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Internal Migration in Myanmar: Patterns, Benefits and Challenges

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Since 2011, Myanmar's economy has been shifting from an agrarian to a more industrial and service-oriented one. As more people migrate from rural to urban areas, agricultural production as a percentage of GDP declines and cities expand.
- Urban-urban migration though is greater than rural-urban migration. The diverse reasons include job availability and differentials in wages and working conditions, and lifestyles.
- Social, communication and logistical networks play a large role. Internal migration brings a higher and more stable income to migrants than wages in their place of origin. Female migrants outnumber male migrants in all areas apart from the Dry Zone, where there is now a labour shortage.
- Yangon and Mandalay receive the most internal migrants and are experiencing increased congestion and rising inequality.
- The Myanmar government's ability to mitigate the ill effects, which include human trafficking and exploitation, is hampered by a lack of coordination, a highly centralized, hierarchical and compartmentalized administrative system, and weak institutions.

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INTRODUCTION

The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census, the first census conducted in the past three decades, listed more than 9.2 million lifetime migrants who had moved between states and regions. This means that almost 20 per cent of the population in Myanmar has moved across during their life time. Between 2009 and 2014, almost 3.6 million people migrated internally, representing 7 per cent of the population.¹

This article draws on recent research on internal migration in Myanmar and on media reports, and presents the broad patterns of internal migration, its impact on rural and urban economies, and the benefits and challenges to individuals and the state. Essentially, the questions addressed are:

- What are the patterns of internal migration in Myanmar?
- What are the reasons for this migration?
- How does this benefit migrants, cities, agriculture and industry?
- What are the challenges to individuals and the Myanmar government?

The positive impact of internal migration is evidenced in economic growth, poverty reduction, financial and social remittances and skills acquisition. However, it also raises challenges that require attention and policy measures, such as labour shortages and skewed age distributions in sending areas, a dependency on remittances, disorganized urbanization leading to urban poverty, risk of exploitation and trafficking, and workers' excessive and sudden exposure to the effects of globalization, including sanctions.

This article examines these benefits and challenges, and their implications for policy responses. It calls for more attention to be paid to labour shortage in rural sending areas, marginalization and congestion in the cities, and for better security mechanisms for internal migrants.

MIGRATION FROM THE DRY ZONE

Internal migration is prevalent in the Dry Zone of central Myanmar. According to a survey conducted by the Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund (henceforth LIFT), a fifth of those living in Magway were internal migrants.² The Dry Zone is a poor and underdeveloped region affected by climate changes and adverse conditions including uncertain rainfall and dry spells. There is no or little mechanization in the agricultural sector, and the production is undiversified and declining. All these limitations explain the low productivity of agriculture and a lack of sufficient year-round labour and non-farm opportunities. As a result, many households face crop failures, income-related shocks, food insecurity and an oversupply of labour at certain periods of the year. Locals appear to be emigrating to other parts of Myanmar to look for better paying jobs.³

Migrants originating from the Dry Zone move to Myanmar's largest cities, and according to the LIFT study, while 58 per cent originating from Ayeyarwady move to Yangon, only 24 per cent from Magway did so. Mandalay was the second most popular destination with 10 per cent of its immigrants coming from Magway and 4 percent from Ayeyarwady.⁴ Census data confirm this pattern: 784,919 lifetime migrants – or 8.5 per cent of the total of

9,231,619 – moved from Ayeyarwady to Yangon while only 199,483 migrated from Magway to Yangon.⁵

URBAN-URBAN MIGRATION IS GREATER THAN RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION

Interestingly, almost half of all lifetime migrants to Yangon and Mandalay come from other urban areas. This reflects a higher rate of urban-urban migration – with 773,414 migrants moving within Yangon’s four Districts – than rural-urban migration.⁶ The LIFT study confirms this pattern: 20 per cent of internal migrants move within the same region, with many navigating across their townships.⁷ A study about trafficking and forced labour conducted by ILO further confirmed the prevalence of urban-urban migration. It found that 62 per cent of internal migrants (n=7295) moved across States and regions.⁸ Besides Yangon and Mandalay, migrants from the Dry Zone move to the Shan and Mon States to work in tea, sugarcane, rubber plantations and mines, to the Kachin state to labour in gold and jade mines, and to the central Dry Zone to work in the crude oil industry.⁹

GENDER DIFFERENCES BY LOCATION AND INDUSTRY

There is a gender component to the internal migration. Census data show that, nationwide, female migrants (53 percent) outnumbered male migrants (47 percent).¹⁰ This trend is reversed in the Dry Zone, according to the LIFT study. It shows that 66 per cent of migrants from Ayeyarwady and 60 per cent from Magway are men.¹¹ Gender differences also inform employment by sector as male migrants work predominantly in construction, transportation, mines, fishing, rubber plantations and brick factories while women tend to work in tea plantations, garment factories and the service industry, including domestic work.¹²

MOTIVES FOR MOVING

The reasons for internal migration include job availability and differentials in wages and working conditions, and lifestyles. Three reasons for migration that depend on livelihoods and social groups are the following:¹³

1. ‘Shock response’: This refers to poor households that migrate as a survival strategy to meet basic subsistence needs and to deal with adverse events. One of these was Cyclone Nargis, which left many distressed farmers no option but to leave their devastated land in 2008.
2. ‘Risk management’: This refers to households with some land seeking to minimize risk and diversify income sources by mixing farm activities at home and non-farm activities at destination. Here, although earnings differentials between labour at home and at destination are often small, the latter provides more stable income.
3. ‘Upward mobile’: This refers to households with enough assets and capital to view migration as an opportunity to acquire skills and experience. Here, the city, urban

life and the opportunities brought about by recent economic development act as pull factors.

A qualitative study on rural women migrating to urban garment factories in Yangon reported an interesting combination of economic and personal motivations. These included the desire to save capital, to gain income stability and to cover remittances and personal consumption, on the one hand, and the wish to gain experience and knowledge, to flee from familial control and to gain self-autonomy, on the other.¹⁴ Overall, although motivations for internal migration are varied and associated to migrant households' socio-economic profile, the desire for economic gain and livelihood improvement prevails.

THE FACILITATION OF INTERNAL MIGRATION

Social networks

Internal migration in Myanmar is not regulated by any legal or institutional framework unlike international labour migration, informal mechanisms do exist. For example, it appears that migrants working in tea plantations in the Shan State have to register themselves in self-administered zones.¹⁵ Social, technological and logistical networks all play a role. Social networks play a key role in inciting, facilitating and sustaining migration, allowing for migrants and their communities to manage risk and reduce information asymmetries in a context where recruitment, migration and employment remain highly informal. Among the respondents from the ILO study, 72 per cent were assisted by friends, relatives and acquaintances instead of commercial brokers in arranging their mobility.¹⁶ Moreover, 54 per cent of the migrants arranged jobs before departure, with the rest doing so only upon arrival.¹⁷ On that point, the LIFT study notes that the poorest households, which tend to be the most risk averse, prefer to secure jobs before departure to reduce costs and minimize risk.¹⁸ Employers also rely on their workers' networks in recruiting new employees.¹⁹ This explains why migrants tend to migrate to the destinations where their relatives and friends who assist them are based, and why employers often recruit workers from the same areas.

Communication technology

Migration is also sustained through communication technology. In particular, the rapid expansion of mobile phones – 90 per cent of households surveyed by HelpAge had either a mobile or landline in 2017 – allows prospective migrants to collect information on jobs, recruitment and accommodation through social networks. Phones also allow them to communicate frequently with their relatives left behind.²⁰

Logistical networks

The last enabling factor are logistical networks. While transportation may be limited by a poor and under-developed infrastructure in the country, it remains cheap and affordable. The same applies to accommodation. More than half of the migrants from Ayeyarwady and Magway spent about K40,000 (US\$26) for transportation-related costs, with a minority from Magway spending 100,000 (US\$66). They paid for them with savings or by borrowing from friends and relatives.²¹

THE BENEFITS FOR INDIVIDUALS AND HOUSEHOLDS

Household finance

Working in other parts of the country generally brings a higher and more stable income to migrants than wages earned in their place of origin. The construction sector, which remains lowly mechanized in Myanmar, is popular among un/semi-skilled male migrants. Respondents in the ILO study survey earned US\$85 per month, with men (US\$96) earning more than women (US\$65), and adults (US\$87) more than children (US\$62).²²

Another important area is remittances, which are often considered a crucial benefit earned from migration. While this holds true for international migration from Myanmar to Thailand, or Malaysia and Singapore, it is less so for migration within Myanmar. The LIFT study found that 69 percent of migrants from Ayeyarwady and 55 percent from Magway remitted money to their families once or twice a year. Over a one-year period, internal migrants remitted on average of US\$165.²³ This finding should be interpreted with caution though, as many migrants share their savings with their relatives upon occasional returns, often once or twice a year. Most importantly, families spend this money on basic subsistence and only invest in education, health and productive assets once they have met their basic needs. Thus, unlike remittances sent by international migrants, those sent by internal migrants have a limited impact on poverty reduction and livelihood improvement. In fact, the role of remittances in migrants' households is contingent upon their situation, with the poorest and landless being more prone to spend on basic subsistence.²⁴

An important finding is that remittances do not create excessive dependency among left-behind families. The survey from HelpAge indicates that a quarter of urban migrant-sending families and a third of their rural counterparts relied upon remittances as their main income source.²⁵ A challenge pointed out by development agencies is how one can leverage migration remittances for development purposes. The problem is that migrants – especially those working in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore – continue to use informal channels to remit money. Amidst a push for financialization and development of financial markets in Myanmar, the challenges being discussed concern making remittance mechanisms more efficient and affordable, integrating them into household's consumption and investment planning, and incorporating them into the banking system.²⁶

Social assets

Discussions about economic benefits should not omit the fact that migration also brings social assets to migrants. In particular, it provides them with vocational and life skills, and tastes and attitudes acquired in the city, which can be used strategically in the rural hometown. For the time being, these changes do not seem to affect family harmony during migrants' absence or upon their return. Many migrants even earn respect from their communities for having migrated and embraced an urban lifestyle.²⁷ In the case of female garment factory workers, however, the researcher Chaw Chaw has noted that social assets reinforce family obligations, especially among the poorest households which expect material support, while also providing autonomy and bargaining power to daughters. This highlights the often ambiguous and contradictory effects that migration has on households and family dynamics.²⁸

CHALLENGES TO POLICYMAKERS

Labour shortage and increasing rural wages in the rural economy

Although migration reduces labour shortages in destination areas, it creates labour shortage in the sending areas especially during the farming season, a problem that raises labour cost and speeds up mechanization and farming desertion.²⁹

Overcrowding in Yangon and Mandalay

There is a fear that ‘Myanmar’s countryside is emptying and its cities bursting’, to quote a recent piece from *The Economist*.³⁰ Recent studies have shown that life is precarious in the informal settlements of Yangon and Mandalay, which suffer underemployment, overcrowding, uncontrolled settlement, shantytowns, limited access to water, sanitation and health services, natural and industrial hazards delinquency, urban poverty and tenure insecurity.³¹ There is also evidence showing a growing crime rate.³²

Dealing with a rapid and uncontrolled flow of internal migrants to the cities requires not only the construction of satellite cities as proposed by the Ministry of Immigration and Population,³³ but also the development of migrant-friendly urban planning and investment in sustainable urban infrastructure and upgrading.

Risk of trafficking and exploitation at destination

Another challenge related to labour is the risk of trafficking, abuse and exploitation at the points of destination. The ILO found that among 7,295 internal migrants, 26 per cent were in a situation of forced labour and 14 per cent in a situation of trafficking for forced labour. The most affected labour sectors were domestic work, fishing, wholesale and retail trade, food and beverage services and mining.³⁴ Similar issues were reported in 2003, with female factory workers complaining about sexual harassment, physical abuse, maltreatment from foreign personnel, difficulty in securing overtime work and being paid for it, and intentional miscalculation of salary.³⁵ Development agencies are advocating for safe recruitment mechanisms and labour practices and awareness-raising campaigns about deceptive, coercive and exploitative practices among key stakeholders.³⁶

CONCLUSION

Although 65 per cent of the population lived in rural areas and 42.3 per cent of the employed population worked in the primary sector in 2015,³⁷ the macro-economic conditions in Myanmar are changing rapidly. Since the launch of economic and political reforms in 2011, we have seen the economy shifting from being an agrarian one towards being a more industrial and service-oriented one. In 2010-2011, agriculture accounted for 36.8 per cent of GDP but this declined in 2014-2015 to 27.9 per cent.³⁸ This trend is compelling: more people will migrate from the rural areas to urban areas, agricultural production as a percentage of GDP will decline, and cities will expand.

For the government, the difficulty lies in balancing the promotion of economic and social development while managing population mobility. It is also hampered by a lack of

coordination, a highly centralized, hierarchical and compartmentalized administrative system, and weak institutions in general.³⁹ Improving governance, coordinating planning on infrastructure and housing, continuing with land reform, setting up frameworks on migration, investing in local rural and urban economies, and consulting with local residents and organizations are the first steps towards addressing this question.

¹ Department of Population. *Census Atlas Myanmar. The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census*. 2015, p. 68, 70. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/593661543241844346/Main-Report>. Please note that all reference materials cited in this article were accessed on 9 August 2019.

² Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund (henceforth cited as LIFT). *A country on the Move: Domestic Migration in Two Regions of Myanmar*. 2016, p. 20. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/727201470636825121/A-country-on-the-move-domestic-migration-in-two-regions-of-Myanmar>.

³ HelpAge International. *Impacts of Migration on Households in the Dry Zone, Myanmar*. 2017, p.10. https://www.psc.isr.umich.edu/pubs/pdf/Myanmar-Migration-DryZone_Knodel-2017.pdf

⁴ LIFT, p.25.

⁵ Department of Population, p. 68.

⁶ Department of Population, p. 68.

⁷ LIFT, p.25.

⁸ International Labour Organization. *Internal Labour Migration in Myanmar - Building an evidence-base on patterns in migration, human trafficking and forced labour*. 2015, p. 38. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-yangon/documents/publication/wcms_440076.pdf

⁹ Helvetas. *Internal labour migration study in the dry zone, Shan state and the southeast of Myanmar*. 2015, p. 18.

https://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report_Myanmar_Internal_Migration_Study_Helvetas_Feb2015.pdf

¹⁰ Department of Population, p. 74.

¹¹ LIFT, p. 22; see also HelpAge Internal, p. 31 for similar findings.

¹² See HelpAge 10; Helvetas 11, LIFT 25.

¹³ LIFT, p. 32-41; see Helvetas, p. 11 for a similar typology.

¹⁴ Chaw Chaw. "Rural Women Migrating to Urban Garment Factories in Myanmar". In *Social Challenges for the Mekong Region*, edited by Mingsarn Kaosa-ard and John Dore. Thailand: Chiang Mai University, Silkworm Press. 2003, p. 216.

¹⁵ Helvetas, p. 23.

¹⁶ ILO, p. 42.

¹⁷ LIFT 7, 54; HelpAge 10; Helvetas 21.

¹⁸ LIFT, p. 34.

¹⁹ LIFT, p. 36.

²⁰ LIFT, p. 59-60; HelpAge 4, 81.

²¹ LIFT, p. 49.

²² ILO, p. 44-45.

²³ LIFT, p. 70

²⁴ LIFT, p. 72; see also Chaw, p. 7; Helvetas, p. 24; Mike Griffiths. "Remittance Economy in Rural Myanmar". In *Migration in Myanmar: Perspectives from Current Research*, edited by Mike Griffiths, Michiko Ito. Yangon: Social Policy and Poverty Research Group. 2016, p 114.

²⁵ HelpAge, p. 79.

²⁶ LIFT, p. 89.

²⁷ LIFT, p. 80; Helvetas, p. 80.

²⁸ Chaw Chaw, p. 223.

²⁹ Mike Griffiths, Michiko Ito. "Migration in Myanmar: An Introduction". In *Migration in Myanmar: Perspectives from Current Research*, edited by Mike Griffiths, Michiko Ito. Yangon: Social Policy and Poverty Research Group. 2016, p. 9; see also LIFT, p. 46, 76; Helvetas, p. 24-25; Kyan Htoo, A Myint Zum. "Rural-Urban Migration around Yangon City, Myanmar". Food Security Policy Project Research Highlights, n. 5. 2016, p. 2.

³⁰ The Economist, "Myanmar's countryside is emptying and its cities bursting". 11 July 2019. <https://www.economist.com/asia/2019/07/11/myanmars-countryside-is-emptying-and-its-cities-bursting>; see also Michael Griffiths, p. 14.

³¹ Eben Forbes. "Migration, Informal Settlement, and Government Response: The Cases of Four Townships in Yangon, Myanmar". *Moussons* 33, 2019: 95-117; Helene Maria Kyed. "Informal Settlements and Migrant Challenges in Yangon". *Moussons* 33, 2019: 65-94.

³² Helene M. Kyed. Migration and Security Challenges in Yangon's Informal Settlements. The Case of Hlaing Thayar Township, DIIS Report number 17/2017. Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2017.

³³ Nyi Nyi. *Levels, Trends and Patterns of Internal Migration in Myanmar*, Nay Pyi Taw: Ministry of Immigration and Population, UNFPA, 2013, p. 57
https://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Ref_Doc_Internal_Migration_in_Myanmar_Sep2013.pdf

³⁴ ILO, p. 6.

³⁵ Chaw Chaw, p. 215.

³⁶ ILO, p. 81-87.

³⁷ Department of Population. *The 2014 Myanmar Population & Housing Census*. Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar, 2015.
http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Census_Atlas_Myanmar_the_2014_Myanmar_Population_and_Housing_Census.pdf

³⁸ Central Statistical Organization (2015). *Statistical Year Book 2015*. [online] Naypyitaw: Ministry of Planning and Economic Development. Available at:
http://www.mmsis.gov.mm/sub_menu/statistics/fileDb.jsp?code_code=001

³⁹ Tim Dobermann. 2016, Urban Myanmar. Policy Note, Yangon: IGC.
<https://www.theigc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/IGC-Urban-Myanmar.pdf>

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