

5 MIGRATION AND URBANIZATION IN THE SAVANNAKHET-KHAMMOUANE REGION

5.1 Urbanization in the SKR

At the present time the overwhelming majority of people living in Savannakhet and Khammouane reside in rural settings, where they usually engage in subsistence and small-scale market oriented agricultural activities. The National Census of 1995 indicated that 83% of the population lived in rural areas in comparison to only 17% inhabiting urban centers. Approximately 14% of the population in Khammouane was classified as urban, while the urban population of Savannakhet represented only 15% of total inhabitants. Only Thakhek district, of Khammouane, had a substantial urban population (37%), and the majority of these urban-dwellers were located in or near the provincial center. In most districts of Khammouane, including Nakai, Nhommalat, Boualapha, Xaybouathong, Xebangfay, and Mahaxay urban residents comprised from <1-5% of the total population. The situation in Savannakhet was slightly different, with Khanthabouly (50%) and Outhoumphone (15%) districts having relatively large urban concentrations. But these two districts respectively included the provincial center of the most populous province in the country, and the major junction of Route 9 and Route 13 [at Seno]. All other districts in Savannakhet had urban areas that accounted for <10% of the population. The Lao Reproductive Health Survey of 2000, indicates that urbanization had increased somewhat, during the period 1996-2000, with approximately 1/5 (19.9%) of the population now living in urban areas, while the remainder (80.1%) still continued to reside in the countryside. In Khammouane urban population now represented 22.4% of the total population, while the figure for Savannakhet had increased to 17.1%. Surprisingly Khammouane had now become the 3rd most urbanized province in the country, only following Vientiane Municipality (61.4%) and Luang Namtha (25.0%). Savannakhet's urban population was ranked 8th in the nation. The above-mentioned macro and micro-economic development scenarios, however, suggest that this situation can easily change in a relatively short period of time and that rapid urbanization and large-scale migration may soon become major issues for the two largest provinces in the Central Region.

5.2 Migration in the SKR

Populations in transit, for temporary or permanent purposes, are ideal focal points for the transmission of disease. This can mean new diseases with which local residents and health personal have little knowledge or experience [e.g. HIV/AIDS], or the re-introduction of health problems previously brought under control [e.g. malaria]. Not all migration is external. The new economic opportunities, and/or conditions, emerging from the construction of the NT2 Project and

other macro and micro-economic initiatives identified for the SKR can easily induce a considerable internal migration from remote mountainous and rural areas into the district towns, alongside major roads, or near construction sites. Large-scale unplanned and uncontrolled migration will complicate the health situation in the NT 2 Project intervention area, and potentially put a tremendous strain on the existing health care delivery system. The establishment of a NT2 Project polyclinic, with professional personnel employed to take care of the immediate health needs of NT2 Project staff, workers, and their families will alleviate some of these problems. A number of important health issues, however, may be beyond the capacity of the project or the local health care delivery system to effectively address, unless they are anticipated well in advance and appropriate plans and measures put into action before the situation has reached a critical level.

Although it has been suggested that the GOL prohibit the movement of families to accompany 4,200 construction workers to campsites in the NT2 Project intervention area, such a ruling may be impractical or impossible to enforce. Recent anecdotal and documented information indicates that there already are a huge number of Lao young men and women on the move, migrating to areas with perceived better economic opportunities. As such it may be useful to review current labor migration patterns in Khammuane and Savannakhet province. Since the early 1990s a number of factors have conspired to increase the migration of population in the Lao PDR. The opening of borders, the impact of globalization, market demand, widening economic differentials within and between countries, and the growing transnational organized crime and illegal labor recruitment networks have each acted to increase migration. Other factors including natural disaster, unbalanced population growth and strains on education and employment opportunities have also stimulated an increase in both legal and irregular migration—internal and cross-border—as “vulnerable” populations try to improve their life opportunities elsewhere.

5.3 Survey: “Labour Migration”

In 2003 the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, Department of Labour, with support from the Committee for Planning and Co-operation, National Statistical Center, conducted a large survey dealing with “labour migration” from communities in Khammuane, Savannakhet, and Champassack. The survey included a total of 6,000 households containing 37,200 people, residing in 300 villages. Four separate questionnaires were included in the survey to obtain information from heads of households, children aged 10-17 years, youth aged 18-25 years, and for returned migrants. The preliminary survey report also included baseline data of Lao migrant workers in Thailand, which was provided by the Ministry of Labour, Thailand.

Some of the highlights of the survey include the following:

- Of the 2,526 individuals who had migrated from their homes, 80.8% migrated overseas. With respect to male migrants, 4.9% migrated inside their district, 4.8% migrated to other districts, 9.5% migrated to other provinces, and 80.8% migrated to other countries. With respect to female migrants, the percentages were slightly different, with more females migrating to other countries. The figures for females included those migrating inside their district (3.5%), to other districts (3.0%), to other provinces (7.5%), and to other countries (86.0%). These figures indicate that the overwhelming majority of migrants perceived that there were better economic opportunities overseas than at locations closer to their respective homes.

- With respect to migration to other countries, Khammouane had the lowest percentage of migrants [44.7%]. This included 61.3% of the female and 32.4% of the male migrants. This was considerably different than Savannakhet, where 87.7% of all migrants went overseas [i.e. 91.0% of females and 83.2% of males]. In Champassack 71.5% of all migrants went overseas [i.e. 75.1% of females and 67.7% of males].
- With respect to the origin of migrants who went overseas, the survey did not indicate home-district, but rather disaggregated data into three distinct categories, which included urban, rural with roads, and rural with no roads. Regardless of their geographical origin, the vast majority of all migrants went overseas. With respect to those originating from urban areas 87.3% went overseas. This included 91.3% of all female and 82.4% of all male migrants originating from urban areas. Of those migrants who came from rural areas with roads, 75.9% went overseas (i.e. 82.3% of all females and 67.8% of all males migrating from this zone). Of those migrants who originated from rural areas without roads 88.0% went overseas (i.e. 89.7% of all female and 85.5% of all males migrating from this zone).
- Thailand was the main attraction for migrants going overseas [81.5%]. Very few went to Europe [0.5%], while the remainder primarily went to other Asian countries [8.3%] or the USA [9.3%]. Although migration from the Lao PDR to Thailand started many years ago, approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ [73.7%] of the migration to Thailand, took place during the past four years [2000-2003]. These figures suggest that the pace of migration has increased in recent years, and that the potential for future migration, whether domestic or internal, is a well-entrenched phenomenon that may not be subject to governmental attempts at control.
- With respect to how migrant workers fared in Thailand, heads of households were asked whether they had received information concerning the livelihood of household members currently working in Thailand, and whether these individuals could be contacted. The results indicated that 67.5% of migrant workers [i.e. 63.2% of males and 70.6% of females] apparently had no problems and were satisfied with their working conditions. A much smaller percentage of migrant workers [3.4%] indicated some problem or hardship [i.e. 3.9% of males and 3.1% of females]. A potential source of concern, however, was the fact that 29.1% of migrant workers [i.e. 32.9 % or males and 26.3% of females] have not sent back any information to their families, nor has anybody in their community received information about their fate or whereabouts. The last series of figures is somewhat troublesome as they may indicate that children, adolescents, and youth have been lured to work overseas, and are now employed in occupations that expose them to physical, emotional, or health risks.
- Of the cohort who did not send any information to their families, the survey suggested a possible correlation between socio-economic status (SES) as well as ethnicity. Of those households listed as being in the lowest 20% SES group, 60% of the migrant workers did not send home any information. For the lower-middle 20% SES group 42.1% of migrant workers did not send information home. For the middle 20% SES group 29.5% did not send home information. For the upper-middle 20% SES group 19.6% did not send home information, while for the highest 20% SES group only 13% did not send home any information. With respect to ethnicity only 27.3% of the Tai-Kadai Group did not send home any information, while for the Austroasiatic Group this fig-

ure was 49.3%. Similarly with respect to place of origin, only 15.4% of those originating from urban areas did not send home any information, compared to 21.9% from rural areas with roads, and 31.1% from rural areas without roads. The provincial breakdown of migrant workers not sending information back home to their families were as follows: Khammouane (43.9%), Savannakhet (32.1) and Champassack (15.4%).

- The above mentioned topic was included in the survey to determine whether “migrant workers are at high risks of being victims of trafficking”, with the assumption that “migrant workers” who have not contacted their head of household, have not sent any information about their livelihood, nor sent any remittances since leaving their village at least a year ago” are a high risk group. Interpreting the data is a little more complex, as there can be other reasons why migrant workers do not contact their families or send remittances home. Two of the most logical causes may be that this cohort contains a large percentage of individuals who are illiterate, or functionally illiterate, and/or whose family members cannot read or write. This cohort may also live in remoter areas of KM/SVK/CPX where routine and reliable mail service is not available, and/or where it may not be safe to send money/remittance through the postal system. This interpretation would correspond to the fact that those having no contact with family members are more commonly found in rural areas without roads, where socio-economic status is very low, and where there are a greater concentration of Austroasiatic ethnic groups. This interpretation should not, however, reduce concern that many migrant workers may indeed be the victims of trafficking, and that effective programs to address this issue need to be established immediately.

5.4 Migration to Thailand

In 2001 and 2003 Thailand attempted to register all foreign migrant workers. The Minister of Labour/Thailand shared this information with the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare/Lao PDR. The data does not indicate what percentage of Lao migrant workers, in Thailand, actually registered. Nor does it suggest what percentage of migrant workers, from the Lao PDR, had legal work permits. The registration process was established to extend work permits for a 6-month period. The first phase of registration was completed from 24 Sept to 25 Oct. 2001. The second phase was conducted from 24 Feb. 2003 to 25 March 2003. In the first phase a total of 59,358 Lao migrant workers registered [25,771 male and 33,587 female] in 10 categories of permitted work. The registration fees for the first registration cost 3,250 Baht [for health insurance, work permit fee, ID card, and repatriation fund]. During the second round of 6-month work permit extensions only 42,186 Lao migrant workers registered. The registration fee was 1,200 Baht. Only those migrant workers who registered during the 1st phase were allowed to register for the 2nd phase of work permit extensions. The report suggests that the large decline in Lao migrant worker registration, during the 2nd phase, may have come about because individuals changed employers, or they did not wish to pay the registration fee.

Of the 59,358 Lao MW in Thailand who registered for 1st phase, the following table illustrates the type of occupation according to gender:

Table 4: Percentage of Migrant Workers According to Occupation and Gender.

Type of Activity	Male	Female	Total
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Agriculture	3,951 (6.7%)	1,750 (2.9%)	5,701 (9.6%)
Mining	32 (0.1%)	16 (0.0%)	48 (0.1%)
Pottery	139 (0.2%)	41 (0.1%)	180 (0.3%)
Construction	1,479 (2.5%)	654 (1.1%)	2,133 (3.6%)
Rice Mill	89 (0.1%)	40 (0.1%)	129 (0.2%)
Animal Husbandry	2,630 (4.4%)	887 (1.5%)	3,517 (5.9%)
Fishing	1,720 (2.9%)	382 (0.6%)	2,102 (3.5%)
Porters in Warehouses	676 (1.1%)	223 (0.4%)	899 (1.5%)
Domestic Workers	1,521 (2.6%)	15,307 (25.8%)	16,828 (28.4%)
Special Activities with Employers	11,621 (19.6%)	11,993 (20.2%)	23,614 (39.8%)
Special Activities Without Employers	1,913 (3.2%)	2,294 (3.9%)	4,207 (7.1%)
Total	25,771 (43.4%)	33,587 (56.6%)	59,358 (100.0%)

One of the serious drawbacks in trying to analyze this data concerns the fact that two of the ten categories are very vague. This includes “special activities with employer” and “special activities without employer”. “Special activities with employers” represents the largest occupation for males, the second largest occupation for females, and the largest category for all Lao migrant workers. One wonders whether this category includes people working in the entertainment sector or commercial sex industry, or in factories with poor working and/or living conditions conducive for physical and mental abuse and/or which promote the trafficking of women and children.

Table 5: The Residence/site of Work of Lao MW in Thailand According to Region.

Province/Region	Male	Female	Total
Bangkok	33.7	49.6	42.7
Central Region	21.1	17.5	19.1
Eastern Region	17.7	8.4	12.4
Western Region	3.3	1.9	2.5
Northern Region	3.0	1.6	2.3
Northeastern Region	12.9	17.9	15.7
Southern Region	8.3	3.0	5.3

The distribution of Lao migrant workers in Thailand, by geographic region, is consistent with economic opportunities in the country. Hence it is not surprising that most migrant workers were concentrated in Bangkok, the Central, and the Eastern Regions. The Eastern Region has many factories while the Central Region is the major agricultural producing area of the country. The large number of Lao migrant workers employed in the Northeast tend to be distributed in provinces adjacent or close to the Mekong River and/or directly across from Khammouane, Savannakhet and Champassack. Lao migrant workers in the South probably account for those employed by the fishing and related canning industries.

The age of migrant workers is relatively young. More than one-third (38.4%) are 20 years of age or younger, while almost three-quarters (72.5%) are 30 years of age or younger.

5.5 Future Migration Trends

The fact that the migrating population comprised 6.9% of the total sample population, in Khammouane, Savannakhet, and Champassack, suggests that a huge number of people are in the process of migrating from their homes in search of employment and/or educational opportunities. As new economic opportunities are created by the NT2 Project, and other macro and micro-economic development initiatives outlined in the preceding section, it is conceivable that the pace of migration may dramatically escalate, and that migration patterns may substantially change within the next 5-10 year period. This may mean that more migrant workers eventually seek employment opportunities closer to their village of origin. This scenario can have a profound effect on health throughout the Lao PDR, but especially in selected “hot spots” where new types of behavior, different living conditions, and a close mingling amongst previously separated socio-economic and ethnic groups will come into play.

Escalated and expanded levels of migration, especially among adolescents and youth migrating from rural to urban areas, can exert a profound influence on the demographic composition of communities and future population growth rates. These new migration patterns could also radically impact on traditional socio-economic and emotional support systems that sustain rural life, or ensure that linguistic and cultural traditions [including the use of herbal medicines] are passed from one generation to the next. These factors are often overlooked or given a low priority when designing national or regional level long-term economic development plans.