

MIGRANT RESOURCE CENTRES IN CAMBODIA AND MYANMAR

SUPPORTED BY THE INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION

LESSONS LEARNED REPORT

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| CLM | Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar |
| COVID-19 | Coronavirus Disease 2019 |
| CSO | Civil Society Organization |
| GCM | The Global Compact on Migration |
| IEC | Information, Education and Communication |
| ILO | International Labour Organization |
| IOM | International Organization for Migration |
| MMK | Myanmar Kyat |
| MoU | Memorandum of Understanding |
| MRC | Migrant Resource Centre |
| NEA | National Employment Agency |
| NPIA | National Polytechnic Institute of Angkor |
| POE | Point of Entry |
| PROMISE | Poverty Reduction through Safe Migration, Skills Development and Enhanced Job Placement |
| PTC | Poipet Transit Centre |
| RPL | Recognition of Prior Learning |
| SDP | Skill Development Provider |
| SOP | Standard Operating Procedure |
| THB | Thai Baht |
| USD | United States Dollar |

OVERVIEW

Labour migration to Thailand is a pathway to economic empowerment and resilience for the estimated 3 million migrant workers from Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar (CLM) in Thailand. Migrant workers also act as drivers of economic growth and business development in Thailand, and yet labour migration to Thailand is also commonly associated with the risk of exploitation, discrimination, poor living and working conditions, debt and low wages.

Returning migrant workers make a vital contribution to household and national income in countries of origin through remittances and are increasingly recognized in national policies as critical to building a strong labour force in CLM as countries of origin. However, migrant workers commonly return with the same or fewer savings than before they migrated, and return to the same or similar income levels and occupations.

Strengthening the overall support mechanisms that are available to migrant workers to facilitate safe labour migration and effective reintegration is needed. To do so, the following actions are needed:



Provide job seekers with accurate information and counselling before making an informed decision about migrating for work;



Provide returning migrants with referrals to opportunities for skills training and certification, employment in their communities or possibilities of remigrating;



Provide reintegration support to returning migrant workers and promote alternative livelihood options;



Receive grievances in those cases where migrant workers' rights have been abused, or if they have suffered exploitation as result of their recruitment or migration experience.

To this end, the role of Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) as one-stop service centres for information and assistance to migrant workers has been widely recognized. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has been supporting governments and other stakeholders to establish and manage these centres to ensure the effective delivery of services and long-term sustainability.

This policy brief is an overview of key findings from an assessment of Migrant Resource Centres supported by IOM in Cambodia and Myanmar in 2022.

The assessment was conducted under IOM's regional "Poverty Reduction through Safe Migration, Skills development and Enhanced Job Placement in Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Thailand" (PROMISE) Programme. The assessment aimed at generating knowledge and guidance on how MRC services can better contribute to the protection of migrant workers and improve their access to support services, skills development and recognition of prior learning (RPL) in targeted sectors, as a foundation for improved employability at home and abroad. The assessment draws on the results of mixed methods research

and operational insights from MRCs at different stages of the migration process to present good practices and lessons learnt about access to effective services, specifically for returning migrant workers in the Mekong subregion.

The brief first provides an overview of the methodology of the assessment and the context for MRC operations in the Mekong subregion, with a focus on return migration. The results of quantitative surveys with migrants and key informants at key border crossings are then presented, highlighting the socioeconomic and protection profiles of migrant client groups served by IOM-supported MRCs. Insights from qualitative enquiry into MRC operations follow, captured in eight 'lessons learned' covering topics that include referring migrants in transit to reintegration services, the challenges of responding to diverse migrant needs, coordination amongst MRCs, and prospects for their long-term sustainability. A brief conclusion is followed by six practical and evidence-based recommendations to improve the effectiveness of MRC operations in the sub-region.

Research questions and key findings explored in these areas are:

- **How effective are MRCs in informing aspiring migrants on safe migration and relevant administrative requirements?**

In the context of return migration, MRCs' communication strategy needs to be effectively tailored to the needs of diverse groups, including regular returnees, deported migrants, and those working in bordering provinces of Thailand. MRC communication (including through the use of digital means) should specifically address the barriers that returning migrants face in understanding reintegration opportunities.

- **How effective are MRCs in referring returning migrants to skills development and certification opportunities, as well as employment?** MRCs often refer migrants for reintegration support simply by sharing information. However, returnees face multiple barriers to entering programmes such

as skills training or testing. In addition to information, referral mechanisms linking MRCs and service providers are needed to offer support to migrants to access unfamiliar reintegration options.

- **How effective are existing MRCs in providing humanitarian support for returning migrant workers during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic?** During the pandemic, MRCs supported by IOM shifted from centre-based services to delivering humanitarian assistance to over 42,000 returning migrant workers in quarantine facilities in Myanmar and Cambodia. The pandemic demonstrated that humanitarian and direct assistance are valuable entry points for effectively engaging with migrants in transit – a challenging point in the migration cycle due to migrants' lack of time during the journey home and their limited trust in institutional actors at borders.

- **What coordination mechanisms with relevant stakeholders from multiple sectors exist, and what are areas for improvement?** The positioning of MRCs at Cambodian and Myanmar points of entry (POE) creates potential for interconnected MRCs that link services at border crossings with those in communities of origin. At present, MRCs at key border crossings are poorly integrated with MRCs in the interior of both countries.

- **How can MRCs enhance their reach with migrant communities?** MRCs staff at points of entry in Cambodia and Myanmar find it challenging to engage and maintain contact with returning migrant workers to mobilize them for reintegration support. MRCs should use in-person engagement opportunities afforded by the delivery of direct assistance to migrants and by survey work among migrants to improve face-to-face engagement. Expanded use of digital means of communication would help maintain contact after migrants leave MRCs.

METHODOLOGY

The assessment was based on semi-structured interviews with MRC staff in Cambodia and Myanmar and structured surveys of 1,972 returning migrants at two key ports of entry where IOM's PROMISE programme is supporting MRC operations, Poipet and Myawaddy. A research consultant conducted on-site and remote qualitative interviews with 17 MRC and IOM staff and 19 stakeholders in Cambodia and Myanmar who helped unpack multiple dimensions of MRC service provision, in line with an assessment framework developed by IOM Thailand. On the quantitative side, IOM conducted three rounds of surveys to generate data on the protection and socioeconomic profile of returning Cambodian and Myanmar migrant workers – MRCs' primary client group.



CONTEXT OF RETURN MIGRATION

Return and reintegration of migrant workers are potentially overlooked areas of policy in a context where the focus in countries of origin in the Mekong subregion has been on the recruitment and protection of migrant workers during their employment abroad. Policy frameworks in the greater Mekong subregion presently do not identify or actively target returning migrants as a group with distinct needs. Yet, the scale of return migration from Thailand to Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar is significant. Following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, successive outbreaks of the virus in Thailand, lockdowns, suspension of labour migration in 2020 and the border closure triggered large-scale return of migrant workers. As such, in the early months of the pandemic, returns of Cambodian and Myanmar migrant workers temporarily replaced out-migration as the dominant mobility pattern between Thailand and neighbouring countries of origin. IOM estimates that from the start of the pandemic, approximately 240,000 Cambodian and 280,000 Lao migrant workers returned home from Thailand up to August 2021 and about 233,000 Myanmar migrant workers did the same up to July 2022. While there was a surge driven by the pandemic, return migration from Thailand remains dynamic due to the temporariness of migrant workers' employment contracts, the lack of gainful employment opportunities and legal status among irregular migrants, and mandatory return that regular migrant workers in Thailand are required to make upon completion of maximum four years of work in Thailand.

In the COVID-19 recovery phase, migrant workers are making a vital contribution to household and national incomes through remittances to Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar. Yet challenges limit their contribution. Many migrants return with the same or fewer savings than before they migrated or even with significant levels of financial debt. Upon return, they often go back to their pre-migration occupations and levels of income. They have often gained new skills in Thai workplaces that are not formally recognized and tapped into back home. A significant proportion of returnees have experienced abuses on job sites and mistreatment on the journey home, which undermines the socioeconomic benefits they and their households derive from migration. Recent IOM survey work on the Myanmar-Thai borderline revealed that one third of returnees experienced exploitative practices at work and harsh conditions in immigration detention. In addition, they reported high levels of debt¹ and no savings to cover basic needs upon return. Clothing and cash for transport to get home were the priority needs of 60 per cent of returnees in transit from Thailand to Myanmar in the month of September 2022.

¹ The average debt among 218 of 278 deported Myanmar migrants in the sample reporting debt was 2,018,807 Myanmar Kyat (MMK), equivalent to approximately 961 United States dollars (USD) (Myanmar official exchange rate of 1 USD = MMK 2,100).

A challenge in the Mekong subregion is how to set up effective services to migrant workers to facilitate safe labour migration and more effective reintegration. The Global Compact on Migration (GCM), specifically under Objective 15, recognizes the imperative to “establish and strengthen holistic and easily accessible service points at the local level that are migrant-inclusive, offer relevant information on basic services [...] and facilitate safe access thereto.” To this end, the role of MRCs as one-stop service centres for information and assistance to migrant workers has been widely recognized. Since 2012, IOM has been supporting governments and stakeholders in the Mekong subregion to establish and operate these MRCs, with a network of ten such centres currently supported in Cambodia and Myanmar. The International Labour Organization (ILO) also provides extensive support to MRCs through partnerships with governments, trade unions and civil society organizations across the region. MRCs are among the few entities enhancing the evidence base on returning migrant workers as a distinct group and contributing to understanding their needs in countries of origin. As a service delivery modality, MRCs contribute to GCM Objective 15 on access to services by:



Providing job seekers with accurate information and counselling to help them make informed decisions about migrating (or remigrating) for work;



Referring returning migrants to skills training and certification opportunities, employment in their communities, or channels for remigrating;



Offering humanitarian and reintegration support to vulnerable returning migrant workers and promoting livelihood alternatives;



Registering grievances in cases where migrant workers' rights have been infringed upon, or when they have suffered exploitation as result of their recruitment or migration experiences.



SOCIOECONOMIC PROFILE AND PROTECTION NEEDS OF CAMBODIAN AND MYANMAR RETURNEES SERVED BY IOM'S MRCs

The following section presents the headline findings from three quantitative surveys undertaken at the Poipet Transit Centre (PTC) on the Cambodia-Thai border, and at the Myawaddy POE on the Myanmar-Thai border. At Poipet, all the Cambodian migrants sampled (a total of 1,121, of which 611 men and 510 women) were deportees from Thailand. At Myawaddy, where a total of 573 Myanmar migrants were sampled (of which 379 men, 184 women and 10 non-binary), 65.8 per cent of respondents in the survey were deportees. While this representation

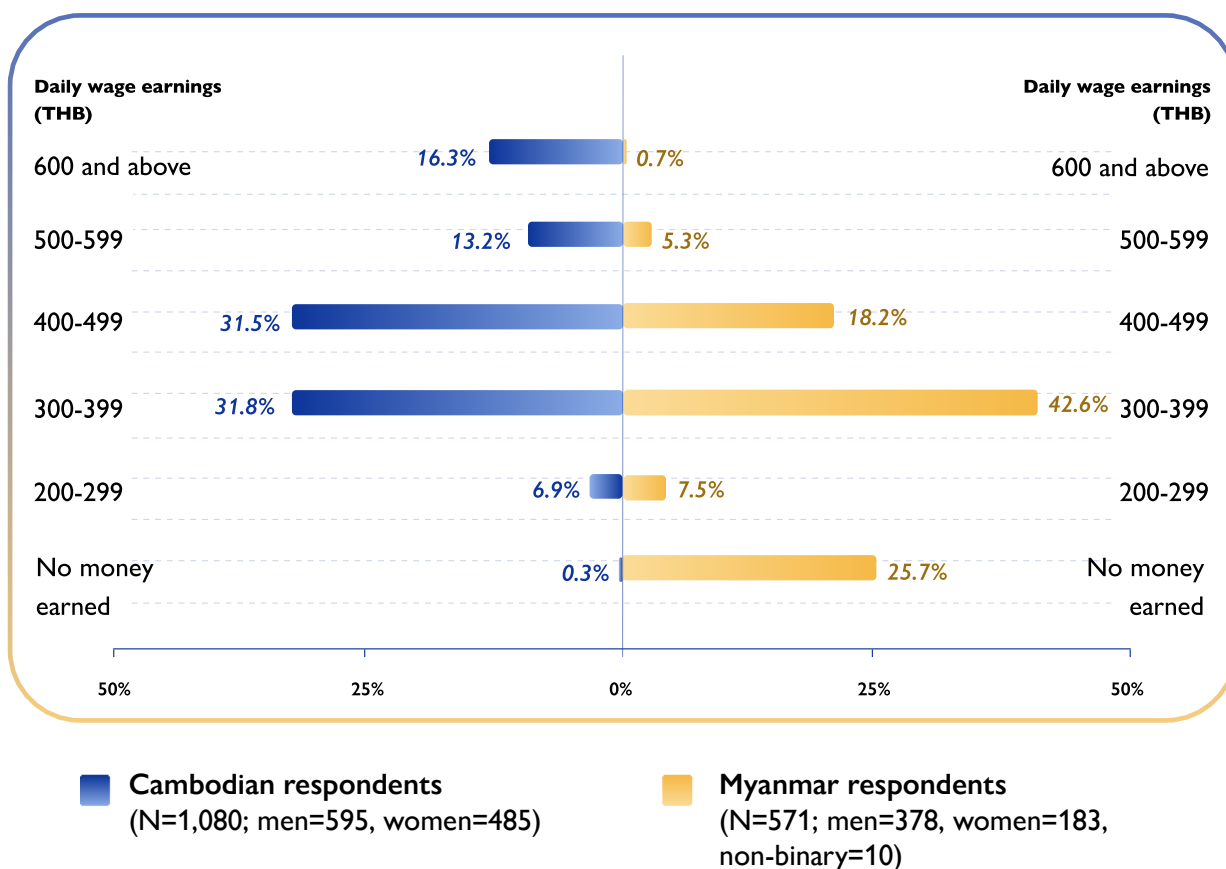
limits the reliability of analytical comparison between the two samples, most migrants in both samples were deported migrants. An additional, standalone protection needs survey was carried out among Myanmar returnees at Myawaddy POE only – 83.8 per cent of migrants sampled in this survey were deportees. The significant socioeconomic and protection needs among migrant workers reported below is potentially attributable to the high proportion of deportees in all three survey samples.



Finding 1 : Cambodian returnees earn more working in Thailand than Myanmar returnees.

Among Cambodian respondents, the 400–449 Thai Baht (THB), that is, approximately USD 12–13.5 daily wage bracket was the most common, accounting for almost one quarter (23.9%) of respondents, compared with the THB 350–399 (USD 10.5–12) daily wage bracket among Myanmar respondents (23.3%). Those earning THB 400 per day and above accounted for 61 per cent of Cambodian respondents (70% of whom work in neighbouring Sa Kaeo province of Thailand) but only for 24.2 per cent of Myanmar respondents. The largest employment sector among these Cambodian ‘higher earners’ was running their own business (well above one third), which might partly explain the difference in earnings via-à-vis Myanmar returnees. Among Cambodian respondents reporting daily earnings of THB 400 (USD 12) and above (of which 38.8% were women), two thirds had no travel document when they were deported, suggesting that lack of legal status was not an impediment to earning above the minimum wage in Thailand.

Figure 1: Comparative daily earnings among Cambodian and Myanmar deportees (by wage bracket, percentage of migrants)



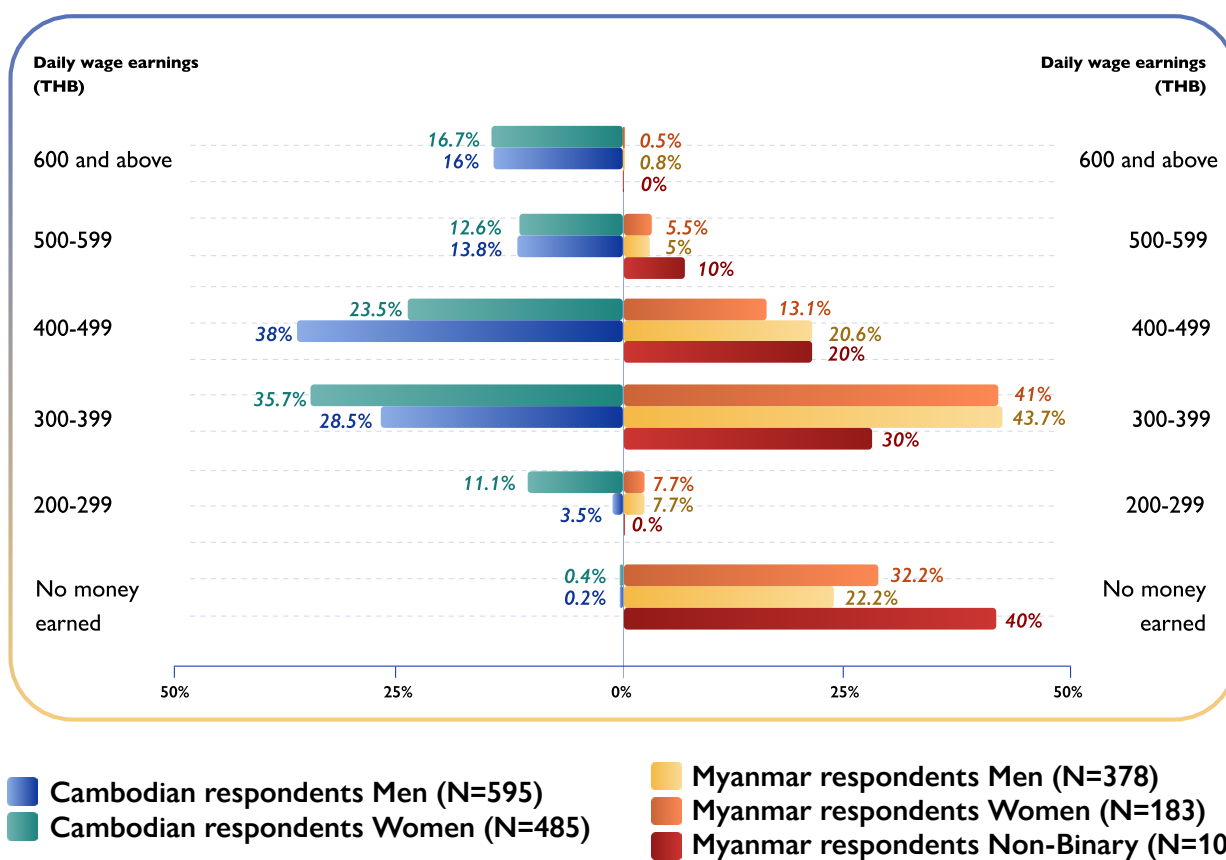
When migrant workers’ reported earnings are sex-disaggregated (Figure 1A), the largest proportion of migrant workers earning above the Thai minimum wage of THB 353 (USD 10.6) per day are men migrant workers from Cambodia (84.2%), followed by women migrant workers from Cambodia (more than two thirds at 67.8%), followed by men migrants from Myanmar (over half at 52.1%), with the smallest proportion being women migrant workers from Myanmar (38.3%). Among the top wage earners,

that is, those making more than THB 500 per day, there is an almost equal proportion of women and men migrant workers in the Cambodian cohort. Similarly, there is an almost identical proportion of Myanmar women and men at those wage levels. Yet it is striking that the overall proportion of Myanmar migrant workers (men and women) earning more than THB 500 (USD 15.1) per day is far smaller compared to that of Cambodian migrant workers (0.7% of Myanmar migrant workers earn over THB 500

per day compared to 16.4 per cent of Cambodian migrant workers). Below the Thai minimum wage, the difference in proportion between Cambodian men and women migrant workers earning at those levels is greater than the difference between their men and women Myanmar peers, that is, almost twice as many Cambodian women as men work below the Thai minimum

wage, whereas 29 per cent more Myanmar women than Myanmar men earn those wage levels. Last, when the finding that 26 per cent of all Myanmar returnees earned nothing while in Thailand (Finding 2) is sex-disaggregated, a comparatively greater proportion of women Myanmar returnees are found to be in this vulnerable position.

Figure 1A: Sex-disaggregated comparative daily earnings among Cambodian and Myanmar deportees (by wage bracket, percentage of migrants)



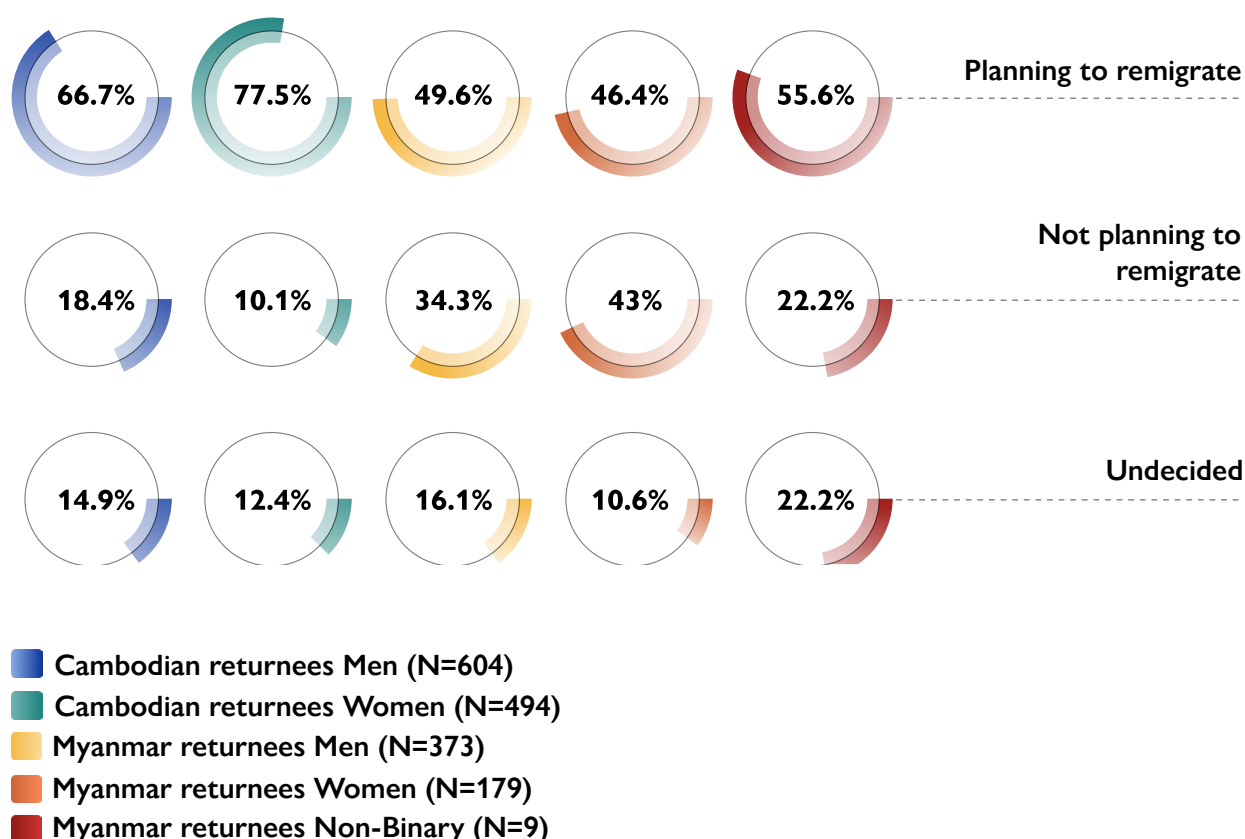
Finding 2 : A high rate of ‘failed migration’ is observed among the cohort of Myanmar migrants returning at Myawaddy. An alarming 25.7 per cent of Myanmar returnees surveyed (of which 88.4% were deported migrants) at Myawaddy report not earning any money at all in Thailand (Figure 1).² The data indicate that all these respondents stayed in Thailand for less than three months, did not have a travel document, and cited detention and deportation as the reason for return to Myanmar. About 81 per cent of these respondents also reported being first-time migrants, and a slightly disproportionate number were women. This finding points to a high rate of what could be understood as ‘failed migration,’ potentially coming at significant financial and mental health burden for migrants, given that almost 30 per cent of Myanmar respondents in the complementary protection needs survey at Myawaddy were found to owe more than MMK 2,100,000 (USD 1,000) in migration-related debt³ (Finding 8).

² In the sample, 57 per cent of respondents reported having no travel document, 23 per cent of respondents (presumably regularized workers) reported having a temporary passport/certificate of identity, visa and work permit (NV) (green card), registration card (“pink card” or Tor Ror 38/1), and 19 per cent (presumably MoU migrant workers) reported having a passport and visa (or passport, visa and work permit).

³ At the time of writing, MMK 2,100,000 was equivalent to USD 1,000.

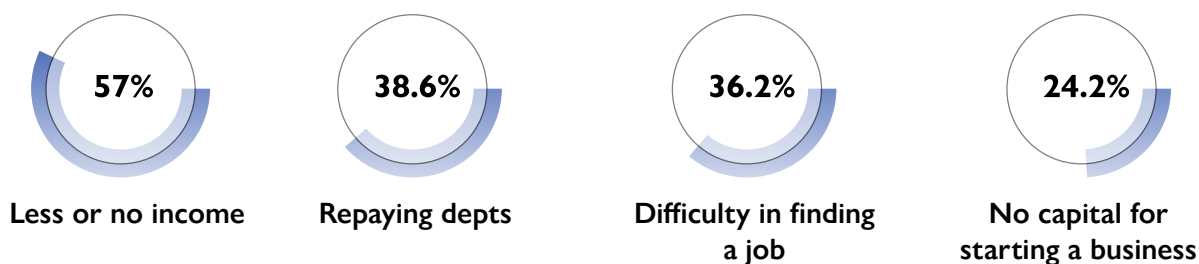
Finding 3 : Fewer than half (48.7%) of surveyed Myanmar returnees at Myawaddy were interested in remigrating to Thailand and one third (36.9%) had no such intention, suggesting the importance of effective return and reintegration assistance. Two thirds of Myanmar migrants not planning to remigrate reported that “living in Thailand is difficult” as their primary reason for not wanting to remigrate. Three other reasons (each given almost equal weight by around one quarter of Myanmar migrants) were fatigue and poor health, a desire to be close to family and friends in Myanmar, and the belief that they will not find a good job in Thailand. By comparison, most Cambodian deportees (71.6%) intend to remigrate to Thailand, with only 14.7 per cent not planning to (Figure 2). Four in ten Cambodian respondents expected to face various challenges upon remigrating to Thailand, compared with nine in ten Myanmar migrants (Figure 3). The primary sector that both Cambodian and Myanmar returnees not planning to remigrate expected to work in upon return was farming, which suggests low awareness of alternative employment possibilities, options for skills training, or possibilities for migrants to have their skills formally recognized. Disaggregated by sex, Cambodian women returnees have comparatively the highest level of interest to remigrate (77.5%) while Myanmar women returnees have the lowest (46.4%). Returned men migrant workers from Myanmar have the highest rate of indecision about whether to remigrate (16.1%).⁴

Figure 2: Future migration intentions of Cambodian and Myanmar migrants (percentage of respondents)



⁴While the rate of indecision is higher among Myanmar non-binary respondents, the total number of respondents in this cohort (10 persons) is too small to be statistically significant.

Figure 3: Challenges that Myanmar returnees (not planning to remigrate) expect to face back home (percentage of respondents) (N=207; men=128, women=77, non-binary=2)



Finding 4 : Interest in skills training is very high among all Myanmar migrants and among Cambodian returnees not planning to remigrate. A total of 89.5 per cent of Myanmar respondents compared with 50.9 per cent of Cambodian respondents expressed interest in skills training. Among migrants intending to remigrate to Thailand, 42.2 per cent of Cambodian respondents and 94.1 per cent of Myanmar respondents were interested in skills training. Interest in skills training was significantly higher among Cambodian respondents not planning to remigrate (or who were unsure if they will) than those planning to go back to Thailand (72.4% versus 42.2%). Among Myanmar returnees, the difference between the two groups was less obvious, with 94.1 per cent of those intending to remigrate and 84.7 per cent of those not planning to remigrate (or who were unsure if they will) interested in skills training. Figures 4 and 5 show the skills in which returning men and women are most interested. Among both genders and Cambodian and Myanmar returnees alike, the skill areas prioritized by respondents not wanting to remigrate (or who were unsure if they will) suggest low awareness of the diversity of training options that may be available to them.

Figure 4: Skills training of greatest interest for men migrants not planning to remigrate (or who are unsure if they will); (percentage of respondents)

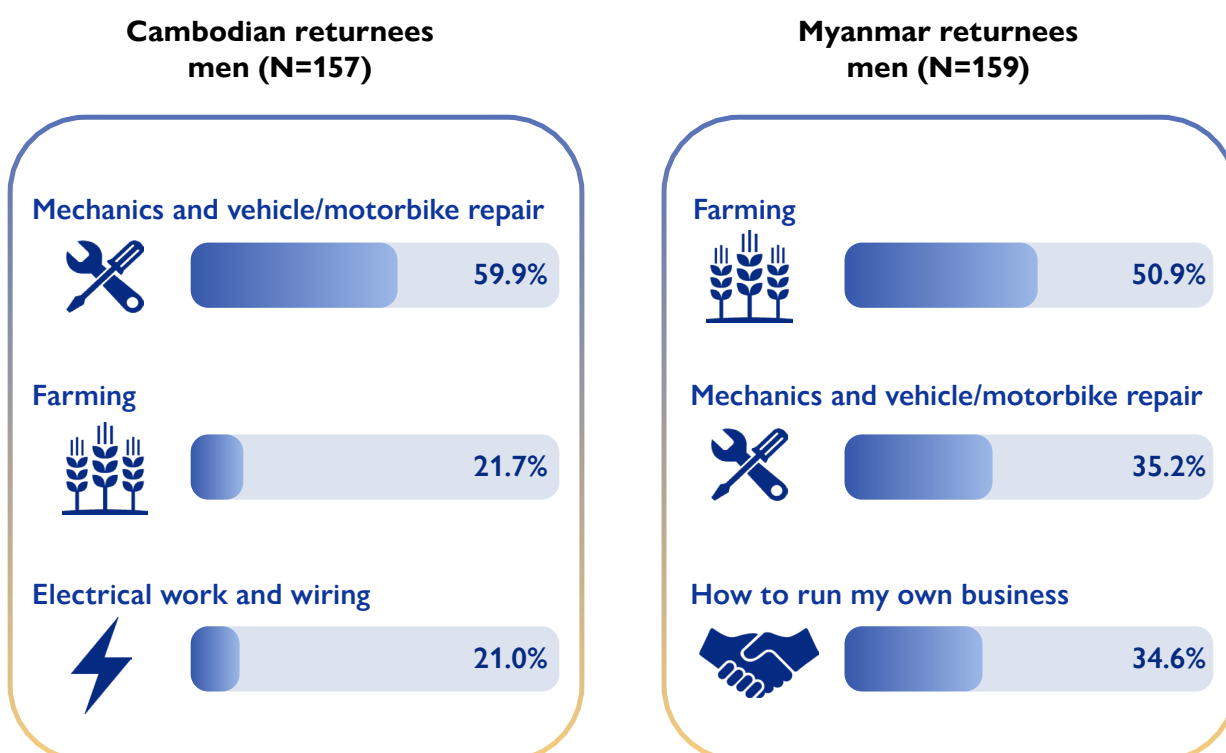
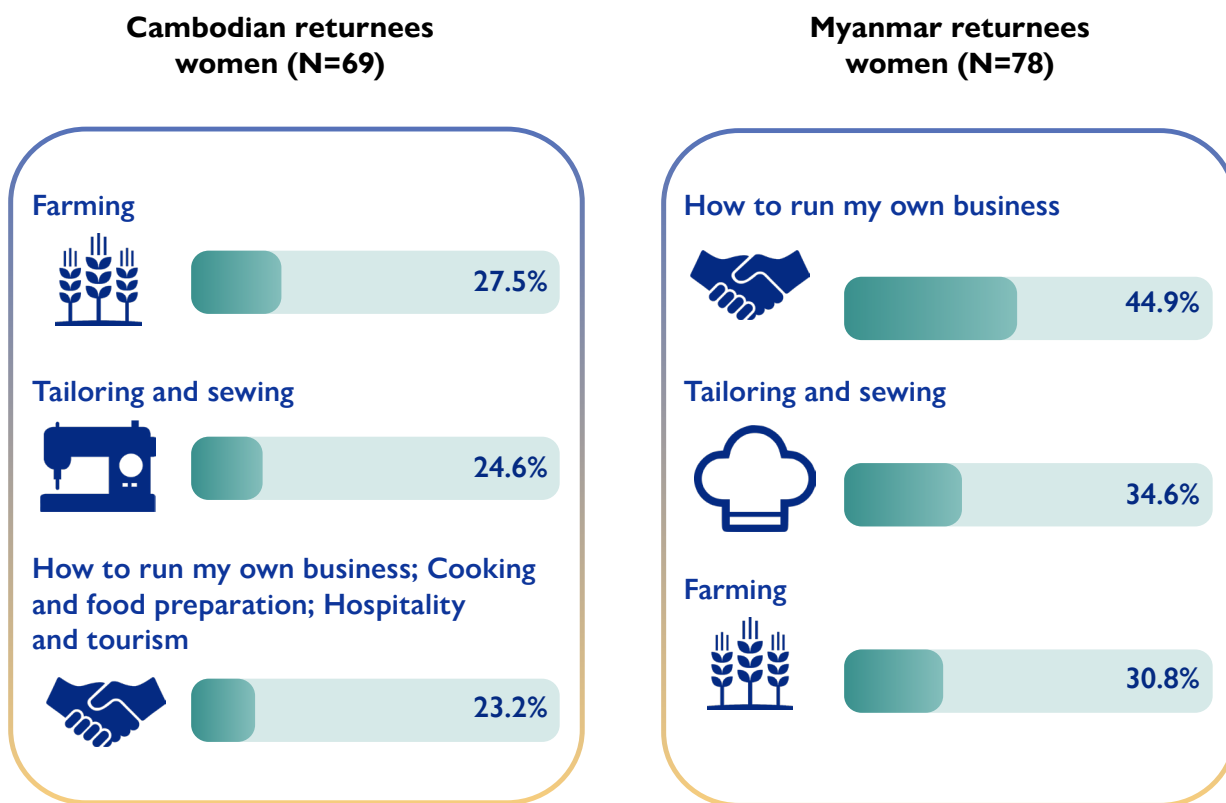


Figure 5: Skills training of greatest interest for women migrants not planning to remigrate (or who are unsure if they will); (percentage of respondents)



Finding 5 : Digital communication channels offer the best prospect to stay in contact with returnees after they leave an MRC. Given the challenge that MRC staff face in staying in contact with returnees (see lessons learned), IOM has been exploring the option of maintaining a channel of communication using popular messaging apps. The surveys found that most Cambodian respondents (90.9%) use Facebook Messenger. While 14.5 per cent of Myanmar migrants do not use messaging apps, among those who do, 99.2 per cent use Messenger. Given security risks in the current political environment in Myanmar, a follow-up survey asked Myanmar respondents: “Will you feel safe to receive text messages from IOM on your smart phone?” Two thirds of returning Myanmar migrant workers answered “yes” (the other third reported not owning a smart phone).

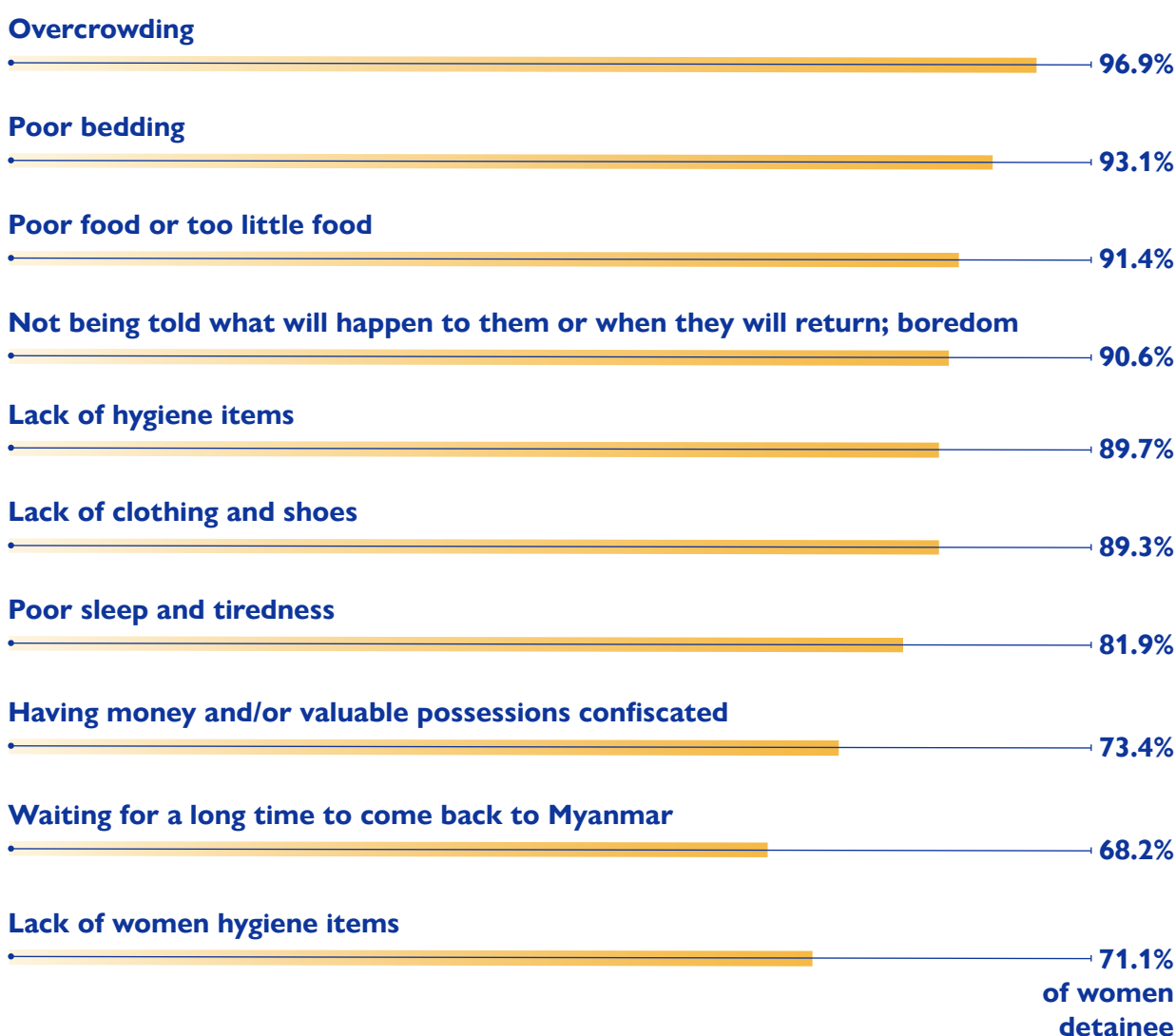
Finding 6 : A majority (85.6%) of sampled Myanmar returning migrants reported being deceived, abused or exploited during their journeys or in employment in Thailand and Malaysia. The most cited abuses are presented in Figure 6. A high proportion (93.2%) of Myanmar migrant workers experiencing abuse or exploitation expressed interest in reporting a complaint to IOM against a broker, recruitment agency or employer.

Figure 6: Main abuses and exploitation experienced by Myanmar migrants in Thailand or Malaysia (N=237; men=187, women=45, non-binary=5)



Finding 7 : A high percentage of returnees surveyed (84.1%) were detained by Thai immigration authorities prior to returning to Myanmar. Slightly more than one quarter (27.5%) of returnees spent between one and two months in detention centres in Thailand. Detained migrants reported a range of difficulties in detention related to poor living conditions, lack of necessities, confiscation of valuable possessions, and uncertainty about the future, compounding their vulnerability at the time of return (Figure 7).

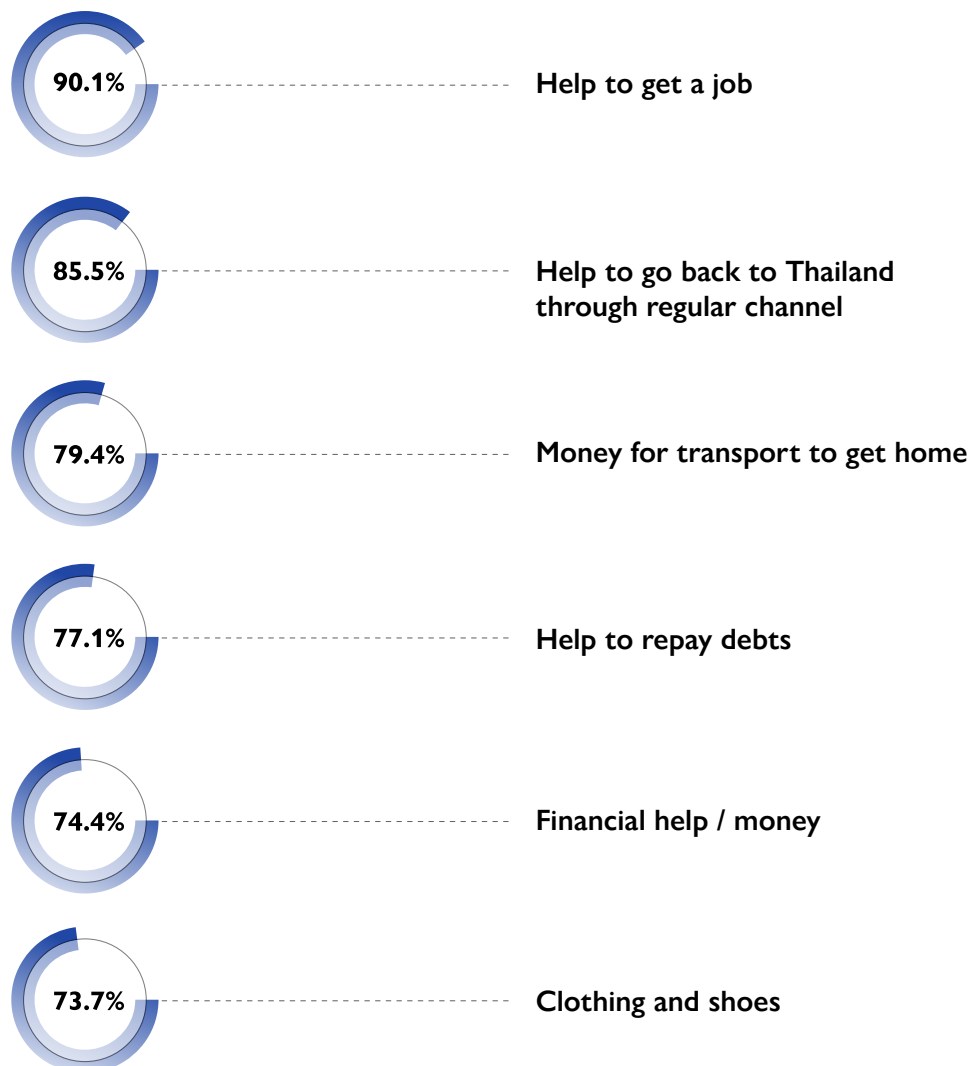
Figure 7: Difficulties experienced by Myanmar migrant workers in Thai immigration detention centres (by percentage of detainees) (N=233; men=180, women=45, non-binary=8)



Finding 8 : Almost four fifths of Myanmar returnees (79.1%) owe money to a broker, money lender, recruitment agency or family member for their migration costs. The amounts of individual debts were considerable, with 28.5 per cent of all respondents owing more than MMK 2,100,000 (USD 1,000) for the cost of their migration. When asked about combined debt (the sum of migrants' individual debt and debt owed by their immediate household), almost 60 per cent of migrant households were found to have debts between MMK 2,100,000 (USD 1,000) and MMK 10,000,000 (USD 4,700). For almost half of returnees (48%), debt incurred to cover migration costs constituted 70 per cent or more of total household debt.⁵

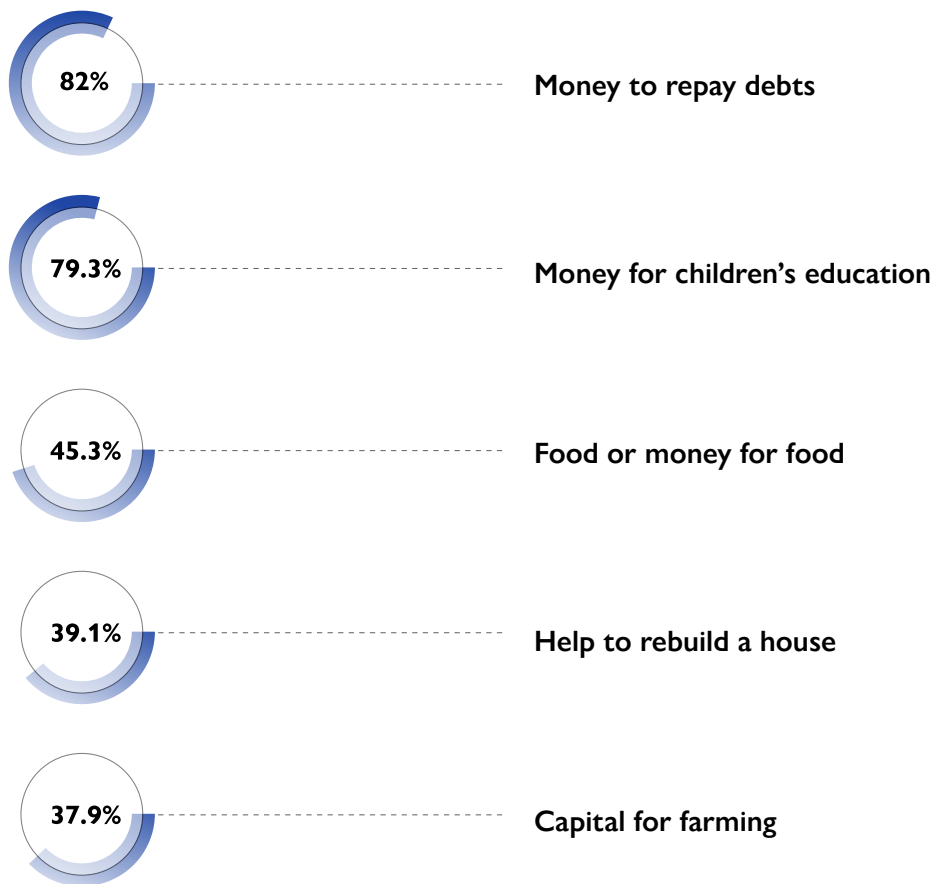
Finding 9 : Myanmar migrants' immediate needs in transit on the Myanmar-Thai border are job referrals and livelihoods support, assistance to reach home, repayment of debt, general financial help, and basic needs (Figure 8). Myanmar migrant households' priority needs in communities of origin are repayment of debt, covering the cost of children's education, food, rebuilding houses and capital for agriculture investment (Figure 9).

Figure 8: Returning Myanmar migrants' priority needs in transit at Myawaddy (by percentage of migrants) (N=262; men=205, women=49, non-binary=8)



⁵ This finding about a high debt burden among returning Myanmar migrant workers correlates with the finding in the socioeconomic survey at Myawaddy, which found that the greatest challenge anticipated by 40 per cent of returning Myanmar migrants was repaying their debts.

Figure 9: Myanmar migrant households' priority needs (by percentage of migrants) (N=256; men=200, women=48, non-binary=8)



QUALITATIVE FINDINGS FROM IOM'S MIGRANT RESOURCE CENTRES OPERATIONS IN CAMBODIA & MYANMAR

For returning migrants to access opportunities for socioeconomic reintegration, effective referral mechanisms established by MRCs supported by IOM are critical. Supporting returning migrant workers in accessing market-responsive skills training, recognition of RPL and job-matching opportunities requires interacting with returning migrants during the return process to refer them to services. The location of IOM

MRCs on the Cambodia-Thai and Myanmar-Thai borders is an opportunity to reach out to returnees who do not plan to remigrate, and to engage them on available reintegration options. To enhance the effectiveness of referrals, IOM has developed a six-point checklist to assess referrals for skills development, RPL and employment as a basis for successful reintegration and measuring the impact of referrals.

What is an effective MRC referral?

- 01 **Do migrants understand what the referral opportunity is?** Have they been counselled on it and received printed and/or digital content that communicates what is involved?
- 02 **Is there an application or intake process at the MRC** that involves identifying migrants, screening their profiles, and supporting interested and suitable candidates to submit applications?
- 03 **Are there effective training, accreditation or job-matching programmes** available in countries of origin that responds to the needs, economic situation and skills of migrants?
- 04 **Are there written referral procedures in place** between MRCs and skill development providers (SDP) or RPL schemes? Has there been discussions between MRCs and SDPs/RPL providers to streamline the referral process?
- 05 **Is there tracking of referrals or follow up** with referral-receiving entities to assess whether MRC referrals are resulting in migrants successfully entering reintegration programmes?
- 06 **What is the number of migrants successfully accepted into reintegration programmes** as a result of MRC referrals? Having numerical targets helps assess effectiveness of referrals.

Findings 1 to 5 present some of the key learning from the MRC assessment, as it relates to engaging and referring migrants in transit to reintegration service providers. Findings 6 to 8 cover additional learning related to the challenge of responding to the diversity of needs among migrant subgroups, the imperative for better coordination amongst MRCs, and prospects for the long-term sustainability of migrant services.

FINDING 1: MRC communication with migrants at origin and during return could be strengthened.

Because a significant proportion of aspirant migrants will migrate irregularly (and likely bypass often-distant MRCs), widespread outreach to communities focussing on premigration decision information, is lacking. Such communication is intended to help aspirant migrants make informed choices, develop realistic migration plans (such as household migration budgets to enhance savings from remittances), and understand the risks. Communication with aspirant migrants who do visit MRCs is frequently undermined by lack of time to properly engage because of the high number of clients who visit MRCs, official limits on time for engagement, and/or because migrants are often in a rush to complete government-mandated administrative steps. At present, MRC information, education and communication (IEC) content does not sufficiently reflect ‘bottom-up’ perspectives of migrants themselves and insights from local partners in Thailand.

In transit locations such as Yangon, pre-departure information communicated to regular migrants deploying under the MoU process is not country-specific to Thailand⁶, while MRCs’ IEC content is not sufficiently tailored to the needs of the diverse categories of migrants passing through points of entry (POEs) on the Thai borderline – such migrants include regular returnees, deported migrants, and those working in bordering provinces of Thailand. In both instances, the relevance of IEC content to migrants is undermined.⁷ Key information is sometimes absent, related to missing services at select MRCs (for example, the ability for migrants to lodge complaints at the PTC). During return, MRC communication does not sufficiently address the barriers that migrants face in understanding reintegration opportunities.⁸ Two years of social distancing regulations at Myawaddy and Poipet POEs has meant that MRCs lost the opportunity to directly engage with migrants to refine the effectiveness of their communication. In the COVID-19 recovery period, transit remains a unique moment to stimulate returnees’ interest in return and reintegration support options in countries of origin.



MRC staff providing humanitarian assistance to returning migrants in Myawaddy, Myanmar. ©IOM 2022

⁶ The MRC in Yangon contributes a 45-minute presentation to a three-day pre-departure orientation programme delivered at the Department of Labour’s facility in North Dagon.

⁷ For example, categories of migrants at POEs between Cambodia-Thailand and Myanmar-Thailand include migrants working in bordering provinces of Thailand under Section 64 of Thailand’s 2017 Royal Ordinance on the Management of Foreign Workers; migrants deploying to Thailand under the bilateral MoU process; regular returning migrants, including those who plan to remigrate and those who do not; and deported migrants.

⁸ Surveys among returning migrant workers at the Poipet Transit Centre (PTC) suggest that, first, the relevance of skills training is not well understood by migrants. For example, migrants struggle to differentiate between skills and job categories, and to know what skills would be relevant to support employment outcomes. Second, skills training is seemingly not something that they have thought much about, and they are not very decisive in their answers. Last, communicating on reintegration requires time whereas migrants in transit prioritize getting home as soon as possible.



Survey enumerator interviewing a migrant, Shwe Myawaddy Quarantine Centre, Myanmar. ©IOM 2022

FINDING 2: The pandemic demonstrated that humanitarian and direct assistance are entry points for effective engagement with migrants in transit.

Following the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, MRC operations supported by IOM shifted from centre-based services to delivering humanitarian assistance to over 42,000 returning migrant workers in quarantine facilities at POEs in Myanmar and Cambodia. MRCs' experience during the pandemic in Cambodia confirmed that direct assistance is appreciated by migrants, helps build trust in MRCs and creates an entry point for interaction with returning migrants in transit– which is otherwise a challenging point in the migration cycle to do so. In Myanmar, humanitarian aid helped create the opportunity for MRCs to forge operational partnerships with local volunteer organizations who through their daily work at quarantine centres gained a proximity to migrants that enabled MRCs to gain insights into the returnee population. Going forward, the challenge for MRCs will be to maintain interaction with returnees after quarantine centres eventually close – this is important for MRCs in communities of origin that have difficulty attracting returnees. New returnee engagement strategies will need to be tested, drawing on partnerships MRCs developed during the pandemic.

FINDING 3: MRCs need more effective approaches to mobilizing returning migrants as participants for skills training opportunities in countries of origin.

MRCs at POEs in Cambodia and Myanmar find it difficult to maintain contact with returning migrant workers in order to mobilize them for post-return reintegration support. Reaching returnees by mobile phone after they leave MRCs at border crossings is challenging because migrants often switch between local and Thai SIM cards. At the same time, returning migrant workers often bypass MRCs located in provincial cities to reach home as quickly as possible. To overcome this difficulty, MRCs have been mobilizing returnees for reintegration through outreach in their communities of origin after they reach home. Experience shows, however, that returnees are not always easy to find. Doing so requires resources and effective partnerships with community organizations. Questions of sustainability once projects and dedicated funding end also arise. While the challenges to effectively mobilizing returned migrants for reintegration support are real, the question remains whether MRCs are doing enough to effectively engage them while they are in transit. IOM survey work found that high proportions of both Cambodian and Myanmar returnees use Facebook’s Messenger app. This finding suggests that text messaging channels could be one avenue for MRCs to connect with returnees at border crossings so as to later share information about reintegration options and to follow up with interested candidates.

From the field: Effective MRC referral in practice at the Poipet Transit Centre , Cambodia

In early 2022, the MRC at Poipet Transit Centre (PTC) conducted outreach in communities around Poipet to identify migrants with experience of working in Thailand with interest to attend skills training at the National Polytechnic Institute of Angkor (NPIA). Several returnees expressed interest, and the MRC sent them application forms via Messenger. Several migrants struggled to complete the form, so MRC staff invited them to come to the PTC for assistance. Having helped returnees complete the forms, the MRC filed their applications and later submitted them to the NPIA by the stipulated deadline. Five of the six applicants were accepted into skills training at NPIA in Siem Riep.



MRC staff at PTC assisting returned migrants to apply for skills training at NPIA, Poipet, Cambodia. ©IOM 2022

FINDING 4: Returning migrant workers need active support to enter reintegration programmes.

MRCs often refer migrants for reintegration support simply by sharing information about a service provider and its contact details. However, returnees face barriers to entering programmes such as skills training or RPL. In addition to information, they often need guidance and support to take advantage of unfamiliar reintegration opportunities. By means of a referral mechanism, MRCs can better support migrants in successfully accessing reintegration opportunities. Doing so requires having a process in place, involving agreed-upon standard operating procedures (SOPs) for cooperation between a referring party (such as an MRC) and a referral-receiving entity (for example, a skills development provider) to guide and support migrants to enter programmes. A referral process can begin with sharing information but includes support during subsequent steps, including screening interested candidates; discussing with them the practical implications of attending skills training; assisting them to complete application forms, and forwarding these to service providers; maintaining communication with returnees waiting to enter reintegration programmes; and following up with service providers to track the outcome of referrals made. Arguably, not all referrals can obtain this higher level of support, and some referrals will necessarily remain only information-based. Where referrals with a higher level of support to migrants are possible, MRCs should collect data on the outcomes to continuously assess the effectiveness of referrals.

FINDING 5: Viable and high-quality programmes on the referral aspect of reintegration options must be available, and adapted to low-skilled returning migrants.

A referral can only be as good as the service or programme that is available. A case in point is the referral of returning migrant workers to job-matching platforms. For job matching to be successful, there must be sufficient intersection between the level of skills in the pool of low-skilled migrants and the level required in job vacancies. In Cambodia, where MRCs refer returning migrants to job opportunities advertised on the National Employment Agency's (NEA) job-matching web portal, the application process has little space to capture information on skills categories that reflect the likely work experience of low-skilled migrant workers. This suggests the possibility of a skills mismatch between supply and demand within existing job-matching platforms. Related challenges have arisen in the private sector, where initiatives – the Good job-matching service in Myanmar and the Bong Pheak employment service in Cambodia –struggled to become commercially viable. Indications are that Good could not overcome competition from informal job brokers active in the communities. Directors at provincial Job Centres in Cambodia have observed that it is easy for workers to find work through informal networks, and that returning migrants therefore have “less chance” to get employed via NEA's web portal. In both the public and private spheres, MRCs will need to further collaborate with their partners to address challenges that arise in the referral of migrant workers to employment services in Cambodia and Myanmar.

FINDING 6: Expanded data collection on the diversity of migrants' profiles and needs would help MRCs to offer higher quality services and more targeted messaging to migrants.

Data from IOM's recent survey work has revealed the diversity of socioeconomic profiles and needs among subgroups of migrants in transit between Thailand and Cambodia, and Thailand and Myanmar. This diversity translates into differing needs for information, the urgency of assistance, orientation of services (pre-departure, return and reintegration, or remigration), and mode of delivery (group-based or one-to-one, direct or by referral).



Returning migrants participate in a safe migration and employment orientation in Poi Pet Transit Centre, Cambodia. ©IOM 2023

MRCs seek to respond to diverse needs, and therefore operate in a context of market forces where their clientele, that is, migrants, have greater or lesser needs for various services and 'vote with their feet' (that is, impulsively) to express preferences. In the past, IOM's MRC staff remained aware of migrants' needs by administering a vulnerability assessment to a high proportion of deportees in Poipet (see picture). Survey work afforded MRC counsellors the opportunity to get close to individual migrants and hear their experiences first-hand. Doing so enabled them to better understand the profile of their clients and to adapt messaging and service delivery accordingly. Without such insight, there is a risk that MRCs offer services that are irrelevant and that they fly blind in the face of changing migrant profiles and needs. Yet survey data collection is frequently a neglected or non-existent function of MRCs. This situation should change, with survey data collection seen as equally critical to the MRC business model as market research is to private enterprises.

FINDING 7: MRCs in transit and communities of origin should coordinate more closely to improve referrals of returning migrants.

Several IOM-operated MRCs are strategically located in proximity to Cambodian and Myanmar POEs, creating opportunities for engagement with large numbers of migrants as they funnel through narrow border crossings. This positioning also creates potential for interconnected MRCs that link services at busy border crossings with those in communities of origin experiencing high rates of out-migration and/or return. As such, returning migrants could be referred in transit to MRC services closer to their communities of origin, in the interiors of Cambodia and Myanmar. At present, however, MRCs at key crossings on the Myanmar and Cambodian borders are not well integrated with MRCs in the interior of both countries, and there is room for improved operational cooperation between IOM- and ILO-supported MRCs. Stronger operational coordination between MRCs would improve the responsiveness to migrants' needs across large geographical areas that the two agencies' MRCs cumulatively cover.

FINDING 8: Return and reintegration policy frameworks are not yet mature enough to support the sustainability of MRC services in countries of origin.

The Mekong subregion has MRCs hosted in a variety of institutional settings including government labour and social welfare offices, civil society and human rights organizations, educational foundations and trade unions, among others. Inevitably, the question of when these host institutions might be able to assume financial and technical responsibility for MRCs arises. Prospects for the sustainability of IOM-supported MRCs in Myanmar and Cambodia have been bolstered by their association with public bodies, in two ways. First, cooperation with Myanmar's Department of Labour and Cambodia's Ministry of Social Affairs Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation has meant that the MRCs they host have benefitted from in-kind provision of office infrastructure, enabling savings. Second, MRCs have become embedded in government-managed migration processes, improving recognition of their role and making them less dispensable.⁹

An ILO stakeholder in Cambodia explained the sustainability conundrum: government-run MRCs are more financially sustainable because the State covers recurring operational expenses, but the more expensive to operate CSO-managed MRCs deliver higher quality services to migrants. IOM's MRC at the Poipet Transit Centre operates in circumstances potentially conducive to integrating the two modalities.¹⁰ In Myanmar, the current crisis has created an unfavourable moment to be engaging stakeholders to assume responsibility for MRCs. In the short term, MRCs in Cambodia and Myanmar need more time to implement some of the lessons presented in this policy brief, in order to demonstrate more effective models of service provision and put forward a business case for sustainable operations. IOM will continue to offer its technical assistance for MRCs to advance in this direction.

⁹ For example, at points of entry in Myanmar, MRC services are integrated into the official deployment of MoU migrants as well as the reception of deportees.

¹⁰ For example, the PTC, a government facility, already hosts two CSOs. Therefore, it would not be unusual for a CSO to take over MRC operations at the PTC, where officials are familiar with the presence and modus operandi of CSOs.

CONCLUSION

Given that MRCs are essentially information hubs from which returning migrants are directed to specialized service providers, the quality of their referrals is central to achieving impact in migrants' lives. This policy brief has shown that successful referral necessarily involves a *process*, beginning with *initial contact* with migrants to *engaging* them on the relevant options available but also subsequent follow-up actions and interventions. Such actions include *mobilizing* returnees to express interest in reintegration opportunities, *guiding* candidates to successfully enter programmes, and *tracking* the outcomes of referrals to assess impact. With the COVID-19 recovery period, MRCs need to enhance all stages of the referral process and do more to assess the impact of referrals. The choice and quality of programmes on offer on the supply side is also critical to effective referral. A greater commitment to ongoing empirical research, qualitative and quantitative, of MRC clientele is important for ensuring that services reflect the changing profile and needs of migrant workers, enabling each MRC to develop a niche set of services based on actual demand and migrant preferences. At the system level, MRCs in the Mekong subregion can enhance networking efforts to create stronger operational linkages and improve coordination, both within countries and across borders.



RECOMMENDATIONS

01 **Expand the role of MRCs in transit areas in referring migrants to reintegration opportunities, as a complement to outreach-based community-level mobilization.**

A stronger focus on digital communication channels would enable MRCs to broadcast 'open calls for candidates' for entry into reintegration opportunities. Conduct a pilot to trial the use of the most popular platforms such as Facebook Messenger, Telegram and Viber to communicate with returnees en masse after they leave MRCs and document the results. Develop new digital communication content to share with migrants in transit to foster a richer understanding of which reintegration options are available in their home provinces and regions/states.

02 **Collaborate with select partners to develop and implement referral mechanisms between MRCs and skills training and RPL service providers**

Themes covered in the SOPs for a referral mechanism could include: procedures for screening of candidates; support to migrants during the application process; financial aspects of cooperation, including financial support to applicants; and data management, including tracking the outcomes of referrals. Following the development of SOPs, MRCs and referral partners should collaborate on a pilot to assess whether SOP referral mechanisms are functioning as intended.

03 **Develop a Communication with Communities strategy for MRCs and review all existing migrant-targeted IEC materials.**

Given that a high proportion of migrants interacting with the IOM-supported MRCs go through irregular migration channels, it is critical that communication at MRCs considers the realities of regular and irregular migration experienced by migrant workers. Content should be jointly developed with migrants, be based on rights and focus on outlining practical warning signs that migrants can identify and action. New IEC content should be tailored to different groups of migrants at origin and transit in Cambodia and Myanmar, and reflect the experiences of migrants and insights from partners at destination in Thailand.





International Migrants Day Event at the MRC in Myawaddy, Myanmar. ©IOM 2022

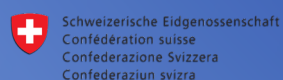
- 04 Strengthen migrants’ access to complaints reporting at MRCs.** The approach should be two-pronged. First, make infrastructural and procedural adjustments at MRCs to enable both departing and returning migrants to lodge complaints. Second, establish operational links between MRCs and Thai partners (official and non-governmental) able to act on complaints relating to abuses occurring in Thailand.
- 05 Adopt a market research approach to understanding the needs and preferences of MRCs’ clientele, as the basis for improving the relevance of MRC services for returning migrants.** Data collection by MRCs should go beyond day-to-day client data capture to include mixed methods research work focused on periodic assessment of the socioeconomic and protection-related profiles of migrant workers. In parallel, methodologically rigorous client surveys should be integrated into a broader process of constantly tweaking or remodelling services, piloting and monitoring their roll-out, and evaluating impact, leading to further adjustments.
- 06 Draw on the positioning of MRCs in communities of origin, border areas and at destinations to forge improved referral linkages between MRC services available to migrants at the pre-decision, pre-departure, transit, post-arrival, return and reintegration or remigration stages of the migration cycle.** At the practical level, there is scope for better integration of MRCs both within countries as well as across borders in the Mekong subregion. Annual national and/or region-wide MRC Forums could be a platform for networking and fostering exchange as a basis for increasing the range of operational linkages between MRC services that now cover large parts of the Greater Mekong Subregion.

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