

## **Informal Networks as Alternatives of Life Development of Return Migrants**

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Labour migration is a vital part of modern economies and the management and integration of migrants into the labour force of great importance in fashioning its ability to adapt to and take advantage of emergent opportunities. This study applied a qualitative approach to exploring how returned migrants re-integrated into society and their informal networks with a view to improving the quality of life of the people concerned. In-depth interviews and direct observation were used in combination with the content analysis of secondary data. Findings were mainly based upon evidence from the interviews. Both skilled and unskilled returnees have regularly turned to informal networks for assistance on their own account, partly because official programs could be disorganized and lack resources. It has been found that most return migrants find themselves unemployed and have had to turn to access to their informal networks (parents, relatives, cousin and friends) to borrow money, get ideas and suggestions, locate further network connections so as to prepare to enter self-employment and personal investment in ventures such as grocery stores, beauty salons, food street vending and similar. Returnee management has been disappointing because of inadequate NGO involvement, lack of strategies to mobilize migrants' knowledge and expertise, and lack of complete and up-to-date statistics, among other constraints. This has given rise to a new generation of cyclical migrants, who move back and forth across borders attempting to integrate their internally multiple identities and senses of loyalty and belonging.

**Keywords:** return migrant, informal network, Laos.

### **Background of the Study**

Labour migration is a vital part of modern economies and the management and integration of migrants into the labour force of great importance in fashioning its ability to adapt to and take advantage of emergent opportunities. This paper discusses research aimed at determining the importance and administration of return labour migrants in the Lao context.

From 1975-90, an unknown number of Lao people migrated to countries with better economic conditions, such as Thailand, China and western countries due to political issues. The economic differences in the Sub-Mekong region made people migrate to relatively wealthier countries.

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The International Labour Organization (ILO) supported a study by the Lao Government that found that nearly 7% of households in three border provinces had family members working in Thailand. With more than half of the population under the age of 20, young Laotians migrate to fill unskilled jobs and become vulnerable to trafficking for sexual and labour exploitation, particularly in Thailand (Humantrafficking Organization, n.d.). Many refugees could not substantiate their status and were at enhanced risk of trafficking, but many of them did not opt to return to their countries of origin since, during previous return episodes, several of them were fined and/or detained, even those who had been forcibly taken overseas by human trafficking gangs. While other recent returnees found themselves unemployed, and have turned to informal networks for help and occupy themselves with casual work on a day-to-day basis. The objective of this study was to explore how return migrants were able to reintegrate themselves back into society and make use of their informal network connections as a means of improving their quality of lives.

### **Terms of Return for Migrants and Development**

Souza (2006) explained that return migrants are retirees who always intended to return to their country of origin with the expectation of contributing to their home countries because they are old and not working in the formal labour market. Skilled return migrants are poised to become more important to local government policy, as well as holding the potential to help build cross-border networks, forge further links between sending and receiving countries and directly contribute to development efforts. Corcoran and Marry (2002) stated that whether they are skilled or unskilled returnees, they are nevertheless highly self-aware. This helps them leverage their experience overseas in their home country. Owing to the cross-cultural awareness and ability obtained from the international experience, returnees felt they had improved themselves, particularly in the areas of self-management and confidence.

To develop better quality of life for the return migrants, a number of factors should be considered, such as motivations for return, relevance of acquired skills to the country's development priorities, legislative, economic and social conditions in the country of origin and the ways that government and informal networks help returnees reintegrate into society, as observed by

Souza (2006). John, Chan, Fox, and Kim (2007), in a comparative study concerning return migration policy in Asia and Europe, found that Malaysia encouraged skilled former citizens to return to their home country as they were a valuable source of income and investment for national development. This was also true of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, which also appeared to have similar policies aimed at helping and encouraging return migrants as a means of boosting national development. However, this situation is complicated by the fact that many migrants left because of civil war, persecution or the fear of persecution.

### **Migration and Return Migration in Laos**

The Lao government reinvigorated its interest in fighting human trafficking in 2001 and attempted to improve its awareness of returnees' identities and circumstances, promulgating new laws to assist them and increasing enforcement of existing laws. In 2006, for instance, the Thai Social Development and Human Security Permanent Secretary and the Lao Labour and Social Welfare Permanent Secretary co-chaired the Thai-Lao committee to introduce the Plan of Action to Return and Reintegrate Trafficked Victims to provide special employment schemes for those repatriated, as well as providing some vocational training and other support, such as food, household and business equipment, land for homes and so on (Anonymous, 2006). The Lao and Thai governments have furthermore agreed to address the problems by legalizing workers currently in Thailand, protecting their rights as well as ensuring that they are paid the same as Thai workers. After such an agreement, around 90 Lao workers were legally sent to work in Thailand, and also got paid at least 150 Baht a day as well as social insurance. However, there is of course pressure from employers to avoid this additional paperwork, which is perceived as restrictive and a cost which removes competitive advantage – most workers operate in very low value-added activities which rely almost entirely on low labour costs for competitiveness.

### **Methodology**

This study applied a qualitative approach to explore return migrants and their informal networks in Laos as a mean of improving quality of life.

Quite a considerable strand of literature considering the nature of labour migration and return, although to date little of it applies to the Laotian situation. This research builds upon existing knowledge about return migration and to extend insights gained elsewhere to the Lao people concerned. Consequently, this is not a form of grounded theory research in which nothing is known *a priori* about the actually existing situation but rather a form of confirmatory research. In-depth interviews and direct observation were used in combination with content analysis of secondary data. Prior to interviews, the authors contacted known return migrants by using networking as well as snowball-style approaches. The potential respondents were contacted by telephone to explain the nature and purpose of the research and reach agreement and make appointments for face-to-face interviews subsequently. That means the authors had certain contacts with some known returned migrants before interviewing them; and later those interviewed respondents had suggested other key respondents to the authors for further interviews. The respondents were returnees who had migrated to other countries such as Thailand, America, Australia, Japan and elsewhere. The interviews took place during April-June 2008. Eleven face-to-face interviews took place in respondents' shelters as they were comfortable and convenient, while one additional interview was carried out via phone. The respondents of this study consisted of six men and six women, aged from 24 to 55 years old. Seven of them were single.

The interviews were conducted in Vientiane Municipality and Savannakhet province, which are the sources of most emigration from Laos. Four respondents were born in Vientiane Municipality; two respondents originated from Savannakhet province before having moved to Vientiane when they were young; while the rest were respondents from Savannakhet province. Some interviews were tape recorded for subsequent transcription and detailed notes were made on the spot in other cases. Each interview took at least one hour, and each involved using the same scope or checklist guidelines, which included 1) reasons for leaving Laos, 2) working experiences in adopted counties, 3) their lives and informal networks upon their returns, and lastly 4) plans of their lives and expected required assistance. The results are presented and discussed below. The content analysis used to explore the interview transcripts is conceptual in nature: that

is, it investigates the concepts described by respondents according to a framework established (at least in part) by pre-existing research.

## **Results and Discussions**

### **Reasons for Leaving Laos**

There are two types of return migrants: skilled and unskilled return migrants. Skilled migrants of this study were diverse in educational achievement, including those with undergraduate degrees in dentistry, English language major, engineering or vocational training skills in primary school teaching. These respondents generally had preferred to work and earn in developed countries such as the USA, Australia, Japan, France and Canada. These attempted migrants not only anticipated working there for income but also for further study, visiting relatives and improving their second language ability, especially the English language, which is considered as one of the most important abilities in obtaining a job in Laos at the moment.

Unskilled return migrants mostly had few choices and mostly opted to migrate and work in Thailand. Most of them said that as soon as they finished their studies at high school (some only completed primary school), they immediately left Laos for Thailand. Some went to Thailand to follow a partner who was working in Thailand. Some stressed that Laos and Thailand border each other and share many similarities, including language, appearance, dress and cultural values, and ease of migration. Thus, many Lao migrants could enter Thailand with a border pass sometimes and illegally moved to other provinces of Thailand, even Bangkok, to find jobs there. They may have stayed in Thailand for up to seven years, in some cases crossing or re-crossing the border legally or illegally as opportunity dictated.

Generally speaking, reasons for migration varied. Many people fled Laos to avoid fighting and persecution. Many admitted that economic and political reasons were usually intertwined. In particular, economic motivations seemed to dominate the migration decision. One respondent observed that several Lao emigrants migrated because they expected to be paid more in the host countries. Some were convinced by friends and job

brokers. Some said they had no or low education or low performance while studying.

In addition, it was found that Lao emigrants appeared to be younger than they were generally considered to be, according to one respondent. In particular, young girls have been following their fiancés and spouses to Western countries. For those have gone to Thailand, the men mostly found work in the fishing and construction industries, in factories, construction sites, sugar cane and rubber plantations. Women most commonly worked in factories, restaurants, entertainment venues and the sex industry. Many of the female respondents felt it was their duty to earn money and remit that to their families. So, they were often willing to take almost any paid job. Apart from this, family pressure was another reason which caused respondents to migrate. McCoy (2007) noted that growing levels of materialism in the young further spur the desire for more highly paid jobs. That made the young migrate to where they would be paid more and thus could obtain more consumer goods both for themselves and for their families at home.

### **Migrants' Work in Adopted Countries**

According to the interviews, it is not always easy to find work in the destination country, especially in developed countries such as the USA and Australia. In this case, many migrants resorted to informal work such as part-time work in neighbours' small grocery shops or doing work that could be managed at home, such as sewing, and being paid in cash. One woman worked regularly behind closed doors in designing and making clothes for Lao people living nearby. She found it not very challenging even though she had never had any experience or training in this area. Another obtained a job in a Japanese car assembly factory. Later, as a result of her proficiency in English, she was promoted to group leader and was made responsible for managing her team members, whose English abilities were lower, including providing orientation and training and problem-solving. Her undergraduate degree had been in English language from Laos and this was of great assistance. While this respondent was able to increase her skills, the remaining said they had faced the opposite process. Nevertheless, both skilled and unskilled workers reported that at least they brought home with them new skills and competencies. These benefited them in subsequent employment and entrepreneurialism in Laos in a variety of ways.

## Return Migrants' Lives and Informal Networks in Laos

While reasons for return did vary, the most repeated reason was that economic objectives had been achieved and that a scheduled return was therefore made. Many were aware of the increased openness of the Lao economy: the number of foreign direct investment projects in agriculture and forestry, industry and handicrafts, wood products, and else have been increasing and migrants believed they would have an advantage in claiming jobs in these attractive projects, which customarily offer higher salaries and clearer career paths. In addition, they felt they could also look after their families better owing to their accumulated savings and remittances already made. According to interviews, upon the respondents' return, new job opportunities opened for those returnees (especially with improved English ability), particularly as English teachers, coordinator in foreign investments and in the Poverty Reduction Programs of NGOs.

However, unskilled workers seemed to have fewer job opportunities and a number of them have remained unemployed. Indeed, a new generation of cyclical migrants appears to have arisen. The alternatives involved self-employment, for instance, selling homemade ice cream and confectionery, tailoring and construction work. Nevertheless, even when obvious improvements in income or future opportunities were apparent, all respondents felt that their lives and their abilities had improved. This might be manifested in a greater sense of self-confidence or ability to adapt to new situations.

Most respondents revealed that they commonly received assistance from their informal networks, such as families, relatives, friends and society at large. Family members were usually the first to lend a hand. Assistance included encouragement, working support, suggestions concerning networks and connections, advice, accommodation and, not least, financial support where required. It is considered easier to borrow money from relatives. Fewer steps were necessary to arrange a loan and there was no need for formal paperwork, just a verbal agreement between those involved. Interest was rarely charged and there was no set limit for when the money had to be repaid. However, the amount of money available was limited because relatives had little and were reluctant to put all their accumulated capital at risk. In addition to relatives, friends also represented an important resource,

offering assistance in knowledge about job opportunities and potential customers, as well as being possible business partners.

None of the respondents had accessed relevant public assistance services, whether offered by the government or by any of the international partners. Indeed, a number of respondents reported that they had in fact never heard of such assistance projects. Some were aware of vocational training services, especially for trafficked returnees and of schemes to help Lao people find jobs overseas. However, respondents were again reluctant to access these services for fear of lengthy bureaucratic procedures and other formalities.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Briefly, both skilled and unskilled returnees have turned to informal networks, partly because official programs are probably disorganized and lack necessary resources. Many returnees found themselves unemployed and had turned to self-employment and personal investment in ventures and day-to-day or casual work such as grocery stores, beauty salons, food street vending and similar. Ineffective information dissemination and law enforcement have resulted in recycling and new migration events and increased the risk of human trafficking. However, all of the respondents seemed happy to be back in their home country and to be among their family and friends, irrespective of an objective assessment of the success or failure of their migration. Any income gained from overseas was, in general, happily shared with family and friends.

Regarding their future, the returnees planned to open their own business, either immediately or at some stage in the future. They look to apply their skills and experience to establish schools to teach English, mini mart retail outlets, restaurants or others. However, most found that constraints of capital, information and connections, and threat of risk and loss usually prevented them from realizing their plans. The returnees at this point often shied away from making the commitment, instead preferring to take another period of migration to try to close the perceived skills and resources gaps. Indeed, they may have postponed plans indefinitely and instead supported their children to obtain as much education as possible with a view to being supported by them at some later stage. Meanwhile, some

returnees made plans to make new trips, preferably to developed countries, including the USA and Australia as described previously but also Japan.

As a recommendation, public awareness campaigns are probably required to help Lao people become more aware of the dangers involved in seeking work oversea but the lack of employment opportunities and grinding poverty at home are also important. These conditions may still make working abroad appear attractive. Only a stronger economy with better work opportunities and higher wages will discourage labour migration and this seems to be a distant prospect at the moment.

The returnees, in describing how their future colleagues might make best use of the opportunities overseas, tended to demonstrate their own failings. They expressed the importance, for example, of being prepared for overseas conditions and being knowledgeable in both the skills necessary there as well as the need for establishing an entrepreneurial business on their return. They also talked about the importance of abiding by laws and regulations and completing all formalities, even though they themselves rarely managed to do this. Lack of knowledge benefits employers, agents and traffickers, as well as those who profit from their activities. Properly workable agreements with Thailand, in particular, are necessary in order to reduce the prevalent level of exploitation.

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