Fair Programme in ASEAN. The IOM, in collaboration with the Cambodian Ministry of Labour and Training, operates one MRC in Poi Pet, Banteay Meanchey Province.

### 3.2.3. Indonesia<sup>41</sup>

Indonesia has a number of reintegration programmes in place covering both psychosocial and economic support. The responsibility for reintegration programmes is shared by different ministries and agencies, particularly the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA), Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Agency (BP2MI),<sup>42</sup> Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, and the National Commission on Violence against Women.

<sup>41</sup> The description of the programs here rely on Bachtiar and Prasetyo (2017).

<sup>42</sup> Formerly the National Agency for the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers.

a. *Repatriation of migrants displaced by disasters in their host countries*

This programme targets migrants who encountered problems in their host country, such as natural disasters, plagues, political unrest, and other developments that lead to deportation or immediate evacuation. The programme, carried out by MoSA, covers the total cost of repatriation, including transportation, food, and clothing expenses, up to the home province of the migrant.

b. *Shelter for protection and trauma healing*

This programme is led by MoSA, with other agencies. It assists return migrants who experienced psychological, social, or psychosocial trauma, including physical and sexual abuse. The programme established two trauma centres, one in Jakarta and another in Tanjung Pinang, Riau Islands Province. The centres are staffed by a group of professionals, including social workers, doctors, nurses, psychologists, and lawyers. The centres provide therapy before letting migrants return home or referring them to other institutions for further assistance.

c. *Productive Economic Activities Programme*

This programme is led by MoSA and targets return migrants who have completed treatment at the trauma centre. It improves migrants' capacity for gainful employment through business training and the provision of capital for business in the amount of IDR3 million (US\$250).

d. *Return Migrants Post-employment Empowerment Programme*

This programme, led by the BP2MI, helps return migrants and their families by -increasing their motivation and capacity for self-employment. The financial literacy training focuses on five areas: (i) how to manage remittances, (ii) the importance of savings to financial goals upon return, (iii) information on borrowing from banks and other financial institutions, (iv) sending remittances, and (v) the use of insurance to reduce financial risks before, during, and after overseas employment (Bachtar and Prasetyo, 2017). From 2010 to 2014, this programme trained 16,292 return migrants.

e. *Programme to Promote the Welfare of Migrant's Families*

The programme, led by the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, addresses the challenges migrant families face in managing remittances, caring for children, and fostering family cohesion. The stages. The first stage involves generating an understanding of the issues from the standpoint of different stakeholders and engendering a joint commitment to work on the issues. The second stage forms task forces at the district level, which include representatives from government, the private sector,

NGOs, and community. This stage is followed by the formation of task forces at the village level; they implement fourth stage activities to address identified problems, promote entrepreneurship, arrange for the provision of capital, and coach migrant families on spiritual and mental wellbeing. The programme has been implemented in 22 districts identified as migrant source areas (Bachtar and Prasetyo, 2017).

*f. Programme for Recovery of Victims of Trafficking and Violence*

The programme targets women migrants, especially victims of trafficking, violence, and other abuses. Implemented primarily by the National Commission on Violence against Women, the programme has multiple goals, but it mostly focuses on helping victims recover. The programme includes counselling, legal assistance, health services, trauma therapy, and economic empowerment.

*Reintegration programmes of non-governmental organisations*

*g. Serikat Buruh Migran Indonesia (SBMI)*

SBMI is a union operated by returnees, current migrant workers, and aspiring migrant workers and their families (Justice Without Borders, 2017). The aim of the organisation is to improve the welfare rights of Indonesian migrant workers through advocacy work, client support, education, and economic empowerment. In collaboration with other stakeholders, SBMI helps returnees seek redress on many issues, such as unpaid wages (Migrant CARE, n.d.; Mampu, n.d.).

*h. Migrant CARE*

Migrant CARE is a civil society organisation which provides counselling services for Indonesian migrant workers, forms migrant worker groups, and developed the DESBUMI (Village that Cares for Migrant Workers) initiative (Migrant CARE, n.d.). The DESBUMI provides village-based services for migrant workers; local government support at all stages of migration, including financial literacy; and access to government services and programmes for former migrants.

*i. Women's Solidarity for Human Rights Programme*

This human rights NGO advocates policies and programmes against poverty and gender inequality, especially the protection of women migrants and their families. Activities include legal assistance and counselling for migrants, raising public awareness about migrant issues, improving advocacy work to improve migration policies and programmes, and training advocates.



j. *Economic Empowerment of Indonesian Migrant Workers (PIJAR Indonesia)*

IOM, in partnership with SBMI and Semut Nusantara, recently launched PIJAR Indonesia, which provides skills training for business start-ups. It also provides direct economic support to vulnerable Indonesian migrant workers in Central Java, East Nusa Tenggara, West Java, and West Nusa Tenggara (IOM Indonesia, 2022).<sup>43</sup>

### 3.2.4. Lao PDR<sup>44</sup>

At the central level in Lao PDR, the return and reintegration of migrant workers is under the purview of the Department of Skills Development and Employment in the MoLSW. At the local level, the agencies involved include 18 job centres in the country's 17 provinces and one prefecture (Vientiane) and MRCs in six provinces (Xayabuly, Luang Prabang, Bokeo, Bolikhamxay, Savannakhet, and Champasak).

These agencies register returnees and coordinate with local employers to match workers with available jobs. The job centres and MRCs rely on government and donor funding, such as from Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) of Australia, European Union, Global Affairs Canada, and UN Women, which channel aid through the ILO.

Lao PDR identifies migrant returnees in Labour Force Surveys (LFS). It identifies returnees and asks for information on their date of return, previous country of employment, reason for return, occupation and income abroad, and how they obtained work abroad. For this reason, Lao PDR can profile the returnees and monitor how well they do in the local labour market, which are important aspects of reintegration.

Lao PDR did not report any government-initiated return and reintegration programmes prior to the COVID-19 crisis, although such programmes featured in the 2021-2025 Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare workplan. Lao PDR reintegration programmes are mainly spearheaded by international organisations, including the ILO's Triangle in ASEAN project, which is responsible for MRCs in Lao PDR; the ILO and UN Women's joint Safe and Fair Programme, which makes women migrant workers less vulnerable to violence and trafficking; and the IOM's Poverty Reduction through Safe Migration, Skills Development and Enhanced Job Placement (PROMISE) Programme, which increases access to employment skills for migrant workers – especially women – in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Thailand.

<sup>43</sup> The programme is funded by the Korea International Cooperation Agency.

<sup>44</sup> Information for Lao PDR were obtained from responses by the Lao Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare to the survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook.

### 3.2.5. Malaysia

#### *Policy on migrant workers in Malaysia*

Malaysia signed Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with origin countries,<sup>45</sup> specifically Nepal and Bangladesh, for the employment and repatriation of foreign workers. It is also finalising negotiations for new MOUs with Indonesia, India, Viet Nam, Sri Lanka, and Cambodia. The MOUs ensure orderly recruitment of foreign labour to Malaysia, as well as adequate protection and improved working conditions under Malaysia's policies, laws, rules, and regulations. Under the new MOUs with Nepal and Bangladesh, Malaysian employers bear the costs of recruitment and repatriation (Low, 2020). A survey conducted in 2014 by the Malaysian Employers Federation of 101 Malaysian companies employing foreign workers showed 95 percent of these companies arranged and bore the costs of repatriation (Malaysian Employers Federation, 2014).

### 3.2.6. Myanmar

The return and reintegration of Myanmar migrant workers is coordinated by the Committee for the Repatriation of Migrant Workers from Abroad, established in 2019.<sup>46</sup> The Committee includes members from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Ministry of Home Affairs; Ministry of Information; Ministry of Transport and Communication; Ministry of Labour; Ministry of the Economy and Commerce; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement; Immigration Department; and the General Administration Department. The Committee coordinates with relevant countries to return and reintegrate migrant workers, making sure returnees do not include non-citizens, providing necessary support to workers, preventing human trafficking, and facilitating the return and reintegration of undocumented Burmese migrant workers.

Myanmar migrant workers and their families had access to financial management and job-search training through the IOM and the Union of Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI). In addition, with financial support from Human Resource Development Korea, the ILO, working through the Triangle in ASEAN Project, established MRCs in Myanmar; its Happy Return Programme helps migrant returnees from Korea find employment in local Korean-owned firms.

Many returnees in Myanmar experience challenges utilising skills they acquired from working abroad because of a mismatch with available jobs (ILO, 2020g). This is partly because the equipment they used

45 Unless otherwise stated, information was obtained from responses by the Ministry of Human Resources of Malaysia to the survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook.

46 Information in this and succeeding paragraph were obtained from responses by Department of Labor, Myanmar to the survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook.

abroad is not available in Myanmar. Although returnees initially had no intention to do so, many ended up self-employed.

### **3.2.7. The Philippines**

In the Philippines, the establishment of a welfare fund for migrant workers in 1977 (Welfare and Training Fund for Overseas Workers, which became Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) a decade later), was initially controversial because of the compulsory US\$25 charge for all formal migrant workers.<sup>47</sup> Initially, the services provided by the Fund included insurance coverage, legal assistance, placement assistance, and remittance services (Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, 2017). Through subsequent legislation, the mandate expanded to include repatriation of overseas workers during crisis, and reintegration programmes. After several crises that gave workers no option but to return because of dangers to their lives, the programme earned wide acceptance. As of December 2019, OWWA had 8.6 million members, 7.1 million of which were land-based OFWs and 1.5 million sea-based OFWs (Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, 2017). Of these, 1.375 million were active members, 1,093,000 of which were land-based and 282,000 were sea-based.

In particular, three notable pieces of legislation strengthened the mandate of OWWA with respect to the return and reintegration of overseas workers. The first is the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995, which created the Emergency Repatriation Fund. The second is Republic Act No. 10022, which established the National Reintegration Center for OFWs (NRCO). The third is the OWWA Charter (RA 10801), which made the programme eligible for government funding for personnel salary, maintenance, and other operating costs, rather than relying on OFW contributions, which made the fund entirely available for OWWA programmes. The OWWA Charter made reintegration – in the form of employment and livelihood training, access to credit, and start up grants for new business – one of the agency's core programmes, and transferred NRCOs from DOLE to OWWA.

DOLE-OWWA's reintegration services have two components: Psychosocial and livelihood.

#### *a. OFW Family Circles*

OWWA encourages OFWs to form or join OFW Family Circles, which provide support systems for OFWs and their families, in preparation for the OFWs eventual return home (Melencio, 2007). The Family Circle provides members updated information on employment opportunities and current livelihood prospects in the Philippines, and access to business skills training. In 2019, OWWA

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47 The biannual contribution remains set at US\$25.

maintained 3,225 OFW Family Circles and had 113,179 members (Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, 2019).

*b. Balik Pinas! Balik Hanapbuhay! Programme*

The programme targets displaced or distressed returning OFWs, who are members of OWWA, with a package with a maximum of PHP20,000 (about US\$400) to be used as start-up or additional capital in addition to training (Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, 2019). Displaced or distressed OFWs include those who did not finish their employment contracts or were displaced due to welfare-related cases, including maltreatment, non-payment of salary, war or political conflicts in their host country, sudden policy changes in the host country, or illegal recruitment. The programme assisted 22,236 distressed OFWs in 2017 and 34,416 distressed OFWs in 2018.

*c. Overseas Filipino Workers – Enterprise Development and Loan Programme (OFW-EDLP)*

OFW-EDLP targets OFWs and their families with an enterprise development support facility provided by OWWA and two government-controlled banks: the Land Bank of the Philippines (LBP) and the Development Bank of the Philippines (DBP). OFWs and their families can borrow funds from the facility for working capital or fixed asset acquisition for eligible projects, including franchising business, contracting with top 1000 corporations, construction or rental business, service or trading business, transport services, and production or manufacturing with identified market linkage. The borrower must put up equity of at least 20 percent of the total project cost and borrow at most 80 percent of the total project cost. Individual borrowers can borrow PHP100,000 (US\$2,000) to PHP2 million (US\$40,000). The interest rate for the loan is fixed at 7.5 percent per year, and the term of the loan is limited to a maximum of seven years (for term loans). In 2018, the programme provided training to 16,030 OFWs and approved 217 business projects.

*d. Tulong Pangkabuhayan sa Pag-unlad ng Samahang OFWs (Tulong-PUSO)*

The programme encourages environmentally friendly livelihood projects that use local materials, generates local employment, franchises online selling and delivery services, and produces priority products identified by the Department of Trade and Industry. It provides grants depending on the size of the group, for use in Livelihood Start-up, Livelihood Expansion, and Livelihood Restoration. It provides up to PHP150,000 (US\$3,000) for groups with five to 10, PHP250,000 (US\$5,000) for groups of 11 to 15 members, PHP500,000 (US\$10,000) for groups of 16 to 30

members, and PHP1 million (US\$20,000) to group of 31 members or more.

*e. Balik Pinay! Balik Hanapbuhay Programme*

This programme targets distressed women OFWs, especially household service workers. Beneficiaries are provided financial literacy training, entrepreneurial development, and livelihood skills, plus a PHP10,000 assistance grant. In 2019, the programme provided 1,770 returned women OFWs with grants to operate livelihood projects (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, n.d.).

*f. Repatriation Assistance Programme*

The programme returns distressed OFWs and human remains in the event of natural calamities, political unrest, and other emergencies in the host country. OFWs receive airfare and airport assistance, temporary shelter at a OWWA Halfway Home, psychosocial counselling, stress debriefing, and transport services for travel to their hometowns.

*g. SPIMS (Sa Pinas, Ikaw ang Ma'am/Sir)*

This is NRCO programme targets licensed Filipino teachers who worked abroad as domestic workers, helping them refresh teaching skills and helping them re-enter the Philippine public education system. From 2018 to 2020, the programme helped 1,106 qualified OFWs attain teaching positions.<sup>48</sup>

*Reintegration programmes with private sector involvement*

*h. PiTaKa: A Financial Literacy Programme for OFWs*

This is a collaborative effort of OWWA, the Philippine Central Bank (Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas), and BDO (Banco de Oro) Foundation (The BDO is the largest private commercial bank in the Philippines). The programme equips OFWs and their families with financial literacy skills to better manage remittances and investments. The programme offers a special module for domestic workers (Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, 2019).

### **3.2.8. Singapore**

As a receiving country, Singapore does not have any reintegration policies and programmes for Singaporean migrant returnees.

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<sup>48</sup> Philippines' Submission of the Voluntary GCM Review for the Asia-Pacific Regional Review of the Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

### 3.2.9. Thailand

#### a. *Return and Reintegration Programme*<sup>49</sup>

This programme provides returned Thai workers job-search training for employment at home or overseas. In the 2021 fiscal year (October 2020 to September 2021), the Ministry of Labour reported that 244 participants took part in this programme at a cost of THB412,825 (US\$12,300). From 1 October to 30 December 2021, 244 participants took part in the programme at a cost of THB161,900 (US\$4,820).

#### b. *Membership Fund for Thais Working Abroad*

The Membership Fund provides protection and benefits to Thai migrant workers in the event of harm encountered in the host country. This includes assistance to those stranded abroad and support to their rightful heirs if the workers have disappeared. Members of the Fund are protected throughout the period they work overseas or until the end of their employment contract. In the 2021 fiscal year, the Fund spent THB15.438 million (US\$460,000) on 816 members. In the first quarter of 2022 fiscal year, the Fund spent THB1.902 million (US\$57,000) on 68 members.

#### c. *Preparation of Jobseekers Programme to Prevent Human Trafficking in Labour Working Abroad*

Under this programme, prospective migrant workers receive information on relevant laws, methods, and procedures on overseas work, including information on dishonest tactic and recruiters, expected expenses, safe payment methods, and other relevant information. In the 2021 fiscal year, the programme spent THB554,800 (US\$16,520) on 2,131 participants. In the first quarter of the 2022 fiscal year, the programme spent THB256,300 (US\$7,600) on 169 participants.

#### d. *Provision on Return in Employment Contract for Thai Migrants*

The Department of Employment, Ministry of Labour provides model contracts that make employers responsible for the return of Thai migrant workers to Thailand. In particular, the model contract states that “in the event of natural disaster, riot, fighting or war the Employer shall evacuate the Employee to a safe area, and if the situation is no longer conducive for the continuity of work, the Employer shall repatriate the Employee and shall pay for all the expenses of the repatriation.”

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<sup>49</sup> Information on programs (a) to (c) were obtained from responses by the Thailand Ministry of Labour to the survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook.



e. *Post-arrival and Reintegration Centres for Migrant Workers*

With regard to migrant workers in Thailand, the MOUs between Thailand and the governments of Myanmar, Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Viet Nam agree to the orderly arrival and return and reintegration of migrant workers who have completed the terms of their employment contracts in Thailand. Post-arrival and Reintegration Centres where the Department of Labour conducts post-arrival training to migrant workers (under the MOU) on working and living conditions in Thailand, and screens workers during their arrival and departure from Thailand (ILO, 2020h).

### 3.2.10. Viet Nam

Viet Nam has signed 18 agreements with other countries to promote the safe return of its migrants during crises.<sup>50</sup> With respect to their reintegration upon return, Law No. 69/2020/QH14, which amends the earlier Law No. 72/2006/QH11, states the policy to “effectively utilize and employ labour force returning from abroad” (Article 4.1) to assist migrant workers in their “social integration and participation after returning” (Article 4.6). The Law also tasks the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) with creating a database for Vietnamese migrant workers that includes workers’ skills, professions, experience, etc., maintained by local authorities to facilitate the employment of migrant returnees (Article 60). Article 61 of Law 69 encourages the provision of psychosocial assistance to migrant returnees.

There is no information available, however, on whether these provisions have been implemented. Current programmes on reintegration are spearheaded by the IOM, the ILO, and by Viet Nam Women’s Union, a socio-political organisation.

a. *Sustainable Reintegration of Returning Migrant Women and their Households in Viet Nam*

Viet Nam Women’s Union operates a programme targeting women returnees. It received funding from KOICA and technical support from IOM.<sup>51</sup> The Union drafted specific policies and programmes, built a database of returning women migrants, and established one-stop support offices in selected locations. The programme is implemented in five provinces in the country. The programme’s current activities include capacity building for government officials on sustainable reintegration for women returnees and a One Stop Service Office to support returning women migrants during reintegration through the provision of essential items, psychological counselling, medical assistance, legal aid, and temporary housing (MOLISA, 2020).

50 Viet Nam’s Submission of the Voluntary GCM Review for the Asia-Pacific Regional Review of the Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

51 Not necessarily a migrant worker.

*b. IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme<sup>52</sup>*

This programme targets migrants in an irregular situation, persons with rejected asylum claims, victims of trafficking, any person with legal status in their home country but no means to return home, and labour migrants at the end of their contracts (IOM Viet Nam, n.d.). The IOM provides a range of assistance, including reinstallation allowances, and medical, psychosocial, and livelihood assistance.

*c. Establishment of Migrant Resource Centres*

With support from the ILO, Viet Nam established MRCs to provide returnees with reliable and up-to-date information about migration and improve their access to justice through a complaints mailbox for migrant workers and their family members.

*d. Anti-trafficking Programme*

Viet Nam established a national programme to combat and prevent human trafficking. The programme includes a national data system on human trafficking and enhanced inter-agency coordination and international cooperation for the prevention and control of human trafficking. Viet Nam took measures to protect victims and their families and the confidentiality of their information (Luat Viet Nam, 2021). Viet Nam is also developing standard operating procedures (SOP) for the aid of overseas Vietnamese citizens, including migrant workers who are victims of violence and human trafficking.<sup>53</sup>

***No assessment of the impact of programmes***

There is significant information about how many migrants and family members have utilized reintegration programmes, but there is limited information on how much these programmes costs or how effective these programmes are in terms of successfully reintegrating returnees into their communities. Past studies based on small case studies found that most businesses started by returned migrants failed (Spitzer and Piper, 2014).<sup>54</sup> There is no assessment of the effectiveness of the psychosocial support provided by NRCO-OWWA. In labour force surveys, current migrants are sometimes mistakenly counted among members of the households they left behind and returnees are not identified, except in the case of Myanmar, which makes labor force surveys ineffective for examining migrant workers' performance in the labour market.

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52 Although this is cited in the case of Viet Nam, this programme is operational to different degrees in most AMS.

53 Viet Nam's' Submission of the Voluntary GCM Review for the Asia-Pacific Regional Review of the Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

54 This is something the government might be trying to address. In 2018, OWWA organized with the Development Academy of the Philippines a series of trainings on monitoring and evaluation for technical staff of OWWA and NRCO, to equip them in evaluating the progress and success of their existing programs.

### 3.3. Good Practices on Return and Reintegration in Other Regions

The following are examples of successful reintegration programmes that are different than programmes already in place in AMS. Some of the programmes illustrate a level of participation by destination countries that is not seen in AMS.

#### 3.3.1. Germany: Advice Centres for Jobs, Migration, and Reintegration in Origin Countries

This German Returning to New Opportunities Programme established centres in different areas in Germany to provide individual migrants advice on employment and training opportunities in their origin countries. The centres also offer migrant workers psychosocial support for entering the job market. The centres partner with agencies, organisations, and centres in the origin countries and links potential returnees to these partners prior to the migrants' return. The programme offers preparatory training to potential returnees and informs them about further reintegration assistance available to upon return (OECD, 2020c).

#### 3.3.2. Europe: Partnership with Private Sectors – MAGNET I and MAGNET II Programmes in some European countries

The MAGNET programme facilitated the sustainable reintegration of Iraqi nationals who voluntarily returned from European countries. MAGNET I assisted migrant workers who worked in Belgium, Finland, France, and Germany, and MAGNET II assisted migrants working in the previous countries as well as the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The programme offered vocational training and job placements in local business in Iraq. The projects targeted beneficiaries who were especially unlikely to find work because of their extended stay abroad (IOM, 2015).

#### 3.3.3. Ecuador: Matching Fund for Migrant Returnee Business

This programme for returnee business support is a variation on current programmes that already exist in AMS. In existing AMS programmes, support is in the form of full grants (especially for assistance to migrants who have suffered abuse) or full loans. This Ecuador programme, managed by the National Secretariat for Migration of Ecuador, provides a matching grant. The fund provides either a 25 percent or 50 percent total project cost matching fund, depending on the size of the project and the number of returnees involved. The fund supports business activities in tourism, manufacturing, fishing, forestry, animal husbandry, education, construction, and personal, social, and community services. Beneficiaries submit business proposals through an online portal, and they can also benefit from technical advice, training, and referrals to public banking institutions (IOM, 2015).

**3.3.4. Online portals and platforms established in European destination countries: IRRiCO (Enhanced and Integrated Approach regarding Information on Return and Reintegration in Countries of Origin)**

This online platform provides potential returnees with information about prospects and conditions in their origin countries. The platform features information on return and reintegration opportunities in 20 countries of origin. Country sheets provide information on the economic situation in origin countries (IOM, 2015).

**3.3.5. Web-based platform of the Employment Permit System of the Republic of Korea**

The platform is available in different languages and contains information and services for migrant workers in Republic of Korea throughout the migration cycle. The Happy Return Programme provides potential returnees with free vocational training and advisory services for entrepreneurship, assistance with job applications to Korean firms in the migrant's home country, and guidance and support for insurance claims (OECD, 2019; OECD, ADB and ILO, 2021).

**3.3.6. Sri Lanka: Digital portal of the Bureau of Foreign Employment**

This digital portal provides information on services available to Sri Lankan migrants, pre-departure, during migration, and after migration. Information for potential returnees includes assistance and welfare services, processing insurance claims, and accessing loans with favourable interest rates (OECD, 2019; OECD, ADB and ILO, 2021).

**3.3.7. Ethiopia: SIRA**

This is a mobile app developed by the ILO in collaboration with Ethiopia's Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs to link low and semi-skilled returnees with employers, both private and public. The app allows employers to post vacancies and returnees to upload profiles and search for jobs. SIRA is available on Android and iOS devices. It can also be used offline to access previously downloaded data (OECD, 2019; OECD, ADB and ILO, 2021).

**3.3.8. India: Skilled Workers Arrival Database for Employment Support (SWADES)**

This is a digital platform for returnee skill-mapping. The programme is a joint initiative of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, the Ministry of Civil Aviation, and the Ministry of External Affairs. Under the programme, returnees fill out an online Skill Card with their job experience, job description, and sector of employment. This information is collected into a database and shared with local and foreign companies. The database is integrated with another employer dataset in India (OECD, 2019; OECD, ADB and ILO, 2021).

### 3.4. Features of Reintegration Policies and Programmes in ASEAN Member States

AMS differ significantly in the features of reintegration policies and programmes offered to their citizens (Table 3.1). Only a few AMS (Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Viet Nam) have codified reintegration policy in law or an official policy statement (Table 3.2). Most AMS offer an agency to conduct or coordinate reintegration programmes, usually the Labour Ministry, a department under the Ministry, or an attached agency, but their mandates widely differ (Table 3.3). The countries differ greatly in terms available resources and number and the scale of reintegration programmes they offer, particularly those spearheaded by governments rather than donor agencies. Although there is active CSO participation in reintegration programmes in some AMS, these tend to concentrate on victims of trafficking and abuse. There is little private sector participation in reintegration programmes. AMS destination countries offer little to no reintegration support for migrant workers returning to their origin countries, unlike European destination countries. Programmes that offer psychosocial support and community network support are scarce, apart from those in Indonesia and the Philippines or carried out by donor agencies. National statistics offices collect very limited data on migrant returnees. Most data on returnees are based on occasional surveys with small samples. There is no information or data portals, similar to the examples described in Ecuador, Sri Lanka, and India, which are useful in matching available skills and experience among returnees to the needs of the local labour market. It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of reintegration programmes because of the absence of proper impact evaluations done on programmes, even in the Philippines and Indonesia, which have the most extensive reintegration programmes among AMS.

**Table 3.1.** Features of reintegration policies for own migrants

Features of Reintegration Policy and Programmes	Cambodia	Indonesia	Lao PDR	Malaysia	Myanmar	The Philippines	Thailand	Viet Nam
1 Is reintegration codified in law or in an official policy statement?	✓	✓	X	X	X	✓	X	✓
2 Is there an agency officially tasked with conducting or coordinating reintegration programmes	✓	X	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	✓
3 Is there regular government funding for reintegration programmes?	X	✓	✓	X	X	✓	✓	X

**Table 3.1.** Features of reintegration policies for own migrants (continuation)

Features of Reintegration Policy and Programmes	Cambodia	Indonesia	Lao PDR	Malaysia	Myanmar	The Philippines	Thailand	Viet Nam
4 Is there widespread multi-stakeholder (national and local governments, donor agencies, CSOs, private companies) participation in reintegration programmes?	X	✓	X	X	X	✓	✓	X
5 Are government reintegration policies holistic? (covers psychosocial support, job or employment support, and community integration support)	X	✓	X	X	X	✓	X	X
6 Is there data collected on returnees to profile them and monitor their employment status (and living conditions)?	X	✓	X	X	X	X	X	X
7 Are impact evaluations conducted of reintegration programmes in order to measure their effectiveness and to adjust them accordingly?	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

\*Brunei Darussalam and Singapore are excluded because they are destination countries with marginal, if any, outbound migration of low or semi-skilled workers.



**Table 3.2. Provisions of reintegration in law and policy document**

AMS	Law/Policy	Provisions specific to returnees
Cambodia	Policy on Labour Migration for Cambodia 2019-2023, Section 7.3.2. (2018)	Strengthen supporting mechanism for migrant worker's family and reintegration mechanism for migrant workers by (1) Collaborates with labour counsellors/attaches to ensure migrant workers' safe return with wages and other benefits in accordance with the destination countries' law; (2) Provides support and counselling services for migrant returnees on cultures, management of physical and mental wellbeing prior to their integration in family and community; (3) Registers returnees in the National Employment Agency database for access to labour market information, job and employment opportunities, and employment services for local and overseas employment; (4) Develops support mechanism for migrant workers' families for communicating with migrant workers, promotes remittance services, and establishes migrant worker family communities in order to share information and experiences; (5) Provides entrepreneurship and financial literacy training, particularly how to maximise remittances and counselling services for establishing businesses or other investments.
Indonesia	Law No. 18 of 2017 – Law on Protection of Indonesia Migrant Workers, Article 7 (2017)	Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers begins after working period and includes facilitation of repatriation, settlement of rights that have not been fulfilled, facilitation of travel arrangement for migrant workers who are sick or dead, social rehabilitation and social reintegration, and empowerment of Indonesian migrant workers and their families.
Philippines	RA 11641 – Department of Migrant Workers Act, Sec. 6 (2021)	The department “shall formulate, recommend, and implement national policies, plans, programs, and guidelines that will ensure the protection of OFWs, including their safe, orderly and regular migration, the promotion of their interests, the timely and effective resolution of their problems and concerns, and their effective reintegration into Philippine society.”
	RA 10022- Act Amending RA 8042, Sec. 10 (2009)	Establishment of the National Reintegration Center for Overseas Filipino Workers, “which shall provide a mechanism for their reintegration into the Philippine society, serve as a promotion house for their local employment, and tap their skills and potentials for national development.”
	RA 8042 – Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act, Sec. 17 (1995)	Establishment of Re-placement and Monitoring Center, “which shall provide a mechanism for their reintegration into the Philippine society, serve as a promotion house for their local employment, and tap their skills and potentials for national development.”

**Table 3.2.** Provisions of reintegration in law and policy document (continuation)

AMS	Law/Policy	Provisions specific to returnees
Viet Nam	Law No. 72/2006/QH11 – Law on Vietnamese guest workers, Article 59 and Article 60 (2006)	Employment support: (1) Provincial/municipal Services of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs shall notify guest workers who return home of domestic employment opportunities; guide and introduce them to register to find appropriate jobs. (2) The State encourages enterprises to receive and recruit former guest workers or send them to work abroad. Encouragement of job creation: (1) The State creates favourable conditions and encourages former guest workers to invest in production or business activities and create jobs for themselves and for others. (2) Workers who meet with difficulties may borrow preferential capital for the creation of jobs in accordance with law.

**Table 3.3.** Lead government agency/committee on return and reintegration

AMS	Lead agency on return and reintegration	Other agencies with significant involvement in return and reintegration
Cambodia	Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training	Cambodian Embassies/Consular Offices, Provincial Department of Labour and Vocational Training
Indonesia	The National Board for the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Overseas Workers	Ministry of Social Affairs, Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Social Protection, National Commission on Violence Against Women
Lao PDR	Department of Skills Development and Employment, Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare	Job Centres in 18 provinces, MRCs in six provinces
Myanmar	Committee for the repatriation of Myanmar Migrant Workers from abroad (with representatives from different ministries)	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Information, Ministry of Transport and Communication, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Economic and Commerce, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, Immigration Department and General Administration Department
Philippines	Overseas Workers Welfare Administration	National Reintegration Center for OFWs, Department of Labour and Employment, Department of Foreign Affairs
Thailand	Department of Employment, Ministry of Labour	
Viet Nam	Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs	

The COVID-19 pandemic increased the need for well-functioning return and reintegration programmes in ASEAN. Even countries like the Philippines and Indonesia, which have more advanced programmes, have room to improve. The region also lacks destination country participation in return and reintegration. The final chapter contains recommendations on how these shortfalls can be addressed.

### 3.5. Re-migration instead of Reintegration?

This report has focused on the return of migrant workers due to COVID-19 and how governments in the AMS countries have so far acted in facilitating their reintegration at home. However, based on ASEAN's previous experience during the Asian Financial Crisis, it is likely that returnees during the COVID-19 crisis will find their way back to gainful employment through migration. The damage done to many industries due to lockdown measures caused a rise in unemployment. Although prospects for business start-ups are limited and interest rates are low, subsidized financing for SMEs can be regulated and controlled.

The opportunities for re-migration will depend, firstly, on how quickly destination countries within and outside the region are able to recover and open their doors to foreign workers, and, secondly, on the revival of the recruitment industry, which suffered massively over the past two years. Fortunately, forecasts of early recovery have been optimistic.

As countries embark on recovery strategies, their first concern is to minimize displacement and maximize employment of their own nationals. Over the long run, this means channelling resources to economic sectors most likely to do well in an environment characterized by rapid technological change. Successfully managing this transition is still uncertain. In major AMS destinations, the domestic labour force largely concentrates in semi-skilled occupations, while migrant workers occupy unskilled positions. In many ways, migrant workers are not substitutes but are complements to domestic workers. The rapid growth of industries employing mainly un-skilled or low-skilled workers also generates a demand for semi-skilled and high skilled workers. In the major destination countries, it is very evident that labour migration has been driven by shortages, and wages of national workers in sectors where they are concentrated have risen despite the increased flows of foreign labour through regular as well as irregular channels.

In countries that have been employing migrant workers, the pandemic and subsequent return of migrant workers to their origin countries offers an opportunity to change policies and reduce dependence on foreign labour. Continuing to employ migrant workers may delay the structural adjustments necessary in a fast-emerging economy that has a small population and an ageing labour force. Although it is not disputable that the easy availability of cheap foreign labour leads postpones technology develops and reducing labour-intensive industries, there is also ample evidence that the participation of foreign workers has increased the industrialisation processes in the AMS. In Malaysia, over 700,000 foreign workers were employed in manufacturing when the pandemic struck, and 435,000 were in construction. According to the Malaysian Employers Federation, 78 percent of their member companies employed foreign workers (Wahab, 2020a). Foreign workers enabled the country to modernize its infrastructure and create new cities, meet the demand for housing, exploit the country's comparative advantages in agriculture-based exports, including palm oil and rubber, and maintain domestic prices stability.

According to an OECD study, the total migrant population in Thailand increased from 230,000 individuals in 2000 to 2.2 million in 2010.<sup>55</sup> Within the same time period, the migrant worker population increased from 144,000 individuals to 1.9 million. For that period, the migrant worker share of the total employed population rose from 0.4 percent to 4.7 percent. The study found that foreign-born workers and Thai-born workers have different labour market positions, as reflected in a range of labour market indicators (OECD and ILO, 2017). The differences include:

- Foreign-born workers increasingly move out of subsistence agriculture and into industrial sectors.
- Occupational distributions of native- and foreign-born workers are very different, and these differences became more pronounced between 2000 and 2010. Foreign-born workers are more likely to work in elementary occupations in industry than native-born.
- Labour intensive industries have become increasingly dependent on migrant workers as Thais move up the skills ladder to take on better paying jobs.
- Foreign-born workers are over-represented in some of the fastest growing occupational groups, namely plant operators and craft workers, as well as in private household services.
- Foreign-born workers are more likely to be younger and employed compared to the Thai-born, mitigating the impact of population ageing in Thailand.
- A higher percentage of Thai-born workers (57.6 percent) were own-account workers compared to the foreign-born (13.6 percent) in 2010.
- Because foreign-born workers often take less attractive jobs, the risk of displacement of native-born workers by foreign-born workers is reduced.
- In 2000, almost half of Thai-born workers had less than a primary education, while the same was true for almost 77 percent of foreign-born workers.

According to the OECD, various studies found that immigration has had no significant effect on employment rates of Thai workers. In fact, immigration made an important contribution to the industrialisation of the Thai economy. In 2000, migrant workers accounted for around 1 percent of all workers in manufacturing; in 2010, close to one out of every eight workers in manufacturing was a migrant worker. Interestingly, services accounted for 35.9 percent of the employment of Thai-born workers, while industry accounted for only 16.7 percent (OECD and ILO, 2017). With respect to the impact of immigration on wages of Thai workers, Pholphirul, Kamlai and Rukumnuaykit (2010) found that the foreign worker employment reduced real wages of native-born in agriculture by 4.3 percent, in manufacturing by 2.4 percent, and in services by 0.2 percent.

Migrant workers also occupy important role in Malaysia's economic development. In 2015, the World Bank concluded that immigrants, both

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<sup>55</sup> According to ILO's latest International Labour Migration Statistics, this rose to 3.2 million in 2019 (ILO, 2022).

high- and low-skilled, are necessary for the country to achieve high income status by 2020 (World Bank, 2015). In 2019, according to the ILO (2020d), there were 3.1 million working-age migrants in Malaysia, but the total number remains a matter of speculation; it is widely accepted that there are millions of undocumented migrants in Malaysia.

The 2015 World Bank report, using an econometric modelling to quantify the impact of immigration, suggests the following:

- A 10 percent increase in low-skilled foreign workers may increase Malaysia's GDP by as much as 1.1 percent.
- For every 10 new immigrant workers in a given state and sector, up to five new jobs may be created for Malaysians in that state and sector, two of them women workers.
- A 10 percent increase in immigration flow increases the wages of Malaysians by 0.14 percent; however, it reduces salaries of immigrant workers already in the country by 3.94 percent.
- A 10 percent increase in immigration flow reduces wages by 0.74 percent of the least-educated Malaysians, who represent 14 percent of the total labour force.
- Documented immigrants in Malaysia raise employment and wages of Malaysians which contributes to public revenues.

Migrant workers fill gaps across the entire skills spectrum. The percentage of Malaysians with post-secondary education doubled from 16 percent in 2001 to 30 percent of the Malaysian workforce in 2014. As more educated Malaysians seek out higher-skilled work, migrant workers fill gaps in lower-skilled occupations. Many of these jobs are in agriculture, which generates 8 percent of Malaysia's GDP, and in lower-skilled services, such as wholesale and retail commerce and hospitality, which combined represent 19 percent of GDP.

Labour force data shows that about 44 percent of all immigrant labour in Malaysia works in low-skilled occupations, often in jobs that are deemed 'dirty, dangerous and difficult' (3D jobs) that are most commonly in labour-intensive sectors, such as construction, agriculture, and certain types of manufacturing. They tend to work as plant and machine operators, services and sales workers, and in craft and related trades. Highly skilled foreigners comprise only 5 percent of total immigrant workers and fill skills gaps in occupations that require specialized skills that may not be available locally. They are, on average, more educated than Malaysians (61 percent of foreigners have a degree or higher compared to 39 percent of Malaysians) and work in business services, wholesale or retail, and construction (World Bank, 2015).

Compared to an average of 70 percent labour force participation rate in East Asia and the Pacific, the average was 66 percent for all Malaysian in 2014 and 53 percent for Malaysian women. The relatively low labour force participation rate, particularly for Malaysian women, further contributes to labour shortages. The World Bank (2015: 30) points out that "...even increasing Malaysia's

labour force participation rate to Singapore's 74 percent would only activate 1.5 million more Malaysians, fewer than the 1.8 million employed immigrants and much fewer than the total estimated immigrants (documented and undocumented) in Malaysia."

### 3.6. Role of Migration in Economic Recovery

Unless the AMS adopt some new policies, large numbers of foreign workers will return to crossing borders through regular and irregular channels.<sup>56</sup> Recent IOM surveys of Burmese, Cambodian, and Laotian returnees reveal that many have received invitations from their former employers to return; many other returnees indicated that they intend to go back to their former employers (IOM, 2022a). In Malaysia, the Malaysia Palm Oil Association (MPOA) estimated the plantation worker shortfall at roughly 75,000, nearly half of which comprises harvesters who are urgently needed to pluck the heavy, perishable palm fruit bunches from towering trees (Chu, 2021). Palm oil constituted nearly 3.6 percent of the country's GDP in 2020.

#### A Slow Recovery Forecast for Plantations

"We anticipate that, even with the arrival of workers, it will take a long time for the plantation sector to recover," said Julian McGill, head of South East Asia at LMC International. He explained, "Plantation companies went to great lengths to keep harvesting during the peak crop, but the longer harvesting rounds and lack of maintenance, particularly pruning, will take at least six months to rectify." "The return of workers could help Malaysia's production to recover by 1 million tonnes in 2022," said Thomas Mielke, the head of German-based analyst firm Oil World.

Source: Chu (2021)

As noted earlier, the pandemic led to many workers being laid off or withdrawing from the labour force altogether. For example, Thailand's Social Security Office revealed that 693,204 Thai workers and 467,357 migrant workers in Thailand left the labour force between March 2020 and September 2021. Many who left the system were likely to have been laid off from formal jobs. However, as soon as the Thai economy started to show signs of recovery, undocumented workers (largely from Myanmar) began crossing into Thailand, despite stern measures taken by the Thai Government to seal the borders (Duangdee, 2021). By early 2021, Thai authorities had registered 2.917 million migrant workers from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Lao PDR, including 2.261 million previously registered workers and 654,864 online-registered workers who are irregular because they lack current documents or employers (*Phuket News*, 2021). About 242,328 of these irregular workers technically counted as undocumented, but the Thai authorities allowed them to remain in the countries because they had previously worked in Thailand through MOUs with their countries of origin.

<sup>56</sup> Suggested policies are discussed in Section 4.1.2.



### 3.7. A Word on the Role of the Recruitment Industry

Private for-profit recruitment agencies have largely been responsible for the rapid rise in cross-border migration of workers within AMS and to other regions. The number of licensed (or legal) and unlicensed (illegal) job brokers rapidly grew as demand for their services exploded when labour-short countries relaxed immigration controls. A notable number of licensed agencies were in operation in mid-2021 in the three major destination countries: Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand (Table 3.4).

**Table 3.4.** Recruitment agencies with valid licenses in sending countries in ASEAN region as of 1 July 2021

	Cambodia	Indonesia	Malaysia	Myanmar	The Philippines	Singapore	Thailand	Viet Nam
Agencies with valid licenses	126	329	1034		510 <sup>1</sup>	3812	130 243 <sup>2</sup>	523
Number of workers recruited for jobs abroad by year	26,000 (in 2015)	264,000 (in 2018)		95,300 (in 2015)	798,000 <sup>3</sup> (in 2017)		53,000 (in 2020)	116,000 (in 2015)

<sup>1</sup> As of 18 July 2022, of which 380 land-based and 130 sea-based agencies.

<sup>2</sup> As of 6 July 2022, 130 recruiters are licensed to recruit Thais for jobs abroad and 306 recruiters are licensed to recruit foreign workers into Thailand.

<sup>3</sup> Of which 420,000 land-based new hires and 378,000 seafarer new hires

**Source:** Survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook responses; DFA, 2022; ILO, 2015a; Department of Employment, Thailand, 2022

In some countries, such as the Philippines and Viet Nam, private recruitment agencies are legally responsible for organising the return of workers placed in jobs abroad when they are laid off due to sickness or injury, or leave their employers for valid reason, such as harassment or abusive treatment. During the pandemic, many recruiters in the Philippines had to shut down because they were unable to find and place workers and could not meet the legal requirement of return. In the destination countries, many recruitment agencies also had to shut down for lack of demand: Whether the Philippines authorities will revalidate the closed agencies' licenses and how many agencies will resume operations remain open questions. It is likely that both will occur once demand for their services returns.







## 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1. Promoting Migration through Regular Channels

Since 2015, the World Bank and the ILO have jointly undertaken surveys in 18 important migration corridors to estimate the costs that workers incur in order to be recruited and find work in another country. The results often provide very good insights into policies that AMS will need to re-examine if they want to better protect migrant workers' rights. For example, a 2018 ILO survey of 1,200 Burmese, Cambodian and Laotian migrant workers who went to Thailand for work found that workers who paid recruitment agencies in their origin country or in Thailand in order to enter through regular channels incurred more than 45 percent higher costs than migrants who used irregular channels. Workers who entered through regular channels without using an intermediary (broker or agency) still incurred higher costs, on average, than those who crossed the border clandestinely and became irregular migrants. A 2017 World Bank study of worker migration from Indonesia to Malaysia found that "the process of becoming a documented worker is burdensome and time consuming. The documentary requirements to become documented migrant workers are onerous and create a disincentive for prospective migrants to choose to go down the documented path. According to BNP2TKI, the general process comprises 22 separate administrative steps to complete. Moreover, the extra time required to become documented is a further disincentive, with almost half of all documented migrant workers having to wait three or more months to migrate." The study found that documented migration costs nearly 52 percent more, on average, than undocumented migration (World Bank, 2017c). Items that are entirely within the control of host and origin country governments cost jobseekers the most time and money. The 2018 ILO study points to the biggest cost items: visa fees, passport fees, work permits, medical examinations, registration cards, and police or security clearances.

These six items add up to US\$255 and account for almost 80 percent of the total costs incurred by the migrants. Contrast that sum with US\$240, which is the mean monthly earnings of the entire sample group in their first job in Thailand. In such cases, government requirements exceed the cost of one month's wages and implies an average total recruitment cost equivalent to almost two months of earnings.

Considering migrant workers' contributions to their origin and host economies, receiving governments should offer visas and work permits at no cost to the migrant workers they need. The 2018 ILO survey provides further evidence that these costs are borne by the migrants, not their employers. Similarly, the so-called 'foreign-worker levy' that is meant to disincentivize hiring foreign workers has no such effect since employers pass the cost on to their foreign workers by paying lower than prevailing wages, thus raising an invisible yet real cost to migrant workers.

In contrast to charging fees and levies, reducing fees presents substantial benefits and improves migration management:

- Fewer migrants will enter clandestinely if going through regular channels does not incur more cost, thus reducing their exposure to abuse and exploitation;
- Authorities will be able to ensure greater complementarity between the skills of domestic and foreign labour forces in different occupations and sectors of the economy;
- Migrant workers will be employed formally, pay taxes, and contribute to social security funds; they may also send more remittances to family members in their origin country;
- National authorities will have more information and access to foreign workers for more effective response to pandemics and similar emergencies;
- Industrial policies that aim to induce adjustments during periods of rapid technological change will not be negated by enterprises' path dependence on unlimited supplies of cheap undocumented workers;
- Governments can lessen discrimination and minimize social conflicts that result from wide inequalities in wages and other terms of employment.

The pandemic and prospects for economic recovery offer an opportunity to reform the labour migration system in the region. A better system would enable workers to cross borders for employment by following the rules and regulations of origin and destination countries without going through costly or abusive smugglers or recruiters.

AMS economies will find these and other advantages by establishing a migration system that promotes more orderly responses to labour shortages – shortages that are already occurring. AMS workers will find immeasurable benefits in terms of greater enjoyment of basic human rights and fair wages too often denied to the undocumented. As the AMS move towards greater integration of their economies, these foundations of a well-ordered regional labour market must be established to help hasten economic recovery.

## 4.2. The Argument for More Inclusive Social Protection

Between 2018 and 2020, the IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC) did a survey of 84 countries to find out how migrants are afforded protection under government-provided health services. According to its report, the countries do provide migrants with varying degrees of access to these services depending on their migratory status (ILO GMDAC, 2021). Of the countries that reported a third provide the same access to healthcare to both citizens and migrants, regardless of their migratory status, but in half equal access to healthcare is contingent on migratory status. About 12 percent provide migrants with access to some health services only, including emergency healthcare (IOM, 2019; Milan and Cunnoosamy, 2020). Some countries reported including migrants in their national vaccination plans but these plans are not always enacted in practice. Less than half of 168 countries that reported on their national vaccination plans actually included them in the roll-out of vaccination campaigns (IOM, 2021c).

*No one is safe unless everyone is safe:* If there is one lesson that all countries have learned from efforts to stop the pandemic, it is that 'no one is safe unless everyone is safe'. Although most countries initially focused on testing and vaccinating their citizens and prioritising them for hospital admissions, governments have since realised that everyone, including undocumented migrants and refugees, needs to be protected to end the pandemic. Excluding non-nationals from basic health services counters all that is known about containing transmission. Migrant workers who lost their jobs were evicted from employer-provided housing; many ended up in cramped rental houses or on the streets. Migrants living on the margins, especially those in fear of having violated immigration laws, needed to be supported and encouraged to seek medical assistance, instead of hiding from the authorities.

*Accessing social protection is difficult:* All AMS have social protection policies and systems for their nationals mandated by social security legislation, labour laws, or provident funds that may be extended to also provide sickness and hospitalisation benefits, as in Singapore. Most systems draw distinctions between benefits enjoyed by nationals compared to non-nationals, but the exclusions are few and typically unemployment and old age benefits. However, only a tiny minority of migrant workers actually benefit from these social protection systems, even when they are legally included, primarily because of ambiguity in laws covering their right to membership, their lack of valid immigration status, and their lack of understanding or awareness of their entitlements or rights. In some countries, social protection laws do not explicitly say that non-nationals can become members, so the matter is left to the discretion of the government. Even where non-nationals are entitled to membership, they may be excluded if they do not have valid or current work permits, as happened to many during COVID-19. Claiming benefits can be made administratively difficult: migrant workers typically must show evidence of their contributions to the system. If they cannot navigate the administrative process, even migrants who were registered by their employers

and contributed for a few years may leave at the end of their contracts without claiming their benefits.

**Migrant workers in social security systems of ASEAN sending states.**

Table 4.1 maps how social security covers national and non-national workers in the AMS under 10 branches: medical care, sickness, unemployment, old age, work injury, maternity, invalidity, and family or survivor's benefits. The last column in Table 4.1 indicates if the national system provides for nationals working abroad. Notably, except for unemployment and family benefits, non-nationals who are not permanent residents are covered under most other branches of social security in every country. In two destination countries, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam, non-nationals formally admitted as guest workers are covered for accidents and sickness under mandatory employer liability schemes. Malaysia provides documented non-nationals medical care benefits under a scheme separate from SOCSO. Only Thailand explicitly provides medical care benefits to undocumented non-nationals, under a separate scheme.



**Table 4.1.** Social security coverage of national vs. non-national workers by country and branch, 2017

	Medical care		Sickness		Unemployment		Old age		Work injury		Family		Maternity		Invalidity		Survivors benefit		National workers abroad?
	Nationals	Non Nationals	Nationals	Non Nationals	Nationals	Non Nationals	Nationals	Non Nationals	Nationals	Non Nationals	Nationals	Non Nationals	Nationals	Non Nationals	Nationals	Non Nationals	Nationals	Non Nationals	
Brunei Darussalam	✓	✓*1	✓**	✓**	–	–	✓	✓*	✓**	✓**	–	–	✓	✓*	✓	✓*	✓	✓*	No
Cambodia	✓	✓	✓**	✓**	–	–	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	–	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	No
Indonesia	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	–	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	–	✓**	✓**	✓	✓	✓	✓	Yes
Lao PDR	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Yes <sup>2</sup>
Malaysia	✓	✓***	✓**	✓**	–	–	✓	✓***	✓	✓***	–	–	✓**	✓**	✓	✓***	✓	✓***	No
Myanmar <sup>3</sup>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Yes <sup>4</sup>
Philippines	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	–	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	–	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Yes
Singapore	✓	✓*5	✓**	✓**	–	–	✓	✓*	✓**	✓**	–	–	✓**	✓**	✓	✓**6	✓	✓**6	Yes <sup>7</sup>
Thailand	✓	✓ <sup>8</sup>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Yes
Viet Nam <sup>9</sup>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	–	✓	✓	–	–	✓	✓	Yes

**Notes:** \* – permanent residents only; \*\* – employer liability; \*\*\* – separate scheme

<sup>1</sup> Universal coverage – permanent residents; employer liability – other migrant workers (insurance-based).

<sup>2</sup> Via a Labour Fund.

<sup>3</sup> Not applicable to establishments with fewer than five employees. Such employees can register voluntarily.

<sup>4</sup> Voluntary contribution possible.

<sup>5</sup> For those who are not permanent residents, employer-based/employer-insured provision is available.

<sup>6</sup> This includes foreign domestic workers as well as work injury-related cases, through mandatory insurance coverage – feedback received from SLOM Singapore, July 2017.

<sup>7</sup> In relation to Medishield Life – the Singapore Government provides for continued contribution to Medishield Life even while overseas.

<sup>8</sup> Undocumented non-nationals (except for those who completed the National Verification Process) are covered under a separate scheme.

<sup>9</sup> 2018 position indicated here: as from 1 January 2018, regular migrant workers will be covered by compulsory social insurance.

**Source:** Olivier (2018)

Migrant workers in social security systems of ASEAN receiving states. As noted earlier, only a small minority of migrant workers become members of social security systems in their countries of employment; hence, they have little to fall back on when they return to their country of origin.<sup>57</sup> AMS have long recognized this problem and various ASEAN forums have recently added the subject for study and discussion. Several such initiatives, in particular by the ILO (2020i), to promote an ASEAN agreement or treaty on social security coverage have yet to see fruition. However, it is encouraging to find

<sup>57</sup> An ILO report in June 2020 estimated that 97 percent of migrant workers in destination had not accessed social security support during the early days of COVID-19, when it was urgently needed (ILO, 2020b). A follow up assessment in June 2021 found that among migrants not working the share of those who received social security support increased, but was still only 43 percent (ILO, 2021a).

that most countries are providing some coverage of non-national workers for critical needs like medical care and sickness, even if only through separate insurance schemes. It should be possible for AMS to find common ground and make progress in providing social protections for migrant workers through both bilateral and multilateral agreements. AMS have made some progress in facilitating the free movement of highly skilled workers within the region, indicating that AMS already view labour-market integration as being in everyone's long-term interest.

**Protection offered at origin.** For many years, the OWWA in the Philippines has provided Filipino migrant workers insurance against invalidity, sickness, and death risks. They are also encouraged to become, or continue to be, members of the Philippine Social Security System which insures them against risks of accidental death, permanent disablement, medical evacuation and repatriation, and even subsistence allowance during litigation to protect their rights in the country where they work. The Philippines has bilateral social security agreements with a number of important destination countries. Indonesia, another major country of origin, has a compulsory insurance scheme for workers going abroad. Private recruitment agencies are obliged to insure their recruits in various stages of job placement against sickness and disability, accidents, unpaid wages, physical or sexual harassment, premature termination, and contract failure. The scheme is managed by a consortium of private insurance companies.

**Exclusion of migrant workers from social protection can be greatly minimised if they are documented.** The case for addressing irregular migration is recognized and accepted in the ASEAN region, but efforts to solve it have had mixed results. Since 1992, Malaysia has had 10 regularisation programs, including the broadest amnesty of 2011, known as '6P', under which 2.3 million migrant workers registered. The so-called 'recalibration' programs introduced since the pandemic began show that irregular migration continued and even grew, despite strengthened immigration regulations. Thailand has also grappled with irregular migration through its long borders and has launched several campaigns to register foreign workers. Wide income disparities create emigration pressures, but a social phenomenon also contributes: better-educated Malaysian workers are no longer willing to accept physically demanding and sometimes dangerous jobs on plantations or in low-tech manufactures. Moreover, many Malaysians have better options in cities. In addition, the lack of realistic policies motivates employers to prefer hiring less costly migrant workers, because they accept lower wages, stay on the job, and are always willing to work overtime. The foreign worker levy has not had its intended effect because its cost is absorbed by the foreign worker willing to accept lower wages. Employing undocumented migrants has the added advantages of not having to observe minimum wage rules or to contribute to the employee's social security membership.

In today's world, virtually no country can avoid irregular or undocumented migration. Millions of people cross borders every day, and controlling movements is more difficult, if not impossible, where neighbouring countries

have widely different incomes or employment rates. In the ASEAN region, the differences in per capita income can be as large as five to one and unemployment levels between 4 percent and 16 percent. However, immigration policies that take into account economic and demographic realities stand a better chance of controlling irregularity. A realistic policy should start by determining if a labour shortage really exists, understanding why it exists, and deciding on whether labour immigration is an essential solution. Policymakers should ask: Are local workers not attracted to the sector because of the nature of the job, its location, or employment conditions? Are wages too low? Or do socio-economic changes, like the migration of young people to the urban areas, create shortages? Next, policymakers must examine their options: Are there labour-saving technologies available? Are they a viable or realistic option in this sector? What policies will be required to incentivize business to shift? Finally, does the country still have a comparative advantage in producing commodities that are labour-intensive to produce?

The fastest growing AMS economies clearly highlight the importance of easy access to labour resources to maintain competitiveness in the global market. Despite AMS declarations of policies to reduce dependence on imported labour, the past four decades have seen labour migration grow rapidly in the region. The growth of AMS economies is more closely bound than ever before to the maintenance of skill complementarities between native and foreign workers. A two-track labour migration policy that gives equal treatment to skilled workers but limits rights for the less skilled has been in place from the very beginning and gained wide political support from host country constituencies. However, there are well-recognised long-term consequences to this dichotomous policy. One important consequence is the slowing of structural economic adjustments needed to accommodate demographic change and global competition. Export industries that thrived under a system where the less-skilled foreign employees had fewer rights than their native counterparts, and were thus less costly to employ, did not invest in labour-saving processes, or shift to new product lines. Another consequence is seen in the increased profitability of economic activities dedicated to expanding worker recruitment and employment from cheaper and cheaper foreign sources. Resistance to change occurs once path dependency develops from the easy availability of cheap foreign labour.

Government measures during the pandemic do not suggest that immediately reducing dependence on foreign workers is considered a realistic option. In the middle of 2020, Singapore started a pilot programme to bring in migrant workers from India due to reported shortages of labour in construction. In Malaysia, the government's first response was to repatriate migrant workers who lost their jobs because of COVID-19, but before long the Chamber of Industries complained of labour shortages in several sectors and started lobbying for more foreign workers. In Thailand, there were initial policy ambiguities, but when industries complained of a shortage of up to 400,000 workers, the government decided to allow migrant workers to stay and continue working. It is highly unlikely that governments will continue repatriating undocumented workers to their home countries, especially when labour shortages can hinder

faster economic recovery. Instead, policies are shifting from repatriation to retention. Now the question is whether wage subsidies should be extended to employers of foreign workers in some sectors to forestall labour shortages and support faster economic recovery.

Thailand addressed the undocumented problem squarely by asking workers from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Lao PDR to register, enabling them to stay and work in Thailand while the pandemic is still considered a threat. Unlike regularisation drives in other countries, Thailand did not impose an arbitrary cut-off point for an arrival date to determine registration eligibility. By the end of 2021, 434,153 workers had registered, including 343,929 who can work legally in Thailand until 13 February 2023. Thailand also reached agreement with the governments of Myanmar, Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Viet Nam on orderly processes for the return of workers who had completed their employment contracts. Documented migrant workers who worked in the formal sector and contributed to the social security system for more than six months became entitled to up to three months of unemployment benefits; those who have worked for their employers for at least four months are entitled to severance pay.

#### **Towards an ASEAN Agreement on Social Security for Migrant Workers.**

Extending social protection to migrant workers has long been proposed by the ILO for adoption by AMS and there are still on-going efforts to design a scheme that can be accepted by some, if not all. Some countries, notably Singapore, see no need for a multilateral agreement, but all AMS provide medical care and sickness benefits to non-nationals under one form of insurance or another. Similarly, all the countries provide old age benefits, even for non-nationals, although only for permanent residents in Singapore and Brunei Darussalam. However, most AMS do not offer unemployment and family benefits to their nationals, hence it is unlikely that a proposal including these benefits will receive support. Since the intended beneficiaries are temporary migrants, the portability of rights or benefit entitlements gained by the workers will be an essential element of any scheme. Migrant workers who become members of the social security system in one AMS must not lose their rights to benefits when they move from one country to another. For example, pension benefits under social security are typically based on the length of time that a member contributes to the system. Workers should not lose their rights if they move to another country; instead, they should be able to accumulate their rights to old age pensions wherever they work and receive the pension wherever they retire. This is possible when the rights to social security benefits are made portable through coordination of schemes and agreement among the countries. Many bilateral and multilateral agreements provide migrant workers with portable rights, but an ASEAN-wide agreement on social security has yet to be achieved. There are on-going consultations on portability among some AMS, such as the subregional Declaration for Migrant Workers in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Viet Nam and Thailand (CLMVT). As mentioned earlier, Cambodia is leading an initiative to develop an ASEAN Declaration on Portability of Social Security Benefits for Migrant Workers. Once the declaration has been developed, the ILO will support the

Government of Cambodia in conceptualising its project in order to develop ASEAN Guidelines on Memorandums of Cooperation on Portability of Social Security Schemes for Migrant Workers.

The labour ministry authorities who took part in the 2021 14<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour in Brunei Darussalam agreed and emphasized the importance of giving migrant workers access to social protections (ILO, 2021g). These include pandemic-related protections, such as ensuring migrant worker access to healthcare, relief measures, psychosocial support, access to grievance mechanisms for laid-off workers; and COVID-related information that affects them or that can help them. Recommended overall protections also include improving workplace and employer-provided migrant housing safety and health standards; maximising digital technology use when processing migrant workers' immigration and employment documents; and strengthening return and reintegration programmes, including integrating rights-based and gender-responsive protections into national and regional pandemic and emergency preparedness plans.

The profound structural changes taking place in the ASEAN region have seen important re-allocations of labour as better-educated workers move from traditional sectors to new types of occupations. The pandemic put into sharp relief the significance of migration in enabling economies to adjust successfully to these new labour market conditions; it also revealed the precarious position of foreign workers who filled the spaces that were created. Before COVID-19, the region's dynamic economies had very low levels of unemployment and rising wages, a clear indication that migration did not lead to displacement. Many studies cited in this report provide strong evidence of the complementarities between national and migrant workers. This report has advanced the view that the region's economic recovery depends not only on sound macroeconomic policies, but more importantly on how governments are able to reform labour migration policies, protect the rights of migrant workers, and provide them adequate if not equal social protection.

#### **4.3. Recommendations for Bilateral, Multilateral and Regional-Level Initiatives**

##### **4.3.1. Promote and Facilitate Migration through Regular Channels**

In order to speed up their economic recovery, the AMS would benefit from introducing policies that facilitate the movement of migrant workers through regular channels. This will mean minimising bureaucratic hurdles that unnecessarily lengthen the process of securing permission to leave a country, combating recruitment malpractices and abuses, eliminating or reducing to a minimum the fees charged for passports, visas, and work permits, regularising the status of undocumented migrants, ensuring equal treatment of migrant workers in employment, and eliminating ineffective foreign worker levies and fees. These changes will encourage workers to observe labour migration rules, enabling origin and host countries to use labour migration as part of their development strategies. These changes will also reduce native



citizens' objections to foreign workers availing of social protection, especially if the latter are allowed to become members and contribute to social security programs. Ample evidence indicates that migrant workers complement, rather than displace, native workers. As better-educated native workers leave traditional sectors for better opportunities elsewhere, migrant workers can fill their vacancies and enable many industries to recover and regain their markets.

Although many countries of employment included migrants in COVID-19 testing and vaccination plans, and may have provided medical services, many irregular migrant workers failed to benefit from such services because they feared being placed in detention centres, being forced to return home, or being required to show proof of valid papers to stay in the country. While the extension of lapsed work permits is important, securing regular status will ensure that migrants can use social protection services. It will also increase the effectiveness of pandemic containment measures. As often as necessary, countries of employment should consider launching public awareness campaigns on safe, orderly, and regular migration that encourage participation by all by avoiding setting unrealistic cut-off dates for workers' arrival in the country, offer a reasonable period of work permit validity, and not charge migrant workers and their employers onerous fees when they comply with the rules of regular employment.

#### **4.3.2. Establish an ASEAN Protocol on Return and Reintegration**

Although it is not always easy to determine the right response to emergencies and some confusion is inevitable when much is unknown about the best way to respond, migrant workers remain most vulnerable to suffering the consequences of delayed action, or worse, mistaken decisions. This has been amply demonstrated when confusing orders were issued in one AMS on the inclusion or exclusion of migrant workers in vaccination programs. Similar confusion occurred in deciding whether workers who lost their jobs needed to return or be forcibly repatriated. AMS have already adopted *Guidelines on the Effective Return and Reintegration of Migrant Workers* (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020b) which contain very detailed principles and recommendations dealing with similar issues. Each AMS should ensure that their emergency measures respect these Guidelines. to the AMS must ensure the guidelines' application in practice, especially when responding to challenges like wars, pandemics or economic crises. Establishing an ASEAN Protocol on Return and Reintegration will involve laying out and agreeing specific procedures that authorities in each affected country will follow in order to organise the orderly return or repatriation of migrant workers. This will allow designated officials in countries of employment and origin to quickly act in tandem and coordinate action.

#### 4.3.3. Extend Social Protection to All Migrant Workers

A review of AMS social insurance programs shows that most countries already provide non-nationals the ability to participate in most of branches of social security, from sickness to disability benefits. Some benefits can be availed of through special insurance schemes that have been established alongside social security systems. Non-nationals are commonly excluded from unemployment insurance, which is not available to nationals in most countries, and old age benefits, which entail complex issues regarding portability for workers who move from one country to another. AMS are fully cognizant of the need to provide better social protection for migrant workers, but there has so far been no success in promoting the idea of an ASEAN-wide agreement on social security for migrant workers. Nevertheless, there are already on-going initiatives to develop a multilateral agreement covering some countries. The success of on-going AMS initiatives to develop multilateral agreement will likely pave the way for a wider examination of the legal and technical impediments to providing non-nationals access to some benefits, and in the future may allow consideration of the means to overcome the impediments and reach a regional agreement. At this juncture, AMS may consider two proposals:

- (1). An agreement among all AMS countries to give all migrant workers, regardless of immigration status, the same access to health and medical insurance available to nationals.
- (2). Promote bilateral and, wherever possible, multilateral social security agreements, to give each other's nationals the right to membership in social security including for portable old age pension benefits.

The first proposal aims to formalize what all countries experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when everyone realized that 'no one is safe unless everyone is safe'. Most AMS countries already have national basic health insurance systems, but non-nationals are still excluded in others from their coverage. Availing of benefits can still be made contingent on a minimum period of membership. The second proposal for entering into agreements on social security simply endorses the initiatives taken by some governments to make it an ASEAN priority. Hopefully, the new ASEAN initiative on an ASEAN Declaration on Portability of Social Security Benefits for Migrant Workers in ASEAN championed by Cambodia as the ASEAN Chair will bring the region closer to this goal.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> This initiative builds on the findings of the Study on Portability of Social Security Rights Between AMS, which examines existing national systems and recommends some possible ways to build linkages among AMS (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021).

#### **4.3.4. Digitise and Share Information on Migrant Workers**

Experience has shown that a lack of information has hampered efforts to assist migrant workers during emergencies. National authorities in countries of employment and origin need detailed information to plan logistics, reach target beneficiaries, provide them with up-to-date information, and organise repatriation or relief. A comprehensive and up-to-date database is essential, one that has adequate data protection and data privacy safeguards. The database system should address the interoperability of different information systems and digital infrastructure. Once in operation, it is envisaged that the system will be particularly helpful in providing timely information, especially online, to inform migrants on what is being done to assist them and for migrants to inform the authorities on their condition and situation. The Philippines, for example, has already operated such an information system for several years. This is a proposal for the standardisation and digitisation of bilateral databases on migrant workers starting with all available contact information, migrant workers' profiles, and employment (deployment data from origin, issuance of work permits data by country of employment, where appropriate the registration and nationality verification, etc.). Much of the information already exists in digitized form in countries of origin and employment, but there is a need for an agreement to harmonise terms and nomenclature, use compatible software, train staff, and set up dedicated internet linkages. Continuously updating the information will require the participation of employers and recruitment agencies.

#### **4.4. Recommendations for National Initiatives**

##### **4.4.1. Evaluation and Assessment of the Effectiveness of Reintegration Programme**

In preparing this report on the experience of AMS with COVID-19 and the reintegration of returning migrant workers, it became abundantly clear that national authorities will not be able to assess the impact of their policies and programs unless they invest in collecting information on the situation and the condition of their intended beneficiaries, not just once but over time. They will need to be able to assess the cost effectiveness of various interventions and forms of aid and assistance, from cash transfers to low-interest loans, from training returnees in new skills to advising on entrepreneurship, from psychosocial support to organising family circles. As a minimum, countries should consider using national surveys such as quarterly labour force surveys to track how returnees are faring in finding employment. Evaluation of government policies has already become a standard activity in many countries, but has yet to be carried out for reintegration programmes.

#### **4.4.2. Enable MRCs to Respond to Emergencies and Help with Reintegration**

MRCs have now been established with ILO and IOM assistance in almost all AMS. They provide information to jobseekers about recruitment and how best to secure safe and remunerative employment abroad; they also inform migrant workers about their rights and how to access assistance. With additional resources, especially staffing, MRCs can also play a role during emergencies, assisting laid-off workers and those stranded and unable to return to their home countries. MRCs would have records of migrant workers who have accessed the centre's services, and can provide emergency contacts. In countries of origin, MRCs can start outreach programs; – keep records of returnees, their skills and experience; liaise with the public employment service offices to facilitate local job placements; link with business establishments; and provide online information about employment opportunities, including for self-employment. In addition to foreign language skills, migrant returnees bring with them useful skills, know-how, and familiarity with foreign cultures, skills and information that can be very useful to local enterprises.

##### **Box 7. Migrant resource centres**

MRCs played a critical role in assisting migrant returnees during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in AMS with underdeveloped government programmes for return and reintegration. For this report, seven MRCs (one each in Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand, and three in Cambodia) supported by the ILO Triangle project were interviewed for the survey of the first edition of ASEAN Migration Outlook.

##### **Profile of MRCs:**

- The MRCs typically have been operating for a decade or less in the covered countries, and are located in areas with a large concentration of migrant workers or potential migrant workers.
- The number of paid staff ranges from two to five, a mix of men and women, although they also get volunteers to help in their activities.
- Funding is mainly from the ILO, though in case of MRCs operated by a government agency, the government agency provides office space, except in Malaysia where office space is provided by the Malaysia Trade Union Congress.

- MRCs were run either by CSOs, trade unions, or by an office in the labour ministry, each of which has its own advantages. For instance, MRCs in origin countries housed in the labour ministry can easily link with other government services, such as those offering local job placement, which would help returnees. Trade unions, meanwhile, can take advantage of connections to trade unions in the destination country to support migrant workers, especially in organising. CSOs typically have a stronger presence in local communities.

Activities before and during the pandemic:

- Before the pandemic, for MRCs in countries of origin, services were targeted predominantly to potential migrants to inform or counsel them through meetings, via media, or by providing information packs about safe migration practices, documentary requirements, registered recruitment agencies, numbers to call when they encounter a problem in their country of destination, and the costs of migration.
- MRCs in countries of destination assisted migrant workers by explaining new registration policies; assisting in filling out work permit forms, disseminating information on migrant policies, labour laws and rights, occupation safety and health; and helping with their labour complaints, including unpaid wages, abuse, and injuries.
- MRCs also provided financial literacy training to migrants and their households, trained local authorities, and assisted migrant workers with salary disputes, mainly by referring them to the appropriate government office.
- Though MRCs also received clients in their offices or assisted via phone calls, their main way of reaching potential migrants and their families was by going into communities and through radio spots.
- During the pandemic, when visits to communities was not possible, many migrants (potential, current, or returnees) or their families needing assistance contacted MRCs mainly by phone, and through social media in some cases.
- The services provided by the MRCs during the pandemic, especially in the early part, included providing survival bags containing food and protective equipment to those in quarantine (donated by NGOs), local transportation support, some counselling, and training sessions.
- MRCs also served as a hub to refer returnees to appropriate government offices depending on their need.
- MRCs collected some information about migrant workers who access their services, including their profile, the work they will do (or did) in their country of destination, and what returnees plan to do.



Need for more and better-resourced MRCs:

- The MRCs believe that there is room for a greater number of MRCs to serve migrants and their households, especially in the origin countries where some provinces have limited access.
- MRCs would benefit from more staff with complementary expertise, such as in law, psychology, communication, media, and information technology, to support the centres' activities. Having a lawyer on staff is especially important in destination country MRCs. Additionally, existing MRC staff would benefit from having more training in needed skills. Movement restrictions during the pandemic underscored the need for MRCs to develop digital or social media platforms or content to facilitate easier access to their services.

#### **4.4.3. Fund for Emergency Repatriation**

Migrant workers and their families faced many hurdles and incurred high costs to return home when lockdowns and other measures forced the closure of their employing establishments or stopped construction activities. Some had to leave without receiving fully earned wages. While AMS governments responded to the crisis by providing some financial support to the unemployed, cash transfers to poor families, exemptions to some business taxes, and continued to fund some infrastructure projects, migrant returnees could only expect modest support due to the scale of the needs of the wider community. Countries with a contributory fund for migrant workers were in a better position to support returnees and had operational programs designed specifically to meet their needs. Other origin countries should be encouraged to establish similar funds. It will require legislation, appropriate budgetary appropriation, and an organisation.

#### **4.4.4. Sharing Lessons and Best Practices**

The experiences of countries over the past two years provide valuable lessons on how to protect migrants as well as host communities. Singapore showed why adequate and safe housing accommodation for migrant workers is critically important to the rest of society. In Malaysia, labour shortages in some critical sectors could have been avoided if decisions to repatriate foreign workers had been made in close consultation with industry. In the Philippines, the magnitude of return quickly overwhelmed reception and quarantine facilities. In Cambodia, many migrants complained that they contracted

COVID-19 only upon return, when they were confined in overcrowded quarantine centres. There were, however, some useful lessons of good practices. Thailand implemented public health measures in its far-flung regions because it was able to mobilise 1000 Surveillance and Rapid Response Teams (SRRT) nationally, and 1 million village health volunteers, to identify, isolate, and quarantine cases. Thailand has invested in this surveillance system for more than two decades and many volunteers work at the village level to detect illnesses of concern and promote community awareness. These teams and volunteers proved indispensable in contact tracing, outbreak reporting, and thus containing the problem.<sup>59</sup> Establishing similar systems in all AMS where they do not yet exist merits serious consideration.

#### **4.4.5. Tailor Reintegration Policies to Meet the Specific Needs of Women Migrant Returnees**

Women migrant workers, especially those in domestic work occupations and in many manufacturing or processing plants, faced higher risks of infection compared to their male counterparts because of the nature of their jobs (social distancing not possible at home and especially in assembly plants). Many women sought jobs abroad because they lacked gainful work options at home, hence return due to the pandemic often means a withdrawal from the labour force and a complete loss of income. These are significant disadvantages that require special measures to overcome in countries of employment and origin. Addressing the risks will require giving these women workers priority in accessing health services, such as vaccination and treatment in receiving states; supporting employers' organisations and trade unions in designing safer work environments; and offering re-employment schemes in home communities that take into account the knowledge and skills women migrant workers may have acquired while abroad.

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<sup>59</sup> The district level Surveillance and Rapid response Teams (SRRT) preparedness and response capacity was gradually strengthened and sustained through regular outbreak investigations and responses in the community to diseases such as dengue; meningococemia; hand, foot and mouth disease; rabies, and the highly pathogenic avian influenza in 2004; SARS in 2003; and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus in 2015. Field epidemiologist training since 1980 has resulted in Thailand achieving a critical mass of epidemiological capacity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, village health volunteers supported SRRT to identify contact cases for investigation. For example, in Samut Sakhon Province, migrant health workers and health volunteers, mostly Myanmar nationals, played a significant role in contact tracing because they know the community and speak the same dialect. Universal health coverage facilitated full access to quality COVID-19 services without co-payments. Early hospital admission of moderate and severe cases resulted in a low mortality rate (Rajatanavin et al., 2021).

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