

Rural Migration News

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Labor in Thai Agriculture

Almost 13 million people or 30 percent of Thailand’s 42 million strong labor force are employed in agriculture. Most of those employed in Thai agriculture are self-employed Thai farmers and their unpaid family members, but an increasing share are migrant workers from neighboring Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar.

Some 318,000 migrants were employed in Thai agriculture in 2019, and these foreign farm workers were 11 percent of the 2.8 million migrants registered with the Thai government in December 2019. Two-thirds of registered migrant workers in Thailand were from Myanmar, a quarter were from

Cambodia, and 10 percent were from Laos. Most of the 2.8 million registered migrants in Thailand were legalized under the nationality verification scheme between 2016 and 2018.

Low-skilled migrants from Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar can migrate legally to Thailand under MOUs. In border provinces, Thai employers can recruit migrants from Myanmar and Cambodia to work under renewable three-month contracts.

A 2018 ILO survey of 528 migrant farm workers who were employed to produce corn, palm oil, rubber and sugarcane found that almost 60 percent did not earn the Thai minimum wage of 305 baht (\$9) for an eight-hour day or 7,320 baht (\$212) for a 24-day work month. The share of migrant workers who did not receive the minimum wage varied by province, and was very high in Tak province on the Burmese border.

62% of the 2.8 Million Registered Migrants in 2019 in Thailand Legalized Their Status Between 2016 and 2018

Total	Entry/regularization arrangement		
	MOU	Border employment	Regularized (NV)
2 788 415 M = 56% F = 44%	1 005 848 36%	65 991 2%	1 716 576 62%
Myanmar = 65% Cambodia = 25% Lao PDR = 10%	Myanmar = 518 321 (52%) Cambodia = 303 971 (30%) Lao PDR = 183 460 (18%)	Myanmar = 26 095(40%) Cambodia = 39 896 (60%)	Myanmar = 1 276 512 (74%) Cambodia = 342 562 (20%) Lao PDR = 97 502(6%)

Almost Two-Thirds of the Registered Migrant Farm Workers in 2019 Were from Myanmar

Total	Entry/regularization arrangement		
	MOU	Border employment	Regularized (NV)
317 996 M = 57% F = 43%	49 374 ¹ M = 28 622 F = 20 752	21 936 M = 12 064 F = 9 872	246 686 M = 139 220 F = 107 466
Myanmar = 63% Cambodia = 26% Lao PDR = 11%	Myanmar =12 213 Cambodia = 17 064 Lao PDR = 20 097	Myanmar = 877 Cambodia = 21 059	Myanmar = 186 668 Cambodia = 44 590 Lao PDR = 15 428

Lao PDR = Lao People’s Democratic Republic. ¹ Note that according to the Ministry of Labour, in 2019, 12,102 employers were registered as hiring foreign workers for agriculture and animal husbandry.

Thailand's Sugarcane Planting Area and Production



Source: Office of Cane and Sugar Board

Available at: <https://www.fas.usda.gov/data/thailand-sugar-annual-6>

In southern Thailand, rubber tappers are often independent contractors who receive 40 percent of what farmers are paid by rubber processors, while in other areas rubber tappers are paid by piece rates or by the day. Falling rubber prices and thus falling piece rates mean that Thai workers shun rubber tapping jobs.

Palm oil occupies six percent of Thai farm land and yields over 11 million tons a year. Hired workers harvest palm oil fruits from the tops of trees that are transported to mills that extract the oil.

Thailand produces about 100 million tons of sugarcane from 1.2 million hectares. Sugarcane competes with rice and cassava for land, and some of 200,000 to 300,000 farmers who normally grow sugar cane may switch to other crops in 2022-23 due to high fertilizer prices. Most Thai sugar is exported, although the government wants to use some sugarcane to make ethanol.

ILO Survey

Some 528 migrant farm workers, over half women, were interviewed in 2018, including 311 from Myanmar, 134 from Laos, and 83 from Cambodia. The Burmese were interviewed in Tak province (sugarcane and corn) and Surat Thani (rubber and palm oil), the Laotians in Loei (sugarcane), and the Cambodians in Sa Kaeo (sugarcane). Almost half of those interviewed worked in sugarcane, followed by 30 percent in corn and 20 percent in rubber.

Two-thirds of the migrants interviewed were lawfully employed in Thailand. The largest share, 34 percent, legalized their status under nationality verification, meaning that they received documents in Thailand from authorities in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar that verified their citizenship in these countries.

Over Half of the Migrants Interviewed Were Women, and 45% Were Burmese Women Who Worked in Sugarcane

Location	Total (women)	Crop				Country of origin		
		Sugarcane (women)	Maize (women)	Rubber (women)	Oil palm (women)	Cambodia (women)	Lao PDR (women)	Myanmar (women)
Tak	203 (126)	40 (27)	150 (92)	2 (2)	11 (5)	- (-)	- (-)	203 (126)
Loei	134 (67)	134 (67)	- (-)	- (-)	- (-)	- (-)	134 (67)	- (-)
Surat Thani	108 (57)	- (-)	- (-)	95 (48)	13 (9)	- (-)	- (-)	108 (57)
Sa Kaeo	83 (42)	77 (38)	3 (2)	1 (1)	2 (1)	83 (42)	- (-)	- (-)
Total	528 (292)	251 (132)	153 (94)	98 (51)	26 (15)	83 (42)	134 (67)	311 (183)
% of total¹	100% (55.3%)	47.5% (45.2%)	29.0% (32.2%)	18.6% (17.5%)	4.9% (5.1%)	15.7% (14.4%)	25.3% (22.9%)	58.9% (62.7%)

- = nil; Lao PDR = Lao People's Democratic Republic. ¹ Figures in this row represent the following: (i) not in brackets - percentage of all respondents (n=528); and (ii) in brackets - percentage of all women respondents (n=292).

Almost Half of the Migrants Interviewed Had No Formal Education or Were Illiterate

Educational level	Total (n=528)	Country of origin			Gender		
		Cambodia (n=83)	Lao PDR (n=134)	Myanmar (n=311)	Male (n=233)	Female (n=292)	Other (n=3)
Cannot read and write	18.0	45.8	-	18.4	15.9	19.9	-
No formal education	30.7	41.0	38.8	24.5	32.2	29.6	33.3
Some primary school	36.1	10.8	61.2	31.9	36.5	35.4	66.7
Secondary school	12.0	2.4	-	19.7	11.2	12.7	-
University	2.3	-	-	3.9	3.4	1.4	-
Other	1.0	-	-	1.6	0.9	1.0	-

Another 14 percent entered under the MOUs, and 13 percent were employed under a border-area program that allows Thai farmers to recruit migrants from neighboring countries for three months.

The ILO survey reported that a third of migrants found Thai farm jobs via friends and relatives, a sixth were recruited by a Thai farm employer, and a quarter migrated to Thailand without knowing where they would find work.

Migration costs, including travel, broker and agency fees, and passports, visas, border passes, work permits, health exams, and various formal and informal registration fees, averaged 6,448 baht or \$187, about a month's Thai earnings.

The Burmese workers in Tak province were most likely to be unauthorized and to earn less than the minimum wage. Over 95 percent of the migrants interviewed in Tak earned less than 7,320 baht a month, including 40 percent who earned less than 3,600 baht a month.

Sugarcane workers had the highest wages, an average of over 10,000 baht a month. By contrast, corn offered the lowest earnings.

Wage systems varied by commodity. Migrants in rubber typically received a share of grower revenue, migrants in corn were paid a daily wage, and migrants in sugarcane were paid piece rate wages that reflected how many tons of cane they cut.

Thailand allows employers to pay for worker documentation costs and legalization fees and deduct these costs from worker wages. Many migrants ask for wage advances, which employers also deduct from worker earnings. Half of the migrants interviewed had deduc-

2/3 of All Migrant Farm Workers, and 2/3 of Burmese Migrants, Were Documented

a. By crop sector (%)

Legal working status	Rubber (n=98)	Palm (n=26)	Maize (n=151)	Sugarcane (n=250)	Total (n=525) ¹
Documented workers	86.7	100.0	56.3	61.6	66.7
Documented, but not working legally	11.2	-	1.3	23.2	13.5
Undocumented	2.0	-	34.4	13.2	16.6
Stateless card	-	-	8.0	2.0	3.2

- = nil. ¹ Three migrant workers declined to respond.

b. By province (%)

Legal working status	Surat Thani (n=108)	Tak (n=201)	Sa Kaeo (n=83)	Loei (n=133)	Total (n=525) ¹
Documented workers	89.8	52.7	47.0	81.2	66.7
Documented, but not working legally	8.3	1.0	43.4	18.1	13.5
Undocumented	1.9	38.3	9.6	-	16.6
Stateless card	-	8.0	-	0.8	3.2

- = nil. ¹ Three migrant workers declined to respond.

c. By country of origin (%)

Legal working status	Cambodia (n=83)	Lao PDR (n=133)	Myanmar (n=309)	Total (n=525) ¹
Documented workers		47.0	81.2	65.7
Documented, but not working legally		43.4	18.1	3.6
Undocumented		9.6	-	25.4
Stateless card		-	0.8	5.2

- = nil; Lao PDR = Lao People's Democratic Republic. ¹ Three migrant workers declined to respond.

d. By gender (%)

Legal working status	Male (n=230)	Female (n=292)	Other (n=3)	Total (n=525) ¹
Documented workers		68.7	65.4	33.3
Documented, but not working legally		14.8	12.7	66.7
Undocumented		13.9	18.2	-
Stateless card		2.6	3.8	-

tions from their wages, including a third who had wage deductions during their entire period of employment in Thai agriculture.

Over 85 percent of the migrants reported that they received housing at no cost from their employers, although migrants employed in seasonal crop tasks in sugarcane and corn were often provided with building materials to build their

own housing on the farm. Some 30 percent of migrants experienced workplace problems, typically unpaid wages, long work hours, and employer retention of personal documents.

Perspective

The Thai government has struggled to manage the migration of low-skilled workers from neigh-

boring lower-wage countries. One overriding principle of Thai policy is to avoid having migrant workers become immigrants and eventually Thai citizens. However, most migrants are employed in year-round jobs and by employers who see little prospect of replacing migrants with Thais, leading to migrant settlement, family formation, and children born in Thailand to migrant parents.

The Thai government appears to tolerate sometimes poor treatment of migrants until internal and external pressures force new regulations and their enforcement. This occurred in fish and seafood, where reports of migrant worker abuse threatened export markets and led to reforms that improved recruitment, wages, and safety and health protections for migrants.

Most Migrants Found Thai Jobs Via Family and Friends Or On Their Own

Method of recruitment	%	No.
Friends or family brought me	66.7	194
Independently/on my own	25.8	136
Direct recruitment by an employer	17.8	94
Individual broker	16.1	85
Recruitment agency	3.2	17
Other ¹	0.4	2 ¹
Total	100.0	528

Laotian Migrants Who Arrived Legally in Thailand Had the Highest Migration Costs

Cost of migration (baht) ¹	Total (n=528)	Country of origin			Crop			
		Cambodia (n=83)	Lao PDR (n=134)	Myanmar (n=311)	Rubber (n=98)	Oil palm (n=26)	Maize (n=153)	Sugarcane (n=251)
No cost	9.1	9.6	3.7	11.3	0.00	3.9	13.1	10.8
<1 000	18.0	24.1	1.5	23.5	3.1	-	38.6	13.2
1 000-4 999	28.8	44.6	2.2	36.0	28.6	61.5	38.6	19.5
5 000-9 999	15.0	10.8	29.1	10.0	23.5	7.7	2.6	19.9
10 000-75 000	26.7	7.3	63.4	16.1	40.8	26.9	3.3	35.5
Do not know	2.5	3.6	-	3.2	4.1	-	3.9	1.2

- = nil; Lao PDR = Lao People's Democratic Republic. ¹ Figures in this row represent the following: (i) not in brackets - percentage of all respondents (n=528); and (ii) in brackets - percentage of all women respondents (n=292).

Male Migrants Earned 1,000 Baht (\$29) a Month More Than Female Migrants

Monthly income of migrant worker respondents, by gender (%)

Monthly income (baht)	Male (n=221)	Female (n=274)	Other (n=3)	Total (n=498) ¹	
<3 000		5.4	14.6	-	10.4
3 000-5 999		32.7	32.5	33.3	32.6
6 000-8 999		19.0	25.2	33.3	22.4
>9 000		42.2	27.7	33.3	34.2
Mean monthly income		8 301	7 305	7 867	7 750
Median monthly income		7 000	6 000	8 000	6 000

- = nil. ¹ Thirty migrant worker respondents could not be classified in an income group due to irregularity of pay. Among these 30, most were paid at the end of the season based on the sale of the harvested crop and therefore were not sure how much they would be paid.

Sugarcane and Rubber Offered the Highest Monthly Earnings

Mean, maximum and minimum monthly incomes reported by migrant workers, by crop sector and gender (n=498) ¹

a. Rubber

Monthly income	Male (n=46)	Female (n=51)	Other (n=1)	Total (n=98)
Mean income		9 087	7 978	8 000
Minimum income		3 500	2 500	8 000
Maximum income		20 000	15 000	8 000

b. Oil palm

Monthly income	Male (n=11)	Female (n=15)	Other (n=0)	Total (n=26)
Mean income		5 782	5 507	n/a
Minimum income		3 000	1 000	n/a
Maximum income		10 000	10 000	n/a

c. Maize

Monthly income	Male (n=59)	Female (n=92)	Other (n=0)	Total (n=151)
Mean income		3 679	3 545	n/a
Minimum income		1 500	1 800	n/a
Maximum income		9 000	12 000	n/a

d. Sugarcane

Monthly income	Male (n=105)	Female (n=116)	Other (n=2)	Total (n=223)
Mean income		10 817	10 224	7 800
Minimum income		1 200	640	5 600
Maximum income		40 000	59 600	10 000

Cutting Sugarcane is the Most Difficult Job Filled by Migrants



Most Sugarcane Workers Were Paid Piece Rate Wages

Wage determination	Rubber (n=98)	Oil palm (n=26)	Maize (n=151)	Sugarcane (n=250)	Total (n=525) ¹	
Daily flat rate		2.0	50.0	81.1	13.9	33.0
Monthly flat rate		7.1	3.9	5.9	0.8	3.6
Piece rate (flat rate by amount)		4.1	-	0.7	74.5	36.4
Mix of daily/monthly rate and piece rate		1.0	-	4.6	8.0	5.3
Percentage share of crop		84.7	38.5	3.9	2.4	19.9
Weekly/bi-weekly		1.0	7.7	2.6	-	1.3

The ILO Has Been Monitoring Migrants in Thai Fishing and Seafood



Half of Migrants had Deductions From Their Wages, Most Often for Utilities and Documentation

What wage deductions were for, by sector (%)¹

Wages deducted for	Rubber (n=76)	Oil palm (n=23)	Maize (n=33)	Sugarcane (n=135)	Total (n=267) ²
Uniforms/clothing	-	-	-	-	-
Tools/equipment	1.3	4.4	3.0	38.5	20.6
Food/drinking water	6.6	-	21.2	28.2	18.7
Housing	9.2	4.4	9.1	1.5	4.9
Electricity/water	73.7	95.7	72.7	6.7	41.6
Health services	2.6	21.7	12.1	19.3	13.9
Social security contribution	-	-	-	0.7	0.4
Recruitment fees	1.3	-	-	4.4	2.6
Document costs	6.6	43.5	12.1	31.1	22.9
Informal payments to police	11.8	-	3.0	1.5	4.5
Loans	2.6	13.0	3.0	20.0	12.4
Fertilizer fee	13.2	-	-	-	3.8
Transportation fee	4.0	-	-	-	1.1
Border pass	-	4.4	-	5.2	3.0
Other ³	1.3	4.4	-	5.2	3.4

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