

Population Review

Volume 44, Number 1, 2005

Type: Book Review pp. 77-79

International Migration in Southeast Asia

Edited by: Aris Ananta and Evi Nurvidya Arifin

Publisher: ISEAS, Singapore, 2004

ISBN: 981-230-279-4 (soft cover); 981-230-278-6 (hard cover)

Reviewer: Ghazy Mujahid, Ph.D.

Affiliation: Advisor on Population Policies and Development, UNFPA

Corresponding author/address: Dr. Ghazy Mujahid, UNFPA Technical Support Team for East and South-East Asia, UN Building, 14th Floor, Rajdamnern Nok Avenue, Bangkok 10200 Thailand (mujahid@unfpa.org)

International Migration in Southeast Asia examines the socio-economic and political impacts and challenges of international migration within, to and from Southeast Asia. The region is defined to cover: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam. In the Introductory Chapter – *Should Southeast Asian Borders be Opened?*, the editors set the overall tone of what is to follow by emphasizing the sensitivity of the movement of human beings because “they bring with them their myriad aspects which may affect the social and political life of the receiving countries”. The discussion is then appropriately divided into the following sub-themes: the history of migration; linkages between migration and economic development; the lucrative business of exporting unskilled workers; the problems of irregular and forced migrants; and national policies of receiving and sending countries. Twelve chapters, each contributed by an outstanding researcher or researchers, provide ample insight into relevant issues. Each chapter focuses on one of the sub-themes, though, given the inter-linkages between various issues, is not restricted to that sub-theme only.

Chapter 2: International Migration in Southeast Asia since World War II by Graeme Hugo and *Chapter 3: Chinese Migration and Adaptation in Southeast Asia: the Last Half-Century* by Leo Suryadinata – trace the history of international migration. Chapter 3 deals exclusively with the patterns of migration of the Chinese over the past century but mainly since World War II. Its main contribution is providing a vivid picture of assimilation of Chinese migrants into the local population: from *huaqiao* (Chinese citizens overseas), to *huaren* (ethnic Chinese) to *huayi* (of Chinese descent). In Chapter 2, Hugo, brings out the unprecedented increase in international migration since the 1970s. He ascribes this to the revolution in global transport, the liberalization of cross-border restrictions, the differential pace of the demographic transition leading to the persistently widening gap between labour-surplus and labour-deficit countries, and the “oil boom” in the Middle East. Issues such as the impact of remittances, “brain drain” and the increasing role of women in migration together with the higher risks of exploitation they face are brought out.

Migration-development linkages are discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. In *Chapter 4: Foreign Direct Investment and International Migration in Economic Development: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand*, Pan-Long Tsai and Ching-Lung Tsay present an investment migration development path (IMDP) model describing the systematic relationships between patterns of foreign direct investment (FDI) and international labour migration (ILM) on the one hand, and economic development on the other. Using data from the four countries, they show how with development, a country moves from having a net inflow of FDI and net outflow of ILM (stage 1) to having a net inflow of both (stage 2) and then having a net outflow of FDI and a net inflow of ILM (stage 3). Indonesia and Philippines are in stage 1, while Thailand and Malaysia have entered stage 2. Thailand, it is pointed out, has a considerable outflow of workers but the inflow is larger. Graphic plots of net

outward FDI and net outward ILM with per capita GDP are used to show that a country moves from stage 1 to stage 2 as per capita GDP rises. The authors do not however discuss if all countries in the region could reach stage 3, or the whole graph can be expected to shift upwards, that is, with time each stage would be defined by a higher level of per capita income. Intra-regional migration can be expected to continue forever: net FDI and ILM flows being determined not so much by each country's absolute level of per capita income but by its level relative to other countries in the region.

In *Chapter 5: Impact of Remittances on the Indonesia Economy*, Sukamdi, Elan Satriawan and Abdul Haris focus on remittances as an important aspect of international migration on the development of the sending countries using Indonesia as a case study. While the Chapter describes the effects of remittances at the macroeconomic and household levels, it fails to analyse the empirical evidence to show what impact remittances have had in Indonesia. For example, it says that in some regions remittances have constituted a much larger proportion of the regional domestic product, but does not link these to differences in regional development or regional disparities in household living standards. It also does not bring out the inflationary pressures caused by remittances-inflated domestic expenditures and the effect these may have had on poverty levels.

In *Chapter 6: Transnational Networks in Female Labour Migration*, Vivienne Wee and Amy Sim highlight a very crucial issue: the inadequate attention paid to female labour migration despite its growing significance. It details how transnational labour networks profit from mediating between migrant women workers and international labour markets on the one hand, and how these workers fall victims to extortion and abuse on the other. Citing evidence, mostly from Hong Kong, on the relative better position of female workers from Philippines than Indonesia, the chapter builds a strong case for the need of ensuring empowerment of female migrant workers: Indonesian female workers too should be assisted to organize themselves like those from the Philippines.

Chapters 7-9 focus on irregular and forced migration. In *Chapter 7: Borders, Globalisation and Irregular Migration in Southeast Asia*, Maruja Asis shows how attempts by countries to restrict labour migration have resulted in unauthorized or irregular migration. "Irregular" migrants are defined as those who move without any coercion across borders but in violation of migrations rules of the country of origin or destination. Drawing on a study covering the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, the author brings out the economic necessity as the main determinant of irregular migration. It is not only the irregular migrants but also the receiving countries that gain in terms of cheaper labour – employers pay lower wages and are also free from obligations under labour laws. Countries have usually sought a solution to irregular migration through restrictive policies focusing on the irregular migrants without looking at the underlying causes of the flows as well as the recruiters and agents who victimize these workers. The Chapter concludes with a case for a transnational mechanism to deal with the issue.

Carl Grundy-Warr provides a detailed description of the internally displaced persons within Myanmar as well as of the "refugees" forced into camps across the border in Thailand. In *Chapter 8: The Silence and Violence of Forced Migration: The Myanmar-Thailand Border*, the author provides valuable information and deep insight into the issues relating to forced migrants, particularly the diametrically opposed views of the governments of Myanmar and Thailand. The need for a regional approach in dealing with issues relating to forced and irregular migrants is further brought out by Ramasamy's discussion of the economic, social and political impact of migrant works in *Chapter 9: International Migration and Conflict: Foreign Labour in Malaysia*. He describes how inflow of migrant labour has given rise to conflict of employers-workers unions interests, led to problems of social assimilation of migrants as well as antagonism and unfounded suspicions towards migrant workers.

The last four chapters focus on national policies relating to international migration of two sending and two receiving countries. In *Chapter 10: Policies on International Migration: Philippine Issues and Challenges*, Nimfa Ogena points out that the Philippines government has recognized promoting overseas employment as a solution to the domestic unemployment problems. It has also put in place policies to ensure protection and welfare of migrant workers abroad as well as to assist returning migrants in putting their savings to productive use. The government expresses its commitment to ensuring that the dignity, fundamental human rights and freedoms of Filipino workers abroad are not compromised or violated. In contrast to this, in Indonesia as Riwanto Tirtosudamaro describes in

Chapter 11: Cross-Border Migration in Indonesia and the Nunukan Tragedy, the government has given very low priority to the issue of migrant workers and has been reluctant to introduce any meaningful policies. This may partly be due to the strong vested interests of the bureaucratic staff who apparently benefit from illegal practices in the migrant worker trade.

Illustrations of policies adopted in receiving countries are given from Malaysia and Thailand. Measures adopted by governments in both countries have centered mainly on controlling irregular migration. In *Chapter 12: Regional Migrant Workers Flows: Outlook for Malaysia*, Bilson Kraus points out that laws providing for punishments and deportation have from time to time been enacted to control irregular migrants, but enforcement has always fallen short under pressure of employers depending on cheap labour. He also argues that despite the long-term perspective of the government to move from labour-intensive industries towards more capital-intensive and knowledge-based industries, migrant workers will be needed for some years to come. In Thailand too, as Yongyuth Chalamwong points out in *Chapter 13: Government Policies on International Migration: Illegal Workers in Thailand*, government policies relating to migrant workers have focused on curbing the inflow of irregular migrants. The country has not had any policy to utilize migrant workers as a means to improve competitiveness.

By bringing the twelve well-researched papers together in one place, Aris Ananta and Evi Arifin have provided very informative and thought-provoking reading on international migration in Southeast Asia. The compilation fills a crucial gap in literature. It shows how multi-dimensional the international labour migration issue is and how closely inter-linked it is with the major global concerns – poverty alleviation, human rights and gender. Greater focus on some issues such as human trafficking, problems facing return migrants and the impact of the changing international security situation on freedom to move may have been precluded by lack of data. The compilation points to the need for more data collection and research in the field. Above all, what the reviewer considers to be its biggest contribution is that it builds a strong case for the need for action at regional level to regulate migration so as to maximize its benefits and safeguard the rights of migrant workers. As each sending and receiving country usually interacts with more than one country, it is not (as shown to date) possible for any country to tackle migration related issues individually. Hence the reader would wonder in agreement with Ramasamy (Chapter 9) “why countries in this region have not approached the problem of migrant labour from a regional perspective”. Every reader would hope that researchers, planners and policy-makers will consider the publication under review as mandatory reading. One could then reasonably expect that national governments in the region will, sooner than later, come to view the emergence of the ASEAN Free Trade Area as a vehicle for addressing issues emanating from migrant workers’ flows in Southeast Asia.