

How should we enhance the pre-departure and post-migration training program for Thai overseas migrant workers?

Sopon Naruchaikusol

This brief focuses on international labor migration through a bilateral agreement and pre-departure training program in four major destination countries.

Migration has been a common strategy for rural households to cope with fluctuations in agricultural production and prices, land pressure, and income diversification (Huguet

and Chamrathrithong 2011; Rigg et al. 2014). Internal labor migration between rural and urban areas is most often for work in construction, manufacturing and services in industrial estate areas in cities including Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phitsanulok, Khon Kaen, Nakhon Ratchasima, Ayutthaya, Chonburi, and Rayong. Many people leave Thailand to find work abroad, where there are better income and job prospects.



A returnee in Udon Thani province brought back a new business model after working in Japan and used social media to promote and sell Japanese rice products. Farmers and visitors go to this learning center that is promoted by the provincial agriculture office in Kut Chab district, Udon Thani province, Thailand (photo: Sopon Naruchaikusol).

Ten major destinations for Thai migrants are Taiwan (factory jobs), Israel (agriculture jobs), South Korea (factory, agriculture, and construction jobs), and a variety of occupations in Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Finland, Sweden, Hong Kong, and the United Arab Emirates. Most migrants go to Taiwan due to the lower entry costs, the 1–3-year contracts, medium wages (a salary of approximately THB 20,000–30,000 or EUR 555–835), and regular travel through the agency. South Korea is another favorite destination for Thai migrants, where there are higher salaries (at least THB 40,000 or EUR 1,110).

The Department of Employment (DOE) plays an essential role in facilitating and regulating outmigration. In addition, the Overseas Employment Administration Division under DOE has been mandated to provide the necessary support to outmigrants through training, bilateral employment agreements in the major destination countries, a labor registration system and database, and an emergency fund.

Thailand’s overseas migration history

Thailand has had a long migration history since the 1960s for overseas study, marriage migration, and skilled labor

migration (e.g., medical doctors and nurses). Low and semi-skilled labor from Thailand filled labor shortages in Middle Eastern countries from 1973 onwards (see Figure 1). Methods to work abroad developed from self-traveling before expanding through human resource companies. This resulted in an increasing number of migrants and mounting problems. The number of Thai migrants to the Middle East declined after a DOE regulation under the Employment Arrangement and Jobseeker Protection Act B.E. 2528 from 1982 onwards. This Act focused on enhancing the social protection of Thai migrants and overseeing human resource companies. From official records, the number of Thai overseas migrants reached 202,300 by 1995 (Department of Employment 2018). This figure does not cover undocumented migrants. Migration destinations subsequently shifted to other countries in Asia, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, and the rest of the world. After 2003, the Thai Ministry of Labour signed a memorandum of understanding with related labor ministries and organizations, such as the International Manpower Development Organization, Japan (IM Japan), the Employment Permit System (EPS) program for South Korea, and the Thailand-Israel Cooperation on the Placement of Workers (TIC) project with support from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), to enhance the official flow of Thai labor migrants to well-known destination countries.

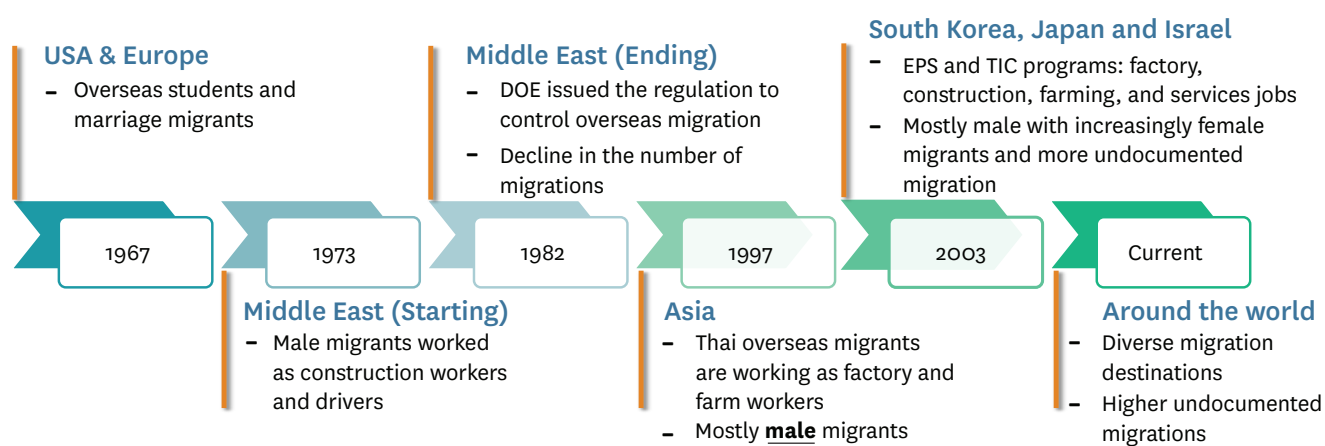


Figure 1. International migration timeline of Thai overseas migration.

Source: Ayuwat 2019.

For most migrants, remittances sent to family members play a vital role in household living standards, investments, and wider community development. According to phone interviews with returnees and migrant family members in Udon Thani province in 2020, remittances have contributed to caring for families and raising children (27%) and household consumption (22%). This is followed by savings,

education, and caring for parents (Figure 2). Remittances from international migration can enhance household capacity to invest in agriculture or new businesses that improve living standards and household status. It also ensures that households diversify sources of income and no longer rely solely on unstable income streams from agriculture.

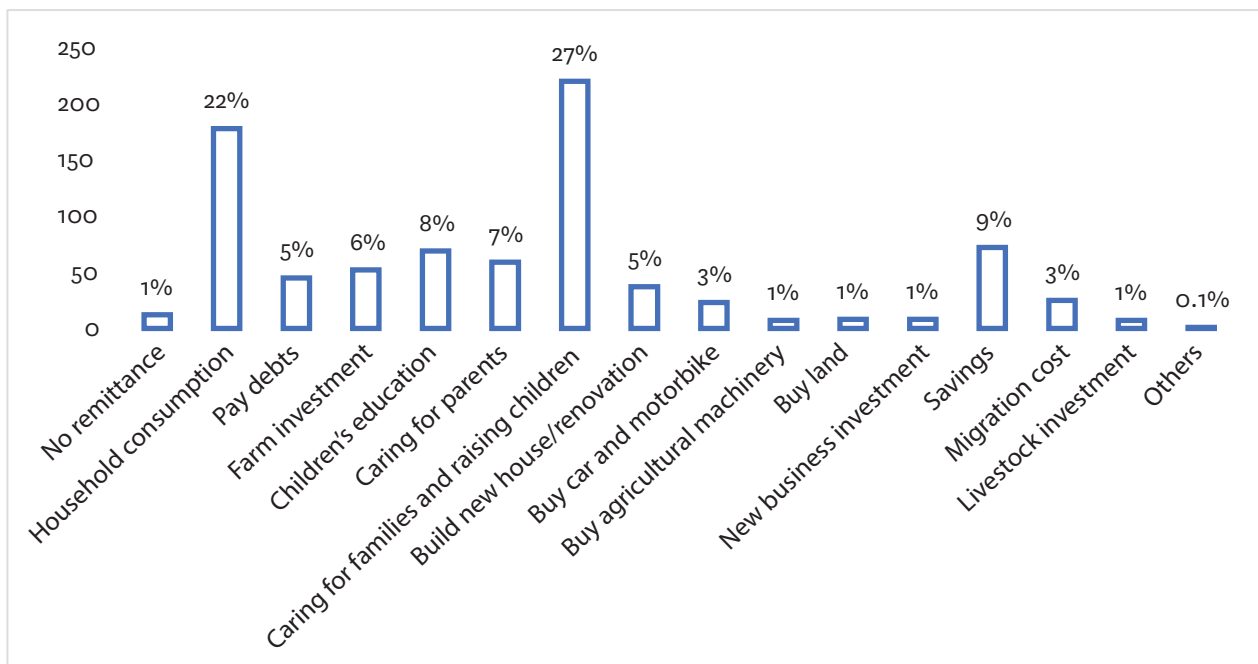


Figure 2. Remittance use by returnee migrants in Udon Thani Province, Thailand.

Source: Raks Thai Foundations 2022.

Data from DOE show that remittances sent to families of international migrants increased from 2015 to 2022, even during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020–2022 (Table 1). The value went from EUR 2,791.11 million in 2015 to EUR 6,629.28 million in 2022. Although migrants can earn a better salary in another country, they prefer to live and work close to their families after a certain period abroad or after reaching their goal.

The bilateral agreement for Thai overseas migrants and benefits

The Thai government has signed bilateral agreements with destination countries to support migration flows and recruitment procedures that can lower recruitment fees, manage irregular migration, and protect the

rights and welfare of Thai migrants (ILO 2022). Thailand signed a formal agreement with South Korea under the Employment Permit System in 2004, followed by Taiwan, Israel (under the Thailand-Israel Cooperation on the Placement of Workers program), and Japan in 2008, 2010, and 2012, respectively (Figure 3). The Thailand-Israel program focused on recruiting migrant workers in agriculture with support from the International Organization for Migration until September 2020 (Ministry of Labour 2020) before replacing it with an agreement between the governments of Israel and Thailand on the Temporary Employment of Thai Labor in Agriculture in Israel. The number of those traveling has shifted from 80:20 for human resource companies and the government (DOE) over the past 20 to 30 years to 50:50 since signing the agreement (Sridaorueng 2022).

Table 1. Thai labor migrant remittance transfers through the Bank of Thailand.

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
THB (millions)	100,480	114,581	126,428	144,451	192,903	194,960	217,343	238,645
EUR (millions)	2,791.11	3,182.81	3,511.89	4,012.53	5,358.42	5,415.56	6,037.31	6,629.28

Source: Department of Employment 2023.

Note: EUR 1 = THB 36 at the time of writing.

Bilateral agreements have reduced recruitment fees for work in Israel by around 60%, from more than THB 200,000 (EUR 5,555) to THB 80,000 (EUR 2,220). The fees include medical checks, passport fees, and Thai Overseas Employment Administrative funds. For South Korea, the EPS enhances labor law protections to cover the rights of foreign workers in common with national workers, which includes recruitment, selection, placement, employment insurance packages (departure guarantee, return cost, injury, and wage guarantee), and contributions to the national pension (Kim 2015).

Pre-departure training for Thai laborers

Pre-departure training and orientation programs are important methods for providing necessary information that can enhance a migrant’s capacity and knowledge as they transition from their country of origin to their destination. They also inform and strengthen migrants’ social protection benefits before and while working abroad. Pre-departure training provided by the DOE and the Provincial Employment Offices impart essential information on labor protection and the culture of destination countries, basic language for general communication, an introduction to occupational health and safety, and registration with the Thailand Overseas Employment Administration (TOEA) fund. The TOEA fund covers accidents or death affecting Thai overseas migrants in accordance with the Employment Arrangement and Jobseekers’ Protection Act, B.E. 2528 (1985). The fund is a one-time payment for protection throughout an employment period of five years. It covers transportation, accommodation, meals, medical, and other necessary expenses but does not exceed THB 40,000 or EUR 1,110 (Ministry of Labour 2018). Pre-departure training lasts about six hours.

Indonesia and Malaysia are the only two ASEAN countries that provide post-arrival training to their migrants. Destination countries such as South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong offer training to migrant workers upon their arrival in their respective countries. Training and orientation should take place at every stage of the migration process, including before departure from the country of origin, after arrival in the destination country, and before migrants return to their country of origin (ILO 2015).

According to a direct government-to-government agreement under the South Korean EPS, including the Ministry of Labour of Thailand, the Korean Labor Foundation is an authorized training agency for the post-arrival orientation program. Migrants must complete the paid training (EUR 151-174) for 20 hours. The training supports faster integration (law, sociocultural, and language training) and medical checkups for employer insurance schemes (ILO 2015). However, the pre-departure and post-arrival trainings do not cover irregular or undocumented migrants. They remain with limited access to information and proper support about welfare and rights during their period of working and living in destination countries.

Lessons learned from the AGRUMIG returnees workshop in Udon Thani province

The AGRUMIG project organized a returnees’ workshop to discuss the limitations and challenges of their international experience, particularly regarding remittances (Figures 4 and 5). Feedback on pre-departure training covered issues such as training modules, limited access to information and funding sources, and establishing a returnee network. Pre-departure training is useful in supporting the integration

South Korea: EPS Program

- Initiated in 2004: factory, construction agriculture and service.
- Language skills test and proof of no criminal record required.

Taiwan: Direct Employment

- Initiated in 2008: aims to reduce all documentation processes and procedures.
- Thai labour recognized as honest and hardworking. Undocumented migration has significantly declined.

Israel: Thailand-Israel Cooperation on the Placement of Workers (TIC)

- Initiated in 2010: working as farm labor in cooperative farmers’ villages (*moshav*) and agricultural communities (*kibbutz*) for Thai migrants working in Israel for the first time.
- Travel cost: THB 80,000 (EUR 2,220) covered air fare, employment and management costs, and insurance

Japan: IM Japan Program

- Initiated in 2012: Technical intern training program in Japan.
- Internship duration: 3 years with monthly salary without management fee.

Figure 3. Bilateral agreements between the Government of Thailand and destination countries.

Source: Adapted from Ayuwat and Urai-ampai 2022.

of migrants when they reach their destination countries. DOE provides this training in Bangkok and some provincial labor employment offices. Government officers usually facilitate the training, but it would be more useful if trainees could learn directly from experienced or successful migrants. Training should not only be for migrants but also cover family members in sending communities through supplementary courses (e.g., on the financial management of remittances and perceptions of new farming technologies and innovations).

Imbalances in support policies and activities were noted between sending and returning Thai overseas migrants. The Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

have strongly supported promoting and protecting Thai overseas migrants, including recruitment infrastructure, welfare and social protections, and bilateral agreements. Nevertheless, limited support remains for those returning migrants after completing their overseas employment contracts. The DOE re-integration project does not include establishing a returnee network, upskilling and re-skilling for returnees, or recognizing migrant workers' newly acquired skills. The Human Resources Development Service of Korea (HRD Korea) and the International Manpower Development Organization (IM Japan) also offered activities to maintain a returnee migrants' network from their countries in Thailand, such as job fairs and meetings to promote job opportunities to the Korean and Japanese companies in Thailand.



Figure 4. Returnee migrants exchanged experiences of working overseas in the AGRUMIG returnees workshop in Udon Thani province, Thailand (photo: Sopon Naruchaikusol).



Figure 5. Returnee migrants exchanging experiences with a successful returnee at his organic farm during the AGRUMIG returnees workshop in Udon Thani province, Thailand (photo: Sopon Naruchaikusol).

Recommendations to improve pre-departure training and orientation

Improve the training module and facilitators providing pre-departure training and orientation: The training module should have a migrant-to-migrant session. Migrant workers are interested in learning from the real experiences of successfully returned migrants. This can enhance their preparation for work in the destination country, make better investment plans for their remittances, develop business models and deal with expected problems in the workplace. This would have more impact than learning from a government official who has never worked in a low- or semi-skilled job overseas.

Mechanism or program to support irregular and undocumented migrants: The Ministry of Labour should develop a mechanism or program to provide wider support that can cover irregular migrants in a destination country, such as a TOAE-funded membership or attracting them to legal recruitment loops and supporting access to important information on welfare and rights protection in the destination country.

Promote mobile applications, the TOEA application, or the LINE application *Nong Sit* chatbot as an

alternative to reduce paperwork. Migrants can report their return and reentry from anywhere and present their report form at the labor checkpoint when arriving in or before departure from Thailand. The application can provide information for development initiatives such as the Young Smart Farmer Program and the re-integration project.

Establish a pre-return or post-migration orientation program. This training can be facilitated with the host country government authorities or representatives under bilateral agreements such as HRD Korea, IM Japan, and TIC and through the Thai embassies before migrants return. This would help to inform the re-integration of returnees within the domestic labor market, support migrant rights to financial assistance including tax refunds, departure guarantee insurance, pensions, establishing networks for returnees, and training opportunities. Workers' organizations, employers, and civil society organizations can collaborate in providing training with labor consulates or related government authorities. The post-migration training can also support DOE's goal of establishing a returnee migration database as part of a training module by recording skills and knowledge that migrants have gained from their work in the destination country.

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Alternative farm income from the cultivation of cucumber in the dry season in Nakhon Thai district, Phitsanulok province, Thailand (photo: Sapon Naruchaikusol).



Farmers work in their rain-fed paddy fields in Mae Chaem district, Chiang Mai province, Thailand (*photo*: Sopon Naruchaikusol).

AGRUMIG Policy Brief Series

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Author:

Sopon Naruchaikusol, Raks Thai Foundation, Bangkok, Thailand.

AGRUMIG Project

The project titled **AGRUMIG 'Leaving something behind' - Migration governance and agricultural & rural change in 'home' communities: Comparative experience from Europe, Asia and Africa** proposes an integrated approach to migration governance to address the two-way relationship between labor mobility and changes in agriculture and the rural sector. Migration creates challenges for rural 'sending' communities in low- and middle-income countries, yet it can also be transformative. The project engages in a comparative analysis of seven countries (China, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Morocco, Nepal and Thailand) to identify the economic, institutional, cultural and agroecological factors which shape these relationships. It will identify the range of governance interventions that can harness migration to stimulate sustainable, gender equitable growth in agriculture, and reduce the distress associated with migration.

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(Call: Towards forward-looking migration governance: Addressing the challenges, assessing capacities and designing future strategies)

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For more information on the project, contact: Angela Haynes, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, UK (ah121@soas.ac.uk)

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