

Understanding Relevant Sustainable Development Goal Targets Related to Labour Migration in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations During the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic

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ERIA Research Project Report FY2021 No. 04

Published in June 2021

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACMW	ASEAN Committee on the Implementation of the Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers
ACRF	ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AEC	ASEAN Economic Community
AMS	ASEAN Member States
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ATUC	ASEAN Trade Union Council
BHRRC	Business and Human Rights Resource Centre
CFR	<i>Council on Foreign Relations</i>
CMIM	Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralisation
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
CSO	Civil Society Organisations
CSIS	Center for Strategic and International Studies
FAO	UN Food and Agriculture Organization
GDP	gross domestic product
GFMD	Global Forum on Migration and Development
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRGSC	Institute of Resource Governance and Social Change
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
MFA	Migrant Forum in Asia
MGI	Migration Governance Indicators
MiGOF	Migration Governance Framework
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MRA	mutual recognition arrangements
MSME	micro, small and medium-sized enterprises
NCD	non-communicable diseases
NGO	non-government Agency
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFW	overseas Filipino workers

RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SPF	social protection floors
TF-AMW	Task Force on ASEAN Migrant Workers
UHC	Universal Health Coverage
UN	United Nations
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive Summary*

Southeast Asia has been one of the fastest growing regions in the world for the last several decades. Since 1980, the 10 member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have experienced growth at an average rate of 5.4%, well above the global average of 3.4%. Although the 1997 Asian Economic Crisis dealt a severe blow to ASEAN economies, they emerged even stronger, with gross domestic product (GDP) growing at an average rate of 5.1% during 2000–2004, and 4.9% during 2005–2009 (Lee, 2015). ASEAN countries also rebounded from the global economic crisis of 2008, with the region's GDP growing by 4.7% between 2008 and 2010. With economic recovery underway across the region, the ASEAN+6 countries (including Australia, China, India, Japan, the Republic of Korea [henceforth Korea], and New Zealand) saw average annual growth of 6% from 2011 to 2015, and maintained this growth momentum until the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in early 2020 (Vu, 2020). In addition to the flow of capital, labour migration has emerged as a significant driver of economic growth and development in both origin and destination countries within the ASEAN region.[†]

According to the most recent figures from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA, 2016), some 20.2 million ASEAN nationals live outside their country of birth for work or as accompanying spouses.[‡] According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2020j; also see United Nations [UN], 2020a) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) (2017), the total population of international migrants in ASEAN is 9.9 million, of whom nearly 6.9 million people have moved between countries within the region.

* The authors would like to acknowledge the support received from Beryl Jane Duterte and Thanigan. Comments and suggestions received from Dr. V. Anbumozhi and the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia's specialists are gratefully acknowledged.

[†] Some of the information for this note on migration, migrant workers, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) comes from the publications of (i) the International Labour Organization (ILO) Southeast Office in Bangkok, (ii) International Organization for Migration (www.iom.org), (iii) UN DESA (2016) on SDGs, and (iv) the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) (2020c): Asia and the Pacific SDG Progress Report 2020.

[‡] In the ILO Article 11(1) of the Convention, the term 'migrant for employment' means a person who migrates from one country to another with a view to being employed otherwise than on his or her own account. <https://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc/ilc87/r3-1b2.htm>

Figure 1: Association of Southeast Asian Nations Map



Source: Devonshire-Ellis, C. 2012. 'Why ASEAN Matters for Your China Business', *China Briefing*. 22 May. <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/why-asean-matters-for-your-china-business/> (accessed 1 September 2020)

The ILO June 2020 report asserts that the actual number is probably significantly higher, as undocumented, irregular, or short-term migration is rampant in the region. In addition to agriculture, construction, and manufacturing, migrant workers in the ASEAN region are employed in a variety of service sectors, such as tourism, retail, and hospitality, which also employ a large number of seasonal workers.⁵

Since the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly threatened people's lives and the region's economic outlook. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) acknowledged this in their October 2020 report, projecting that growth in the ASEAN+5 region (including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam) would shrink to -3.4% in 2020 – a drastic decline from the 2019 growth rate of 4.7% – because of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis. However, in 2021, growth in the region is projected to reach as high as 6.1% as economies rebound.

The present health and economic crisis has given rise to significant public policy issues in

⁵ The ILO Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 97) defines a 'migrant worker' as a person who migrates from one country to another with a view to being employed otherwise than on his or her own account. The scope of this convention excludes frontier workers, the short-term entry of members of the liberal professions and artists, and seafarers. Additionally, the ILO Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975 (No. 143) follows this definition but excludes two additional categories including (i) persons coming specifically for training or education, and (ii) persons admitted temporarily to a country at the request of their employer to undertake specific duties or assignments for a limited and defined period of time, and who are required to leave that country upon the completion of their duties or assignments.

Southeast Asia. Importantly, the economic downturn and severe social disruption caused by the pandemic are expected to impair the region's progress towards meeting the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which encompass a very wide range of development sectors including reducing poverty, improving health and education indicators, facilitating women's empowerment, and tackling climate change. In this regard, the experiences gained in managing COVID-19 offer some insights for ASEAN Member States (AMS), such as enforcement of individual quarantine, early border controls, and extending access to public health facilities. The lessons learned should motivate governments to discuss challenges and policies related to macroeconomics, regional labour migration, strengthening social welfare systems, and reforms, which are critically necessary for the region's recovery and cross-border cooperation.

The impact on livelihoods is expected to be particularly severe. Although exact data for the pandemic's impact on employment are not yet available, this is projected to be substantial, especially for regional labour migrants and informal employment, which comprises over 75% of all jobs in Southeast Asia (ILO News and Letzing, 2020).

Civil society groups, academics, policy makers, and media in the region have rightly underlined the plight of migrant workers as being disproportionately at risk from the negative consequences of the pandemic. Even before the current crisis, many migrant workers were periodically subject to uncertain work and poor work conditions, inadequate and crowded living conditions, lockdowns and harsh containment measures, limited access to health care and basic services, and exploitative labour systems.

ASEAN governments must form a collective policy response to the COVID-19 crisis that is rapid and effective in reducing income insecurity and increasing people's capacity to manage and overcome ongoing economic shocks. As a first step, a collective declaration adopted in April 2020 at the Special ASEAN Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019 reaffirmed the regional grouping's determination and commitment 'to act jointly and decisively to control the spread of the disease while mitigating its adverse impact on our people's livelihood, our societies and economies' (ASEAN, 2020k).

The purpose of this report is to analyse how the social and economic crisis precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic will impact the very large number of cross-border migrant workers in the region. The report conducts this analysis by measuring the progress of the SDGs as well as the longer-term prospects of the Regional Cooperation and ASEAN Economic Community (AEC).

Methodology

The study was undertaken as the COVID-19 pandemic was still unfolding in the region and the situation of migrant workers was in flux. Therefore, estimates of the impact of the crisis on migrant workers are based on published reports, media articles, blogs, and interviews with key informants. A thorough review of the available literature and discussions for the report was conducted in May–August 2020. The review included various media and online reports published by different development organisations and civil society groups. Legal, institutional, technical, social, and other aspects of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on migrant workers as well as lessons learned have been synthesised. These were confirmed through online interviews with key stakeholders in Cambodia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Viet Nam. The interviews provided anecdotal evidence, validated initial findings, and confirmed conclusions and recommendations. The report presents, summarises, and interprets the evidence that has emerged so far based on contextual factors that have shaped the current situation in the region.

Some specific research questions examined in the report include the following:

- (i) What are the social and financial impacts of COVID-19 on migrant labour within the ASEAN region?
- (ii) How will the COVID-19 pandemic impact the achievement of SDGs in the ASEAN region?
- (iii) How has migrant labour coped with the disaster in the immediate term? Was there a delivery mechanism for providing migrant labourers with a social safety net?
- (iv) What measures have been taken at the regional level to address the problems of migrant labour?

Some assumptions made in the report include the following:

- (i) The COVID-19 pandemic will last until mid-2021, after which economic recovery can begin.
- (ii) The pandemic's economic impact, while severe, is likely reversible.
- (iii) Regional and international treaties will continue to be respected.
- (iv) Despite challenges, regional cooperation at the ASEAN level will remain strong.
- (v) Social and political conflict within and between AMS will be minimal.

Rationale for Choosing to Focus on the Sustainable Development Goals

The 2030 Development Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted on 25 September 2015 by 193 member countries of the UN General Assembly comprises 17 goals and 169 targets encompassing a wide range of development themes. It marks a milestone by mainstreaming migration, migrant workers, and the issues of inequality and decent work as integral components of development policy; and includes a number of targets recognising the economic value of migrants, such as SDGs 4, 5, 8, 10, 16, and 17 (Foresti and Hagen-Zanker, 2018). Target 10.7 in particular calls for the facilitation of 'safe, regular and responsible migration' and the implementation of 'well-managed migration policies'. While the SDGs are all relevant in a cross-cutting way to the situation of migrant workers

(International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2018), this report focuses on SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, and 10, in which areas the impact of COVID-19 on regional migrant workers is more direct and immediate. It is also currently relatively easier to gather information to advocate policymaking and regional cooperation in these areas. The longer-term impact of the remaining SDGs will need to be studied separately in the future.

Limitations

This review has two principal limitations. First, there is a paucity of primary data on the impact of COVID-19 on different aspects of migrant workers' lives, including food security, loss of household income, the education of children, and health indicators. Second, as the pandemic is still unfolding, there is a widespread lack of clarity about the long-term impact of COVID-19 on ASEAN economies and policies, particularly with respect to country social protection and welfare systems and the type of regulatory reforms needed to address some of the issues confronted by intraregional migrant workers. The conclusions and recommendations of this report are therefore likely tentative and subject to further study.

Structure of the Report

This report is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 explains the background and context for this study. Chapter 2 provides an overview of impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of migrant workers, as well as different aspects of labour migration. Chapter 3 presents a step-by-step analysis of how the current crisis will impact different SDGs relevant to migrants, and provides an analytical basis for determining the welfare requirements of migrant workers with a special emphasis on providing them with decent work (SDG 8). Chapter 4 summarises key recommendations made by civil society groups and academics, notes further areas for research, and lists areas for further ASEAN engagement in ensuring the rights of cross-country migrant workers and enhancing regional cooperation amongst the AMS, all of which will help to progress SDG targets in the future.

Chapter 1

Regional Labour Migration in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations: Background and Context

1. The Association of Southeast Asian Nation's Migrant Workers: Political and Economic Context

The ASEAN regional grouping consists of 10 countries comprising a population of more than 650 million.⁵ The regional grouping also encompasses several diverse economic, political, and social systems. In 2019, the Council for Foreign Relations reported that, in terms of economic development, Singapore has the highest GDP per capita amongst the group's members, at nearly \$65,000; while Myanmar's is the lowest at less than \$1,400.⁶ As of 2019, ASEAN had a combined GDP of \$2.8 trillion, and was also the third fastest-growing regional economy from 2010 to 2020, after China and India (United States [US]-ASEAN Business Council, 2019). More than \$3.6 trillion in global trade transits through the region each year.

The ASEAN regional grouping promotes economic, political, and security cooperation amongst its 10 members; and over the years has contributed to regional stability by developing common norms and principles to address shared challenges. In 1992, the ASEAN Free Trade Area was launched with the goal of creating a single market, increasing intra-ASEAN trade and investments, and attracting foreign investment. Intra-ASEAN trade as a share of the bloc's overall trade grew from about 19% in 1993 to 23% in 2017 (ASEAN, 2014; Maizland and Albert, 2020). According to the July 2020 ASEAN Policy Brief (Chandra, Muhajid, and Mahyassari, 2020), more than 90% of goods are currently traded with no tariffs across ASEAN.

The 1997 Asian financial crisis, which started in Thailand and spread across the region, highlighted the lack of social safety nets and welfare systems to protect poorer groups in times of crisis. In response, the AMS decided to push further integration of their economies through a series of agreements both amongst themselves and outside the region to protect their economies from speculative capital flight and other associated socioeconomic risks. In 2007, the AMS adopted the ASEAN Charter, a constitutional document that provided the grouping with legal status and an institutional framework, and that strives to facilitate regional integration while maintaining national autonomy and preserving regional diversity. With respect to labour, a social charter was formulated as part of the broader 2007 ASEAN Charter

⁵ ASEAN was established in August 1967 with five member states: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Brunei Darussalam joined on 8 January 1984, Viet Nam on 28 July 1995, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) and Myanmar on 23 July 1997, and Cambodia on 30 April 1999. At present, ASEAN has 10 member states, and counts several other nations such as Australia, China, the European Union, India, Japan, Korea, and the United States (US) as dialogue partners.

⁶ All monetary denominations are in US dollars, unless otherwise stated.

(Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 2015; ASEAN, 2016a).

As per ASEAN (2008), the 2007 charter enshrines core principles, delineates requirements for membership, and lays out a blueprint for a community made up of three branches: the AEC, the ASEAN Political-Security Community, and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. The AEC seeks to reduce or remove trade barriers to facilitate the free movement of goods, services, capital, and skilled labour within the region. By the end of 2019, all ASEAN nations had joined the ASEAN Single Window Live Operations, which facilitates the granting of preferential tariff treatment to goods originating within the regional grouping (ASEAN Single Window, 2020).

ASEAN currently has regional free trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand, China, India, Japan, and Korea; and since 2012 has also been negotiating the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a proposed free trade agreement that would include all AMS, as well as Australia, China, India, Japan, Korea, and New Zealand. The RCEP aims to create an integrated market with 16 countries, making the products and services of each of these countries more accessible across the region (ASEAN, 2016b; US-ASEAN Business Council, 2019). The negotiations focus on trade in goods and services, investment, intellectual property, dispute settlement, e-commerce, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), and economic cooperation. Final adoption of the RCEP was scheduled for March 2020 but has been postponed due to COVID-19.

Table 1.1: Socio-economic Indicators, by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Member States

	GDP per capita, 2018 (USD)	Population, 2018 (million)	Gini coefficient, 2017	Unemployment (%) (various years)	Average monthly earnings of employees (USD equivalent, various years)	Health Protection			Social protection for unemployment
						UHC service coverage index (out of 100) (%)	Insurance coverage (%) (a)	Catastrophic health spending (%), 10% (b)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
<i>Brunei Darussalam</i>	30,645	0.4	-	8.7	1,147.8	≥80.0	100.0	NA	None
<i>Cambodia</i>	1,541	16.0	0.31*	0.7	182.7	55.0	37.5	10.7	Limited provisions
<i>Indonesia</i>	3,930	265.0	0.39	4.4	173.6	49.0	84.0	3.6	Limited provisions
<i>Lao PDR</i>	2,627	6.9	0.36	9.4	285.5	94.0	94.0	3.0	Yet to be implemented
<i>Malaysia</i>	11,067	32.4	0.46	3.3	765.1	100.0	100.0	0.7	Limited provisions
<i>Myanmar</i>	1,441	53.6	0.38	0.9	141.6	2.0	2.0	3.4	Yet to be implemented
<i>Philippines</i>	3,215	106.6	0.40	2.3	256.1	78.0	78.0	6.3	Limited provisions
<i>Singapore</i>	64,567	5.6	0.46	4.1	3,557.8	93.0	93.0	9.0	None
<i>Thailand</i>	7,446	67.8	0.38	0.7	489.5	100	100	3.4	Yes
<i>Viet Nam</i>	2,546	94.7	0.35	2.0	286.8	89.9	89.9	9.7	Yes

GDP = gross domestic product, Lao PDR = Lao People's Democratic Republic, UHC = universal health coverage. Note: Data presented in the table are from the sources identified, and may not be the most updated nor from the same years. For more, detailed information on the indicators, please check the data sources, all of which are available online. (a) Population coverage; (b) Proportion of population spending more than 10% of household consumption or income on out-of-pocket healthcare expenditure. *2016 data.

Source: Zulkhibri, M. and J.B. Sinay (2020), 'Assessing ASEAN Economy Policy Responses in a Pandemic', *ASEAN Policy Brief*, No. 2. 28 May. https://asean.org/storage/2020/06/ASEAN-Policy-Brief-02_31-May-2020.pdf (accessed on 28 October 2020).

2. Economic Integration and Migrant Workers

The main labour destination countries in the ASEAN region (accounting for around 91% of intra-ASEAN migrant workers) are Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand (ILO, 2015a and ILO, 2020b). Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, the Philippines, and Viet Nam are the most prolific origin, or labour-sending, countries; and the largest flows occur amongst countries that share borders such as Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Thailand; and Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. A substantial number of Malaysians also work in Singapore as 'guest workers' (Paitoonpong, 2011).⁷

⁷ For example, foreign workers have assumed low-wage, '3D' (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning) jobs in Singapore and Malaysia that the local populations no longer prefers to take. They also provide domestic workers so that middle-class women in Singapore can participate in the labour force. In addition, foreign workers have kept wages down and maintain the receiving countries' competitiveness in labour-intensive industries.

A study by Harkins and Lindgren (2018) indicates that the seven AMS – Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam – deployed more than 2.1 million migrant workers within ASEAN. Intraregional labour migration is especially significant for Myanmar and Cambodia, which deploy 93.4% (Myanmar) and 66.8% (Cambodia) of their migrant workers to other AMS.

Many of these migrant workers engage in low- and medium-skilled occupations (such as construction workers, garment workers, fishers, and plantation labourers) under seasonal, temporary, or short-term contracts, with women constituting a disproportionate share (ILO and the Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2014). Six of the seven sending countries listed above accounted for more than 350,000 women migrant workers, representing 52% of deployed workers. In 2015, 88.3% of migrant workers from Indonesia were women, the highest share of all the AMS (ASEAN Trade Union Council [ATUC], 2020).

Regional labour migration across the AMS is triggered by several factors. Harkins and Lindgren (2018) identified the following critical factors: (i) disparities between countries in terms of socioeconomic development, (ii) political and civil strife displacing certain sections of the society (e.g. refugees from Myanmar living in Thailand) seeking local employment for survival, and (iii) demographic differences amongst AMS populations and shortages of cheap and skilled workers in higher income countries (see also Harkins, Lindgren, and Suravoranon, 2017). The political process of regional integration also plays an important role in encouraging migration within the regional grouping. Thus, the potential for intraregional migration to contribute to the growth and development of the bloc has been frequently recognised as a key issue in the grouping's various declarations and policy statements. Facilitating the cross-border movement of skilled labour within ASEAN features prominently in the newly established AEC.

One of the AEC's central purposes is to create a single market and production base that is stable, prosperous, highly competitive, and economically integrated. It also aims to facilitate effective trade and investment involving the free flow of goods, services, and investment; the smooth movement of business persons, professionals, talent, and labour; and freer flow of capital.

The AEC Blueprint (2009–2015) calls for 'managed mobility or facilitated entry for the movement of natural persons engaged in trade in goods, services, and investments, according to the prevailing regulations of the receiving country' (ASEAN Secretariat, 2008). Recognising the challenges of increasing labour mobility, ASEAN leaders mandated the organisation to strengthen national systems of social protection through the 2004 Vientiane Action Programme and to work towards adopting appropriate measures at the regional level to provide minimum uniform social protection coverage for skilled workers in the region (ASEAN, 2004). These efforts yielded the 2007 ASEAN Social Charter and 2016 ASEAN Consensus on Migrant Workers. The ASEAN Vientiane Action Programme 2004–2010 also included measures to protect high-skilled labour following the liberalisation of services within ASEAN and mutual recognition arrangements (MRAs) to facilitate the movement of skilled workers by the end of 2008 (ASEAN Secretariat, 2005; ATUC, 2005).

The ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers was launched in 2017 at the 31st ASEAN Summit in Manila, where several social and labour protections measures were proposed (ASEAN, 2018a and ASEAN, 2018b). This was followed by a high-level, multi-stakeholder dialogue in September 2018 amongst ASEAN representatives in Manila for implementing the consensus on responsible business conduct for safe labour migration in ASEAN.

ASEAN has begun expanding labour mobility under the AEC for eight high-skill occupations, including accountancy, architecture, dentistry, engineering, medicine, nursing, and tourism. However, progress in operationalising the MRAs ‘remains painfully slow and uneven across countries and for all occupations’ (Mendoza and Sugiyarto, 2017). Consequently, greater mobility for highly skilled professionals as envisioned by ASEAN and the AEC remains far from being realised.

According to a Migration Policy Institute and ADB report, for the MRAs to be fully implemented, the laws must be translated into a clear working process of mutual recognition and registration (Mendoza and Sugiyarto, 2017). The report reveals that many governments lack the institutional capacity to implement the MRAs, while wage disparities and poor working conditions in some areas have generally discouraged professional movement.

A 2019 ASEAN Secretariat report (ASEAN, 2019) on regional integration stated that jobs requiring high skills collectively represent only 0.3%–1.4% of total employment in AMS. Most workers involved in intra-ASEAN labour migration are employed in low-skilled, labour-intensive jobs in agriculture, fisheries, domestic work, manufacturing, and construction. Harkins and Lindgren (2018) suggested that, although workers in low-skilled jobs are estimated to constitute as much as 87% of intraregional labour migration flows, ASEAN has yet to establish policies regarding them.

2.1. Intra-Association of Southeast Asian Nations Agreements on Migrant Workers

Following the Vientiane Action Programme of 2005, the 2007 ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers led to the establishment of an ASEAN committee on the implementation of the declaration, as well as the creation of the ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour as a venue for regular consultations. By 2013, six AMS (Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore) had ratified the Equality of Treatment (Accident Compensation) Convention, 1925 (No. 19) that provides occupational injury protection for non-national workers (Orbeta et al., 2013). However, there has been less progress with respect to other migrant worker-related conventions or bilateral social security agreements between AMS.

Despite several different efforts since 2004, many ASEAN countries still rely on bilateral memoranda of understanding (MOUs) focussing on regulating the flow of migrant labour, while clauses on welfare and social protection are mostly absent or treated as a byproduct. A recent ILO study found that, while MOUs may serve as a starting point, a formal bilateral agreement is necessary to address welfare and social security issues to ensure that provident funds and social insurance schemes are well coordinated and weighted appropriately for different jobs and worker contributions, in both receiving and

sending countries.⁸

With respect to Thailand's MOUs with Cambodia, the Lao PDR, and Myanmar, the study found widespread differences and determined that the MOUs were outdated (ILO, 2015b). Nevertheless, some regional trade union groupings see these MOUs as prototypes that can potentially evolve into a social protection scheme in the longer term. Under the MOUs, authorised agencies in the countries of employment are required to set up a savings fund to which migrant workers contribute 15% of their monthly wages or salary, and the accumulated contributions are refunded to them upon termination of their employment and their return to their home country (ATUC, 2020).

Pursuing specific bilateral social security agreements is not an easy task, as receiving states typically have more developed social protection and social security legislations than do sending states. Sending states are in a particularly weak position, having no leverage to negotiate unless they first improve social protection and security provisions for their own nationals at home. Since reciprocity is part of any bilateral agreement, receiving and sending states may both face political and practical constraints.

3. Timeline of Association of Southeast Asian Nations Efforts to Protect Migrant Worker Rights

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| 2003 | Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) heads of states and governments adopt the Declaration of ASEAN Concord II (Bali Concord II), which envisages the establishment of an ASEAN Community by 2020. The ASEAN Community comprises three pillars: the ASEAN Political-Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community, and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. |
| 2004 | The Vientiane Action Programme, 2004–2010, on protecting migrant labour, is adopted in Vientiane, Lao People's Democratic Republic on 29 November 2004. The plan calls for an 'Elaboration of an ASEAN instrument on the protection and promotion of the rights of migrant workers'. |
| 2007 | <p>The ASEAN Economic Community is established, envisaging full economic integration of the ASEAN Member States (AMS) and calling for the freer flow of skilled labour.</p> <p>The ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers is adopted at the 12th ASEAN Summit in Cebu, Philippines. This declaration takes important steps to move ASEAN towards compliance with existing United Nations conventions and treaties that many AMS have already ratified. It recognises the need to share responsibilities regionally for the protection of migrant workers while also acknowledging both the differences and similarities of AMS concerns. The International Labor Organization established the Triangle Project (ASEAN Migrant Labour Forum) to support the elaboration and implementation of this declaration.</p> |
| 2008 | The ASEAN Committee on the Implementation of the Declaration on the |

⁸ Some AMS have experience negotiating formal bilateral agreements with countries outside the region. For example, the Philippines already has nine such agreements in place, and Viet Nam is upgrading its national laws to enable it to commence business service agreement negotiations with Germany and Korea.

- Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers (ACMW) is established to support the implementation of the Cebu Declaration.
- AMS adopts the ASEAN Charter, setting forth a vision of movement of labour within the region. Amongst other things, the charter sets out ‘to create a single market and production base which is stable, prosperous, highly competitive and economically integrated with effective facilitation for trade and investment in which there is free flow of goods, services and investment; facilitated movement of business persons, professionals, talents and labour; and freer flow of capital...’
- 2009** The ASEAN Framework Instrument on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers is formally proposed to the ASEAN Senior Labour Officials by the Task Force on ASEAN Migrant Workers, a civil society body comprising trade unions, human rights and migrant rights nongovernment organisations, and migrant worker associations. The group supports the development of a rights-based framework for the protection and promotion of the rights of migrant workers, in line with ASEAN’s Vientiane Action Plan.
- 2012** The adoption of the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint promotes closer cooperation of various ASEAN sectoral bodies to expedite the ASEAN Committee on the ACMW’s work in developing an instrument to ensure that the rights of migrant workers are well protected within the region, in accordance with the laws, regulations, and policies of the AMS.
- The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint is adopted, providing for the protection and promotion of the rights of migrant workers and other vulnerable groups.
- 2013** The ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection recognises migrants as a vulnerable category of workers.
- 2015** **AMS endorse the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.**
- 2016** The ACMW Work Plan 2016–2020 is adopted. This covers four areas: (i) mechanisms governing labour mobility, such as recruitment, job placement, and reintegration programmes; (ii) social protections for migrant workers in ASEAN; (iii) the protection and promotion of the rights of migrant workers; and (iv) the labour dimension of human trafficking.
- 2017** AMS take a significant step forward in their efforts to protect and promote the rights of migrant workers by signing the ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers, which elaborates the rights of migrant workers and their family members, and expands the obligations of AMS, subject to national laws.
- 2018** The ASEAN Action Plan 2018–2025 is adopted to guide the implementation of the ASEAN consensus.

Figure 1.1: An Overview of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Consensus

Who is covered by the ASEAN consensus?

Migrant Workers

Documented migrant workers
Migrant workers undocumented through no fault of their own

Families of Migrant Workers

Family members already residing with them
Visitation by family members not residing with them



Which issues are covered by the ASEAN consensus?



Education and Information



Recourse



Protection



Reintegration



Enforcement

ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

Source: United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (2017), *Women Migrant Workers in the ASEAN Economic Community*. New York, NY: United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2017/06/aec-women-migration-study.pdf?la=en&vs=4122> (accessed 11 May 2020).

4. Portability of Rights of Migrant Workers

The portability of migrant workers' social security rights remains a major problem within ASEAN (Ong and Peyron Bista, 2015). Trade union organisations and civil society groups in the region have been calling for migration policies and institutions built on the recognition and portability of social protection (ATUC, 2020), and have argued that migrant workers should be able to preserve, maintain, and transfer benefits from one country's social security programme to another, as well as between localities within a country (spatial portability), between jobs, and between members of a household (social portability). Since the right to social protection and security is attached to the migrant worker, this should include the ability to maintain and access the benefits of the social protection system of the country where he or she currently works.

Table 1.2: Social Security Coverage of Migrant Workers by Country and Branch, 2017

Country	Medical care		Sickness		Unemployment		Old age		Work injury		Family		Maternity		Invalidity		Survivors		National workers abroad?
	Nationals	Non-nationals	Nationals	Non-nationals	Nationals	Non-nationals	Nationals	Non-nationals	Nationals	Non-nationals	Nationals	Non-nationals	Nationals	Non-nationals	Nationals	Non-nationals	Nationals	Non-nationals	
Brunei Darussalam	✓	✓ ^a	✓ ^{**}	✓ ^{**}	–	–	✓	✓ [*]	✓ ^{**}	✓ ^{**}	–	–	–/✓	✓ [*]	✓	✓ [*]	✓	✓ [*]	No
Cambodia	✓	✓	✓ ^{**}	✓ ^{**}	–	–	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	–	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	No
Indonesia	✓	✓	✓ ^{**}	✓ ^{**}	–	–	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	–	✓ ^{**}	✓ ^{**}	✓	✓	✓	✓	Yes
Lao PDR	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Yes ^b
Malaysia	✓	✓ ^{***}	✓ ^{**}	✓ ^{**}	–	–	✓	✓ ^{***}	✓	✓ ^{***}	–	–	✓ ^{**}	✓ ^{**}	✓	✓ ^{***}	✓	✓ ^{***}	No
Myanmar^c	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Yes ^d
Philippines	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	–	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	–	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Yes
Singapore	✓	✓ ^{*e}	✓ ^{**}	✓ ^{**}	–	–	✓	✓ [*]	✓ ^{**}	✓ ^{**}	–	–	✓ ^{**}	✓ ^{**}	✓	✓ ^{**6}	✓	✓ ^{**f}	Yes ^g
Thailand	✓	✓ ^h	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Yes
Viet Namⁱ	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	✓	✓	✓	–	–	✓	✓	–	–	✓	✓	Yes

Lao PDR = Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Note: * permanent residents only, ** employer liability, *** separate scheme.

^a Universal coverage – permanent residents; employer liability – other migrant workers (insurance-based).

^b Via a labour fund.

^c Not applicable to establishments with fewer than five employees. Such employees can register voluntarily.

^d Voluntary contribution possible.

^e For those who are not permanent residents, employer-based or employer-insured provision is available.

^f This includes foreign domestic workers as well as work injury-related cases, through mandatory insurance coverage (feedback from the Senior Labour Officials Meeting Singapore, July 2017).

^g The Government of Singapore provides for continued contributions to Medishield Life, even while overseas.

^h Undocumented non-nationals (except those who have completed the national verification process) are covered under a separate scheme.

ⁱ 2018 position indicated here: from 1 January 2018, regular migrant workers are covered by compulsory social insurance.

Source: Olivier, M. (2018), *Social Protection for Migrant Workers in ASEAN: Developments, Challenges, and Prospects*. Geneva: International Labor Organization.

However, in the absence of bilateral agreements between sending and destination countries, these portability rights remain unrecognised (Tamagno, 2008). A large majority of migrant workers are unable to enrol in either their own national social security systems or that of the host country, or to transfer the accrued contributions or entitlements between social security systems. Migrant workers are often doubly disadvantaged because they receive less social protection both at home and in their host country.⁹ They are also often excluded from tax-financed schemes such as social assistance programmes or social pension schemes despite contributing to the host country economy through work, consumption, and taxation. Documented workers are only entitled to a few benefits from their host country, depending upon their immigration status category (Olivier, 2018). For example, in Singapore and Brunei Darussalam, participation in the national provident funds is possible only for workers with permanent residence status (i.e. documented or registered persons) (UN Women, 2019; Pasadilla and Abella, 2012).

To compensate for this lack of protection for its large labour population working abroad, the Philippine Overseas Workers Welfare Administration operates schemes that cover overseas workers for invalidity and death risks, in which they can optionally enrol under the Philippine Social Security System.

Indonesia has one of the world's largest migrant worker communities.¹⁰ In 2016, an estimated 9 million Indonesians were working abroad, the majority of whom were undocumented, and of whom half were women, mostly employed in the informal sector as domestic workers (Arisman and Jaya, 2020).¹¹ Acknowledging the plight of Indonesian migrant workers, in 2017, Indonesia enacted a new law on the protection of Indonesian migrant workers (Law No. 18/2017). In line with the 2019 Recommendations of the High-Level Political Forum, the new law reinforced policies to provide end-to-end protection to overseas workers; however, this new provision has not yet been implemented (Global Forum on Migration and Development, 2019).

With respect to health coverage, health insurance for migrant workers is mandatory in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, the main migrant-recipient AMS. However, Thailand's tax-financed Universal Coverage Scheme excludes migrant workers, ethnic minorities, and displaced or stateless persons who lack a national identity document. Arisman and Jaya (2018) suggest that around half of migrant workers from Cambodia, the Lao PDR, and Myanmar working in Thailand who do not qualify for government welfare systems were obliged to take up the Compulsory Migrant Health Insurance to access public healthcare facilities because of their lack of formal immigration status. Several media sources cited

⁹ See also the ILO Maintenance of Social Security Rights Convention, 1982 (No. 157).

¹⁰ Since 2003, the Indonesian civil society organization (CSO) Migrant Care has been helping villages hold safe migration workshops for locals about to move abroad for work, providing assistance with contracts and information about their legal rights in their destination countries and where to get help if they find themselves in trouble. Migrant Care was one of several CSOs who lobbied the government for the enactment of this new law in 2017. Although not perfect, this law provides an umbrella for further elaboration and enforcement. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this law proved useful for migrant workers returning home to seek relief support from the Government of Indonesia.

¹¹ See the authors' interview with Dr. Elcid Li on 18 August 2020. Discussions with Dr. Dominggus Elcid Li is the Executive Director of IRGSC (Institute of Resource Governance and Social Change) (2013-to current), an Indonesian think tank based in Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia.

in this report report that such workers have faced challenges in quickly accessing welfare services, particularly in the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis.

In Malaysia where public healthcare providers are tax-financed, the Foreign Workers Health Insurance Protection Scheme involving private medical insurers was implemented between 2011 and 2013 to reduce the government's subsidisation of migrant workers' healthcare. Similarly, Singapore obliges employers to purchase private insurance for non-permanent resident migrant workers and to bear any excess medical expenses. Migrant workers who are permanent residents in Singapore are covered under the compulsory medical savings and opt-out insurance schemes, but receive fewer healthcare subsidies than Singapore citizens. In 2015, Brunei Darussalam introduced mandatory take-up of private insurance for non-permanent resident migrant workers.

Given the imminent AEC integration, decent work conditions for migrant workers and a multilateral social security agreement as proposed in the 2007 ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers (or the Cebu Declaration on Migrant Workers) would be indispensable to manage intraregional migration responsibly.

Box 1: Social Protection Floors

At the 23rd ASEAN Summit in Brunei Darussalam in October 2013, the 10 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) leaders adopted a Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection, reaffirming their commitment to build a 'socially responsible and people-oriented' ASEAN community by establishing nationally defined social protection floors (SPFs) for all (Ong and Peyron Bista, 2015). The declaration reflects a growing regional consensus that the establishment of SPFs is fundamental to reduce poverty and inequality and promote inclusive and sustainable growth.

In support of this, a more focused 3-year programmatic project was launched in 2016, with support from the Government of Japan, in Indonesia and Viet Nam. Its objectives were increased social security coverage for workers in ASEAN Member States, and greater coverage of social security schemes, particularly amongst informal workers and migrants, through improved policies, legal frameworks, and enforcement and delivery mechanisms in Indonesia and Viet Nam (International Labor Organization, 2016).

Following the adoption of the 2016 ASEAN Consensus on Migrant Workers, despite differing levels of coverage and speeds of change, most countries are now moving towards establishing sound policy and institutional frameworks to deliver social protection effectively and efficiently. Based on the principle of universal protection, SPFs are an investment with both immediate and long-term effects on millions of lives, including enhanced political stability and social cohesion. Social protection and SPFs also contribute to economic growth by supporting household incomes and thus domestic consumption. They also enhance human capital and productivity, and empower people to find decent jobs. Consequently, they are a critical policy tool for supporting transformational national and regional development and the formalisation of economies.

Sources: Olivier, M. (2018), *Social Protection for Migrant Workers in ASEAN: Developments, Challenges, and Prospects*. Geneva: International Labor Organization (ILO); and ILO (2016), *Building an Inclusive Future with Decent Work: Towards Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific. Report of the Director General to the 16th Regional Meeting of Asia and Pacific, Held in Indonesia*. Geneva: ILO.

https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_531409.pdf (accessed 8 June 2020).

5. Association of Southeast Asian Nations Commitment to International Treaties

Over the years, AMS have failed to ratify or acknowledge several important international labour and human rights instruments, with some notable exceptions, such as the 1966 UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. To date, no AMS has ratified the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102), which is the main ILO social security instrument.

As of early 2020, only two countries, Indonesia and the Philippines, had ratified the global Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, which states that migrant workers' rights are to be respected without undermining state laws.¹² The convention recognises several different groups of migrant workers (frontier, seasonal, self-employed, seafarer, and itinerant), and comprises nine parts: scope and definitions; non-discrimination with respect to rights; human rights of all migrants; other rights of documented or regular migrants; provisions applicable to particular categories of migrants; the promotion of sound, equitable, humane, and lawful conditions in connection with international migration; the application of the convention; general provisions; and final provisions.

Even when ratified, the norms and standards embedded in these instruments have been poorly implemented. In fact, no bilateral social security agreements exist between AMS, and the level of ratification of international standards is not uniform, resulting in a persistent lack of adequate instruments or appropriate enforcement mechanisms that jeopardises the 'greater integration of the ASEAN region'.

¹² On 18 December 1990, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution guaranteeing dignity and equality to migrant workers in an era of globalisation. The Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families is a mechanism to monitor and measure the national agencies and actors responsible for implementing the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families articles. For an update and commentary on the status of the enforcement of this convention in ASEAN, please see Olivier (2018). The fact that only two AMS have ratified the convention is unsurprising since AMS have also failed to endorse many other similar international conventions and treaties. They likely see these conventions as a needless burden to carry and prefer to handle domestic and regional migrant workers issues in a more informal, self-regulated, and at times arbitrary manner subject to national priorities or even prejudices. In general, AMS do not appear eager to sign conventions that they do not wish to implement.

Table 1.3: Ratification of Conventions Related to Migrant Workers by Association of Southeast Asian Nations Member States

Country	Migrant workers' rights			Equal treatment in social protection		
	Migration for Employment Convention (Revised), 1949 (No. 97)	Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention, 1975 (No. 143)	International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, 1990	Equality of Treatment (Accident Compensation) Convention, 1925 (No. 19)	Equality of Treatment (Social Security) Convention, 1982 (No. 118)	Maintenance of Social Security Rights Convention 1982 (No. 157)
Brunei Darussalam
Cambodia	2004 ^(c)	...	...	...
Indonesia	2012	1950	...	...
Lao PDR
Malaysia	1964 ^(a)	...	...	1964	...	...
Myanmar	1927	...	...
Philippines	2009 ^(b)	2006	1995	1994	1994 ^(d)	1994
Singapore	1965	...	...
Thailand	1968	...	...
Viet Nam

...: Convention not ratified, Lao PDR = Lao People's Democratic Republic.

^a Only Malaysia-Sabah (also excludes the provisions of Convention No. 97, Annexes I–III).

^b Excludes the provisions of Convention No. 97, Annexes II and III.

^c Year of signature (yet to be ratified).

^d Includes branches a–g only.

Source: Ong, C.B. and C.P. Bista (2015), *The State of Social Protection in ASEAN at the Dawn of Integration*. Bangkok: International Labour Organization Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-jakarta/documents/publication/wcms_428982.pdf (accessed 11 August 2020); reproduced from *International Labour Organization and Asian Development Bank (2014), ASEAN Community 2015: Managing Integration for Better Jobs and Shared Prosperity*, pp.83–100. Bangkok; Manila: International Labour Organization and Asian Development Bank. p. 95.

ASEAN has made impressive progress over the decades, both as a cohesive regional grouping and in the way it has managed to improve the living conditions of its populations steadily through policies of peaceful development. However, the treatment of migrant workers in the region still leaves much to be desired. This is partly for economic reasons as businesses in receiving countries want to spend as little on labour as possible. Another reason is political, as governments worry about how domestic populations would respond to large influxes of migrant workers from neighbouring nations. Nevertheless, in a globalised economy in which the region has taken advantage of low-cost labour to boost its own growth, it is necessary to follow global standards of humane treatment by providing social protection and investing in the welfare of the most vulnerable sections of the population.

Chapter 2

Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic

Southeast Asia was affected early by the COVID-19 pandemic because of its close geographical proximity, business, travel, tourism, and supply chain links to China. However, relative to other regions of the world, the number of confirmed cases in the ASEAN region is much lower and the rate of increase is also slowing. As of 22 October, there were 42,138,128 confirmed COVID-19 cases worldwide (Worldometer, 2020;) and over 869,544 cases in Southeast Asia (Chua, 2020).

By October 2020, many countries in the region such as Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam, while still very cautious, had started relaxing their nationwide lockdowns or community quarantine measures, and economic activities had begun to resume. Travel restrictions and quarantine protocols for foreign visitors and incoming labourers are still being implemented.

Even prior to the COVID-19-induced crisis, Southeast Asian economies were already struggling with their growth figures for a variety of reasons, but mainly because of global trade tensions and a general economic slowdown across the continents. It is expected that the region will be severely impacted by a global recession and disruption of economic activities in several key economic sectors after the pandemic.

In response to the crisis, most governments in the region have introduced fiscal stimulus packages mobilising both fiscal and monetary measures to mitigate the economic impact, but the impact of these measures is yet to be seen. ASEAN has also called for collective action by leveraging technology and digital trade and setting up trade facilitation platforms to foster supply chain connectivity and sustainability (ASEAN, 2020a). As part of the Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on Coronavirus Disease 2019, AMS leaders also proposed a post-pandemic recovery plan and a COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund (ASEAN, 2020d).

Overall, however the pan-ASEAN lockdown and curfew has rapidly transformed a public health crisis into an economic and social crisis, and to some extent a mild political crisis too. Intra-regional migrant workers were amongst the hardest hit segments of society, and faced extreme social and economic distress. The spread of COVID-19 has highlighted the weaknesses of ASEAN's national healthcare and social welfare systems, in addition to challenging the labour recruitment and employment practices implemented in region over the years. While informal labourers have become increasingly important for many different economic activities, the pandemic exposed their poor living and working conditions, and their migration status impacted their well-being during the crisis. This is discussed in greater detail below.

1. Impact on Association of Southeast Asian Nations Economies¹³

More broadly, the COVID-19 lockdown measures worsened the economic slowdown of 2018–2019. The crisis has interrupted global value chains, exacerbating the fall in global economic activity and disruption to international trade that was already weakened by the 2019 trade tensions between the US and China. Many migrants have already lost their jobs, are projected to lose their jobs, or are expected to be forced to accept lower wages due to lockdowns or oil price crashes in their destination countries. They may also be prevented from sending remittances as a result of stringent movement restrictions and the exclusion of money transfer service providers from the list of essential services. Furthermore, many intended migrants who had been preparing to depart their home countries have been forced to change their livelihood plans for the coming years. In summary of this situation, the IMF reported in 2020 that 80% of the world's total remittances flowed to low- and middle-income countries in 2019. Elaborating on this, the IOM (2020a) reasoned that the negative impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak may be more serious in developing countries whose citizens depend heavily on remittances from migrant family members. Reports published by multilateral organisations in April–May 2020 (IMF, 2020; World Bank, 2020b; Villafuerte and Takenaka, 2020) concluded that the ASEAN region may experience a decline in remittances, tourism, and foreign direct investment. However, reports in October 2020 suggest that remittances are gradually recovering in countries like the Philippines (Lopez, 2020).¹⁴ However, analysts are reluctant to accept this as a sure sign of recovery, as such positive signals may capture a short-term effect of the pandemic on remittances while the negative impact on declining income and remittances, if any, on household welfare may be more serious in the longer term. Therefore, as Murakami, Shimizutani, and Yamada (2020) suggest, it may be necessary to take a more nuanced approach to the use of data on international restrictions on travel and remittance transactions.

An online report published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) (2020) projected that the economic impact of COVID-19 in ASEAN will be huge, on par with the fallout of the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis, or perhaps much greater. The IMF projects that ASEAN+5 (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam) will see their economies shrink by 0.6 percentage points in 2020, in contrast to its pre-pandemic forecast of 4.8% growth. A World Bank report (2020a) includes both a baseline and a more pessimistic scenario, with the 'worst-case' forecast projecting that the

¹³ A crisis of this nature generally leads to 'distress' sales of land and assets amongst poorer households. At present, no data are available on distress sales of land and assets by migrant worker households, if any, from labour-sending nations in the region. However, in response to COVID-19 concerns, real estate developers and architects will likely reverse the trend of densification and open-plan layouts of urban and peri-urban areas. Public health officials may begin to amend building codes to limit the risk of future pandemics, and may seek more land for built-up areas in the future. In addition, the return of poorer migrant workers to their villages may increasingly compel them to look for cash, leading to the sale of land and assets. Moreover, demand for land is likely to increase, especially in rural areas where more space is available.

¹⁴ The post by CNN cited here suggested that remittances to the Philippines totalled \$3 billion in July 2020, despite the pandemic. Land-based Filipino workers remitted more funds than in 2019, while those working at sea remitted less. Local analysts suggested a 10%–12% decline in 2020; however, these projections were described as lacking evidence as to the likelihood of a recovery.

economies of the major developing ASEAN countries will contract by 0.5–5.0%, with the exception of Viet Nam, which has maintained positive (+1.5%) growth. The global collapse in oil prices is expected to have a sharp impact on economies dependent on fuel exports, in particular Indonesia, where coal and oil comprise nearly 25% of exports; Malaysia, where oil and gas make up about 16% of exports; and of course Brunei Darussalam, where crude and natural gas account for over 90% of all exports (Searight, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has also drastically reduced global demand for oil, especially in the transportation sector, and it is unclear to what degree low oil prices will impact ASEAN economies (Taghizadeh-Hesary, 2020; Arezki and Nguyen, 2020).

1.1. Supply Chains

The fallout of COVID-19 has already affected demand and supply chains in both food and non-food sectors because of the contraction of production and distribution networks, and has also impacted the service sectors and commodity exports. With around 40% of its exports relying on global value chains, and its strong linkages to multiple nodes, the region is highly exposed to supply-chain risks (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific [UNESCAP], 2020c). Amongst the ASEAN countries, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand are heavily integrated into regional supply chains and have been most severely affected by reduced demand for goods produced therein (Menon, 2020). Indonesia and the Philippines, which have been increasing supply chain engagement, are similarly threatened. In Viet Nam, which has maintained a robust supply chain with China, movement restrictions from late February 2020 created severe supply disruptions that later spread to the Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and across the region (CSIS, 2020).

Although the global food supply chain remained intact until June, some reports indicate that since mid-June COVID-19 restrictions on movement and activities have affected all segments of food supply chains, simultaneously impacting farm production, food processing, transport, and logistics.¹⁵ Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand have reported that farm production has been afflicted by various bottlenecks, with limits on the mobility of people reducing the availability of seasonal workers for planting and harvesting. With travel restrictions continuing, there is also concern over seed and other input shortages. The supply chain disruptions are likely to exacerbate food insecurity in remote places in the Lao PDR, Myanmar, and parts of Indonesia (Food Industry Asia, 2020; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2020a; Kovac, 2020).

1.2. Impact on the Service Sector

In countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Viet Nam, the tourism sector, which employs a large share of migrant workers, has been badly impacted. In the case of Myanmar, a post-conflict nation in transition, the IMF reasoned that its six growth engines would be affected (De and Nadeem, 2020). Since late March 2020, governments across the region have imposed restrictions on large-scale events, restaurants, and leisure activities, in addition to school closures. These curfew and lockdown measures, although

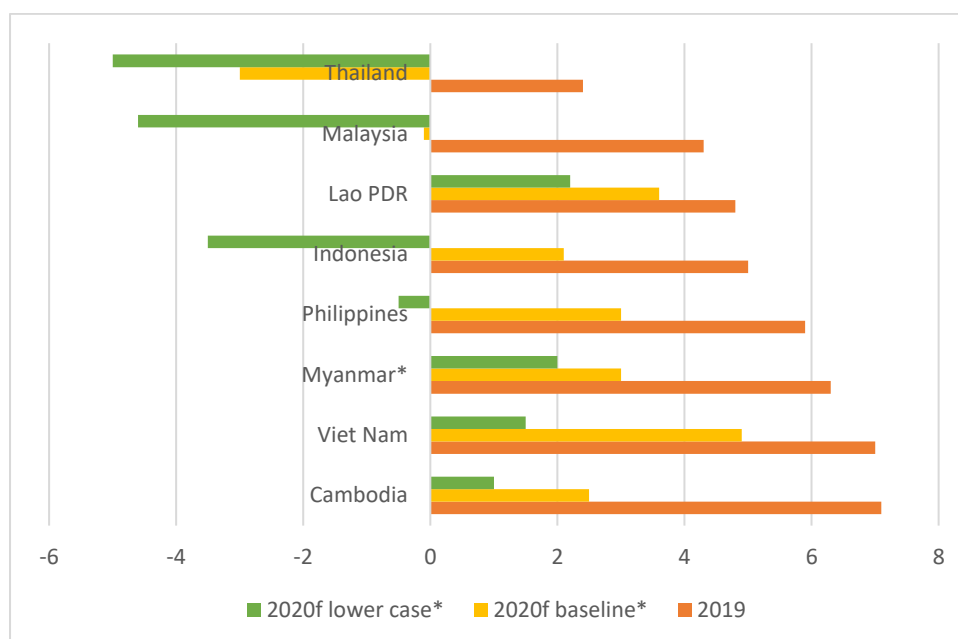
¹⁵ Some farm subsectors are dependent on seasonal labour, and certain operations, such as vegetables and fruit, are particularly labour-intensive.

differing in scale and scope across the region, have slowed or even stopped economic activities in certain sectors, and had a ripple effect on others (ASEAN, 2020m; Hayat, 2020; Agarwal, 2020). Several migrant workers from Myanmar engaged in the tourism sector in Rayong, Kanchanaburi, and Chiang Mai, Thailand reported non-payment of wages since April 2020; and social benefits, however meagre, were available to only a few (Kaicome, 2020; Sandar, 2020; O'Connor, 2020; Bangkok Post, 30 March 2020). Indonesian workers engaged in the service sector in Malaysia reported similar wage cuts in April 2020. According to reports, more than 2.8 million domestic Indonesian workers had lost their jobs by the end of April 2020, and another 1 million workers (both domestic and returning migrants) were furloughed and placed on paid or unpaid leave (Rahman, 2020).

1.3. Manufacturing

With respect to manufacturing, MSMEs, which tend to have fewer internal resources and more limited access to information, are likely to be particularly affected. This stress is likely to impact economically vulnerable communities disproportionately, as these people are much less likely to be employed in large enterprises. Surveys suggest that roughly two-thirds of ASEAN MSMEs had less than 2 months' worth of cash reserves left in early April, and more than one-third expected to lay off over 40% of their staff (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020a). However, ADB has also pointed out that ASEAN's resilient nature should help the region overcome the economic impact once the pandemic is contained. ASEAN should ensure that containment measures to rejuvenate the economy cover all parts of society, including marginalised and vulnerable communities (ADB, 2020a; Fernandez, 2020; Virgil and Lie, 2020)

Figure 2.1: Estimates of Gross Domestic Product Loss in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations



Lao PDR = Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Source: World Bank (2020), *East Asia and the Pacific in the Time of COVID-19 – Regional Economic Update*. Washington, DC: World Bank. April. <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/33477> (accessed 24 May 2020).

Box 2: Association of Southeast Asian Nations Responses and Reactions

In the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), first responses to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic have included scattered national policy initiatives leading to severe limitations on freedom of movement. This has also resulted in the increased concentration of power in the hands of executive branches, which have largely turned to govern by decree (or executive order) to legislate curfews and lockdowns.

However, there is considerable variation in the ways that ASEAN governments have responded to the pandemic, as they had to navigate the costs of each measure according to their domestic social, demographic, and economic realities. One major difference can be seen in the speed of response, ranging from Viet Nam's prompt action to monitor and contain the pandemic, to the Philippines and Indonesia's long 'phase of denial' (Dabla-Norris et al., 2020; Abuza, 2020; Lindsey and Mann, 2020). Another major difference has been in the aggressiveness of the response. Some countries have implemented full or partial lockdowns, such as the Philippines' lockdown of Manila, curfew in Thailand, and Malaysia's Movement Control Order. Other countries have opted for less strict measures, such as Myanmar's targeted partial lockdowns. With local economies likely to stumble, most ASEAN countries' initial instinctive reaction to the COVID-19 crisis has been to look inwards and act alone. As a result, borders were abruptly closed, supply chains disrupted, and regional activity virtually came to a halt for a period of time.

As in other parts of the world, several ASEAN governments presented their dilemma as being between stopping the spread of COVID-19 and saving jobs. In some countries, the consequences of initially excluding marginalised groups from COVID-19 response measures, or paying less attention to them, has been dire. For example, in Singapore, the second wave of the virus was linked to packed dormitories for migrant workers, who were apparently not granted access to the same degree of medical care and contact-tracing measures as the general population (Noel, 2020; Karmini, 2020; Lindsey and Mann, 2020).¹⁶ Such measures have invariably impacted migrant workers in their home and host countries in different ways.

Even where commendable ambitious national responses were implemented, it has become clear that the immediate needs of the broader economy and migrants were not addressed, and most workers were allowed to return home without adequate medical screening or advisory support. This ambiguous response from host nations led to mild discontent amongst labour-sending nations, and there is uncertainty as to whether workers will return when normalcy is reestablished.

During the pandemic's initial stages, many host governments also lacked clarity as to whether migrant workers could access health and welfare systems in their host countries (Global Forum on Migration and Development, 2020). Civil society networks were sceptical of government assurances of material support, and screening and testing, which were viewed with suspicion (ATUC, 2020). Meanwhile, police forces were deployed in several cities and along travel routes across the region to ensure 'law and order', ignoring the public health nature of the pandemic (Migrante International, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020b; Palatino, 2020; World Law Group, 2020). At the same time, governments in origin countries (e.g. Singapore and Thailand) also made a feeble attempt to halt migrants from returning home, ostensibly for fear of further spreading the virus (ILO, 2020f; ILO, 2020g; ILO, 2020m; Yee, 2020; Gu, 2020).¹⁷

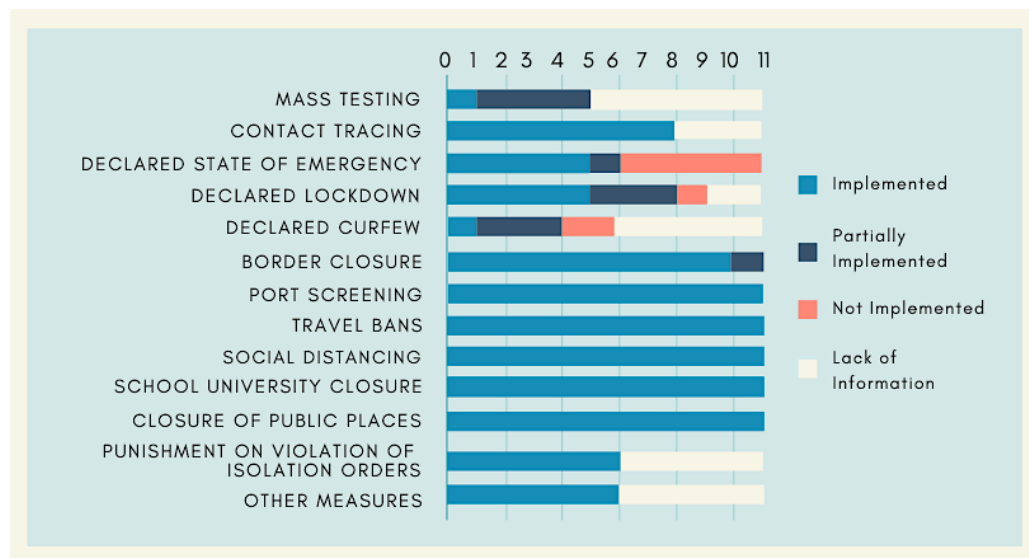
¹⁶ Although workers were paid during the lockdown, continued uncertainty regarding their jobs and the possibility of returning home affected their movement and mental health.

¹⁷ For example, the Government of Myanmar initially resisted opening checkpoints for workers to return home from Bangkok.

While the ASEAN nations all provided relief packages to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic, the delivery and impact of such efforts remains to be seen. The relief packages were provided independently, without much coordination across the ASEAN countries to ensure that they mitigated the sufferings of migrant workers. If there had been more coordination in the earlier stages of the pandemic, the relief packages could have been better targeted to mitigate the pandemic's negative effects, both within and across countries. Kimura et al. (2020) reason that a coordinated policy response would have been best. However, as Djalante et al. (2020) highlighted, such an effort requires political will to an extent that remains challenging. Bilateral and multilateral diplomacy was instituted late in Southeast Asia: ASEAN ministers only began to confer virtually in mid-April 2020, and ASEAN leaders held a summit in June 2020 to provide a framework for coordinated action ('ASEAN Holds Special Summit', 2020, 2020; ASEAN, 2020k). Prior to this, coordination amongst ASEAN governments remained elusive and was frequently scattered, impacting supply chains, migrants, and the regional economy.

Source: Authors.

Figure 2.2: Coronavirus Disease Containment and Mitigation Measures in Southeast Asia



Source: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2020), *Policy Brief: Impact of COVID-19 on Southeast Asia*. July. Bangkok: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

2. Immediate Impact on Migrant Workers¹⁸

In the early days of the pandemic, particularly between March and mid-June 2020, the shutdown of economic activities and curfew imposed on the movement of persons left migrant workers with the choice of either starving in the countries where they had been working, with no job or money and unpredictable access to healthcare and welfare systems; or return to their home countries (United Nations Capital Development Fund, 2020).¹⁹ Despite facing the same poverty that compelled them to leave in the first place,

¹⁸ The ASEAN Trade Union Council periodically disseminates information through its website on the status of migrant workers in the region (www.aseantuc.org).

¹⁹ Before the onset of COVID-19, the major destination countries for Myanmar's migrants were China, Japan,

media reports and various government statements suggest that many believed they would have a better chance of survival amongst familiar surroundings and familial networks in their countries of origin. Highlighting the plight of refugees, who are also mostly irregular migrant workers in their host countries, analysts argued that ‘services dealing with migration, both governmental and non-governmental, are currently heavily stretched in terms of money, manpower and facilities leaving not only migrants but also refugees scrambling for advice on the pandemic and immigration services’.²⁰

2.1. Closed Borders

When Thailand announced measures in March to close their land borders temporarily, thousands of jobless migrant workers streamed over the borders to their homes. However, for some of these, ‘home’ means one of nine camps along the Thai–Myanmar border that shelter more than 90,000 people (Nanthini, 2020; Engblom, Lephilibert, and Baruah, 2020; Asadullah, 2020; Bismonte, 2020). Current border control measures have limited their freedom of movement across the border and left them unable to travel for informal labour or to return home (to Myanmar, in this case), while political uncertainty persists. This has eroded their income and left them almost entirely dependent on external humanitarian assistance. Not satisfied with living in the refugee camps for long, they will often take up jobs below their skill level in their host countries. Thus, despite their credentials, they are unable to integrate easily into their host countries.

The suspension of public transport services and restrictions placed on the movement of private vehicles drove tens of thousands of migrant workers to return to their hometowns on foot. Others decided to travel by road using local vehicles, such as cargo vans, and crossed international checkpoints in small groups. Thailand reported large movements of migrants out of Bangkok and other metropolitan areas into Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, and other provinces during the first week of April (ILO, 2020o).

2.2. Rising Xenophobia

The lack of coronavirus testing during the early stages of the pandemic and the virus’s long incubation period made it difficult to estimate how many migrant workers left their host countries (e.g. Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Singapore, or Thailand) carrying the COVID-19 virus. What is known, however, is that after the migrant workers returned to Myanmar, the Lao PDR, and Cambodia, those countries experienced spikes in COVID-19 cases, exacerbating the strain on their limited health resources. As a result, local media and governments claimed that they had kept their countries safe from the pandemic, but that returning migrants ‘brought the virus and spread it’ (Nyein, 2020; Weng, 2020; Htet, 2020). To address this, precautionary quarantine measures were implemented, but little

Korea, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and Thailand. At least 71,000 migrants are thought to have returned to Myanmar by the end of May 2020, primarily from Thailand and China. However, the final figure is uncertain because there were many informal returnees. Returning migrants are required to quarantine for 21 days in community-based quarantine facilities, and a further 7 days at home before they can rejoin their communities.

²⁰ Although refugees are in a different category from migrants, they tend to work in their host countries, as in Thailand, often without formal documentation.

effort was made to support workers returning home or to prevent the spread of wrong or exaggerated information on the spread of virus via returning workers. This led to occasional acts of violence and discrimination linked to the virus and migrant workers. Acknowledging this situation, in May 2020, the UN Secretary General issued a statement appealing to governments to prevent the spread of the ‘virus of hate’ (Human Rights Watch, 2020a).

In the middle of May 2020, a surprising second wave of coronavirus infections emerged in several ASEAN countries, and continued for a while. In September 2020, Viet Nam reported around 2,000 new infections in Danang province, indicating a sudden spike; meanwhile, the Philippines reported around 1,800 new cases per day (on average) while Indonesia reported 1,400. In contrast, in the same month Singapore only witnessed around 533 new infections, of which about 400 occurred in migrant dormitories (Singapore Ministry of Health, 2020). Following the political turmoil in Thailand and Malaysia in September–October, a higher number of new infections was reported: Sabah in Malaysia reported 2,600 new infections, second only to Kuala Lumpur. Periodic spikes in Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore were attributed to the conditions of migrant worker dormitories, a fact that was overlooked in the initial stages. For example, while Singapore was originally hailed for its quick COVID-19 response, by May–June blind spots had emerged in its execution (Bismonte, 2020; Ng, 2020; Minter, 2020). As of June 2020, the country had more than 1,351,800 foreign workers in a population of 5.6 million, with low-skilled migrant workers making up roughly 40% of the total (Singapore Ministry of Manpower, 2020). Most COVID-19 cases occurred amongst these low-skilled migrant workers living in crowded foreign worker dormitories (Koh, 2020).

On 18 March, Malaysia issued a Movement Control Order, which restricted the movement of people. While some relaxations were allowed in May 2020, several trade unions have criticised this order for placing migrant workers in a precarious situation involving not only job losses but also the inability to move, making their futures uncertain. The ILO (2020o; see also ILO, 2020j) reported that, as of June, almost 50,000 Thai and 100,000 Indonesian workers had been repatriated from Malaysia. The Malaysian Trade Union Congress reported that in March–June 2020 there were instances of unfair termination of employment, unpaid wages, workers forced to live in poor conditions, employers forcing workers to continue working in nonessential jobs, and uncertainty surrounding workers’ employment status, as governments frequently modified their migration policies. Commentators and civil society organisations (CSOs) feared that migrant workers would be overlooked in COVID-19 response programmes supporting people’s access to spaces for isolation and decent housing and living conditions, such as dormitories. On this subject, the Malaysian Bar, a coalition of 62 local CSOs and many other groups issued statements following the large-scale arrests of irregular migrant workers on 1 May 2020. In addition, a statement issued by the UN Resident Representatives’ Office in Malaysia noted that fear of arrest and detention may drive migrant groups further into hiding and prevent them from seeking treatment (‘Sacked and Abandoned’, 2020; Sri Priya, 2020; Thomas, 2020; Bismonte, 2020).

2.3. Chaotic Exodus

This situation suggests that, although Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand (the main worker-receiving countries in the region) have robust domestic welfare and health care systems owing to their investment in social protection and health security over the years, their quick shutdown and restrictive migration policies have led to a sudden movement of large numbers of people and contributed to the spike in COVID-19 cases in the region (Yayboke, 2020). This precipitous flight also caused tremendous economic stress to the already traumatised migrant population, depriving them of the economic resources they would have had if given more time to evacuate, and making them even more susceptible to COVID-19. While the banning of cross-border travel across all countries in the region may have served domestic ends, it harmed the greater ASEAN region, particularly in its execution, by displacing thousands of migrant workers who hurriedly returned home without adequate testing, health protection (such as face masks), or food support, triggering concern in their home countries as well (Taskforce on ASEAN Migrant Workers, 2020).

3. Medium and Long-Term Impact on Migrant Workers

Several studies that investigated the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak on regional migrant workers generally examined the prevalence of migrant workers in two types of jobs: (i) jobs in essential industries and occupations where workers are unlikely to lose their jobs but are more likely to face health risks; and (ii) jobs in nonessential industries and occupations that cannot be done from home in which workers are more likely to lose their jobs (Djalante et al., 2020; ILO, 2020i; OECD, 2020b; ILO 2020q).²¹

Although regional migrant workers have supported local businesses for decades by filling domestic labour shortages, they were amongst the first to lose their jobs as employers downsized their work forces. Initial projections suggested that close to one-third of those in the construction sector and more than 50% of those in the tourism sector temporarily lost their jobs during March–June. The lockdowns also impacted the domestic labour market. Country-level assessments (e.g. ILO, 2020g on Malaysia dated 8 May 2020; ILO, 2020l on Myanmar dated 22 June 2020; ILO, 2020o on Thailand dated 3 July 2020) and regional reviews (CSIS, 2020) highlighted that the construction and tourism sectors in ASEAN were massively hit during March–June, and most regional migrant workers were unsure whether their employment would continue.

²¹ ADB (April 2020) estimated that employment in Asia and the Pacific will fall by as much as 167 million jobs in 2020 should containment measures last 6 months from when the outbreak first intensified in the region. In turn, wage incomes in the region are projected to fall from \$359 billion to \$550 billion. Migrant workers, many of whom have limited job security and access to social assistances, are amongst the hardest hit groups as workplace closures and border control restrictions are being put in place to abate further outbreaks. The crucial remittances they send home to their families are expected to decline dramatically. In understanding job and income losses in ASEAN (estimated to be around \$300 billion and 90 million jobs lost between February and December 2020), a proportional estimate for the region will be helpful. The ILO's initial assessment in May 2020 indicated that close to one in six young people is likely to lose their job due to COVID-19 (ILO Newsroom, 2020). This estimate was marginally revised in September 2020 but job losses on a broader scale were retained.

The Government of Malaysia estimated that every 10 new migrant workers helped create five new jobs for locals and increased GDP by 1.1%. Without these migrant workers, many MSMEs – particularly in the plantation, construction, and service sectors – were likely to face long closures (Asadullah, 2020).

Since April 2020, the ILO has published several country briefing notes, a regional briefing report, and country reports documenting the experiences of migrant labourers during the ongoing crisis. These reports indicate that the consequences of the crisis on intra-ASEAN migrant workers have been harshest in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand where those employed in construction, services, and manufacturing were the first to lose their jobs. Countries like Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines, which supply migrant workers for sectors such as fishing and shipping, have also been affected, with boats and vessels being grounded in early April 2020 (Engblom, Lephilbert, and Baruah, 2020; Manlangit, 2020).²²

The Migrant Working Group, a member-based organisation that advocates for the rights of migrant workers in Thailand, estimates that as many as 700,000 migrants had lost their jobs by the end of March ('Migrant Workers on Virus Front Line', 2020; Knight, 2020). These workers were reportedly in a very grim situation by May as they had difficulty finding new jobs, limited options to return home, and very little access to government aid in Thailand. Many of these workers were women employed in either the domestic or tourism sectors. Later reports estimated that almost 30% of the 21 million migrant workers had lost their jobs since March 2020, and may have been unable to return to work until at least the end of 2020 (Fernandez, 2020).

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis has been greater on certain sub-groups of migrant workers, such as women, indigenous peoples, older people, and irregular migrants, all of whom face systemic barriers to integrating themselves into the formal labour market. One in every five young people in the ASEAN region is expected to be unemployed in 2020, twice the overall rate and three times the adult rate (Fernandez, 2020). In addition, 20% of young people aged 15–24 are neither studying nor working. This proportion is even higher for women, at nearly 30%. More than 80% of women in the domestic sector are employed informally, and many women are exposed to gender-based violence as a result of the confinement measures (UNESCAP, 2020c; ILO, 2020j).

Many of those fortunate enough to remain employed during the crisis across the region have reported employment-related problems. A rapid assessment interviewing migrant workers in several countries, including Thailand, during April–May 2020 found that 32% reported work-related problems or abuses such as arbitrary wage-cuts, inability to refuse work during lockdown, being pushed to take unpaid leave, having their personal documents kept by employers, being threatened with the termination of their contracts, or other forms of harassment and violence. Anecdotal reports indicate that most used their meagre savings to survive during the lockdown period. Most of the respondents in this assessment were women (ILO, 2020n; Thubchumpon, 2020).

²² It is estimated that approximately 350,000 Filipino overseas workers had returned home by 1 May 2020.

Even before the pandemic, migrant workers in ASEAN already faced many challenges, including employment-related and human rights abuses. The absence of more effective, timely, and coordinated government responses to contain the pandemic and a lack of measures to protect the rights of migrant workers and their families has obviously exacerbated their precarious condition (Thubchumpon, 2020). According to the Task Force on ASEAN Migrant Workers (TF-AMW), 'The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the existing discrimination, inequality in access to decent work, health care, and better job opportunities. ASEAN's vulnerable people, migrant workers, are at higher risk of contracting COVID-19, as they are on the front lines, workers in low-wage, high-contact, essential jobs in sectors such as health care, retail, and government services. In addition, they may be less likely to have access to medical testing' (2020: para. 3). The ASEAN ministers acknowledged the lack of adequate coordination amongst AMS as a challenge in meetings held in April and June 2020.

In the past, CSOs and trade unions have demanded absolute protection and promotion of the rights and welfare of migrant workers, having outlined more than 140 recommendations (TF-AMW, 2018). Key strategic recommendations include the protection of human and labour rights, a complaint mechanism, pre-departure and post-arrival training, the reintegration of returnees, monitoring recruitment agencies, social protections for migrant workers, labour inspection and work safety, and the promotion of decent work for all, including migrant domestic workers (Serrano, Marasigan, and Puppos, 2014).

Persistently depressed economic conditions could lower demand for migrant workers and lessen support for cross-border migrant workers and permissive migration policies. For example, in construction and entertainment (major sectors that absorb migrant labour), lower demand for migrant workers is reportedly emerging in Thailand where no new construction work has taken place, and hotels and entertainment places closed in March 2020 (National Geographic, 2020).²³ Although ongoing construction projects have resumed and hotels reopened in June 2020, there is little hope for a 'return to normal', resulting in a lessened demand for labour. Moreover, the Government of Thailand has imposed additional scrutiny measures for the recruitment of migrant workers by contractors, creating further hurdles and possibly incentivising the illegal deployment of migrant workers ('Bangkok Tightens Scrutiny', 2020). Yusof, Muuti, and Ariffin (2020) and other media reports suggest that growing negative social attitudes towards migrants are already evident in some settings.²⁴ There is also widespread concern that prolonged travel restrictions across national borders may lead to labour shortages and speed up the mechanisation of sectors like agriculture, further lowering demand for migrant workers in the future.

²³ According to National Geographic, 'The unemployment rate reached 9.6% in May for the greater Bangkok area and 8.4 million workers across the country are at risk of losing their jobs, according to one government estimate. More people are homeless because they can't afford to pay rent' (2020).

²⁴ See earlier discussions on reported discrimination of migrant workers in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand.

Box 3: Association of Southeast Asian Nations Stimulus Packages

To deal with the fallout of the coronavirus disease pandemic, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) governments and central banks have announced fiscal and monetary policy packages on an unprecedented scale. Monetary policies adopted by several ASEAN member countries were meant 'to ensure adequate liquidity and boost confidence in the economy when initial concerns on broken supply chains and travel cancellations emerged' (Zulhibri and Sinay, 2020: 4). Okamura, Nguyen, and Doi (2020) noted that governments in the region eased interest rates and provided government guarantees on select bank lending activities, market interventions to improve temporary credit lines, purchases of corporate bonds, and even temporary relaxation of regulatory measures for financial institutions.

Some measures to ensure monetary stability were at the regional level, building on financial cooperation initiatives first adopted in 2000 after the Asian financial crisis. Finance ministries and central banks of ASEAN, together with those from China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ASEAN+3) established the Chiang Mai Initiative, a network of bilateral swap agreements designed to protect member countries against future crises. In 2010, this was revamped as the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralisation (CMIM), and a corpus of \$240 billion was set up to provide dollar liquidity support to reduce vulnerability to short-term external shocks.

In response to the coronavirus disease pandemic, ASEAN+3 finance ministers and central bank governors reached agreements to enhance the CMIM further, making it more effective and operationally ready for countries in need. These included institutionalising the use of local currencies in addition to the dollar for CMIM financing, broadening financing options for members in times of need.

Fiscal policy measures in the region have been mostly aimed at encouraging household consumption and helping companies survive the severe economic downturn. Governments implemented fiscal stimuli to boost the capacity of the health sector and cushion the impact on the broader economy, particularly in hard-hit sectors such as tourism and micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises.

Sources: Okamura, K., N. Thi Hong, and T. Doi (2020), 'Boosting ASEAN+3's Economic Resilience and Recovery during COVID-19', *Nikkei Asia*. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Boosting-ASEAN-3-s-economic-resilience-and-recovery-during-COVID-19> (accessed 29 October 2020); and Zulhibri, M. and J.B. Sinay (2020), 'Assessing ASEAN Economy Policy Responses in a Pandemic', *ASEAN Policy Brief*, No. 2. 28 May. https://asean.org/storage/2020/06/ASEAN-Policy-Brief-02_31-May-2020.pdf (accessed 28 October 2020).

The sizes of the stimulus packages have ranged from 10% of GDP to 40% of GDP. Collectively, fiscal packages adopted by AMS amount to a \$318.2 billion, equivalent to 10.1% of regional GDP in 2019. Thailand has the largest total stimulus package with three instalments reaching \$88.8 billion, followed by Indonesia with \$81.8 billion.

While the fiscal stimulus packages adopted by AMS are primarily aimed at helping affected industries, a significant part of the measures are for the health sector and subsidies to households, including cash allowances, electricity subsidies, and subsidies for social security contributions and pensions. These subsidies are crucial for the daily needs of workers and their households, especially those in the low-income and vulnerable categories.

In most countries in the region, food packages have also been provided to those in need. For example, the Philippines announced the reallocation of around \$3.9 billion for subsidies in cash and basic needs to 18 million low-income households over 2 months. In Singapore, citizens aged 21 and older will each be given S\$900 (\$634.90), while self-

employed persons will be paid S\$3,000 (roughly \$2,116.20) in three tranches to supplement their incomes. Innovative measures such as the ‘rice ATMs’ in Indonesia and Viet Nam, or pay-it-forward food coupons in Thailand, were also introduced. Beyond support for basic needs, other subsidies, such as for electricity, fuel, pensions, and social security contributions have helped lessen the financial burden on households. However, despite such short-term measures, for most migrant workers, maintaining their livelihoods during the COVID-19 crisis and coping amidst vulnerabilities and marginalisation remains a challenge.

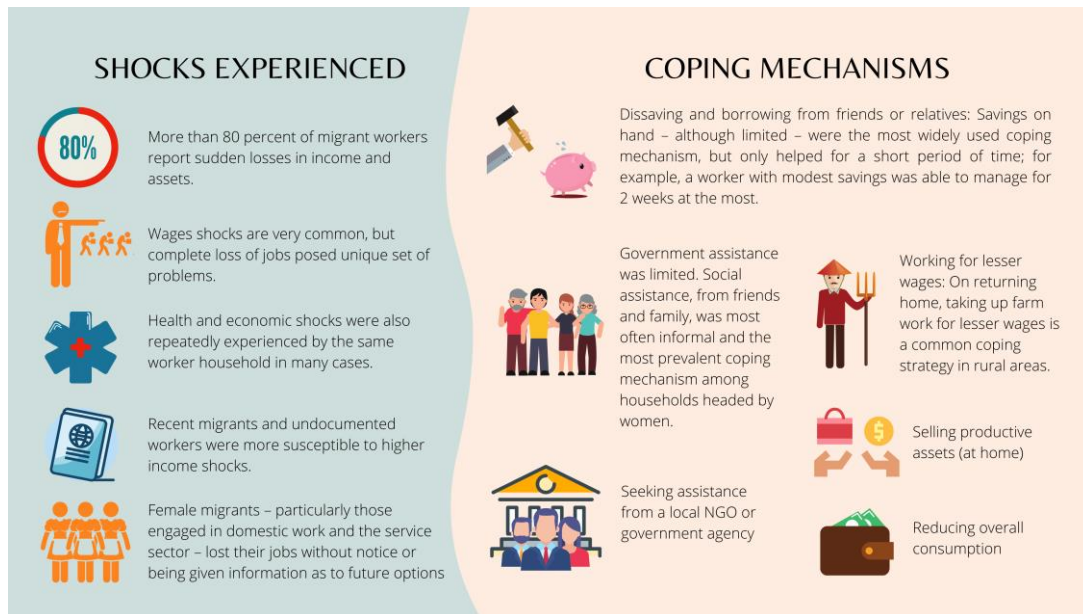
4. Coping Strategies of Migrant Workers After Job Losses: The Case of Myanmar

COVID-19 created a crisis within a crisis, that is, a health crisis led to an economic and survival crisis amongst migrant workers returning from different parts of the ASEAN region. In the case of Myanmar, reports indicate that around 250,000 workers, both domestic and abroad, have lost their jobs since March 2020 following the closure of microenterprises, tourism sites, and restaurants and hotels (Zaw Zaw Htwe, 2020).²⁵ Migrant workers from Myanmar typically work as temporary labourers in Thailand (and therefore lack the flexibility to switch jobs), and job loss often means a loss of work and residence permits, pushing them into irregular status without protection. There are serious obstacles barring them from accessing food supplies and health services in Thailand (for example, a Thai bank account is needed to access social protections). Several banks in Yangon reported an approximately 40% decline in external remittances during April–June 2020.

In interviews, migrant workers returning from Thailand to their homes in Myanmar’s Ayeyarwaddy region reported that the most stressful types of situations they had experienced since March 2020 were related to health, jobs, economic conditions (of the family and self), social and emotional issues, and the death of a friend or relative.

²⁵ This subsection is based on interviews and discussions with CSOs in Myanmar held on 21 July 2020. Some of the findings were validated by the ILO report of 2 June 2020 on Myanmar (ILO, 2020j).

Figure 2.3: Impacts of Job Loss on Migrant Workers from Myanmar



NGO = nongovernment agency.

Sources: Zaw Zaw Htwe (2020), 'Quarter of a Million Myanmar Workers Left Jobless Due to COVID-19', *The Irrawaddy*. 26 June. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/quarter-million-myanmar-workers-left-jobless-due-covid-19.html> (accessed 20 July 2020); and authors' personal communication with local civil society organisations on 21 July 2020.

In Myanmar, those migrating from interior rural areas to Thailand, Malaysia, or Singapore experienced more income shocks than those coming from other regions, as agriculture and related activities had stagnated in these areas long before, and could offer the returnees little (ILO, 2020I). For many households, loss of income in their villages pushed members to Thailand for work. Job opportunities for informal workers within Myanmar have also declined. For example, since the onset of the pandemic, several garment factories in the country slowed production and retrenched workers.²⁶ There are reports that major importers like Korea and Europe have cancelled their orders. Myanmar's Garment Manufacturers Association issued a media statement to this effect in early July 2020 (Myo Pa Pa San, 2020). This has left those returning home with fewer options for survival.

²⁶ As of December 2019, garment factories in Myanmar were estimated to employ around 100,000 workers, with a profit of around \$4.5 billion.

Box 4: Civil Society Organisation Response to the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic

Following widespread national lockdowns and curfews across the region, many migrant workers and daily wage earners found themselves stranded without money, food, or advance payment from their employers. They also faced a lack of information on the possibility of travelling and their migration status if they were to return home. Many CSOs directed their efforts towards addressing these immediate concerns, which dominated the discourse in the weeks following the lockdowns and curfews. The civil society response was varied, ranging from the provision of immediate relief to advice on managing the crisis and connecting people to various government schemes and facilities arranged by CSOs.

At the start of the pandemic, maintaining hygiene and safety was promoted as a precautionary measure: people were encouraged to remain safe, maintain physical distancing, and use masks and sanitisers. Families were provided with health kits consisting of masks and sanitisers and/or soap.

This was followed by the dissemination of coronavirus disease information in several different languages adapted to the context in which migrants were living and working, and hotlines were later provided to track gender-based violence and harassment, offer legal services and advice on migration procedures for migrant workers desiring to return home, and monitor human rights (largely related to curfew and movement control orders in Malaysia and Singapore). By June 2020, many CSOs were offering mental health support, training, advocacy, and campaign support. They have created solidarity networks and provide support to migrants, including food, water, essential medicines, shelter, personal protective equipment, and economic assistance. They have also established relief funds for farm workers, domestic workers, and others who have lost their livelihoods as a result of the pandemic. Worker and employer organisations are promoting equal treatment, decent work, and respect for fundamental principles and rights at work through social dialogue and in coordination with local authorities. CSOs and other stakeholders are also working to include migrants in the planning of policy responses to the pandemic. The concerted action of governments and stakeholders in developing coronavirus disease policy responses is key to ensure that migrants' rights and contributions are addressed and fostered.

Source: United Nations Network on Migration (2020), *Standing in Solidarity with Migrants*. 8 July. Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.
https://www.unodc.org/documents/press/releases/2020/July/NW_Statement_for_CSOs_final_version.pdf (accessed 25 August 2020).

Given the extent and scale of the disruptions that have occurred since March 2020, the impact of COVID-19 is likely to be much worse than that of the 1997 Asian financial crisis or the global financial crisis of 2008–2009. While these previous economic crises led to job losses and considerable distress amongst migrant workers, this proved to be temporary, as remittances and influxes of migrants have subsequently risen steadily (Abubakar, 2002; Abella and Ducanes, 2009). The long-term economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is not yet clear. While there are some grounds for optimism that ASEAN economies could recover quickly once the pandemic has ended, there is much uncertainty about how long the crisis itself is likely to last. Meanwhile, it is critical that governments focus on alleviating the economic and other suffering of their own citizens as well as that of migrant workers, who are amongst the most vulnerable sections of the region's population.

Chapter 3

Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic on the Sustainable Development Goals

In 2015, all ASEAN governments adopted the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, including 17 goals and 169 targets, which were designed to shape action over the next 15 years to realise the socioeconomic and cultural rights of all and to balance economic, social, and environmental development (UN DESA, 2016b). This agenda marks a milestone by mainstreaming migration, migrant workers, and the issues of inequality and decent work as integral components of development policy into SDGs 8 and 10 (Foresti and Hagen-Zanker, 2018; Long et al., 2017). In paragraph 29 of the declaration accompanying the adoption of the SDGs, ASEAN governments also committed to recognise the positive contribution of migrants to ‘inclusive growth and sustainable development’.

The ASEAN governments also committed to ‘cooperate internationally to ensure safe, orderly and regular migration involving full respect for human rights and the humane treatment of migrants regardless of migration status’ (UN General Assembly, 2015). Given the wide range of factors driving the phenomenon of migration, from poverty to climate change, it is seen by international agencies (IOM, 2018) and by ASEAN as a crosscutting issue relevant to all 17 of the SDGs and most of the 169 targets in the agenda. The paragraphs below review the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on select SDGs and their targets with respect to migrant workers, based on currently available information.

1. Baseline and Progress

A snapshot analysis of where the ASEAN region stood in 2015 (the baseline year for measuring progress towards the SDGs to be achieved by 2030) revealed that the region as a whole made significant progress in four goal areas from 2000 to 2015: poverty eradication (SDG 1), quality education (SDG 4), affordable and clean energy (SDG 7), and life below water (SDG 14) (UNESCAP, 2017b). For example, extreme income poverty (earning less than \$1.90 a day in 2011 purchasing power parity) more than halved from 26% in 2000 to 9% in 2015.

However, progress was slow or stagnant in six goal areas: good health and well-being (SDG 3); gender equality (SDG 5); clean water and sanitation (SDG 6); industry, innovation, and infrastructure (SDG 9); responsible consumption and production (SDG 12); and peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16).

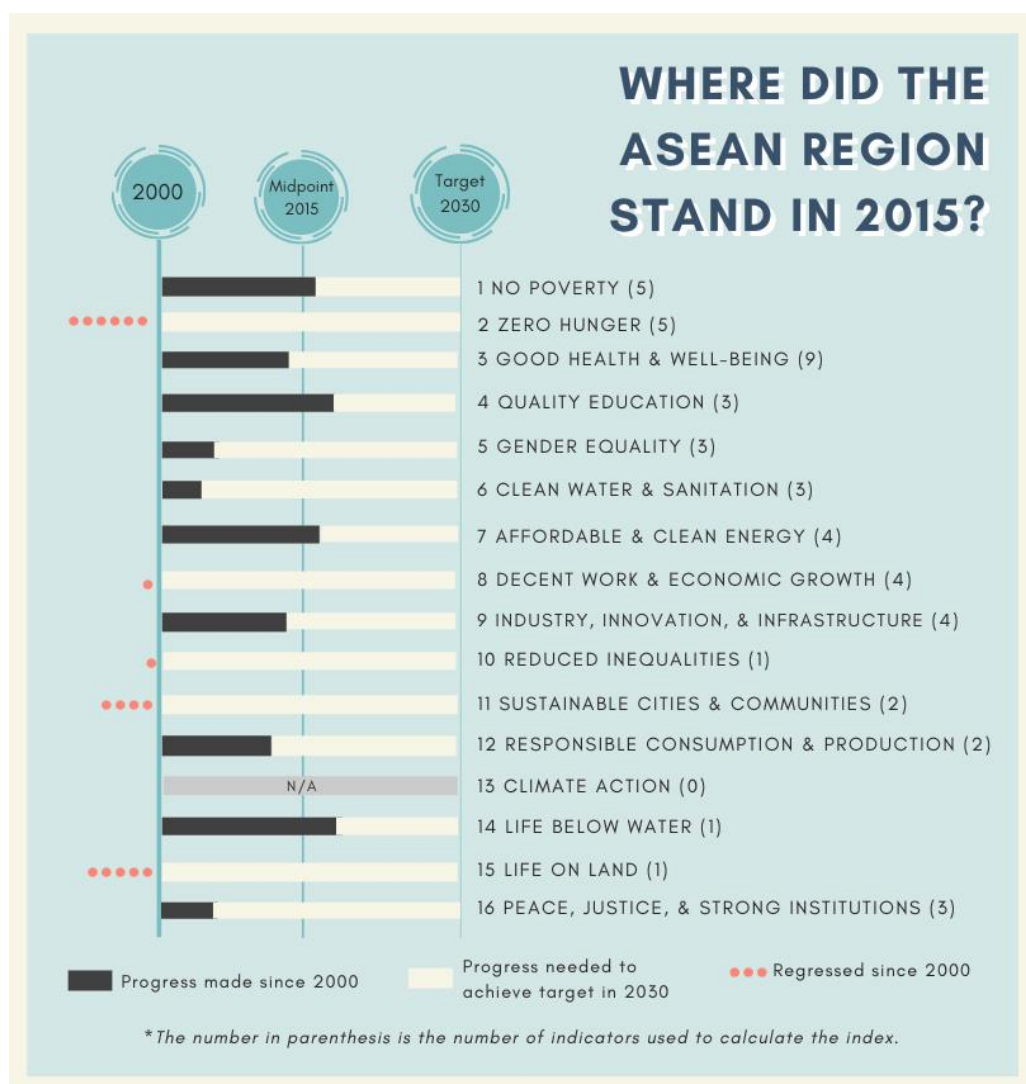
Figure 3.1: Links between the Sustainable Development Goals and Migration



Source: International Organization for Migration (2018), *Migration and the 2030 Agenda: A Guide for Practitioners*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration.

Since 2015, ASEAN has been making progress in several target areas under SDG 3 (good health and well-being); SDG 5 (gender equality); SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy); SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth); and SDG 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure). The UNESCAP analysis (2017a) cautioned that, to achieve the SDGs by 2030, ASEAN as a whole must to maintain its current rate of progress in reducing under-5 and maternal mortality, ensuring equal opportunities for leadership for women, increasing access to renewable energy, enhancing employment, increasing access to mobile networks, and reducing carbon dioxide emissions.

Figure 3.2: The Association of Southeast Asian Nations' Performance on the Sustainable Development Goals, 2015



Source: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2017), *Southeast Asia Subregion Challenges and Priorities for SDG Implementation*. 17 May. Bangkok: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. <https://www.unescap.org/resources/southeast-asia-subregion-challenges-and-priorities-sdg-implementation> (accessed 12 February 2021).

ASEAN would also have to reverse the trend in several other target areas, including increasing investment in agriculture, reducing overweight and wasting amongst children under 5, reducing adolescent fertility, increasing the supply of qualified primary school teachers, promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialisation, achieving the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources, conserving natural forests, and reducing all forms of violence and related death rates.

It has been predicted that the COVID-19 pandemic will have both short- and long-term impacts on many of the SDGs (Evetts, n.d.). In the ASEAN region the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to significantly impact the ability of least developed countries like Cambodia, the Lao PDR, and Myanmar in the Lower Mekong Region (currently the main labour-

supplying nations to the ASEAN region) to meet the SDGs by 2030, as well as reversing gains made in recent years (UN, 2020a).

The section below presents an overview of the possible channels of impact of COVID-19 on different SDGs and specific targets related to migration and the welfare of migrant workers. Although the paucity of reliable and up-to-date region-wide data limits this analysis, the discussion below indicates the overall trends and provides useful insights on appropriate mid-course corrective action for governments and policy makers, and future research.

2. Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic on Migration-Related Sustainable Development Goals

2.1. Sustainable Development Goal 1: End Poverty in All its Forms Everywhere

Historically, an important driver of migration has been the quest of people to improve their lives and those of their families materially (Murrugarra, Larrison, and Sasin, n.d.). Large differences in income within and between countries motivate individuals to escape poverty through migration. Migrants typically not only improve the economic status of their own families, but through remittances can make an impact on sending countries at the national level. They also acquire new skills and education that can make a lasting impact on poverty alleviation.

In implementing the SDG targets related to poverty, governments can help integrate the rights and interests of migrant groups, including asylum seekers, refugees, and internally displaced persons, in local and national poverty reduction policies and programming.

Migration relevant targets to be achieved by 2030 under SDG 1 include (i) eradicating extreme poverty (currently measured as earning less than \$1.25 a day) for all people everywhere (Target 1.1); and (ii) implementing nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable (Target 1.3).

Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic

According to a UN assessment of the global impact of COVID-19, the crisis risks ‘reversing decades of progress in the fight against poverty and exacerbating already high levels of inequality within and between countries’ (UN, 2020a). The UN report warned that, unless adequate measures are promptly put in place, the disruptions imposed by the pandemic and the measures adopted to suppress the virus will dramatically worsen the situation.

Another analysis asserted that ‘the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic are predicted to hit vulnerable populations in the region – which include urban and rural poor, migrants, informal workers, refugees, indigenous and ethnic groups, religious minorities, and women – harder. This is due to a complex intersection of a lack of social protections, limited infrastructure for hygiene and sanitation, difficulties in implementing social distancing, and overall low resilience to shocks like these due to underinvestment in the necessary supports’ (Open Development Mekong, 2020).

Based on a survey, the University of Chicago has estimated that globally two out of every five jobs lost during the pandemic may not come back, and that close to 40% of people are likely to face pandemic-induced layoffs from work (Barrero, Bloom, and Davis, 2020).

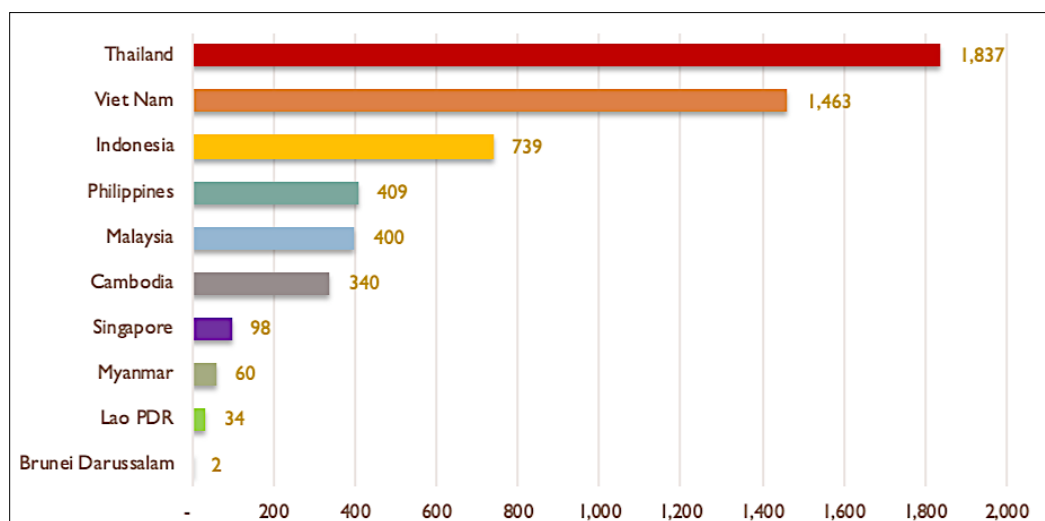
What is said about the global trend is equally relevant for ASEAN, and probably more relevant because a higher proportion of the population is dependent on the informal sector (Nortajuddin, 2020b).

A major negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the ASEAN region will likely be reduced employment, in both the formal and informal sector, which in turn will considerably drive up the number of people living in poverty in the region ('ADB Says Cambodia to Lose', 2020; ILO, 2020b; 2020c). While official figures are not yet available, ADB's Asian Development Outlook 2020 concluded that, overall, ASEAN countries stand to lose around 16 million jobs in 2020, and will take 2–3 years to recover.

In the context of Southeast Asia, according to a UN policy brief, the COVID-19 crisis also threatens to destroy the livelihoods of the region's 218 million informal workers, who represent 51–90% of the national non-agricultural workforce in the subregion. Without alternative incomes, formal social protection systems, or savings to buffer these shocks, workers and their families will be pushed into poverty, reversing decades of poverty reduction (UNESCAP, 2020c).

In the ASEAN region, economic shocks wrought by COVID-19 are already impacting poverty and welfare indicators, especially amongst the vulnerable and workers in the informal economy. Virgil and Lie argue that 'COVID-19 impacted all sectors in ASEAN, from health to the economy. It is predicted that 60 million people in East Asia and the Pacific may be pushed into poverty as a result of a 20% loss in income' (2020). While the region has accomplished considerable progress in poverty alleviation in the last few decades, approximately one in seven residents across the region were still living on less than \$2 per day as of 2015 ('The Fourth Industrial Revolution', 2020).

Figure 3.3: Post-Coronavirus Disease Pandemic Job Loss amongst Intra-Association of Southeast Asian Nations Migrant Workers

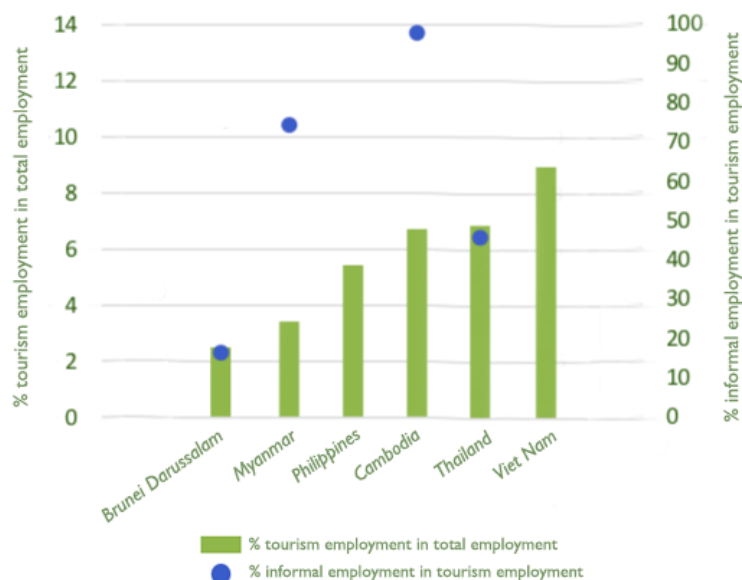


Lao PDR = Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Source: Myat Thura (2020), *Myanmar: Over 60,000 Workers Lost Jobs Due to Factory Shutdowns. Caused by COVID-19*. 28 April. London: Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (republished from Myanmar Times). <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/myanmar-over-60000-workers-lost-jobs-due-to-factory-shutdowns-caused-by-covid-19> (accessed 25 September 2020).

At the country level, between 2015 and 2019 the Philippines made progress in combating poverty; the poverty rate decreased from 21.6% in 2015 to 16.6% in 2018, and was projected to decline further during 2020–2025. A report in 2019 showed that about one in five of the country's 106 million people lived in extreme poverty and, of these, around 50% were reportedly undernourished. The ongoing public health crisis is expected to come as an additional burden for impoverished families and those living in urban slums, many of whom are informal workers. Similarly, Nortajuddin observes that things have never looked bleaker in Indonesia, where 24.79 million people are considered impoverished (2020b).

Figure 3.4: Employment in the Tourism Sector as a Share of Total Employment and Share of Informality in Tourism Employment, Latest Available Year (%)



Note: The informal employment share is not available for Fiji, the Philippines, or Thailand.

Source: Calculations based on national labour force surveys in the International Labour Organization (ILO) repository of micro datasets (www.ilo.org/ilostat). ILO (2020e), *Thematic Brief: COVID-19 and Employment in the Tourism Sector: Impact and Response in Asia and the Pacific*. 24 April. Bangkok: ILO.

https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms_742664.pdf (accessed 20 July 2020).

Box 5: Collapse of the Travel and Tourism Industry

The travel and tourism sector is fundamental to the economic health of several Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states, accounting for about 12.0% of the region's gross domestic product in 2019 and 13.3% of employment (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020). Online travel booking services, the bedrock of thousands of startups in the region, are now a \$34 billion industry and saw annual growth of 15% in the region from 2015 to 2019.

The collapse of the tourism sector (a major source of revenue and jobs in the ASEAN region) induced by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic is an important factor behind the International Monetary Fund projections of stalled economic growth for 2020 (International

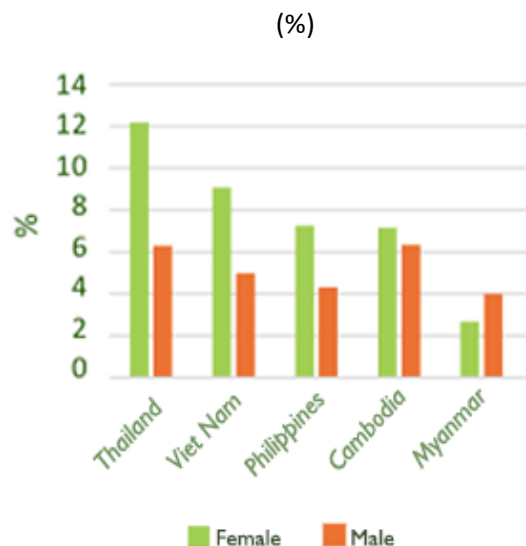
Monetary Fund, 2020). The impact on the region's tourism sector was felt at an early stage when the number of tourists from China declined abruptly. Now, with the virus spread across the globe, as many as 96% of the world's destinations are imposing some form of travel restrictions according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization.

According to an International Labour Organization report in April 2020, Asia and the Pacific stands to lose approximately 63 million jobs and \$1 trillion in gross domestic product, as international tourism plunged by about 80% in 2020 compared to 2019. This is by far the worst result for tourism since 1950 and puts an abrupt end to a 10-year period of sustained growth since the 2009 financial crisis (International Labour Organization, 2020e). Amongst countries with available data, those with the highest share of employment in tourism are Cambodia (with 6.7%), Thailand (with 9.0%), and Viet Nam (with 6.9%). During peak travel months, the percentage of workers employed in tourism can reach as high as 12%–15% in some countries. Tourism-dependent economies like Thailand – where nearly one in four jobs are in the hotel and restaurant sector, and migrant workers (both domestic and regional) account for two-thirds of those engaged in tourism sector – stand to lose 1.8 million jobs (ADB, 2020a).

In many ASEAN countries, more than three in four workers in the tourism sector are in informal jobs, leaving them especially vulnerable to the negative impacts of the COVID-19 crisis.²⁷ Workers who continue to work for hotels, airlines, or other hospitality industries typically do not have the option to work remotely, and therefore have a heightened risk of COVID-19 infection. Those who do fall ill may be disadvantaged in accessing healthcare services as informal workers and have no way of replacing their incomes if they stop working because of sickness or lockdowns.

Source: Authors.

Figure 3.5: Employment in the Tourism Sector as a Share of Total Employment by Sex, Latest Available Year



Source: Calculations based on national labour force surveys in the International Labour Organization (ILO) repository of micro datasets (www.ilo.org/ilostat). ILO (2020e), *Thematic Brief: COVID-19 and Employment in the Tourism Sector: Impact and Response in Asia and the Pacific*. 24 April. Bangkok: ILO. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms_742664.pdf (accessed 20 July 2020).

²⁷ Informal sector jobs are characterised by a lack of basic protections, including social protection coverage.

Beginning in April 2020, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao PDR, the Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam reported a spike in unemployment rates that continued into June 2020 (Hutt, 2020). For the last decade, Thailand's jobless rate has hovered around 0.6%, while Cambodia's unemployment rates before the COVID-19 crisis had barely risen above 2% since the early 1990s. Viet Nam's unemployment rate had also been consistently at less than 2%, while the formal unemployment rate in the Lao PDR was less than 1% through the end of 2019. Unemployment rates have risen to a 10-year high in Viet Nam, where the pandemic has cost nearly five million Vietnamese workers their jobs in just the first quarter (Q1) of 2020, according to the country's General Statistics Office. Experts predict that this rate will increase when figures for the more economically debilitating second quarter results are released (OECD, 2020b; 'ASEAN's Virus Dilemma', 2020; Hutt, 2020).

In the case of the Lao PDR, the World Bank observed that a sharp drop in the performance of the travel, tourism, and hospitality sectors – which account for 11% of total employment and 22% of employment in urban areas – has caused widespread job losses (2020c). Sengpaseuth (2020) reported that joblessness in the Lao PDR spiked to around 25% in May alone due to the pandemic. Between 96,000 and 214,000 additional people are projected to fall into working poverty as a result of the pandemic. In all cases, job losses in Thailand are projected to occur in construction, services (hotels and tourism in particular), and seasonal agriculture amongst both domestic workers and migrants.

By June 2020, the situation in Indonesia was equally serious, with around 6 million reported job losses in the construction, textile and garment, and service sectors (Jefriando and Suroyo, 2020). This in turn is expected to impact jobs for returning migrant workers and/or cause competition for jobs, resulting in wage cuts (Soeriaatmadja, 2020). Indonesia's National Planning Board (Bappenas) reasoned that the pandemic will worsen the labour market for Indonesia's young candidates as a result of higher barriers of entry into the job market, long-lasting lower income levels, and worsening labour conditions. These poor employment conditions might, amongst other factors, force desperate young graduates to accept jobs for which they are overqualified with low pay and minimum growth opportunities. Others might even be forced to accept informal jobs, typically characterised by vulnerable contract terms and substandard working conditions (Pradesha et al., 2020).

The situation is no different in Cambodia where layoffs were reported amongst garment workers, while at the same time migrants returned from Thailand in April–May 2020 ('ADB Says Cambodia to Lose', 2020). Given the economic decline, companies have been unable to finance expenses, including their employees' wages; and by the end of June 2020 there were reports of employers seeking 'deferred payment of wages', particularly in the travel and hospitality sector (Bagus Enrico and Partners, 2020). The return of migrant workers and increased competition for local jobs were expected to drive significant wage cuts in the garment sector, which was already bracing itself for the cancellation of export orders and lack of new business proposals. Given this situation, many in Cambodia and Myanmar wanted to return to Thailand (despite travel restrictions and a possible lack of jobs in Thailand too), hoping for a turnaround ('Migrant Workers Poised', 2020).

The COVID-19 shock has been most devastating for discretionary services, including restaurants, hotels, travel, and entertainment, which face a slow recovery but account for a high proportion of employment. One assessment predicted that many of these service businesses would soon have to choose between cutting workers, closing down, or facing bankruptcy (Subbaraman and Varma, 2020). The costs of unemployment for individual migrant workers and their households are not hard to imagine. When a person loses their job, there is often an immediate impact on that person's standard of living, particularly amongst informal sector workers whose savings tend to drift down to zero when a crisis occurs at home. Job losses are also likely to trigger social strife and increased household violence (ILO, 2020i; 2020k).

Despite playing an important role in national economies, providing a link with global structures of agricultural production and trade, and feeding the world, many agricultural workers and their families have long suffered from poverty and periodic and seasonal food insecurity (ILO, 2020c). Post-COVID 19, experts have also predicted that working poverty rates around the world and in ASEAN are expected to increase significantly. A report published by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) for Indonesia and Myanmar observed that agricultural workers experienced the highest incidence of working poverty during the early days of COVID-19 as there was prolonged non-activity followed by stiff competition for local jobs that led to arbitrary wage cuts. By June 2020, one-quarter of workers engaged in the sector were estimated to be in extreme poverty (Pradesha et al., 2020; ILO, 2020a). In addition to this, as governments order nonessential business to close, millions of people employed in the gig economy – who are mostly on precarious contracts, with little or limited access to health facilities or health insurance – are put in vulnerable situations and may turn to risky or exploitative employment.

Based on multiple field reports, the ILO expressed concern that casual and migrant wage workers (particularly in agriculture), landless farmers, small-scale traders, and commodity producers whose ability to purchase food grains were most affected. The ILO estimates that, to maintain their standard of living and not fall into poverty, low-paid rural migrant workers in the worst affected countries (like Myanmar, Indonesia, and the Philippines) would have had to find an additional week of employment every month (ILO, 2020c). Given widespread curfew and the closure of economic activities, replacement work has not been possible for many who have lost their jobs.

The social costs of job losses are difficult to calculate but are more real. Past crises have shown that increased unemployment (both domestic and migration-related) leads to domestic violence; social strife within communities; and, politically, nationalistic rhetoric, protectionism, and severe restrictions on migration of poorer groups. Moreover, prolonged periods of unemployment amongst migrant workers without a replacement job at home could lead to resentment within the local community, and/or drive unemployed people to crime to meet their immediate economic needs (ILO, 2020i; UNESCAP, 2020c).

Social Protections

SDG 1.3 calls for the implementation of appropriate social protection systems nationally, including support for different floors,²⁸ and achieving substantial coverage of the poor and vulnerable by 2030. A UN report observed that social protection or assistance has a positive impact on migrant workers and should be systematically enforced to secure SDG 1.3 (2018). The report adds that ‘social protection can cushion the adverse social effects of rapid structural change, including those associated with migration, unemployment, rising inequalities and pandemics’. It asserted that better access to social protections and services have been proven to ‘enable families to care for and sustain their members and reduce both the costs and time involved in work and other daily activities. They increase the chances that individuals and their families can lift themselves out of poverty and live dignified and productive lives’. This underlines the importance of taking marginalised and vulnerable communities into account in developing the pillars of ASEAN’s economy in all circumstances (ATUC, 2016b). Although migrant workers play a key role in ASEAN’s economic development, a large proportion of them lack adequate social protection coverage in both their home and host countries, such as proper contracts, unemployment support, retirement funds, accident coverage, sufficient paid leave, and family care. Many labour-sending nations also lack adequate resources for such programmes (Olivier, 2018; ASEAN, 2016a).

The ASEAN community has yet to achieve fair treatment of migrant workers and effective protection for them from abuse, exploitation, and violence (ATUC, 2020). AMS have been reluctant to extend the coverage of the Employment Act and Workmen’s Compensation Act to foreign migrant workers, leaving the parties to negotiate benefits individually (ATUC, 2020). Instead, many receiving countries in the region treat the migrant labour market arrangements (including wages and benefits) between employees and employers as a private matter, and refuse to intervene on matters of working hours and rest days for live-in domestic workers.²⁹

Even prior to the pandemic, AMS acknowledged that the absence of coordinated social protection programmes rendered workers vulnerable to discrimination in the laws and practices of both origin and destination countries. They also recognised that undocumented and women migrant workers in particular are left with little or no protection from very low wages and poor working conditions (Orbeta et al., 2013).

In addition, existing social protection programmes have always lacked a comprehensive list of migrant workers employed at any given time, thus weakening the targeting of assistance delivery. The targeting effectiveness of these programmes and registries has also been poor, often excluding over half of the poorest migrants such as undocumented workers or women (who often serve as domestic workers or family care givers).

²⁸ According to the ILO, national social protection floors should comprise at least the following four social security guarantees: (i) access to essential health care, including maternity care; (ii) basic income security for children, providing access to nutrition, education, care, and any other necessary goods and services; (iii) basic income security for persons in active age who are unable to earn sufficient income, in particular in cases of sickness, unemployment, maternity, and disability; and (iv) basic income security for older persons.

²⁹ While Singapore has put in place strict oversight arrangements on the provision of and access to welfare systems for migrant workers, such oversight arrangements are treated flexibly in Malaysia and Thailand.

Some countries in the region have responded to the crisis by increasing social welfare measures for vulnerable populations. For example, the Philippines is currently providing a cash transfer to 75% of the poorest households across the country using its social registry to identify beneficiary households (Rutkowski, 2020). However, this approach likely excludes a considerable portion of intended recipients, particularly migrant workers who may not have registered or renewed their registration. Although Thailand's response was seen as efficient, reaching almost two-thirds of households, few schemes targeted the social protection of documented regional migrant workers, and a large number of undocumented, irregular workers were excluded (ILO, 2020i; 2020l; 2020o).

The COVID-19 crisis is also gradually reducing access to safe and reliable employment opportunities for migrant workers and informal sector in general.³⁰ Informal sector workers carry obvious risks, like substandard safety provisions and working with dangerous goods and machinery, on construction sites for example. During the COVID-19 crisis, migrant workers have reportedly been prepared to engage in unsafe tasks to avoid job losses (Saturdaysang, 2020). For domestic workers and those engaged in service sector, there is no process in place for resolving workplace-related safety issues, and helplines provided by civil society organisations only extend support at times. Moreover, women (particularly those in domestic work and elderly care) are sometimes unable to access these services because of their work location and conditions imposed by their employers.

Box 6: Importance of Equal Treatment

Many migrant workers in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) region are vulnerable to discrimination and exclusion in their destination countries (Olivier, 2018; ATUC, 2019b). Two overlapping reasons for this are their migration status (irregular or undocumented) and the nature of their employment (e.g. informal work or the informal economy). Even regularised migrant workers in the formal economy are not subject to equal treatment across all four social protection guarantees. Since early 2000s, the main receiving ASEAN countries – Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand – have also reduced hospital subsidies for non-nationals or obliged them to take up private insurance.

Six of the 10 ASEAN Member States – Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore – have ratified the Equality of Treatment (Accident Compensation) Convention, 1925 (No. 19) to ensure some occupational injury protection for non-national workers. Under the Work Injury Compensation Act 2009, private insurance for work injury and illnesses is compulsory in Singapore for both migrant and non-migrant workers engaging in manual work or earning less than S\$1,600 per month for non-manual work. In contrast, although Thailand recognises equality of treatment for accident compensation under its 1994 Workmen's Compensation Act B.E. 2537, in reality, most migrant workers are uninsured for occupational injury and diseases. This is because of their undocumented status, non-compliance of employers, migrants' lack of awareness of their rights, language barriers, onerous administrative procedures, and other factors. In Malaysia, non-permanent resident migrant workers do not qualify for work injury and invalidity protection under its Social Security Organization, and are instead obliged to be insured under the lesser Foreign Workers Compensation Scheme. Although not a signatory of Convention No. 19, the Government of Viet Nam recently amended its Law on Social Insurance to permit the coverage of migrant workers with valid work permits as of January 2018.

Source: Authors.

³⁰ Workplace shelter-related issues are discussed under different SDGs.

2.2. Sustainable Development Goal 2: End Hunger, Achieve Food Security and Improved Nutrition, and Promote Sustainable Agriculture

Low-paying employment in rural areas and low productivity of small-scale food producers drive migration to urban centres and overseas, as workers search for better income opportunities. At the same time, agricultural communities are often affected by climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding, and other disasters, necessitating adaptation strategies to boost livelihoods and help prevent forced environmental migration.

Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic

A large migrant labour force that depends on the food supply chain sector for their livelihoods remains significantly affected by the COVID-19 crisis. ASEAN's food and beverage sector not only accounts for 116 million jobs (about 35% of the labour force) but also ensures a continued food supply. By the end of July 2020 this labour force was confronting numerous challenges (Chan, 2020). Apart from the threat to lives and livelihoods of millions of those employed in the sector, the pandemic initially raised additional concerns about the durability of the subregion's food supply systems, a complex matrix involving farmers, fishers, labourers, drivers, cold storage, food processors, retailers, and consumers (UN Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2020a). In a briefing note on ASEAN dated 2 June 2020, the OECD observed that '...the COVID-19 pandemic has placed unprecedented stresses on food supply chains, with bottlenecks in farm labour, processing, transport and logistics, as well as momentous shifts in demand. Most of these disruptions are a result of policies adopted to contain the spread of the virus'.

At the onset of COVID-19, initial lockdown measures resulted in panic buying that left many migrant workers and their households in distress as they either could not access supplies or lacked cash on hand to purchase them. Safety nets are essential to avoid hunger and food insecurity for migrant workers and help them overcome temporary shocks. Border closures and export restrictions have limited the availability and affordability of certain food items for countries that rely on imports. Domestically, disruptions in upstream food supply chains have arisen from both mobility restrictions and worker illness during planting and harvesting, in addition to hindered operations in processing, trucking, logistics, and trading ('ADB Says Cambodia to Lose', 2020). The sudden closure of economic activities and international borders quickly halted the transport of essential commodities for some time, leading to public anxiety. Disruptions to domestic and regional food supply chains (including the delayed start of the farming season in Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam) caused by major transport and travel restrictions undermined food availability and accessibility (Ellis, 2020; Food Industry Asia, 2020).³¹ At the same time, a host of new problems brought on by the pandemic has stunted both in-country and cross-border supply chains, leaving essentials

³¹ Southeast Asia's food supply chain was already at risk of serious disruption before the COVID-19 pandemic, which has underscored existing frailties and brought them to the fore.

accessible only to a few (Ellis, 2020).

Rapid regional surveys and anecdotal reports indicate that sudden job and income losses are triggering reduced food consumption amongst migrant workers as they try to save money and survive during the lockdown period, leaving them at risk of hunger and malnutrition (ADB, 2020b). Given the lack of income and concerns about the impossibility of returning to work in the near future, households have started 'saving', impacting food consumption and nutrition amongst informal sector workers. Basic food handouts provided by state agencies or charities to compensate for the losses incurred are often limited, and may not meet the nutritional needs of children and pregnant women (Tantau, 2020).

An ADB briefing note found that household food consumption and nutrition have been significantly affected by the loss of jobs and income and by limited access to food. Informal sector workers in particular, most of whom are migrants (either domestic or regional), have been at a higher risk of food insecurity since April 2020. Shortages of labour and input supplies resulting from prolonged lockdowns can reduce the scale of crop production while disrupted logistics limit the options of smallholder farmers to access better priced markets. A parallel report noted distress sales of vegetables during May–June in several parts of ASEAN (ADB, 2020b).

Potential Long-Term Impact

Although food supplies currently appear plentiful and the initial panic buying has subsided, worries persist about the availability of sufficient food at affordable prices in the future, particularly in the context of job and income losses amongst migrant workers. Approximately 61 million people in Southeast Asia are currently undernourished; this number may increase following the pandemic and is likely to moderate only when the economic situation stabilises (FAO, 2019).

Rice is the staple food of Southeast Asia, which produces, trades, and consumes a large portion of the global rice supply. In 2018, Southeast Asia produced more than 220 million tonnes of rice. While both FAO and the IFPRI have projected sufficient rice stocks for the rest of 2020 in ASEAN and Asia and the Pacific more widely, the measures needed to curb further COVID-19 outbreaks could disrupt supply chains critical for food security (ADB, 2020b; Diao and Wang, 2020; Pradesha et al., 2020).

A participant in a webinar on the future of food systems in Southeast Asia post COVID-19 convened by the International Rice Research Institute along with other development institutions asserted that, 'the impacts of the pandemic pose immense threats to the health of communities already struggling with hunger and on the livelihood of vulnerable groups including farmers'. The webinar participants considered various ways that AMS could help smallholders, landless people, and other poor groups who migrate for work across borders and have lost their jobs since March 2020. In the short term, the continued lack of economic access to food is a major challenge that must be dealt with. This could mean cash disbursements in some cases and free distribution of food for a period of time in others.

Studies and anecdotal reports have identified multiple impacts of the pandemic felt by different groups in society, including primary food producers such as smallholder farmers, landless people, and those who have now been without an income for a significant period of time (ADB, 2020b). Field studies and reports from Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand observe that curfew forced the closure of operations, removed travel and transport facilities, and prevented workers (both locals and migrants) from working in farms and processing and packaging facilities. In many rural areas, access to farm inputs such as seeds, fertilisers, and crop protection products became challenging. Farming activities virtually came to a halt during April–May and gradually opened only in late June (Pradesha et al., 2020; UNESCAP, 2020b; FAO, 2020b). In the medium term (through early 2021), this non-activity is likely to have significant impacts on labour-intensive food crops, including fruit, vegetables, dairy products, and meat processing (Dzulfikar, 2020).

Acknowledging this situation, the June 2020 ASEAN Summit stated, ‘We note that the COVID-19 outbreak has drawn our attention on the immediate danger of food shortage and its adverse effect on nutrition, given a sudden spike in demand and disruption in supply chains, ASEAN needs to also continue its efforts to ensure stable and sustainable food sources’ (ASEAN, 2020e). In parallel, the ASEAN Ministers’ Summit on Agriculture and Forestry recognised the threat to food security, food safety, and nutrition; and called for pertinent actions (ASEAN, 2020e).

In response, in addition to credit support for the agriculture sector, some ASEAN governments have implemented measures to ensure that supply chains from farms to markets remain open. For example, Malaysia allotted RM1 billion (\$231.6 million) to its Food Security Fund, and provided additional support to farmers and fishers for agricultural production (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2020). A budget was allocated for food storage facilities and distribution to safeguard supply, and for agro-food projects. Myanmar also provided substantial support for its agriculture sector in the form of cash or loans to smallholder farmers to support production (French-Myanmar Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2020).

Several AMS have complemented these measures by supporting access to markets and productivity enhancement, and facilitating export processes including for rice. Rural cash-for-work programmes for the economic recovery period were also included in overall measures to ensure food supply chain connectivity during the pandemic (ASEAN, 2020c).

2.3. Sustainable Development Goal 3: Ensure Healthy Lives and Promote Well-Being for All Ages

It is well recognised that to achieve the vision of the SDGs – to leave no one behind –the health needs of refugees and migrants must be adequately addressed (World Health Organization [WHO], 2018). Unfortunately, productive migrant populations have been perceived as a burden on countries’ health services rather than an asset. Achieving the health-related targets of SDG 3 in the ASEAN region will require a special focus on migrants and refugees, to help both the cause of these vulnerable groups as well as larger national health goals.

Migrants face a variety of obstacles in accessing quality healthcare, which is often denied to them due to their legal and administrative status. There is a lack of comprehensive national health policies and strategies for migrants in many Southeast Asian countries. With the exception of a few countries in ASEAN, undocumented migrants have been prevented from accessing local health services, resulting in great hardship for them and also contributing to a failure to eliminate vaccine-preventable and other communicable diseases.

Migration relevant targets to be achieved by 2030 under SDG 3 include the following:

- (i) Reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births (Target 3.1).
- (ii) End preventable deaths of neonates and children under 5 years of age (Target 3.2).
- (iii) End the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and neglected tropical diseases; and combat hepatitis, waterborne diseases, and other communicable diseases (Target 3.3).
- (iv) Reduce by one-third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment, and promote mental health and well-being (Target 3.4).
- (v) Substantially increase health financing and the recruitment, development, training, and retention of the health workforce in developing countries, especially in least developed countries and small island developing states (Target 3.8).

Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic

People in vulnerable situations are particularly at risk from the COVID-19 outbreak because of their health and overall social and economic circumstances. Intra-ASEAN migrant workers face greater risks because of their often solitary status and living conditions in workplace shelters or dormitories, which are ideal settings for rapid transmission. They may also find it difficult to social distance. In the case of female domestic workers or caregivers, there is a possibility of further risk from their work, in addition to sociocultural and financial barriers. Working mothers have little recourse to social protection when public health measures such as school closures are imposed (UN Women, 2020b; ILO, 2020n).

Countries such as Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao PDR, and Myanmar where COVID-19 is likely to exacerbate multiple existing vulnerabilities are of particular concern. Myanmar, for example, has relatively poor public health infrastructure and domestic opportunities for livelihoods. Of the four million Myanmar citizens currently working abroad, it is estimated that 700,000–900,000 may have returned home after losing their jobs, and another 500,000 may have lost their jobs but have yet to return home (Diao and Michael Wang, 2020).³² Almost all have likely lost their incomes and are unable to remit money home, leaving their families to cope with complex livelihood issues, especially health concerns, during a pandemic with less cash on hand. Even before the pandemic, many households in southeast Myanmar were highly vulnerable as a result of the effects of protracted conflict, a lack of sufficient investments in local development, and stagnating

³² This report estimated that remittances declined by 14% during the first 2 weeks of May 2020.

employment opportunities. The COVID-19 crisis has further exacerbated the vulnerability of these households (United Nations Capital Development Fund, 2020). As migrants lose income and remittances correspondingly decrease, families back home dealing with their own pandemic-related challenges will suffer. Over the years, various studies have shown that health care crises can drive people to make risky labour market decisions that can make them more vulnerable, either because they cannot afford to pay for medical care or because they have lost their job as a result of the crisis. This can heighten the risk of forced labour or enslavement, further impacting their health (Human Rights Watch, 2018).³³ Moreover, large numbers of migrant workers fall into employment ‘grey areas’ such as the entertainment and related service areas, which are associated with higher levels of poverty (Buller et al., 2020).

In Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore – despite statements to the contrary – there is also serious concern about the risks of infection amongst migrant workers accommodated in densely packed, often poorly sanitised dormitories.³⁴ As analysts have pointed out, with no vaccine and continued high demands placed on the public health system and services, the level of care available to regional migrant workers is likely to deteriorate in the coming months, and the situation could obviously be worse in the case of undocumented workers (US State Department, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2018).³⁵ In all of these countries, undocumented migrant workers often lack ready access to local health care systems, and that access may be further hampered as spiralling demands on those systems force governments to limit who receives health care.³⁶ The post-COVID-19 surge of nativist and nationalist political rhetoric (e.g. Malaysia, as discussed below) have also made migrant workers easy targets for exclusion from further access to services or, worse, stigmatisation as an infection risk (‘Locked up in Malaysia’s Lockdown’, 2020). As a result, migrant workers have had to use their savings, if any, to pay medical bills.

Long-Term Health Impact

Even before the pandemic, healthcare in the ASEAN region was of variable quality. Maternal mortality in some countries (e.g. the Lao PDR and Myanmar) was 10 times higher than in others (e.g. Brunei Darussalam, Thailand, and Singapore). While Southeast Asia had made considerable progress in its fight against malaria, it lagged in eliminating tuberculosis, with new and relapse cases of tuberculosis still affecting 300 in 100,000 people, double the average rate in Asia and the Pacific. Neglected tropical diseases constituted a burden on the region’s development, with 31.3% of the population (more than 200 million people) requiring interventions in the form of large-scale preventive drug treatment or individual treatment. Child malnutrition in the region is also a complicated issue, with more than one-third of children in some countries malnourished, while the

³³ Most migrant workers engaged in the illegal fishing sector in Thailand moved out of their homes largely out of concern about heightened risks of poor health, either to themselves or someone in the household.

³⁴ Thailand allows migrants to access health care like all citizens; however, this situation is challenging in the case of undocumented migrant workers. Similarly, in Malaysia the high number of undocumented migrant workers and refugees (who may also work illegally) makes the provision of health care difficult.

³⁵ Thailand is known to be a source, transit, and destination country for forced labour, particularly in the fishing, service, and sex sectors.

³⁶ Migrants include irregular migrants and those trafficked into other countries.

proportion of overweight children has tripled since 2000. In this context, COVID-19 has the potential to disrupt health services in several different ways; through the health system becoming overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients, through interventions used to slow the transmission of COVID-19 inhibiting access to preventative interventions and services, and through the interruption of medical supplies (Hogan et al., 2020).

According to a 2020 study by the Imperial College London COVID-19 response team, such service disruptions in high-burden settings worldwide could increase deaths related to HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria over 5 years by up to 10% (for HIV), 20% (for tuberculosis), and 36% (for malaria) (Hogan et al., 2020). The greatest impact on HIV deaths will likely be from interruptions to antiretroviral therapy, which may occur at times of high or extremely high demand on health systems; and for tuberculosis, the greatest impact is likely to be from reductions in the timely diagnosis and treatment of new cases, which may result from a long period of COVID-19-suppression interventions. New modelling on HIV by the WHO and Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS also highlights the importance of taking immediate steps to minimise interruptions in health services and supplies of antiretroviral drugs during the pandemic (WHO, 2020a).³⁷

While there is limited data on COVID-19 infection in tuberculosis patients, those ill with both will likely have poorer treatment outcomes, especially if tuberculosis treatment is interrupted. Tuberculosis patients should take precautions against COVID-19 as advised by health authorities, and continue their treatment as prescribed (WHO, 2020b).

Maintaining critical prevention activities and health care services for HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria could significantly reduce the overall impact of the pandemic and contribute towards the progress of this SDG and its targets.

Box 7: Noncommunicable Diseases

According to a 2019 World Health Organization (WHO) report on noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) (September), COVID-19 poses a high risk to both older people and people with pre-existing NCDs, include cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory disease (e.g. chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), diabetes, and cancer. According to global data, death rates in COVID-19 patients with pre-existing conditions such as cardiovascular disease (13.2%), diabetes (9.2%), chronic respiratory disease (8%), hypertension (8.4%), and cancer (7.6%) exceed that of patients without coexisting conditions (0.9%) (Guan et al., 2020).

Noncommunicable diseases – mainly cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory diseases, diabetes, and cancer – are top killers in the WHO South-East Asia Region,³⁸ claiming an estimated 8.5 million lives each year (WHO, n.d.a.). One-third of these deaths are premature and occur before the age of 70, thus affecting economically productive individuals. The four most common NCDs are largely caused by four modifiable behavioural risk factors: tobacco use, unhealthy diet, insufficient physical activity, and harmful use of alcohol. NCDs disproportionately affect the poor, impoverish families, and place a growing burden on healthcare systems.

According to Thakur et al. (2020), many people with NCDs are expected to experience restricted

³⁷ Service disruptions related to COVID-19 could cause hundreds of thousands of extra deaths from HIV.

³⁸ The WHO South-East Asia Region includes only Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand.

mobility due to lockdowns or a lack of transportation, which will affect their ability to access health services during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, restrictive measures such as lockdowns, social distancing, and travel restrictions to reduce the spread of infection in many countries may also impact people living with NCDs by limiting their activity, hampering their ability to secure healthy foods and access preventive or health promotion services. Without proper management, chronic medical conditions can worsen due to stressful situations resulting from restrictions, insecure economic situations, and changes in normal health behaviours. Disruptions in routine health services and medical supplies can also increase morbidity, disability, and avoidable mortality amongst NCD patients (Thakur et al., 2020).

Source: Authors.

2.4. Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Promote Lifelong Opportunities for All

Migrants often have difficulty providing their children with quality education because of a variety of barriers, including cost, access, and discrimination. Deprived of a good education, these children grow up with several disadvantages that in turn keep them in the same conditions of poverty as their parents. Ensuring the education of these children is essential to meet the targets of SDG 4 in the ASEAN region.

Migration-relevant targets to be achieved by 2030 include the following:

- (i) By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education, leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes (Target 4.1).
- (ii) By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational, and tertiary education, including university (Target 4.3).
- (iii) By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults (both men and women) achieve literacy and numeracy (Target 4.6).
- (iv) By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries (especially least developed countries, small island developing states, and African countries) for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training; information and communication technology; and technical, engineering, and scientific programmes in developed countries and other developing countries (Target 4.b).

Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic

A study of AMS showed that, while the impact of worker migration on children is not always negative, it often results in them being deprived of a normal schooling and childhood (Mortensen, 2016). Migrating parents often leave school-aged children with elderly grandparents or other extended family members, and children therefore may lack the necessary supervision to attend school. These children often must work to meet shortfalls in household income (resulting in increased child labour), and girls especially are required to take on caring roles previously done by the migrant mother. Children not in school are often easy targets for trafficking.

Children left behind in a sending country also have high rates of non-attendance at school between the ages of 10 and 17 years, and those in school often show no substantial improvement in educational performance. Children who accompany their parents to their destination countries may find it difficult to access educational infrastructure as they are often not included in school enrolment campaigns by local authorities, for example, because of a lack of proficiency in the local language or non-recognition of grades completed in their home towns. Children who do enrol in a state school may be unable to learn in their native language, and households may find it difficult to bear the costs of uniforms and/or books. (Altbach and de Wit, 2018).

The COVID-19 crisis is likely to exacerbate existing inequalities in access to quality education (e.g. through the lack of adequate information technology infrastructure and facilities to engage in online learning) in the ASEAN region, and children of vulnerable groups such as migrant workers are likely to be impacted most by the COVID-19 crisis (Jalli, 2020). This reality will affect populations from low-income, labour-exporting countries like Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Viet Nam (and to an extent Indonesia), where access to good-quality learning institutions has been a problem for some time (Altbach and de Wit, 2018). In ASEAN's developing countries, primary school-age children from households in the poorest quintile are almost three times more likely to be out of school than those in the richest quintile, and the childhood mortality rate for the poorest quintile is two to three times higher than for the richest quintile.

During the COVID-19 crisis many of these countries observed significant increases in school drop-out rates and the incidence of child labour because of unaffordable school costs and a lack of adequate food (Nortajuddin, 2020c).³⁹ In addition to the impact on their growth and development, children not in school are easy targets for trafficking (both domestic and across borders) (US State Department, 2020; US Department of Justice, n.d.).⁴⁰

School Closures

The Declaration of the Special ASEAN Summit on COVID-19 (virtual) held on 14 April 2020 reaffirmed ASEAN's commitment to take collective action and coordinate policies in the fight against the pandemic. In doing so, ASEAN leaders acknowledged that hard-won gains in expanded access to education in the region since the 1990s could stagnate or reverse as school closures are extended, and access to alternative options like online or distance learning remain out of reach for those without means to connect. This may cause further losses in human capital and diminish economic opportunities. The statement included special action plans for school-going children and education ('The Fourth Industrial Revolution', 2020). Nonetheless, schools were closed for a period of time, sparking concern about the education sector in general and rural schools in particular.

³⁹ The World Bank has stated that Cambodia's economy is likely to shrink by 1.0%–2.9% this year, the worst performance for the country in a quarter of a century. The COVID-19 crisis will put 1.76 million jobs at risk as a result of losses in tourism, manufacturing, and construction, which together account for more than 70% of growth and 40% of employment (World Bank, 2020a).

⁴⁰ See www.ecpat.org. The US Department's Trafficking in Persons Report 2020, which cites different issues that occurred during 2020, shows that child trafficking flourished despite the pandemic.

While school closures seem to be a logical solution to enforce social distancing within communities during the pandemic, educationists and activists assert that prolonged closures tend to have a disproportionately negative impact on the most vulnerable students, particularly those living in rural areas and those with disabilities. They have fewer opportunities for learning at home, and their time out of school may present economic burdens for parents who may face challenges finding prolonged childcare, or even adequate food in the absence of school meals.

After some initial hesitation, countries like Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand (and to a lesser extent the Philippines and Indonesia) continued with internet (online) and distance learning, regardless of school closures ('Schools May Reopen', 2020; 'Thailand Schools Reopen', 2020; Su and Daga, 2020). Institutions of higher learning in these countries were also generally quite prepared to adapt to this new reality because of the rapid progress of technology since the mid-2000s and distance learning methods. However, rural areas faced technical problems along with difficulties providing the necessary household infrastructure for children to engage in online classes. This gap further increased as a result of the job and income losses experienced by households that depend on remittances. In Myanmar and the Philippines, there were reports of distress sales of items like mobile phones and laptops by households in both urban and rural areas.⁴¹

Most other countries and school systems (e.g. Indonesia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, and the Philippines) were much less prepared to introduce e-learning methods, particularly for secondary education and below. Governments acknowledged that access to technology in most households varied, with shortfalls seen amongst poorer groups and especially amongst migrants. Programmes to target those most in need were lacking, and children from these households were likely to drop silently out of school (Jalli, 2020).

By August, schools in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand reopened with varying degrees of caution, but those in other countries remained closed. In countries like Myanmar, where health facilities are scarce, schools were turned into makeshift holding centres during the initial period of the crisis. The extent to which this temporary closure of schools impacted education is unknown. These issues must all be factored into planning, particularly during the coping and recovery phases when schools reopen post-COVID-19, and in addressing the education needs of children of migrant workers.

⁴¹ Discussions with U Maung Soe in Yangon (21 July 2020) and Ramon Bultron in Manila (21 August 2020).

Box 8: Risks of Increasing Child Labour

The crisis induced by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has already caused enormous geographical and social dislocation, loss of income, and disruption in the lives of migrants; and is expected to have a very negative impact on the education of their children, only compounding existing problems. In recognition of this, at the onset of the pandemic, the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children and the Joining Forces and Child Rights Coalition issued the following collective statement: 'The COVID-19 pandemic is a child rights crisis in Asia. Due to school closures across the region, tens of millions of children have been forced into potentially unsafe home environments for weeks or months on end. We have received extremely worrying reports from several countries that domestic violence is on the rise. Governments of ASEAN and SAARC must put children's well-being at the centre of the pandemic response. Child protection services must be designated as essential and be given adequate resources to respond to reports of abuse'.⁴²

A particular concern was that prolonged closure of rural schools could result in large numbers of children dropping out of the system and becoming child labourers (Nortadujin, 2020a). In early May 2020, the International Labour Organization and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) warned that the COVID-19 outbreak could create the first increase in child labour in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations region in more than 20 years unless urgent action were taken. This concern was particularly widespread amongst educationists and civil society groups engaged in protecting child rights (UNICEF, 2020).

Integrating child labour concerns across broader policies for education, social protection, justice, labour markets, and international human and labour rights makes a critical difference. According to a UNICEF brief, COVID-19 could lead to a rise in poverty and in child labour as a result, as households use every available means to survive (UNICEF, 2020). Some studies show that a one percentage point rise in poverty leads to at least a 0.7% increase in child labour in certain countries (Idris, 2020). This again underscores the importance of providing social protection to the most vulnerable in times of crisis (The Human Capital and Education for Asian Development Foundation, 2020).

Source: Authors.

2.5. Sustainable Development Goal 5: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower All Women and Girls

Female migrant workers not only face the same problems that male workers face, but are also subjected to gender-based discrimination. Migrant women and girls are also often subject to violence and exploitation at all stages of the migration cycle. This includes physical, sexual, or psychological violence both during transit (e.g. while travelling or in refugee camps) and at the final destination (e.g. by an employer).

Achieving SDG 5, which calls for gender equality and empowering all women and girls, should involve protecting the rights of migrant women, including domestic workers and combating all forms of trafficking of women and girls (Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons, 2018).

⁴² Statements by Amihan V. Abueva, Regional Executive Director, Child Rights Coalition Asia.

Migration-relevant targets include Target 5.5: ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic, and public life.

Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic

Women account for nearly half of the intra-ASEAN migrant working-age population (UN Women, 2017), and form a substantial proportion of the workforce in sectors such as agriculture, personal care and healthcare, garbage collection, and cleaning services where employment conditions are poor.⁴³ Prior to the pandemic, undocumented women workers accounted for almost one-third of intraregional migrants. At least 30% of women migrant workers in Malaysia and Thailand are girls aged 15–24 (UN Women, 2017; Piper, 2011).

Although migration brings many socioeconomic benefits and some freedom from social norms that women normally experience in their home countries, women migrant workers confront restrictive social norms and laws, gender and racial discrimination, and gender-specific vulnerabilities in their host countries as well, limiting their opportunities for personal growth and access to benefits. Many migrant women are also employed in highly feminised sectors such as healthcare, domestic work, entertainment, manufacturing, and textiles in destination countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand (Piper, 2011). Thus, women migrant workers are vulnerable not just because of their youth, which prevents them from being vocal about their rights because of constraints imposed by regressive cultural norms, but also because of the type of work in which they are engaged (e.g. domestic work, home-based health care, entertainment, and services) and a lack of adequate protection when they face challenges.⁴⁴

The nature of their employment, inability to work remotely, limited access to private transportation, physical proximity with co-workers and customers, and lack of adequate protective equipment and hygiene options make some of these 'women migrant-centric' occupations particularly risky. Many women workers who lacked decent working conditions before the COVID-19 crisis are now at high risk of getting sick because of a lack of access to health care, job loss, or substantial decreases in income (as employers tend to cut wages citing the pandemic). They also often lack safety and privacy, and face specific privacy concerns such as accommodation arrangements for live-in domestic workers.⁴⁵ At the same time they have limited access to social protection, as employment arrangements rarely follow prescribed standards (Guadagno, 2020). Several reports highlighted acts of overt and covert deception, coercion, and exploitation experienced by

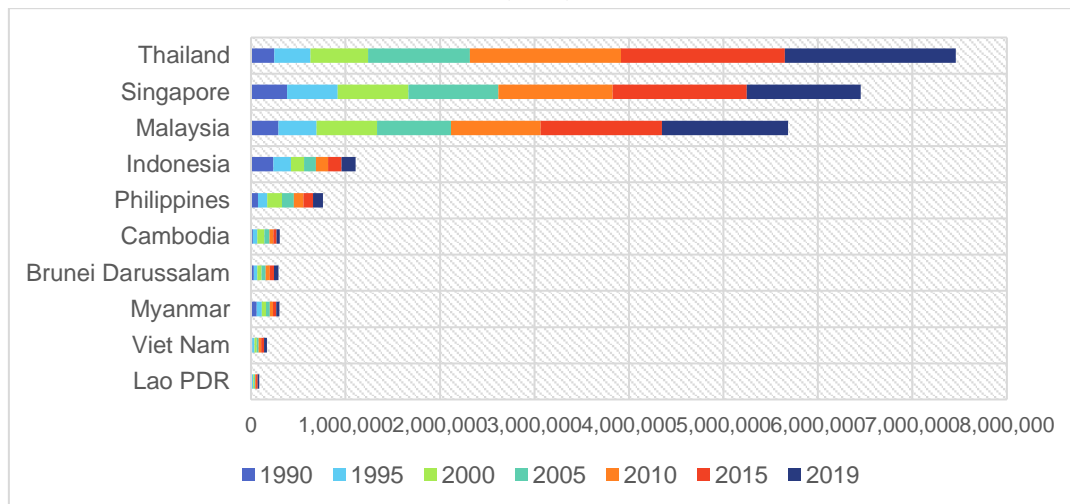
⁴³ASEAN countries with ageing populations or high women's labour force participation (e.g. Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand) have higher demand for domestic work and care for children and the elderly. Although more women are participating in the labour force, social gender norms still dictate that women care for the household, both in domestic work and caregiving. This presumption leads to a higher demand for migrant women, creating a 'global care chain' consisting of women migrant workers.

⁴⁴ Despite skilled female migrants being the fastest growing category of migrants, little attention has been paid to their experiences, particularly those working in the personal care and health care sectors.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women Article 2: legal guarantees and penalties for violation. GR. No. 26, para. 17: lack of privacy and hygiene in working and living conditions, especially related to health.

women migrant workers (e.g. forced sex, noncompliance with contract provisions, extended work hours, and lack of social distancing) (ILO, 2020n).

Figure 3.6: Association of Southeast Asian Nations Women Migrants at Mid-Year
(‘000)



Lao PDR = Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Source: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2017), *Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2017 Revision* [Data Set]. New York, NY: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates17.asp> (accessed 12 February 2021).

COVID-19 has exposed the influence of social norms on women's migration and decisions to take up certain kinds of work (Fleury, 2016).⁴⁶ Several studies have shown that many migrant women, often accompanying their spouses, start off as temporary workers before moving to seasonal or circular (during off-farm months) employment, quasi-permanent jobs, then 'better' or more socially valued types of employment (Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau, 2017; ASEAN, 2012). For example, women migrants are often employed in domestic work either because they accompany their spouses to a host country and then seek local employment that is largely undocumented (and hence lack benefits and protection), or because they have moved from other jobs such as entertainment seeking 'better', or more socially valued types of work; this is reflected in lower pay and fewer labour regulations compared with other sectors (Fleury, 2016). For example, several ASEAN countries do not offer adequate protection for domestic workers within national labour laws. Some countries (e.g. Malaysia and Singapore) may include protections in national labour laws but invest little or no resources in enforcement. Enforcing the rights of domestic workers is particularly difficult since many live in their employer's home, away from public view (UN Women, 2017; 2020a; O'Neil et al., 2016). Gender-based discrimination of women migrant workers and structural inequalities were

⁴⁶Women are more likely to make migration decisions based on their family rather than individually. On the other hand, single mothers, widows, or divorcees who experience discrimination at home may use migration to escape social stigma. Domestic workers in the latter category reportedly confronted more workplace abuses during the pandemic and curfew period as they had little incentive or option to return home, leaving them at the mercy of their employers (Statement by Indonesian Migrant Workers Union, 24 May 2020).

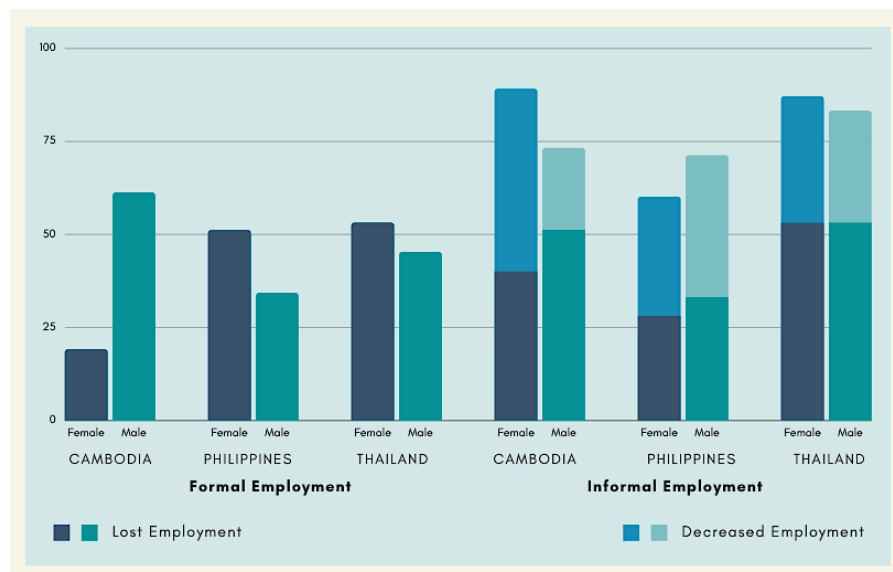
widely seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has been especially challenging for female migrant workers, who have had to face gender barriers (e.g. access to health, privacy, and childcare facilities) on top of other general impacts and discrimination in terms of language, race, and cultural barriers (Fleury, 2016). With economic activity at a halt during the pandemic, employers across ASEAN initially laid off women workers in the informal sector in large numbers (around 33% of women workers between April and June 2020), resulting in a dramatic decline in their capacity to earn a living (ILO, 2020n; UN, 2020a; Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau, 2017).⁴⁷ Secondly, rural women are more likely to migrate across borders if social networks are in place or if recruitment agencies can facilitate the process. With social networks virtually broken during the early days of the pandemic and lockdown, gender-based risks reportedly increased in the case of undocumented women workers (UN Women, 2020c; Peterman et al., 2020).

Between March and June 2020, there was no shortage of news reporting on migrant workers on the road, with the media describing them as the mass intraregional migrant worker exodus. Many migrant workers traveled on foot or different road transport facilities to reach the border. However, women migrant workers were invisible in these discussions, either because many stayed with their employers and did not return, or because their trauma is even less obvious than that of other categories of workers (Lavietes, 2020; United Nations Development Programme, 2020).

Surveys also show that fewer women than men are receiving information to prepare for COVID-19 (IOM, 2020b). For instance, in the Philippines, 79% of female respondents indicated they did not receive any information on the virus, compared to 57% of men. Assessments indicate that women experience increased barriers in accessing health care (especially amongst undocumented and sex workers who fear seeking help will lead to deportation) (UN Women, 2020c). As health care systems have been overwhelmed, the crisis has hit pregnant women and women with infants and young children particularly hard, disrupting access to health care services, medical supplies, and hygiene products.

⁴⁷ This estimate was presented during the early days of the pandemic, and was later affirmed by data from the ILO (3 July 2020).

Figure 3.7: Proportion of People Who Experienced Job Losses or Decreased Paid Work Hours since the Spread of Coronavirus Disease, by Sex (January–June 2020)
(%)



Source: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2020), *Policy Brief: Impact of COVID-19 on Southeast Asia*. 30 July. Bangkok: United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/2020-07/SG-Policy-brief-COVID-19-and-South-East-Asia-30-July-2020.pdf> (accessed 30 August 2020).

Box 9: Impact on Trafficking

Prior to the onset of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, several regional studies concluded that migrant women domestic workers in the region are often victims of trafficking and forced labour. Most are poor, especially those who are single or widowed, and therefore particularly vulnerable to distress migration. Some factors underpinning this vulnerability are their lack of skills, awareness, income-generating opportunities, land, and assets, in addition to illiteracy and social inequalities due to nationality or ethnicity. National labour laws still do not protect many domestic workers, who are instead exposed to overly restrictive immigration laws and policies. Their isolation in private homes and a lack of information and support can lead to exploitation.⁴⁸ Human rights groups have largely blamed the heightened abuse and exploitation of migrant workers on outsourcing firms, who are also involved in the trafficking of persons for labour in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand (ECPAT International, 2016; Giammarinaro, 2020). Based on available reports from the International Labour Organization, other multilateral institutions, and civil society, it is evident that COVID-19 has impacted those forcefully trafficked into ASEAN in at least three ways: (i) heightened risks for those already working under exploitative conditions, (ii) increased risk of exploitation, including through child labour and sex work, and (iii) disruption of some of the affirmative actions and response efforts in progress prior to the onset of the pandemic.

⁴⁸ The SDGs' central reference to migration is made in Target 10.7: to facilitate orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies. This appears under SDG 10: to reduce inequality within and amongst countries. Other targets that directly reference migration mention trafficking, remittances, and mobility, amongst other things.

In Thailand and the Philippines, for example, civil society voices have expressed concern for sex workers as nightclubs shut and sex work is pushed underground, making workers increasingly vulnerable to lower pay, poorer working conditions, and exploitation. In the construction and tourism sectors, with economic activities contracting, an increased supply of workers could result in lower wages and exploitation. Past experiences indicate that the growing informalisation of women migrants heightens the risk of modern slavery, further reversing previous socioeconomic progress.

Finally, the social and economic disruptions caused by COVID-19 will fragment anti-trafficking response efforts in numerous ways. Many government and civil society response organisations have been impeded, and are finding it difficult to obtain the resources needed to sustain anti-trafficking efforts (including funding and attention). On the other hand, civil society organisations that provide critical protection, advocacy, and advisory support to those trafficked (such as shelters and reintegration programmes) are likely to be adversely affected as donors turn their attention elsewhere. This could further expose migrant women to abuse and exploitation.

Source: Authors.

2.6. Promote Sustained, Inclusive, and Sustainable Economic Growth; Full and Productive Employment, and Decent Work for All

The concept of ‘decent work’ in the 2030 Agenda is an important and positive move forward, steering policy debates beyond their focus on the quantitative aspects of job creation towards considering how the quality of new and existing work opportunities might also be enhanced (Võ Hải Minh, 2012; Umanath, 2020).⁴⁹ It features most centrally in SDG 8, which sets targets for job creation, social protection, social dialogue, and workers’ rights, including those of migrant workers, in a manner that is consistent with environmental, social, and even economic imperatives. Migrants in particular, especially irregular migrants, should be given access to social protections, and efforts should be made to ensure the transferability and portability of these benefits.

Targets relevant to migration under SDG 8 include the following:

- (i) Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation; and encourage the formalisation and growth of MSMEs, including through access to financial services (Target 8.3).
- (ii) By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value (Target 8.5).
- (iii) By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education, or training (Target 8.6).
- (iv) Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking, prohibit and eliminate the worst forms of child

⁴⁹ It is important to note that, within the policy context, the relationship between migration and employment tends to be discussed in terms of how job availability influences migration movements (and vice versa). Recent mass displacements have given further weight to this focus on the numbers. In countries such as Myanmar, the Philippines, and Viet Nam, new jobs are being created to counter domestic political pressures.

labour (including the recruitment and use of child soldiers), and end all forms of child labour by 2025 (Target 8.7).

- (v) Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers and women migrants in particular, as well as those in precarious employment (Target 8.8).
- (vi) Strengthen the capacity of domestic financial institutions to encourage and expand access to banking, insurance, and financial services for all (Target 8.5).

Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic

Worsening Work Conditions

Current unemployment rates and a prevailing pessimistic outlook on job creation in the short- to medium-term in ASEAN is a cause for concern.⁵⁰ The current phase of growing unemployment is not cyclical, and different estimates have asserted that unemployment will continue to increase over the next 5 years while many jobs lost during the pandemic may not return. The sectors that are expected to be affected most are tourism, services (including health care tourism), garments, and, to an extent, supply chains (logistics) ('ADB Says Cambodia to Lose', 2020). These are all sectors that employ a large proportion of migrant workers, who are likely to lose their jobs with no new investments or job opportunities in sight. This sudden loss of jobs for migrant workers not only has resulted in lost income, but also is likely to make competition for jobs more deeply entrenched, with significant wage cuts and social costs (Virgil and Lie, 2020; Diao and Wang, 2020).

Better recruitment and labour market practices built over the years, along with sustained advocacy and investments, have gradually eroded since the pandemic. Even prior to the pandemic, because of the high costs, long duration, and considerable complexity of navigating the existing bilateral channels for migration, many intra-ASEAN migrants were precariously employed in an irregular or quasi-regular status (Wickramarasekara, 2002). The pandemic has provided an additional opportunity for employers and agents to erode and undermine labour market practices deliberately (Satrusayang, 2020). Migrant workers who returned to work in June 2020 reported not only wage cuts (at times more cuts than those imposed on domestic workers), but also being asked to work more hours (against employment norms) to compensate for the losses incurred in April–May, without additional payment (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020). Migrant workers in Thailand and Malaysia have reported that this situation had already resulted in wage cuts in June–July 2020 (ILO, 2020d). This situation was reportedly prevalent in export-dependent industries (e.g. textiles) where merchants could not execute pending orders (because of cancellations or delayed processing of documentation) and insisted on suspending minimum wages and certain work-related benefits, such as free meals (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2020c; Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020). According to

In ASEAN, more young people than older people are unemployed, with five young people per one adult out of work, on average. Young people, moreover, are vulnerable to losing their jobs in volatile, short-cycle industries. The high proportion of young, unemployed workers creates disturbing problems for society, such as increased crime, increased numbers of drug addicts, and the cost to the state of dealing with these problems.

workers, such measures were subtly imposed on them, such as through the threat of massive layoffs, to avoid legal action (Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2020b). The ILO and UN Women have reported more such suffering amongst domestic workers and health care providers. In a related blog post, based on information received from different network members, the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre argued that migrant workers in supply chains faced further risks from inadequate and crowded living conditions, harsh virus containment measures, and discrimination. The situation was reportedly more dire in the garment, food, and beverage sectors, which employ proportionally more women (2020b).

Box 10: Irregular Workers

Irregular labour migration has emerged as a major issue affecting the management of intra-Association of Southeast Asian Nations migration, and more so during times of economic or political crises. Many workers become irregular in their host countries because they have overstayed their visas. Typical examples of irregular migrant workers are those who overstay their tourist visas and engage in work, students engaged in employment, trainees overstaying their visas, regular migrants continuing beyond the contract period, regular migrants running away from their designated employers before the expiry of their contracts, and persons trafficked into the sex industry. The seriousness of this problem led the Governments of Malaysia and Thailand to revise their visa policies several times since the 1990s. At present, no verifiable data are available on the regular versus irregular migration of workers. However, anecdotal data and estimates indicate that close to one-third of migrant workers could be treated as 'irregular' (Kassim and Zin, 2011). The irregular situation of such migrants, who comprise 30%–40% of all migrants in the region, puts them at the mercy of unscrupulous agents, employers, and officials and weakens their ability to seek redress (Orbeta and Gonzales, 2013).

Source: Authors.

Immigration status worsens the sufferings of migrant workers. Given the rise of outsourcing and off-shoring approaches, migrant workers across ASEAN often work as part of a complicated system of subcontracting and intermediaries, which hurts their rights as workers as well as the progress of the 'decent work' agenda. Recruitment agencies, who are more active in construction and domestic work, did not turn up to offer advice, information, or travel support to workers when the pandemic unfolded in March–April 2020 (ILO, 2018b). Despite several governments issuing statements on the automatic extension of work visas or arranging transport to return to border towns, the information networks on which workers rely failed to function, aggravating anxieties and concerns (Kuentak, 2020; Lindsey and Mann, 2020; Rajah and Yihan, 2020). On the other hand, considering the high level of bureaucracy and 'service fees' often demanded when making use of 'official' channels for labourers to work in another country, seeking employment via social networks might seem like a rational choice from a migrant's perspective. However, during the pandemic such arrangements seem to have partly made workers more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation (Orbeta and Gonzales, 2013).

The pandemic provided an additional opportunity for employers and outsource agencies to modify existing employment arrangements with irregular workers with less pay and fewer benefits, if any, using the threat of deportation in the case of resistance (Reich, 2020; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2015). There were unverified reports of unscrupulous manpower agencies engaging in coercive practices, including forced isolation, surveillance, withholding of payments, and threats of violence and of denunciation to authorities. In many cases, especially in the domestic and entertainment sectors, recruiters or employers reportedly withheld workers' identification documents and passports for fear of losing them (The Interpreter, 2020). The retention or confiscation of workers' identity documents typically affects international migrants, but can also involve those that do not cross international borders. This can restrict workers' freedom of movement, and be used as a means to bind them to a particular job or employer, forcing them to do work that they may not have originally consented to for fear of losing their documents or jobs permanently, and consequently being deported to their country of origin (TF-AMW, 2020; 2018).

Labour agents thrived even during the pandemic, but have neglected to prioritise migrant workers' survival needs. In Indonesia in May–June, labour brokers reportedly deceived workers about the characteristics and terms of their potential employment, charging them fees of \$600–\$1,200 to secure them employment (US State Department, 2014). The Indonesian Migrant Workers Union asserted that recruitment agencies usually work through individual brokers who often operate in rural areas and lure people by offering well-paid jobs. In such cases, recruitment agencies' abusive practices are generally hidden under the surface, and the agencies may claim that they are not accountable for local brokers' noncompliance with agreements made with the workers. Such abuses were rampant as news of workers returning and the revival of economic activities surfaced in May 2020, highlighting the demand for labour. Fearing demands from workers, by early April most brokers' phones were either 'switched off' or busy.⁵¹

The work of labour institutions during the early phase of the crisis exposed serious limitations in labour governance (ILO, 2020m). As curfew measures were relaxed in mid-June, stranded migrant workers prepared to return to their home countries, whose economies were already fragile and could not absorb additional labour. The Indonesian Migrant Workers Union reported that labour institutions were completely unprepared and seriously under-resourced to help returning workers reintegrate, and those who remained in their host countries to seek work received little information on available opportunities. There was no recognition that helping returning migrants reintegrate could reduce socioeconomic tensions in their home countries, where some communities fear the transport of virus by returning workers. In addition, analysts have also noted that 'there was no scheme to reintegrate migrants so that returnees are not forced into accepting wage-cuts or efforts to re-migrate through illegal means' (Walden and Wijaya,

⁵¹ In an interview in early September, Dr Dominggus Li in Indonesia confirmed that labour agents were still 'hiding', fearing demands for lost wages by workers sent to work overseas. Dr Dominggus Elcid Li is the Executive Director of the Institute of Resource Governance and Social Change (2013 to present), an Indonesian think tank based in Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia.

2020; Chew, 2020; 'Region's Migrants Struggle', 2020). Poor or dysfunctional labour institutions in both sending and receiving countries impacted the capacity of labourers to express their grievances and undermined the strength and voices of labourers in every possible arena (ATUC, 2016b). According to the International Trade Union Conference's statement, immigrant workers entering through brokers faced extremely harsh conditions during April–June and later received lower wages than promised (Ang, 2020; Medina, 2020).

Even migrants who follow regular programmes may not find the protection of their guaranteed, since certain destinations such as Singapore group them into different categories: high-skilled labour is actively catered for and such workers may gain the right to abode, while migrants in low-skilled jobs can only get temporary contracts, and domestic workers are completely excluded from labour laws, since their occupation is not recognised as actual work (Kaur-Gill, 2020).

The private sector has a significant responsibility in progressing SDG 8. If the targets under this goal are to be achieved, the private sector must fundamentally change the way it operates. A move away from a model built upon maximising profit through the exploitation of labour to one built upon rights-based principles and approaches, as well as adherence to the ILO conventions will be key.⁵²

Private sector involvement in humanitarian and health crises is not a new phenomenon. For example, in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, several corporate groups provided financial aid to relief organisations and affected populations. Indeed, the private sector has almost always been willing to provide in-kind and cash donations in times of crisis. However, the impact of COVID-19 is on a much larger scale than previous outbreaks as it has seriously impacted every aspect of life and livelihoods. It is not geographically isolated, instead spreading across all of the AMS and beyond. The scale and reach of the disease have created a global supply chain crisis, with many AMS facing shortages of medical equipment such as surgical masks and ventilators. In this context, the private sector was expected to make efforts to manage the pandemic. While most medical companies are repurposing their factories and leveraging their comparative advantages and resources to help fill gaps in medical supply chains, others were forced to 'rethink' their plans and strategies. Regrettably, the private sector response during the crisis was not viewed favourably overall. Initially, several large corporations announced cash donations and medical supplies to governments as relief funds (CSIS, 2020; Kirschner, 2020; ILO, 2020k; TF-AMW, 2020). However, most factories and private sector operations announced the closure of activities and laid off workers without much warning, while cutting the wages of those

⁵² A discussion of the role played by the private health sector is outside the scope of this report. However, we note that ASEAN's private health sector is largely unregulated and was visibly absent in the initial weeks of the pandemic, leaving the provision of health services to state hospitals. By the end of April, the regional WHO office reported that the private sector was handling only one-tenth of the COVID-19 patient load, although it had two-thirds of the region's hospital beds and ventilators. This was a result of several factors, from restrictions implemented through government policy, to these hospitals 'playing it safe'. According to local media reports, private hospitals only began to provide emergency and patient care for those affected by COVID-19 in May 2020.

who continued to work (ILO, 2020k; TF-AMW, 2020).

There were also reports that the private sector in Thailand and Malaysia was not properly and timely distributing relief funds provided by the government or local charities meant for migrant workers, for example, by disallowing entry or timely distribution at construction sites or worker dormitories. There were also reports of pilferage and non-distribution (Uy, 2020). It is clear that, given their fragile immigration status, workers receive neither fair compensation for their efforts and productivity, nor relief in times of crisis to which they are entitled. Consequently, self-reporting and self-assessment of social responsibility by the private sector must end and be replaced by mandatory and transparent agency-by-agency reporting. The current model of global and regional labour supply chains is based on low wages and insecure – often unsafe – work. The challenge facing governments and civil society is how to push the private sector to do more to promote social and fiscal accountability and transparency in times of crisis.

Regular dialogue amongst stakeholders while undertaking relief efforts is essential to improve quality of outcomes (ILO, 2020d).⁵³ Between April and October 2020, AMS made several statements indicating the need for national- and regional-level dialogue and action (ASEAN, 2020e; 2020h; 2020i; 2020m). However, no multi-stakeholder social dialogue was held between the ASEAN governments and civil society groups; instead, governments issued ‘orders and instructions’ to be complied with. The absence of a multi-stakeholder platform during the early stages of the pandemic deprived the public of a better understanding of the evolving situation, restricted the exchange of information, and prevented the building of responsive networks to support migrant workers in the region.⁵⁴ Some countries with reasonably good public health systems (e.g. Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand) should have responded to the crisis more effectively, but poorly designed crisis-redressal mechanisms and a lack of monitoring resulted in weak targeting and the circulation of misinformation, leading to panic buying and workers hurriedly traveling out of their work areas, amongst other things (Migrant Forum in Asia [MFA], 2020c).⁵⁵ Regional and local CSOs asserted that the absence of a clear crisis monitoring and stakeholder dialogue platform left governments ignorant as to what was happening on the ground, and governments continuing to treat the pandemic as a mere ‘law and order’ issue also did not help provide any good solutions (Migrante International, 2020). Better communication with civil society and local communities would have mitigated the forcible displacement of workers within a short timespan and non-collection of wages for work performed, while reducing deaths and the suffering of workers (MFA, 2020b; 2020c; World Council of Churches, 2020). On a positive note, prior to the pandemic, the ILO’s work through the Triangle Program for ASEAN established a platform known as the ASEAN

⁵³ It is important to note that, of the four pillars of the Decent Work Agenda, social dialogue is the only one not explicitly recognised amongst the targets and indicators of SDG 8. Since the four pillars are equally important and mutually reinforcing, this omission is a notable oversight. with regard not only to SDG 8 but also to other goals, including ending poverty (SDG 1), advancing gender equality (SDG 5), reducing inequalities (SDG 10), and building more just and inclusive societies (SDG 16).

⁵⁴ On the other hand, ASEAN countries convened a couple of virtual gatherings to review the situation and issued solidarity statements.

⁵⁵ See Migrant Forum in Asia (2020c) for instances of ‘wage theft’ during the pandemic, based on anecdotal evidence.

Migrant Labour Forum, which meets annually to review progress on the implementation of compliance with international labour standards and treaties.⁵⁶ During the pandemic, such a forum can play valuable role in encouraging stakeholder engagement. One can only hope that going forward such platforms and efforts will offer a space to develop and strengthen dialogue amongst governments, the private sector, and civil society for a better future for migrant workers.

In sum, to achieve the targets under SDG 8, comprehensive national employment policy frameworks along with functioning labour institutions are needed to ensure that standards of employment of regional migrants in ASEAN match global requirements. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the poor progress made in policymaking and strengthening labour institutions in the region to support the provision of ‘decent work’ for migrant workers. Despite numerous efforts to engage in tripartite consultations including governments and civil society partners (e.g. employers and workers’ representatives), strong and functioning labour market policies and institutions have not yet emerged in any meaningful way. Arbitrary wage cuts, extended work hours, poor benefits, and a lack of social protection programmes for migrant workers remain the norm.

This calls attention to the fact that workers in general and migrant workers more specifically have not emerged in the region as a powerful enough lobby to have their voices heard and demands fulfilled by those in government. Most AMS, with some exceptions, follow economic and social policies heavily skewed in favour of businesses and investors, often to the detriment of employees. For just and humane policies on migrant workers to be implemented with sincerity, international conventions alone may not be enough and in the long term, change will have to come from within ASEAN by assigning workers their rightful place as important contributors to economies and nation building.

2.7. Sustainable Development Goal 10: Reduce Inequality within and amongst Countries

SDG 10 intends to tackle inequality both within and amongst countries with respect to income inequality; social, political, and economic exclusion; discrimination; inequalities of opportunity and outcome; and reform of global governance.

With regard to migrant workers, SDG 10 wants governments to facilitate the orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies. Specifically, SDG 10.c aims to reduce the transaction costs of migrant remittances to less than 3% and eliminate remittance corridors with costs higher than 5% by 2030.

The targets set by SDG 10 also emphasise human rights, and operate as a lever to combat ‘horizontal’ inequality and the exclusion of particular groups, including women and racial

⁵⁶ The annual ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour hosted by the ILO regional office is an open platform for the review, discussion, and exchange of good practices and ideas amongst governments, workers’ and employers’ organizations, and civil society stakeholders on key issues facing women and men migrant workers in Southeast Asia; and to develop recommendations to advance the implementation of the principles of the 2007 ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers.

or ethnic minorities, as well as overall levels of economic inequality (i.e. disparities of income and wealth). For example, Target 10.1 calls for progressively achieving and sustaining income growth for the bottom 40% of the population at a rate higher than the national average by 2030. SDG 10.2 aims to empower and promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status.

In early 2020, when COVID-19 hit ASEAN, many AMS were not on track to achieve the 17 SDGs by 2030, but were lagging behind in most of them (UNESCAP, 2020a). The 2020 UNESCAP Report on this subject observed that, although the region has done well in terms of economic growth over the last few decades (especially since 2010), it has neglected human development issues such as persistent high levels of inequality in select regions and amongst social groups, continued lack of access to social safety nets and welfare systems amongst poorer groups, low levels of social protection, and the continued growth of a large informal sector, as well as weak institutions of justice and ecological sustainability.

The preparation of medium- and long-term responses to the COVID-19 crisis provides AMS with an opportunity to rethink their priorities and to centre the welfare of poorer sections of the society and ordinary people, both domestic workers and migrants, in developmental policies. This will not only enable a speedy recovery by mobilising the contributions of all citizens, but will also ensure the sustainability of social safety nets and investments in the long term.

Migration-relevant targets under SDG 10 include the following:

- (i) By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic, and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or economic or other status (Target 10.2).
- (ii) Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies, and practices; and promoting appropriate legislation, policies, and action in this regard (Target 10.3).
- (iii) Facilitate orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies (Target 10.7).
- (iv) By 2030, reduce the transaction costs of migrant remittances to less than 3%, and eliminate remittance corridors with costs higher than 5% (Target 10.c).

Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic

In the AMS, as in other regions, wide wage and income disparities and wealth inequality, in addition to poor living conditions, amongst sections of the population are the single major reason why many poorer and less educated sections migrate for employment, both within and outside the country.⁵⁷ Typically, many leave their homes because of a lack of sufficient fertile pastures, arable land, food, or water, as well as a surplus household labour force and lack of local employment opportunities and other fundamental

⁵⁷ In 1960, the income of the richest fifth of the world's population was, on average, 30 times higher than that of the poorest fifth. In 2015, it was 90 times higher.

requirements (Singapore Ministry of Manpower, 2020). The poorest often lack the means to escape war and poverty or obtain support from community networks. Once in a new country, migrants prefer to engage in a job right away and undergo a difficult and often conflict-driven process in the host community (Hein et al., 2015).

The slow economic progress across the AMS has also given rise to distorted social progress. Serious development problems, including poverty, inequality, and unemployment, lingered even in economically advanced Singapore (Võ Hải Minh, 2012). The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated these problems, which were prominently exposed in the sufferings of migrant workers.

ASEAN's 2001 Hanoi Declaration on Narrowing Development Gap for Closer Economic Integration acknowledged the uneven distribution of income and wealth both within the AMS and across the region, and resolved to promote effective measures to address these growing challenges (ASEAN, 2012). As of 2019, despite economic progress made by ASEAN since the 1990s, inequalities in income and wealth were severe and had been widening in both worker-sending and -receiving countries (see Table 3.1). Economic prosperity within the region is significantly uneven, and poverty remains an enduring challenge both within and amongst ASEAN countries.

However, regional economic gains have fallen short of erasing significant differences amongst the AMS. The AMS span a wide spectrum of income levels, from Singapore's GDP per capita of \$57,714 (as of 2018) to Cambodia's \$1,298. In recent years, lower-income states have made important gains. With respect to financial inclusion, the 2017 edition of the World Bank's Global Findex showed that, while 98% of adults in Singapore and 85% in Malaysia had a bank account, just 22% of Cambodian adults and 26% of Myanmar adults did (Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2018).

Today, roughly two-thirds of the people in the region live in economically poor countries such as Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Viet Nam. Women, indigenous peoples, ethnic groups, and rural communities in particular have not benefitted to the same extent from the region's macroeconomic gains or progress of their respective countries (ASEANStats, 2018). Large wage differentials also exist between AMS, with workers in Myanmar earning an average of \$91 per month and those in Singapore earning \$2,859 (Harkins and Lindgren, 2018). Given the wage cuts imposed after the pandemic, these gaps are set to increase rather than decline, which will negatively impact progress towards the targets under this SDG.

Available data indicate that, between 1990 and 2019, intra-ASEAN migration of workers, of whom 85% are either unskilled or low-skilled, increased many times over. Those migrating from one part of ASEAN to another obviously seek better terms of employment and wages.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ In general, the labour-receiving nations are Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand; and the labour-sending nations are Cambodia, Indonesia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Viet Nam. Thailand is also a labour-sending nation, with people traveling to work in the Middle East, Korea, Taiwan, and Japan.

**Table 3.1: Minimum Wages in Association of Southeast Asian Nations
Member Countries**

Country	Last	Previous	Reference	Unit
<i>Cambodia</i>	190	182	January 2020	\$/month
<i>Indonesia</i>	3.94	3.6	January 2019	Rp million/month
<i>Malaysia</i>	1200	1100	February 2020	RM/month
<i>Myanmar</i>	4800	3600	December 2018	MK/day
<i>Philippines</i>	537	537	December 2019	₱/day
<i>Thailand</i>	331	325	December 2019	B/day

Source: Trading Economics (2020), Minimum Wages – Asia [Data Set].

<https://tradingeconomics.com/country-list/minimum-wages?continent=asia> (accessed 1 September 2020).

The Asian Development Bank Institute's August 2020 briefing note on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic observed that 'the overall economic conditions of the host countries and their sectoral affiliations determine the impact, with severe losses of migrant jobs reported in the retail trade, manufacturing, hospitality and recreation, and accommodation and food service sectors. Workers have been laid off and, in many cases, stranded in host economies as strict quarantines have been imposed, borders closed, and air travel halted. Worse still, departures of new migrant workers from Asia have been put off until further notice' (Takenaka et al., 2020a).

In the long term, income gaps between countries are the most important driver of migration pressures, and the present crisis is not expected to lower the income gap sufficiently to reduce this. Instead, the crisis is likely to increase income inequality between low- and high-skilled workers (Ratha et al., 2020). Similarly, in the case of migrant workers within a country, the COVID-19 outbreak is likely to result in dire conditions, with many losing their (mostly informal) jobs and unable to return home because of disruptions to public transport services and movement restrictions. Lockdowns, travel bans, and social distancing measures in response to the crisis have disproportionately affected internal migrant workers, who have found themselves stranded, unable to return to either their places of work or their communities of origin. Without adequate access to housing, basic water and sanitation, health facilities, or social safety nets to help them survive such restrictions, these migrants have become even more vulnerable to both ill health and severe poverty.

Unless governments include internal migrants in programmes to provide health services, cash transfers, and other social programmes, the net result may be increased inequality between the rich and poor within AMS.

Box 11: Migration Policies

While Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states have responded to the problems faced by migrant workers as part of their policy initiatives aimed at the larger economic and social crisis wrought by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, there is a need to maintain a holistic and longer-term perspective on migration governance. The current crisis can be an opportunity for governments to reassess their long-term migration governance and be better prepared for future crises (Giammarinaro and Palumbo, 2020).

In this context it is relevant to note that the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 10.7.2 – which calls on countries to facilitate the orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies – is the target most explicitly and directly related to international migration amongst all the targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The indicator aims to describe the state of national migration policies and how such policies change over time.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs have developed a methodology to measure this indicator based on an assessment of six policy domains: migrants' rights, institutional capacity, regional and international cooperation, migrants' socioeconomic well-being, mobility dimensions of crises, and safe and orderly migration (Migration Data Portal, 2020).

The Migration Governance Framework developed is being applied in a growing number of volunteering countries to help them develop baseline assessments and conduct future reviews of their work in the context of the SDGs. This is a gap analysis tool, not meant for ranking countries on their migration policies, but rather aiming to offer insights on policy levers that countries can action to strengthen their migration governance, and identify best practices for future programming.

Based on the available data, an analysis of SDG Indicator 10.7.2 indicates that more than half of all ASEAN governments (54%) report having a wide range of policies to facilitate the orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people (Migration Data Portal, 2020). Additionally, 91% of governments indicate that they have an inter-ministerial coordination mechanism on migration in place, and 90% have bilateral agreements on migration with other countries.

Of the ASEAN Member States, only Cambodia, the Philippines, and Thailand are participating in the monitoring process, and all of them meet or fully meet the different criteria for achieving the target set by SDG Indicator 10.7.2 (United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs and IOM, 2019).

As is the case with most other countries, the analysis shows that these ASEAN members have room for improvement as policies are often not fully aligned with other important relevant policy domains such as sustainable development, disaster management, and climate change mitigation and adaptation (IOM, 2019).

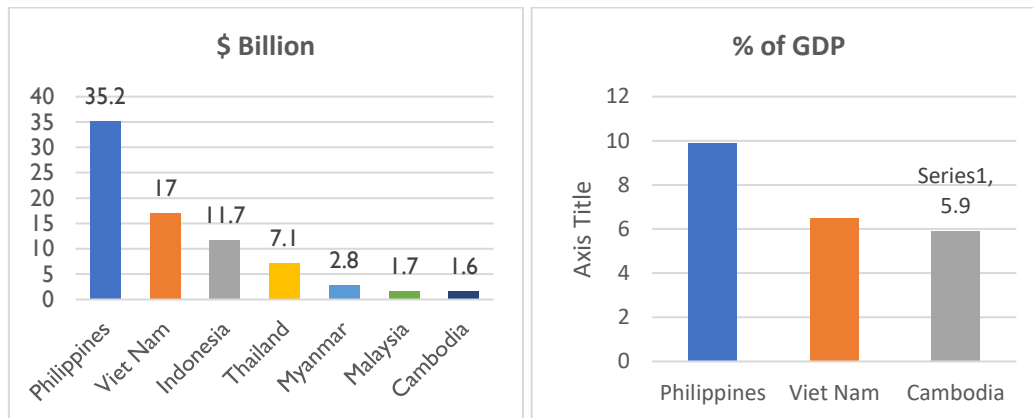
Source: Authors.

Impact of the Coronavirus Disease on Remittances

Remittances form a substantial proportion of many nations' GDP in the region, and have historically been an important tool to help people in developing countries overcome poverty. For example, in 2018 the Philippines, as one of the world's largest recipients of remittances, received roughly 12%–16% of its GDP through this channel (ASEAN, 2020c; Bismonte, 2020); and remittances formed about 12% of Myanmar's GDP. These flows

have become the single most important source of foreign exchange to the economy (Figure 3.8) and a significant source of income for recipient families. Migrant remittances transferred to families in home countries directly become part of household budgets that can be spent on basic needs, serve as extra funds for increased consumption of durable and nondurable goods, or be used for savings. Remittances may also serve as capital for starting businesses. Thus, such cash flows from overseas raise the standard of living of recipient families (Takenaka et al., 2020b).

Figure 3.8: Top Remittance Recipients in the East Asia and Pacific Region (2019)



GDP = gross domestic product.

Source: Ratha, D.K., S. De, E.J. Kim, S. Plaza, G.K. Seshan and N.D. Yameogo (2020), 'COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens', *Migration and Development Brief*, No. 32. Washington, DC: World Bank Group.

<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/989721587512418006/COVID-19-Crisis-Through-a-Migration-Lens> (accessed 20 August 2020).

Although exact figures might be unknown for some time, it is clear that COVID-19 has already caused many migrant workers to lose their jobs and income while abroad and forced them to use any savings they may have had to survive for a period of time. This situation has, in turn, led to an inevitable decrease in remittances, which will negatively affect families and communities in sending countries acutely (Dang, 2020; Yayboke, 2020; ILO, 2020i).

The World Bank projects that remittance flows will decline across all regions as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, as follows: Europe and Central Asia (-27.5%); Sub-Saharan Africa (-23.1%), South Asia (-22.1%), the Middle East and North Africa (-19.6%), Latin America and the Caribbean (-19.3%), and East Asia and the Pacific (-13%) (Ratha et al., 2020). This decline comes after remittances to low-to-middle-income countries reached a record \$554 billion in 2019, overtaking foreign direct investments. In 2019, in current US dollars, the top five remittance-recipient countries were India (\$83.1 billion), China (\$68.4 billion), Mexico (\$38.5 billion), the Philippines (\$35.2 billion), and the Arab Republic of Egypt (\$26.8 billion) (Ratha et al., 2020). This drop in remittances could have a very significant impact on ASEAN's labour-sending nations. For example, in the case of the Philippines a conservative estimate forecasts that the COVID-19 pandemic will result in a drop of around \$10 billion (around 35 % below 2019 levels) in 2020, an enormous blow to the country's remittance-dependent economy (Moritsugu, 2020).

Table 3.2: Impact on Global Remittance Inflows (Worst-Case Scenario)

<i>Remittance Recipients</i>	<i>Amount (\$ million)</i>	<i>% of Baseline</i>
<i>Global</i>	–108,617	–18.3
<i>Asia</i>	–54,255	–19.8
<i>Australia and New Zealand</i>	–299	–10.8
<i>Central Asia</i>	–3,366	–23.8
<i>East Asia (excluding China and Japan)</i>	–1,660	–16.2
<i>Japan</i>	–497	–13.3
<i>China</i>	–7,886	–12.6
<i>Southeast Asia</i>	–11,660	–18.6
<i>South Asia</i>	–28,621	–24.7
<i>Pacific</i>	–267	–13.2
<i>United States</i>	–482	–7.4
<i>European Union + United Kingdom</i>	–17,889	–14.4

Note: Data presented for East Asia do not include those for China and Japan.

Source: Asian Development Bank estimates.

Another ADB analysis assuming a worst-case scenario projected that ASEAN (including Asia and the Pacific) economies will likely take about a year to get their domestic outbreaks under control and bring economic activities back to normal; and, in parallel, estimated that remittances in Southeast Asia would fall by around \$11.7 billion, an 18.6% decline from 2018 (Takenaka et al., 2020b).

An analysis by the IFPRI's Myanmar Agriculture Policy Support Activity showed a major short-term contraction of remittances of 22%–27% into the country during April–May 2020, compared to the same period in 2019 (Diao and Wang, 2020). The report highlighted that the lockdown and subsequent restrictive measures have had direct and indirect negative impacts on the flow of goods and services, resulting in a decline of 41% in Myanmar's GDP during the 2-week lockdown in April 2020; this decline reportedly continued into May–June. The situation is no different in other countries in the region. For example, in the case of Indonesia, remittances from overseas workers declined by 20% by June 2020, and an IFPRI report suggested that national poverty would increase by 13 percentage points by the end of 2020 (Pradesha et al., 2020; Villafuerte and Takenaka, 2020). A panel discussion on migrant workers, organised by the IFPRI in collaboration with the FAO and others, asserted that this decline in remittances is partly linked to travel bans, lockdowns, and social-distancing rules, which reduce migrants' incomes or lead to unemployment (Paitoonpong and Chalamwong, 2012).

In addition, since the start of the lockdown, as commercial banks and money-transfer offices were not functioning at full scale, marooned migrants were unable either to send money overseas to their families or to receive cash from home to survive. This had a very negative impact on households, many of whom are reeling from job losses and economic hardship and need the money more than ever (Chalamwong, 2011).

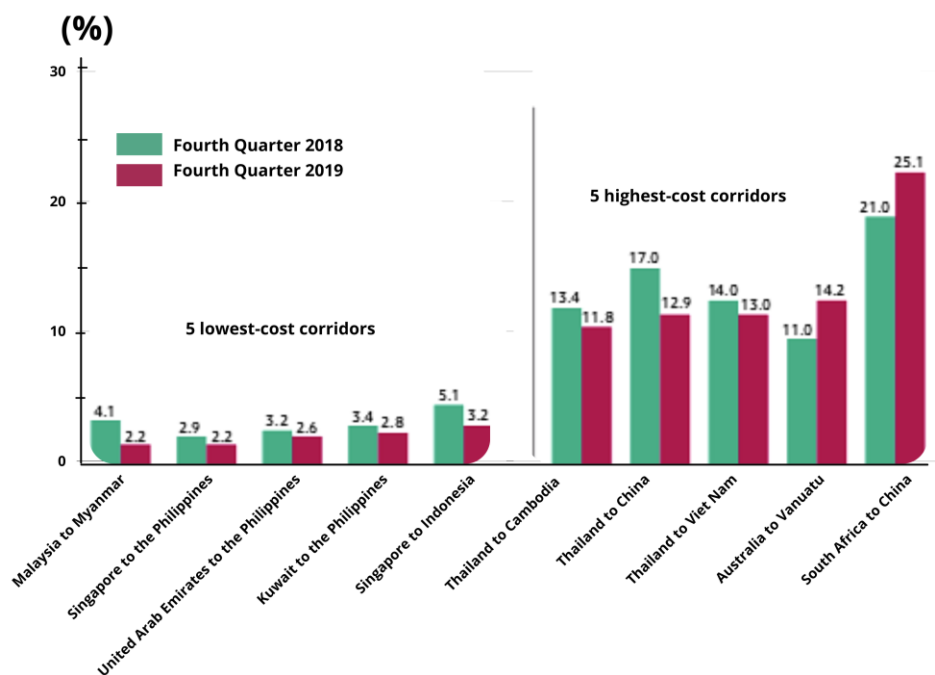
Transaction Cost of Remittances

Reducing the cost of remitting funds by migrant workers is an important target under SDG 10. The objective of SDG 10.c is to help bring remittances into the formal economy, enhance financial inclusion, and increase the net income of receiving households. Globally, sending remittances costs 6.75% of the amount sent, on average (World Bank, 2020d). SDG 10 aims to reduce this global average to 3% by 2030 and the transaction costs of between any two corridors to less than 5%. Cutting prices by 5 percentage points is expected to result in savings of up to \$16 billion.

The cost of remittance services can vary substantially by region and transfer method. According to a World Bank study, the average cost of transferring \$200 to a developing country remained at 7% in Q1 2019, about the same as in previous quarters (Ratha et al., 2020). This is more than double the SDG target of 3% to be achieved by the year 2030. Banks are the most expensive route for sending remittances, with an average cost of 10.9%, while post offices are cheaper at 7.6%, although many poorer migrant workers use informal banking systems where costs are lower (Ahmed, Mughal, and Martinez-Zarzoso, 2020). Overall, based on data from formal remittance methods it is estimated that the transaction cost is the lowest in South Asia, at 4.98%, and the highest in Sub-Saharan Africa, at 8.47% on average (Ratha et al., 2020). According to a database maintained by the World Bank, the average cost of sending \$200 in remittances to East Asia and the Pacific dropped to 7.13% in Q1 2020, compared with 7.21% in Q1 2019 (2020d). The five lowest-cost corridors in the region averaged 2.6% while the five highest-cost corridors averaged 15.4% as of Q4 2019. Money transfer costs from Thailand to neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia were amongst the highest, averaging 12.1% in Q4 2019.

Because of the closure of many brick-and-mortar services, the use of digital channels for sending money is increasing (World Bank, 2020d). However, many migrant workers and their families back home who lack access to proper banking services face challenges in meeting the due diligence requirements of digital channels. In the short term, services that remain available are generally less expensive than those preceding the COVID-19 measures. Some remittance service providers have removed their fees and have been using social media to raise awareness of digital payment instruments. According to the World Bank study, it is important for remittance service providers and authorities to work together to mitigate the effects of the crisis and encourage the adoption of digital payments, greater use of regulated channels, and wider availability of cost-efficient services (World Bank, 2020d).

Figure 3.9: Remittance Fees to the Philippines versus East Asia and the Pacific



Source: Ratha, D.K., S. De, E.J. Kim, S. Plaza, G.K. Seshan and N.D. Yameogo (2020), 'COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens', *Migration and Development Brief*, No. 32. Washington, DC: World Bank Group.
<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/989721587512418006/COVID-19-Crisis-Through-a-Migration-Lens> (accessed 20 August 2020).

Chapter 4

Way Forward

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a global catastrophe, causing enormous damage to economies and severely affecting the day-to-day life of billions. While the number of infections in the ASEAN region is much lower than in many other parts of the world, the pandemic has significantly disrupted lives and there is no certainty as to when it will end. A severe economic contraction as a result of stringent restrictions on travel and regular social and business activities has left millions without work or sources of income. Those already vulnerable have been especially traumatised and will continue to be unless decisive steps are taken to support them.

Against this background, discussions have identified tardy progress in enforcing several labour laws, treaties, and guidelines critical for improved governance and better institutions. Given the extent of regional labour migration, it is inevitable that discussions on labour governance will include concerns about employment practices, labour safety, occupational health, and welfare systems. The ASEAN region needs to develop a response that helps everyone, especially the many migrant workers in the region, to build back better from the conditions before the crisis. Simply put, the challenge is to make policies and regulations work for society and not the other way around. There are many good examples of innovative, practical means of achieving this. However, this calls for the adoption and implementation of reforms at a certain speed and scale. General improvements in governance and institutions in tandem with the implementation of legal and policy guidelines for sustainable labour management could contribute to labour reforms.

Undoubtedly, this process will require large-scale resource mobilisation across the region. To build a cohesive response, greater attention will also have to be paid to several important initiatives undertaken by governments, international agencies, and civil society groups before the pandemic. This includes complying with various treaties to ensure the rights of migrant workers and enabling policies that allow them to live and improve their lives with dignity, as equals with all members of society.

In addition to its impacts on the economy, the pandemic is expected to strain regional cooperation initiatives. Scholars have thus called for sustained regional policy coordination on all socioeconomic matters to mitigate and isolate the pandemic shock (Kimura et al., 2020). Drawing from past experiences, Kimura et al. (2020) indicated the need for timely and greater coordination in ASEAN to mitigate the pending economic shock in terms of unemployment, corporate bankruptcy, and financial market fragility. In the absence of regional cooperation, the cost of the pandemic and economic shocks will increase significantly.

It is also clear that the resources required for recovering from the COVID-19 shock will take the form not only of funds or materials but also of non-tangible things such as trust, cooperation, and solidarity between governments and people of the region. The current

crisis offers an opportunity to build an ASEAN that is both economically vibrant and a world leader in upholding standards of human welfare and environmental protection.

1. Regional Measures to Soften the Impact of the Coronavirus Disease Pandemic

Coordination amongst AMS was slow in the initial stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, but there has since been increased policy convergence and a more united regional response. This is thanks to the functioning of existing mechanisms set up to deal with regionwide crises of any kind, particularly since the 1997 Asian financial crisis. For example, high-level ASEAN officials met as early as January 2020 to prepare a regionwide response, building on existing measures undertaken by individual AMS and regional health forums. The meeting pledged to strengthen coordination of national and regional efforts in ensuring ASEAN's readiness to mitigate and subsequently eliminate the threat of COVID-19 (ASEAN, 2020i).

Similarly, during the 26th ASEAN Economic Ministers' Retreat in Da Nang, Viet Nam on 10 March 2020, the regional group agreed to take collective action to mitigate the impact of the virus by working with external and development partners (ASEAN, 2020a). The ASEAN Economic Ministers issued a joint statement saying that they would continue to facilitate the smooth flow of goods and services in supply chains, and refrain from imposing new and unnecessary non-tariff measures (ASEAN, 2020m). Their statement focused on leveraging technology, digital trade, and trade-facilitation platforms such as the ASEAN Single Window, to foster supply-chain connectivity and allow businesses, especially SMEs, to continue operating during the pandemic.

ASEAN is also collaborating with external partners such as the European Union to mitigate the social and economic impacts of COVID-19, keep supply chains open, and advance relevant scientific research. It has also joined with the US to strengthen cooperation on public health measures. Experiences in tackling the pandemic were shared within the ASEAN+3, which includes China, Korea, and Japan.

In early April 2020, a Special ASEAN Summit and an ASEAN+3 Special Summit on COVID-19 issued a statement (ASEAN, 2020c) calling for a post-pandemic plan for ASEAN to (i) restore connectivity, tourism, normal business, and social activities to prevent potential economic downturns; (ii) ensure that critical infrastructure for trade and trading routes via air, land, and sea ports remain open; and (iii) refrain from imposing unnecessary restrictions on the flow of medical, food, and essential supplies. One result of these summits was the decision to establish the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund.

At its virtual meeting in June 2020, ASEAN leaders underscored the need to strengthen regional economic integration and enhance cooperation based on open markets that promote free trade and encourage investment, and an inclusive and rules-based multilateral trading system (ASEAN, 2020i). They reaffirmed their shared commitment to maintaining resilient supply chains for essential goods and to easing restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The meeting also reaffirmed ASEAN's commitment to sign the RCEP in 2020 (ASEAN, 2016b), sending a clear signal of unwavering support for the multilateral trading system, regional integration, and economic development across the region. The meeting reaffirmed their shared commitment to supporting migrant workers' well-being across ASEAN in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. An effort was made to chart a course towards early economic recovery from COVID-19 by harnessing potential opportunities and boosting community resilience.

2. Association of Southeast Asian Nations Comprehensive Recovery Framework

At the 37th ASEAN Summit, AMS leaders adopted the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF) and Implementation Plan to serve as an exit strategy for the region to recover and build back better from the COVID-19 pandemic (ASEAN, 2020k). The ACRF, which takes a whole-of-community approach, focuses on key sectors and segments of society that are most affected by the pandemic, setting broad strategies and identifying measures for recovery in line with sectoral and regional priorities. Overall, ASEAN's recovery efforts will focus on five broad strategies that are deemed most impactful to take the region through the recovery process and its aftermath.

Broad Strategy 1 (enhancing health systems) prioritises building and sustaining current health gains and measures, maintaining and strengthening essential health services, and strengthening vaccine security. In addition, the quality of human resources for health will be enhanced by ensuring an adequate supply of trained, well-equipped, and healthy workers. The strategy also calls for enhancing the capacity of public health services to enable health emergency responses, including food safety and nutrition in emergencies.

Broad Strategy 2 (strengthening human security) commits ASEAN to develop a recovery framework that puts the welfare of people at its core, by strengthening the protection and empowerment of all people and communities during the COVID-19 recovery period and beyond. To guide these efforts, the immediate priority is to enhance social protection, and strengthen food security, food safety, and nutrition for vulnerable groups. To overcome severe setbacks on human capital accumulation, digital skills and higher education, as well as re-skilling and upskilling for employment, will be promoted. To ensure the well-being of workers and improve the future of work, labour policies for 'the new normal' will be further strengthened, including through social dialogue. Mainstreaming gender equality will also be prioritised throughout the response and recovery process given the gendered impact of the pandemic. Lastly, the strategy calls for safeguarding human rights.

Broad Strategy 3 (maximising the potential of the intra-ASEAN market and broader economic integration) focuses on intensifying intra-ASEAN trade and investment, establishing ASEAN as a competitive market, and further increasing intra-ASEAN trade and investment to strengthen supply-chain resilience and regional value chains. Opportunities to maximise the potential of ASEAN's internal market will be explored while ensuring that the region remains open to opportunities presented by broader regional integration. New initiatives will be promoted, including the setting up of travel bubbles or corridors;

strengthening of transport and regional connectivity; and revival of affected sectors such as tourism and MSMEs. The RCEP is expected to provide a strong anchor for achieving all these goals.

Broad Strategy 4 (accelerating inclusive digital transformation) leverages the momentum and imperative of digital transformation, and seizes the enormous opportunities presented by digital technologies to boost the economy and improve society in a post-COVID-19 world. Amongst other important priorities, promoting e-commerce and digital economy will be key, along with initiatives on e-governments and e-services, digital connectivity, the use of information and communication technology in education, and digital transformation of MSMEs. Data governance, cybersecurity, legal framework, and institutional capacity will also be enhanced.

Broad Strategy 5 (advancing towards a more sustainable and resilient future) concerns ASEAN's commitment to develop a recovery framework that is durable, long-lasting, inclusive, and capable of safeguarding the region's natural resources and social fabric, as well as the prosperity of its people. To support the attainment of this strategy, the priorities will focus on achieving sustainability in ASEAN in all dimensions, particularly in investment, energy, agriculture, green infrastructure, disaster management, and sustainable financing.

Given the comprehensive scope of the ACRF, resources will also be needed to support the implementation of initiatives and programmes. Some of this will be met via the newly set up COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund. Additionally, existing funding programmes in the region will be re-purposed to meet current needs towards COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.

3. Association of Southeast Asian Nations Stimulus Packages

The steep fall in economic growth, accompanied by overall large-scale job losses is, of course, the primary challenge. Unless this is tackled, the region will find it very difficult to solve any of the other problems that have arisen. The good news is that, while 2020 has been a setback, ASEAN economies are projected to rebound sharply in 2021, matching or even outstripping growth in the years prior to the COVID-19 crisis. Much of this regional growth will be driven by the improvement in the global economic outlook, as well as the unprecedented monetary and fiscal stimulus packages announced by various ASEAN governments. Monetary policies adopted by several AMS were meant to ensure adequate liquidity and boost confidence in the economy when initial concerns on broken supply chains and travel cancellations emerged (Zulhibri and Sinay, 2020). Governments in the region eased interest rates and provided government guarantees on (i) select bank lending activities, (ii) market interventions to improve temporary credit lines, and (iii) purchases of corporate bonds; and even temporarily relaxed regulatory measures for financial institutions (Okamura, Nguyen, and Doi, 2020).

Some measures to ensure monetary stability were at the regional level, building on financial cooperation initiatives first adopted in 2000, following the Asian financial crisis. Back then, finance ministries and central banks of ASEAN, together with those from Japan,

Korea, and China (ASEAN+3) had established the Chiang Mai Initiative, a network of bilateral swap agreements designed to protect member countries from future crises. In 2010, this was revamped as the CMIM, and a corpus of \$240 billion was set up to provide dollar liquidity support to reduce vulnerability to short-term external shocks.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, ASEAN+3 finance ministers and central bank governors reached agreements to enhance the CMIM further, making it more effective and operationally ready for countries in need. This included the institutionalisation of the use of local currencies in addition to the dollar for CMIM financing, helping to broaden financing options for members in times of need.

Table 4.1: Summary of Association of Southeast Asian Nations Member States Stimulus Packages to Counter the Impact of the Pandemic

<i>Country</i>	<i>Stimulus package</i>	<i>\$ billion equivalent</i>	<i>Date</i>
<i>Brunei Darussalam</i>	B\$450 million	0.319	30 March
<i>Cambodia</i>	¥420 billion	0.1	13 April
	¥8.1 trillion	2.0	14 April
<i>Indonesia</i>	Rp 10.3 trillion	0.742	25 February
	Rp 120 trillion	8.1	13 March
	Rp 22.9 trillion	1.5	16 March
	Rp 62.3 trillion	3.9	18 March
	Rp 405.1 trillion	24.6	31 March
	Rp 641.2 trillion	43.0	19 May
<i>Lao PDR</i>	₭N30 billion	0.005	2 April
<i>Malaysia</i>	RM20 billion	4.8	27 February
	RM230 billion	55.2	27 March
	RM10 billion	2.4	6 April
<i>Myanmar</i>	MK100 billion	0.101	27 April
<i>Philippines</i>	₱27.1 billion	0.527	16 March
	₱200 billion	3.8	31 March
<i>Singapore</i>	S\$6.4 billion	4.6	18 February
	S\$48 billion	33.7	26 March
	S\$5.1 billion	3.4	6 April
	S\$33 billion	23.3	26 May
<i>Thailand</i>	฿100 billion	3.2	4 March
	฿117 billion	3.6	24 March
	฿1.9 trillion	82.0	7 April
<i>Viet Nam</i>	₫250 trillion	10.8	6 March
	₫62.0 trillion	2.6	10 April

Lao PDR = Lao People's Democratic Republic.

Note: Based on information from various sources, including government websites and online news sites. Source: Zulkhibri, M. and J.B. Sinay (2020), 'Assessing ASEAN Economy Policy Responses in a Pandemic', *ASEAN Policy Brief*, No. 2. 28 May. https://asean.org/storage/2020/06/ASEAN-Policy-Brief-02_31-May-2020.pdf (accessed 28 October 2020).

The size of the stimulus packages has ranged from 10% to 40% of GDP. Collectively, fiscal packages adopted by AMS amount to a combined \$318.2 billion or 10.1% of regional GDP in 2019. Thailand has the largest total stimulus package, with three instalments reaching \$88.8 billion, followed by Indonesia with \$81.8 billion.

While the fiscal stimulus packages adopted by AMS are primarily aimed at helping affected industries, a significant number of the measures are for the health sector and household subsidies, including cash allowances, electricity subsidies, and subsidies for social security contributions and pensions. These subsidies are crucial for workers to meet their daily needs and those of their households, especially those in low-income and vulnerable categories.

In most countries in the region, food packages have been provided to those who need them. The Philippines, for example, announced the reallocation of around \$3.9 billion in subsidies consisting of cash and basic necessities to 18 million low-income households over 2 months. In Singapore, citizens aged 21 and above will be given S\$900 (\$634.90) each, while self-employed persons will be paid S\$3,000 (\$2,116.20) in three tranches to supplement their incomes. Innovative measures such as 'rice ATMs' in Indonesia and Viet Nam and pay-it-forward food coupons in Thailand were also introduced. Beyond support for basic needs, other forms of subsidies, such as for electricity, fuel, pensions, and social security contributions, help lessen the financial burden on households.

Table 4.2: Migration-Related Responses to the Coronavirus Disease within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

Country	Beneficiary	Origin or Destination Country	Intervention
Indonesia	International	Sending	The Indonesian migrant workers' protection agency, the National Board for the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Overseas Workers, facilitated the return of Indonesian migrants, both documented and undocumented, owing to lockdowns in Malaysia.
Malaysia	International	Receiving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Government of Malaysia announced the introduction of an RM150 subsidy to employers for each foreign worker sent for coronavirus disease (COVID-19) screening starting 1 June 2020. To be eligible, foreign workers must be documented and contributing to the Social Security Organization. For workers not in the target group, the cost of COVID-19 screening should be borne by the employer to prevent an

			<p>outbreak amongst workers in the country.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The government announced a 3-month grace period to allow employers to comply with amendments to the Workers' Minimum Standards of Housing and Amenities Act 1990, which addresses living conditions of migrant workers. Enforcement had been scheduled for 1 June 2020, but was delayed to 31 August. The amendment (passed in July 2019) extends the coverage of the act to housing and accommodation for workers in all sectors across Peninsular Malaysia and Labuan. Previously, the act was only empowered to govern such aspects for plantations of more than 20 acres (8.09 hectares) and the mining sector. Act 446, (amendment) 2019, also hopes to enhance the 2018 guidelines regarding accommodation for foreign workers prepared by the Peninsular Malaysia Labor Department. This covers a minimum standard for space required for workers' accommodations, basic facilities for housing and safety, and hygiene elements that employers must emphasise. At the end of August 2020, Malaysia's Human Resources Ministry published new rules covering minimum standards that employers must follow from September 2020 if they provide housing for their employees. Failure to do so will result in a fine of up to RM50,000 (Lai, 2020). • Eligibility of undocumented migrants for COVID-19 tests and treatment has been extended. • The foreign worker levy was cut by 25% for those with a permit ending by 31 December 2020, but the discount is not applicable to domestic helpers. • Foreign workers can apply online to renew temporary employment visit passes that expire during the movement control order.
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Philippines	International	Sending	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Philippines Department of Labor and Employment recently announced that cash assistance amounting to \$200 (over ₱10,000) would be provided to overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) whose work was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The government aims to reach 70,000 OFWs. To access the assistance, OFWs must submit the certificate of employment issued by their agencies. Their applications will be evaluated and processed by the Philippine Overseas Labor Office or Overseas Workers Welfare Administration. • Various government agencies have expressed their collective decision to provide ₱5 billion to support migrant workers from the Gulf and other destinations globally.
Thailand	International	Sending	<p>Thailand has just initiated a multi-pronged package for Thai workers forced to return from the Republic of Korea due to the outbreak.</p> <p>Those who are members of the Overseas Workers Fund will be entitled to B15,000 in compensation; this is also available to member workers who return from other countries that have announced a COVID-19 outbreak.</p> <p>The Thai Ministry of Labor will coordinate with labour offices in the Republic of Korea to make sure that Thai labourers receive pending wages and benefits. The Department of Employment has identified over 81,562 domestic jobs for Thai labourers returning from overseas.</p>

		Receiving	<p>Legal foreign workers registered under Article 33 of the Social Security Act will receive all benefits. If a business closes, they will receive 62% of their pay for a time not exceeding 90 days. Registered workers, including migrants, are also entitled to severance pay if they are terminated. In addition, they will receive medical care, including check-ups and treatment, under this article.</p> <p>The qualifications required to receive the aid, including a Thai bank account and at least 6 months' of contributions to the government fund, have excluded the most vulnerable, including millions of migrants from neighbouring countries.</p> <p>On 15 April 2020, the Government of Thailand announced a blanket extension for the country's migrant workers, who are permitted to stay until 30 November and exempted from overstay penalties.</p> <p>Other visa relief measures were also announced for non-nationals, including automatic stays for border pass holders until borders with Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Myanmar are reopened.</p> <p>The Thai cabinet approved visa extensions until 31 July for about 1 million migrant workers from Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Myanmar to ease potential labour shortages as the country's economy reopens.</p>
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Sources: Lai, T. (2020), 'New Rules for Employees' Minimum Housing Standards from September 1, 2020. Employers to comply or be fined RM 50,000', *HRNEWS.my*. 1 September. <http://hrnews.my/2020/09/01/new-rules-for-employees-minimum-housing-standards-from-sept-1-employers-to-comply-or-be-fined-rm50000/> (accessed 2 October 2020); Moroz, H., M. Shrestha, and M. Testaverde (2020), 'Potential Responses to the COVID-19 Outbreak in Support of Migrant Workers', *World Bank Working Paper*. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33625> (accessed 12 August 2020).

4. Protecting Migrant Workers

The Joint Statement of ASEAN Labor Ministers on ‘Response to the Impact of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) on Labor and Employment’ pledges to support the livelihood and health of all workers, including migrant workers, by facilitating access to essential health care services, without discrimination (ASEAN, 2020h). In solidarity, AMS will support migrant workers affected by the pandemic in each other’s country or in third countries to implement occupational safety and health standards and social protection systems effectively.

Several AMS have implemented policies that factor in the needs of vulnerable populations. Thailand will provide emergency welfare measures to migrant workers during the pandemic, providing them with free food and health services in select locations. Thailand also suspended immigration enforcement for overstaying migrants through the middle of November while international travel restrictions are in place. Some AMS have introduced economic stimulus plans and workplace measures to protect the health and income of workers during the pandemic. However, effective implementation of these measures will be key, and ASEAN often sees a significant gap between agreements and actual implementation.

Migration Governance Framework

In 2015, the IOM developed a Migration Governance Framework to clarify the purpose of SDG 10.7, which calls for ‘well-managed migration policies’. It also developed Migration Governance Indicators (MGIs) to assess national frameworks and help to operationalise the framework. This framework is relevant for monitoring the social protections of migrant workers and tracking progress on certain SDGs.

The MGIs are a tool based on policy inputs that offers insights on policy levers that countries can use to develop their migration governance. Countries with a comprehensive migration governance framework are likely to be better prepared to manage any shock, including COVID-19. The MGI framework also includes information that can help assess countries’ preparedness to ensure that no migrant is left behind, the risk of which is heightened during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

The six dimensions of migration governance included in the Migration Governance Framework and MGIs are outlined in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1: Six Dimensions of Migration Governance



Source: International Organization Migration (2019), *Migration Governance Indicators: A Global Perspective*. Geneva: International Organization Migration. <https://publications.iom.int/books/migration-governance-indicators-global-perspective> (accessed 5 August 2020).

5. Need and Areas for Further Research

Further research and in-depth documentation are needed to come up with long-term solutions to ensure humane policies that help migrant workers work and live with dignity, and to track the progress of relevant SDG targets and indicators in the ASEAN region. Currently, several grey areas exist because of a paucity of data and the lack of a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of migrant worker flows, the true impact of current policies, obstacles to the implementation of treaties, and a method for developing more effective future strategies.

For example, the effect of the COVID-19 crisis is likely to differ amongst the various subcategories of migrant workers and their families, including long-term, short-term, undocumented, returning, and women migrants. Going forward, AMS will have to work with international agencies and civil society to develop interventions targeting each of these subcategories specifically, to address their problems most effectively.

Such a disaggregated approach will help develop new policies or fine-tune existing ones to help anticipate and solve, ahead of time, many of the problems related to migrant workers that have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. For short-term or temporary migrants, who are often very low-skilled and have few social protections, the impact of sudden job losses on their immigration status and income can be drastic. Job loss as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak means loss of income for consumption, to remit home, and to repay the (often large) loans taken out to finance migration (Moroz et al., 2020). Typically, such workers live in shared accommodation or work in environments that are not conducive to social distancing or home-based work, making them more vulnerable to COVID-19. Moreover, loss of employment could also mean loss of legal status and risk of harassment by local authorities.

Undocumented workers, who migrate without legal documents, are another very vulnerable category. Not only are they often employed in jobs without social protection benefits, but their illegal status also makes them ineligible for any benefits that governments may provide. The UN estimates that globally, up to 20% of all migrants could be irregular (UN DESA, 2018). Reliable data on undocumented workers across the ASEAN region are lacking; this is yet another area that needs further research.

Returning migrants are another subcategory about which information is relatively sparse. COVID-19 disrupted economies and livelihoods, forcing many to return home after sustaining losses in terms of unpaid wages and depleted savings, without any great expectation of social support.⁵⁹ Apart from the health challenges posed during a pandemic outbreak by such large and chaotic population movements, such a sudden influx can also exacerbate various social tensions.

⁵⁹ Several ASEAN governments have taken measures to help returning migrants, including Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand. For example, Indonesia's National Agency for Placement and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (BNP2TKI) has facilitated the return of both documented and undocumented migrants from Malaysia. In Myanmar, an emergency COVID-19 cash transfer targeting vulnerable groups, including internal and returning international migrants, will be financed by a consortium of international donors.

Figure 5.2: Areas and Themes for Further Research



ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations, AMS = ASEAN member state, COVID-19 = coronavirus disease, MGI = Migration Governance Index, MiGOF = Migration Governance Framework, SDG = Sustainable Development Goal.

Source: Authors.

6. Looking Ahead

There is growing consensus amongst civil society groups and international organisations working in AMS that the region should adopt and enforce policies and programmes related to migrant workers that ensure respect for all human rights, the rule of law, and international labour standards. Safety and health, employment and decent work, wage protection, social security, and non-discrimination are key principles that must be upheld. Based on several consultations and reports published by concerned groups (MFA, 2020a) and international bodies (UNESCAP, 2020c), a set of recommendations are provided below for ASEAN governments of both origin and destination countries.

General Measures for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

- (i) **Strengthen social protection and welfare systems.** Social safety nets, particularly those targeting regional migrant workers, must be reinforced and strengthened to protect migrants from the consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak, including income loss and health impacts.
- (ii) **Develop and implement an action plan for rejuvenating livelihoods and reducing immediate economic stress.** An action plan must be put in place to restore people's livelihoods and return economic activity to normal levels. Lost income reduces demand and worsens economic conditions, creating social conflict. Special employment-retention policies may be needed to keep all workers, including migrant workers, employed.
- (iii) **Strengthen supply chains.** Sustainable and resilient supply chains are necessary to supplement recovery efforts, both locally and globally. A key immediate step should be to reduce trade tariffs and open borders for goods to restart trade.
- (iv) **Invest in targeted stimulus packages.** As part of building back better, stimulus measures and long-term policy changes must focus on ameliorating deeply entrenched inequality in the region. Policies should be formulated to reduce inequalities in income, wealth, and access to basic services and social protection, with a special focus on vulnerable groups, such as people in the informal economy, women and girls, persons with disabilities, and migrants. Increased investments to strengthen health systems and accelerate progress towards universal health care will also help reduce inequalities significantly.
- (v) **Emphasis on labour-efficient approaches.** In the long run, ASEAN's overall productivity framework, which relies on the use of low-wage workers instead of more efficient technology, must be restructured. Such a change will need to be accompanied by measures to upgrade the skills of migrant workers and ameliorate economic and social conditions in origin countries.
- (vi) **Advocate rights of workers.** Upholding human rights and good governance practices will ensure that recovery in the region benefits all sections of the population and is sustainable. In destination countries, tensions between locals and migrants, exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, must be reduced. The rise of hate speech against migrants in particular needs to be tackled systematically before it results in further conflict.

- (vii) **Reinforce and bolster gender-focused actions.** The return of women to the labour force must be supported. All forms of social protections must be extended to them, including measures to address protection from possible violence at the workplace and from unpaid care work in mid- to longer-term economic recovery plans.

Governments of Destination Countries

- (i) **Advocate the adoption of inclusive labour policies at national and regional levels.** ASEAN governments must be persuaded to include migrant workers' welfare in national policies or economic stimulus packages being implemented to help companies recover and sustain themselves during and post-lockdown. Many industries such as plantation, agriculture, and construction that traditionally depend heavily on migrant workers should therefore have equal access to financial benefits from the government as part of these stimulus packages.
- (ii) **Encourage policies centred on rights.** Adoption and enforcement of a comprehensive legal framework to protect migrant workers will help orderly progress on SDGs. To address the COVID-19 health crisis, governments should be persuaded to adopt and implement policies that are inclusive, equitable, non-discriminatory, and centred on human rights. This will enable migrant workers and their families, regardless of their status, to access free screening and treatment for COVID-19 without the fear of arrest and detention. The health and safety of migrant workers in the workplace must be ensured in keeping with WHO guidelines.
- (iii) **Ensure workers' safety and health standards.** Mechanisms must be developed to ensure that employers who provide dormitory accommodation to migrant workers guarantee the health and safety of workers living in that space in accordance with WHO guidelines.
- (iv) **Ensure access to health services in case of COVID-19-related issues.** Migrant workers who test positive for COVID-19 or are unable to work due to preventive quarantine and forced temporary business closures should continue to receive their full salaries, wages, and benefits. The COVID-19 crisis must not be used as an excuse by unscrupulous employers to lay off workers without just cause and without payment of earned salaries, wages, and benefits.
- (v) **Ensure access to fair financial services.** Procedures must be developed to guarantee that governments uphold a non-discriminatory approach to loan and credit card payment issues during COVID-19, such as deferring payments for both national and migrant workers. This will include recognising COVID-19 as a disease within labour laws and social security legislation, thus entitling migrant workers to claim compensation, medical, and allied care.
- (vi) **Help streamline remittance procedures.** As remittances are important to migrant worker households, governments should be encouraged to develop policies to address the fall in remittances likely to result from the COVID-19 outbreak.
- (vii) **Disseminate information regularly.** Migrant workers must be provided with correct and up-to-date information on government policies and regulations to combat COVID-19 in languages they understand, using various traditional and social media

platforms.

- (viii) **Urge the elimination of unfair practices.** Governments and employers must stop the discriminatory and arbitrary detention and deportation of migrant workers as a means to contain COVID-19. The human and labour rights of migrant workers must be respected at all times, even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- (ix) **Encourage protection of labour rights.** Procedures must be developed to ensure that labour courts protect migrant workers' rights by passing preventive attachment orders against employers' assets. This is to ensure that migrant workers get their service benefits if the company closes or if an employer files a case against migrant workers in court.

Governments of Origin Countries

- (i) **Boost migrant labour-related diplomacy and communication across the region.** All AMS should use the current situation as an opportunity to ensure that diplomatic missions and consulates perform their duties to protect migrant workers from COVID-19 by disseminating correct and timely information to migrant workers in destination countries. In addition, all missions and consulates should reinforce their communication mechanisms to ensure the protection of the rights of migrant workers to communicate with their family and friends.
- (ii) **Develop mechanisms for safe return transport.** Governments should ensure the free, immediate, and humane repatriation of all migrant workers and their families stranded and/or deported from abroad. The remains of deceased migrant workers should also be returned to their families without delay, in accordance with WHO guidelines.
- (iii) **Assure access to facilities and services.** Once workers return home, governments should ensure that they have free and immediate access to health care including testing, quarantine facilities, and treatment for COVID-19. Returned migrant workers should be provided with free transportation, food, temporary housing, and quarantine facilities (if deemed necessary), until their return to their own homes in their origin countries.
- (iv) **Recognise COVID-19 as an eligible disease for medical support.** COVID-19 should be recognised as a disease in labour laws and social security legislation so that migrant workers can claim compensation, medical, and allied care.
- (v) **Develop mechanisms to settle claims and grievances.** A fair, accessible, and speedy mechanism must be set up for rescue, repatriation, settlement, and payment of migrant workers' claims, even after they have been repatriated to their origin countries.
- (vi) **Develop opportunities for employment in migrants' home countries.** Decent work opportunities should be provided to all, including returned migrant workers, in their home countries.

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