

Learning from the pandemic: how to better integrate migrant workers in disaster risk reduction in Thailand



SEI policy brief

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Key messages

- Thailand's disaster risk reduction (DRR) efforts tend to overlook the root causes of migrants' vulnerability to disaster, which would require re-thinking labour-migration policies and tackling discrimination.
- Measures were taken during the Covid-19 pandemic that were inclusive of migrants, facilitated by cooperation among relevant stakeholders. Some of these measures can be replicated beyond the pandemic for more inclusive DRR.
- A proactive, whole-of-society approach is necessary to effectively reduce disaster risks regardless of the nature of the disaster. This entails putting human rights at the forefront of DRR efforts, with policies informed by the lived experiences of vulnerable groups.

This policy brief is based on an SEI study on how migrant workers from Myanmar in the provinces of Phuket and Samut Sakhon, Thailand, have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and by the measures taken in response to it.

While pandemics differ from natural hazards, there are also similarities in how countries and communities prepare for, respond to and recover from them. Vulnerable groups such as migrant workers remain particularly at risk to both. Action to reduce risk, both in the context of natural hazards and pandemics, needs to account for the specific needs of migrants, and wider political efforts need to address the root causes of their vulnerability, which include inadequate labour-migration policies, discrimination that undermines decent working and living conditions, and unequal access to social rights. This is especially important because natural hazards are ongoing threats, the effects of which are compounded by pandemics, making the most marginalized people even more vulnerable.

Below, we make recommendations for tailoring disaster risk reduction (DRR) planning, policy and practice to the case of migrant workers in Thailand, building on the lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic. Ultimately, more inclusive and effective DRR can benefit migrant workers and strengthen the resilience of society more broadly.

1. Myanmar migrant workers: among the most vulnerable to the pandemic

Previous disasters such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which hit Phuket particularly hard, or the 2011 floods, which affected Samut Sakhon, showed how migrant workers fared worse compared with Thai nationals, tourists and wealthier foreign residents, in terms of death toll, limited access to relief, and mobility restrictions. The Covid-19 pandemic further revealed some of the root causes of migrants' vulnerability and how overlooked systemic issues contribute to entrenching this vulnerability.

Interviews with international and civil society organizations revealed that Myanmar migrant workers were among the most affected by the direct impacts of the pandemic and by the socio-economic consequences of mitigation measures. Infection rates spiked in migrant settlements, impacting people's health and sometimes causing death. At the same time, the economic slowdown and measures taken to limit the spread resulted in temporary or permanent loss of employment. In this context, and particularly during lockdowns, many migrants lacked food and took on debt to survive. Key informants also reported increased exploitation in the workplace and rising gender-based violence in households. Furthermore, the sudden closure of Thailand's borders in March 2020 led some migrants to rush to the borders where brokers and other intermediaries took advantage by charging exorbitant fees for passage across the border, while providing little safety along the journey. And because the borders remained closed for an extended period of time, many migrants found themselves trapped in Thailand under precarious conditions.

These impacts are rooted in migrants' pre-existing and multi-dimensional vulnerabilities. Aligned with findings from the literature, discussions with local organizations have stressed the precarious living and working conditions endured by migrant workers, for example crowded seafood processing factories and dormitories in Samut Sakhon, or informal urban settlements in Phuket, where there is limited access to water and sanitation. Such conditions facilitated the spread of the virus.

Limited access to social protection. Section 22 of the Labour Protection Act (1998) excludes those working in fisheries and domestic work – sectors heavily reliant on migrant workers – from labour protection standards. In addition, even though the Social Security Act (1990) does not discriminate between Thai and foreign regular workers in terms of benefits and social protection, section 39 of the act excludes many migrant workers whose employers did not enrol them in the system. Key informants also reported legal loopholes that employers use to defer their labour protection and social security responsibilities by hiring contractors. Because of these limitations, only a minority of migrant workers can claim their rights, a problem compounded by a lack of awareness about their rights and how to navigate bureaucracy, and limited translation services provided by the Ministry of Labour to support migrants along these processes.

Furthermore, **migrants have to navigate the complex Thai labour-migration system** and often depend on the help of expensive brokers to obtain and maintain their status, which has negative psychological and financial impacts. Informal migrant workers put themselves at risk of fines and deportation when interacting with bureaucracy. In addition, racism and xenophobia compound challenges in migrants' daily lives, pushing them further to the margins.

Evidence from the pandemic and previous disasters in Thailand suggest that these problems are systemic and not yet addressed in DRR efforts.

While Thailand's Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Plan (2015) includes "aliens" under vulnerable groups and stresses the need to "lessen factors contributing to vulnerability" (p.17), issues of health inequality, precarious employment, abuse, mobility restrictions, shelter, limited social services and discrimination keep affecting migrants in their day-to-day lives and are amplified in the context of disaster.

2. Promising practices and gaps observed during the pandemic

DRR efforts linked to the Covid-19 pandemic in Thailand appeared to be more inclusive of migrant workers compared with previous disaster situations. Interviews with international organizations, scholars, civil society and local government representatives in Phuket and Samut Sakhon suggested that many of the migrant-specific measures taken were pragmatic. Indeed, allowing universal access to health services, including testing, treatment and vaccination, was critical for protecting both migrant workers and the whole nation. Similarly, as it became essential to limit mobility to contain the spread of the virus, once borders remained closed and migrant workers' documentation expired, there were several rounds of visa amnesties, facilitated "regularization" processes, and prosecutions of paperless migrants were curtailed. Those practices also helped to limit labour shortages.

Key-informants also reported **increased multi-stakeholder cooperation**, particularly at the local level, to better address the needs of migrant workers. Non-state actors provided food, relief assistance and translation support to migrants, and the state and NGOs collaborated to mobilize migrant health volunteers in communities. The state and the private sector also worked together on the "bubble and seal" strategy, which included testing of workers, quarantine and isolation areas within work premises to contain the spread.

While these practices hold promise, they were hindered by discrimination and lack of awareness about migrants' conditions. Xenophobic public discourse framed migrants as spreaders of Covid-19, which reinforced widespread negative attitudes towards this vulnerable group. As local civil society organizations observed in both provinces, this was reflected in the approach to vaccination, which prioritized Thai citizens, then regular migrant workers, finally allowing irregular migrants – arguably the most vulnerable group – to access the vaccine. Key-informants also reported that access to state-led relief (including first relief, healthcare and unemployment benefits) was hindered by a lack of information targeted to migrant workers about their social rights, a fear of public authorities, problems with bureaucracy and the language barrier.

The lack of state-led efforts to understand and address the root causes of migrants' vulnerability is a significant gap that, if unaddressed, risks perpetuating and reinforcing migrants' vulnerability to future disasters.

While the migrant-inclusive measures that have been taken during the pandemic were most likely pragmatic, the lessons learned from the multi-scale and multi-stakeholder cooperation that emerged could be institutionalized for more inclusive DRR in the future.

3. The way forward: recommendations for bringing migrant-inclusive measures into disaster risk reduction

Migrant workers' human rights must be considered in DRR efforts – not only their economic value. The pandemic revealed the extent to which Thailand's economy relies on migrant workers, and how overlooking their rights will not only render them more vulnerable but also impact society as a whole. This points to a critical need to address their vulnerability, and to include them in building community resilience, recognizing that their lived experience, knowledge, skills and networks can contribute to DRR. The following recommendations can guide policymakers and civil society in ensuring migrant-inclusive measures are included throughout the DRR cycle.

Disaster prevention and mitigation: understanding and addressing the root causes of vulnerability

The Thailand government and migrants' countries of origin should cooperate more to facilitate safe, orderly and regular labour migration and improve migrant workers' conditions. National migrant networks strongly recommended simplifying access to regular migration by clarifying processes, reducing administrative barriers and the costs of migration, and ensuring decent working and living conditions.

The Ministry of Labour should streamline labour protection and social security standards, ensure transparency about migrants' rights, remove barriers to access these rights and monitor accountability. This entails compliance with relevant international laws such as ILO Conventions and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women to ensure the implementation of non-discrimination principles. It is imperative to hold employers to account on these principles. Removing barriers to accessing these rights could include sensitizing administrative staff to avoid discrimination, boosting translation support and delivering clear information to migrants about their rights when entering the country.

Local authorities should pro-actively support the integration of migrant workers and earmark financial resources to involve them in DRR planning and activities. Co-designing and implementing DRR measures, particularly at the local level, would ensure that migrants' needs, perspectives and skills are considered so that their vulnerability can be reduced, and their capacities leveraged. Involving them in multi-stakeholder DRR platforms can shift negative discourses and perceptions while fostering cultural and skills exchange.

The Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation (DDPM) should institutionalize pro-active, holistic and multi-hazard approaches to DRR.

Vulnerability can be reduced through efficient disaster planning that considers all hazards, such as pandemics, and addresses the risks of concurrent and cascading disasters (e.g. floods occurring at the same time as a pandemic, or a tsunami following an earthquake). A multi-hazard approach requires cross-sectoral and multi-stakeholder collaboration with strong cooperation mechanisms that can be headed by the DDPM to ensure vulnerability is understood and addressed in holistically. This would involve all ministries, but also NGOs, CSOs and vulnerable groups, including migrant workers.

Local government and civil society should regularly conduct comprehensive and intersectional vulnerability assessments to identify the most at-risk groups and engage them in DRR.

Quantitative data disaggregated by sex, age, disability, nationality, and legal status can be useful to identify and quantify vulnerable groups, but qualitative analysis is also necessary to understand how these factors intersect. Given that migrants are often in an area temporarily or for seasonal work, analysis needs to be carried out regularly to keep databases operational when disaster hit.

Disaster preparedness: reducing exposure to hazards and anticipating needs.

Local DDPM agencies should engage with vulnerable groups in hazards mapping.

Research found that migrant workers often have a different perception of risks because of cultural factors and a lack of knowledge about host community. Factors such as gender, age, and previous experience of disasters also affect perceptions of risk, hence the need to facilitate meaningful participation for all groups. Engaging with them to do hazards mapping would allow a better understanding of their perspectives, which, complemented by other participants' views, can help develop more equitable and efficient DRR strategies.

The DDPM, with the help of local civil society organizations, should strengthen efforts to provide disaster information and training in languages and formats that are adapted to migrant workers.

The National Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Plan (2015) mentions the creation of inclusive disaster communication to smartphones and tablets (p.71), which is a promising step towards better dissemination of warning information. However, to reach migrant workers, such information needs to be provided by trusted and secure sources in their native language, and in formats adapted to their literacy and connectivity. Civil society organizations at the local level and migrants' organizations can be pivotal for designing appropriate content and using the most efficient channels for dissemination.

Disaster response: provide timely and adequate assistance

Establish cooperation mechanisms between state and non-state actors, including civil society and the private sector, to ensure vulnerable groups have timely and adequate access to relief and social services, and streamline reporting mechanisms for threats and abuse. National citizens tend to be prioritized in disaster response, and xenophobia increases with competition for resources. Reporting mechanisms are essential to ensure timely support to migrants experiencing threats and abuse (e.g. gender-based violence and trafficking; restricted access to evacuation centers and relief items) which tend to increase in post-disaster situations. The pandemic revealed how non-state actors played a vital role in assisting migrant workers, because they have direct access to migrants and can rapidly evaluate their needs. This can be enabled by clearly defined areas of responsibility, allocation of resources and effective collaboration between stakeholders.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should systematize visa extensions and amnesties in times of disaster, and increase cooperation with countries of origin and consular services to facilitate the repatriation of migrant workers. Such measures can prevent risks of extortion, exploitation and trafficking, which would increase migrants' vulnerability in post-disaster contexts.

Disaster recovery: building resilience

The Thai Government should include considerations for migrant workers in recovery frameworks. This entails financial assistance to recover from loss of livelihood and material damages but also training and support to find new employment.

State and non-state authorities should pro-actively learn from previous disasters to improve DRR strategies that ensure human rights are fully respected and protected at all stages, while continuously working on addressing the root causes of vulnerability to disasters. This entails investment in participatory research to understand the lived experiences of the most affected groups to support their meaningful participation in future DRR efforts.

The research combined a review of academic literature and semi-structured interviews with twenty key informants. Those included non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations, UN agencies, academics, the private sector, and local government representatives. Interviews in English and Thai were conducted remotely between June 2021 and January 2022. This policy brief has been shared with all key-informants for review and inputs and presented during a validation workshop held on the 30 March 2022. Their comments and feedback have been addressed in this document.



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