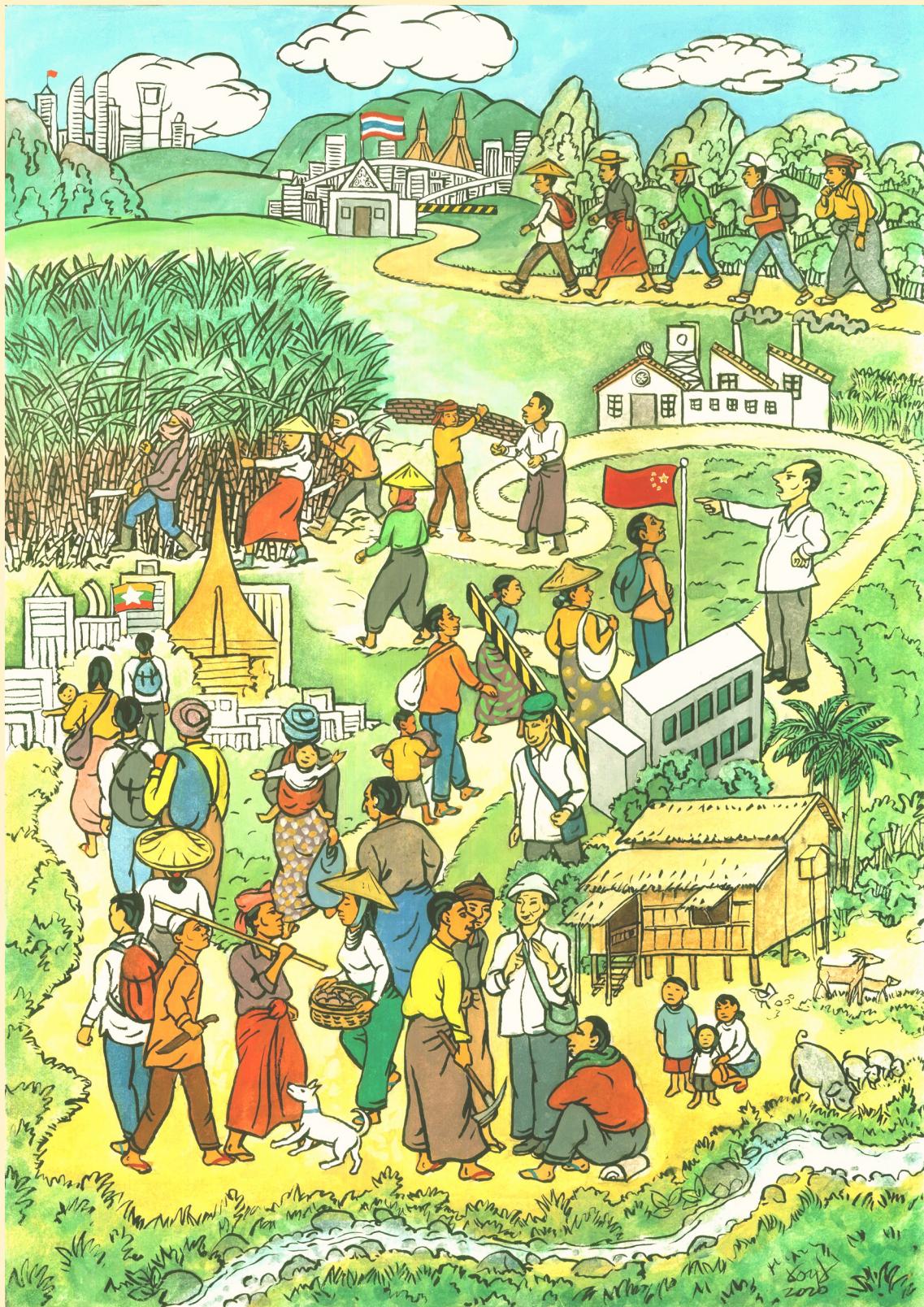


Myanmar's cross-border migrant workers and the Covid-19 pandemic



Their life stories and the social structures shaping them

November 2020

Cover Image: "Migrant Workers", watercolour on 8" X 11" paper by Filipino artist Boy Dominguez (2020)

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November 2020

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Myanmar's cross-border migrant workers and the Covid-19 pandemic:
Their life stories and the social structures shaping them

A report by
Transnational Institute (TNI)

in collaboration with:

Justice Society, Lahu Development Network, Metta Development Foundation, Mon Area Community Development Organization (MACDO), Mon Region Land Policy Affair Committee (MRLPAC), Mon Women Organization (MWO), Mon Youth Progressive Organization (MYPO), Pa-O Youth Organization (PYO), Paung Ku, Ta'ang Students and Youth Organization (TSYU), and Tai Youth Network (TYN)
and RRUSHES-5 Research Project

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Section 1: Introduction¹

2020 will be remembered as the year that the COVID-19 outbreak became a global pandemic. The pandemic has had major impacts. This report focuses on the socio-economic impacts and especially on the well-being of working people. Myanmar's cross-border migrant workers have been significantly affected.² The pandemic has altered their lives in the sphere of economic production (e.g., jobs, labour market, etc.), and in the sphere of everyday well-being (e.g., daily subsistence, child care, health care, pension, etc.). The report looks into who the cross-border migrant workers are, why they have become migrant workers, and how they perceive their own conditions. Their individual life stories are highlighted. Heroing their life stories helps to reveal underlying factors that condition their access to food, shelter, clothing, health and education, and in this way, conditions what work they do where.

What kinds of activities (or what particular 'song and dance', as the American social scientist Nancy Fraser puts it) do different people have to do -- and different classes and groups of people do -- in order to continue living and raising children?³ While some people have access to what they need to survive without having to go through labor markets, others do not. While some people have the means to hire the labor power of others, others do not. What individual people and groups of people do to survive is no random accident. We can see patterns; patterns of social relations that emerge and persist between classes and groups are called 'social structures'.

The social relations or social structures in which any given person finds herself tend to be relatively stable over time. We often take their existence for granted, as if they are as natural as the air we breathe. They shape the concrete reality of our existence, and our perceptions of the world. This does not mean that social structures automatically limit or rigidly dictate our perceptions or actions. Rather, each one of us possesses 'political agency' – the drive and imagination to act to change the circumstances in which we find ourselves in any given moment. We are not machines; we feel pain and we have survival instincts as well as aspirations; we have a moral compass and can perceive justice and injustice. This can imply different strategies at different times for

different people or groups of people facing harsh life conditions: we choose between 'escaping, resisting, taming, or smashing' (as the American sociologist Erik Olin Wright has put it).⁴

Our starting point in this report is that migrant workers have political agency and are capable of not only understanding their situation, but also of trying to change it. From this perspective, structural conditions can be seen as *both* an important context for *and* an object (target) of working people's social consciousness and individual and collective actions. The report thus spotlights migrant workers perceptions and activities in the current situation and puts them in context. Patterns can be seen by reading individual testimonials in a wider context using data and analysis found in other reports, studies and publications, and by aggregating responses from the 136 cross-border migrant workers whom we interviewed. We meet these migrant workers at a dramatic moment in their lives. The current moment is conditioned by social structures inherited from the past, but then redefined by a deadly global virus outbreak in the present, and then perceived by way of their own aspirations for a better future for themselves, their families and their communities.

Analysing the situation of migrant workers in a longer timeline (linking past, present and future) allows us to know them better as fellow human beings, who are trapped in a harsh situation that is largely not of their own making; who must find ways to cope with daily survival while navigating often militarized lockdowns; and who have more stories to tell than just about how they managed to return to their home communities from distant work sites. Their stories did not start in and are not confined to the migrant dormitories in the countries of their work. Nor do their stories end in the quarantine centers outside their home villages in Myanmar.

Their experiences of hardship began long before the pandemic hit, and are likely to continue long after the current global health emergency. This pandemic is not the only emergency situation that migrant workers have had to face in their lives; nor will it be the last -- especially if no radical changes occur in their current conditions or the global social order more generally. But the COVID-19 outbreak has brought humanity more generally to a major historical conjuncture. The connections between

¹This is an action research led by the Transnational Institute (TNI) in collaboration with (in alphabetical order) Justice Society, Lahu Development Network (LDN), Metta Development Foundation, Mon Area Community Development Organization (MACDO), Mon Region Land Committee (MRLC), Mon Women Organization (MWO), Mon Youth Progressive Organization (MYPO), Pa-O Youth Organization (PYO), Paung Ku, Ta'ang Students and Youth Organization (TSYU), Tai Youth Network (TYN) and the RRUSHES-5 Research project. There were three waves of field work and interviews carried out: (1) Fieldwork by Borras in Yunnan in late 2019, where he did some interviews with migrant workers, especially migrant sugarcane cutters and labour contractors in Yunnan, as well as with various Chinese officials at the different levels (village, township, county); (2) August-September 2019 where interviews of 16 migrant workers were carried out in the Dry Zone; and (3) in May-July 2020 where we interviewed 120 migrant workers from the Dry Zone as well as Shan and Mon States. We thank Yunan Xu for helping us tabulate and graph our interview data.

²This report on migrant workers can be read in conjunction with other reports on COVID-19 and its impacts in Myanmar including the July 2020 TNI Myanmar Commentary by Nwet Kay Khine (<https://www.tni.org/en/article/hitting-where-it-hurts-impacts-of-covid-19-measures-on-myanmar-poor>), and the forthcoming TNI report on Covid and Conflict.

³See Fraser (2014: 57).

⁴See Wright (2019).

past activity and present impacts and options, and therefore, between present activity and future impacts and options, have been revealed more concretely and clearly. What we do (or don't do) now will shape what impacts will be felt by, and which options will be available to, which people – and with what prospects for their well-being -- in the future.

We invite readers to listen to these migrant workers' life stories and to engage in *community conversations* about these experiences. We hope that this can contribute to a knowledge building process *with* the migrant workers that will help in generating the appropriate public action and policies needed to address the current crisis humanely, and to move toward building a post-pandemic new normal that is socially just.

Methods

Our research for this study started in August-September 2019 in the Dry Zone (Magwe, Mandalay, Sagaing Regions) where we interviewed 16 migrant workers who regularly work as sugarcane cutters in China. We tried to understand the dynamics of land and labour transformation in the corridor between the Dry Zone and southern China. Then the pandemic erupted in January 2020, and in April we began conducting interviews digitally: by phone, Facebook Messenger, or Viber, or face-to-face when it was possible to observe the government required safety measures. We expanded our initial focus in the Dry Zone to include migrant workers from Shan and Mon States. We did this for two reasons: (a) the presence in these places of existing local partners who were interested, willing and able to collaborate in the research, and (b) the significance of migrant wage work in these two states in relation to China and Thailand, the former being a relatively new but rapidly growing frontier of migrant work, and the latter being the largest destination of Myanmar migrant labour.

We used a purposive sampling method, focusing mainly on migrant workers who decided to go home because of the pandemic, although we also spoke with a handful of migrant workers who decided to stay abroad. The majority of our respondents were more or less evenly distributed between China and Thailand in terms of the location of their work sites, with just a handful working in Malaysia or other countries. We spoke with people working in different sectors: agricultural, non-agricultural, rural and urban; with more or less even numbers of male and female migrant workers divided across three age groups: 25 years old and below, 26-49 years old, and 50 years old and above. Our respondents, especially in Shan State, came from multiple ethnic nationality groups and a significant minority are landless.

The CSO collaborators in this research have long-standing community-based work in the Dry Zone and Shan and Mon States. We relied on our preexisting local networks to make contact and build a pool of interviewees using the 'snowball' method. Interviews were conducted after explaining the purpose of the research and other procedures relevant to securing informed consent (including assurance to protect interviewees' identities). We made all interviewees and their villages anonymous to protect their privacy and ensure their safety and security. All interviews were conducted in the local languages. The interviews were carried out in May-July 2020 for the 120 migrant workers and 4 other interviewees (rural health worker, local quarantine center team leader, and volunteer staff in two humanitarian organizations), except for the 16 migrant workers we interviewed in the Dry Zone in August-September 2019.



Map of Myanmar in regional perspective

Overview

The report is divided into five sections. The next section, Section 2, is about the situation of migrant workers during the pandemic -- at their work sites, in their home villages and while transiting in between. Section 3 looks into the working conditions of migrant workers at their work sites, with some emphasis on relatively less explored social dynamics of the Myanmar-China migrant labour corridor, compared to the older corridors connected to Thailand and Malaysia. Section 4 looks at the structural and institutional conditions in Myanmar rural areas and agriculture where most migrant workers come from (and continue to return to). Section 5 explores questions around what will happen to working people during an extended pandemic and in a post-pandemic world marked by global economic downturn.

Section 2: Migrant workers and the COVID-19 pandemic

A 28-year-old female migrant worker and her husband from Sagaing Region went to China to cut sugarcane. They have no farmland. Her husband works as a street food peddler, selling ice-cream sticks and crispy pancakes. She said that most people in their village do not do farming or animal herding because it is not profitable without water and capital. Instead, most of them work in nearby chalk factories, coal factory or in a garlic trading place where garlic is transported from other villages and sold. While they don't have farmland, they do have a small home garden where they grow vegetables during the rainy season, planting pumpkin and beans for their own consumption. Their child is 2 years old; she stayed with her oldest sister when they were in China. Frightened by the pandemic, they decided to go home in March 2020 before the sugarcane cutting season ended. Below is their story of how they managed to come home:

My husband and I were supposed to be paid in lumpsum for all our combined work since January but we did not get our full wages because we went home before the end of the cutting season. We were supposed to get around 10,000 Yuan (1,513 USD) for our combined work, but only got about 3,500 Yuan (530 USD). That was the rule: we were to be paid in full only if we stayed up to the end of the sugarcane cutting season in May. If we went home before that, we only get a third of our wages. To return to Myanmar, we first went from the village where we worked to the Chinshwehaw border [Kokang region] by car. We were in two cars carrying around 18 people. We had to pay 100 Yuan (15 USD) per person. At Chinshwehaw, we were told to stay in the nearby storage facility for two nights and three days. We were cramped inside with

around 1,000 people. We were told that it was an order from above. We were provided with rice but could not go outside to buy curries. There were only two toilets which made things really hard. Drinking water was not enough. Then we had to spend one night in Kyaukme [Northern Shan State]. The 12-wheel truck we were riding carried over 70 people. We had to stay in the school classroom, like 30 people per room. Some slept on the desks and some on the concrete floor. We were fed breakfast, but no dinner was provided. People had to eat whatever they brought along. On the next day, I bought bread from the nearby shop. Then we were offered a lunch box and drinking water. We were then taken to Mandalay on the same truck with 90 people, including 20 additional people they had to bring on board. There was no space to move around. When we reached Mandalay, our temperatures were taken and we were told to stay some feet apart. We had to stay at a mechanical training school. There were so many people. No dinner and not even drinking water was provided. From the Chinshwehaw gate to Mandalay, we paid 15,000 Kyats (12 USD) per person. When we reached Pyin Oo Lwin, our fate improved. There were many people who wanted to do charities and gave us a lot of food, snacks and water. At the later gates, only our NRC [National Registration Card] cards were checked. We joked that maybe only the NRC cards can carry the disease not the people. From Mandalay to [close to their home place], we paid 10,000 Kyats (8 USD) per person.



A notebook on daily sugarcane cutting output per worker, recorded by labour contractor (called 'worker team leader'-cum-translator)

Photo by Jun Borras (2019), Yunnan

Her financial worries are common among migrant workers who returned to Myanmar because of the pandemic. She explained:

My husband and I brought with us 500,000 Kyats [US\$ 350] when we went to China. Of this, 100,000 Kyats was used to pay for our labour contractor who is a

Shan-Chinese from Myanmar, at 50,000 Kyats for each of us. Now, we did not make much money because we were not paid in full for the wages we earned, and because we had to pay for the cost of our going home. We are now in debt, and we have to pay that money back. But we have no jobs. We will wait for the next sugarcane cutting season [that is, November 2020] and go back to China, and we will bring with us our two-year-old daughter.



An outdoor kitchen where migrant workers can sometimes cook
Myanmar food
Photo by Jun Borras (2019), Yunnan

Her story is not unusual. Nearly all those we interviewed who worked in China, but did not stay until the previously agreed end date of work (the end of the sugarcane cutting season is in May), were paid at best only a third of the wages for the days they worked. At worst they were reimbursed only the transportation cost.

Myanmar's estimated 5 million migrant workers are major contributors to the national economy (World Bank, 2019:16) – a fact that is celebrated by the national government. With the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan, the media began reporting of tens of thousands of Myanmar migrant workers trying to return home because of the pandemic. Partly because of the informal status in their countries of work, it is impossible to know how many stayed in their host countries and continued working,

how many stayed but partially or fully lost their jobs, and how many went back to Myanmar and lost their jobs. One estimate early in the pandemic was that up to 300,000 Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand were rendered jobless but remained in Thailand.⁵ For many, fear of losing their jobs and income proved to be stronger than fear of the pandemic; they opted to stay in the countries of their work.

Another respondent, a 26-year old male migrant worker from Mandalay Region, is a farmer who works on the 10-acre land owned by his parents. They grow rice, peanuts and corn. They usually hire outside laborers. They usually raise some cows. But this time they could not harvest what they had earlier planted because there was not enough rain and the crop failed. So he and his wife went to work cutting sugarcane in Yunnan. He went to Yunnan in November 2019 together with his wife and young daughter to cut sugarcane, and went back to Myanmar on 5 May 2020. But unlike the woman in the previous story, he is a migrant worker himself and he also recruits other people living in the Dry Zone to cut sugarcane in Yunnan. He is paid 30 Yuan (5 USD) for every person he is able to recruit from his village. In addition to his role as labour recruiter, when in Yunnan he is also a 'work team leader' and translator. He takes a share in the piece-rate wage from out of every bundle of sugarcane cut by migrant workers.

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I have been cutting sugarcane in Yunnan already for four years. We were recruited to stay until the end of the season. So we stayed until the end of the season, and went home on 5 May 2020, and were paid full wages. Our boss is a Chinese Kachin lady [a Chinese national who is ethnic Kachin]. If people did not stay until the end of the season, they would be paid only the transportation cost, and would not be paid their wages. Things were not hard during the pandemic time, at least in our area. Markets were closed for some time. The boss gave masks to the workers and asked me to report if anyone coughed or got sick. They may be taken to the village clinic or the town hospital if sick. If

⁵<https://business.inquirer.net/298514/300000-myanmar-migrant-workers-in-thailand-jobless-due-to-covid-19-pandemic>; downloaded 31 May 2020.

anyone went to the town, there were check points. The village that we were staying in was also in lockdown. Strangers could not come in. We were able to cut sugarcane everyday. Our location was in the rural forest area. We lived and worked in the same place. We stayed at places where there were sugarcane plantations, and where water was available. I know some other Myanmar people who are also from the Dry Zone region who remained in China even after the season of sugarcane cutting ended. In between sugarcane cutting seasons, they would pluck herbs, and prepare the land again for the next season. These in-between jobs last for about three months and are paid daily.

Stay or go back?

Deciding whether to stay or go back home was not easy, especially if going home early meant losing a job, or losing wages already earned (e.g., worked for) but withheld by employers to compel workers to complete the agreed timeframe. For migrant farm work in southern China, the norm appears to be that the China-based labour broker (or ‘Chinese boss’, as commonly called by the Myanmar migrant workers) is the direct employer of the worker, and not the farm or factory owners. The boss pays the workers their wages only partially as they work; full payment is made only at the end of the agreed timetable, usually the end of the work cycle (e.g., at the end of the cutting season in the sugarcane sector, for example).

Most of those we spoke with decided to go home during the pandemic and were not paid the full wages they had already worked for. They are probably among the worst hit during the pandemic: they lost their jobs and earnings; they had to figure out on their own how to get back to Myanmar; and they had to use their own money to make the journey back home safely.

Not everyone decided to go back to Myanmar during the pandemic. Some chose to stay in the countries where they were working for different reasons. The most common reason was that they did not want to lose their income. The decision to stay did not always have good results. In some cases, a new dilemma arose when the enterprises where they were working either shut down or scaled back operations, also due to the pandemic. In the end, many of them still lost income or faced radically reduced incomes. Another reason given for not going home was the thought of having to spend 14-21 days in quarantine upon arriving back in Myanmar, followed by the uncertainty of not being able to go back to their work sites later.

The news media have shown migrant workers in Singapore and Malaysia being quarantined in crowded workers’ dormitories, contributing to high rates of workers suffering from coronavirus infection in these spaces.⁶ But risk of infection is not the only important impact on migrant workers who stayed behind. Other types of impact are being felt as well.

This 35-year-old man from Mon State working in Malaysia ended up not being able to work, but not being able to go home either:

When I called my wife and said I wanted to go back, some people said to my wife, “why ask your husband to come back home? Don’t let him return.” People say it will be the talk of the town if I carry an infection back home. So, my wife doesn’t want me to come back. Because my work was closed for sometime because of the pandemic, I could not send back money to my family. But my wife is a primary school teacher so she could earn some money for the family expenses.

For a 23-year old woman from Mon State, unable to go home, she finds herself more tied to her work site, and with more work, less freedom than before the pandemic:

I wanted to go back home but I can’t go back yet because my passport expired. I heard stories that it might be a problem to travel back home with an expired passport. Now in Thailand they started to relax the lockdown rules. Back home, my father is sick, and our house needed to be rebuilt. So, I need to tolerate having to stay here. I go back and forth between Myanmar and Thailand to work for the past 6 years. I used to work at a construction, and was paid 270 Baht (9 USD) a day, but the employer is not good. So, I changed job. Now I work in housekeeping. I’m paid 10,000 Baht (328 USD) a month. Due to the pandemic, I just stay at the house where I work. But because I have to stay at the employer’s house I have to work more and longer hours. I don’t have freedom.

Whether they stayed or returned home, their lives and livelihoods have been severely disrupted.

Myanmar government response to COVID-19

Focusing on the biomedical impact of the pandemic, the situation in Myanmar barely registers compared to many other countries, despite sharing a border with China, where the current coronavirus was first reported in late 2019. Myanmar initially appeared to be lightly affected in terms of numbers of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths. But infection rates went up dramatically from

⁶Weiyi Cai and K.K. Rebecca Lai, 28 April 2020. Packed With Migrant Workers, Dormitories Fuel Coronavirus in Singapore, New York Times. Downloaded from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/28/world/asia/coronavirus-singapore-migrants.html>, on 8 August 2020.

August. As of 31 October 2020, 52,706 people had been infected, with 1,237 deaths and 32,774 recoveries (according to official statistics).⁷ Yet the socioeconomic impacts (e.g., job losses, disruption in peoples' lives and livelihoods, etc.) have been as severe as in many other countries with much higher numbers of infection.

Southeast Asian government responses have varied. The immediate response typically was to impose restrictions on movement through lockdowns of various degrees and extents, and to allocate funds for testing kits, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for health workers, and emergency relief for citizens, especially low-income households. But emergency relief support has varied in terms of amount, categories and number of recipients. Looking at how national governments have acted might shed light on which responses are effective in assisting those in desperate situations. Tables 1 and 2 provide a comparative view of official responses in terms of budget allocated, as tracked by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) as of 26 May 2020.⁸ Because different countries and governments have different financial capabilities based on size and strength of their economy, and national planners may calculate the threat of the pandemic differently, these data should be viewed with caution.

Table 1: Southeast Asian government responses to Covid-19, in total value

Country	Total COVID-19 package, in US\$
Thailand	84.1 billion
Indonesia	64.3 billion
Singapore	45.1 billion
Malaysia	35.5 billion
Vietnam	26.4 billion
Philippines	19.8 billion
Cambodia	2.1 billion
Brunei	318.1 million
Timor-Leste	254 million
Myanmar	99 million
Laos	10 million

Source: Asian Development Bank (2020)

Table 2: Southeast Asian government responses to Covid-19, in value, per capita

Country	Total COVID-19 package, in
Singapore	7,991.68
Thailand	1,211.20
Malaysia	1,125.15
Brunei	741.61
Vietnam	276.28
Indonesia	240.13
Timor-Leste	200.32
Philippines	185.86
Cambodia	126.77
Myanmar	1.84
Laos	1.46

Source: Asian Development Bank (2020).

Data from May 2020 shows that Myanmar is together with Laos at the bottom of the list in terms of total amount and per capita amount of response to Covid-19. Yet Myanmar is now the third most affected country in Southeast Asia in terms of Covid-19 infection, hospitalization and death as of mid-November 2020. It is important to distinguish between biomedical impact on the one hand, and socio-economic impact on the other hand, when considering the pandemic and government responses to it. The socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, especially on migrant workers and their families, have been profoundly negative and the effects will continue to be felt for a long while to come. So it is useful to take a closer look at government response (see Tables 1 and 2).

On 21 April 2020 the Myanmar government announced a comprehensive response called the Covid-19 Economic Relief Plan (CERP). By mid-May international development institutions had pledged up to US\$2 billion in aid for CERP. By July a total of US\$1.25 billion in loans had been received: US\$700 million from International Monetary Fund, \$270 million from Japan, \$250 million from the World Bank and \$30 million from the Asian Development Bank.¹⁰

During this period, the government spent (a) US\$ 36.8 million on food package support in April; (b) US\$ 15.5 million on financial support to households between June and July, where 1.4 million households each received a payment of 15,000 kyats (US\$11.00). The government reportedly planned to provide payments of 20,000 Kyats (US\$14.72) in the last week of July to 5.4 million

⁷Myanmar Union Government, Ministry of Health and Sports (2020). Situation of Covid-19 Infection and Mortality in Myanmar. Facebook. 31 October 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/MinistryOfHealthAndSportsMyanmar/photos/pbc.3920932044602738/3920931054602837/>. Downloaded 10 November 2020.

⁸De Vera, Ben (2020), 'PH ranks 8th in Southeast Asia response to COVID-19', Philippine daily Inquirer. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1280799/ph-ranks-8th-in-southeast-asia-response-to-covid-19>. Downloaded, 28 May 2020.

⁹Nan Lwin (2020). Myanmar to Receive \$2B in COVID-19 Relief from Int'l Development Organizations. The Irrawaddy. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-receive-2b-covid-19-relief-intl-development-organizations.html>; downloaded 29 August 2020.

¹⁰Myanmar Union Government (2020). State Counsellor discusses remedies to lessen COVID-19 impacts on economy. <https://www.statecouncillor.gov.mm/en/node/2910>; downloaded 29 August 2020.

households who have no regular source of income.¹¹ It also planned to release 600 billion kyats (US\$ 428 million) for special relief loans for farmers covering 12 million acres from June to September 2020. Calculated at 50,000 Kyats (US\$ 35.7) loans per acre, at 5 percent annual interest rate starting this month, the loans reportedly aim to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the agricultural sector.¹² The amount of CERP loans to be disbursed before the end of 2020 was later raised from 200 billion Kyats to 500 billion Kyats (or up to US\$ 365 million), and by July 2020, more than 2,000 small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) had already received low-interest loans.¹³



*Cattle-drawn cart, Dry Zone
Photo by Jun Borras (2019)*

The pandemic and the government measures to address it (e.g. (semi)lockdown) will impact different groups of people differently. From the perspective of working people, is the government taking the best path to addressing the crisis and its effects? The answer to this question is open to debate (see Bello et al. 2020). Government assistance measures may benefit some, but not others. Who is being prioritized in government support packages? Who is being left on their own to cope? Many landless rural working people do not qualify for pandemic-related farming loans, nor do they qualify for pandemic-related funds set aside for small and medium size enterprises. Yet they are among those whose need for support is most urgent.

We interviewed a 40-year-old man from Magwe, married with two small children, who went back to Myanmar from China on 1 April. He said:

I don't have any job at the moment. I used to do all sorts of work in and around Pakokku, and I could earn up to 5,000 Kyats on a day I have work; less when I

work as a peanut picker. I wanted to raise animals, but we have no capital. I heard that the government is lending some money for farming, but I have no farmland. We stay in a rented house. At least the house owners allow us to take some fruits from the fruit trees around the house for consumption. I have to wait for November, and hope that the coronavirus is over so that I can go back to China to work as a sugarcane cutter. But for now, I don't know how we are going to survive.

Local responses to the global pandemic

Containing the spread of the coronavirus is an urgent challenge for local communities (neighborhood and village). At this level, the efforts and interactions of different actors (state and non-state), and how these matter for migrant workers, can also be felt concretely. Based on our interviews, frontline health workers seem to be doing their best to help migrant workers get home safely, while also keeping their home communities safe. Different types of quarantine arrangements have emerged: some are government-run, others are run by local religious groups, or NGOs and charity organizations. There are also many community-driven initiatives, for example, make-shift dwellings constructed just outside their villages for returning migrant workers to quarantine. The pandemic has shown the importance of community solidarity and voluntary support systems.

In many rural areas, the pre-existing health system and social security infrastructure is often in a poor and precarious condition and in urgent need of improvements, despite the presence of dedicated frontline health and social welfare workers. In addition to interviewing rank and file staff of a local rural health clinic attending to the needs of migrant workers returning to their home villages, we also interviewed several individuals working in organizations assisting migrant workers returning through the Muse border crossing (Northern Shan State).

One staff member of a volunteer organization in Muse described the situation in May 2020:

We also get support from the respective township and district Covid-19 Pandemic management committees. They give support when we need it in terms of masks, hand gel, medicine, food, etc. The only challenge we faced previously was the limit set by the Shan State Government to transport only 400 people per day to the next transit. But we were receiving more than 400; up to 700. We had to send the people from Muse to Lashio

¹¹Nyein Nyein (2020). Myanmar Takes US\$250 M Loan from ADB for COVID-19 Relief. The Irrawaddy. 29 July 2020. <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-takes-us250-m-loan-adb-covid-19-relief.html/amp>; downloaded 29 August 2020.

¹²Mizzima (2020). Myanmar provides 31.8 billion kyats loans to vulnerable business affected by the COVID-19. Mizzima. 25 June 2020. <http://mizzima.com/article/myanmar-provides-318-billion-kyats-loans-vulnerable-business-affected-covid-19>; downloaded 29 August 2020.

¹³Flanders Trade (2020). CORONAVIRUS - The situation in Myanmar. 21 October 2020.

by train, the capacity of which is only around 400. But later, we negotiated with the government and they adjusted the limit. In Muse, the quarantine centers are set up at a Chinese-language school (only males are accommodated here), a high school and a football field. Most donations come from the town. Usually, the migrants have to spend around 3 nights in Muse for health check and other information gathering, then they can proceed to their destination quarantine centers. However, for the people from Wuhan and other faraway locations in China, or those who were sent from prison there, they have to go through quarantine in Muse. There are about 17 CSOs (including charity groups, fire departments, health support groups) in Muse. Not all of them play a major role but all of them participated to some level. We take responsibilities for health, sanitation, food, etc. We have coordination meetings with Government authorities from time to time. For example, when there are quotas received from Government regarding the supplies – masks, hand gels – we would discuss among ourselves who should get what amount and provide to where. It costs about 700,000 Kyats [US\$500] per day to produce about 500 meal boxes, which is the estimated regular supply. We have been supporting this process since January, since there was an outbreak in China.

From the border towns through to the migrant workers' destination communities, local community volunteers are on the frontlines, helping to establish and maintain safe quarantine centers. They must also manage fears that returning migrant workers would bring the virus with them. One respondent, a 43-year-old man who heads a medium size quarantine center in Magwe, told us he is "also discouraged by others being over afraid of the returnees. Yes, it can be infectious but it is manageable." Villagers in home communities have donated a significant amount of time, labour, money and logistics to deal with the emergency situation of migrant workers returning amidst a pandemic. The same respondent went on to explain about the operations of his local quarantine center:

Our center is aimed for the migrants returning from across the border. It is located at a meditation center. Usually for the meditation purpose, about 150 people can stay here. But for quarantine purposes, only about 60 people can stay. Currently [that is, sometime in April], there were 29 people being quarantined (21 male, 8 female). Since the beginning, about 80 people have already finished quarantine process. The youngest age is 18-year-old and the oldest is 45-year-old. We do not get financial assistance from the Government. We don't have special rules for the center, but have to follow guidelines produced by the Government. The township authorities would come and

supervise the center but they could not provide financial support. However, our ward supervisor group does not even come and see the center. They come only when they need to send people for quarantine. The center is the joint self-initiative by interested youth and volunteers who are eager to work for the community welfare from different wards. We raised fund together. In practice, there are two full time volunteers: me and a cook, plus two other volunteers. The township authorities and health department staff come and take the temperatures of people under quarantine once every 2-3 days so that they can make referral if anyone is sick. The doctor himself does not come. The center is run by the donations from the community. We already used about 10 million Kyats. We have a treasurer and an accountant. For one person in quarantine, if we have to feed every day, it cost about 100,000 Kyats [US\$ 74] for the whole process. For a long time, we bought meals from outside shops, but now we're cooking for them. For now, the market is temporarily closed so we have to use money from our funds to open a temporary grocery shop as well. We also need masks for the volunteers. When the demand was high, we had to pay as much as 600 Kyats [US\$ 0.50] per mask. We are able to support the people in quarantine as best as we can. We were able to open temporary grocery stores, and pharmacy shops on our own. We can link with other quarantine centers in the neighborhood. The difficult thing is that, except me, no one can work as a fulltime volunteer. Some people just participated for a show.

Rank-and-file rural health workers are on the frontlines in neighborhoods and villages. They have face-to-face interaction with returning migrant workers and persons suspected to be infected and oversee what is to be done. They carry out demanding and difficult tasks with meagre resources and often without PPE, since donated medical supplies (gloves, mask, hand gel, etc.) often go to bigger hospitals and clinics first. Everything must be done with care and a sense of urgency. Many health workers are also from the local communities they serve, so they can be seen as part of broader concerted community action in the time of emergency.

A male rural health worker from Magwe shared his experience with us in May 2020:

During this pandemic, the health department has to carry out two tasks. One is for treatment and the other is to provide basic health education. Health education related to Covid-19 has to be provided by basic health staff (health assistant, nurse, midwife, community health worker). We also have to check the migrant returnees as well as the suspected patients. We also have to support the health check gates. We have to

monitor the health status of the people under quarantine. We have to give Covid-related health education, surveillance of suspected patients, and make referrals. There is no separate support from the Governmental departments for the quarantine process. When we provide health care to the people under quarantine, we used medicines which were previously supported by the Ministry of Health and Sports for the routine health activities. We also use donations from

the donors. Health workers have to use essential protective materials which are donated by the donors, procured through own arrangement or with the support from the communities. The Health Ministry has provided 50 masks to each rural health center since the pandemic was announced within the country. We also got 500 ml hand gel. Other than that, we have not received other things. Most of the donations went to the hospitals or clinics which can provide secondary or

Table 3: Migrant workers from the Dry Zone, Shan and Mon States experiences during the pandemic
N = 120; Dry Zone: 38; Shan State: 74; Mon State: 23

Issue	Migrants from Dry Zone	Migrants from Shan	Migrants from Mon	Total
Lost jobs or abandoned job because of the pandemic, whether went home to Myanmar or staying at country of work	16	47	16	79
Spent own money to travel from work site to home village	13	38	14	65
Quarantined in/near their village, or house compound, or IDP camp	11	37	14	62
Own expenses/maintenance during quarantine	9	25	9	43
Government health workers regular check-up (temperature etc.,) during quarantine	7	16	4	27
No support from government to come home and during quarantine	8	16	6	30
Received support from government to come home and/or during quarantine	3	7	3	13
Support from family, community and humanitarian groups during travel back home and quarantine	7	16	12	35

Note: Based on interviews in 2020, N = 120: Dry Zone: 23; Shan: 74; Mon: 23

Fig 1: Number of migrant workers from the Dry Zone, Shan and Mon States who lost/abandoned jobs because of the pandemic, and percentage share of the interviewed migrant workers in each region/state

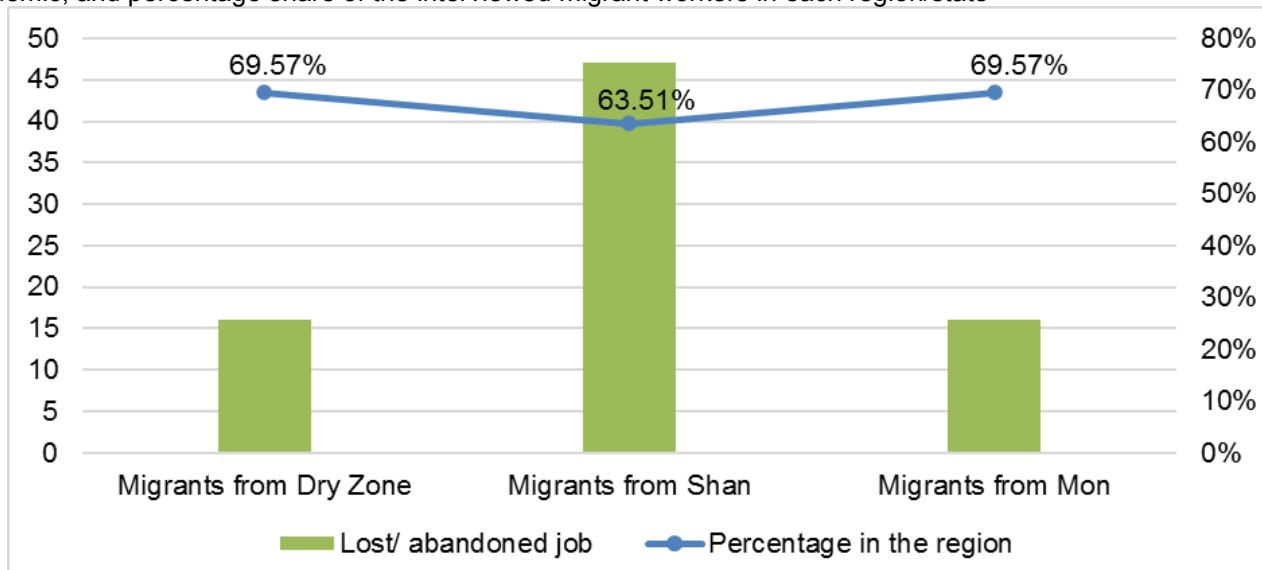
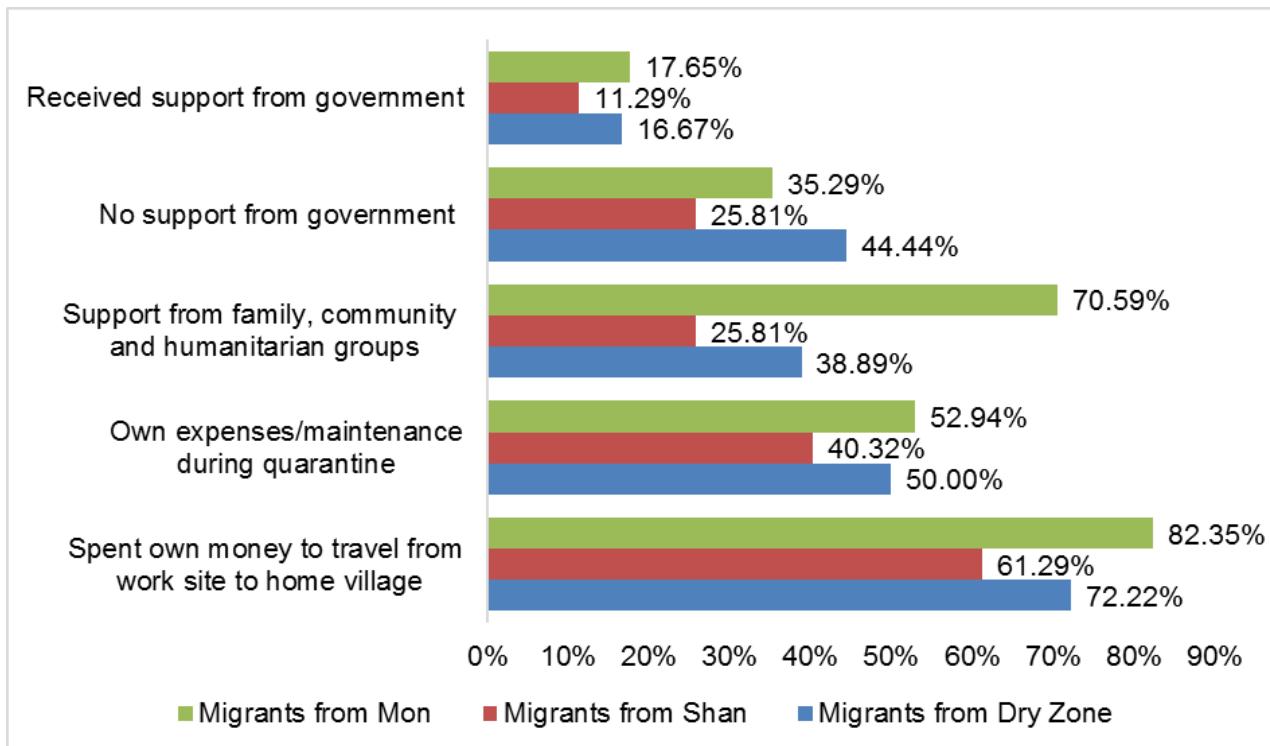


Fig 2: Support that migrant workers received coming back home and/or during quarantine



Note: here the percentage is calculated based on the number of the migrant workers who returned home. As shown in Annex 1, Dry Zone: 8; Shan: 16; Mon: 6

tertiary treatment. From those centers, only a few are shared back to the community health centers. So overall, we can see that basic health staff who are the first contact for the suspected patients do not have sufficient protective materials. Since March 2020, basic health staff cannot take leave or holidays. And then we have to check the businesses operating in our areas whether they are complying with rules and regulations passed by the Health Ministry. There is no support whatsoever to the basic health staff for this kind of community monitoring activities (for example, transport costs, food costs, protective equipment, etc.). Based on my observation, health care support in quarantine center locations in different regions and states are not the same. In some areas and townships, General Administrative Departments took care of necessary logistics and other needs. For those communities with strong cooperation, things are smooth. As the pandemic drags on, donations decrease and more gaps faced by the basic health staff in terms of physical, psychological and burn out aspects.

Key insight

Out of the 120 migrant workers interviewed during the pandemic, 79 (roughly two out of every three) either lost their job or abandoned their job because of the pandemic (see Table 3, Fig 1 and Fig 2). Losing or giving up their income is a deeply dramatic disruption for any individual. That so many people found themselves in this situation makes it even more dramatic. But that it hap-

pened in a sector that is a major contributor to the national economy is profoundly consequential for the whole society. Seen in this light, one might expect migrant workers to be among the first to receive government support.

Yet this has not really happened, according to our findings. Out of 120 interviewees, only 13 said they received government support, while 30 interviewees said they did not receive government support (apart from that received from health workers and administrators in quarantine centers at the village level – see Table 3). A broadly similar response pattern emerged in all the regions of our study (see Fig 2). Many Mon respondents in particular said they “received support from family, community and humanitarian groups during travel back home and quarantine”. Even if not all the issues covered by our list of questions received equal emphasis by either interviewers or interviewees, these findings are significant. The two entries in Table 3 -- “spent own money to travel from work site to home village” with a total frequency of 65 and “received support from government to come home and/or during quarantine” with a total frequency of 13 (and its related entry “no support from government to come home and during quarantine” with a frequency of 30) -- suggest a major contradiction: migrant workers give so much to the national economy and were hugely affected by the pandemic, but have received little, if any, support from the government, despite the existence of a substantial pandemic-related government support fund.

Section 3: Migrant workers as super-coveted and grossly-underpaid ‘superworkers’

It takes about 5 travel days to reach my work site in China. We went to the border checkpoint by bus and it costs 20,000 Kyats (16 USD). We applied for a red book which allows us to enter China legally and stay there for a few days legally. After that, we worked as illegal. Our Chinese brokers brought us to one place by car and it costs 25 Yuan (4 USD). From there, we had to take the bus, and then a car again, for 2 days and 3 nights. We had to pay a month salary of each of us to brokers. I worked at a fish company for seven months. I had to cut the fish and put them to the ice-box, and also had to measure the fish-box, and packing. The company provided us a dormitory for workers. I earned about 2,500 Yuan (378 USD) per month. When the pandemic started happening, the company didn't allow us to go outside the dormitory. I was worried about the pandemic and so I decided to go back home. I came back to Myanmar by my own expenses, and the brokers brought us back. I had to pay my one month salary to brokers for the cost of going home. Overall, I worked for 7 months. I used two months of wages to pay my cost going there, and my cost coming back home. No one helped me to get home during the pandemic. (50 year-old woman from Northern Shan State)

Migrant workers contribute not only to the Myanmar economy, but also to the economy of their work-site countries. The countries where they work need labour, but not just any kind of labour. Migrant workers typically perform jobs that the domestic workforce avoids for various reasons – for instance, jobs involving heavy manual labour, lowest paying jobs, and the most precarious jobs in terms of time and security of tenure. A common say-

ing among Burmese migrant workers in Thailand is that they work the ‘3Ds’: dirty, dangerous and difficult. Many such jobs are in secondary or smaller cities, small and medium towns, or remote rural areas, and may range from construction and restaurant support jobs, to car washing and housekeeping services.

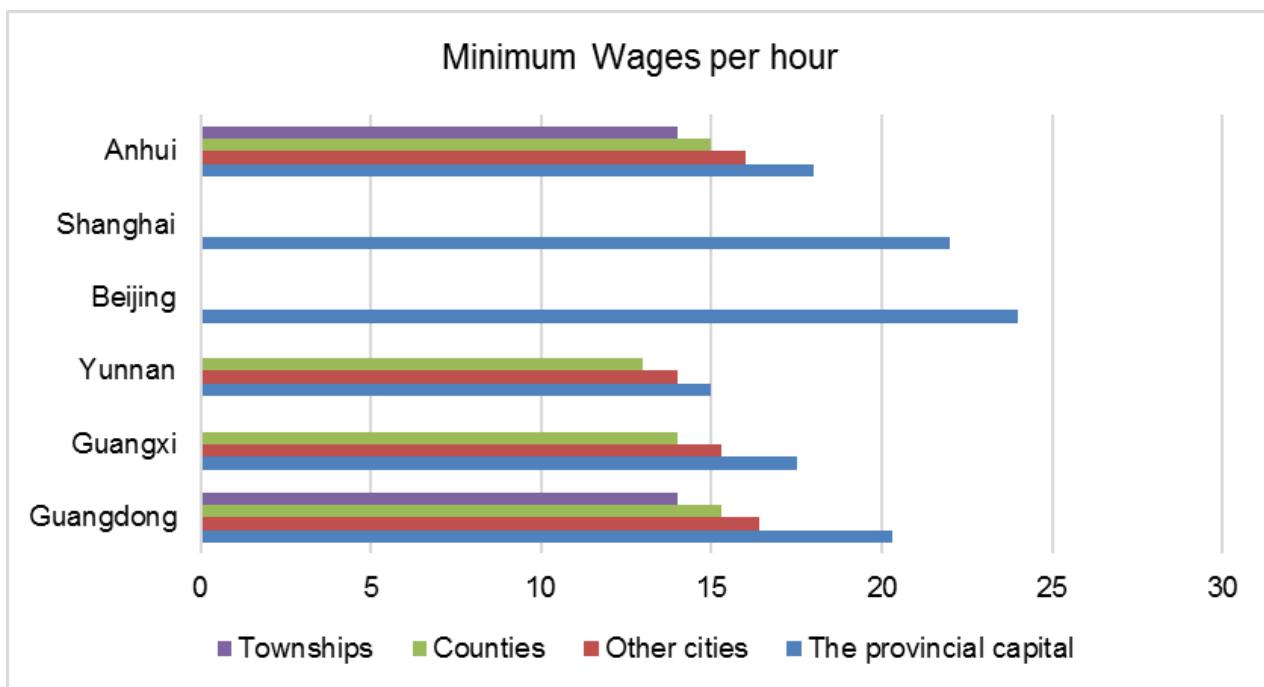
A lot of migrant labour is in seasonal agriculture-related work: oil palm plantations in Malaysia, rubber plantations in Thailand, or sugarcane farms in southern China, for example. Connecting potential workers to available farm work in distant places is a challenge. Even if someone looking for such work finds it, the next challenge is organizing transportation and accommodation. Farmsites might be kilometers outside village or town centers; affordable accommodation and convenient public transportation may be lacking. For individual farmers or plantation owners, finding enough workers at the right time and for the right length of stay is a challenge, as is organizing accommodation and transportation.

For this reason migrant farmwork tends to be organized through layers of informal, even illegal, labour brokers. Labour brokers often recruit workers from their own home countries and villages and act as labour work team leaders at the work site. They may change from one farm to the next; they may or may not be the one who deals with the farm owners. The principal labour contractor contracts with the farm owners, directly employs the migrant workers, sets up the workers' accommodation, and organizes daily transportation to and from the work site.

But it is the migrant workers themselves who tend to shoulder the costs and burdens within the system, making it profitable for both the owners of capital and the

Fig 3: Minimum wage standards in Guangdong, Guangxi, Yunnan, Beijing, Shanghai and Anhui, in RMB yuan)





Note: The date of data is up to 31 March 2020.

Source: http://www.mohrss.gov.cn/SYrlzyhshbz/liaodongguanxi/_fwyd/202004/t20200426_366507.html

Note: Beijing has the highest minimum wage per hour; Shanghai has the highest minimum wage per month. Anhui has the lowest minimum wage per month, and Yunnan has the lowest minimum wage per hour

Tier 1: applicable in provincial capitals; Tier 2: other cities; Tier 3: counties; Tier 4: townships

labour brokers. From recruitment to border-crossing, accessing work sites, organizing accommodation, in normal times and during emergencies – all these social processes involve migrant workers entering into complex social relations dominated by the owners of capital and by labour brokers (migrant labour entrepreneurs, moneylenders, merchants, scammers, swindlers, thieves, etc.), all along the continuum between work sites (sites of economic production) and home villages (sites of social reproduction).

Informality and illegality

Studies about Myanmar migrant workers often highlight the informal and illegal character of these social processes. Many migrant workers stay and work at the countries of job site without the necessary legal permits to stay and work. Many others are in the grey area between what is legal and illegal, for example, initially entering the country where they work with the proper permits, but then overstaying past the expiration. How can the relevant authorities remain ignorant to the presence of masses of migrant workers within their jurisdictions, busy in the fields and traveling daily between the fields and their encampments? Probably they do not. But migrant workers are so crucial for business owners and the host country's economy and therefore coveted by government and employers alike, that law violations that enable them to stay and work are deliberately overlooked. The precarious situation of the workers is revealed only when anti-migrant sentiment in the wider

society rises; this happened, for example, in Malaysia and Singapore during the pandemic.

Informality and illegality -- and the underlying unequal power relations between the owners of capital and those who have no choice but to sell their labour power to survive -- helps to ensure the relative cheapness of migrant labour. Owners of capital and labour brokers can more easily avoid giving illegal migrant workers legally mandated minimum wage standards (wages, benefits, and working conditions). They can more easily avoid paying the costs of labour social reproduction: health care, child care, social insurance, pension, paid holidays, paid sick leave, maternity and paternity leave, over time and working holiday wage differentials. If formalized, the use of migrant labour by business owners would entail legal obligations around minimum wages, welfare benefits, and working conditions; the costs of avoiding these would go up. If formalized, the functions that labour brokers currently perform would be subject to legal rules and regulations that would reduce or eliminate opportunities of capital accumulation if followed.

This does not mean that formalization/legalization of migrant work in itself or alone necessarily or automatically guarantees better wages, benefits or working conditions for migrant workers. Our research suggests that deeper changes are needed in the both the sending and receiving societies.

Comparing the legally-mandated minimum wage in Myanmar, to that in southern China, Thailand and Malaysia (destination countries of migrant labour coming from Myanmar), cannot explain the existence or persistence of migrant labour. But it does show that the levels of wages paid to Myanmar migrant workers are at best at the mandated minimum wage standards in those societies.

A number of issues are linked to this:

(a) the minimum wage standard differs significantly between Myanmar and the destination countries of Myanmar migrant workers,

(b) the minimum wage standard in these destination countries is relatively low in their own contexts, and is part of the reason why local people stay away from the kinds of work that migrant workers do,

(c) labour brokers direct and maintain labour flows from Myanmar to these destination countries (and back again) to a large extent; they are a key part of the

largely informal and illegal cross-border labour flow architecture; this positions them to take – largely unimpeded -- major cuts from migrant workers' already grossly underpaid wages,

(d) the widespread informality within which much migrant work is embedded reinforces the tendency toward relatively high degrees of wage exploitation and precarious work conditions, and

(f) the social and health insurance and other workers' rights and benefits one would expect in a regular employment are quite rare.

Many China-bound Myanmar migrant workers go to Yunnan, where the minimum wage in townships, counties and small cities (other than the capital city) ranges from 1,350 Yuan to 1,670 Yuan per month (or 204 USD to 253 USD), and hourly rate of 14 Yuan to 17.5 Yuan (or 2 USD to 3 USD , respectively) as of March 2020 (see Fig 4).¹⁴ These rates are low, found only in poorer provinces like Yunnan, as well as in non-major cities in



*Rice cultivation in northern Shan State
Photo by Tom Kramer*

Table 4: Minimum wage/month in Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, and China (Yunnan) in USD

Country/Province	Minimum wage	Remarks
Myanmar	97	As of late 2019
Thailand	272	As of 2018, lower scale
Malaysia	272	In 2019
China (Yunnan)	203	In 2020, in township and county level
China (Yunnan)	230	In 2020, in small and medium cities, but not in Kunming

Source: compilation by authors from various sources.

¹⁴Exchange rate based on XE foreign exchange rate on 11 November 2020: <https://www.xe.com>.

these poorer provinces, such as those in townships and counties where many of the Myanmar migrant workers work, especially in agriculture (like sugarcane cutting). These rates are quite low compared to the minimum wage standards in key Chinese cities like Shanghai, which has 2,480 Yunnan per month (375 USD), or per hour 22 Yuan (3 USD) minimum wage standard. It is no wonder that, increasingly, Chinese labour prefer to work in key cities and provinces with higher minimum wage standards.

This creates the condition for demand for cheap labour to surge in agricultural areas and in small to medium towns and cities inside China. Many rural villages across China today stand half-empty because of a massive rural-urban migration that has occurred in many counties. But another way to see these places is as *half-filled* with ‘left-behind’ populations, usually children, the elderly, and the ill or in poor health (e.g., household members typically left behind by those who migrate to urban centers for relatively better paying regular wage work).¹⁵ Migrant workers from Myanmar (and elsewhere) are, in a way, repopulating these rural communities in China, even if only temporarily or seasonally. And their absence from their own home villages, in turn, creates a similar ‘left-behind population’ situation in rural Myanmar.

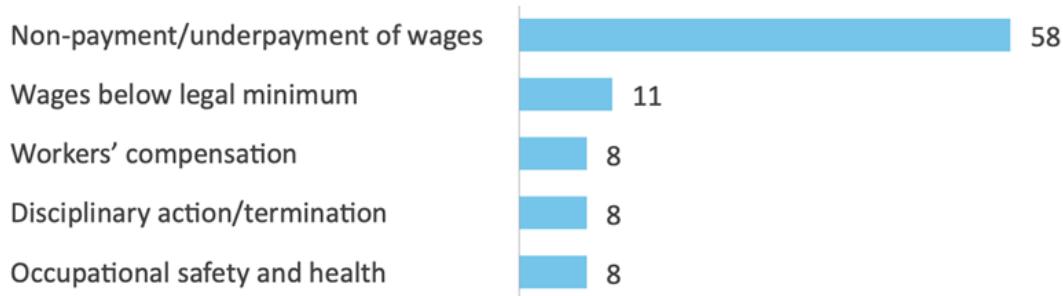
Change in rural villages across Myanmar is thus linked

to change in rural villages in China. Even the low minimum wage standards in the townships and counties of poorer provinces in China, although lower than in Shanghai or Guangdong, are much higher than the mandated minimum wage in Myanmar which is 4,800 Kyats per day (3.7 USD) (beginning in 2019). The minimum wage in Myanmar could more or less be 115,000 Kyats (89 USD) per month at 24 working days a month – or about a third of the lowest possible minimum wage levels for farmwork one can find in Yunnan. As a reference point, a kilo of an average quality rice is more or less 1,500 Kyats (1.2USD), roughly a third of the mandated legal minimum wage per day.

Further, payment for work in the agricultural sector in China is usually on a piece rate basis, so workers can opt to overwork in order to earn more. Many do over-work, despite the increased risk of exhaustion, serious illness or accident that this can entail. A 30-year old Ta’ang man from Shan State shared his experience:

I worked for four months in China cutting sugarcane. My earnings depend on how much sugarcane I cut. There were nine Myanmar people including me working together. We worked from morning after breakfast, had a short lunch break, and continued working until late evening. I don’t know exactly how many hours we work. We just worked as much as we could because if we

Fig 4: Five most common types of complaints by Southeast Asian (including Myanmar) migrant workers in Thailand (N=160)



Source: Harkins and Ahlberg (2017: 26)

Fig 5: Five most common types of complaints by Southeast Asia (including Myanmar) migrant workers in Malaysia (N=263)



Source: Harkins and Ahlberg (2017: 25)

¹⁵On China’s ‘left behind’ population, see Ye et al. (2013) and Ye (2018).

could cut more, we earn more money. We earn an average of 2,000 Yuan (303 USD) per month. The place where we worked was in the village. During the pandemic, there was no special prevention materials provided to us. But we were not allowed to go to town and other places. We only had to stay at our work place in the village to prevent the transmission.

The dynamic is similar between Myanmar's rural areas and migrant workers' other important destination countries. As of 2018, the minimum wages in Thailand, depending on the regions, are from 313 Baht to 336 Bath (10.3 to 11 USD) (see Table 4).¹⁶ If they work on the lower level of this scale, and work for 24 days in a month, they can earn up to 350,000 Kyats (272 UD), as long as they receive the full minimum wage, and do not have to spend too much for accommodation and food expenses, and for labour brokers. And in Malaysia in 2019, the minimum wage was RM1,100 (= 267 USD) and is supposed to increase in 2020 to RM1,200 per month (of 24 working days).¹⁷ The minimum wage in Myanmar is from half to a third of those in China, Thailand, and Malaysia.

Based on our interviews, a migrant worker can earn around 300,000 Kyats (233 USD) a month in farmwork, especially sugarcane cutting, and in odd jobs in townships and small cities in Yunnan. This is just about the minimum wage for those areas in Yunnan (but without any of the legally-mandated, non-wage benefits that a Chinese worker would normally enjoy). But this minimum wage level can only be earned by working non-stop for 7 days a week (not 5 days a week) for one month, and in some sectors such as sugarcane cutting, by working super long hours each day since wages are usually calculated on a piece rate basis. Many of the wage and non-wage benefits that are taken for granted elsewhere in the world today – overtime pay and weekend and holiday differentials, paid sick leave, social security, and health insurance -- are rare-to-non-existent for migrant labour. In addition, migrant workers often must pay to secure a job in the first place, spending money even before they start earning on fees for labourer brokers, transportation to the job site, and permits to stay (when relevant). On the positive side, food and accommodation are almost always supplied free of charge, at least in farmwork in China. See Table 5 and Fig 7 further below.

Living and working conditions at the work sites

My eyes are not good and I often go to a clinic. At the same time, I cut my hand by myself while I am cutting sugarcane. It was difficult to get treatment there. That is why I came back home. Although the accident hap-

pened at work, the employer did not give anything for the treatment. The employer also did not give the daily wage during the days I could not work because of the accident. So, I decided to go home. But the end of the sugarcane cutting season was only in May. So, my employer did not give me the full payment of my earned wages, only one-third. I used that money to go back home. (A 30-year-old man from Magwe)

Many people we interviewed stressed two points: (1) they can potentially earn twice or three times as much working outside as they could working inside Myanmar, and (2) when it becomes possible they intend to go back to China or Thailand or Malaysia to work. Eagerness to return does not mean they do not have serious problems at their work sites. Even before the coronavirus pandemic, not every migrant worker was lucky enough to receive a minimum wage or to enjoy good working conditions, as suggested by a 2017 ILO report by Harkins and Ahlberg on access to justice with specific reference to migrant workers from Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam) working in the region (see Fig 5 and Fig 6).¹⁸

One often hears casual remarks about wages and working conditions being better in Malaysia and Thailand than in China. But the same ILO study (cited above) suggests that the situation is probably similar across the three countries, as shown by the frequency of complaints by migrant workers in Thailand and Malaysia (see Fig 5 and Fig 6 above). Additionally, not giving full wages -- either by paying below the minimum wage standard or by withholding wages -- was not unique to the pandemic era; it appears to be routine in the world of migrant labour.

Take the experience of a 44-year-old woman from Mon State who worked in Thailand:

I attended school up to fourth grade. I stopped and worked in order to help out my parents and look after my siblings. I learned sewing skill, and worked as a seamstress. I had a major accident with the sewing machine's needle and had to stop working. With the help of my aunt, I opened a small garment shop in the main market in our township. But I was very young and inexperienced in running a business. Many people took goods from my store, promised to pay, but never did. I had to close the store. Without permission from my parents, together with my friends, I started to sell salt and coconuts to the houses in Yangon that made ice cream. Without luck and success, partly due to high living cost in Yangon, after one year, I had to give up and went back to my village.

¹⁶<https://www.nationthailand.com/news/30379141>; downloaded 02 June 2020.

¹⁷<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2020/01/14/new-minimum-wage-gazetted>; downloaded 02 June 2020.

¹⁸https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_565877.pdf

But I could not bear seeing my parents struggle to survive. I wanted to help. Without letting my parents know, I sold the earrings they gave me, and loaned additional money from the labour broker with interest for the overall labour broker's fee of 300,000 Kyats (233 USD) to go and work in Thailand. At first, I worked at a historical museum with a lady friend who had been working in Thailand for long. My job was to serve the museum guests with soft drinks and tea drinks. The boss arranged for us food and accommodation but did not pay us regularly. I did not have legal permit to work so I dared not report to anyone. I quit the job. With the help from another friend, I started to work in a construction site where many villagers from my township were already working. I have to carry the liquid cement, bricks, and helped in laying out tiles. I could earn up to 300 baht (9.9 USD) per day [or 290,000 Kyats (225 USD) a month, in a 24-day work month]. During my free time, I looked for waste construction materials and

empty softdrink cans, and sold them to earn extra cash. The work was highly dangerous for women and I faced many difficulties to work among many men. For example, we have to share the same toilets, bathrooms and canteen which made me feel uncomfortable. That is why, I had to marry a man who liked me and asked me to marry. He became my husband, and he is a divorcee and has 3 daughters in his first marriage.

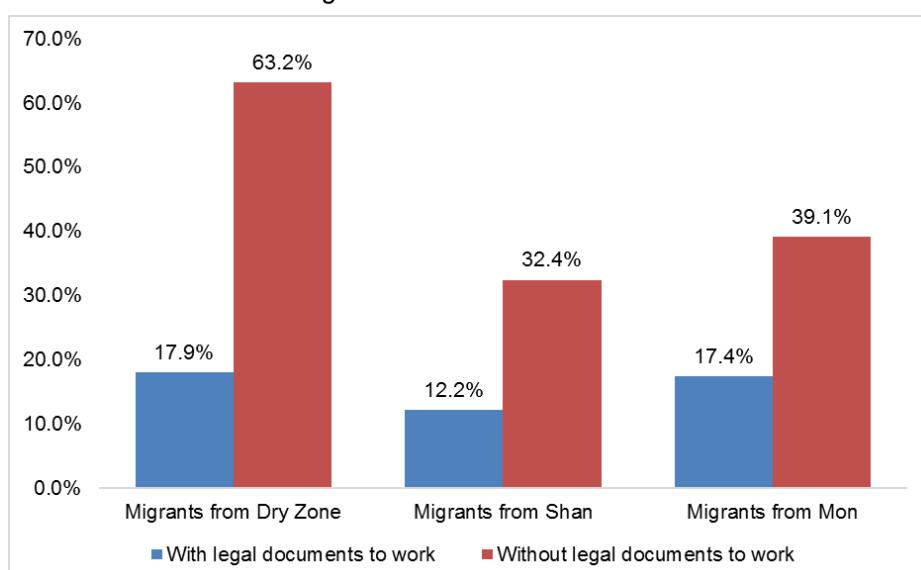
During the early pandemic period in April 2020, we heard that the elder sister of my husband was suffering from a late stage of blood cancer. So, we came back to Myanmar despite many difficulties and bribed many checkpoints along the way to reach to our village. But unluckily, we did not arrive back in time to see the elder sister alive but was able to see her face one last time at the funeral. We were able to join the funeral but on the next day, we had to go into quarantine for 14 days. There was no wage work in our village. We cannot af-

Table 5: Migrant workers from the Dry Zone, Shan and Mon States conditions at the work site

Issue	Migrants from Dry Zone	Migrants from Shan State	Migrants from Mon State	Total
With legal documents to work	7	9	4	20
Without legal documents to work	24	24	9	57
Paid labour brokers to find job and travel to work site, and/or pay portion of wages	20	15	13	48
Earning 115,000 Kyats or below a month (equivalent to 24 days' work at the new 2018 minimum wage standard in Myanmar)	0	0	0	0
Earning 115,000-299,000 Kyats a month	11	10	2	23
Earning 300,000 Kyats or more a month	22	17	7	46

Note: based on interviews in 2019 and 2020, N = 136: Dry Zone: 39; Shan State: 74; Mon State: 23

Fig 6: Share of migrant workers with/without legal documents to work



ford not to have wage earnings. So we decided to return to Thailand through illegal rough trek. We had to pay 10 lahks (1,000,000 Kyats or 777 USD) for each person. But on the way, we were blocked by the Government and the ethnic armed group, and so we had to take refuge at a village for 3 nights. And then, we had to trek through the forest and when we reached the top of the hill, we had to stay at the house in a Karen village for 3 nights and then later reached to the Thai side. Even though we had to travel on a very rough journey, we are still convinced that the migrant worker life is most suitable for us.

Key insight

Each person's story may differ slightly, but we do find patterns emerging from the aggregated responses of the 136 migrant workers interviewed (see Table 5 and Fig 7).

First, 57 respondents said they worked illegally, while 20 said they worked legally (or a ratio of 3:1 illegal/legal work). The silence on this issue of the remaining 59 people interviewed is significant. Some may not be comfortable talking about their own situation, and so it is notable that 42% -- almost half -- of our interviewees did not remain silent but said they worked illegally. Most of those who reported working illegally were from the Dry Zone (almost two-thirds), while Shan and Mon States accounted for one-third and two-fifths, respectively.

Second, 35% -- or just over one third -- of those interviewed reported making payments to one or more layers of labour brokers (e.g., to find a job, to travel to the work site, etc) and/or paying a portion of their wages to these labour brokers. This is more or less the same percentage found using a large survey in a study by Deshingkar et al. (2019); the Deshingkar study found the mean amounts paid to broker as follows: 250,000 Kyats (194 USD) for China-bound, 500,000 Kyats (388 USD) for Thailand-bound, and 1,500,000 Kyats (1,163 USD) for Malaysia-bound workers. In our study, respondents reported paying fees to brokers ranging from 100,000 Kyats to 1,000,000 Kyats (78 to 776 USD). These are huge amounts for people already in debt and distress.

Third, regarding wages, the legally mandated minimum wage in Myanmar since late 2018 is 115,000 (89 USD) per month on the assumption of 24 working days in a month. Only half of the total number of migrant workers who participated in our study mentioned the range of their monthly salary. Close to one-fifth said that it is in the range of 200,000 Kyats (155 USD) a month. One-third reported their income as almost three times higher than the Myanmar minimum wage (or in some cases even higher).

Stepping back, probably the best scenario that many working people in Myanmar can hope for is to get a regular job that brings income every month at the legally mandated minimum wage standard. But what chance do they have of realizing even this minimum threshold of regular paid work? At least 50% of the so-called employment in the Myanmar economy is in agriculture. But as we hear from people's testimonies, there is not much stable and regular wage work in Myanmar's rural areas. Even if one could find a regular job that pays the daily minimum wage standard, the attraction of earning at least three times that amount working abroad is a strong factor pushing people out of the Myanmar countryside and across national borders.

Section 4: Migrant workers ... but not only

I have my own land back in my village. Every year in the rainy season, I plant opium [poppy] as it gets higher price than other vegetables, and is more suitable to grow in our hilly areas. Transportation is a challenge. But every year, the police comes to destroy the opium plants that I grow. So I lost everything and accumulated debts. I don't know how to grow other crops and I don't have capital as well. Back in 2009, I rented land from another person and planted garlic. But there was no buyer and all the garlic produced were wasted. I don't have large enough land to grow avocado. The income was no longer enough for family survival. So I migrated to Thailand for work and have been staying here for two years. Before the pandemic, it was fine. But now we cannot go out shopping and work without wearing mask. The pandemic affects my income. As a small loss, I had to buy masks and as a big loss, wage work was gone because the business closed. I continued to stay in Thailand and didn't go back to Myanmar... [even when] I can't earn income here. (A 34-year old Pa'O woman from Shan State)

I started to work in China since I was 13 years old. I did not have any work in the village. My parents have land but it was given to my two brothers who are now working on it. I cannot inherit the land because I am a girl. I searched for a job in China with my sister's help. I came back home to renew my passport and NRC card. It also coincided with the pandemic, so I had to do home quarantine according to the rules of the government and an ethnic armed organization (Ta'ang 34-year-old woman, Northern Shan State)

Early in the pandemic, news media reported about migrant workers trapped in neighboring countries, in long lines waiting to cross the border back into Myanmar or in cramped workers' dormitories marked by high coronavirus infection rates and suicides, and about the arrest and detention of newly arriving Rohingya migrants as

well. It is important to show how the pandemic and government responses to it have been affecting migrant workers in the region.



A small-scale fisherman in Mon State
Photo by Sawor Mon

Yet widening the spotlight beyond these snapshot views is also important, to include the longer life stories and difficult journeys of migrant workers in pursuit of a better life and livelihood than what they find is possible in their home villages. The story of a 34-year old Pa-O woman described above, for example, sheds some light on most people in Myanmar who grow opium because of poverty. They are mostly subsistence farmers from different ethnic groups based in remote mountain areas. They grow opium as a cash crop to meet food shortages and to buy access to health and education. Some communities also grow it for medicinal and cultural purposes, and

use it in traditional ceremonies and religious worship.

Their lives and the conditions that compel them to choose a life as migrant labourer cannot be fully captured or understood in a snapshot of one moment frozen in time and place. Migrant workers' life stories do not begin and end in the confines of crowded dormitories somewhere abroad during a pandemic. Nor do they begin and end in a local quarantine center somewhere in Myanmar.

We have 5-acre farmland that I inherited from my parents. My parents' farmland used to be bigger than that, but in the 1990s the military grabbed some lands from many villagers including from my parents. My wife and I work in the farm and cultivate many kinds of crops, including beans and rice. But most years we could not make any profit from farming. In a good year, the most profit for the entire year is equivalent to one-month wages from working in China. So, I went to China in 2018 to cut sugarcane from January to May. After the sugarcane cutting period, I come back here and work in our farmland, the produce of which is just good for family consumption. I also work as a palm tree climber the season for which is from February to July. Then in November, I went again to China until May. Majority of the households in my village have members who regularly go to China to work. In some nearby villages, all households have their members go to China, with only the older people and children left behind. Many bring their babies and very small children with them to China. Last time I brought with me my 15-year old son. He is strong. He can cut up to 200 bundles of sugarcane in



Myanmar migrant workers cutting sugarcane in Yunnan
Photo by Jun Borras (2019), Yunnan



*A snapshot of countryside in Southern Shan State
Photo by Tom Kramer*

one day! I can only cut an average of 80 bundles a day.

This story, told to us in May 2020 by a 30-year-old man from Sagaing State, is illustrative of many migrant workers' lives: they are migrant workers, but not only. Many of them, and/or their household members, are at the same time peasant, agro-pastoralist, fisher, agricultural labourer, artisanal miner, mine worker, forest forager, or service worker. They juggle many livelihood activities in multiple sites in order to survive. Migrant workers work abroad, seasonally or otherwise. Yet most of those we interviewed maintain a firm connection with their home villages. Many seasonal migrant workers have farmland back home that they maintain and work. For example, migrant workers in the sugarcane sector in China engage in sugarcane cutting from November to May, then return to their own villages to work their own farms when the cutting season ends.

Most of those we interviewed have families that stay behind in their home villages; this is the case both for seasonal and non-seasonal migrant workers. Departure of migrant workers does not necessarily or automatically lead to a hollowing out of village life; left behind does not necessarily mean idle. Those who are left behind help to ensure the conditions for the survival and continuation of the family household. Some help to maintain the family's farmland. Nearly all engage in social care work: child care, schooling of the children, care for the elderly and the sick, maintenance of home food gardens for daily sustenance, maintenance of village community.

The family home and home village are the place where migrant workers regularly return to, to rest and get re-energized, after enduring grueling work schedules and exhausting conditions (long work days, no rest days, piece rate work). It is where they go to recuperate from illness or injury received at the workplace, especially since most do not have health insurance or access to appropriate health care. And it is where they go to retire, when no longer physically able to bear the working conditions, or when they are deemed too slow or weak by their work bosses and managers. In general, migrant workers have no pension and social insurance in the countries where they work; and their stay in those countries largely depends on the owners of capital giving them work.

The lives of migrant workers thus play out along a 'corridor': on one end is the site of work (economic production) that generates cash income and, on the other end is the site of social reproduction (biological reproduction, labour power recharge and recuperation, education for children, health care, pension, socialization of children, and so on). They go back and forth as they can, at times, bringing their children along as well. They are the contemporary 'working people', as described by the Tanzanian scholar-activist Issa Shivji (2017): stuck in a 'subhuman' kind of existence, consigned to a life of travelling back and forth and working to exhaustion as underpaid 'superworkers'.

They were largely invisible or ignored until the COVID-

19 pandemic occurred. But a situation where 5 million people live their lives in this kind of ‘corridor’ does not just happen by chance. It is a pattern that invites us to understand the broader structural and institutional context, especially Myanmar rural society and economy, because this is where migrant workers come from, where they return to in between work contracts, and for many, where they hope to return for good in the future.

Migrant workers and the national economy

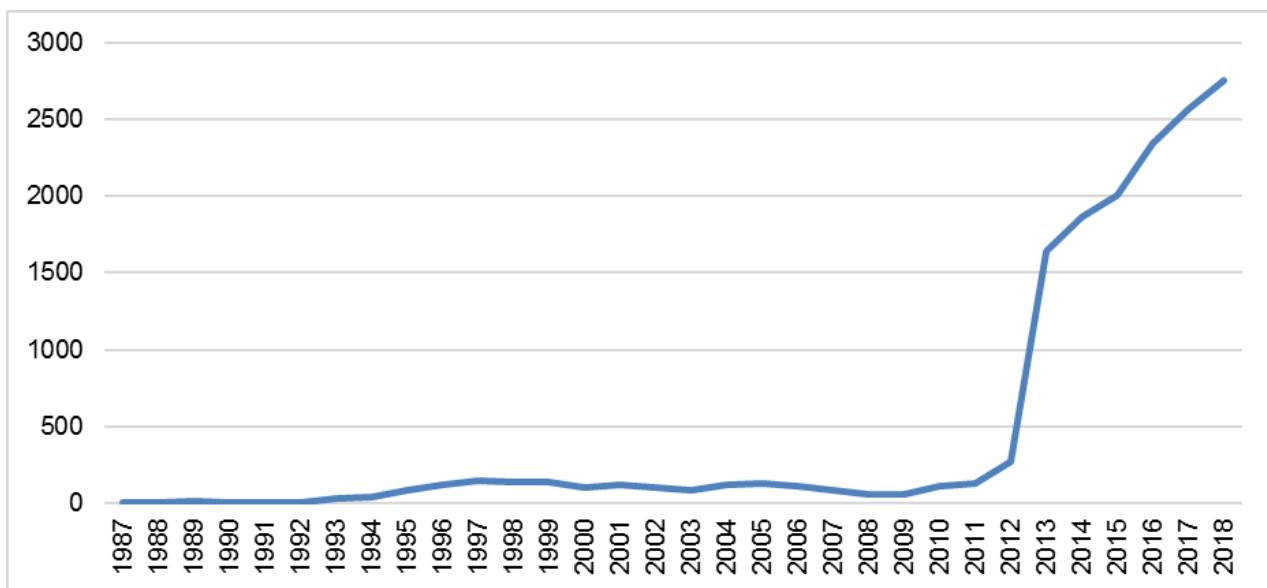
Myanmar’s national development strategy currently has two main pillars: extraction of natural resources (oil and gas, jade, and others), and export of labour, that is, migrant workers. Five million Myanmar nationals are said to be working mostly as manual labour overseas, including 3 million in Thailand (World Bank 2019:16). This number is probably low, given that much migrant work is located somewhere in the grey area between legality and illegality. While the IOM estimates that about 5% (about 250,000) of the 5 million migrant workers go to China,¹⁹ well-placed officials in Yunnan estimate that the number is closer to 500,000.²⁰

Estimates of the value of total annual remittance of migrant workers vary greatly. The World Bank estimate puts it at around US\$2.8 billion for 2018 after a steady sharp increase during the past ten years (see Fig 8 below). This World Bank (2020) figure is lower than the estimates offered by International Organization on Mi-

gration (IOM). According to the IOM, “While official estimates are that Myanmar only receives \$118 million USD in remittances in 2015, the then Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security estimated that remittances could be as high as \$8 billion USD”.²¹ The \$8 billion USD was about 11% of the country’s GDP that year.²² Regardless of the exact value, between a low of US\$2.8 billion and a high US\$8 billion annual remittances, what these data show is that the contribution of migrant workers to the national economy is absolutely significant. It even seems to be higher than the contribution of the mining sector which was estimated to be 4.4% of the GDP in 2016-2017.²³

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), 70% of an estimated 53.7 million population of Myanmar live in rural areas. The agriculture sector contributes enormously to the national economy, and gives far more than it receives from the government. In 2017, the agriculture sector comprised 23.7% of the GDP and providing the national economy with up to 50% of total employment, while it received just 3.8% of the total government expenditure (FAO, 2020: 1), corresponding to 1.1% of the GDP (World Bank, 2018: 46) (see Table 7). From 2009 to 2017, “agricultural public expenditures in Myanmar averaged 1% of GDP and 6.5% of the Union budget” (World Bank, 2017: 21). While the GDP has been growing at an impressive annual rate, the growth rate of value added in agriculture is not as impressive (see Table 6), following a pattern of neoliberal develop-

Fig 7: Myanmar’s migrant remittance inflow (US\$ million)



Source: KNOMAD (2019)²⁴

¹⁹<https://www.iom.int/countries/myanmar>. Downloaded 29 May 2020.

²⁰Interview by Borras with some of these Chinese government officials in late 2019 in Yunnan.

²¹<https://www.iom.int/countries/myanmar>; downloaded on 29 May 2020.

²²World Bank Databank: https://databank.worldbank.org/views/reports/reportwidget.aspx?Report_Name=CountryProfile&Id=b450fd57&tbar=y&dd=y&inf=n&zm=n&country=MMR; downloaded 29 May 2020.

²³https://eiti.org/es/implementing_country/54; downloaded 31 May 2020.

²⁴KNOMAD (2019). <https://www.knomad.org/publication/migration-and-development-brief-31>. Downloaded 5 June 2020.

ment more generally: economic growth that does not trickle down to the vast majority.

Table 6: GDP growth rate of Myanmar

Year	GDP growth rate	Growth rate of value added in agriculture
2019	4.3	
2018	4.7	2.0
2017	5.7	1.3
2016	5.9	-0.5
2015	7	3.4
2014	8	2.8
2013		3.6
2012		1.7

Source: Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2020)²⁵

Table 7: Public Sector Expenditures (Share of GDP)

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18
	PA	PA	PA	RE
Total Expenditure	26.2%	26.0%	23.4%	23.8%
Ministries	12.0%	12.9%	12.3%	12.9%
Defense	3.8%	4.3%	3.7%	3.5%
Agriculture	1.5%	1.5%	1.2%	1.1%
Energy	0.2%	0.2%	0.3%	0.5%
Education	1.9%	2.1%	2.0%	2.0%
Health	1.1%	1.1%	0.9%	1.2%
Planning and Finance	1.3%	1.2%	1.5%	2.3%
Other Ministries	2.4%	2.5%	2.7%	2.4%
SEEs	11.5%	10.6%	8.8%	8.8%
SAOs	0.2%	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
Other	2.5%	2.4%	2.2%	2.0%

Sources: MOPF; World Bank staff estimates.

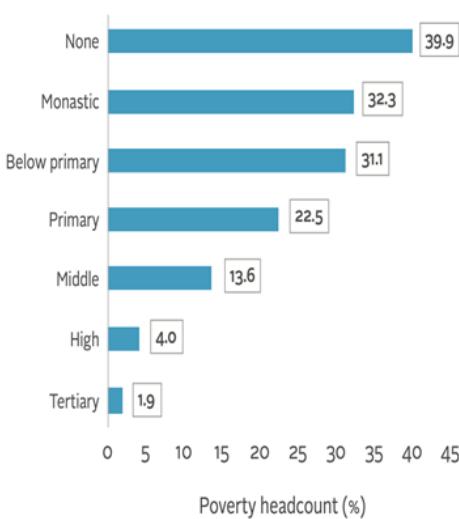
Note: PA = Preliminary Actual; RE = Revised Estimates; SAOs = State Administrative Organizations; SEEs = State Economic Enterprises.

Source: World Bank (2018: 36).

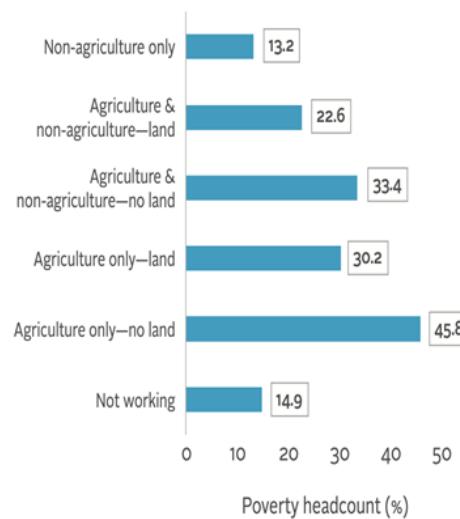
Fig 8: Poverty headcount by education of the household head and occupational sector of household members, 2017

Poverty headcount by education of the household head and occupational sector of household members, 2017

a) By education of the household head



b) By occupational sector of household members



Note: The sectoral participation of the household is based on the sector of occupation of its working-age household members.

²⁵<https://data.adb.org/dataset/agriculture-value-added-asia-and-pacific-asian-development-outlook>; Downloaded 30 May 2020.

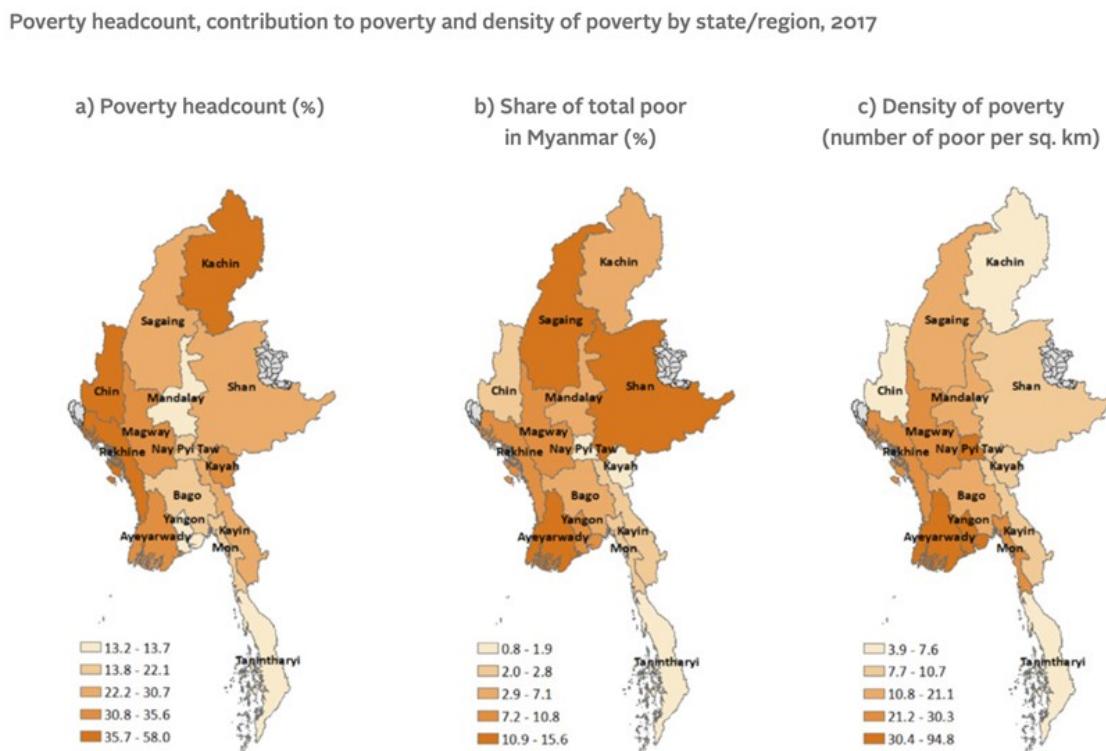
These data suggest that the economic growth's modest employment gain is mainly limited to the service sector. Since the economic growth is also heavily dependent on extractive industries, including agro-extractivism such as the expansion of oil palm, rubber, sugarcane and maize plantations, it could also mean that it has been carried out by expelling peasants from the land.²⁶ Rural communities contribute significantly to the national economy by providing cheap labour to the emerging top sector (e.g., the service sector) on the one hand, and by exporting a particular type of labour (e.g., manual labourers) on the other hand. In this way the rural sector reduces national unemployment, or conceals the extent of real under- and unemployment. Fifty percent of those deemed employed in agriculture are mostly poor peasants, who barely survive from farming and are unable to find regular wage work in and near their home villages. They are the rural poor.

Poverty is significant, and significantly rural in character in Myanmar.²⁷ To detect poverty, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) uses a multidimensional measurement, the Human Development Index (HDI), which is "a summary measure for assessing long-term progress in three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge and a decent standard of living" (UNDP, 2019: 1). In its global ranking

produced annually, the UNDP found that "Myanmar's HDI value for 2018 is 0.584 [...] positioning it at 145 out of 189 countries and territories" (UNDP, 2019: 2). Within this overall picture, it is in rural areas where poverty is most concentrated. According to the Ministry of Finance and Planning, "an individual in Myanmar is considered to be poor if he or she lives in a household with consumption per adult equivalent per day of 1,590 kyat or less" (2019: 6); and then based on this measure, the ministry observes that "[p]overty is more prevalent in rural areas. The poverty headcount is significantly higher in rural areas of Myanmar (30.2 percent) than in urban areas (11.3 percent). The number of poor people is also 6.7 times higher in rural areas than urban areas, and those residing in rural areas make up an overwhelming majority (87 percent) of the nation's poor" (2019: xi, emphasis added).

Looking at labor and employment trends since 1991 (see Fig 11 below), the International Labor Organization (ILO) reports that the number of people 'not in labour force' has been growing and is now the biggest category. This corresponds to data about unemployment (see Fig 12 below) that has accompanied economic liberalization and political transition. Unemployment has increased sharply since 2015, and is expected to reach close to half million unemployed people by 2021.

Fig 9: Poverty data, by region



Note: Outreach activities took place over the 12 months of data collection, but it was not possible to interview in northern parts of Rakhine State (Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships) and the Wa Self-Administered Division. Limitations in coverage are fully documented in the MLCS 2017 Technical Report and can be seen in the maps presented in this report.

Source: Ministry of Planning and Finance (2019: 10).

²⁶See, for instance, Bello's analysis of the national development strategy of Myanmar (Bello, 2018).

²⁷Here, the paper does not imply that there is no poverty in urban areas. According to Myanmar Living Conditions 2017 survey, poverty headcount in urban areas is 11.3 percent.

Fig 10: Myanmar labour & employment data, by sector, 1991 to projection in 2020-21

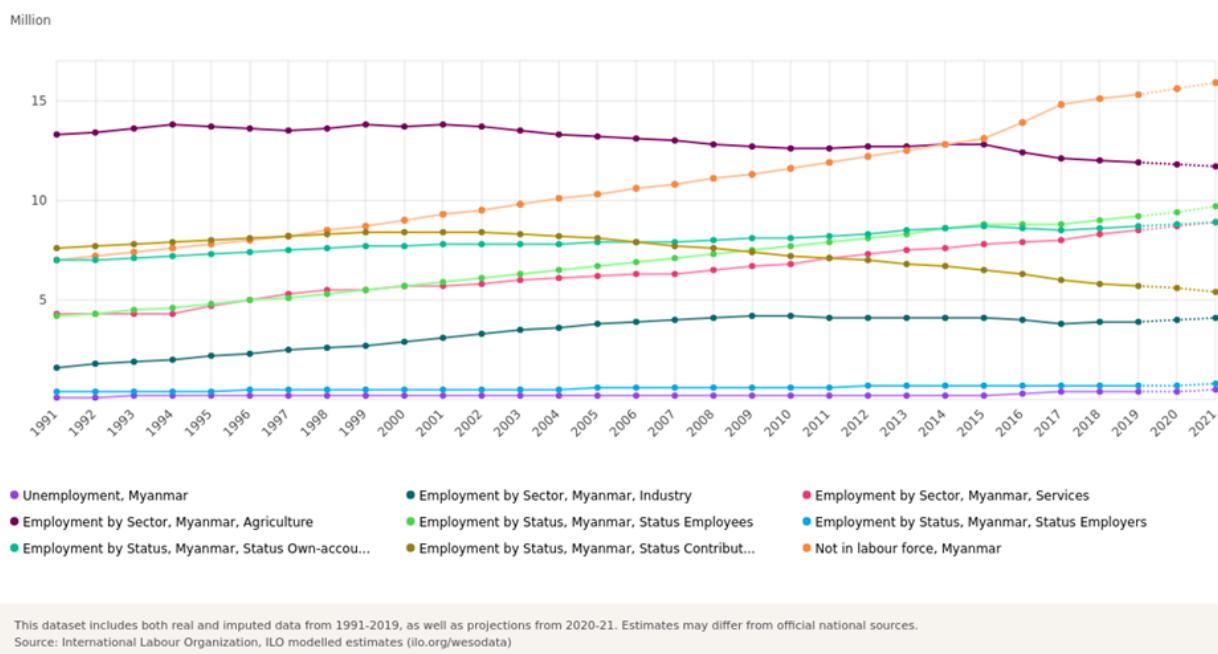
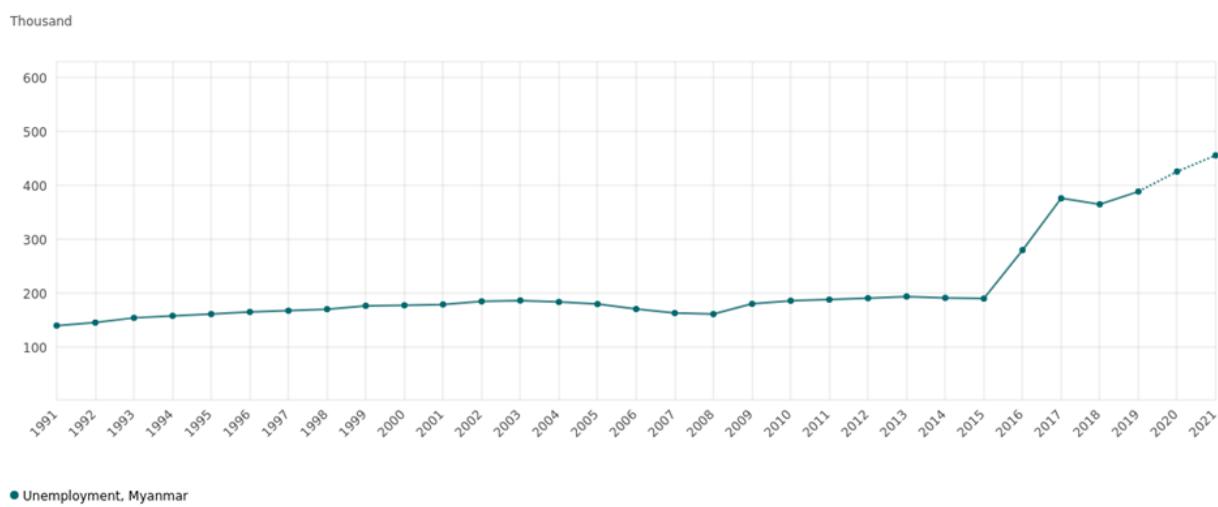


Fig 11: Myanmar unemployment data, 1991 to projected 2020-21



Although this rate is low compared to the global trend, this is not really a cause for cheer, as the ILO explains:

The unemployment rate is very low in many of the low- and middle-income countries such as Myanmar (1.6 per cent in 2017)... compared with the global unemployment rate of 5.0 per cent. This does not mean that the labour markets in these countries are functioning well. Two important aspects need to be considered. First, formal employment opportunities are not keeping up with the rapidly growing labour force in these countries [...] For the poor... unemployment is not an option and the vast majority of them continue to depend on subsistence agriculture or the urban

informal economy, often creating their own employment opportunities [...] This shows the importance of going beyond unemployment rates and looking at the quality of employment. Second, the ILO's definition of unemployment is very strict, as a person is already considered to be in employment when having worked for at least one hour in the reference week ILO, 2019: 46).

In this regard, the labour market in Myanmar is among the world's worst, according to the ILO:

The prevalence of informality in [Asia] remains the highest globally, affecting close to 70 per cent of all

workers. Among the subregions, Southern Asia has the highest share of informal employment (about 90 per cent), which is mainly due to a large agricultural sector, in which virtually all workers experience informality. The incidence of informality is also high in South-Eastern Asia and the Pacific, where it affects three-quarters of the employed, a share that rises to over 85 per cent in countries such as Cambodia, Indonesia and Myanmar (ILO, 2019: 46).

Taken together all these data help to paint an overall picture of the national economic situation and the situation in the countryside in particular. Firstly, Myanmar remains overwhelmingly rural; 71.5% of the population lives in rural areas. This is not necessarily or automatically a problem. But, secondly, Myanmar's rural areas are home to up to 90 % of the country's poor. Thirdly, at the bottom of the poverty ladder in Myanmar, are households with no land and no off-farm and non-farm employment possibilities. But, and this is the fourth point, having land does not necessarily or automatically improve one's situation either. Fifthly, there is a generally low level of land and labour productivity.

This context helps to explain where migrant workers are coming from (and why they remain rooted in their home villages), what motivates them to get into migrant labour abroad (despite the hardships they find there), and how their life and livelihood prospects in the coming years are precarious (despite their own heroic efforts to provide for their own and the families' survival). But it doesn't explain why there is so much poverty in the Myanmar countryside.

Migrant workers and poverty

Poverty can often seem to be 'natural' -- 'there was no rain and so people starved' -- as if it is a condition that cannot be helped, no one is at fault, and one is born either lucky or unlucky. This perception and the fatalism that accompanies it can be detected in the words of a 38-year-old male migrant worker from Magwe:

I have three and half acres of my own land which I inherited from my grandparents. Tha-Na-Khar Trees are planted in the entire land. But there is no market for Tha-Na-Khar. It takes 15-25 years for Tha-Na-Khar trees to mature, and even then, you only get 2,000 Kyats per tree after deducting all expenses like transportation. It is also difficult to cultivate the land after uprooting all Tha-Na-Khar trees. Other people also plant corn and sesame, partly for cattle food. Most of the land are empty because of lack of rain and because of insects. It's difficult. It is not only me. Most people in my village have the same situation. All members in the household must work. It is a hand-to-mouth existence.

Currently, I have no income. I have to wait until November, and hope that it will be possible to return to China to cut sugarcane.



*Irrigation Dam in Mandalay region
Photo by Doi Ra*

Yet what may appear 'natural' in close-up view, starts to emerge as unnatural as one steps back. In the above case, for example, prosperous capitalist farm enterprises and ranching activities can be found co-existing alongside peasant farms just scraping by. The contrast is striking. These capitalist farm enterprises control local trading activities in farm inputs and agricultural produce, engage in outgrowership, accumulate lands at the expense of poor villagers, hire cheap labor to expand production. They could generate vibrant production and profit by building infrastructure, e.g. irrigation, invest in modern technology, secure transportation capability, and buy farm inputs and necessary production requirements at the right time.

All these 'modern improvements', however, are built beyond the reach of poor rural villagers in the same vicinity. Even in the best scenario -- that is, a poor peasant having some marketable surplus to sell -- the prices a peasant can get for his or her surplus is usually too low to make a meaningful long-term difference in the household well-being.

There is nothing natural in this. What impoverishes poor working people, and renders them vulnerable to climatic variability or risks in farming, are the terms of their insertion into existing social structures and institutions, including increasing commoditization of land and labour, unequal terms of exchange between agricultural and commercial/industrial sectors, merchant capital-influenced price fluctuations for agricultural produce, and so on. Myanmar's rural working people are constantly and increasingly being squeezed. The very difficult conditions of human existence for most people living in My-

anmar's rural areas on the one hand, and the relatively economically productive character of migrant work abroad on the other hand, are linked. They have emerged as two key poles of gravity on a larger multipolar field of ongoing human activity, where movement is dynamic, fluid and multidirectional.

Incomes earned abroad and livelihoods maintained at home enable and reinforce one another for migrant workers. While work abroad is key in the here and now, livelihood and a sense of belonging at home -- in which land is central -- is key in the here and now *and later*.

The cost of maintaining the conditions for social care at home is never included in the calculation of the cost of labour in the productive sphere in the worksite. These costs are shouldered largely by the worker's households, largely at the primary social care site at their home villages in particular, and partly by the Myanmar government and society more generally, although some social care tasks cannot be left behind in the migrant workers' home villages. For example, many female migrant workers bring their babies and non-schooling small children with them. Desperately and precariously, productive and well-being/social care tasks are being carried out at the same time and place.

Take the case of a 28-year-old woman from Mon State, who shared part of her life story:

I had to quit school in my seventh grade to help out my parents by looking for wood for fuel, rubber tapping and selling tamarind leaves. Even though they have a rubber farm in the village, due to poor market and low price, it was not enough to feed the family. So, I went to Thailand with my uncle. At that time, we had to pay a labour broker 300,000 Kyats (233 USD) per person. I worked different jobs. After I married, my husband and I worked at a rubber plantation for 3 years. I got very sick while working at the rubber plantation and came back to my home village and went to Yangon to seek health care. When I got better, I went back to Thailand. One difficulty was while I have a passport, my husband did not. So when I was pregnant and had to deliver the baby, I was alone traveling back to Myanmar to deliver the baby. During the pandemic, our boss frequently gave food and baby nutrients. During the break from rubber tapping, my husband worked to clear the bushes for 200-300 baht (6.6-9.8 USD) per day, while I worked at a nearby house who were holding donation ceremony by cleaning dishes, washing clothes and other cleaning chores. Now our daughter is two years old. During the pandemic, we just stayed within the compound. Before, we had planned to send our daughter to our home village, but because the roads were blocked, we could not do that anymore. The

weather has now changed to rainy season, so I am worried my daughter might contract dengue or malaria. And I feel it unsafe to leave her alone while I'm doing rubber tapping. So, when I go to rubber tapping work, I had to take her to the rubber plantation. I position the baby at a seeing distance with a companion dog so that I could work.

The huge profits in capitalist enterprises in crop booms in southern China (sugarcane, banana, macadamia, etc.), in the world famous Thai food and agricultural sector, and in the world-leading oil palm sector of Malaysia – none of these would have been possible without migrant workers from Indonesia, India, Bangladesh, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Myanmar, who were significantly underpaid in the sense of not being paid either for the full and appropriate cost of their labour power or for the full and appropriate cost of the social reproduction of their labour power.

In so many situations, without the resources that migrant workers have -- e.g. access to land and forest, and capabilities back in their home countries, where most of their family members remain, and the home place where they will eventually go back to for labour power recuperation or eventual retirement -- it would not have been possible for them to sell their labour as cheaply as they do. This makes them highly coveted by owners of capital and layers of labour brokers, while the conditions prevailing back home are what makes them vulnerable to such exploitation. It is what enables owners of capital to grossly underpay migrant workers to perform the jobs that domestic labour do not want. Migrant workers can 'hibernate' when the season for work ends or during public emergencies (such as the current pandemic), and can be easily discarded as necessary (e.g., if become ill or infirm; as they age etc). This is in no small part because migrant workers themselves typically take care of most of the cost of maintaining the minimum conditions of their human existence, and that of their families. Maintaining rootedness to their home villages is a big part of what enables migrant workers to do this. Maintaining a 'home base' in Myanmar is key to migrant workers' families for schooling, health care, social security, and for labour power recuperation.

Migrant workers and harsh conditions in home villages

Their home villages (and as noted earlier) are among the places where state-provided health care and social security support barely exist, and so they themselves are shouldering the key elements of social reproduction. Left-behind families' short-term to long-term survival (including labour recuperation and labour retirement) thus depends hugely on the socio-economic conditions prevailing in their home communities. But in too many

instances the socioeconomic health of rural villages is critical and the prognosis is poor.

Take the case of a retired 57-year-old woman from Mon State, who shared part of her life experience. Even with a pension, life remains hard:

I have been a farmer since 1990, inheriting land from my parents for paddy production. At that time, the military Government supported the farmers with loans, fertilisers and paddy seeds and in exchange the farmers were obliged to sell back their produce to the Government with a fixed quota of 8 bags of rice per one acre. I can only grow paddy during the rainy season because salt water gets regularly into my land. In the summer, there is not enough water to irrigate the field, so I could not farm. My crops were destroyed regularly by flooding. We could not repay our debts, and interests accrued over the years. I often do wage work in nearby places, but these are irregular jobs and the wages were not enough for my family to survive. In 1999, in order to pay off the debt, my husband and I went to Kanchanaburi, Thailand. We paid a lot of money to the labour broker, using as insurance our backs. In Mon context, giving your backs as loan insurance means we will carry the debt on our backs and work for years until our debts are paid off. Some brokers take the equivalence of one to two years wages of migrants by way of advancing the full amount from the employer, or the boss. I started working at a Thai boss's vegetable farm in Kanchanaburi for 30 Baht a day. After two years, I was able to pay off the debt to the broker. But I was not able to save anything for myself. I was not able to pay off the debt back home, and the interest just kept growing and growing. I started to learn the Thai language. So, I moved to the Kanchanaburi towncenter and worked at a petrol station for one year. From there, I worked at a plastic factory near Bangkok for 2 years, cotton blanket making factory for 15 years, and I was asked to retire by the factory as I turned to the retirement age.

We took pension money from the factory and returned to Myanmar in March just as Covid-19 was starting to spread to Thailand. Despite all the earnings all these years and the pension money from Thailand, we were left only with a small amount of money and around 16 grams of gold. We were able to support our children's education expenses and helped open a motorbike repair shop for our eldest son. But our son is still single, and he earns just enough for him to survive. He cannot support us. Our second son is still very young. We own

about 5 acres of farmland. Because of our age, we feel very tired when doing farming. We prefer to just spend our time doing religious devotion. But we have to worry for the family survival and for the younger son's education. Because of the back-breaking work in Thailand, my husband started to suffer from chronic back pain. We have no other livelihood options, and so we can only do farming. But if during this year we won't have a good amount of harvest, we won't farm again. We would just rent out the land to others. People who can do farming in large area of land come and rent the farmland. We don't know what the livelihood opportunities are for us next year. We worry for our family. Our son's motorbike repair shop is small so there is not much income. We want our second son to quit from school and go to Thailand, but we also pity on him. If the gate from the Thai side will be open, and if he wants to go, we would let him. To survive becomes the most important aspect for us. We have to generate income from whatever means available.



A paddy field in Mon state
Photo by Mehm Htaw

Meanwhile, the population of working people in Myanmar, from which the sub-category of migrant workers has emerged, can be said to be extra-large, owing also to the country's history of agrarian crisis combined with long history of ethnic and political conflict.²⁸ This is a particularly perverse combination, which results in continuous reproduction of large numbers of economically impoverished and vulnerable working people with characteristics attractive to owners of capital.²⁹ Under current circumstances, this process is unlikely to stop anytime soon.

I live in an IDP (Internally Displaced Peoples) camp. I

²⁸For background on Myanmar's long history of ethnic conflict, the 1991 landmark study by Martin Smith remains essential reading. For more recent developments and analysis, see various TNI reports, especially "Burma: Neither War Nor Peace" (July 2009), "Developing Disparity" (February 2013), and more recently, "Arakan (Rakhine State): A Land in Conflict on Myanmar's Western Frontier" (December 2019).

²⁹The implications of this historical context for present day land policy making are addressed in various TNI reports, including: "The Challenge of Democratic and Inclusive Land Policymaking in Myanmar" (February 2015), "The Meaning of Land in Myanmar" (January 2016), "The Right to Land at a Crossroads in Myanmar" (July 2016), and most recently "Not about us without us": Legitimate land law making by design" (December 2019).

have no farmland in the camp. No one has a farmland in the camp. But I have land at my original village. We planted paddy and corn, and raised chickens and pigs in our compound there. But then there was fighting between the military and an ethnic armed group. So, we had to leave, and ended up in this camp. We can only go back and work at our original village when it is safe and peaceful. But it is not certain when that is going to happen. I studied at the Lashio Teachers Training College, and accumulated debts because of that. There is no regular wage work in and near the IDP camp. That is why I went to work in China to pay off my debts. Before the pandemic, it was fine to work in China. But when the pandemic happened, the income became less. I earned 1,500-1,900 Yuan (227-287 USD) per a month before the pandemic. But during pandemic, there were a lot of restrictions on wage work, and I earned only 700-800 Yuan (106-121 USD) per a month. That's why I decided to go home in May 2020. At the camp, I was given the responsibility as a teacher because of my formal education. But income was not enough for my family. (A 25 year old Kachin woman from Shan State)

The estimated 5 million Myanmar migrant workers is about 10% of the total population -- a big chunk, although not necessarily exceptional among labour-exporting countries today. Where do they come from? As noted earlier, poor peasants, pastoralists and fishers are being socially differentiated 'out' via everyday economic relations on the one hand, and/or are expelled from their lands as a result of various forms of extra-economic coercion on the other hand. Over the past decades, these complementary processes have played a key role: in creating a mass of peasant, pastoralist and fisher households who are now landless or with very little land (and what little the latter does have is likely of poor quality); and in generating and maintaining an enormous number of migrant labour. Many of them have been completely divorced from their means of production.

Boutry et al. (2017) found that (i) 41% of the villagers surveyed in the Dry Zone are completely landless households, and that (ii) while the majority still have some access to land, there is a trend of distress land sales and renting out of land by plot holders. This trend may not be unique to the Dry Zone, and may increase in the context of the pandemic and government responses to it, along with the subsequent global economic downturn. But because different people are impacted differently, coping strategies will vary. Some may be compelled to sell or rent out their land; others may find that

returning to work their own land helps them to survive after the loss of wage work; and still others may be able to do both -- sell or rent out a portion of their land, while working their remaining land in a labour intensive manner.³⁰

Market-oriented policy interventions such as promotion of private sector intervention through insertion into commodity value chains or various contract farming schemes are likely to accelerate and expand social differentiation in the rural areas. More poor peasants could lose (more of) their lands, while a handful of rich peasants, traders and moneylenders would be able to accumulate more land at the expense of those in distress. Distress land sales and renting out is not limited to fellow villagers. Lands that poorer households cannot make sufficiently productive because of lack of capital, or that have to be sold for immediate cash when there is a family emergency, are increasingly taken over by capitalist farmers, traders, moneylenders and speculators.

Cheap land and cheap labor

Two practices in particular seem to be growing in popularity.³¹ The first practice involves leasing lands to entrepreneurs, mostly from China or their local middlemen, for large-scale crop production, such as watermelon in Mandalay and corn in Northern Shan.

In Mandalay, land is leased to outside investors for watermelon cultivation for around 300,000 Kyats (232 USD) per acre. A single entrepreneur usually leases more or less 50 acres per operation, usually the lease is for three years (that's 15,000,000 Kyats in Myanmar in one-year rentals). They hire a few (not many) local workers who are paid 4,000 Kyats (3.1 USD) per day, working every day from 6:30 am to 5:00 pm, with one hour break in between. The time from land preparation to watermelon harvesting is about four months. Workers continue to be hired for packing the watermelons for transport to China. The growing season is between September and April, with two yields per year.

A large part of Northern Shan State has been radically transformed from biodiverse swidden agriculture into sedentary monoculture for corn. Various types of ownership or land lease arrangements prevail. The bottom line is similar to what is happening via land leasing for watermelon in the Dry Zone: poor peasants are losing their autonomy regarding what to plant and how and where to sell and for how much. In both places, contracting elites (e.g., traders and moneylenders) are tightening

³⁰Whether and to what extent either of these possibilities is happening remains an open question that more investigation will be needed to answer.

³¹Data and information used to piece the picture together in these two tales of capitalist intrusion into the Dry Zone countryside were gathered through various informal chats with villagers, and participant observation by the authors especially by the co-authors who live and work in the region.

their grip over production and market terms even when peasants retain formal ownership of the land.

The big attractions to these cross-border transactions are cheap land and labour. In Yunnan, the going land rental rates of a comparable land is around 3,000 Yuan (454 USD) (and as we already know earlier, the labour cost there is several times higher than in Myanmar). In the adjacent southern province of Guangxi, land rental rates of similar land are higher, at up to 6,000 Yuan (908 USD).³² This means: from 30,000,000 (23,232 USD) to 60,000,000 Kyats (46,463 USD) in rentals). Entrepreneurs could get land in Myanmar for half of what it costs in China (or less) and in addition, they can also get labour that is cheaper than either hiring Myanmar migrant labour inside China because they do not have to pay layers of labour brokers, or hiring the more expensive Chinese domestic labour inside China.

The second practice involves the interlinking of individual pastoralist cattle raising and emerging capital-intensive cattle ranching. The actual raising of cattle is done by individual peasants or pastoralists on their own land using their own labour and feed. Cattle brokers then buy cattle from multiple individual herders, gathering them on a small ranch usually on rented land until they amassed enough (usually 100) for shipping to China. For export to be permitted, each animal must have the legally required health checks, blood tests and other kinds of checks (e.g., must be neutered, not younger than three years old, and horns not longer than eight inches) by Livestock Breeding and Veterinary Department (LBVD) officials. They are then transported to the temporary livestock collecting farms and marked with microchip or ear tag together with vaccine injection. There are more inspections along the checkpoint locations until reaching the border trading zone, where further procedures await for final approval. Local villagers are hired to take care of the cattle while in the transitory ranches. Wages depend on different locations, but no more than 5,000 Kyats (3.9 USD) per day. The export end of the business is usually controlled by wealthy locals, but increasingly involves Chinese entrepreneurs too. There are said to be cattle brokers in every township who buy cattle from individual herders in the surrounding villages.

In both schemes, cheap land, water and labour is activated and captured by capitalist entrepreneurs and multiple layers of land, labour and cattle brokers. Both are straightforward forms of agro-extractivism that can lead to villagers' loss of land and land control. Being differentiated out in the process of commoditization of labour and the means of production (land, water, forest) re-

mains probably one of the most pervasive reasons for the progressive increase of the number of working people, most of whom ended up as migrant workers due to an inability of the national economy to absorb more wage workers.



Taungyar cultivation in Shan State
Photo by Tom Kramer

Extra-economic coercion

The separation of peasants from their means of production (land, water, forest), and/or capitalist seizure of the associated natural resources (land, water, forest, minerals), also occurs through extra-economic coercion. Many who end up as migrant workers have previously lost land, or their parents lost land, due to what is commonly known as land grabbing. Examples of this include when villagers' lands are seized by the state or the military for whatever purpose and justification.³³ In 2012-2013, a land investigation commission looking into military seizures of villager lands nationwide found cases totalling a quarter million acres. Only about 18,000 acres of these were returned to the villagers (Myanmar Union Government, 2016: 87; for a critical analysis of the government's land grabbing investigation efforts, see LIOH et al December 2017). In many such cases, powerful actors, including the central state, military, owners of capital, loggers, mine prospectors, big conservation organizations, militia, or sometimes even some ethnic armed groups, have taken over these lands formerly in the hands of villagers. There are also cases of armed militias in ethnic communities seizing villagers' lands and converting these to plantations, for example, sugarcane (Borras et al. 2020). Militarization may vary in form, scale, intensity and purpose, but invariably lead to people fleeing their villages and with many ending up in a semi-permanent state of displacement either as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) or as refugees. It is safe to assume that at least some, and perhaps many, dis-

³²Based on Borras's fieldwork interviews with farmers and village and country officials in Yunnan and Guangxi between 2014 and 2019

³³On land grabbing in Myanmar, see LIOH (December 2015), available at: https://www.tni.org/files/article-downloads/lioh_research_report_eng_0.pdf

placed villagers (including children) end up as migrant labourers.³⁴ As long as civil war and militarization continue, so will the associated social processes of displacement and search for survival, thus assuring owners of capital in Thailand, Malaysia and southern China a supply of cheap migrant workers.

Alongside these ‘regular’ processes of social differentiation and expulsion unfolding in the Myanmar countryside, are other mechanisms too. Existing land laws are also greatly contributing to separating peasants from their lands and means of livelihood. Especially problematic is the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin (VVF) Land Management Law, enacted in 2012 and amended in 2019, which requires villagers to officially register their lands with the government or face expulsion and punishment (fines and jail time), and anything not registered is then ‘available’ for the state to reallocate to big investors or big conservation projects.³⁵ The law is a key part of the economic liberalization and political transition since 2010, and alongside ongoing civil war and ethnic conflict, is widely seen as a ‘declaration of war’ especially on non-Bamar ethnic nationality groups in whose territories and villages lie many of the country’s remaining natural resource wealth.³⁶ But the law is also being used as a tool to dispossess peasants in Bamar-majority areas too (Thein et al, 2018). Many villagers do not or cannot register their lands for various reasons: they are engaged in shifting agriculture which is not formally allowed, they are not aware of the law, they are not aware of the procedure, they do not have the logistical means to pursue their claims, the counter-claim-making of those who want to acquire their lands is often backed by powerful elite alliances, among others. But the key issue is that the new laws do not recognize customary and communal tenure. By early 2013, according to the government, almost 2 million ha of land (farmland, wetlands, and forested lands) had already been given to various concessions (Myanmar Union Government, 2016: 67–68).

Land concessions have triggered complex changes in land-based social relations, as the 25-year-old man from Magwe explained to us:

During the pandemic, I went back to my home village in the Dry Zone, leaving my work in Thailand. I come from a poor farming family. When I was still young, a big company close to the military grabbed many lands in

our village, including the lands of my parents. I could still remember the quarrel and struggle among the villagers and the company. The company made a plan to develop the land, but were not successful. Many parts of the big land became idle, and the company started to let some outsiders use it. Many villagers started to reoccupy their lands and started some farming. My parents reoccupied their 10 acres of land grabbed from them. The military does not make a problem, but the people who rent the land from the company are making trouble. But even so, there is not much income from farming. I do wage work in and around the village, and if there is a day I am lucky to get wage work, I am paid 4,000 Kyats (3 USD). But wage work is rare in and around my village.



Coffee farmer in Southern Shan State
Photo by Tom Kramer

Digging deeper into this case, it seems a well-known Myanmar company close to the military had grabbed an area of 30,000 hectares in 2000. The company tried to establish a big plantation of sesame. They used a lot of manpower, hiring around 1,000 people and using a lot of machineries. But the company failed to make the land as productive as intended. They tried sesame for one to two years, before switching to cotton, and then castor oil. But neither of these worked either, and the company eventually left the area, leaving behind about 50 workers previously hired by the company. These workers set up housing near the roads on land that had been grabbed by the company, and started to work on the lands themselves. When U Thein Sein became president, the villagers demanded back the lands and applied for an official Land Use Certificate (also called Form 7) that was created by the 2012 Farmland Law, but these ef-

³⁴Transnational Institute, Re-Asserting Control: Voluntary Return, Restitution and the Right to Land for IDPs and Refugees in Myanmar, TNI, Myanmar Policy Briefing No. 20, May 2017.

³⁵See various TNI reports: Access Denied: Land Rights and Ethnic Conflict in Burma, Developing Disparity, From War to Peace in Kayah (Karen) State

³⁶See Civil Society Organizations' Statement on the Vacant, Fallow & Virgin Land Management 2018 and related announcement, 16 November 2018, https://lioh.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/LIOH_MATA_Statement_20181116.pdf. See also See Transnational Institute, “First they grabbed our land with guns; now they are using the law”, Transnational Institute, 26 August 2019, <https://www.tni.org/en/article/first-they-grabbed-our-land-with-guns-now-they-are-using-the-law>.

forts did not succeed.³⁷ So the villagers have simply started to reoccupy that portion of the grabbed lands not currently occupied by those workers the company left behind.

Three key insights

In the course of conducting this research we have heard heart-breaking stories about impoverishment and desperation, with families barely able to survive with the paltry livelihood possibilities currently available in Myanmar's rural areas. These 136 individual stories, taken together,

Table 8: Land access and production-related issues

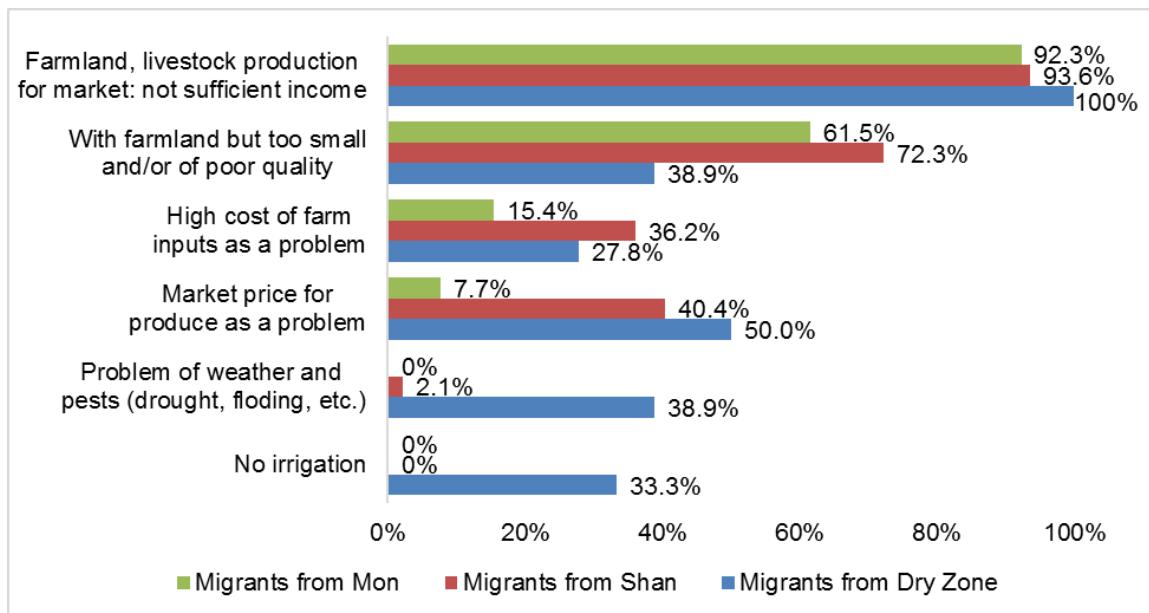
Issue	Migrants from Dry Zone	Migrants from Shan State	Migrants from Mon State	Total
No farmland	12	19	7	38
With farmland	18	47	13	78
With farmland but too small and/or of poor quality	7	34	8	49
Farmland, livestock production for market: not sufficient income	18	44	12	74
Market price for produce as a problem	9	19	1	29
High cost of farm inputs as a problem	5	17	2	24
Problem of weather and pests (drought, flooding, etc.)	7	1	0	8
No irrigation	6	0	0	6
Hiring out labour: wage working in and near home communities, but not sufficient income	19	42	15	76
Hiring in labour to work their farmland, livestock (while	6	0	0	6

Note 1: based on interviews in 2019 and 2020, N = 136: Dry Zone: 39; Shan State: 74; Mon State: 23

Note 2: "No farmland" includes mostly: (a) young people many of whom have parents who have lands, (b) Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs), many of whom live in IDP camps; all those interviewed said they have land in the original village, but not since they become IDPs; and (c) others who are old enough to have land but for various reasons have no land.

Note 3: "With farmland" is vague category to include those with access to land but without formal registration as well as those with formal registration (formal claim or title).

Fig 12: Access to land and production-related issues



³⁷The 2012 Farmland Law introduced private ownership of land use rights (versus private ownership of land itself) and made it possible to sell, mortgage and inherit this use right. See Farmland Law (2012) and the Law Amending the Farmland Law (2018). For more background and analysis, see: TNI (2013). Access Denied: Land Rights and Ethnic Conflict in Burma. Burma Policy Briefing Paper Number 11. Amsterdam: TNI. Available at: <https://www.tni.org/files/download/accesdenied-briefing11.pdf>, downloaded on 12 November 2020; and also Boutry, M. et al (2017). Land Tenure in Rural Lowland Myanmar: From historical perspectives to contemporary realities in the Dry Zone and the Delta. Yangon: GRET. Available at: https://www.gret.org/wp-content/uploads/GRET_LandTenure_PDF.pdf, downloaded on 12 November 2020.

reveal clear patterns in terms of the situation migrant workers face and in terms of how they try to cope. Table 8 and Fig 13 capture some of the key highlights.

First, more than half (78 out of 136 or 57.3%) of the migrant workers we interviewed have farmlands. Only 38 (or 28%) said they do not have farmland, and another 20 workers did not specify either way. Many among those we interviewed express a wish to have land in order to reconstruct a livelihood complex that is different from what they have now (See Table 12 and Fig 14 in the last section of this paper). But what this data shows is that it is not only rural working people who have been separated from their means of production (land, water, forest)



*Upland agriculture in southern Shan State
Photo by Tom Kramer*

who migrate. And it shows that giving land to migrant workers, or indeed returning land to IDPs, *alone is not enough* to prevent impoverishment or to make migrant wage work less popular. These insights warrant deeper reflection among both land-oriented agrarian movements and civil society groups, *and* workers' unions and civil society groups working on labour justice issues.

Second, 74 out of the 78 (e.g., nearly all) respondents who said they have farmland, also said that the income generated from their farmland is not sufficient (see Table 8 and Fig 13).³⁸ And, nearly two out of every three respondents (49 out of 78, or 63%) who said they have farmland, also said that their land is either too small or with very poor soil, or both. These data have far-reaching implications for those interested in reforming the structure of land access and tenure in Myanmar. Among others, it suggests that a reform approach that focuses solely on formalization of land claims (e.g., formalizing registration of the current access without re-

structuring distribution of such access) will not stem, and may even increase, the flow of migrant labour because it merely institutionalizes the 'small-ness' and 'poor-ness' of lands within an overall undemocratic distribution of wealth. Further, there are the 38 out of 136 we interviewed (or 28%) of those who said they have no farmland, which is a significant minority. They are *a priori* excluded from land formalization-centric approaches which currently seem to dominate thinking within the Myanmar government.

These findings underscore the importance of combining calls for 'recognition' of access to land, water and/or forest by rural working people with a strong call for 'redistribution' of land to the landless and near-landless working people. While land redistribution without recognition of customary lands would be extremely problematic in the context of Myanmar, a deeper look into the issues confronting migrant workers suggests that the converse is true too: that recognition without redistribution would be extremely problematic in the current context of Myanmar, and that it is within this combination that demands for land restitution among IDP's and refugees should be carefully considered as well.³⁹

Third, 76 out of 136 migrant workers we interviewed (or 56%) explicitly mentioned that they rely on wage work in and near their home villages before or in-between migrant wage work. This has been expressed across the two categories of those who have farmland and those who do not have farmland. Selling labour in exchange for cash, both abroad and in and around their home villages, is clearly the main economically productive undertaking as far as the migrant workers we interviewed are concerned. It appears that they see the importance of having access to land in their home villages as part of a wider condition necessary for maintaining their household and people who stay behind: to maintain production for daily consumption, maintain their house (if they live in their own house), for refuge in times of illness or for the eventual retirement when they could no longer physically continue doing migrant wage work. In short, having land back home is key to holding their households intact, now and in the future, where social care can be coordinated and carried out: care and schooling of children, care of elderly household members, and indeed, care of their own health in between contracts and eventually upon retirement. This is no static 'corridor', but a living dynamic one, where migrant workers, along with other household members, continuously balance the work of production and social reproduction.

³⁸The interviewers among our study team members were uneven in their emphasis in terms of follow up questions on this matter, namely, about the variables that are relevant to farmland production and income generation, including prices of produces, cost of inputs, irrigation, and so on. Therefore, we cannot claim with confidence any insights on these issues from our dataset.

³⁹For more background and analysis on the issue of IDP and land restitution, see https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/voluntary_return_restitution_and_the_right_to_land_for_idps_and_refugees_in_myanmar.pdf

Section 4. Towards a new old normal?

I worked as a sugarcane cutter in China. If I cut 15 sugarcanes, I get 1 Yuan (0.15 USD). In the beginning, the boss provided us the meals but later on there were many illegal migrant workers from Myanmar, and he started not to provide any meals to workers anymore. The boss paid daily wages to us. We got 50 Yuan (7.6 USD) per day and the boss paid all migrant workers daily. We had to spend for food cost using our daily wages. They didn't provide the place to stay, so we just made the temporary tent in the sugarcane yard and stayed there. Not only us, but all migrant workers who came and worked had to make a tent and stayed in the yard. We went home because of the pandemic. But there are not regular jobs in and near our home village. It's difficult for us to survive here. My parents are poor and my family doesn't own land. We rent land from others and grow paddy on taungya before, but it's very low yield. We can't afford to buy farmland. Therefore, I have to migrate again so that my family will survive. I will leave my children with my mother, and my husband and I have go to China again after this pandemic situation is stable and the roads are open. (A 25-year-old woman Kachin from Shan State).

There is a lot of talk these days, both globally and in Myanmar, about a 'new normal' in a post-pandemic world. What will be the 'new normal' for migrant workers, whose lives and ways of coping with structural poverty have been completely disrupted by the pandemic, but most of whom remain rooted in their rural communities? Will the new normal mean going back to the hardships of life and work as it was before the pandemic? Or, will something different, could something better, be possible? It is a confusing time. It may be hard to 'go back', but it may be harder to do differently going forward. This is not to downplay the pandemic and the global crisis that set into motion. Rather, it is to highlight the structural and institutional context within which Myanmar migrant workers exercise agency as they try to understand their condition and address it themselves.

Consider the case of a migrant worker who we interviewed in September 2019 in Bagan, five months before the Chinese government declared a lockdown in Wuhan due to the coronavirus. He is a young man, 19 years old from the Dry Zone who worked in China in 2019, and he narrated to us part of his life story that is worth citing here in an extended manner because it speaks about the thread that strings together the past, present and future, as well as the home village and the work site at the country of work. Without some (major) changes in the bigger structural and institutional context, his life story in the 'old' days is likely to be reproduced (or expanded) in the 'new' days -- a 'new old normal'.

I have no red book or green book. A red book allows one to stay for 7 days legally in China. But you have to renew it in Muse [border town in northern Shan State] once a week, costing you 80 Yuan (12 USD). A green book allows one to stay there for one year, and costs 200,000 Kyats (155 USD). That means, I was illegal in China. I worked in a watermelon farm, together with 15 other people from the Dry Zone, of whom eight were from my village. The farm is near the border, close to Muse. We crossed the border illegally; we rode three different cars to get to the peak of the mountain along the border, crossed the mountain border, and then we rode another car that brought us to the farm. We were accompanied by a labour contractor who is also from the Dry Zone and can speak Chinese. He was our translator at the work site, and the Chinese boss was paying him, although I do not know by how much. We got connected to this labour contractor through a fellow villager via Viber.

We were given free accommodation and food. One hall for all men, and another room just for women. We sprayed fertilizer and pesticide, and we covered watermelon with foam. We didn't have protective gear. We worked from 7am to 12:00 and from 2pm to 5pm, seven days a week. If you get sick, you have to pay for your cost, and you will have no wage for the days you were ill and could not work. We were paid 30 Yuan (4.5 USD) per day. We were given only half of our wages with the understanding that the full payment would be given when we go home to Myanmar on the agreed date. The Chinese boss didn't want us to go home earlier than the agreed date. When the police would be coming, the Chinese boss would warn us, and we would have to hide. The watermelon field has a depression; when the police would be coming we had to run into the depression, cover ourselves with leaves and branches and hide there until the police had already left.

After working there for two months, we were unhappy because the work was hard, the pay was too little and the boss was not very nice. One day the eight of us from my village decided we would want to go back to Myanmar. We waited until the Chinese boss was asleep, then we ran away. We prearranged with a Shan Chinese truck driver to bring us to a particular point where we then took another vehicle to go to a place near Muse but still on the China side. We paid 60 Yuan and 50 Yuan, respectively, for a total of 110 Yuan (17 USD). Then we climbed a mountain for one and half hour, carefully bypassing a military outpost. We had to crawl under a barbed wire fence to cross into the Myanmar side. When we got home, we had no more money. For the two months we worked, we only got the wages for one month because the Chinese boss



Lahu village in eastern Shan State
Photo by Phillimon

withheld the other half.

The work in China was hard, but it's a regular job. I want to go back there. I already have a contact through Viber to work in a sugarcane field. But my younger brother who is still working in China in a car-washing place advised me not yet to come because of the conflict in Muse. My brother is 17 years old and has been working in China for two years already, also without red or green book, and he earns about 200,000 Kyats (155 USD) a month. My wife does not want me to go back to China. When I work around Bagan, usually in the construction of pagodas, I get paid up to 10,000 Kyats (7.7 USD) per day. But it's very irregular work. How are we going to survive? We have no farmland. My parents have a small plot, and raise some goats and pigs. But they could only take care of themselves. I want to go back to China in November and cut sugarcane.

It is a heartbreaking story of two brothers, both in their teens and both in precarious jobs in China instead of studying in school. Even more heartbreaking is the fact that their stories of hardship are not unique, but a salient feature of a general pattern of impoverishment that existed for working people in rural communities across Myanmar long before the coronavirus pandemic ever entered the picture.

If the conditions in their home village that led the brothers to go abroad and work under such conditions are not addressed in a post-pandemic new normal, there is no reason to expect that their life stories will not be reproduced endlessly. How do they see their current situation after returning to their home villages? How do they plan to survive in the coming time? How conscious and prepared are the migrant workers for shocks like the one brought about by the pandemic, the state responses to it, and the expected economic downturn? Have migrants saved enough during years of hard migrant work to be able to survive during this crisis and transition well into a post-pandemic new normal? What do they see as a post-pandemic normal?

A 33-year-old Lahu woman from Shan State narrated to us part of her life story:

I don't have regular income now and we grow paddy field only for family consumption. We grow a small tea plantation. We don't want to grow them more than what we have now because the prices are very low. Before we went to China, we also sold mushrooms, white yum, and many others that we gathered from the forest. Chinese people mainly bought them. My husband and I thought it would be better if we worked outside and get more income. So we contacted our relatives who are working in China. Then, we went to

China and worked there. My husband and I left our children to my mother when we went there. I am happy to stay in my hometown but I need regular income for my family to survive. I am waiting for the border gates to open. We don't have regular income here now, so I have to go back to China and work again.

A 20-year-old young man from Mon State told us part of his life story:

I went to Thailand as migrant worker three times already. The first time was when I was 12 years old. I worked for one year scooping charcoal from a big hole on the ground where the charcoal is burned and made. It's very hard on my back. It takes me three to four days to finish scooping charcoal in one hole. I was paid a very small amount of money. Then I came back to Myanmar. When I was 17 years old I went back to Thailand and worked at a construction. I was

paid 250 Baht (8.2 USD) a day. Later I returned again to Myanmar. In January 2020 I went back to Thailand and stayed until April 2020. Due to the coronavirus we had less work in Thailand, and so I came back to my village in Myanmar. I don't want to go back to Thailand. I don't know, maybe I used to scoop charcoal too much for too long because now my back gets pain all the time.

In September 2019, some months before the pandemic hit, a 45-year-old man from Magwe told us about his plan on how to save for future shocks:

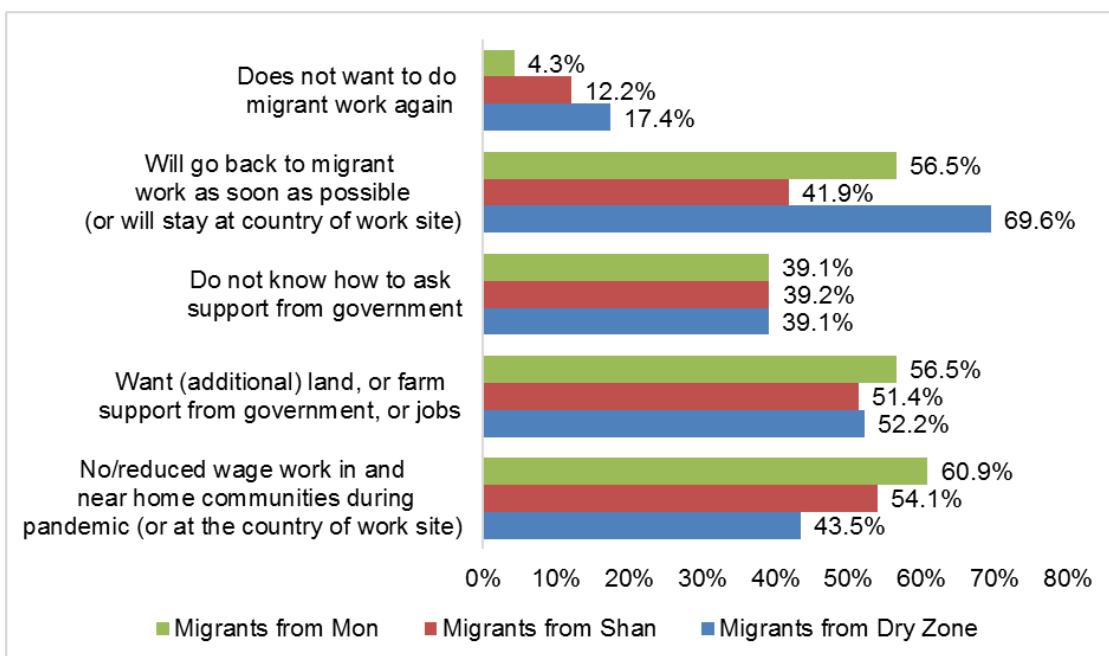
I worked in China from November 2018 to May 2019. I cut sugarcane. But I also worked loading cut sucarcane into trucks. We were paid 27 Yuan (4.1 UD) per ton to load the truck. I bought ten goats when I got back from China in May [2019]. At least when the situation is bad, we can sell them one at a time. The income from China is good. But it is just enough for our subsistence. There

Table 9: Migrant workers' perspectives on current condition and plan for a post-pandemic period

Issue	Migrants from Dry Zone	Migrants from Shan	Migrants from Mon	Total
No/reduced wage work in and near home communities during pandemic (or at the country of work site)	10	40	14	64
Want (additional) land, or farm support from government, or jobs	12	38	13	63
Do not know how to ask support from government	9	29	9	47
Will go back to migrant work as soon as possible (or will stay at country of work site)	16	31	13	60
Does not want to do migrant work again	4	9	1	14

Note: based on interviews in 2020, N = 120: Dry Zone: 23; Shan: 74; Mon: 23

Fig 13: Migrant workers' perspectives on current condition and plan for a post-pandemic period





Women sellers going to the fish market
Photo by Min Ar Non

are 180 households in my village. Almost all of them have members who go to China to work, except for those very few households who have a shop or big farm or a big animal herd with capital.

Today, more than a year on and hit by the pandemic, we wonder what happened to his goats and how they are doing. We attempted to get in touch again with this migrant worker to find out how he is doing, but unfortunately we were unsuccessful, in part because of the difficulty of reaching out to people during the pandemic. We are left wondering what lies ahead for him and the other migrant workers we interviewed, and their families. Already the pandemic is long running, many parts of the world are experiencing second and third waves of infection, and perhaps more are on the horizon. How do they see their current situation changing as the months roll by, and how might their ideas about how to cope be changing too?

There are many issues to consider and many interests at stake, but the perspectives of migrant workers themselves are key. There seems to be a pattern, an overall tendency among the migrants we interviewed, which we aggregate and highlight in Table 9 and Fig 14, and from there draw out some general insights.

First, slightly more than half (64 out of 120, or 53.33%) of the migrant workers we interviewed during the pandemic told us that at that moment there was no wage work or much less wage work available – either in and

near their home communities or at their work sites across the border. This is only for those who explicitly responded to our question on this; it is possible others did not feel it was necessary to state something that seemed to them obvious. This is significant, especially when we compare this with those who feel they didn't get support from government (earlier discussion), or those who explicitly said that they do not know how to ask support from the government (when asked whether they requested support from the government) at 47 out of 120 migrant workers (or 39.1%).

Second, slightly more than half (63 out of 120, or 52.5%) of those we interviewed during the pandemic explicitly said that they would want land, or additional land, and/or farm support, and/ or jobs from the government in and near their home villages, and if they had, they would seriously reconsider doing migrant work again. Those who currently have no land are compelled to take up migrant work as soon as possible. And those who have tried to travel back abroad told of even more precarious conditions, such as having to pay even higher fees to the brokers and increased risk of arrest by the police. They end up with more debt, thus needing to work even more, and so becoming entrapped in a vicious downward spiral.

Third, exactly 50% (60 out of 120) of the migrant workers we interviewed said they will go back and do migrant work abroad again as soon as it is possible to travel and work, or, for those who decided to stay at the countries

of their work sites, they will stay there to retain or look for new jobs. Only 14 out of 120 migrant workers (or 11.7%) said they do not want to do migrant wage work again (including a few saying that they are finally retiring after having worked for many years as migrants). It is not far-fetched to suggest that the 46 migrant workers who did not explicitly said anything about taking up migrant work again, will likely eventually gravitate out of necessity towards the position of taking up migrant wage work as soon as it is possible.



A small fishing boat in Mon state
Photo by Sawor Mon

Section 5. Conclusion

There are several discernible patterns in the causes and conditions, consequences and challenges related to migrant workers from the rural areas who have been impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. Some of the highlights and possible implications of our study are summarized below.

First, many migrant workers went home on their own following the pandemic, while many others opted to stay at their work sites abroad. Whether currently at their home villages or abroad, most migrant workers are facing difficult livelihood situation marked by lost or radically reduced wage work and incomes. The most widespread government interventions that speak to migrant workers' experiences rushing back home involved the setting up of local quarantine centers organized by village government administrative units and the deployment of rural health workers who more or less regularly monitor temperatures of returning migrant workers who stayed in quarantine centers. Other than these, the overwhelming majority of migrant workers feel that they did not receive any support from the government or from their employers abroad going back home. Most of those we interviewed for this study expressed that they did not expect anything from the government, or did not make any de-

mand or request addressed to government, and that even if they had wanted to, they do not know how to express such demand or request.

Second, migrant workers are super-coveted at the countries of their work sites. Without them, many vital sectors in the economy of those countries would not have become as economically competitive as they are now, or some sectors might have even collapsed. This is true whether we are talking about the world-leading Malaysian oil palm sector, or the famed Thai agro-food system, or the sugarcane sector in China – all of which depend largely on migrant workers. Migrant workers are coveted in these sectors in these countries because of their three basic characteristics: the relative cheapness of their labour, their ability to 'hibernate' cyclically (especially for seasonal migrant wage work), and the ease in discarding them.

The relative cheapness of their labour, ability to cyclically hibernate when required, and the ease of discarding them when the time comes are, in turn, directly linked to at least two key institutional and structural factors, namely, the informality and illegality that such migrant wage work complex has been built and maintained, and the rootedness of migrant workers in their rural home villages in Myanmar where most of them leave their household members behind and where majority have access to farmland. The informality and illegality of the migrant wage work complex means that owners of capital do not have to pay the legally mandated minimum wages, benefits, and working conditions, and allow the proliferation of and control by bewildering layers of labour brokers in labour recruitment, transport to and from home villages and work sites, setting up survival accommodation arrangements, carry out labour seller-labour buyer match up, and so on. The rootedness of migrant workers in their rural home villages in Myanmar means that a large part of the real cost of labour – biological reproduction, labour reproduction, social care (child care, schooling of children, etc.), health care, social security, pension, and so on are largely shouldered by the households and the local communities through informal ways, and to some extent, by the Myanmar government. Access to small farmland becomes crucial for migrant workers, for their subsistence needs during the in-between migrant wage work tour, when they get exhausted or ill and needed to recuperate, and in the eventuality of being discarded by the owners of capital and needed to retire from migrant wage work.

These conditions have far-reaching implications for how we think of addressing the issues of migrant wage workers. Advocating for making migrant work legal and formal might reduce the financial burden of finding and maintaining wage, and might require owners of capital to

pay their workers at least the minimum wage standards and workers' benefits (health care, pension, etc.). But as the cost of migrant labour labour goes up, it might also render them less attractive to the owners of capital, and might result on less demand for migrant wage work or particular groups of migrant workers. Advocating for giving sufficient land to landless and land-poor working people in Myanmar rural areas on the assumption that it might radically reduce the number of migrant wage workers, and thus minimize the problems faced by them, might not actually happen, and might even unintentionally and unexpectedly reinforce the current structure of migrant work complex. As shown in this study, the majority of the migrant workers we interviewed have farmland, but that having farmland does not guarantee meeting the minimum conditions for human survival, especially when the conditions required to make such farmlands sufficiently productive (infrastructure, policy support, and so on) are not put in place and consistently maintained.

Third, in all reports and studies about migrant workers in Myanmar, there is a common agreement that the overwhelming majority of migrant workers are from the rural areas. One reason for this as we summarized directly above is that migrant workers rooted in rural areas have the ability to take care of the cost of labour reproduction and social care in a manner described above. Closely linked to this is another reason: because the degree and extent of impoverishment in the rural areas provide that enormous social force that rural working people – peasants, agro-pastoralists, artisanal fishers, landless labourers – to take up migrant wage work, often not because of choice but because they are compelled to do so by the conditions in their social life. Nevertheless, and in the process, the conditions of their migrant work are consciously calculated and reshaped by migrant workers

themselves in the dynamic continuum between work site and social reproduction site. They are not helpless, passive victims of migrant labour corridors – they actively reshape the very terrain of these corridors.

Long before the Covid-19 pandemic, rural working people have been confronted by the pandemic of agrarian crisis. This agrarian crisis is seen in many ways. Low level of land and labour productivity is a common feature across Myanmar countryside. General absence of mass infrastructure in agriculture, agro-pastoralism, agro-forestry, and artisanal fishing, for production, storage, transport, and marketing of produce depress the ability of these sectors to offer viable livelihoods for rural working people. However, government attempts at building, or supporting initiatives by owners of capital to construct enclaves of modern farming and ranching are too exclusionary and predatory, depending on the local contexts within which they arise. Focusing on infusing massive public funds to build large-scale modern irrigation infrastructure accompanied by systematic credit support to build mechanization capabilities of farms may end up benefitting only a handful already better off sections of the peasantry as well as traders, contractors, and moneylenders. Focusing on promoting insertion of farmers into circuits of commodity value chain through a variety of growership arrangements may prove to not only result in the loss of autonomy of poor farmers to decide on their land use and production system, but may also be debt traps for most of them where predatory moneylenders and merchants may end up ultimately taking control over their lands.

Addressing the agrarian crisis is an urgent and necessary – but not sufficient – step in addressing the issues confronting migrant workers today; such public action requires a more systematic view of how land, labour,



*Herding goats near a farm in Magwe region
Photo by Doi Ra*

capital, and technology shape one another whether to decimate or improve the livelihoods of rural working people. Public action should start with a serious, far-reaching and society-wide democratic reconstitution of land control through public policies of *recognition* of land access by working people who still have access but such is constantly threatened by various social forces, *redistribution* of land to those who are landless and near-landless, and *restitution* of land and its corresponding community social order for the International Displaced Peoples (IDPs). But such land-centric public action should constitute just the first step because it will require much more to build a vibrant social order in the rural areas that are truly just, democratic, and sustainable.

Fourth, the system that has generated and maintained 5 million migrant workers continues to reproduce migrant workers. Within such a systemic crisis, mechanisms that generate landlessness and impoverishment are constantly at work. These are not just the mechanisms of debt trap that push peasants to sell or rent out lands and fully rely on wage work, but involve extra-economic coercive mechanisms as well. The widespread militarization that has endlessly produced waves of Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) during the past few decades continues today. In addition, waves of land grabbing done by the military and by the government in the name of national security, development projects, and public interests, and big nature conservation initiatives, have expelled working people from their land or have their access to forests legally banned or significantly clipped. These mechanisms of dispossession are deployed illegally, but often through legal means, such as the Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin (VFV) Land Management Law. The VFV Law feeds the social engine for producing a cheap commodity in labour, as well as predatory merchant capital-dominated commodity value chain insertion of poor farmers. If the plight of migrant workers has to be taken seriously and addressed democratically, one of the most urgent and necessary public actions is to immediately cancel the VFV Law. It should instead pursue democratic land policies based on the fundamental – and inseparable – principles of recognition, redistribution and restitution as discussed above, and the passage of a law that imposes an across-the-broad ceiling (that is, society-wide and multisectorally) as to how much land corporations and individuals can control, combined with recognizing as a right a minimum access to land, water and forest by all those who want to work the land to earn a living. And rather than eradicating opium fields, policies should have a development based

approach, to address the root causes of poppy cultivation (poverty) instead of the symptoms (annual cultivation levels). In addition, the cultural and traditional rights of these communities should be respected (Kramer et al, 2014).

Fifth, a ‘new old normal’ – the old normal persisting into a new era – is the most likely future post-pandemic world for the migrant workers if nothing is done to radically recast the social structures and institutional terrain that have generated and maintained the conditions for migrant wage work as the latter is currently constituted. But a radical recasting of such structures and institutions will not automatically transform migrant labour as a whole or in its parts. We are constantly reminded that half of the story of the migrant work corridor is rooted in and largely shaped by societies and governments of work sites. Ultimately, the question of addressing migrant labour issues is truly an international issue that requires an internationalist solidarity and public action. This is not covered in this report.

Any post-pandemic public action that is based on the assumption that ‘everything was fine before the pandemic struck, and thus, the way forward is to walk backward’, sort of, which the April 2020 Covid-19 Economic Relief Plan (CERP) of the government seems to be sounding like, is bound to be successful only in rebooting the engine of growth in the generation and maintenance of subhuman/superworker migrant workers.⁴⁰ When and if this happens, such public action further normalizes and routinizes dispossession in its many forms, as well as destitution and pauperization of working people.

In closing, migrant workers found their migrant jobs, and get to their work sites, on their own. They managed to come home amid global medical emergency on their own. They stay alive largely on their own. All these speak about the great political agency of rural working people. Will the rural working people be able to change the course, and construct their future according to their own conscious class and identity standpoint? That’s an open question. But ultimately, and paraphrasing one famous political economist, Myanmar working people make their history but not just as they please, not in the conditions of their own choosing, but under circumstances already existing and directly transmitted from the past.

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⁴⁰See Bello et al. (2020).

Annex 1

Summary of the interviewees

Time	Items	Migrants from Dry Zone	Migrants from Shan State	Migrants from Mon State	Total
2020 (after the pandemic)	Number of interviews	23	74	23	120
	Gender	Male	18	43	75
		% in the region	78.3%	58.1%	60.9%
	Age	Female	5	31	45
		% in the region	21.7%	41.9%	37.5%
	Land access	< 25	7	43	55
		% of the region	30.4%	58.1%	45.8%
		26-49	15	30	60
		% of the region	65.2%	40.5%	50.0%
		>50	1	1	5
		% of the region	4.3%	1.4%	4.2%
	Work Site	With farmland	14	19	40
		% of the region	60.9%	25.7%	33.3%
		Without farmland	9	47	69
		% of the region	39.1%	63.5%	57.5%
		No Information	0	8	11
		% of the region	0.0%	10.8%	9.2%
		China	16	49	65
		% of the region	69.6%	66.2%	54.2%
	2020 (after the pandemic)	Thiland	4	22	47
		% of the region	17.4%	29.7%	39.2%
		Malaysia	3	1	6
		% of the region	13.0%	1.4%	5.0%
	2020 (after the pandemic)	Other	0	2	2
		% of the region	0.0%	2.7%	1.7%
	2020 (after the pandemic)	Return home	18	62	97
		% of the region	78.3%	83.8%	80.8%
		remained in the countries they work	5	12	23
		% of the region	21.7%	16.2%	19.2%

Time	Items	Migrants from Dry Zone	Migrants from Shan State	Migrants from Mon State	Total
August-September 2019	Number of interviews	16	0	0	16
	Gender	Male	14	0	14
		% of the region	87.5%	-	-
		Female	2	0	0
		% of the region	12.5%	-	-
	Age	< 25	9	0	9
		% of the region	56.3%	-	-
		26-49	7	0	0
		% of the region	43.8%	-	-
		>50	0	0	0
		% of the region	0.0%	-	-
	land access	With land	4	0	4
		% of the region	25.0%	-	-
		Without land	3	0	0
		% of the region	18.8%	-	-
		No information	9	0	9
		% of the region	56.3%	-	-
	Work Site	China	16	0	16
		% of the region	100.0%	-	-

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