

Labour Migration in the ASEAN Region: Assessing the Social and Economic Outcomes for Migrant Workers

Authors: Benjamin Harkins and Daniel Lindgren

Abstract: During the last two decades, labour migration has emerged as a significant driver of economic growth and development in both countries of origin and destination within the ASEAN region. There are estimated to be 20.2 million migrants originating from ASEAN nations, among whom nearly 6.9 million migrated to other countries within the region. To date, regional integration into the ASEAN Economic Community has focused on mobility of professionals even though most intra-ASEAN migrants are employed in low-skilled jobs – often precariously due to lack of legal status and adequate labour rights protection. While assumptions are made about the end result of this type of migration and how best to ensure a safe and rewarding experience for migrant workers, more rigorous collection and analysis of data has been limited. Application of the Migration Outcomes Index (MOI) as an analytical tool revealed that the potential benefits of labour migration have not been maximized within the region. However, positive outcomes can be achieved if migrant workers are provided with opportunities to enhance their job skills, avoid large debts, receive the minimum wage and find gainful employment upon return. The results suggest the need for a shift in migration and development policy in ASEAN as too much emphasis has been placed on the macroeconomic importance of remittances at the cost of a more balanced and migrant-centred understanding of labour migration outcomes.

Key Words: Labour Migration, Migrant Workers, Migration, Development, Southeast Asia, ASEAN.

Introduction

The 10 Member States of ASEAN form a dynamic and rapidly emerging region, with 629 million residents and a combined gross domestic product of US\$2.4 trillion as of 2015. Labour force expansion and productivity improvements have driven annual economic growth of 5.2% from 2007-2015, consistently outperforming the global average over the same period (ASEAN, 2016).

However, economic prosperity has not been distributed evenly within the region and poverty remains an enduring challenge both within and among ASEAN countries. Despite major progress in poverty alleviation during the last few decades, approximately one in seven residents were still living on less than US\$2 per day as of 2015 (ASEAN, 2016b). In particular, women, ethnic minority groups and rural communities have not benefitted to the same extent from the region's macroeconomic gains (UNDP and ASEAN, 2015).

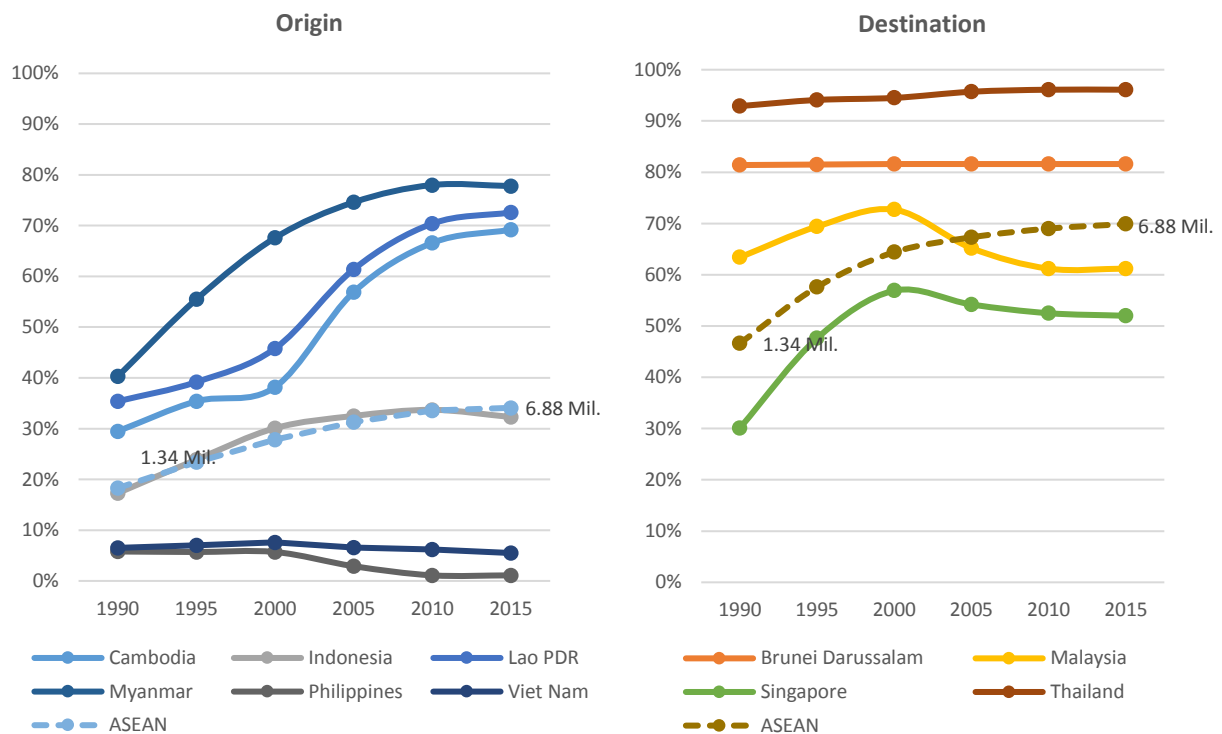
During the last two decades, labour migration has emerged as a significant driver of economic growth and development in both countries of origin and destination within ASEAN. International labour migration in the region is triggered by two main factors: (1) disparities between countries in terms of economic and social development;¹ and (2) demographic differences among the populations of ASEAN nations, with a youthful and expanding labour force in many countries of origin and ageing populations and declining birth rates in destination countries affecting the supply and demand of labour.² As both factors are structural rather than cyclical in nature, labour migration is not likely to diminish in the medium term and can be expected to continue to expand (ILO and ADB, 2014).

¹ In particular, large wage differentials exist between ASEAN countries, with workers in Myanmar earning an average of US\$91 per month (MOLES and ILO, 2016) and those in Singapore earning US\$2,859 (MOM, 2016).

² In Thailand alone, labour shortages in the national work force are projected to reach 4.7 million workers by 2020 (NESDB, 2014).

There are now estimated to be 20.2 million migrants originating from ASEAN nations, among whom nearly 6.9 million migrated to other countries within the region. Though much of intra-ASEAN migration is irregular and not fully captured by official data, the statistics available clearly show the number of migrants moving to other ASEAN countries has risen dramatically, increasing more than fivefold since 1990 (UNDESA, 2016) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Share of intra-ASEAN migrants by countries of origin and destination (1990-2015) (%)



Source: UNDESA (2016)

Acknowledging the potential for intra-regional migration to contribute to the growth and development of the bloc, a freer flow of skilled labour is a key feature of the newly established ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). ASEAN has begun expanding labour mobility under the AEC by establishing Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) for eight highly-skilled occupations. However, most of the workers involved in intra-ASEAN labour migration are employed in low-skilled labour-intensive jobs in agriculture, fisheries, domestic work, manufacturing and construction.

Although they are estimated to constitute as much as 87 percent of intra-regional labour migration flows (Orbeta, 2013), ASEAN has yet to establish policies on mobility of workers into low-skilled jobs. Conversely, the eight professional occupations covered by the ASEAN MRAs collectively represent only 0.3% to 1.4% of total employment in Member States (ILO and ADB, 2014). The policy gap does not fairly reflect the importance of low-skilled migration within ASEAN countries as the prosperity of whole regions and economic sectors are heavily dependent on the output and earnings of these workers.

Due to the high costs, long duration and considerable complexity of navigating the existing bilateral channels for migration, many intra-ASEAN migrants are precariously employed in an irregular status. Regardless of the legal documents they hold, migrants employed in low-skilled work often face exploitation and abuse because of inadequate protection of labour rights during recruitment and employment.

Women face additional challenges in accessing safe and legal migration opportunities, with the type of work available to them often paying less and affording fewer legal protections due to lack of formalization. This reflects an undervaluing of occupations that are traditionally viewed as women's work, such as employment as a domestic worker. In addition, protectionist policies in some countries restrict the movement of women by sector, destination or other circumstances perceived as dangerous or contrary to traditional social values. Because establishing these barriers to regular migration does not remove the factors that push women to seek work abroad, many have no choice but to migrate through irregular channels into the informal economy (ILO, 2017).

While assumptions are often made about the end result of migration in ASEAN and how best to ensure a safe and rewarding experience for migrant workers, more rigorous collection and analysis of empirical data has been very limited. This study aims to help fill the knowledge gap on the socio-economic outcomes of migration into low-skilled work within the region.

Research Approach

A regional baseline survey on labour migration in Southeast Asia was conducted jointly by the International Labour Organization's (ILO) 'Tripartite Action to Enhance the Contribution of Labour Migration to Growth and Development in ASEAN' (TRIANGLE in ASEAN project) and the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) 'Poverty Reduction through Safe Migration, Skills Development and Enhanced Job Placement in Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam' (PROMISE project).

Because of their substantial thematic, geographic and temporal overlap, the TRIANGLE in ASEAN and PROMISE projects expect to work closely together to maximize results. In order to evaluate their impact, a zero-measurement was needed during year one of the projects. The study will also be used to shape the design of interventions by identifying key gaps in policies and practices to be addressed.

This manuscript is drawn from the findings of the broader ILO/IOM study, documenting the application of a methodology developed in partnership with the management consulting firm Rapid Asia to measure the outcomes of labour migration for migrant workers through an index of socio-economic indicators.

Research Questions

Key areas of inquiry for the research included:

1. What are the social and financial outcomes of migration into low-skilled work within the ASEAN region?
2. What are the differences in migration outcomes between sub-groups of migrant workers by nationality, gender, destination, legal status, sector of work, ethnicity and education?
3. What factors are associated with more positive or negative migration outcomes? In particular, is regular migration an important contributing factor to more beneficial migration experiences?

Research Methodology

Data was collected using a mixed methodology approach, including the following quantitative and qualitative techniques:

- Desk review of literature and official data.
- Administered surveys of return migrant workers.
- In-depth interviews with return migrant workers.

- Key informant interviews with stakeholders.

A hub and spoke model network was established to ensure that high-quality data was collected by a field team who are knowledgeable and sensitive to local cultural practices. Rapid Asia managed the overall project and well-established local research firms were contracted in each country to conduct face-to-face surveys with return migrants and stakeholders. Only companies who are members of the European Society for Opinion and Market Research (ESOMAR) were recruited for data collection.

The local research firms were responsible for data entry with regular data checks conducted to ensure quality. Particular attention was paid to the questions capturing ratio data such as cost of migration, savings, remittances made and income to make sure the data was consistent and to remove outliers.

Research Sample

During July – August 2016, a total of 1,808 return migrant workers (Men=51%/Women=49%) were surveyed in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam (Table 1). In addition, 96 qualitative interviews (Men=58%/Women=42%) were conducted with return migrant workers and stakeholders, evenly distributed across the four countries. Purposive sampling for qualitative interviews and intercept for survey participants were applied, with attention paid to inclusion of marginalized groups within the migrant population (particularly irregular migrant workers and ethnic minorities).

In order to conduct a regional study and obtain comparable data between countries, eligibility criteria were applied restricting the respondents to return migrant workers who had been employed in Thailand or Malaysia only. These countries were selected among other ASEAN nations because they are the two largest destination countries within the region and fall within the geographic scope of the ILO and IOM projects.

Table 1. Research sample

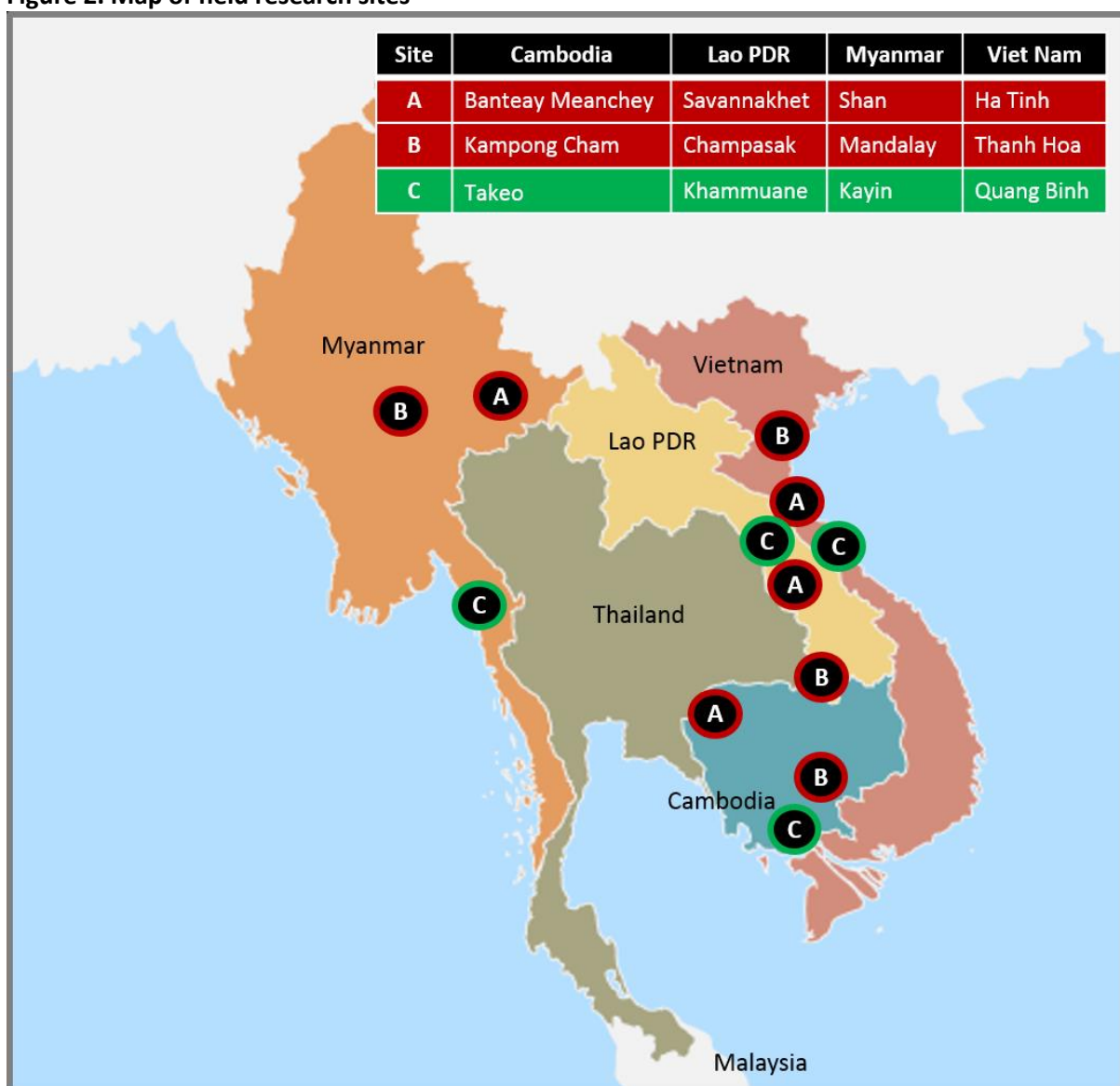
Respondent	Location	Criteria	Sample Size
Return migrant workers	Cambodia Lao PDR Myanmar Viet Nam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 18-45 years of age • Returned from work in Thailand or Malaysia during the last two years • Employed in low-skilled work in fisheries, domestic work, agriculture, manufacturing, construction or hospitality and food services. • 50% women/50% men 	Survey (n=1,808) In-depth interviews (n=60)
Stakeholders	Cambodia Lao PDR Myanmar Viet Nam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equal representation of (1) government officials; (2) recruitment agencies and employers; and (3) trade unions, NGOs, mass organizations and women's groups. • 50% women/50% men (to the extent possible) 	Key informant interviews (n=36)

Research Sites

Figure 2 shows the selected survey locations in each of the 4 target countries. A total of 3 provinces were selected in each country. In each province, 4-5 villages with a high concentration of return migrants were identified based on input from local migrant worker resource centres (MRCs) funded by the ILO and IOM. To ensure a good geographic spread of the sample, respondents were intercepted at different locations within each village.

In addition to collecting data in intervention areas, the research applied a quasi-experimental design through the inclusion of control sites where no activities will be implemented. This will allow for an assessment of the counterfactual during mid-term and end-line studies. The control sites were chosen through consultation with stakeholders to determine areas with similar circumstances in terms of labour migration flows and socio-economic context.

Figure 2. Map of field research sites*



* Intervention sites are marked red and designated with the letters A and B and control sites are marked green and labelled with the letter C.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software. For qualitative interviews, responses provided by informants were summarized and coded against the research questions. Secondary data obtained from the desk review was also extracted from a list of key research documents provided by the ILO and IOM. Data from all sources was then triangulated to produce the research findings.

Research Limitations

Because survey respondents were selected via intercept using quotas, the sample selected was not a pure probability sample and should not be considered representative at national or regional levels. Due to the lack of accurate official data on labour migration and the large portion of migrants who use irregular channels within the region, a reliable sampling frame does not exist and thus the statistical power of the research findings cannot be determined. Instead, sample allocation was based upon the need to have a large enough base to compare results between key sub-groups and determine the baseline state in the ILO/IOM intervention areas.

Profile of Return Migrant Workers Surveyed

As shown in Table 2, the majority migrants from all countries worked in Thailand, with the exception of those from Viet Nam who were evenly split between Thailand and Malaysia. There was no clear pattern in sector of employment, with construction for Cambodians (46%), hospitality and food service for Lao (32%), manufacturing for Myanmar (37%) and fisheries for Vietnamese (29%) the most common types of work undertaken, respectively.

Unsurprisingly, the ethnicity of migrant workers was much more diverse in Myanmar, with more than half coming from ethnic minority groups (57%). Because of the data collection sites, Shan and Kayin migrants represented the largest minority populations surveyed. Ethnicity is an important factor influencing migration patterns in Myanmar because long-standing traditions of cross-border migration exist that are largely based on ethnic or kinship links (Hein et al., 2015).

Vietnamese paid the most in migration costs (US\$709), had to borrow the largest amounts (US\$1,044) and took the longest to pay them back (11 months), much of which can be attributed to a higher portion of workers migrating regularly to Malaysia through recruitment agencies. Conversely, only about one-quarter of Lao migrants had to borrow any money to migrate to Thailand, which cost US\$171 on average and was overwhelmingly through irregular channels (96%).

Working conditions were uniformly demanding, with migrants from all countries working 9-11 hour days for more than 6 days per week. The majority of migrants earned below the legal minimum wage³ in spite of the long hours worked but there were substantial differences by country. Vietnamese workers earned more than double the wages of Myanmar migrants (US\$357 vs. US\$176) even though they actually worked fewer hours.

Though not presented in the table on the following page, a substantial wage gap between women and men migrants was found for all four nationalities, with the latter paid 14% more overall. Analysing the data by sector to determine if the differences were created by highly gendered sectors of work showed large disparities for all types of employment, except in manufacturing and hospitality/food services.

³ On 1 January 2013, Thailand set a national minimum wage of THB300 per day (US\$10) and Malaysia set a minimum wage of MYR900 (US\$296) per month in Peninsular Malaysia and MYR800 (US\$263) for Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan.

Nearly half of migrant workers were employed without documentation, with Cambodian migrants slightly more likely than others to hold regular legal status (35%). It should be noted that this finding specifically relates to documents held during employment rather than migrating regularly, as the vast majority of migrants from the four countries used irregular channels to go abroad (73%).

Table 2. Profile of return migrants by country of origin

Destination Country	Cambodia n=457 (%)	Lao PDR n=450 (%)	Myanmar n=451 (%)	Viet Nam n=450 (%)	Total N=1,808 (%)
Thailand	92	100	71	51	81
Malaysia	8	-	29	49	19
Work Sector	%	%	%	%	%
Domestic Work	7	14	8	13	11
Fisheries	4	4	4	29	10
Agriculture	8	16	27	2	13
Manufacturing	29	24	37	27	29
Construction	46	11	13	14	21
Hospitality and Food Service	5	32	12	15	16
Ethnicity	%	%	%	%	%
Majority	96	96	43	100	84
Minority	4	4	57	-	16
Key Migration Statistics	# / % / \$	# / % / \$	# / % / \$	# / % / \$	# / % / \$
Median number of years abroad	1	2	3	4	3
Average cost of migrating (US\$)	\$255	\$171	\$587	\$709	\$430
Borrowed money to pay for migration	48%	28%	39%	52%	42%
Average loan amount (US\$)	\$241	\$152	\$596	\$1,044	\$560
Average months to pay back loan	5	3	10	11	8
Average number of days worked per week	6.6	6.4	6.4	6.3	6.4
Average number of hours worked per day	10	9	11	10	10
Average monthly income (US\$)	\$268	\$274	\$176	\$357	\$268
Worked without legal documents	35%	46%	46%	48%	44%

Assessment of Migration Outcomes

Financial remittances are undoubtedly a significant outcome of labour migration within the four countries of origin studied. In 2015, an estimated US\$16.9 billion was remitted to Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam (World Bank, 2016) and research has suggested that the real total may be double that amount due to the large flows of remittances sent through informal channels that are not recorded (UNCDF, 2017).

However, the heavy emphasis placed on the macroeconomic importance of remittances within the migration and development discourse can come at the expense of a more balanced and migrant-focused understanding of labour migration outcomes (Keijzer et al. 2016). Reviews of the existing body of evidence have concluded that a complex and heterogeneous relationship exists between

remittances and development, making such unrestrained euphoria about their potential largely unjustified (De Haas, 2007; Carling, 2008).

To assist with redressing the asymmetry of the metrics used, a key analytical tool developed for the study is the Migration Outcomes Index (MOI). Much like the intent in establishing the Human Development Index in 1990, it was created "to shift the focus from national income accounting to people-centred policies" (Fukuda-Parr, 2003). It also represents a break from the very dominant human trafficking paradigm within Southeast Asia, offering a more nuanced assessment of migration outcomes rather than the overly simplistic binary of trafficked or not trafficked.

The MOI provides a short-cut to assessing migration outcomes by generating a single number score, combining an equal number of financial (income, tangible assets, savings and debt) and social (life skills development, skill level of work, unemployment and psychological, social or health problems) indicators to measure changes from before migration to after (Table 3). Each indicator is measured as a dichotomy, categorizing outcomes as either positive or negative during the data analysis. All financial and social indicators are weighted evenly within the aggregate index to provide a holistic assessment of migration outcomes.

The selection of the 8 indicators was made based upon consideration of critical outcomes for return migrant workers, as well as the areas of work planned by the ILO and IOM. Several iterations of the index were developed and tested and the final set of indicators were found to be the most independent from each other. By including indicators with fewer associations, the MOI provides a more robust measure of the variation in migration experiences.

MOI scores are calculated at the individual respondent level and indexed on a range of 0–100 to provide an accessible benchmark against which to measure progress. The benefits of a single number score is that it facilitates comparisons between different groups of migrants and also allows for factors that contribute to positive or negative migration outcomes to be more easily identified.

Table 3. Migration outcome index indicators

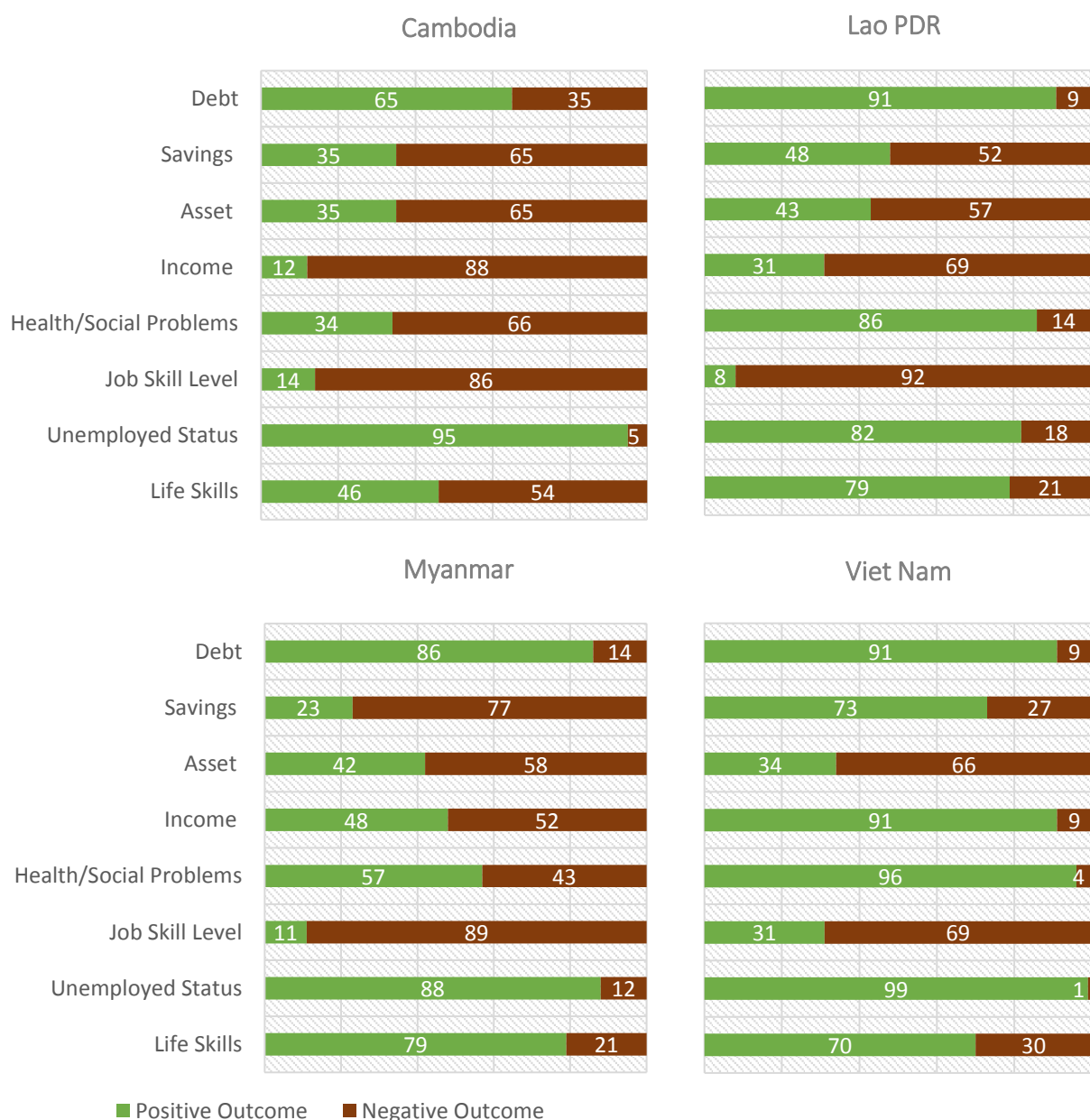
Social Indicators	Positive Outcome	Negative Outcome
Life skills development	Improved	No change
Unemployed	No	Yes
Skill level of work	Improved	No change
Psychological, social or health problems	No	Yes
Financial indicators	Positive Outcome	Negative Outcome
Income	Increased	No change
Tangible assets	Increased	No change
Savings	Increased	No change
Debt	No	Yes

Analysis of the individual MOI indicator results across the 4 countries reveals some notable patterns as well as distinct differences (Figure 4). The majority of migrants in all countries were able to return without debts but the extent to which their financial status had otherwise improved varied. More than half of migrants in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar were unable to increase their income, savings or tangible assets from working abroad, while most Vietnamese migrants had positive improvements in income (91%) and savings (73%).

Examination of social outcomes shows that most migrants in all 4 countries were able to find some type of work upon return. However, few were able to move into higher skilled jobs, with Vietnamese workers the most successful at upskilling (31%). More migrants were able to acquire life skills while abroad, such as leadership skills, foreign language ability and financial literacy, with 79% of both Lao and Myanmar migrants reporting some type of skills development. Social, health and psychological problems resulting from migration varied dramatically, with two-thirds of Cambodian migrants reporting difficulties upon return (66%) and few Vietnamese facing any negative effects (4%). Most of the problems experienced were psychological in nature, relating to anxiety, depression or boredom.

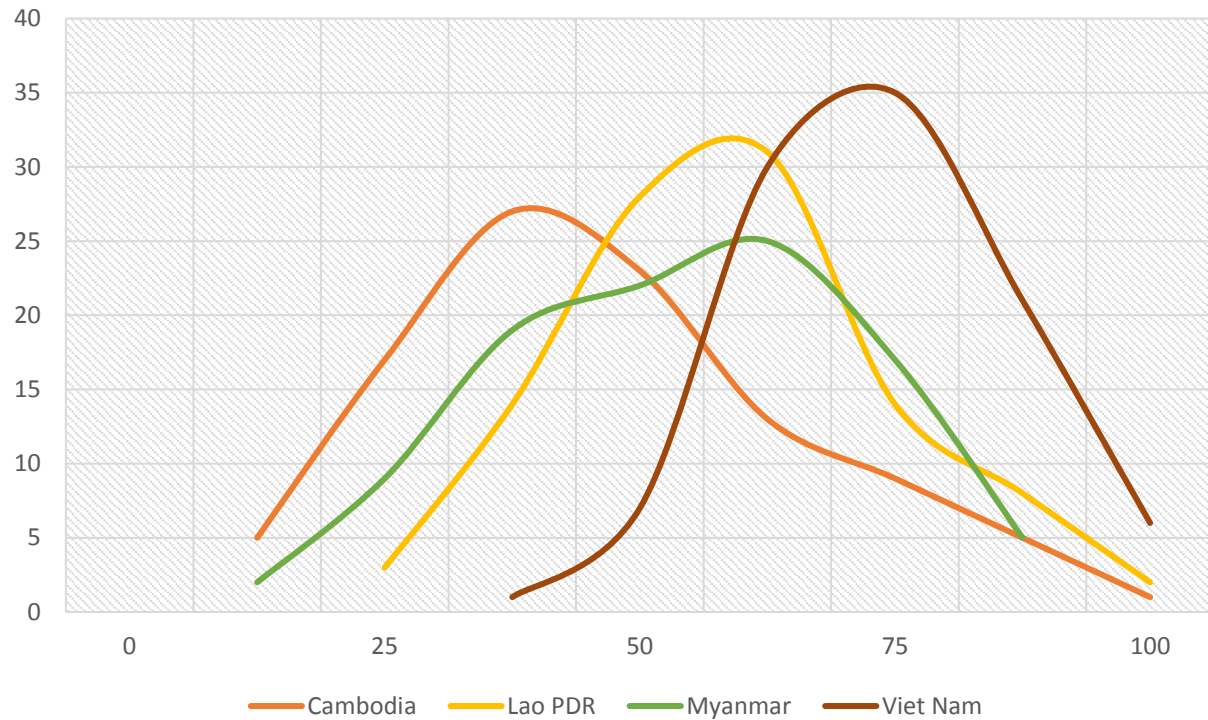
The results were fairly balanced between positive social and financial outcomes, which suggests that migration led to a complex set of changes in the lives of migrant workers that should not be oversimplified. Researchers have pointed out that a narrow focus on the potential of migrants to contribute to development through harnessing of their financial resources can actually lead to stagnation, shifting attention away from necessary structural political and economic reforms in countries of origin (De Haas, 2012). A study by the World Bank reached similar conclusions, cautioning that remittances are not a magic bullet for long-term development in Asia (Ahmad et al., 2014).

Figure 4. MOI indicators by country (n=1,808) (%)



The MOI score results show a normal distribution in all 4 countries, suggesting that the Index methodology is sensitive enough to discriminate between the full range of positive and negative migration outcomes (Figure 5). Overall, all countries were slightly skewed towards more positive outcomes except in Cambodia where the majority had a negative migration experience.

Figure 5. Distribution of MOI scores (n=1,808)

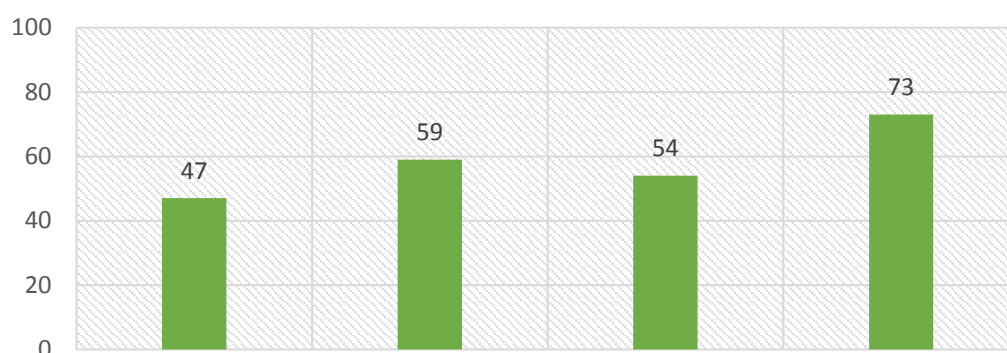


As displayed in Figure 6, migrant workers from Viet Nam (73) had notably better outcomes than migrant workers from Cambodia (47), Myanmar (54) and Lao PDR (59). This was supported by the qualitative findings of the study, which suggested that Vietnamese migrants have better outcomes due to incrementally higher skill-levels. It should also be considered that Vietnamese migrants had spent a much longer period of time working abroad (4 years) than Cambodian migrants (1 year) on average, which is likely a contributing factor.

Exploration of the differences among sub-groups shows that the some of the largest variances in MOI scores were among Myanmar migrants, with ethnic minorities (50) and those migrating to Thailand (51) experiencing worse outcomes than Bamar migrants (60) and migrant workers employed in Malaysia (61). Previous research by the ILO has found that ethnic minorities in Myanmar are marginalized under existing labour migration policies, with fewer opportunities to migrate regularly or to more lucrative destination countries (Hein et al., 2015).

Women of all nationalities had less positive experiences than men, with the differences most notable in Myanmar (Women=50/Men=57) and Lao PDR (Women=57/Men=61). Both of these countries have policies in place that restrict the migration of women – particularly as domestic workers – which frequently has the effect of forcing women migrants to seek employment abroad irregularly to support their families and in turn limits their coverage by labour rights protections and access to support services at destination (ILO, 2017).

Figure 6. MOI score by country (n=1,808)



Sub-Groups	Cambodia	Lao PDR	Myanmar	Viet Nam
Thailand	46	59	51	75
Malaysia	52	-	61	71
Men	48	61	57	73
Women	46	57	50	73
Documented	49	59	57	71
Undocumented	43	58	51	75
Majority	47	59	60	73
Minority	45	54	50	-

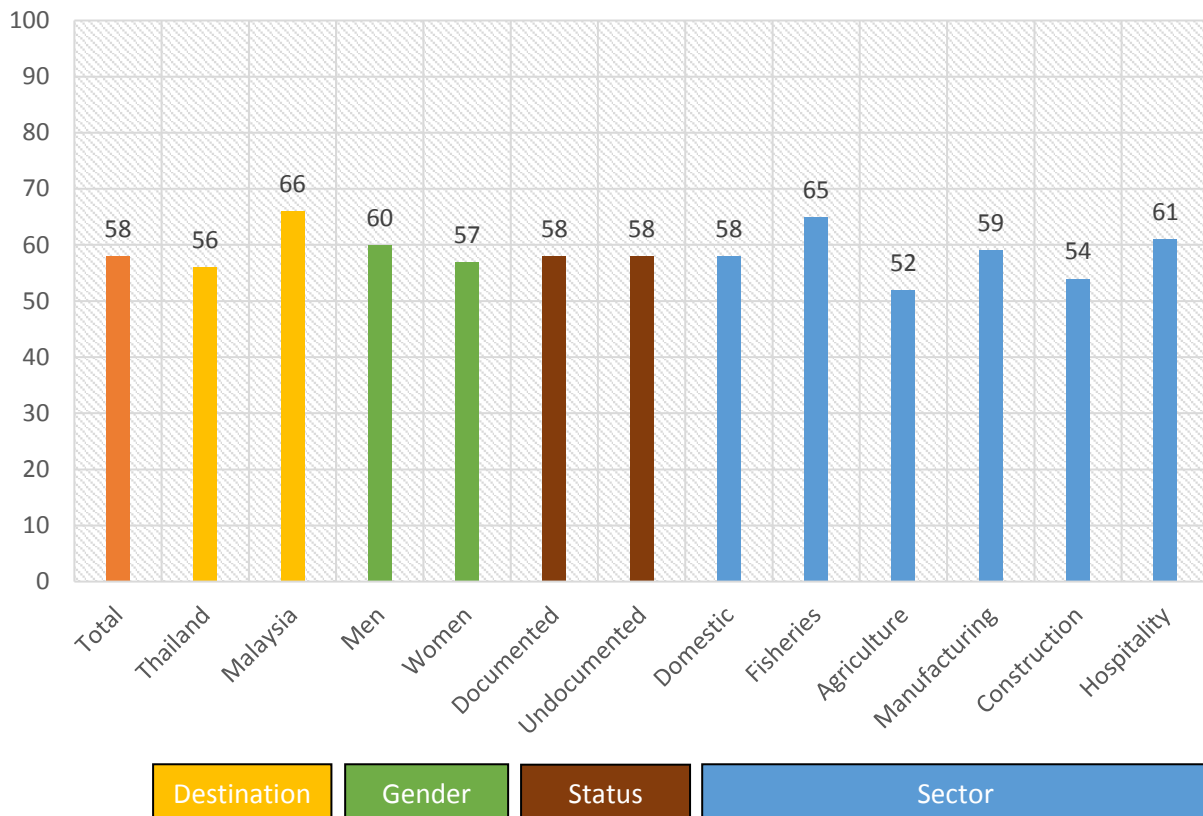
Figure 7 shows that the aggregate MOI score regionally was 58, which can be used as a point of reference in examining the differences among other regional groupings. The most significant differences were found to have a sectoral basis, as migrants employed in agriculture (52) and construction (54) had noticeably worse outcomes than those in fisheries (65). This is perhaps not very surprising as agricultural and construction work are considered high-risk sectors for exploitation of vulnerable workers globally⁴ (ILO, 2014).

Migrants working in Malaysia (66) had better results than those employed in Thailand (56), with higher wages potentially a contributing factor. However, the survey findings also suggest that working in Malaysia entails much higher migration costs (US\$1,082) in comparison to Thailand (US\$251), which can have the effect of reducing the returns on migration significantly. Migrant workers employed in Malaysia reported that on average it took them a full year to pay back the money they had borrowed to cover migration costs.

Smaller distinctions in migration outcomes between men (60) and women (57) were also present, with the former faring slightly better. However, it should be noted that the MOI methodology primarily measures changes relative to an individual's situation before migration and therefore does not take into account the unequal starting point between women and men migrants.

⁴ It should be noted that the ILO also considers work on fishing vessels to be a high-risk sector for exploitation and includes it under the category of agricultural work. However, for the purposes of this study, the 'fisheries sector' refers to both work on-board fishing vessels and land-based employment in seafood processing factories, with the vast majority of the migrants surveyed employed in factories.

Figure 7. MOI score by destination, gender, legal status and sector of work (n=1,808)



An item analysis was conducted to gain a better understanding of how positive or negative outcomes for each of the 8 MOI indicators affected the overall index results (Figure 8). This is a critical issue to consider for project development as it provides supporting evidence for the prioritization of specific areas of work in improving migration outcomes.

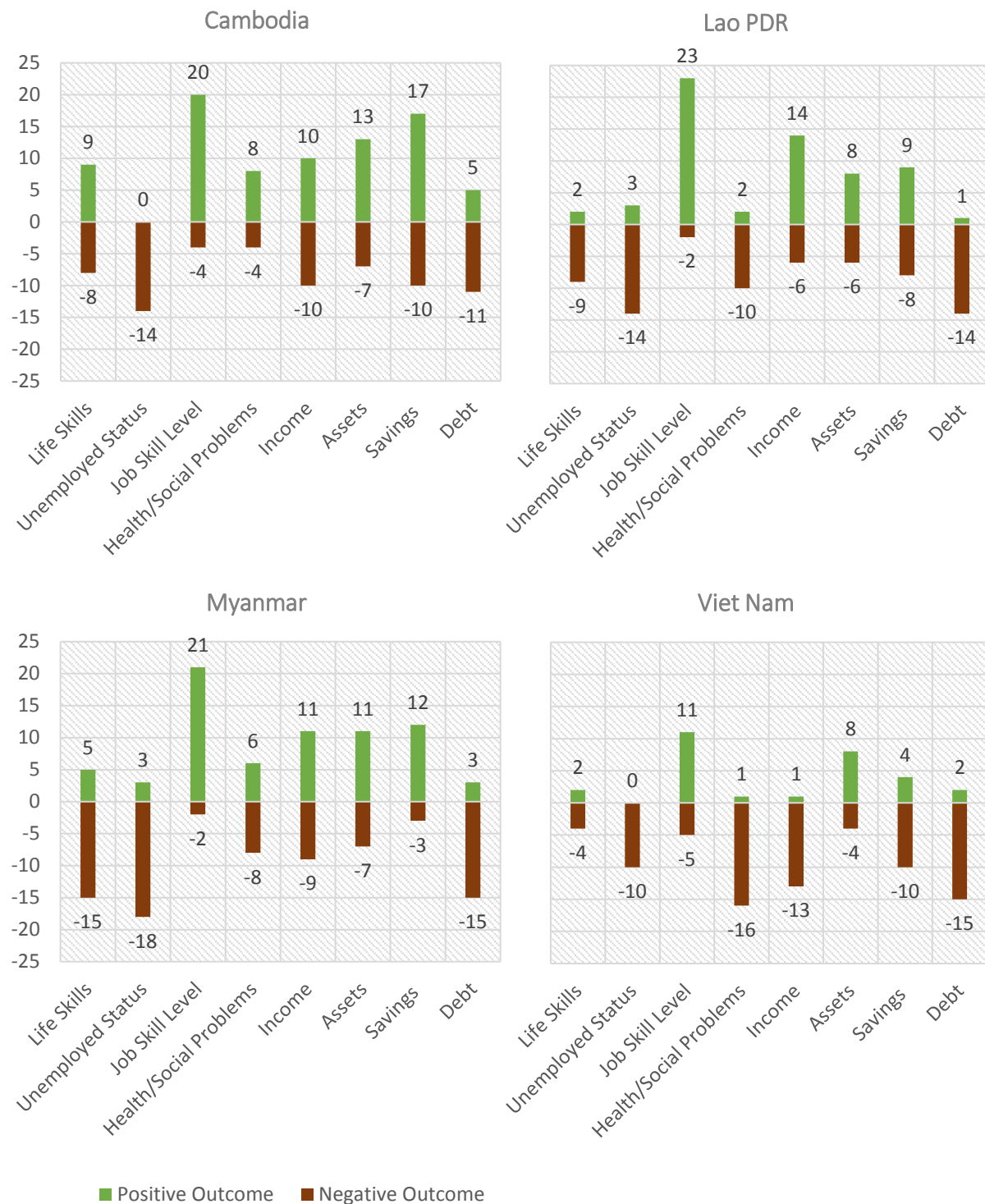
The analysis sought to identify key preventative factors (which subtracted significantly from the overall index score if negative) and key progressive factors (which added considerably to the aggregate score if the result was positive). Although it is important to note the variations across the 4 countries to identify country-specific interventions, there were recurring patterns that are noteworthy.

The two most consistently significant preventative factors were being employed and not having any debts. This means that migrants who return home still in debt and unable to find a job typically had much worse outcomes compared to those who did not face the same problems. While the number of migrants who experienced these two issues was relatively small, the negative effect was quite large for those who did.

The key progressive factor that emerged as the most significant in every country was upskilling.⁵ Migrants who reported an increase in the skill level of their employment from before migration until after – suggesting that they had acquired applicable skills while abroad – had decidedly better overall outcomes. Unfortunately, positive outcomes on skills development represents a significant gap as the vast majority of migrant workers indicated that they did not obtain more skilled work upon return.

⁵ To measure the skill level of migrant workers systematically, the study adapted questions from the four skill levels defined in the ILO's International Standard Classification of Occupations (ILO, 2012).

Figure 8. Item analysis - Deviation from MOI average by indicator outcome (n=1,808)



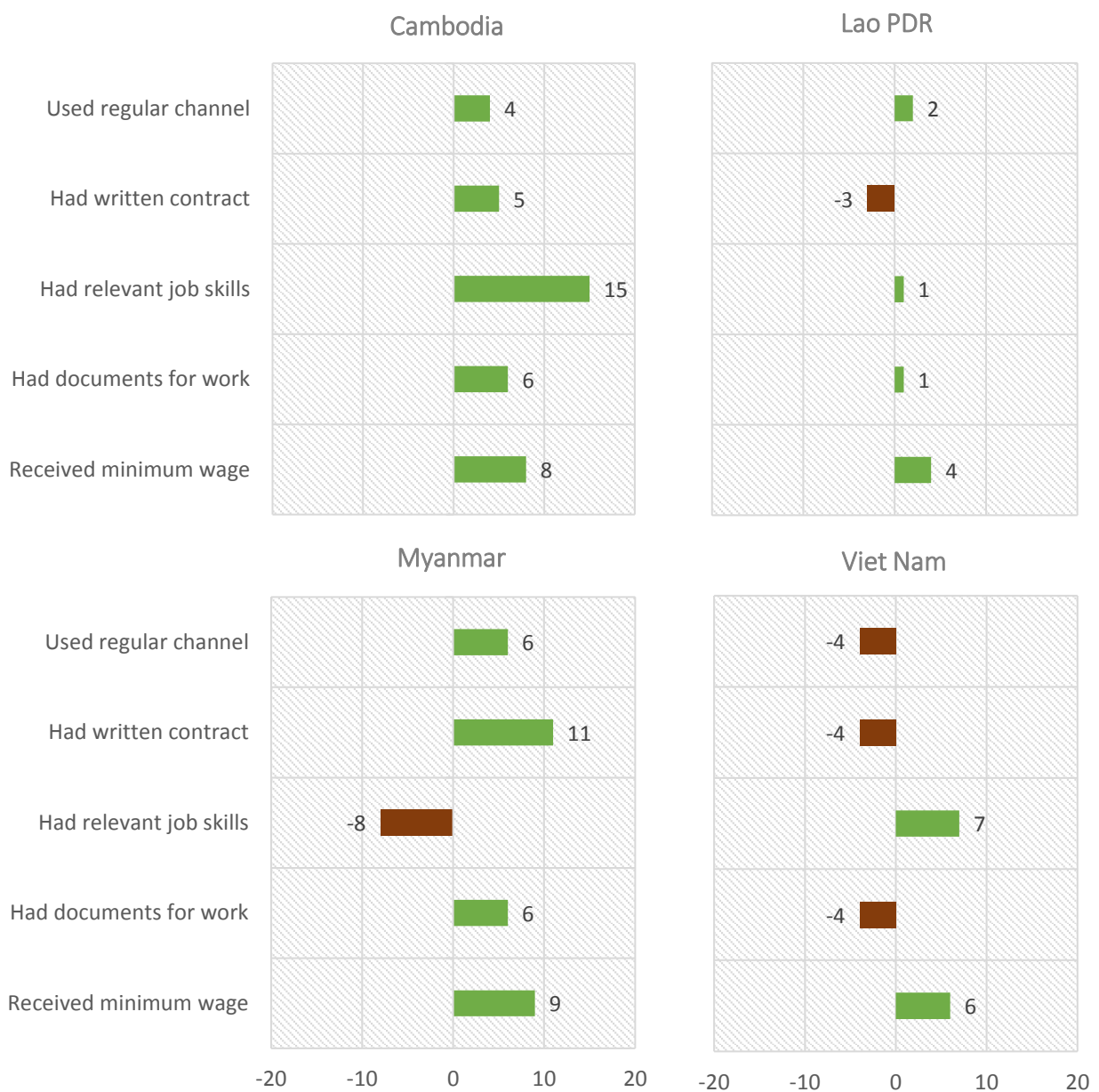
A driver analysis was conducted to assess the effect of additional factors external to the index on migration outcomes (Figure 9). In order to test some of the commonly held assumptions within the safe migration/anti-trafficking field about which practices and conditions contribute to better or worse outcomes for migrant workers, the same 5 factors were analysed in each country. In particular, whether regular migration is in fact a better choice for migrant workers was a key issue of interest. Several qualitative research studies have questioned whether the formal processes for migration established are in the best interest of migrant workers because they often lead to lengthy delays,

greater expense and administrative hassles without affording significantly greater labour rights protection, particularly for migration to Thailand (Harkins et al., 2013; ILO, 2015b).

The most consistently important external factor in improving outcomes for migrant workers across the 4 countries was receiving the statutory minimum wage during their employment. As many migrant workers are employed in informal sectors of work that are not covered by the minimum wage laws in Thailand and Malaysia, or are otherwise not paid a legal wage due to non-compliance by employers, receiving the statutory minimum is a critical issue.

On the contrary, there was no clear association between the conditions of regular migration (using a regular channel, having a written contract or obtaining legal documents) and better outcomes, with large variations between countries. For example, a written contract was the critical factor for Myanmar migrants but actually contributed to worse outcomes for those from Viet Nam and Lao PDR.

Figure 9. Driver analysis - Impact of external factors on MOI scores (n=1,808)



Conclusion

The findings of this study show that although the socio-economic benefits of labour migration have not been maximized within the ASEAN region, positive outcomes can be achieved if migrant workers are provided with opportunities to enhance their job skills, avoid large debts, receive the minimum wage and find gainful employment upon return. To support greater realization of such results, a shift in approach to migration and development policy is needed, reframing the goal as an increased number of migrant workers who have a holistically beneficial labour migration experience rather than simply an expanded national remittance account.

The chances of having a positive result are currently unequal as the profile of migrant workers was found to be an important determinant of their socio-economic returns on migration. Nationality, sector of work and destination country were the most significant demographic factors in shaping migration outcomes, though it was clear that gender was also very meaningful in some countries, particularly where policy is more restrictive towards the migration of women. Specific to the context of Myanmar, migrants from ethnic minority groups had prominently worse results than those from the Bamar majority, who often have fewer options available for migration.

A critical question that the research sought to answer was whether regular migration leads to more beneficial outcomes for migrant workers, as it is a commonly accepted practice to encourage 'safe and regular migration' as a protection strategy against exploitation and abuse. The findings did not demonstrate that regular migration was essential to better outcomes in all countries and its impact appears to be heavily dependent upon how effectively policies are implemented in specific corridors.

Labour rights protection in destination countries was the most consistently important factor in facilitating more positive outcomes for migrant workers, in the form of coverage by minimum wage laws. This suggests that formalizing the working conditions of migrant workers who are commonly excluded from statutory minimum wage requirements, such as domestic workers, fishers and agricultural workers, is a critical step to ensuring they benefit from their migration experiences.

The methodology for assessing the outcomes of migration into low-skilled work has proven very useful to the ILO and IOM projects for which it was designed. The MOI has been accepted as a benchmark against which the two projects will measure their long-term results over the next ten years. However, there is room for further development of the method to make it more broadly relevant.

In its next iteration, consideration should be given to anchoring the MOI to more established socio-economic indicators to validate the approach, such as those included in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. National indicators related to poverty, employment, gender equality, health status and other relevant issues could be used to measure the Index's relationship with absolute conditions, supplementing its initial focus on assessment of relative changes. The index could potentially serve as a migrant-centred metric to be applied by governments in conducting impact assessments of their labour migration policies if tailored appropriately.

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