

Recommendations for Actions to Enhance Skills Development for Migrant Workers in Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Thailand

Conference Paper

Introduction

Skills development is recognized as essential to poverty reduction and enhanced protection for migrant workers, and can contribute to increased productivity and job satisfaction for migrant workers. Skills development also optimizes the employability of migrants in labour markets in countries of origin and destination, as well as ensuring decent work in labour migration. Responsive and more inclusive skills development for women and men migrant workers can thus create positive spill over effects on economic growth for countries of origin and destination, as well as on positive migration outcomes for migrants.

The importance of skills development for migrant workers is recognized in international standards and frameworks. Advancing skills development for migrant workers contributes to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, in particular the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on quality education and SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) also recognizes the need to invest in skills development and facilitate mutual recognition of skills, qualifications and competencies (Objective 18).

The Global Forum for Migration and Development (GFMD), the Regional Consultative Process on Overseas Employment and Contractual Labour for Countries of Origin in Asia (Colombo Process) and the Ministerial Consultation on Overseas Employment and Contractual Labour for Countries of Origin and Destination in Asia (Abu Dhabi Dialogue) also

place a strong emphasis on skills development and qualification recognition for migrant workers.

To promote and increase skills development opportunities for migrant workers, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) collaborates with multiple stakeholders including governments, skills development providers (SDPs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) to align policies, share and promote best practices, and facilitate skills recognition.

To further strengthen the capacities of skills development providers to provide market-driven, migrant-centred and gender-responsive skills training for migrant workers, IOM organized a **Regional Conference on Enhancing Skills Development for Migrant Workers in Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Thailand** on 14 July 2021. The Regional Conference was attended by 65 government representatives from the ministries of labour of Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Thailand (CLT); as well as representatives from SDPs and development partners. The Conference provided a platform for different stakeholders to discuss and develop recommendations on streamlining skills development for migrant workers, and integrating and institutionalizing soft skills and safe migration training into existing skills development programmes.

This paper presents the recommendations on enhancing skills development for migrant workers across Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Thailand that were discussed during the Conference.

Background

As of March 2021,¹ there are approximately 2 million documented migrant workers residing in Thailand primarily from Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Myanmar (CLM). These include migrants documented through national verification processes and border passes, and migrants who entered Thailand through procedures governed by Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) between Thailand and CLM. These migrant workers are mainly employed in lower-skilled occupations in the agriculture, fishing, seafood processing, construction, manufacturing, domestic work and service industries.² As of March 2021, 45 per cent of documented migrant workers from CLM are women and 55 per cent are men.³ Due to limitations of official data, statistics on the number of irregular migrants in Thailand remain as estimations. A 2019 report estimates that there are approximately 800,000 migrant workers residing in Thailand during 2018.⁴

The demand for migrant workers in Thailand began during its economic boom from 1987 to 1996. Wage differentials between Thailand and neighbouring countries – Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar – increased and the Thai economy grew at an average rate of 10 per cent per year. Since then, Thailand emerged as a middle-income country and transitioned into a net-receiving country for labour migration. As Thai nationals increasingly took on skilled jobs, a labour shortage for lower-skilled jobs emerged which was then filled by migrant workers from CLM.⁵

Despite the value of skills development in the economic growth of Thailand and countries of origin, there remains significant gaps in ensuring migrants are equipped with market-driven skills as well as challenges in effective skills and job matching between Thailand and countries of origin. Women and men migrant workers from CLM continue to face limited access to skills training and skills certification, which lead to under-utilization of skills and limited employment opportunities.

While both women and men migrant workers face barriers to skills development, women migrant workers experience disproportionately limited access to skills development opportunities. A 2017 study found that many women migrant workers receive little to no training before migrating, nor do they receive skills development opportunities once in countries of destination.⁵ Moreover, the study suggests that opportunities for skills training for women migrants was reported to depend on the “benevolence of the bosses” and that it is uncommon for employers to offer lower-skilled workers training opportunities that would allow them to transition into skilled positions.⁵ An ILO study into the Thai construction sector also shows that women migrant workers in construction are often given lower-skilled, lower-wage functions such as cleaning, landscaping, and cooking; and were paid less even when performing the same work as men.⁶

UN Women research suggests that internalized notions of gender stereotypes also contribute to the limited uptake of skills development opportunities,⁷ finding that 13.41 per cent of

¹ ILO, “TRIANGLE in ASEAN Quarterly Briefing Note for Thailand, January – March 2021” (Bangkok, 2021).

² United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand, *Thailand Migration Report 2019* (Bangkok, 2019).

³ ILO, 2021.

⁴ United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand, 2019.

⁵ UN Women, *Women Migrant Workers in the ASEAN Economic Community* (Bangkok, 2017).

⁶ ILO, *High rise, low pay, Experiences of migrant women in the Thai construction sector*, (Bangkok, 2016)

⁷ UN Women, *Research on Barriers and Opportunities to Improving Outcomes for Women Migrant Workers through Skills Development in Thailand* (Bangkok, 2021).

women migrant workers surveyed agreed with the stereotype of women's physical weakness and 5.28 per cent stating that women lack abilities to learn new skills compared to men.⁷

Given that most lower-skilled women and men migrant workers start their employment without any prior skills training, improving skills development in Thailand and countries of origin is crucial to enhancing the employability of migrant workers and contributing to better working conditions and protection for migrant workers. This includes training for technical and vocational skills or knowledge, practical competencies, knowhow, and attitudes necessary to perform a certain trade or occupation in the labour market; as well as training for soft skills or skills that relate to personal and social competencies such as self-management, teamwork, and communication.

Recent developments and trends

The Government of Cambodia has recognized skills development of Cambodian workers, including Cambodian migrant workers, as key to the socioeconomic development of the country. Through the Directorate General of Technical and Vocational Education Training (DGTVET) Strategy Action Plan 2019-2023, the Government of Cambodia has committed to continuously strengthen the quality of technical and vocational education training (TVET) in the country.

During the regional conference, DGTVET shared their current activities to develop TVET including developing a guideline for distance and online learning and teaching; improving the quality assurance system for computer-based training; piloting a work-based learning programme; and improving the Competency-based Assessment and Certification System (CBACS). DGTVET is also working with the IOM to integrate safe migration in soft skills training, including through developing a training package for training of trainers (TOT). In addition, the Government of Cambodia is taking steps to review policies on Recognition of Prior-Learning (RPL), including

soft skills in the TVET curriculum, and drafting the TVET law which is expected to be in force by the end of 2022.

To further strengthen the efforts of DGTVET in improving skills development in Cambodia, DGTVET expressed their need for capacity building, support for the development of tools, and rollout of safe migration training.

In Lao People's Democratic Republic, the Skills Development and Employment Department (SDED) under the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MoLSW), is also collaborating with IOM on a training of trainers for safe labour migration.

During the conference, the SDED emphasized the importance of integrating labour market information systems across Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, and Thailand (CLMT). However, challenges remain for the Government. The SDED mentioned that there is currently no training system that exists for Lao migrant workers due to the lack of information on vacancies in countries of destination that can be used for long-term planning. The SDED also highlighted that most Lao migrant workers migrate irregularly without proper documents and come from rural and remote areas where access to pre-departure migration information is limited.

IOM in collaboration with the SDED also commenced skills development training for returning migrant workers in August 2021. Building on this skills training, IOM in Lao People's Democratic Republic will organize a consultation workshop on RPL to discuss ways in which migrants can be supported to receive skills certification for skills they may have gained through their work experience abroad, as well as to establish mutual recognition of skills between Lao People's Democratic Republic and countries of destination.

SDPs in Cambodia and Thailand have also shared their existing skills development programmes

during the conference. In Cambodia, some SDPs mentioned that they provide hospitality training for Cambodian migrant workers to enter the service sector in Thailand, specifically tourism-related services in hotels and restaurants. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, SDPs in Cambodia provided three-month internships for their students and placed them in partner hotels and restaurants in Thailand. Prior to the internship, students are given training on cleaning, hotel room service, customer service, food and beverage service, as well as English and Thai language training. SDPs in Cambodia highlighted the importance of knowing what skills were needed by the Thai labour market in order to plan and adapt their training curricula and ensure their students respond to market needs.

In Thailand, SDPs stated that they provide Cambodian, Lao and Myanmar migrant workers a variety of skills training which include soft skills and Thai language skills. Some SDPs also shared their activities providing makeup and dessert baking skills training to lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) migrant groups in Rayong province with support from IOM.

Soft skills training including Thai language skills was highly valued by Thai businesses and employers' associations. Some Thai businesses reported on their collaboration with IOM to provide Thai language skills training to 100 migrant worker employees. IOM also provided 30-hour Thai language training courses in partnership with partner employers and civil society organizations reaching a total of 496 migrant workers including the 100 migrant workers previously mentioned. Businesses highlighted the impact of this training which led to their migrant workers enhancing their ability to communicate and understand their work, workplace rules and requirements.

In addition to soft skills training, businesses and employers' associations noted the need for migrant workers to have adaptability or the

ability to quickly learn new skills and adapt to changing skills demands and responsibilities at work. Stakeholders mentioned that this was especially critical in light of the COVID-19 pandemic which resulted in changing work environments.

Stakeholders also discussed the importance of skills recognition during the conference, highlighting that the skills and certifications migrant workers gained in countries of origin or in Thailand should be recognized by employers across Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Thailand. In response, a skills certification agency in Thailand shared that they are piloting a skills certification programme for migrant workers which can be recognized under the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRf).⁸ This pilot certification programme for migrant workers in Thailand was conducted in 2019 and 2020 with migrant domestic workers.

Despite these recent developments, some civil society stakeholders stated that there were still gaps in providing migrant worker groups access to skills development opportunities. According to the stakeholders, there is a lack of conversation around providing migrant domestic workers skills training and that they were often not allowed to participate in skills development programmes by their Thai employers since the domestic workers would need to take time off from work. However, employees including migrant workers are entitled to unpaid study leave of up to 30 days per year under the Labour Protection Act. Stakeholders also mentioned that migrant workers, including migrant domestic workers, who are able to join skills development programmes were unable to obtain skills certification. Without proof, the qualifications of migrant domestic workers remain unrecognized and prevent them from negotiating higher wages or transitioning to other service sectors.

⁸ *Bangkok Post*, TPQI shifts to Asean standards. 16 December 2017. Available at www.bangkokpost.com.

Enhancing Skills Development Programmes

In order to support Thailand and countries of origin to enhance skills development in the region, IOM conducted an impact assessment of skills development programmes under the Poverty Reduction through Safe Migration, Skills Development and Enhanced Job Placement in Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Thailand (PROMISE) Project. The study surveyed 277 migrant beneficiaries from CLM who were enrolled in cross-border internship and in-service training programmes.

The study reflected some discussions held during the conference, such as the value of soft skills training for Thai employers. The study found that employers are interested in soft skills that allowed migrants to better adjust to Thai culture. Thai language training was especially relevant, with more women migrant workers showing greater interest than men since they feel safer when they understand the language and can express themselves at work and in daily life.

The study also found that labour rights training leads to increased trust between migrant workers and their employers, and improved working conditions for migrant workers.

When asked about their future plans, 51 per cent of migrant beneficiaries in the study indicated that they would like to engage in some form of professional development – either to pursue studying at a university or joining more training programmes.

Overall, the study shows that both employers and migrant workers greatly benefit from skills training in both Thailand and countries of origin. Employers gain increased worker productivity and satisfaction, while migrant workers learn and strengthen skills that help them better perform at work and adjust to working in the country of destination. The study also demonstrates that training courses for migrant workers should be planned, designed and delivered in line with labour market demand in

Thailand. More importantly, skills development is found to have a significant impact on improving working conditions for migrant workers through trainings on labour rights and occupational safety and health (OSH). The study found that labour rights training leads to increased trust between migrant workers and employers by increasing migrant workers' awareness of their labour rights in Thailand and the Thai labour laws with which their employers are required to comply. Trainings on OSH also contribute to migrant workers' improved understanding of and compliance with safety protocols in the workplace. Employers interviewed in the study state that providing OSH training and safety signs in the workplace in languages understood by migrant workers are effective ways to ensure worker safety.

To help SDPs improve their training courses, IOM in collaboration with Thammasat University has developed the [Good Practice Guidelines on Skills Development](#). The Guidelines provide information on skills in demand in the construction, hospitality and manufacturing and sectors in Thailand, good practices on skills development, skills recognition and certification for migrant workers, and guidance on maximizing existing resources for skills training of migrant workers. The document has five key themes including ethical recruitment in support of skills matching of migrant workers, skills development as part of decent work, enhancing migrant workers' rights and welfare through skills development, public-private partnerships for skills development and skills development for safety practices related to COVID-19 prevention.

Conclusion

The regional conference affirmed the value of skills development for all stakeholders especially employers and migrant workers. Skills development not only enhances business productivity but also working conditions and job satisfaction for migrant workers.

Businesses and employers emphasized the need for migrant workers to have soft skills that allow them to better adjust to Thai culture and their work environment in Thailand. Thai language skills and skills that enable migrant workers to quickly learn and adapt to changing situations and challenges at work were of particular value to employers. Thai language skills were also found to be of value to migrant workers, especially women migrant workers, as it enables them to feel safer and communicate freely at work and in daily life.

Stakeholders highlighted that despite recent developments across Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Thailand on providing skills development training for migrant workers, significant gaps remain. This included ensuring that vulnerable migrant worker groups such as migrant domestic workers continue to face barriers to accessing opportunities for skills development and skills certification.

Stakeholders also noted the need for further collaboration between Thailand and countries of origin in order to plan, design, and deliver skills training courses that are in line with labour market demand in Thailand. In particular, stakeholders mentioned the need for enhanced information sharing between Thailand and countries of origin regarding demand for specific skills and occupations in the Thai labor market, as well as the need for mutual recognition of skills and RPL.

Stakeholders from Cambodia and Lao People's Democratic Republic also stated that further efforts were needed at the national level to enhance their capacity to enhance skills development in their respective countries, which includes further reviewing relevant national laws and policies, developing a standard curriculum for soft skills training, developing training tools and guidelines for SDPs, establishing mechanisms for RPL.

Multi-stakeholder collaboration between government ministries, SDPs and the private

sector, and bilateral cooperation between Thailand and countries of origin, are thus essential to enhancing skills development, job-matching, and career advancement for migrant workers.

Recommendations

The recommendations outlined in this paper consolidate the key issues and priorities identified by all stakeholders across Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Thailand reflecting on how to enhance skills training, job-matching and career advancement for migrant workers, and approaches on institutionalizing soft skills and safe migration into policy and practice. These recommendations are organized into immediate-, medium-, and long-term priorities.

Cambodia

Immediate Priorities

- Continue reviewing relevant policies to enhance recognition of prior learning to ensure that the skills of migrants who return to Cambodia are recognized
- Develop a mechanism to implement recognition of prior learning in Cambodia
- Ensure that provincial offices of the Department of Labour disseminate safe migration information, including relevant labour migration laws and policies in Cambodia and Thailand, as well as information on skills development opportunities available in Cambodia
- Ensure that Cambodian SDPs provide Thai language skills training to migrant workers prior to their departure
- Identify specific soft skills relevant to specific occupations in order to plan, design and deliver targeted soft skills trainings for Cambodian migrant workers

Medium-term Priorities

- Ensure that Cambodian migrant workers have access to skills certifications and licenses in Cambodia
- Consider drafting a ministerial order that ensures Cambodian migrant workers have the relevant skills certifications necessary prior to crossing borders into Thailand

Long-term Priorities

- Continue discussions with Thailand to develop bilateral mutual recognition of skills

Lao People's Democratic Republic

Immediate Priorities

- Identify specific technical and soft skills that are in demand in the Thai labour market in order to improve planning, designing and delivering skills training in Lao People's Democratic Republic
- Develop a standard curriculum on providing soft skills training

Medium-term Priorities

- Enhance cooperation with SDPs, private sector, and civil society organizations to promote skills development and ensure that Lao migrant workers have access to job placement when they return to the country.

Long-term Priorities

- Consider how Lao People's Democratic Republic and Thailand can develop a bilateral mechanism on exchanging information about vacancies, skills and labour demand in Thailand in order to improve planning and coordination on skills development

Thailand

Immediate Priorities

- Identify priority job sectors for skills development through multi-stakeholder collaboration

Medium-term priorities

- Enhance accessibility of skills development opportunities for migrant workers, especially vulnerable migrant worker groups such as migrant domestic workers and informal migrant workers
- Enhance collaboration with businesses and employers' associations to address discrimination against migrant workers with regard to migrant workers' access to skills development and career advancement opportunities

Long-term priorities

- Ensure that information on migrant workers' access to skills certification is made public and transparent, in particular for businesses and employers to raise their awareness of available skills certification for migrant workers
- Continue discussions with countries of origin and development partners such as IOM and ILO to develop mutual recognition of skills across CLT