

## STATEMENT

### MIGRANT EDUCATION SYSTEM

#### THAILAND AND MYANMAR

#### **Executive Summary**

Over the past two decades, members of the Myanmar migrant community in Thailand have been providing various forms of education to their own migrant nationals. Being part of migrant communities, their experiences and voices reflect the actual education needs of migrant workers and their dependents.

Since the existence of these migrant workers is defined by cross-border mobility, they require extensive knowledge of both nations' cultural, political, economic, linguistic, and social structures in order to preserve peace and avoid cross-cultural conflicts. Since Myanmar migrant workers may remain in Thailand long term or may return to Myanmar, their education should be able to provide them with knowledge, language, and skills which are applicable in both Thailand and Myanmar.

This statement is based on the experience and opinions of migrant stakeholders which have been collected through discussions, observations, theoretical analyses, and reports. The main purpose of this statement is to establish the need for a migrant-specific education system that incorporates existing migrant community schools and the state education systems of Thailand and Myanmar. This system will not only address the educational needs of Myanmar migrant workers but also support sustainable and peaceful integration in the region.

#### **Rationale**

Within Thailand there exists a unique migrant situation. Over the past two decades there has been a considerable influx of migrant workers into the country. Many of these migrant workers are young or have dependents, and the educational needs of these children are massive and particular to their migrant context. Over 65 percent of Thailand's migrant

workers are from Myanmar, adding an additional layer of complexity to the educational needs and goals of migrants and their children. Given the basic rights for social mobilization of migrant workers and their dependents, and the national and regional agendas for sustainable development in Thailand and Myanmar, questions about these countries' educational provisions for migrant workers have arisen. The purpose of this statement is to highlight the existing educational provision for Myanmar national migrant workers in Thailand; provide an analytical discussion on the policy of education rights for non-Thai nationals (migrant workers); and recommend approaches for filling gaps and identifying actual needs on the ground.

## **Background**

Thailand is the most economically advanced country compared to the other mainland South East Asian countries of Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. Due to the unbalanced economic development in the region, and the political situation of neighboring Myanmar, a massive amount of labor resources from neighboring countries has flowed into Thailand over the past two decades. Thailand is currently hosting approximately 3.5 million non-Thai nationals working as migrant workers. Of these 3.5 million, 2.5 million are from Myanmar.

In the various provinces of Thailand, Burmese migrant workers primarily get access to education through community-based migrant schools and organizations. The quality, funding, and services provided by these schools varies from one area to another. For example, in some border areas of Thailand, including Mae Sot and Phan Nga, there are approximately 80 known schools, with the possibility of more, providing basic education for migrant children. There are also a few vocational schools for adult migrants in Mae Sot. School curricula, teaching techniques, interests, and visions vary from one school to another. Most important, however, the accreditation of educational achievement at these schools is not systematically recognized by educational authorities in either Thailand or Myanmar. To receive accreditation from either country, there are requirements in school curricula, school organization, minimum resources, teaching methods, which are difficult for migrant community-based schools to follow and meet.

Currently, migrant students may follow two paths of education officially recognized by the Thai government. The first path of education is non-formal education (NFE) schools. These

schools accept only students over the age of 16 years; in essence, they are for adults only. Special considerations are made on a case-by-case basis for children under the age of 16 and over the age of 12; however, this is not a common occurrence. NFE schools were originally designed by the Thai government to provide a recognized path of education for Hill Tribe populations and others outside of the formally recognized system of education. Additionally, although NFE schools were designed to include vocational schools, migrant vocational schools are not recognized under the NFE provisions. The NFE school system requires six years of study to achieve the high school equivalent diploma. To follow the NFE path effectively requires an adult migrant to start at the very beginning, regardless of their educational achievements in their home country. Finally, NFE schools are always taught in the Thai language and follow an equivalency curriculum used in state schools. NFE school accreditation is recognized by the Thai state education authority and allows the holder to continue in Thai tertiary education institutions.

The second and only path of education that a migrant child under the age of 16 can follow is through the Thai state system. Thai state schools are open to migrant children. Though this system should theoretically serve the needs of migrant children, there are a variety of gaps and differences that make Thai state schools unappealing and inaccessible to migrant children. Additionally, migrant children may test into middle school grades in Thai schools, should they wish to, though this is done only on a case by case basis and is not common. We have found that numerous migrant parents, upwards of 80%, choose not to send their children to Thai state schools due to a feeling that the curricula of these schools do not adequately prepare their children for a return to Myanmar. Thai schools teach in Thai and also focus on Thai national history and culture, as they should. This focus, however, does not adequately meet the linguistic, social, and educational needs of migrant children whose families wish to someday return to Myanmar. We have also found that migrant students who successfully complete their education in the Thai system often receive degrees that have an incorrect name. This is due to discrepancies between their nationally registered names in Myanmar and the names inaccurately given to them during the often chaotic migrant worker registration process. Essentially, although a migrant child may have completed an accredited Thai education, their

degrees will not match the officially recognized documentation from Myanmar. This can make it impossible for a migrant student to pursue higher education or employment based on their academic achievement within Myanmar or outside of Thailand.

Fundamentally, Thailand doesn't envision the permanent residency of the current migrant population in its country. However, Thailand also requires a migrant labor force to fill its need for basic laborers in industries that have been contributing significantly to the country's economic growth since 1992. Based on existing reports on Myanmar migrants' ambitions for their existence in Thailand, there will be two groups of migrants—the group that remains in Thailand and the group that returns to Myanmar. However, the division between these two groups is not clear since there are people wishing to migrate back and forth between these two countries for economic and social purposes. As is the nature of migration, a certain part of the migrant population is fluid in their movement between Thailand and Myanmar, based in part on the changing factors connected to the gradual economic and political developments of Myanmar. There is a permanent transnational connection between Thailand and Myanmar which has resulted in a flow of people, human resources, culture, and ideas between these two countries. Since there is a large migrant population residing in Thailand intending to return to Myanmar, there needs to be a particular system for the social welfare of migrants that includes an education recognized by both the Thai and Myanmar governments.

### **Analysis of Thai education policies and educational rights for non-Thai nationals**

Thai policy regarding educational access is clear: a royal mandate grants every person on Thai soil – both Thai and non-Thai – the right to an education. This mandate recognizes that the Thai mainstream educational system may not adequately serve all segments of the population, and allows non-formal education institutions to address the specialized needs of those segments, while maintaining national security and educational standards.

Non-formal schools are organized by civic societies and communities rather than by the central education authority. These schools provide both academic and vocational training, and are designed to help disadvantaged populations based on the specific needs of those populations. The Thai Ministry of Education allows NFE schools to operate in a decentralized

manner and choose their own curricula, pedagogy, assessment methods, and certification requirements. NFE schools can also operate as correspondence schools, whereby students study at home or work and take assessment tests at local schools. NFE schools are also required to adhere to national security regulations regarding the content of their curricula; content that is politically sensitive or critical of Thai society is not allowed. Thai non-formal educational policy clearly states that the purpose of these non-formal schools is to support people's learning not only for their own self improvement, but also for societal development. However, despite the importance placed on universal education at the policy level, in practice both the formal Thai education system and the non-formal education system still need to adequately address the needs of migrant workers from Myanmar.

The official educational regulations for non-Thai citizens state that the director of a migrant learning center must be a Thai national by birth. In reality, most migrant learning centers are operated by non-Thais, as relatively few Thai nationals are focused on the educational rights of migrant workers. Most of the stakeholders in the Myanmar migrant learning community are non-Thai, with Myanmar nationals providing the bulk of the community's educational support. Since they are not operated by Thai nationals, these migrant schools are not officially recognized under the non-formal education policy, and thus are not accredited learning facilities. This restriction can also create the threat of corruption in situations where the providers of learning centers are not Thai nationals. In order to prevent corruption and promote education as a basic human right, non-Thai nationals should be allowed to operate learning centers by conforming to certain educational requirements and regulations.

Policies regarding regulations for teachers at NFE schools allow for flexibility in teachers' qualifications, with certain allowances possible depending on teachers' experience and on the level of their classroom. However, in practice provincial educational authorities require a Thai undergraduate degree as a minimum prerequisite to teaching at NFE schools. This restriction prevents teachers from Myanmar who have completed their undergraduate education in Myanmar – or who have relevant experience – from teaching their own migrant nationals. The

policy should include a process of accreditation or recognition of the educational qualification of teachers in a more flexible way, while still ensuring the quality of the education provided.

In summary, the policies for non-formal education schools and education rights for non-Thai nationals follow the mandate of the King of Thailand and the United Nations vision of “Education for All”. By following official Thai NFE policy and the education policy for non-Thai nationals, migrant schools are part of the system and should be recognized as such by the provincial education authorities. However, the enactment of the policies is still inconsistent throughout the country, and this must be researched and systemized.

### **Need of Myanmar Government’s Educational provision for Burmese migrant workers**

Myanmar’s government and education authorities need to address migrant education as a part of wider educational reform in the country. The former government ignored the existence of Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand, and there was no official policy regarding their social welfare. Along with recent political improvements in Myanmar, the new government has begun to recognize the existence and social welfare of migrant workers in Thailand, but no relevant policy has been drafted yet.

As has been mentioned, some of these migrants will return to Myanmar. The educational credentials they receive in Thailand should be recognized by Myanmar’s education system and allow them to continue their studies or apply for employment in Myanmar. In addition, formal educational provisions for migrants should be developed and systemized by Myanmar’s government in bilateral collaboration with Thai government.

### **Recommendations**

Based on inter-school dialogues and discussions among migrant communities, there is a clear need and demand for a migrant-specific education system. This is due to the migrants’ cross-border mobility. Since they are migrating across the border between Myanmar and

Thailand, they and their dependents need to know the language, culture, and political and social structure of both sides of the border in order to fit into the societies of both countries and preserve the peace and cultural values in both societies. In addition to the Thai non-formal education centers, existing migrant community schools are in the best position to take the role as non-formal education centers for migrant learners since they are familiar with the culture, practices, and political and social structures of both sides of the border. They can be the centers of language and cultural exchange programs for both migrant and Thai communities.

Even more important, migrant schools are already in place and can provide basic education for migrant children who will be continuing further education in Myanmar. Research shows that almost 80 percent of migrant parents want their children to learn at migrant schools since their children need to continue their education in Myanmar when they return to that country.

Considering the current situation and the vision for better educational services for migrants, and as a part of regional integration, the overall recommendation suggests the establishment of a migrant education system which can allow migrants to continue their education on both sides of border. The following detailed recommendations are based on this idea:

- There should be open discussion and collaboration among migrant community-based organizations, Thai and Myanmar educational authorities, and UN agencies for migration and education on the establishment of a migrant education system.
- There should be recognition and accreditation of migrant community schools by both Thai and Myanmar governments.
  - There should be support for curriculum development and a standard quality of education.
- There should be research conducted on migrants' educational needs in Thailand, which needs to address their various needs and backgrounds.
  - Research on migrant workers' educational aspirations.

- Research among migrant schools to document existing resources, interests, visions, and unmet needs.
  - Research on curricula that fulfills migrants' educational needs without conflicting with governmental concerns of national security and peace.
  - Research on the backgrounds and needs of existing migrant teachers, who are the actual implementers of migrant education on the ground.
- There should be public information sharing concerning migrant workers' educational rights.
  - There should be a migrant-specific education system which integrates existing migrant schools and educational organizations, based on the results of the research and fulfilling the both the migrant's needs and the national security interests of Thailand and Myanmar.
  - There should be a similar process followed by the Myanmar government in order to recognize the migrant schools as NFE schools and its students as NFE students, whose educational accomplishments are recognized in both countries.

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