



# Overview of Internal Migration in Thailand



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



Bangkok Office



International Organization for Migration (IOM)  
The UN Migration Agency

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## Thailand Context

- Thailand's total population, as recorded by UNESCAP in 2016, stands at over 68 million.
- Thailand is an ageing society with the lowest population growth rate (0.3% per annum) and the second lowest total fertility rate (1.5) in Southeast Asia (UNESCAP 2016).
- More than half of the Thai population live in urban areas (50.5%) (UNESCAP 2016).
- Internal migrants in Thailand constitute a substantial population: According to the 2010 Thailand Population and Housing Census, 8.3% of the Thai population had migrated internally during the previous five years, and overall 21.8% of the population did not live in their home town (National Statistical Office 2010b).<sup>1</sup> This significantly outstrips international migrant stocks (inflows and outflows from Thailand), estimated at just under 4.5 million in 2017 (UNDESA 2017).

<sup>1</sup> The population census only records moves of at least six months' duration, excluding high levels of seasonal migration. These numbers are hence likely to be significantly underreport the actual number of internal migrants. To provide a point of comparison, the National Migration Survey of 1992 found that 22.0% of the population had moved elsewhere for *one month or more* in the past five years (Chamratrithirong et al. 1995).



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- Internal migration rates in Thailand declined between 2002 and 2009, possible due to government attempts to promote more regionally balanced development (IOM 2011), and this trend appears to have continued: from 2012 to 2016 the number of yearly migrants steadily decreased from 2.3% and 2% of the male and female population to 1.2% and 1.1% respectively (National Statistical Office 2016).
- From 2005-2010 30.6% of migrants moved within a province, while 61.7% crossed provincial lines (National Statistical Office 2010a)<sup>2</sup>.
- Historical data suggest that long-term migration is mainly rural-urban, while short-term migration is mostly urban-rural and, in a slightly smaller proportion, rural-rural. Migration also varies seasonally, moving from the North and Northeast regions towards the Bangkok Metropolis and the Central region during the dry season, and in the reverse direction during the wet season (Guest et al. 1994). Some evidence suggests that these trends still hold today: in the 2016 Migration Survey 41.9% of migrants indicated they had moved from Central to Northeast Thailand, while 30.2% had moved in the reverse direction, from Northeast to Central Thailand (National Statistical Office 2016). It is likely that there is significant overlap between these two populations, indicating that migrants often move between these two regions seasonally<sup>3</sup>.
- The main migration suppliers are the North and Northeast regions of Thailand, while the main migration destinations are the Bangkok Metropolis and vicinities, and the Central region (National Statistical Office 2016, Katewongsawat 2015, Guest et al. 1994). This migration pattern has supplied labour for construction, manufacturing, and services, which along with remittances to out-migrating regions has supported economic growth (IOM 2011).
- Internal migration to industrial estate and urban centres has been driven by the expansion of the industrial and service sectors (*ibid.*). The decline in the share of internal migrants working in agriculture is due to the rise of work in the industrial sector, which employed over 74% of Thailand's total internal migrants in 2009, compared to 64% in 1999 (National Statistical Office 2010b).
- Between 2002 and 2009 internal migration rates declined, though it is unclear what caused this. Possible reasons for this include governments efforts to decentralize economic growth, the 2008 recession, and low birth rates from 1970-2000 leading to smaller migrant cohorts (IOM 2011).

<sup>2</sup> The remaining internal migrants are listed as “unknown” in the census’ Statistical Tables.

<sup>3</sup> The percentages listed in the report (available only in Thai) sum to well over 100%, indicating that migrants could choose multiple options for their movement. For context, 33.5% of migrants indicated they moved from Northeastern Thailand to Bangkok, and 24.8% from Central Thailand to Bangkok, while the percentages who moved away from Bangkok to either region were very small.



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## Migrants' Characteristics

- The 2012 Migration Survey<sup>4</sup> found that 47.8% of Thailand's recent internal migration flows are female (National Statistical Office 2012). This seems to have remained relatively constant over time, as the 2010 Census found that from 2005-2010 48.5% of all migrants were female (National Statistical Office 2010b).
- 45.1% of Thailand's internal migrants moved between the ages of 20 and 29 (National Statistical Office 2010a). Among migrants who moved in 2016, 54.5% were aged 25-29, and 30.1% 15-14 (National Statistical Office 2016).
- Internal migrants come from very poor households. The majority of migrants living in Bangkok come from the Northeast, where households are relatively poor compared to those in other regions (Pholpirul 2012).
- People with better health and education tend to migrate more (Katedwongsa 2015).
- Both male and female migrants consider employment-related purposes as the main motivation for migration (46.8%). However, men are more likely to migrate to seek work or because of a job assignment and women to study or as dependents (ADB 2012).
- The 2010 Census indicates that in the preceding 5 years, 28% of migrants moved to look for a job, 18.4% to change residence, 16.9% to follow people in the household, 13.6% for a job assignment, and 13.4% to study. There were significant differences in the proportion of men and women moving to follow persons in the household (13.7% vs 20.4%), and for study (10.3% vs 16.7%) (National Statistical Office 2010b). The more recent 2012 survey had quite different results: 25.6% of migrants moved to follow family, 24.2% to return home, 11.8% to seek work, 9.6% to change residence, 9.1% for job assignments, and 6.1% for education (National Statistical Office 2012). In the 2016 survey the comparable numbers also varied significantly from 2012: 34.7% moved for occupational reasons, 33.2% to follow or rejoin family, 17.5% to change residence, and 6.4% for education.<sup>5</sup> The year-on-year fluctuations for reasons for movement appear significant.

<sup>4</sup> While the Statistical Tables for the survey are accessible online, there is no available report for this survey, and the definition of "migrant" used for this survey is not available. However, comparing the number of internal migrants identified in this survey (1,462,048) compared to the number identified in the 2010 Population and Housing Census (6,227,495) suggests that the 2012 survey captured migrant flows over a one-year period leading up to the survey. This is also corroborated by IOM (2011), whose Thailand Migration Report notes that the National Statistical Office's migrant survey "asks where the respondent lives now in relation to where they lived one year ago", and the 2016 survey (available only in Thai), which only captured migrants who had moved that year.

<sup>5</sup> The classification used in the 2016 survey appears to be different from that in the 2012 survey's statistical tables, which makes direct comparison difficult. It is also unclear if the results from the 2010 census and the two subsequent migration surveys can be directly compared, since the possible reasons for migration listed in each are different.



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- Seasonal migrants are not captured in the National Statistical Office's migrant surveys or in the population and housing census, and migrant surveys are usually held in the wet season when seasonal migrants normally return home (IOM 2011). In 2009, however, the Survey was conducted during the dry season in order to gauge the impact of the 2008 economic crisis. 73.9% of rural migrants said that their most recent migration was to return home, compared to 66.4% in 2008, suggesting that return migration is a common response to economic contraction (Boonyamanond and Punpuing, 2010).

## Working and Living Conditions in the New Setting

- The industries in which the largest proportions of migrants who moved in 2012 worked were agriculture (26.2%), manufacturing (20.6%), wholesale and retail trade (18.4%), and construction (11.4%). The comparable numbers for non-migrants are 45.8%, 12.4%, 14.1%, and 5.2%. Males were more likely than females to work in agriculture (28.7% vs 22.8%) and construction (15.5% vs 6.1%), while females were more likely than males to work in manufacturing (24.9% vs 17.4%) and accommodation (11.9% vs 5.3%) (National Statistical Office 2012). For 2016 the numbers are markedly different: 27.1% of migrants in 2016 worked as service staff or suppliers, 15.7% as technicians or related practitioners, 14.8% in basic jobs,<sup>6</sup> 14.7% in agriculture, forestry and fisheries, and 13.1% as machinery controllers (National Statistical Office 2016).
- Migrant workers with higher levels of education have more chances of finding better quality employment (ADB 2012).
- Overall, a large proportion of migrant workers see their incomes increase and consider their working and living conditions to have improved (*ibid.*).
- While 77% of rural-urban migrants believe that their working conditions have improved since their last job, nearly 70% lack a written contract and less than a quarter have a written contract of unlimited duration. 40% did not report having a stable income and about one-fifth earned less than the minimum wage for Bangkok (ADB 2012)<sup>7</sup>.
- Professional activities dominated by female migrants are often neglected in policy-making. Until November 2012, domestic workers in Thailand were not covered by labour legislation or social protection. However, despite some progress, domestic workers remain excluded from limits on working hours, minimum wage coverage and social security protection (ILO 2013). However, from 2015-2018, policies relating to migrants underwent substantial change, including the issuing of a Royal Ordinance Concerning the Management of Foreign Workers' Employment B.E. 2560 (2017), which aims to establish a long-term migration management policy and encourage movement into the formal sector.

<sup>6</sup> Cleaning, mining, cooking assistant, street vendor

<sup>7</sup> This research was based on 643 interviews with migrants to the Greater Bangkok metropolitan area in 2010.



- Female migrants face particular challenges. They are often paid less than their male counterparts for the same jobs (IOM 2011), and those in domestic work are especially susceptible to gendered abuse, harassment, and violence due to the private nature of their work in the home (UNTWG 2014).
- 18.5% of migrants receive support either in cash or in kind, with 59.3% of this number receiving it from their parents (National Statistical Office 2012).
- 72.3% of migrants know people living in their new place of residence. Of this number, 58.9% know parents/spouses/children living in the new place of residence, 27.9% other relations, and 13.2% friends (National Statistical Office 2012).

## The Impact of Internal Migration on Those Who Stay Behind

- Nearly all internal migrants remit, although females have a tendency to remit more, more often and in larger amounts than males (IOM 2011).
- Father-only migrant households receive remittances more frequently and in a larger amount than both-parent migrant households (Institute of Population and Social Research 2012).
- Remittances constitute a significant proportion of migrant-sending households' incomes. A survey of 1,874 rice-farming households in the Northeast found that remittances represented 38% of their incomes (Paris et al. 2009).
- Remittances are generally sent to migrants' parents (74.3% to parents and 16.3% to children, according to the National Statistical Office (2012), and tend to go towards daily expenses such as food, farming and household goods, healthcare and children's education (Pholphirul 2012, Institute of Population and Social Research 2012, National Statistical Office 2007).
- A substantial proportion of Thai children stay behind one or both of their parents move (24%, equivalent to over 3 million children). Most of them are located in the North and North-eastern regions, the greatest out-migrating regions, (UNTWG 2014; IOM 2011), where the Multiple Cluster Indicator Survey found that 23% and 31% of children respectively were living with neither parent (UNTWG 2014). About three-fourths of fathers and about 60% of mothers have experienced being away from the child for at least a two-month period since the child was born (Institute for Population and Social Research 2012).



- Most children left behind by their migrant parents live with their grandparents, turning their homes into “skip-generation households” (UNTWG 2014; Knodel and Pothsiri 2014). It has been suggested that parental migration in Thailand has a negative impact on child development and childcare (Nanthamongkolchai et al. 2006). About 60% of migrants’ children report feeling sad or missing their parents, especially if the migrant parent is the mother, and children of non-migrant parents are reported by caretakers to be more responsible, more independent, and happier than children of migrant parents (Institute for Population and Social Research 2012).
- Migrants’ children report high levels of overall life satisfaction, are as psychologically well-adjusted as their counterparts, and report similar educational performance (though adults’ perceptions are otherwise) (*ibid.*).
- After parental migration, over 40% of children report that their life is much easier than before, and half think that they are better off financially. More than half of the caretakers of migrants’ children (58%) report that remittances have “a lot of” benefit to the child, and 30% say it has at “some” benefit to the child (*ibid.*).
- Children in households where both parents are migrants perform the least household chores when compared to their single-migrant or non-migrant counterparts (*ibid.*).
- Almost all households remain in close contact with the migrant parents. Just below 50% of all children reported contacting their parents at least once a day via telephone (*ibid.*).
- Internal migration in Thailand intensifies the ongoing concern over the lack of a young labour force in rural areas. However, internal migrants usually return home during the cultivation and the harvesting periods (Pholhirul 2012).
- Improvement of land-use techniques has taken place in the Northeast region and the return of migrants that have acquired better knowledge and skills through migration and education at their destination have contributed to improvements in agriculture (IOM 2011).
- Overall, internal migration has a significant positive impact (from 17% to 22%) on the per capita income of migrant-sending households, reducing rural poverty and rural-urban inequality (ADB 2012; Institute of Population and Social Research 2012).
- Not all internal migrant workers are involved in labour activities that enable them to significantly improve the well-being of the household left behind. For the poorest households from the Northeast region, the volume of remittances does not always offset the loss in labour caused by the migration of an active member of the family, so that internal migration has been accused of deepening rural-rural inequality (ADB 2012).



- There is little effect of remittances (i.e. reaching an earnings goal) on the decision to return to the place of origin. Those with education beyond primary school are less likely to return than those with less education. The highest rate of returnees is among those working in agriculture (Piotrowski and Tong 2010).
- Single migrants return in higher numbers than married migrants. Migrants are also more likely to return if they have only their mother in their household as opposed to having neither parent at home (ibid.).

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