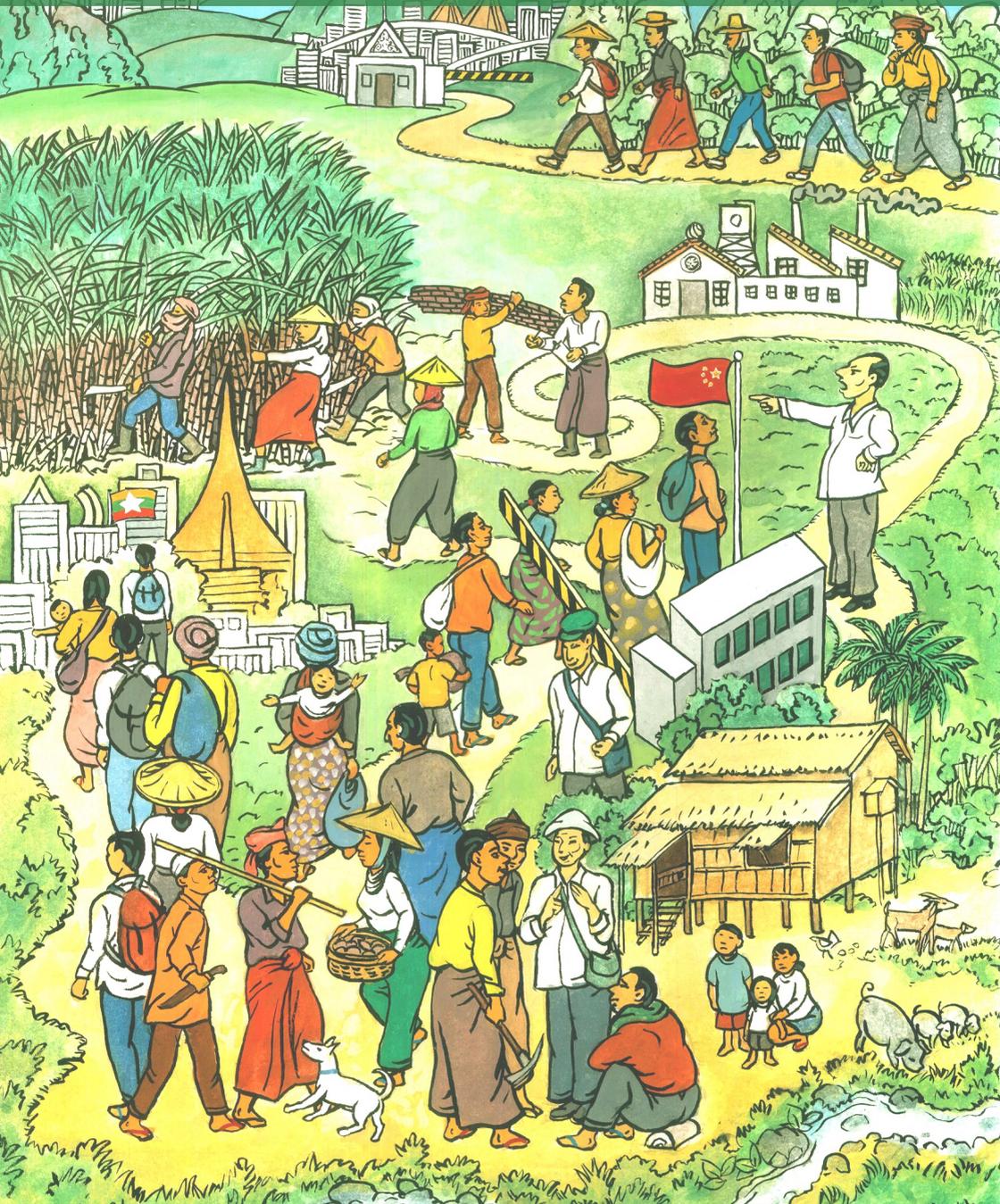


Toward a just transition to a democratic new normal in Myanmar: Cross-border migrant workers and the Covid-19 pandemic



26 urgent & necessary points for community conversation

Toward a just transition to a democratic new normal in Myanmar:

**Cross-border migrant workers and the Covid-19 pandemic
*26 urgent & necessary points for community conversation***

A report by
Transnational Institute (TNI)

in collaboration with:

Justice Society, Lahu Development Network, Metta Development Foundation,
Mon Area Community Development Organization, Mon Region Land Policy
Affair Committee, Mon Women Organization, Mon Youth Progressive Organi-
zation, Pa-O Youth Organization, Paung Ku, Ta'ang Students and Youth Or-
ganization, Tai Youth Network and RRUSHES-5 Research Project

2 October 2020

Cover Image:

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

Design: Aung Thu

Published by Transnational Institute, Justice Society, Lahu Development Network, Metta Development Foundation, Mon Area Community Development Organization, Mon Region Land Policy Affair Committee, Mon Women Organization, Mon Youth Progressive Organization, Pa-O Youth Organization, Paung Ku, Ta'ang Students and Youth Organization, and Tai Youth Network and RRUSHES-5 Research Project

October 2020

Contents of the report may be quoted or reproduced for non-commercial purposes, provided that the source of information is properly cited. TNI would appreciate receiving a copy or link of the text in which this document is used or cited. Please note that for some images the copyright may lie elsewhere and copyright conditions of those images should be based on the copyright terms of the original source. <http://www.tni.org/copyright>

We interviewed 136 migrant workers, male and female, across age groups and ethnic groups from the Dry Zone (Magwe, Mandalay and Sagaing States) and Shan and Mon States: 120 between April and August 2020, and 16 in the Dry Zone in August and September 2019. We wanted to contribute to a better understanding of who the migrant workers are, why they have become migrant workers, and how they perceive their own conditions.

In this short brief we move from what Covid-19 tells us about cross-border migrant labour originating in Myanmar, to more overall remarks about rural development and the entry of particular capital into the Myanmar countryside. We believe that this kind of basic knowledge will help in generating the appropriate public knowledge that is necessary in addressing the current crisis and toward building a post-pandemic new normal that is socially just. Our action research is being compiled into a detailed and lengthy study where life stories of cross-border migrant workers and social structures in and from the rural areas are front and center. The brief that follows here aggregates key highlights of that longer study. We invite readers to also read the full report, which will be available by the end of November 2020 in Burmese and English.

Myanmar cross-border migrant workers overwhelmingly come from and are rooted in rural areas of the country; an estimated 5 million of them working mostly in Thailand, China and Malaysia, and have an estimated combined income remittance of up to US\$8 Billion per year. These cross-border migrant workers are very re-

sourceful people. They find their jobs and get to their work sites on their own. They managed to come home amidst the global pandemic on their own. They stay alive largely on their own. Such experience reveals the great political agency of rural working people – their autonomy and capacity to understand and change their conditions. Will the rural working people of Myanmar 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 directly encountered and transmitted from the past.



There is a discernible pattern 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 (in this brief, we will avoid repeating information that is already widely reported in mainstream media or NGO reports).

1. Many cross-border migrant workers lost their jobs and incomes.

This holds true for those who decided to go back to Myanmar and for those who decided to stay in the country of their work. For the former, their enterprises either closed or went into radical scaling down of operations. The worst cases are those who lost job and future incomes, as well as wages they already worked for and earned, but were not paid to them when they decided to go home. Nearly all of those we interviewed paid a lot of their own personal money going back home to Myanmar.

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. (A 28-year old female migrant worker from Sagaing Region)

I wanted to go back home but I can't go 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. Now I work in housekeeping. I'm paid 10,000 Baht (430,000 Kyats) 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. (A 23-year old migrant worker from Mon State)

2. Migrant workers are highly valued 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 most popular in these sectors in these countries because of their three basic characteristics: the relative cheapness of their

labour, ability to ‘hibernate’ cyclically (especially for seasonal migrant wage work), and ease in discarding them.

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 given free accommodation and food... 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 (5,800 Kyats) 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 left. (A 19-year old male migrant worker from Mandalay Region)



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

3. These characteristics (for which they are highly valued) are conditioned by particular institutions and structures.

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, (1) the informality and illegality that such migrant wage work complex has been built and maintained, and (2) 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.

4. Owners of capital shift a lot of burdens and costs to others.

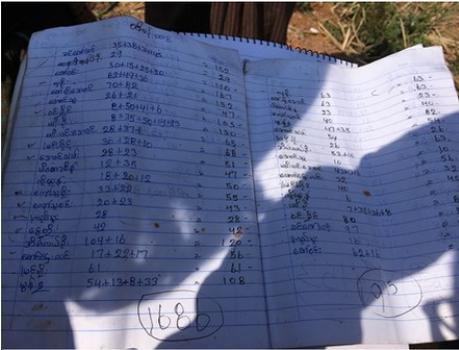
The informality and illegality of the migrant wage work complex means that owners of capital do not have to pay the legally mandated minimum wages, benefits, and working conditions, and allow the proliferation of and control by bewildering layers of labour brokers in labour recruitment, transport to and from home villages and work sites, setting up survival accommodation arrangements, carry out labour seller-labour buyer match up, and so on.

5. Migrant workers themselves and their communities are bearing a lot of the costs.

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 in Myanmar through informal ways, and to some extent, by the Myanmar government through minimum programs on health care and related public service.



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



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

Photo by Jun Borrás (2019), Yunnan

6. Land at home is a crucial survival resource for cross-border migrant workers.

Access to small farmland becomes crucial for migrant workers, for their subsistence needs: (1) during the in-between migrant wage work tour, (2) when they get exhausted or ill and needed to recuperate, and (3) in the eventuality of being discarded by the owners of capital and needed to retire from migrant wage work.

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 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 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. (A 40-year old migrant worker from Magwe Region)

7. These conditions have far-reaching implications for how we think of addressing the issues of migrant wage workers.

But the solutions are not necessarily straightforward; they involve dilemmas and challenges and may generate new problems.

8. One dilemma has to do with labor conditions.

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 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.

9. Another dilemma has to do with access to land.

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 actu-

ally happen, and might even unintentionally and unexpectedly reinforce the current structure of migrant work complex. The majority of the migrant workers we interviewed have farmland, but having farmland alone did 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.

I don't have regular income now and we grow paddy field only for family consumption. We grow small amount of tea leaves 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 to 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 gates to open. We don't have regular income here now, so I have to go back to China and work again. (A 33 year old Lahu 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 the ethnic armed organisation in the area. (Ta'ang 34-year-old woman, Northern Shan State)

10. Definitely, migrant workers who have no land are the worst off.

They have no choice but are compelled to take up whatever kind of migrant work they can get as soon as possible. As they tried to travel back to their migrant work, they even faced more precarious conditions such as having to pay more fees to the brokers and being vulnerable to the police arrest. They ended up with more debts and have to restart working to pay these off.

11. It is not by mere chance that most migrant workers come from rural areas.

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. What our study shows is why and how this reality is not a random accident of history.

12. One reason for this has to do with the key role played by rural households and communities.

As we summarized directly above, migrant workers rooted in rural areas have the ability to take care of the cost of labour reproduction, subsistence food production, social care, and health care, including the cost of convalescence in case of exhaustion or injury in a manner described above. Generally, it is in the home village where social reproduction tasks are carried out by household and family and kinship networks. But in some cases, migrant workers are forced to bring some of these tasks, such as child rearing, along with them, even in more precarious conditions.

My eyes are not good and I often go to a clinic. At the same time, I cut my own hand while I was harvesting sugarcane. It was difficult to get treatment there. That is why I came back home. Although the accident happened 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 to get treatment. (A 30-year-old man from Magwe)

We have a 5-acre plot of 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. The 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. (A 30-year-old man from Sagaing).

My husband and I worked at a rubber plantation for 3 years. I got very sick while working there 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 traveled back to Myanmar alone to do so. During the break from rubber tapping, my husband worked to clear the bushes for 200-300 baht per day, while I worked at a nearby house who were holding a donation ceremony by cleaning dishes, washing clothes and doing other cleaning chores. Now our daughter is two years old. During the pandemic, we just stayed within the compound. Be-

fore that, 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 unsafe to leave her alone while I'm doing rubber tapping. So, when I go to tap rubber, I had to take her along. I position the baby at a seeing distance with a companion dog so that I could work. (A 28-year-old woman from Mon State).



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

13. Another reason, closely linked to the above, has to do with the harsh conditions squeezing rural working people.

The degree and extent of impoverishment in the rural areas provide the enormous social force that makes rural working people – peasants, agro-pastoralists, artisanal fishers, landless labourers – 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.

We went home because of the pandemic. But there are no 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).

14. It would be a mistake to assume that Myanmar's cross-border migrant workers are powerless and passive.

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; instead, they calculate and cope, and in the process, they reshape the very terrain of these corridors.

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. 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. (A 57-year old woman from Mon State)

15. Long before the Covid-19 pandemic, rural working people have been confronted by a 'pandemic' of agrarian crisis.

The agrarian crisis is seen in many ways. Low level of land and labour productivity is a common feature across the 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.

16. Part of the problem is unconscious acceptance of dominant explanations of why there is crisis and how to get out of it.

Take for example the issue of access to water for irrigation in Myanmar's Dry Zone. Villagers often say that there is not enough rain for their farms to prosper. Yet throughout the Dry Zone there are enclaves of wealthy capitalist farms and ranches (including by Chinese capital), sitting side-by-side with village farms that exist below subsistence and survive in part by virtue of remittances by members of their households who cross borders to do migrant work.

The government has been pushing (i) modernization of agricultural infrastructure and (ii) insertion of farmers into commodity value chains as the way forward. Yet these solutions can be exclusionary or predatory.

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. (A 38-year-old male migrant worker from Magwe)

17. Agricultural infrastructure is key in addressing the crisis, but not if its exclusionary.

To date, government interventions have been exclusionary -- building or supporting initiatives by big owners of capital to construct enclaves of modern farming and ranching for a few, at the expense of the many. Focusing on infusing massive public funds to build large-scale modern irrigation infrastructure, accompanied by systematic credit support to build mechanization capabilities of farms, can end up benefitting only a handful

already better off sections of the peasantry as well as traders, contractors, and moneylenders.

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 my myself. I was not able to pay off the debt back home, and the interest just kept

growing and growing. (A 57-year-old woman from Mon State)

18. Markets are key in addressing the crisis, but not if they are predatory.

Focusing on promoting insertion of 'small holders' into circuits of commodity value chain through a variety of growership arrangements, whether those directly promoted by the government or by private traders, can be predatory. Poor farmers can end up losing their autonomy to decide on their land use and production system, and/or can end up falling into deepening debt traps where predatory moneylenders and merchants may end up ultimately gaining control over their lands.

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 waste. 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 for two years. Before the pandemic, it was fine. But now we cannot go out shopping and work without wearing mask. 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)

19. Addressing the agrarian crisis is urgent and necessary, but not sufficient to address the issues confronting migrant workers today.

To more fully address the issues confronting migrant workers today requires a more general public action based on a more systematic society-wide view of how land, labour, capital, and technology shape one another and how existing and proposed interventions and initiatives serve to either decimate or improve the lives and livelihoods of rural working people.

20. Democratization of land access and control is the crucial starting point.

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) and refugees. 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.

21. 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 other coercive mechanisms as well. The widespread militarization that has endlessly produced waves of IDPs and refugees 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, 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.

I live in an IDP camp. I 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 ethnic armed organisation. 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 their 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. 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 the income is not enough for my family. (A 25 year old Kachin woman from Shan State)

22. These mechanisms of dispossession are deployed illegitimately, but often through legal means, such as by using the 2012 Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin (VFV) Land Management Law.

The VFV Land Management 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. The VFV Law is not the only mechanism for grabbing land from the villagers, but it is a key one. By early 2013, almost 2 million ha of land (farmland, wetlands, and forested lands) were given to various concessions¹. There is no known updated official list after 2013. It is likely that there is little change, if any, from this list because there is no known significant recoveries of grabbed lands and redistribution to villagers. This is separate from direct military land grabs in the recent past. In 2012-2013, there was a

land investigation commission that looked into the military seizures of villager's land nationwide that had a total of a quarter million acres. It was not clear what happened to the investigation because only about 18,000 acres of these were returned to the villagers. Moreover, there are sporadic cases of armed militias in ethnic communities that seize villagers' land and convert these to plantations, for example, sugarcane. The government did nothing to stop and rollback such land grabs. In fact, the government decision to force formal land registration through the VFV Law will only legitimize such widespread land grabbing, past and present.

23. If the plight of migrant workers is to be taken seriously and addressed democratically, one of the most urgent and necessary public actions is to immediately cancel the VFV Law.

The government 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 an overall land law that imposes an across-the-board ceiling (that is, society-wide and multisectorally) as to how much land corporations and individuals can accumulate and 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

¹Government of the Republic of Myanmar, MOALI. 2016. Working Paper 10: Land Tenure and Administration: Formulation and Operationalization of National Action Plan for Poverty Alleviation and Rural Development through Agriculture (NAPA). Rome, Italy: FAO.

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 from the Dry Zone. 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 re-occupy 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 I get wage work, I am paid 4,000 Kyats. But wage work is rare in and around my village. (A 25-year old migrant worker from Magwe region)

24. Doing nothing will mean a return to the way things were before the pandemic hit.

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, a 'new old normal' – the old normal persisting into a new era – is the most likely future post-pandemic world for the migrant workers, their families and communities.

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...There was no wage work in our village. We cannot afford not to have wage earnings. So we decided to return to Thailand through an illegal rough trek. We had to pay 10 lahks (1,000,000 Kyats) for each person. But on the way, we were blocked by the Government and an ethnic armed organisation, 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. (A 44-year-old woman from Mon State)

25. A significant recasting of such structures and institutions on the Myanmar side of the border 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. Change is needed in those places too. Ultimately, the question of addressing migrant labour issues is truly an international issue that requires an internationalist

solidarity and public action among peoples across borders.

26. When going forward is really a step backward.

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', is bound to be successful only in rebooting the engine of growth in the generation and maintenance of a massive class of migrant workers who are, in effect, 'superworkers' consigned to live in 'subhuman' conditions. The result will be to normalize and routinize dispossession in its many forms, as well as the destitution and pauperization of working people.



ကျွမ်းသား၊ ချမ်းသာ၊ အောင်မြင် | ရှမ်းလူငယ်လှုပ်ရှားမှု
TAI YOUTH NETWORK

In Collaboration with



ERC (ERC) - Creativity & local voices and agendas: Reimagining the spheres of global social life (food, climate change, labour, citizenship, and geopolitics) is a research project at the International Institute of Social Studies (IISG) of Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands, in collaboration with the Transnational Institute (TNI). This has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 834006).