



PROCEEDINGS OF THE

# 15th Anniversary Workshop

MEKONG MIGRATION NETWORK  
AUGUST 2018



Recognise, Respect and Promote the Human Rights of All Migrants in Mekong

## The Mekong Migration Network's 15th Anniversary Proceedings

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*The Mekong Migration Network (MMN), founded in 2003, is a subregional network of migrant support NGOs, migrant grassroots groups and research institutes. The central goal of MMN is to promote the welfare, well-being, dignity and human rights (especially labour, women's and family rights) of migrants in the GMS and to build mutual support and solidarity among migrants and advocates within the GMS. To achieve this goal, MMN jointly carries out research, advocacy, capacity building and networking.*

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# Acknowledgements

Many individuals and organisations contributed to the Mekong Migration Network (MMN) 15th Anniversary Workshop and proceedings and ensured its success. We wish to acknowledge their efforts with special thanks.

## **Panellists**

Plenary I: Ms. Jackie Pollock, former MMN Chairperson; Dr. Rosalia Sciortino, MMN associate

Plenary II: Ms. Reiko Harima, MMN Regional Coordinator

Plenary III: Ms. Wai Hnin Po, former MMN Steering Committee member; Mr. Sopheap Suong, Cambodian Women's Crisis Center, MMN member organisation; Ms. Reiko Harima

Plenary IV: Ms. Jackie Pollock; Mr. Sokchar Mom, Legal Support for Children and Women, MMN member organisation; Mr. Brahm Press, MAP Foundation, MMN member organisation, and MMN Steering Committee member; Ms. Ei Ei Chaw, Foundation for Education and Development, MMN member organisation

## **Facilitators**

Ms. Reiko Harima, Ms. Carli Melo, Ms. Omsin Boonlert, Mr. Brahm Press

Finally, we would like to extend our sincere gratitude to Open Society Foundation, Solidar Suisse, Oxfam, and Comité Catholique contre la Faim et pour le Développement-Terre Solidaire for their generous support in making this workshop and the work of MMN possible.

## **Organising Team (MMN Secretariat)**

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## Introduction



*Participants at the MMN 15th Anniversary Workshop.*

Mekong Migration Network (MMN) is a subregional network of migrant support non-governmental organisations (NGOs), migrant grassroots groups and research institutes that promotes the recognition and protection of migrants' rights in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS)

The precursor to MMN's creation was a collaborative action research project entitled: "Migration in the Mekong," which was initiated in September 2001 by the Asian Migrant Centre and more than 20 regional and national research partners in the GMS. Following the completion of the first phase of the project, the project partners and other interested organisations from the GMS met again in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in October 2003. Participants unanimously decided to form a network through which they could exchange information and conduct joint programs to overcome the difficulties in assessing migration-related issues and advocating for the protection of migrants without cross-border collaboration. MMN was formed in this context.

Guided by the MMN Terms of Partnership and the MMN Plan of Action, MMN has since jointly carried out a number of activities in the areas of advocacy, capacity building, information monitoring, research and publication. 2018 marks the 15th anniversary of

MMN, and thus MMN deemed it timely to review MMN's achievements and challenges over the past 15 years, as well as to reflect on changes in key migration issues, and identify opportunities and obstacles going forward.

On 4 August 2018, MMN organised the 15th Anniversary Workshop at the Empress Hotel in Chiang Mai. The workshop aimed to: (1) reflect on the work MMN has carried out since it was launched and identify its successes and challenges; (2) reflect on the changes in key issues and the social and political climates surrounding migration, and identify opportunities and challenges in promoting and protecting migrants' rights in the Mekong today; and (3) discuss MMN's role in promoting migrants' rights today and the way forward. 42 participants, including MMN members, associates and supporters, attended the workshop.

The workshop included two in-depth panel discussions with participation from the floor and concluded with participants developing joint recommendations for MMN's future strategies on promoting and protecting the rights of undocumented migrants, achieving social inclusion and embracing diversity, and strengthening solidarity, labour movements and empowerment processes.

# Agenda

<b>Time</b>	<b>Program</b>	<b>Facilitator</b>
<b>8:30-9:00</b>	<b>Registration of Participants</b>	
<b>9:00-9:30</b>	Welcome and Introduction	Ms. Reiko Harima
<b>9:30-10:10</b>	Plenary I: Welcoming Ceremony Ms. Jackie Pollock, a founding member of MMN/former MMN chairperson Dr. Rosalia Sciortino, MMN associate (via Skype)	Ms. Reiko Harima
<b>10:10-10:30</b>	Plenary II: Reflection of MMN's work in the past 15 years Ms. Reiko Harima, MMN Regional Coordinator	Ms. Carli Melo
<b>10:30-11:00</b>	<b>Group Photo and Break</b>	
<b>11:00-12:00</b>	Plenary III: Reflection on MMN's work for the past 15 years. What are the key successes and challenges?  Panellists: Ms. Wai Hnin Po (Po Po), a former MMN Steering Committee member Mr. Sopheap Suong, Cambodian Women's Crisis Center, MMN member Ms. Reiko Harima, MMN Regional Coordinator  Open discussion	Ms. Carli Melo
<b>12:00-13:00</b>	<b>Lunch</b>	

<b>Time</b>	<b>Program</b>	<b>Facilitator</b>
<b>13:00-14:00</b>	<p>Panel discussion 2: Reflections: Key issues, social and political changes surrounding migration, and MMN's future roles and strategies</p> <p>Panellists:            Mr. Brahm Press, MAP Foundation, MMN member;            Ms. Ei Ei Chaw, Foundation for Education and Development (FED), MMN member;            Ms. Jackie Pollock, founding member of MMN and former MMN chairperson; and            Mr. Sokchar Mom, Legal Support for Children and Women (LSCW), MMN member</p> <p>Open discussion</p>	Ms. Reiko Harima
<b>14:00-15:00</b>	<p>Small group discussion: Given the changes, what are new opportunities and threats, and what are strategies in moving forward?</p> <p>Each group is given a thematic focus as follows:            Group 1: Promotion and protection of the rights of undocumented migrants            Group 2: Achieving social inclusion/diversity            Group 3: Strengthening solidarity, labour movements and empowerment</p>	<p>Facilitator:            Group 1: Ms. Carli Melo            Group 2: Ms. Omsin Boonlert (Plaii)            Group 3: Mr. Brahm Press</p>
<b>15:00-15:15</b>	Break	
<b>15:15-15:45</b>	Presentation from small groups	Ms. Reiko Harima
<b>15:45-16:30</b>	Open Discussion	Ms. Reiko Harima
<b>16:30-17:00</b>	Wrapping up; closing ceremony	Ms. Reiko Harima
<b>18:30</b>	15th Anniversary Reception	

## Welcoming Ceremony

The Mekong Migration Network's 15th Anniversary Workshop was opened by Ms. Jackie Pollock, a founding member of MMN and a former MMN chairperson. The full transcript of Ms. Pollock's welcoming speech is as follows:

Good morning everybody. Very good morning to you all. Even though I don't live here anymore, and I don't work for MMN anymore, I can still say a very warm welcome to you. Welcome to Chiang Mai; welcome to the 15th anniversary of the MMN; welcome to old and new members of MMN, to founding members, to supporters, to critics—probably—and congratulations on reaching 15.



But of course, reaching a certain number is not cause for celebration. *Ms. Jackie Pollock delivering her opening remarks for the workshop.*

The cause for celebration is what has been achieved in the 15 years, what has been learnt, what has been shared. Today, we will have time to reflect on all of this. 15 years ago, MMN came together to do some joint research. MMN brings together different types of organisations—local civil society organisations, international organisations, research institutes—different sectors but all with a common goal: the goal for the recognition, the respect, the protection and promotion of the dignity, well-being and rights of migrants and their families. So MMN started with research and expanded into the network, doing advocacy, information monitoring, capacity building and developing materials for organisations, for migrants and for policy makers.

The MMN has raised over the years many issues of concern, and I'd just like to bring up one of those issues because it is a recurring issue—and that is the issue of arrest, detention and deportation. The MMN vision for the dignity of migrants is not being achieved—migrants are being herded into trucks as we speak, they are being sent away, they are being rejected, they are being incarcerated, they are going home in shame and in debt. This is not dignified. So, 15 years of work, we cannot be complacent. We still

have to fight on the same issues as well as new issues. We have to keep pushing the barriers of these discussions to make sure they are not closed discussions which go nowhere. We have to push the barriers.

The MMN has had over the 15 years to manoeuvre—to go through the torrents of the mighty Mekong, to go through the meandering sections of the mighty Mekong—through the different political environments in different countries at different times. Environments which have allowed or not allowed civil societies to voice their opinions; have allowed or not allowed migrants to exercise their rights. MMN has had to make difficult decisions on how to navigate that journey: whether sometimes to water down the message so that it's acceptable to all countries, to all members; or whether to go with the full message that puts some members at risk and alienates some countries. These are difficult decisions and they are not going to get any easier. If we look at the political environment in which we work today, we see the changes backwards and forwards—it's not going to get any easier.

But I'm confident that the Mekong Migration Network can manoeuvre through the next 15 years, through those political environments to keep the network solid, to keep the network active, because the MMN has got that experience and the MMN listens to its partners and acts within the voices of its partners.

The economies of the Mekong, to a large extent, depend on migrants and migration—or maybe we have to ask: do they depend on the exploitation of migrants and migration? And where does the MMN today stand on that broader contextual issue within which migration happens? I look forward to the upcoming studies on the special economic zones which will surely explore these questions.

I recently watched a documentary from the 1950s. It's a documentary about Irish migrants going to work in the UK. It interviewed migrants and employers, and it was the talk of the employers which hit me that it has not changed. It has not changed from that time or from that place to what we hear now. The employers say: yes, they want migrants, they like migrants because they work hard, possibly harder, and are flexible—they will move to where the jobs are. Aren't these qualifications and characteristics for which you will pay more, not pay less? Are these not characteristics and qualifications that deserve more respect, not less respect? We have a long way to go until we can achieve what we are out here for: decent work for decent workers, regardless of their immigration status, regardless of their ethnicity, gender and religion.

I look forward to the discussions for the rest of the day, and I also look forward to another 15 years of hard and enjoyable work with the Mekong Migration Network. Thank you very much.

Following Ms. Pollock's speech, participants of the workshop heard from Dr. Rosalia Sciortino, an associate professor at Mahidol University, Founder and Executive Director of SEA Junction and MMN associate, via Skype. Dr. Sciortino pointed out that MMN's launch in 2003 was timely in view of (1) the lack of attention paid to migration from a regional perspective, as most of the available research at the time was mainly focused on internal migration in Thailand and Vietnam; (2) the poor understanding of regional processes surrounding migration, including labour migration, human trafficking and the movements of ethnic communities; (3) the scant opportunity for dialogue among stakeholders of migration; and (4) the difficulties for civil society organisations (CSOs) to advocate to governments without evidence-based research. Dr. Sciortino recognised MMN's important role in reflecting the voices of local CSOs in countries of the GMS, which had otherwise often been overlooked in regional research conducted by international agencies. She also applauded MMN for always putting migrants' needs and rights at the centre of the network's actions, even if it sometimes meant taking up uncompromising positions.

MMN must, however, confront several challenges in the present and the future. For one, the essence of migration policies in countries of the GMS, especially in Thailand, have largely remained the same in spite of CSOs' efforts to advocate for change. For another, the way migration is handled is still unfair and overlooks issues relating to migrants' integration. In particular, ASEAN's double standards, which grant some people the right to move autonomously, all the while restricting the movement of supposed "unskilled" migrants, are unacceptable both from an ethical and human rights standpoint. In light of this, Dr. Sciortino urged MMN to start pushing for the free movement of labour as its primary goal, and possibly expand the network's scope to include countries in ASEAN in addition to those in the GMS. She also believed that MMN should continue mapping out general migration trends in the GMS alongside work on select thematic issues.

# Reflections on MMN's Work in the Past 15 Years

*Presented by Ms. Reiko Harima, Regional Coordinator, Mekong Migration Network*

In her presentation, Ms. Reiko Harima explained the context under which the Mekong Migration Network had been created. In 2001, several organisations from different countries came together to map out issues relating to migration in the GMS—a significant milestone given that information sharing among countries in the region, especially between Myanmar and Thailand, was limited and difficult at the time. Two years later, in 2003, the project partners produced the first resource book titled “Resource Book: Migration in the Greater Mekong Subregion” and founded MMN to strengthen joint collaboration and advocacy.

Since 2003, MMN has expanded its work into several areas, including (1) information monitoring and joint analysis of labour migration policies in the GMS; (2) advocacy at local and national levels through the submission of recommendations; (3) research and advocacy with thematic foci, such as on the roles of countries of origin, special economic zones, social exclusion, recruitment practices and healthcare-related issues; (4) capacity building through initiatives, such as a regional training on ASEAN advocacy and country exchange visits for member organisations; and (5) networking and solidarity building through participation in regional and international platforms, such as the ASEAN People's Forum (APF), the World Social Forum on Migration (WSFM), and the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD), which link grassroots CSOs in the GMS with broader groups around the world working on different issues.

Ms. Harima went on to review MMN's major achievements in the past 15 years. She began with MMN's research project on Arrest, Detention and Deportation (ADD) in 2003, which involved a process of identifying issues



*Ms. Reiko Harima giving an overview of MMN's past achievements.*

relating to migration, collecting and analysing data, engaging with various stakeholders through one-on-one meetings and multi-stakeholder meetings and organising a press conference and high-profile policy dialogue meeting to launch the findings. In spite of the project's successes in setting a working model for the future, Ms. Harima stressed that indecent ADD practices persist and continue to subject migrants to a state of constant fear of arrest. This prevents them from integrating into their host communities and accessing the rights they are entitled to.

Other MMN milestones include: *Speaking of Migration*,<sup>1</sup> a publication that promoted a common understanding on terminologies surrounding migration and continues to be a reference document for government officials, CSOs and private recruitment agencies; *Restricted Rights*,<sup>2</sup> which examined the garment industry in Thailand and targeted consumers in the UK and in the Mekong; *Climate Change and Migration*,<sup>3</sup> which allowed MMN to investigate this significant impact on migration; *From Our Eyes*,<sup>4</sup> a compilation of migrants' stories published to give voice to migrants about their own experiences and make up for their lack of representation at national- and regional-level dialogues relating to migration; the "Border Economic Zones" project,<sup>5</sup> which looked at how emerging economic trends affect migration and migrants' working conditions; projects on social inclusion,<sup>6</sup> which

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1 *Speaking of Migration: Mekong Vocabulary on Migration* (2011); to view, please visit: [http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page\\_id=1687](http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page_id=1687).

2 *Restricted Rights: Migrant Workers in Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia* (2011); to view, please visit: [http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page\\_id=1691](http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page_id=1691).

3 *Climate Change and Migration: Exploring the Impacts of Climate Change on People's Livelihoods and Migration in the Greater Mekong Sub-region* (2013); to view, please visit: [http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page\\_id=1829](http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page_id=1829).

4 *From Our Eyes: Mekong Migrant Reflection 2000 – 2012* (2012); to view, please visit: [http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page\\_id=1685](http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page_id=1685).

5 The "Border Economic Zone" project produced the report titled *Migration in the Greater Mekong Sub-region; In-depth Study: Border Economic Zones and Migration* (2012); to view, please visit: [http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page\\_id=1815](http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page_id=1815).

6 In February 2013, MMN conducted the "Symposium on Migration: Migrants from the Mekong Neighbourhood Living Together" in Bangkok, Thailand. Participants at the Symposium developed a comprehensive set of recommendations, including the development of educational material on multiculturalism to promote greater awareness of how the migration in the Mekong region has enriched regional cultures and ways of life.

MMN's subsequent project, "Embracing Diversity" (2013-2014), saw the publication of a children's book entitled *Dragon Lake* (to view, please visit: [http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page\\_id=2740](http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page_id=2740)) as well as lesson plans on the history of migration for children aged 10-11 (to view, please visit: [http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page\\_id=2732](http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page_id=2732)). MMN also hosted a Mekong Symposium on Migration entitled "Embracing Diversity: Seeking Multicultural Values and Mutual Understanding" (to view the proceeding of the event, please visit: [http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page\\_id=2957](http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page_id=2957))

In 2015, MMN launched a second project entitled, "Beyond 'Tolerance': Working hand-in-hand to promote the social inclusion of migrants and their families" (2015-2016), which aimed to tackle the issue of social exclusion of migrants in origin countries such as Cambodia and Myanmar, as well as destination countries like

celebrated a vision of society that embraces diversity and enables migrants' inclusion both in policy and in practice; and the "Roles of Countries of Origin" project,<sup>7</sup> which led to both the Cambodian and Myanmar governments publicly announcing their commitment to protect their nationals working overseas and continue dialogue with other countries of origin to strengthen their relationship and ability to advocate to destination countries.

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Thailand and Japan. During the project, MMN and its partners conducted field visits to the four countries concerned, and produced a multimedia presentation of photographs and interviews that were exhibited in Bangkok, Thailand, Phnom Penh, Cambodia and Yangon, Myanmar (to view our multimedia documentary, which is available in English, Burmese, Khmer, Thai and Japanese, please visit [http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page\\_id=5342](http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page_id=5342)). MMN also launched a report entitled Permanently Temporary: Examining the Impact of Social Exclusion on Mekong Migrants (2016) (to view, please visit [http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page\\_id=5171](http://www.mekongmigration.org/?page_id=5171)).

7 The "Roles of Countries of Origin" project produced the report entitled, Safe from the Start: Roles of Countries of Origin during the Policy Dialogue on Roles of Countries of Origin (to view, please visit: <http://www.mekongmigration.org/?p=5875>). MMN also hosted a Policy Dialogue held in Yangon, Myanmar to launch the report. Over 50 representatives of the Cambodian and Myanmar governments, private recruitment agencies, the Philippine Embassy in Yangon, ILO, IOM, and CSOs from Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, and the Philippines attended the event (to read the proceeding of the event, please visit: <http://www.mekongmigration.org/?p=5947>).

## Plenary I: What are the key successes and challenges that the Mekong Migration Network has experienced over the past 15 years?

### Facilitator:

*Ms. Carli Melo, Project Coordinator, Mekong Migration Network*

### Discussants:

*Mr. Sopheap Suong, Cambodian Women's Crisis Center (CWCC), MMN member;  
and*

*Ms. Wai Hnin Po, former MMN Steering Committee member*

### Panel

In this panel discussion, Mr. Sopheap Suong and Ms. Wai Hnin Po looked at MMN's work over the past 15 years to evaluate the network's successes as well as the challenges it has faced along the way with the hopes to build on its existing strengths and to develop strategies to overcome potential obstacles it may face in the future.

Mr. Suong began by sharing his experiences working with MMN as a migrant rights advocate over the last ten years and his belief that his personal growth serves as a testament to



*Mr. Sopheap Suong sharing with audience MMN's successes and challenges.*

MMN's success in building members' capacity. He highlighted two projects most profound to him: "Speaking of Migration" and Roles of Countries of Origin. To him, "Speaking of Migration" was successful not only because it became a resource for many CSOs, trade unions and international agencies, such as the International Labour Organization, but also because it fundamentally altered the way people—including himself—spoke and thought of migration through the promotion of non-exclusionary vocabulary. Whereas he used to adopt words like "illegal" to describe irregular migrants, the project led him to reconsider the narrative behind each word and consciously choose the appropriate language to describe migration in inclusive and non-discriminatory terms. On the other hand, the Roles of Countries of Origin project also stood out because it led to a high-level policy dialogue (alongside the launch of a report of MMN's findings) between the governments of Cambodia and Myanmar and successfully garnered media attention. Following the policy dialogue, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Cambodia and the Royal Embassy of Cambodia in Bangkok even issued separate statements disagreeing with MMN's findings about the inadequate overseas assistance the Cambodian government offered to their nationals working abroad. Mr. Suong found this to be a positive development because the two agencies immediately became more active in updating information and responding to migrants' concerns on their Facebook page to demonstrate their commitment to protecting Cambodian workers overseas.

With regards to the challenges MMN has faced, Mr. Suong spoke about his disappointment with the ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers (signed by ASEAN heads of state in 2017), which ended up becoming a non-legally binding instrument with limited influence on the national policies and laws of ASEAN countries. He urged MMN to continue strengthening its advocacy work at the regional level, especially when it comes to ASEAN.



*Ms. Wai Hnin Po discussing MMN's successes and challenges.*

Ms. Wai Hnin Po echoed Mr. Suong's belief that one of MMN's core strengths lies in its capacity building initiatives for member organisations, through which she was given the opportunity to attend regional and global forums, such as the APF and WSFM, and learn about broader migration trends and issues. Like Mr. Suong, she also considered MMN's ability to produce resources like the Mekong vocabulary book for member organisations, academics, CSOs, government officials and lawmakers as a remarkable achievement. She further applauded MMN for its years-long dedication to advocating to the Myanmar government in spite of the challenging political landscape. Under MMN's continued influence, the Myanmar government gradually began recognising the needs of migrants and expanding services and support to more Myanmar workers abroad, including through the establishment of a complaint mechanism. As Ms. Wai Hnin Po pointed out, however, there remains plenty of room for the government to improve on the effectiveness of these services.

Ms. Wai Hnin Po proceeded to identify two major challenges MMN must continue to work to address. For one, she observed that ASEAN tends to exclude irregular migrants and migrant workers in informal sectors when developing mechanisms to protect and promote the rights of migrant workers. For another, she pointed out that the implementation of the 2003 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Myanmar and Thailand remains largely ineffective as many migrants are still failing to become regularised through the MOU system due to bureaucratic and costly procedures and that migrants who are registered under the MOU process are still not completely protected.

## **Open Discussion**

In the ensuing discussion, Ms. Carli Melo asked participants to share the internal challenges of working across countries with people of different languages, thought processes and cultures. One participant observed that members have developed different degrees of ownership of MMN, which might affect the strength of the network. Another MMN member agreed this can be problematic and saw this as all the more reason for MMN to promote the understanding, sharing, and respect for the network's common values. This not only deepens members' sense of belonging but can overcome differences in cultural backgrounds and interests. Ms. Pok Panhavichetr from CWCC further pointed out the challenges in developing policy recommendations that cater to all countries in the GMS as the region contains vastly different government types and policy mechanisms.

One MMN member from Thailand was interested in learning more about the Cambodian government's disagreements with findings published in MMN's "Safe from the Start: The Roles of Countries of Origin in Protecting Migrants" report, which revealed Cambodia's insufficient provision of overseas assistance to migrants, and the way MMN dealt with such

a reaction. Ms. Reiko Harima explained that the MMN Secretariat consults MMN members and project partners when handling sensitive issues to prevent members' operations from becoming affected. When the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Cambodia and the Royal Embassy of Cambodia in Bangkok issued separate statements opposing MMN's findings, MMN members in Cambodia had several internal discussions and ultimately decided against issuing a response as they felt the government would consider it an attack no matter how diplomatically the response was worded. Mr. Sokchar Mom from Legal Support for Children and Women (LSCW) added that responding to the government is not always necessary as the government may criticise a report on the one hand but actively work to improve the situation presented in the report on the other. Responding to an earlier discussion on MMN's future challenges, Mr. Mom believed that MMN must also look to increase its visibility among migrant communities through means such as the MMN webpage and other forms of social media.

## Plenary II: Reflections—Key issues, social and political changes surrounding migration, and MMN’s future roles and strategies

### Facilitator:

*Ms. Reiko Harima, Regional Coordinator, Mekong Migration Network*

### Discussants:

*Mr. Brahm Press, MAP Foundation, MMN member;*

*Ms. Ei Ei Chaw, Foundation for Education and Development (FED), MMN member;*

*Ms. Jackie Pollock, a founding member of MMN and former MMN chairperson; and*

*Mr. Sokchar Mom, Legal Support for Children and Women (LSCW), MMN member*

### Panel

While the earlier panel looked at MMN’s internal development, this panel discussion focused on the changes and continuity in the issues and policies surrounding migration in the GMS. Here, discussants contributed views from their work in Cambodia and Myanmar—two major countries of origin in the GMS—as well as of Thailand, the major receiving country. In identifying ongoing and emerging trends, MMN hopes to better situate and prepare itself to address emerging challenges in the near future.

Mr. Sokchar Mom kicked off the discussion by sharing with participants the trends of outbound migration in Cambodia. He estimated that 1.07 million documented and undocumented migrants are currently abroad, many of whom have been motivated to migrate because of domestic employment conditions that remain unattractive despite the government’s attempts to implement employment improvement programmes and increase the minimum wage, as well as other issues such as the loss of land from land grabbing due to large-scale industrial development. These factors have effectively rendered migration a necessity rather than a matter of choice.

Ms. Ei Ei Chaw then gave an overview of how Myanmar migrants have been adapting to Thai immigration policies. She found that migrants’ awareness of the registration process



*Mr. Sokchar Mom discussing trends relating to outbound migration in Cambodia.*

has been improving despite inconsistencies in Thai policies and procedures. However, many migrants are still undocumented due to a lack of information, services and support from employers in destination countries. One promising trend is that an increasing number of migrants have become more active in reaching out to regional and international NGOs and CSOs, which helps amplify their voices and make advocacy for the protection and promotion of their rights more effective.

Ms. Jackie Pollock believed that the documentation of migrants gives them an opportunity to contribute to and benefit from the social security system in destination countries. While policies are in place for migrants to access social security, Ms. Pollock urged MMN to step up its efforts in monitoring the system to ensure that migrants are receiving the full benefits to which they are entitled. On top of that, she called for governments in the region to make possible the portability of social security as many migrant returnees and their families are still required to travel back to their prior destination country to collect benefits.

Further pursuing Ms. Pollock's point, Mr. Brahm Press argued that many migrants who are documented and supposedly "in the system"—such as migrants working in the informal sector—are excluded from social security and receiving other benefits because of the inconsistent nature of Thai policies and laws. Existing policies also lack clarity as migrants are no longer allowed to register dependents. This calls into question whether migrant dependents over the age of 55—who are not allowed to work in Thailand—and those

between the age of 15 to 18—who are only allowed to work in certain categories of work—can stay on in Thailand with their families. The ambiguity of these situations means that the status of many dependents is left in limbo. Mr. Press further commented that countries like Thailand and Malaysia have, on paper, commitments to regional and international instruments clarifying the human rights migrants are entitled to, yet crackdowns persist on the ground and render migrants' rights unprotected. All these factors led Mr. Press to conclude that the problems with Thai migration policies have become more complex—the issue is no longer simply whether migrants are “in or out” of regular status, but whether existing policies are coherent and consistent in terms of affording protection to migrants of different backgrounds.

Picking up on discussants' concerns about regularisation policies in Thailand—a major destination country in the region—Ms. Reiko Harima asked whether countries of origin also have an increased focus on regularisation and, if so, whether this has impacted migration patterns to Thailand.

Mr. Mom explained that the Cambodian government has been promoting regular migration by signing MOUs with different destination countries. He believed that these MOUs find their primary motivation in exporting labour to reduce unemployment at home, rather than promoting migrant workers' rights and establishing standards for decent work and dignified pay. As a result, many migrants find little benefit with migrating through official MOU channels and continue to migrate irregularly, which exempts them from the many restrictions often embedded in MOU agreements, including the need to seek permission from the labour department before migration or the requirement that migrants must be tied to a single employer.

Ms. Ei Ei Chaw observed that the situation is similar in Myanmar. She estimated that around 15,000 migrants cross the Myanmar-Thai border daily, although the number of documented and undocumented migrants is not known. Her belief is that irregular migration will continue unabated so long as wage levels stagnate and job opportunities remain limited at home.



*Ms. Ei Ei Chaw speaking about migration trends from Myanmar to Thailand.*

Ms. Pollock remarked that the sole focus on documenting cross-border migrants in countries of origin often overlooks the wider issue of many people from these countries not being documented in the first place. In Myanmar, for instance, citizenship laws are outdated and leave many people without official status and associated documentation. The issue of migrant documentation must, therefore, be linked to the broader issue of citizenship documentation. On the same note, Mr. Press added that many Muslims and persons of South Asian descent are refused nationality in Myanmar, which renders them vulnerable both at home and when they migrate. He also agreed with Mr. Mom's earlier point that the current migration policies of countries of origin often push their nationals into becoming economic migrants without offering them labour protections.

In light of the existing problems with regularisation programmes, both in destination countries and countries of origin, Ms. Harima asked what the challenges and opportunities are in promoting migrants' rights in the region.

Regarding the challenges and threats, Mr. Mom found troubling the fact that countries in the region often use a national security perspective opposed to a human rights-based approach when developing migration policies. He also identified the lack of government policies directed at addressing migrants' social exclusion as another major hurdle in fully promoting their integration and protecting their rights equal to those of nationals.

Ms. Pollock saw the mismatch between policy prescriptions and the nature of migration issues as a challenge in promoting decent work for migrant workers. Governments in the region have a tendency to adopt anti-human trafficking programmes as solutions to migrant workers' lack of labour protection, which not only fails to empower workers but also victimises them. She believed that governments in the region are often reluctant to adopt a decent work framework to promote migrants' labour rights lest migrant workers grow into a force to be reckoned with. Mr. Press agreed with Ms. Pollock by pointing to Thailand's attempts to step up its efforts against trafficking without necessarily empowering migrants in the process. In addition to that, he believed that the promotion of economic migration between governments further commodifies workers and strips away their personal agency. More generally, Mr. Press noted that growing authoritarianism in the region is eroding human rights standards and shaping a more complex landscape to promote the rights of migrants.

As for the opportunities in promoting the rights of workers, Ms. Pollock identified the growing use of social media among migrants as a promising trend as it gives migrants a platform to voice their opinions to their embassies. Furthermore, Mr. Mom believed that social media has the potential to create a network of migrants across countries, which can contribute to their empowerment and help them mobilise on their own. On a different note, Mr. Press considered the growing awareness among consumers about

issues surrounding the use of migrant workers in supply chains as an advantage because it can lead to pressure being put on brands—as opposed to only governments—to correct indecent labour practices.

Provided the general context of migration in the Mekong, Ms. Harima asked discussants to propose recommendations for MMN's future roles and strategies.

Mr. Mom believed that MMN should think about how best to strengthen national advocacy strategies to influence governments in the region. To this point, Ms. Ei Ei Chaw believed that the policy dialogue MMN held last year between the governments of Cambodia and Myanmar, and CSO representatives, among other stakeholders, was a great opportunity to elevate the voices of migrants and grassroots organisations and influence government decisions. She reported that Myanmar's Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population has reached out to CSOs in Thailand twice since the policy dialogue, and she hoped that Ministry representatives will soon also meet with migrants in Thailand to better understand their situation and perspectives.



*Ms. Jackie Pollock giving recommendations to MMN's work moving forward.*

building initiatives in order to understand how MMN trainings have influenced their work. Ms. Pollock concluded by suggesting that MMN go through an independent external evaluation.

Mr. Press agreed that MMN would benefit from reviewing its past work and, at the same time, believed MMN must articulate its core underlying theme of social inclusion more effectively by looking at how it is tied to and represented in each individual project. He expressed his concern that MMN's involvement in projects specific to certain job sectors and policies—such as the current project on migrants in agriculture and fisheries entitled,

Ms. Pollock suggested that MMN should better make use of its vast volume of publications as tools for advocacy to influence policymakers, reach out to the public and build capacity. While donors may want to see new outputs for the projects they fund, Ms. Pollock urged MMN to balance its work on new projects with efforts to consolidate what has been done over the past 15 years. This includes, for example, following up with trainees who have taken part in MMN's capacity



*Mr. Brahm Press sharing about issues relating to migration in Thailand.*

“Protecting Rights of Migrant Workers in Informal Sectors in the Mekong: Migrants in Fisheries and Palm Oil Plantation” (2017-2020) and another project on migrants in the garment industry in special economic zones entitled “Jobs at the border: Promoting gender-sensitive policies for Special Economic Zones in the Mekong region” (2016-2018)—might cause MMN to fail to fulfil its ultimate agenda of promoting social inclusion through the elevation of migrants’ voices.

To conclude, Ms. Harima brought up Dr. Rosalia Sciortino’s earlier recommendation during her opening remarks that MMN should work on mapping general trends in addition to conducting research on select thematic issues. Ms. Pollock believed that the need to map general trends depends on the extent of available literature as well as the gaps in this literature. Mr. Mom agreed with Dr. Sciortino’s suggestions as he observed that MMN’s research has become segmented over the years and tended to overlook the broader picture and emerging trends related to migration, including the trend of marriage migration to China or the impacts of new investments on migration to China.

## **Open Discussion**

In the discussion that followed, participants from the floor continued to give suggestions for MMN’s future strategies. Mr. Phil Robertson from Human Rights Watch recommended that MMN work on specific systematic problems across countries in the GMS—including recruitment fees in countries of origin, citizenship issues, and cross-border portability of benefits—which are recurring because governments have not facilitated official migration channels to work in favour of migrants. He expressed concern that MMN’s jump from one project to another could mean that the network is missing out on opportunities to directly address said problems prevalent throughout the region.

Professor Wako Asato from Kyoto University further urged MMN to expand its scope of research to investigate broader migration trends in other Asian countries beyond the GMS. He pointed out that the increasing demand for migrant workers in Japan—which is estimated to reach 500,000 workers by 2025—and that China will change migration

patterns in the GMS in the near future. Currently, however, there is a large information gap between destination countries in Asia and countries of origin in the GMS, which requires organisations and networks such as MMN to fill.

Mr. Press, as his final point, suggested that MMN expand its reach to CSOs and other networks specialising in themes other than labour migration, including land grabbing and authoritarianism, as issues relating to migration are often intertwined with broader problems. For this reason, he believed MMN should reach out to these movements and become more strongly aligned with them.

Participants from the floor were also interested in discussing migrants' social exclusion. Ms. Chonticha Kon from the Human Rights and Development Foundation observed that Thai society tends to internalise state narratives that 'other' and criminalise migrants. This has given rise to the public's general acceptance of and support for crackdowns against migrants in Thailand—and even Thai migrants abroad—and the belief that migrants are draining public resources. Mr. Thiha from Yaung Chi Oo Workers' Association added that migrants' social exclusion is further entrenched by their own belief that they belong to a lower order in society. Empowerment here means freeing migrants from viewing themselves as the 'other' and raising awareness of the labour and human rights they are entitled to. Ms. Pollock agreed with such a deduction and noted that the intersection of classism, racism, and sexism puts migrants at the bottom of the pile—with classism being a particularly pervasive phenomenon in the Mekong. She believed that achieving the ultimate goal of promoting social inclusion involves not only making policies more inclusive but also changing general attitudes that treat migrants as the 'other'.

# Developing Recommendations for MMN's Strategies Moving Forward

Participants broke into three groups to develop recommendations for MMN's future strategies under three separate themes. The first theme titled, "[The] Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Undocumented Migrants" looked at ways in which MMN can continue its work on making migration safe and rewarding for the majority of migrants in the GMS who migrate without proper documentation, and therefore, fall out of official and authorised migration channels. The second theme entitled "Achieving Social Inclusion/Diversity" focused on ways to address migrants' social exclusion, whether in terms of their access to healthcare, education and justice among other forms of social protection, or their integration into host communities. The third theme entitled "Strengthening Solidarity, Labour Movements and Empowerment" examined how MMN can become more strongly aligned with labour movements in the region and beyond to connect the empowerment of migrants in the GMS with other causes and ultimately make the advocacy of migrants' rights more effective.

The three groups came up with the following set of proposed strategies:

## **Group One: Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Undocumented Migrants**

### *The issues*

1. Migrants are being cheated by brokers in the MOU recruitment process;
2. Governments are monitoring recruitment processes, including private recruitment agencies, as opposed to an independent monitoring body;
3. Many migrants lack easy access to documentation; and
4. Many migrants lack knowledge of the documentation process and awareness of their rights.

### *What MMN can do*

1. Develop tools for its members to raise awareness, and create platforms for information sharing. Where possible, make use of technology and conduct information sharing in local languages;
2. Conduct research on policies in destination countries and on recruitment practices on the ground in countries of origin;

3. Build relationships between CSOs in destination countries and countries of origin, as well as beyond the boundaries of the GMS; and
4. Expand membership to include grassroots migrant groups in destination countries like Thailand.

### **Group Two: Achieving Social Inclusion/Diversity**

#### *Access to benefits and services*

1. Make social security benefits portable and more accessible by integrating a system to do so into MOU processes; and
2. Make language and interpretation services at government offices available and accessible. Governments can borrow strategies from businesses and banks in carrying out these services.

#### *Education and qualifications*

1. Make use of the ASEAN Community concept to promote freer movement of labour;
2. Promote voices of migrant workers and strengthen their agency;
3. Adopt ASEAN curriculum on “living together” in schools throughout the region; and
4. Standardise skill levels across the region to ease migration.

#### *Changing the narrative*

1. Increase trust and connection between migrant communities and host communities;
2. Utilise media to spread information on the positive aspects of migration and that avoids generalisations; and
3. Change the way we speak about migration by promoting non-exclusionary terms.

### **Group Three: Strengthening Solidarity, Labour Movements, and Empowerment**

#### *Information sharing and monitoring*

1. Share information with migrants that can be accessed using phones; and
2. Map out supply chains to investigate the use of migrant labour, the identity of employers, where products are ending up.

### *Capacity building*

1. Train NGOs on how to use new technologies to connect with migrant workers;
2. Train local NGOs on how to monitor ASEAN's five-year plan of action at the national level; and
3. Train local NGOs on how to organise and mobilise migrants.

### *Networking and advocacy*

1. Continue working with grassroots organisations and engage with non-labour networks, such as the Fishers' Rights Network; and
2. Facilitate cross-country NGO and migrant workers exchange.



*Mr. Thiba on Achieving Social Inclusion/Diversity.*



*Participants discuss recommendations at a small group discussion session.*



*Ms. Huynh Thi Ngoc Tuyet, a founding member of MMN, delivers the concluding remarks for the workshop.*



## Mekong Migration Network (MMN)

The Mekong Migration Network (MMN), founded in 2003, is a subregional network of migrant support NGOs, migrant grassroots groups and research institutes. The central goal of MMN is to promote the welfare, well-being, dignity and human rights (especially labour, women's and family rights) of migrants in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), and to build mutual support and solidarity among migrants and advocates within the GMS. To achieve this goal, MMN jointly carries out research, advocacy, capacity building and networking.

### CONTRACT INFORMATION



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