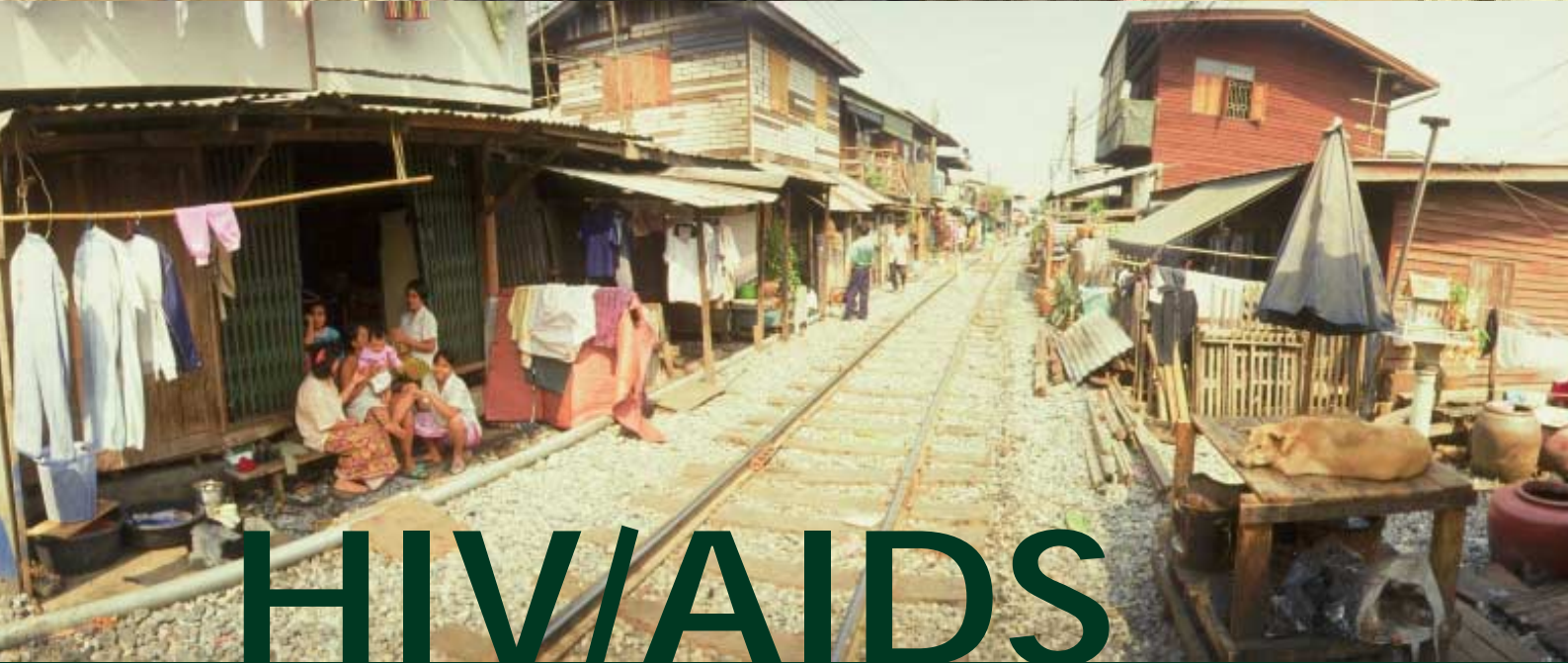




Photo by Ken Duncan Australia



# HIV/AIDS

## Mobility and HIV/AIDS in the Greater Mekong Subregion



Dr Supang Chantavanich  
Asian Research Centre for Migration

In consortium with  
World Vision Australia and  
Macfarlane Burnet Centre for Medical Research

**TA 5881-REG: Preventing HIV/AIDS  
Among Mobile Populations in the  
Greater Mekong Subregion**

Asian Development Bank  
United Nations Development Programme



# **MOBILITY AND HIV/AIDS IN THE GREATER MEKONG SUBREGION**

by  
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Mobile Populations in the Greater Mekong Subregion**

Asian Development Bank (ADB)  
United Nations Development Program (UNDP)

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## Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ANC	Antenatal Care
APICT	Asia and Pacific Intercountry team (UNAIDS)
ARCM	Asian Research Center for Migration
ARC	Australian Red Cross
BAHAP	Border Areas HIV/AIDS Project (CARE)
CARE	Charitable American Relief Everywhere
CARAM	Coordination of Action Research on AIDS and Mobility in Asia
CBO	Community Based Organization
CHASPPAR	Control of HIV/AIDS/STD Partnership Project in Asia Region
CSW(s)	Commercial Sex Worker(s)
DFID	Department for International Development, UK
EAPRO	East Asia and Pacific Regional Project
FHI	Family Health International
GAATW	The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women
GMS	Greater Mekong Sub-region
GTZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft fuer Technische Zusammenarbeit
HIV	Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus
HCMC	Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon)
IDUs	Injecting Drug Users
IEC	Information, Education and Communication
ILO	International Labour Organization
IPD	In-patient Department
LRS	Lao PDR Red Cross
MCH	Maternal and Child Health
MMCWA	Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association
MoLISA	The Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs, Vietnam
MSF	Medicins Sans Frontieres
NAB	National AIDS Bureau
NCA	Norwegian Church AID
NCCA	National Committee for the Control of AIDS
NGOs	Non-Government Organisations
OPD	Out-Patient Department

PATH	Program for Appropriate Technology in Health
PDR	People's Democratic Republic
PLA	Participatory Learning and Activities
PRC	People's Republic of China
PLWHA	People Living With and Affected by HIV and AIDS
PSI	Population Services International
SCF UK	Safe the Children Fund, United Kingdom
SEAMEO	South East Asian Ministers of Education Organization
SEAHIV	UNDP Southeast Asia HIV and Development Project
STDs	Sexually Transmitted Diseases
STIs	Sexually Transmitted Infections
TB	Tuberculosis
UN	United Nations
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS
UNDCP	United Nations International Drug Control Programme
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNTAC	United Transitional Authority in Cambodia
WHO	World Health Organisation
YIDA	Yunnan Institute of Drug Abuse

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## Executive Summary

The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), comprising Cambodia, Lao PDR People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Vietnam, Thailand and Yunnan Province of PRC, shares the water resources of over 3,000 miles of the Mekong River. This river has become a new symbol of unity in a region emerging out of decades of civil wars escalating into regional and international conflicts and the cold-war era. In the geopolitics of the GMS, Thailand is an economic front runner and China is the major power broker. Most of the GMS is in transition from a rigid communism to socialism operating on market economy mechanisms. This is opening up new opportunities and choices for once politically or geographically marginalised communities. The political stability over two or three decades has been threatened by conflict in Cambodia in recent years, but of greater concern today is the ongoing political instability in Myanmar.

In the late seventies and throughout the eighties, over three million refugees, predominantly from the lower GMS countries, formerly Indochina, fled from conflict in their country. While many of them resettled in third countries, over half a million repatriated to their homeland in the early to mid nineties. Now, only displaced people from Myanmar remain in Thailand, over 120,000, with some in Bangladesh.

Most migrants crossing borders in the region are now more closely associated with economic change and recent reforms rather than internal or regional conflicts. Each country, save for Myanmar, has increasing rural to urban population flows. Each country, especially Myanmar, has flows to border sites, as well as to remote construction or mining sites. These internal flows may include seasonal labour, trading, travel to markets and festivals, tourism, and service and transport industry workers, plus uniformed and state officials as well as private sector personnel.

Transnational population movements include much the same groups as the internal movements with both emigration and immigration occurring in each country. Thailand receives most of this emigration from Myanmar and in total has almost a million migrant workers in the country, with numbers having marginally decreased since the financial crisis. At the same time Thailand has over a million workers abroad. Vietnam has many thousands of workers in Cambodia and abroad, with the number of documented workers going abroad projected to rise sharply. Cambodia has had many thousands of workers in Thailand and a few thousand in Malaysia. Even Lao PDR has possibly tens of thousands of workers from China and Vietnam, mostly documented, but this is more than matched by emigration to Thailand, with as many as 100,000 undocumented migrants annually.

The market economy is driving this surge of people seeking work and higher earnings. This occurs through informal and formal trading between the nations, greater investment, infrastructure development, and tourist promotion. Thus, the manufacturing, service and transport sectors hire many unskilled workers. There are other ways the market economy drives mobility. In the four socialist republics of Myanmar, Lao PDR, Vietnam, and China there have been severe restrictions on the movement of people within borders, thus curtailing rural-urban or even much provincial movement. One way this was enforced, at least for some of the countries, was through health and accommodation subsidies as part of work-place benefits. Now these subsidies are being cut, effectively severing the association of work and residence and freeing up people to move. Many people will face restrictions in access to health care and to education if they move but are choosing to move nonetheless. Also, it has become too difficult to stem the tide of workers wanting to cross national borders to find work. While some may face punishment, if found out, on return, this is generally not happening.

For the purposes of identifying population groups, they are arranged into typologies of various characteristics, but are mainly classified by occupation, as well as by type of movement. Thus, for one country there are internal, transnational - cross-border and overseas - plus immigrant flows. While such population movements can all be subsumed under mobile populations it is necessary to differentiate between those migrating for longer periods of time, such as a construction worker, and someone who moves for relatively shorter periods, such as a truck driver. One way to do this is to use the categories of mobile population groups and migrant workers. It should be noted that there is considerable overlap in such definitions and there is significant fluidity in changing occupations or types of movement. These broad categories are further classified by occupations, such as, fisherfolk, transport workers, traders etc. and then by location. At a micro-level, each occupational group may be further subdivided by age, sex, marital status, living conditions etc.

The number of internal migrants and mobile people is vast, and most countries do not have reliable data. While there is good data on trends for most countries the information cannot capture the full picture of population movements. Recent trends in urban expansion can be observed in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi and Phnom Penh. Large numbers of young people are moving to these cities for higher education and training, as well as unskilled or semi-skilled work. Other internal movements include resettlement programs. These may include recent resettlement of refugees but are mainly internal relocations from resource poor or dry areas to more fertile areas, or for purposes of crop substitution or crop stabilisation programs. These relocations are mainly affecting Myanmar, Lao PDR and Vietnam, but occur in all countries. Seasonal work is probably the single biggest cause of movement of migrant labour. Often the work is in agriculture but can also be in fisheries, factories, or construction, and can be cross-border as well as internal. In addition, many other mobile populations eg transport workers, traders, businessmen and sales representatives, fisherfolk and seafarers, state officials, uniformed officials are constantly on the move, and they may also cross borders or travel overseas.

Thailand has been the conceptual centre of much of the cross-border movement in the region. All surrounding countries have people emigrating to Thailand, where the economy has been booming for decades. Cross-border migrants have more complexities facing them than most internal migrants. The Thai border has been and remains porous, with little difficulty in crossing, particularly with Lao PDR, but also with Myanmar and Cambodia. Once across the border migrants are readily employed in a range of low-paying jobs, but for many their illegal status, language difficulties, and low awareness of their new surroundings places them in a precarious position.

The gradual opening of cross-border trade and tourism has revitalised many border towns and settlements. These border crossing points are meeting places of thousands of mobile and migrant populations, namely, transport workers, traders, tourists and visitors, border police and military personnel, service and entertainment workers etc. They are destinations for some, and transit points for others, whether classified as mobile populations or migrant workers. Many border-crossing points have emerged as special zones where law enforcement is lax, and behaviours are less tempered by social norms or values. Some areas on major routes, or with traditional trading links, arise more or less naturally over time, with a range of population groups and activities that converge to form a special zone. Other areas are set up as economic zones with special privileges for trade and transportation. In both types of location entertainment facilities thrive and entice tourists and business people. Poipet, on the Thai-Cambodia border, has seven luxury casinos patronised by foreigners. The town outside of the casinos, with a population of 70,000, is one of the more squalid and poor towns of Cambodia. In Muse and Mong La, in Myanmar, near the Yunnan border, Chinese flock to the

casinos and transvestite shows, as well as other sex and entertainment venues there, also amidst poverty.

Men probably number significantly higher among mobile populations and migrant workers, although the number of women migrants is increasing and in some migration flows their numbers can be equal to, or higher than, that of male migrants. In urban settings in particular, there are many opportunities for women in factories as garment workers, in the expanding service and entertainment industry, as housemaids or as sales clerks. They also find work in construction and agriculture. Some women accompany their husbands or family members but many migrate alone or with friends. This latter group is susceptible to difficulties during travel and at the workplace. They may be sexually or physically abused or be confined to the workplace. Working in difficult conditions, they can be induced into sex work when offers are made to them. At different times, many women are in need of the support, perhaps protection of fellow migrants, assistance from employers, authorities, or drivers, and these men are in a position to negotiate sexual favours from such women.

Women and girls are vulnerable to being trafficked by force or deception. Organised gangs have made a business out of trafficking. Thailand has been the major destination for trafficked women and girls for some decades but, while the same routes may be used, the form of trafficking has changed to be more like human smuggling. Very often it may be groups of men and women who facilitate women, men, and children to destinations of their choosing. Networks have built up over time and women are aware of money to be made in this industry and, in many ways, it can seem to be a cleaner and easier way to earn money. The reality may be different but many women appear to be entering the industry without being in debt, making an informed choice gained from those who went before them.

### **HIV/AIDS Risk Situation**

The risk situations that make mobile people vulnerable to HIV/AIDS are complex and must be determined through an understanding of particular situations. Being away from their family and community where social and sexual norms are prescribed and followed to varying degrees they must adapt to new situations. In their new setting they may have more freedom, new experiences and opportunities, and increased peer pressure, which influences their thinking and behaviour. On the other hand, their activities may be curtailed by remote living conditions, or otherwise restricted by their employers, local residents and law enforcement authorities. They often live in crowded housing with little privacy and, outside of their community, face language and cultural differences and difficulties in accessing information about health risks and health care. Out of boredom, and with few choices for rest and recreation, many young men, as well as older men, will choose whatever entertainment facilities are available. This will usually mean drinking and, sometimes, drugs as well as commercial sex and, when the opportunity arises, casual sex relationships. Migrant workers, from Myanmar or Cambodia, coming into Thailand, and from Vietnam into Cambodia, are the obvious groupings of migrants that run the risk of HIV.

Overseas workers are a special group who will certainly face some of the above difficulties that could make them vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. Thailand has the largest number followed by Vietnam. For many they may be moving from areas of higher prevalence of HIV/AIDS than the locations they move to; however, in many countries there is not much information on the particular migrant or local communities of which they become a part. The potential for vulnerability to poor health, or social and psychological difficulties, is real but their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS is uncertain.

The situation of cross-border migrants, described above, is relevant to internally mobile people but generally not to the same extent, with language and cultural differences being minimal and usually they are not illegal. Many cross-border locations or border areas in general have recorded high HIV prevalence, eg Kawthaung and Tachilek of Myanmar bordering Thailand; Muse and Keng Tung of Myanmar bordering China; Poipet and Koh Kong of Cambodia bordering Thailand; and An Giang of Vietnam bordering Cambodia. Some border sites have high prevalence due to women returning from working in the commercial sex industry. This was a major contributing factor to the epidemic in northern Thailand but can be observed in women returning from Thailand to Myanmar and to Yunnan and in women returning to Vietnam from Cambodia. Many of these women were trafficked into the industry, and trafficking is still a major business in the region.

Particular occupational groups and other internally mobile population groups, however, can certainly have a heightened risk for HIV/AIDS. These groups include transport workers, fisherfolk and seafarers, mobile traders, state officials and uniformed personnel. Migrant students and other young people moving to cities may also be vulnerable. High levels of HIV prevalence are being detected among various migrant and mobile population groups where surveillance is in place, for example, fisherfolk and uniformed personnel in some countries. Known prevalence data is generally adequate for understanding transmission patterns and thus the focus should be on determining risk situations and gaining a greater understanding of population groups.

It is necessary, therefore, to classify population groups by their patterns and degree of mobility, as well as characteristics of age, gender, marital status, occupation, income etc. to assess their HIV risk situations. It is also crucially important to understand in some detail particular geographical locations, the so-called Hot Spots of HIV vulnerability. These Hot Spots require careful analysis to determine the HIV vulnerability of specific population groups, as well as the whole community. Each location varies significantly and it is the behavioural norms and the existence of entertainment venues, coupled with HIV prevalence or potential for HIV spread, that determines whether a location can be ascertained to be a hot spot. Some areas in the region may not experience a rapid explosion of HIV. The more gradual spread of HIV, however, is still of considerable importance and any gradual spread could lead to a rapid spread given the right mix of risk factors. It should never be taken for granted that all similar geographical locations have equal vulnerability to HIV/AIDS.

The locations of Ranong and Sangkhlaburi, as cross-border sites on the Thai-Myanmar border present the extremes that may be found, even in cross-border locations. Ranong has a very high vulnerability to HIV/AIDS due to the presence of large numbers of migrant fisherfolk, young single men and women, large commercial sex venues and lack of access to health care due to illegal status. Sangkhlaburi has large mobile populations, but is more of a transit point. There are few commercial sex outlets and known HIV/AIDS prevalence is low. The main crossing of the Vietnam-Cambodia border has some similar characteristics to Sangkhlaburi, but other locations such as on the China-Vietnam border, and the Thai-Cambodian border have highly vulnerable situations. Similarly, seaports and towns along highways do not have the same HIV vulnerability and each of them should be assessed independently.

The link between population mobility and HIV/AIDS is clearly established through various studies. Migrant and mobile populations experience risk situations that make them vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. If we take a border location as an example, there can be a convergence of many different mobile groups. They in turn are serviced by a range of service providers. Add local populations and you have the entire population. It is this convergence and the mix of services and people that have given rise to a risk situation. Thus, it is the risk situation that is

of utmost importance rather than any particular group, even though groups can be singled out for determining the appropriate means to reach them. In first taking stock of the total risk situation, then creating mechanisms for a dialogue between key groups and institutions, it is possible to create an 'enabling environment' for a cooperative and coordinated response.

## **Key Findings of the Study**

### 1. Major Population Mobility and Migration Trends

- Refugees and displaced persons 1970s and 1980s - Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam. Resettled/repatriated – 1980s, 90s - 120,000 still on the Thai-Myanmar border
- Uniformed personnel during war and conflict situations in Vietnam, Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar; and still active and mobile throughout the region
- Resettlement and relocations for crop stabilisation and substitution; for infrastructure development; and to more fertile areas
- Greater political openness – less restriction on internal movements
- facilitation of trade and travel across borders
- Economic development – increased trade, infrastructure development, transport links, and job opportunities for internal, cross-border, and migration abroad
- Major growth in tourism allowing large numbers of foreigners – Asians and non-Asians - to move into all countries of the region

### 2. Characteristics/Typology of Migrant and Mobile Populations

- More economic migrants but greatest increase is in short-term mobile populations
- More internal than external migrant and mobile populations
- Both emigration and immigration in all countries
- Most flows dominated by young men and women but also many middle-aged and some older people, especially among internal mobile populations
- More men than women but the volume of women is increasing rapidly, and women are moving into a wider range of occupations
- Most economic migrants move without family, but family members may join them later

### 3. Population Mobility and HIV/AIDS

- Risk behaviours of the individuals and/or population groups are heavily influenced by the risk situations they are in.
- Rapid transmission of HIV occurs through commercial sex and, sometimes, intravenous drug use, but slow transmission occurs through casual and regular partner sex is of great concern
- Some specific population groups are very vulnerable to HIV/AIDS because of work situations, living conditions and other risk situations eg fisherfolk, transport workers, sex and entertainment workers, but can also include uniformed personnel, state officials, (some) migrant workers.
- Hot Spots, outside of cities, emerge from the convergence of mobile populations, and the rise of entertainment and sex establishments, and unsafe sex

- Many ports, truck stops, towns and border locations fit the definition of a hot spot and most do not have well targeted HIV intervention projects
- Each location has its own unique configurations that make-up a hot spot – an area where there is a sex trade and many clients may not be a hot spot if there is high condom use; if there are safe needle-use practices; if women are empowered.
- Hot Spots are risk situations for people who are unaware of the risk, such as cross-border migrants who are new and poorly informed about HIV/AIDS populations
- Discrimination against migrants in a foreign country may increase their HIV vulnerability