SUMMARY

Community Perceptions and Information Needs of Persons at Risk of Irregular Migration in Bali Process Member States:

Evidence from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand

REGIONAL SUPPORT OFFICE
THE BALI PROCESS

Mixed Migration Centre

Introduction

The dynamics of migration within and towards Southeast Asia represent a complex interplay of socio-cultural, economic, geopolitical and environmental factors, rooted in the region's history which continue to evolve today.[1] Significant events such as large-scale displacement during the 1950s-70s Vietnam War, the persistent systemic persecution of Rohingya, and the recent conflicts in Myanmar have accentuated the complexity of mixed migration in South and Southeast Asia. Uneven economic development has further fuelled migration, attracting workers from lower-income countries to larger economies that offer more opportunities. Additionally, climate change and environmental disasters have increasingly influenced migration patterns in the region.[2] Combined, these factors contribute to both regular and irregular migration patterns, while porous borders and limited access to regular pathways exacerbate the prevalence of irregular migration.

Addressing the issue of irregular migration requires a multifaceted approach that recognises the diverse backgrounds and experiences of people on the move and addresses the motivations and drivers that compel individuals to undertake irregular journeys.

1   Kaur, A. (2004) Mobility, labour mobilisation and border controls: Indonesian labour migration to Malaysia since 1900, accessible at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Amarjit-Kaur/publication/242440457_Mobility_labor_migration_and_border_controls_Indonesian_labor_migration_to_Malaysia_since_1900/links/544709f90cf22b3c14e0bc15/Mobility-labor-migration-and-border-controls-Indonesian-labor-migration-to-Malaysia-since-1900.pdf; Hatsukano, N. (2019), Overview of Migration in the Mekong Subregion', in Hatsukano, N. (ed.), Rethinking Migration Governance in the Mekong Region: From the Perspective of the Migrant Workers and Their Employers. accessible at: https://www.eria.org/uploads/media/4.RPR_FY2017_19_Chapter_1.pdf.

2   IOM (2024) Policy and Data Insights in the Lower Mekong Subregion: Acting on Human Mobility in a Changing Climate, Accessible at: ; MMC (2024) Impact of Climate Change on the Migration and Displacement Dynamics of Rohingya Refugees, accessible at: https://roasiapacific.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl671/files/documents/2024-06/mecc-assessment-report.pdf.

Under the mandate of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime (Bali Process), the 2023 Adelaide Strategy for Cooperation[3] (the Strategy) identifies 'Irregular Migration' and 'Public Information Campaigns' as two key cooperation areas across the Bali Process structure, calling for enhanced public awareness initiatives to promote safe and regular migration. To this end, the RSO and MMC published the Community Perceptions and Information Needs of Persons at Risk of Irregular Migration in Bali Process Member States: Evidence from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand (hereafter, report).[4] This document summarises the key findings and the recommendations of the report.

The report explores the information needs of persons at risk of irregular migration, and the perceptions of these at-risk persons, and their origin and host communities surrounding irregular migration. The report aims to:

1. Provide insights into the way in which persons at risk of irregular migration and different stakeholders perceive irregular migration;

2. Enhance understanding of the information needs of persons at risk of irregular migration;

3. Assess the effectiveness of interventions carried out by different stakeholders in the four selected Bali Process Member States: Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, targeted towards addressing the information needs of persons at risk of irregular migration, with the intention of promoting dialogue among relevant stakeholders to encourage collaboration; and

4. Provide actionable recommendations to Bali Process Members and Observers to promote and ensure safe and regular migration pathways through effective public information campaigns.

The four Bali Process Member States were selected for the research as they are key origin, transit and destination countries for irregular movements in the region. Bangladesh serves as a country of origin for migrants and refugees travelling to Malaysia; Indonesia is both an origin country of migrant workers and a transit country for asylum seekers and migrants heading to Malaysia and Australia; Malaysia is a destination country for migrants from Bangladesh and Indonesia; and Thailand is a destination country for migrant workers from neighbouring Southeast Asian countries.

The research employed a mixed-method methodology, incorporating findings of **612 surveys** conducted with refugees and migrants in an irregular situation in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, who provided a valuable retrospective perspective on their migration experience, and the role information plays in the decision-making process to migrate. While offering valuable retrospective insights, the research methodology carries inherent limitations brought on by reliance on accounts from individuals who have already completed migration journeys. This may introduce potential reporting bias, as respondents may have difficulty accurately recalling details or assessing their prior information needs. Additionally, the sampling approach, while carefully designed to capture diverse experiences, remains non-random and cannot be considered fully representative of all migrant populations across the target countries.
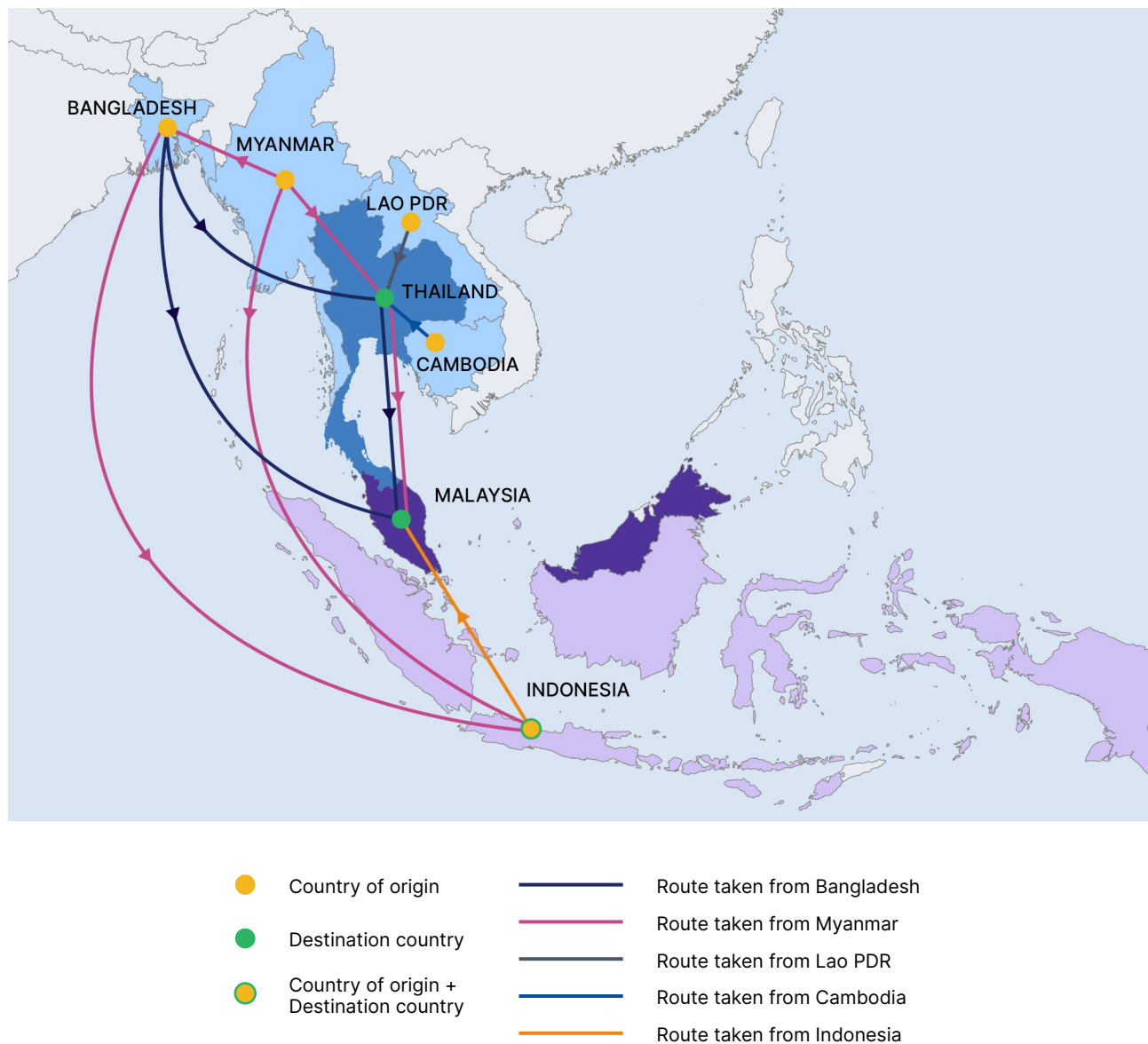
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3   2023 Adelaide Strategy for Cooperation, accessible at: https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/assets.baliprocess.net/app/uploads/2023/02/17124506/2023-Adelaide-Strategy-for-Cooperation.pdf.

4   Community Perceptions and Information Needs of Persons at Risk of Irregular Migration in Bali Process Member States: Evidence from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, accessible at: https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/assets.rso.baliprocess.net/app/uploads/2025/02/20141733/Assessment-of-Community-Perceptions-Report.pdf.

Figure 1 below illustrates the migration routes taken by these respondents originating from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), and Myanmar. It also draws on **41 key informant interviews** with government and non-government interlocuters across Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand held between June and September 2024. The primary data collected is complemented by a desk review of publicly available academic literature on migration issues in the region and information programming, including academic publications and grey literature[5] and policy documents from government and non-governmental sources.

Figure 1. Migration routes to Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand

🟡 Country of origin	—— Route taken from Bangladesh
🟢 Destination country	—— Route taken from Myanmar
🟢 Country of origin + Destination country	—— Route taken from Lao PDR
	—— Route taken from Cambodia
	—— Route taken from Indonesia

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5   This refers to publications which are not formally published in academic journals or books, including reports, policy briefs and working papers produced by research institutions, civil society organisations and the government and inter-governmental agencies.

Key Findings

1. Migration decisions of individuals are collectively influenced by an intersection of economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental factors.
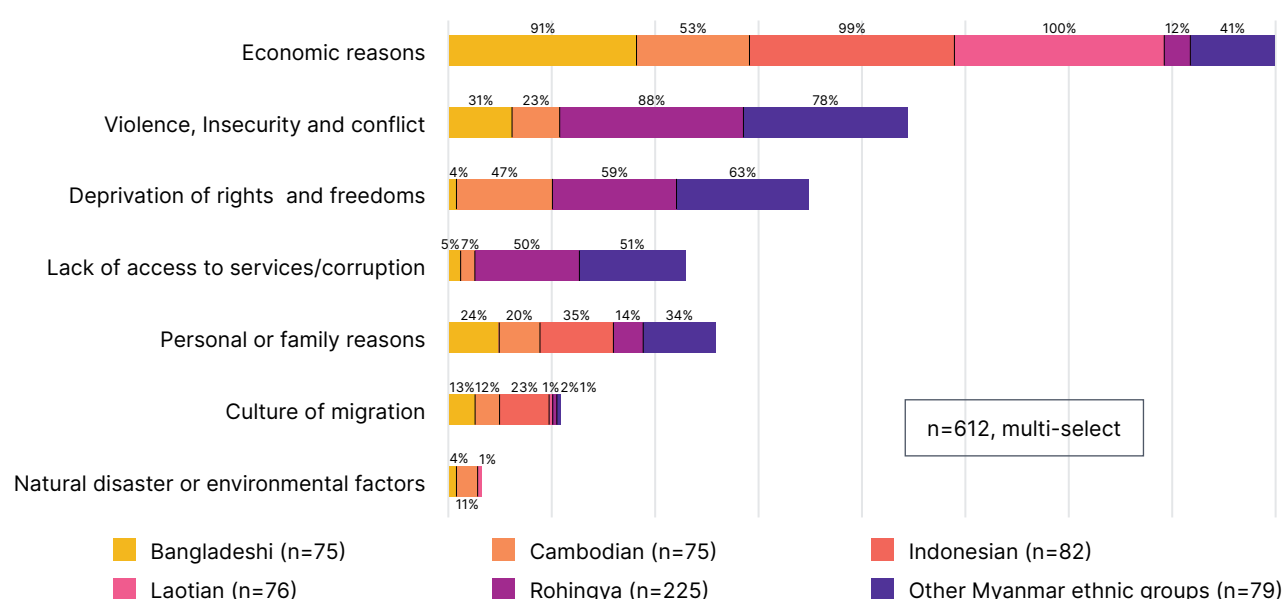
Economic motivations – the search for better livelihoods and job opportunities – are a prominent driver of (irregular) migration, which are often mixed with other factors, including historical and cultural practices of migration. Gender, ethnicity, age, conflict, rural location, lack of reliable information, lack of accessible regular pathways, and environmental factors often exacerbate existing economic pressures.

As shown in **Figure 2** below, drivers of migration vary significantly across different countries of origin. Economic motivations prevail for respondents from Indonesia (**99%**), Bangladesh (**91%**), and Lao PDR (**100%**), highlighting that livelihood opportunities remain the primary push factor for these groups. In contrast, violence, insecurity, and conflict emerge as the main motivators for Rohingya respondents (**88%**) and other Myanmar ethnic groups (**78%**), reflecting the ongoing instability in Myanmar. Additionally, deprivation of rights and freedoms was cited by **59 percent** of Rohingya and **63 percent** of other Myanmar ethnic groups, compared to **4 percent** of Bangladeshi respondents and **24 percent** of Cambodians.

In the case of Rohingya respondents, the findings highlight the intersection of personal vulnerabilities, specifically their statelessness and ethnicity, with contextual vulnerabilities represented by the conflict and violence experienced in their origin country. In the case of other Myanmar ethnic groups, the military conscription law implemented in February 2024, provides further impetus for youth to flee irregularly, seeking employment and shelter in Thailand. While the political context and ongoing armed conflict drives Myanmar youth out of the country, the high demand for young migrant workers, particularly in labour intensive sectors, attract them to Thailand.

Environmental factors, while generally less prominent, were most significant for Cambodian respondents (**11%**), pointing to the emerging influence of climate-related stressors on migration decisions and their role as a vulnerability multiplier.

Figure 2. For what reasons did you leave your country of origin ? (by country of origin)

n=612, multi-select

Legend:
- Bangladeshi (n=75)
- Cambodian (n=75)
- Indonesian (n=82)
- Laotian (n=76)
- Rohingya (n=225)
- Other Myanmar ethnic groups (n=79)

Interesting finding: In some countries, migration is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric and psyche of migrating populations. This entrenched migration culture is particularly pronounced along corridors between Malaysia and Indonesia, or Thailand and neighbouring countries. Combined with economic drivers, these cultural drivers lead many prospective migrants to be influenced by the positive narratives perpetuated by friends and family who may downplay the associated risks and legal consequences of migrating irregularly.

> *"If you look at Indonesia and Malaysia, anthropologically, it was necessary to travel as a rite of passage, they call it 'merantau'. Otherwise, you're not considered a man... But, in the modern period, women are also doing it..." (Key informant interview, academia, Malaysia, MY4)*

Moreover, **75 percent - 89 percent** of respondents across all groups indicated that their communities in the country of origin held neutral or positive views of irregular migration, perceiving it as an opportunity for better economic prospects. This may be owed to financial remittances from abroad being viewed as pathways to social respect and communal support.

> *"People don't look at it too much negatively. There is poverty, unemployment. For survival, they look for opportunities to improve their situation. Socially, they don't look at it as an illegality" (Key informant interview, Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), Bangladesh, BD4).*

2. Marriage abroad, gender-based discrimination, and systemic exclusions are key drivers of migration for women.

There are significant disparities in how men and women navigate migration decisions and access information. The reasons for leaving origin countries remained consistent across male and female respondents of the research, with economic factors, violence, insecurity and conflict, and deprivation of rights and freedoms being the top three most frequently reported reasons. However, the proportion of women who cited personal or family reasons to be driving their decision to migrate was three times higher than men. More specifically, **63 percent** of the female respondents indicated that the pursuit of marriage abroad was a key personal or family reason for leaving. This choice reflects an attempt to improve one's economic and social status back home, at the risk of women's heightened exposure to exploitation, social isolation, and limited access to resources.

Figure 3. For what reasons did you leave your country of origin? (by gender)

Reason	Women (n=217)	Men (n=395)
Economic reasons	48%	56%
Violence, Insecurity and conflict	49%	49%
Deprivation of rights and freedoms	37%	35%
Lack of access to services/corruption	22%	29%
Personal or family reasons	37%	10%
Culture of migration	7%	8%
Natural disaster or environmental factors	3%	2%

n=612, multi-select ▪ Women (n=217) ▪ Men (n=395)
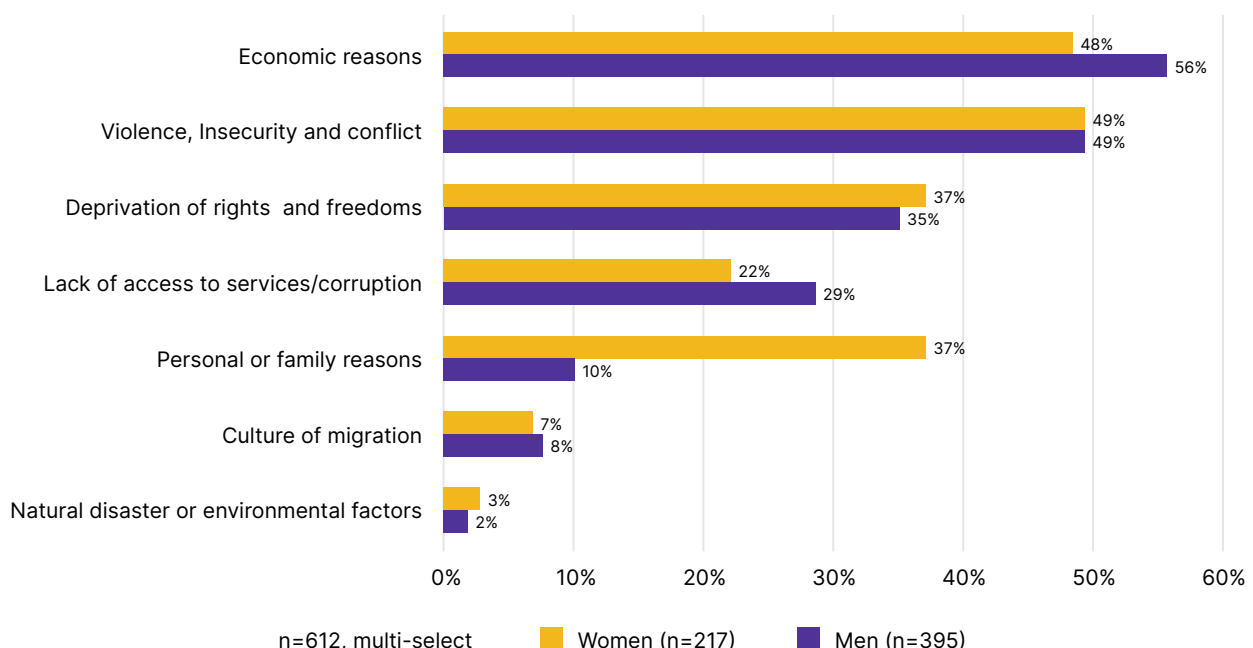
3. Perceptions of irregular migration among migrant groups are largely influenced by the protection incidents they face along their journeys.

Views on irregular migration differ across different respondent groups, reflecting their unique experiences and circumstances. Negative perceptions were particularly prominent among Rohingya respondents (**65%**), followed by Bangladeshi (**48%**) and Indonesian respondents (**45%**). These negative views correlate with higher rates of reported protection incidents such as detention and physical violence during migration. **91 percent** of Rohingya respondents reported encountering protection incidents during migration, compared to **47 percent** of other Myanmar ethnic groups. In contrast, Cambodian (**81%**) and Laotian (**71%**) respondents held predominantly positive or neutral views on irregular migration, possibly due to lower costs, relatively easier border crossings, and economic opportunities in neighbouring Thailand. These factors may be perceived as outweighing the negative experiences of abuse experienced by migrants from Cambodia and Lao PDR.

Figure 4. How do you perceive irregular migration in general?
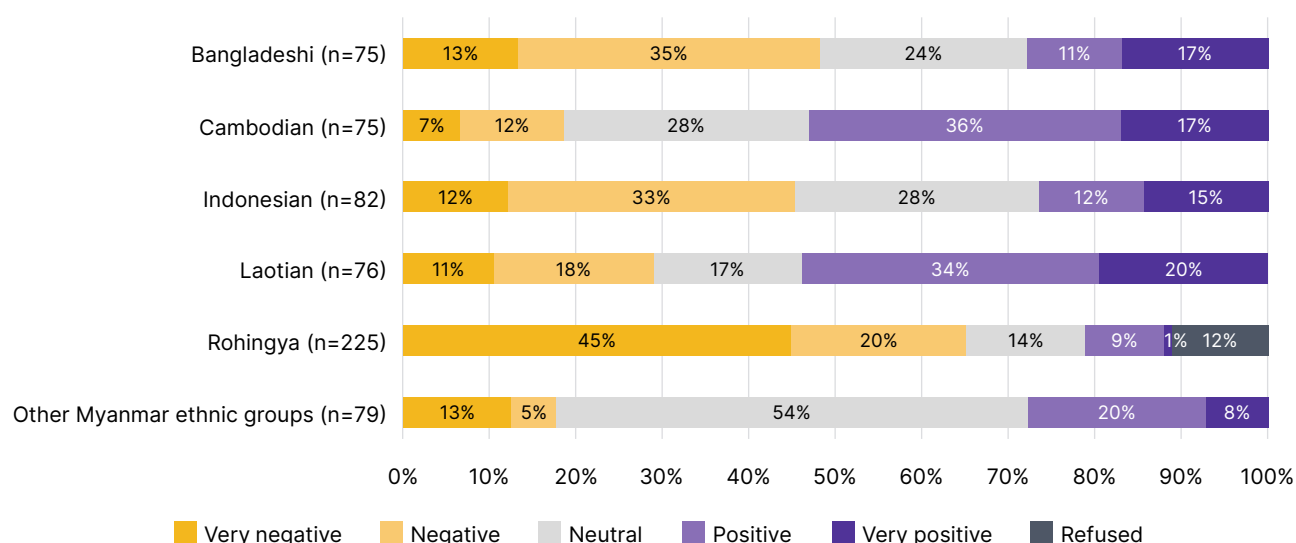
Interesting finding: While **45 percent** of Indonesian respondents perceived irregular migration negatively, **98 percent** would still have chosen the same pathway as shown below in Figure 5, presenting a unique case. This challenges the common assumption that individuals would reconsider their decision pursue irregular migration if better informed.
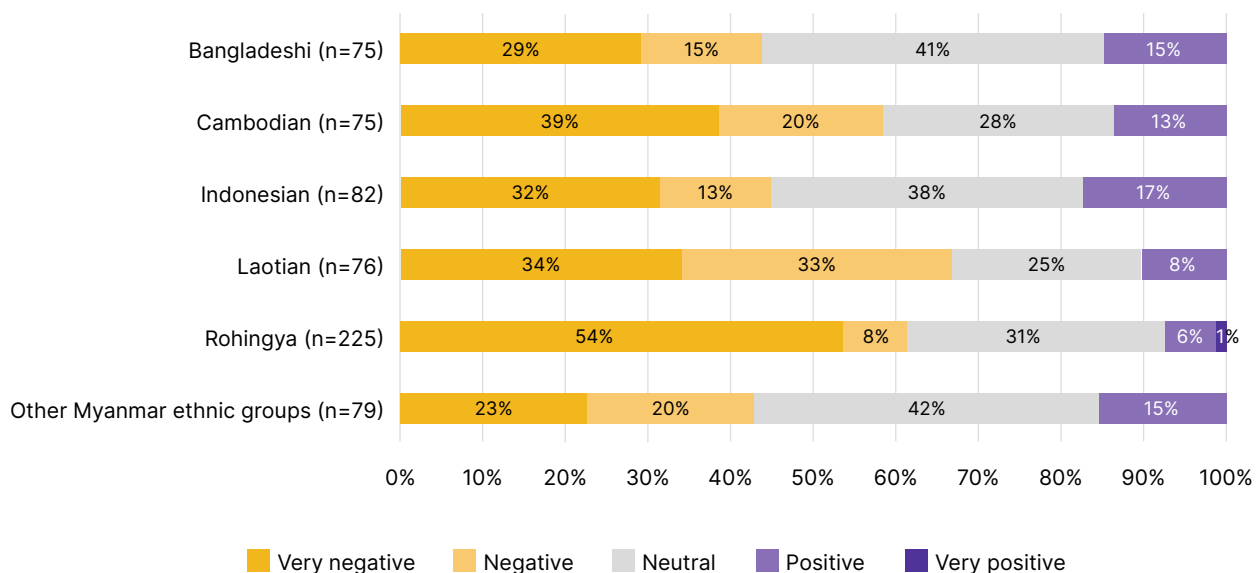
Figure 5. In retrospect, would you have taken an irregular pathway knowing what you know now?

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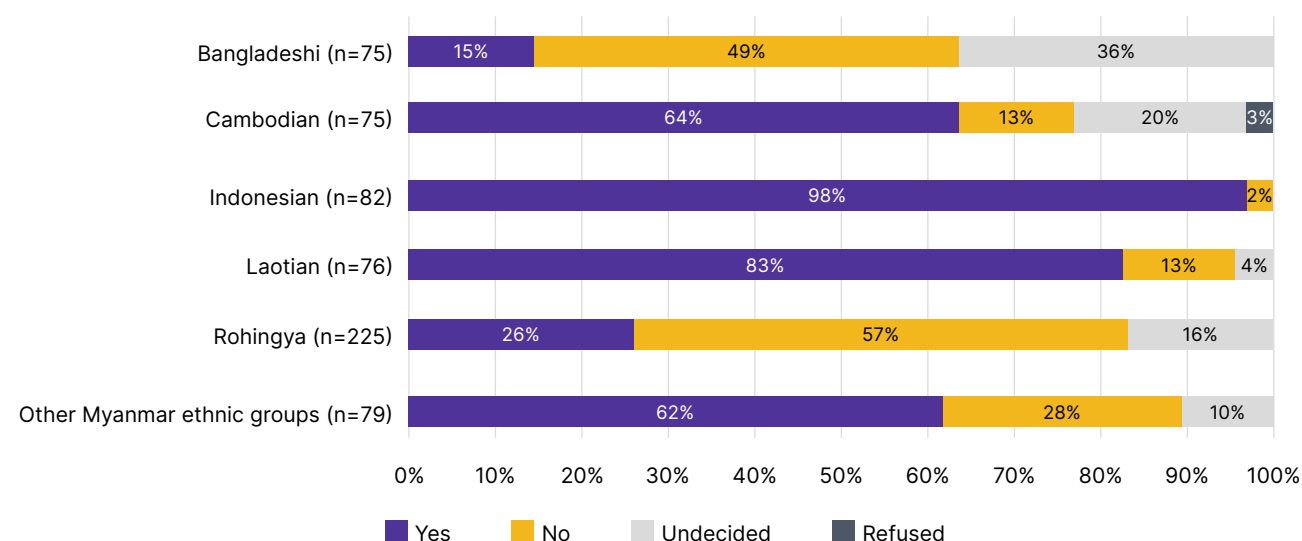
4. In contrast to the heavy reliance of host communities in Malaysia and Thailand on migrant workers, refugees and migrants, particularly in irregular situations, are increasingly stigmatised within local communities.

In host countries – such as Malaysia and Thailand – refugees and migrants often face stigmatisation, with a high proportion of respondents (**44% - 67%** across all groups) reporting negative perceptions and stigmatisation. These negative perceptions are perpetuated by negative media narratives, hate campaigns on social media and national migration management regimes structured through a national security lens, which often frames migrants and refugees through the perspective of national security concerns. Moreover, a perceived increase in competition for jobs further exacerbates negative attitudes towards refugees and migrants.

Figure 6. What does the host community perceive of your status as an irregular migrant?

	Very negative	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Very positive
Bangladeshi (n=75)	29%	15%	41%	15%	
Cambodian (n=75)	39%	20%	28%	13%	
Indonesian (n=82)	32%	13%	38%	17%	
Laotian (n=76)	34%	33%	25%	8%	
Rohingya (n=225)	54%	8%	31%	6%	1%
Other Myanmar ethnic groups (n=79)	23%	20%	42%	15%	

5. Information-seeking behaviours vary significantly across refugee and migrant groups, with some not seeking information at all and others largely relying on informal networks as trusted sources.

A notable portion of respondents, particularly from Cambodia (**37%**) and Myanmar (**36%** Rohingya and **39%** from other Myanmar ethnic groups), indicated that they did not actively seek information before migrating. This is attributed to other priorities – such as economic pressure and safety – taking precedence over the need for information gathering, especially in contexts of political instability and conflict.

Of those respondents who sought information, their information needs vary significantly across different migrant groups, highlighting the importance of tailoring information programmes to specific needs and contexts. The most sought information prior to departure was related to costs associated with the journey and financing, followed by ways to find a smuggler, a travel facilitator, or a travel agent. Meanwhile, a large portion of Rohingya (**40%**) respondents sought information about living conditions at their proposed destination.

Figure 7. What information did you seek before migration? (by country of origin)

n=621, multi-select

Legend:
- Bangladeshi (n=75)
- Cambodian (n=75)
- Indonesian (n=82)
- Laotian (n=76)
- Rohingya (n=225)
- Other Myanmar ethnic groups (n=79)
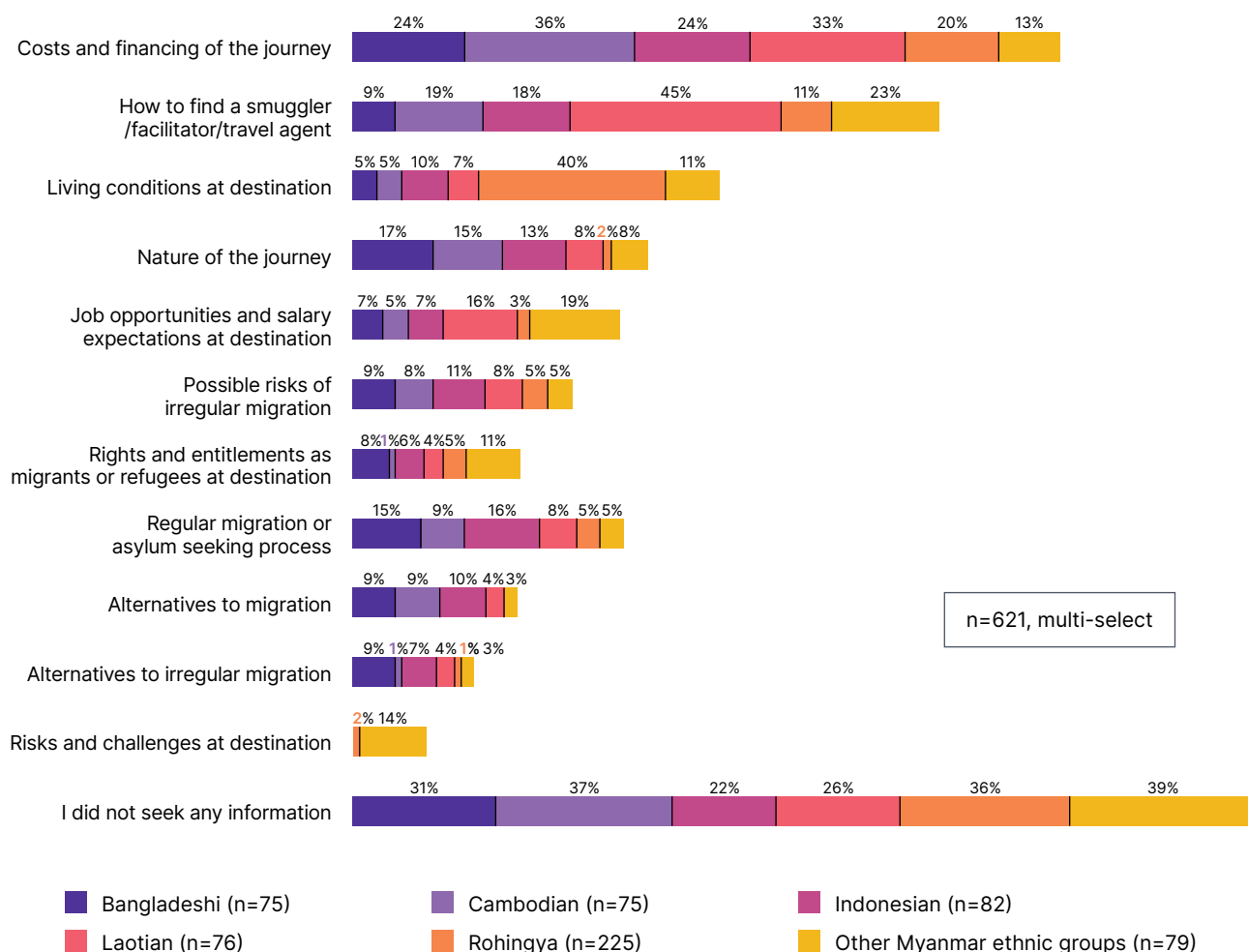
Summary on the information seeking behaviours and information gaps by countries of origin

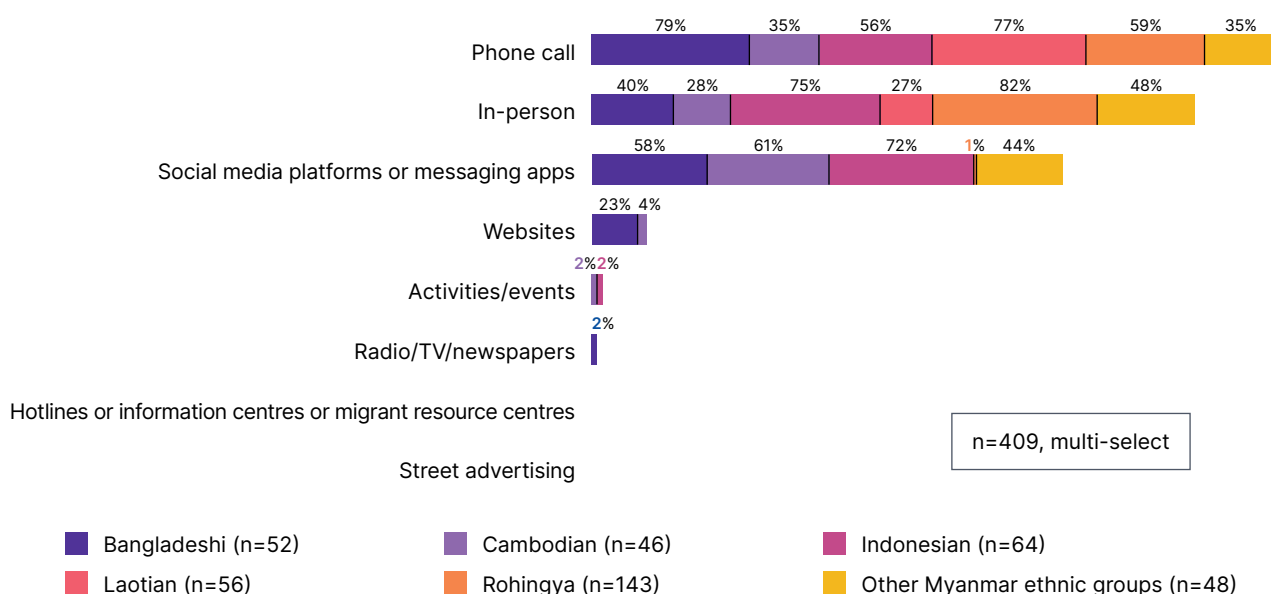|	Information gaps	Trusted sources	Preferred means
Bangladeshi	• living conditions at the destination • job opportunities and salary expectations at the destination • nature of the journey	• friends and family in another country • travel agents or facilitators • employment agency	• phone calls • social media, particularly Facebook
Cambodian	• irregular migration risks • regular migration processes • job opportunities and salary expectations at the destination	• friends and family in Cambodia • friends and family in another country • returned migrants	• social media or messaging apps
Indonesian	• risks of irregular migration • nature of the journey • regular migration processes	• friends and family in another country	• in-person interactions • social media and messaging apps, particularly TikTok and Facebook
Laotian	• risks of irregular migration • regular migration processes • job opportunities and salary expectations at the destination	• travel facilitators or agents	• phone calls
Rohingya	• living conditions at the destination • risks and challenges at the destination • risks of irregular migration	• friends and family in another country • travel facilitators or agents	• in-person interactions • phone calls
Other Myanmar ethnic groups	• job opportunities and salary expectations at the destination • risks of irregular migration • living conditions, risks and challenges at the destination	• friends and family in another country • online community or network	• in-person interactions • social media or messaging apps—particularly Facebook and WhatsApp

Interesting finding: Of those who sought information, **51 percent** reported having unmet information needs prior to their journey. Respondents attributed these unmet information needs to: information not being available (**27%**), information received being unclear or insufficient (**27%**), and information received being unreliable and inaccurate (**24%**). Despite the variety of information programmes in place, survey data reveals that only **4 percent** of respondents attended pre-departure information programmes. This points to a gap in reach and accessibility of existing information programmes, many of which target prospective migrants using regular pathways, often overlooking those at risk of irregular migration.

6. There is a disconnect between information dissemination methods used by government and non-government institutions, and the means migrants and refugees typically obtain information from.

Friends and family, and smugglers and facilitators were reported as the predominant and most reliable information sources, with very few respondents accessing information from formal entities such as NGOs and the United Nations (**6%**), or governments (**2%**). Much of the information sought by migrants and refugees comes from informal networks, including family, friends, and community members. These sources provide firsthand accounts of migration experiences, often emphasising the perceived benefits and opportunities available abroad. However, this information can be biased or incomplete, leading to misconceptions about the migration process. In contrast, formal sources such as government agencies, NGOs, and international organisations offer critical information regarding safe migration practices, legal requirements, and potential risks. Unfortunately, many individuals in rural areas may not be aware of or have access to these resources, limiting their ability to make informed decisions.

The widespread use of informal communication methods, including phone calls and social media, to obtain information further underscores the central role informal networks play in information-dissemination.

Figure 8. Of the means you used to obtain information, what were your most preferred means?

n=409, multi-select

Bangladeshi (n=52) · Cambodian (n=46) · Indonesian (n=64)
Laotian (n=56) · Rohingya (n=143) · Other Myanmar ethnic groups (n=48)

Interesting finding: While, overall, phone calls were the most commonly used means of obtaining information, distinct preferences emerged across different groups, highlighting the importance of considering these variations in programming and policy. Interestingly, in-person meetings were the preferred choice for respondents from Indonesia (**75%**) and Myanmar, with **82 percent** of Rohingya and **48 percent** of other Myanmar ethnic groups opting for this method. The reliance on traditional means is likely due to the high illiteracy among the respondents, which may limit their ability to utilise digital platforms or other channels for accessing information. This showcases that literacy levels, cultural norms, and information-seeking behaviours are crucial considerations when designing effective information programmes.

# Key Recommendations On Addressing Information Gaps

For States
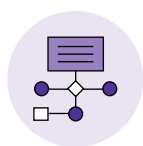
- **Conduct a targeted needs assessment and stakeholder mapping** to identify gaps in information and access, especially for vulnerable groups. Effective information programmes must be tailored to the specific cultural, socio-economic, and geographical contexts of target populations. This involves understanding the unique challenges and opportunities faced by different communities and adapting content accordingly.

- **Enhance and tailor information programmes** based on the findings of the targeted needs assessment and the stakeholder mapping, prioritising accessibility and relevance for various demographics. This includes:

  ‣ Tailoring messages to specific audiences such as low-literacy populations, rural or urban dwellers, and different cultural backgrounds.

  ‣ Going beyond generic information about migration risks and draw from evidence-based research to address specific concerns and perspectives.

  ‣ Providing information that is clear, concise, easy to understand, and accurate.
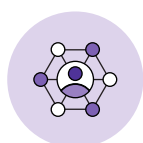
- **Leverage social networks and digital platforms especially Facebook and TikTok** for information dissemination. Information programmes should account for how different groups seek and receive information. Furthermore, programmes should address language barriers by offering information in the local languages of the origin countries, rather than relying solely on English or on official languages of destination countries, which many migrants may not fully understand.

- **Implement a localised and decentralised approach in information dissemination** by:

  ‣ Drawing on migrants' experiences and community insights.

  ‣ Developing localised and culturally relevant content that resonates with the targeted audience.

  ‣ Supporting community-specific approaches, especially at the village level, fostering trust and allowing programmes to engage more deeply with their target populations.
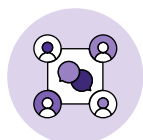
- **Enhance cross-border collaboration** between host countries and migrant-sending countries to address cross-border migration issues through initiatives such as the Bali Process and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) forums. Using these platforms to strengthen information programmes and collaborate on effective information dissemination of information would ensure migrants and prospective migrants have access to information about regular migration pathways, labor mobility agreements, and their rights. Moreover, effective coordination between governments, civil society organisations, and international bodies can prevent duplication of efforts and maximise resource impact.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON ADDRESSING MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION:

- **Raise awareness against misinformation and disinformation** by providing accurate information, particularly on social media or through agents. Moreover, it is essential to empower prospective migrants with the skills and tools to verify the information they receive— whether from social media, agents, or peers.

- **Strengthen monitoring on social media platforms** by:
    - Collaborating with social media companies, particularly Meta and ByteDance, to advocate for enhanced protection measures against misinformation and online abuse targeting migrants and refugees.
    - Bolstering the presence of government institutions on social media platforms to ensure accurate information and support are readily available.

For Civil Society and the Private Sector

- **Strengthen coordination between actors** by collaborating with local authorities, including officials at district and provincial levels, and the community, including community leaders, religious leaders, and teachers to enhance the delivery of targeted migration information and support services.

- **Actively combat misinformation and disinformation** about migration by providing accurate and reliable information through trusted channels – leveraging strong, pre-established social networks with friends and family who already migrated can play a key role in disseminating credible information.

- **Establish and maintain robust mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the impact of information programmes** by:
    - Conducting regular assessments to identify effectiveness, gaps, and areas for improvement including programme design, reach, and accessibility.
    - Carrying out longitudinal assessments to measure the long-term impact of these programmes on migration decisions.

- **Promote capacity building and empowerment** by supporting initiatives that foster local economic development and educational opportunities, thereby enhancing conditions and creating more opportunities within source communities.

For Development Partners

- **Fund and support innovative, evidence-based approaches** to migration awareness and information dissemination, particularly community-based initiatives.

- **Ensure sustainable funding** by transitioning from short-term, one-off projects to long-term investments. Sustainable funding supports ongoing effectiveness, allows for adaptation to evolving needs, and prevents disruptions due to funding gaps. It enables the development of durable solutions and resilience systems that can adapt to changing migration dynamics and address emerging challenges effectively.
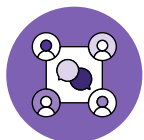
- **Promote cross-border solutions:** Support regional and cross-border initiatives that facilitate information-sharing and collaboration among countries facing irregular migration.

- **Enhance monitoring and evaluation** by investing in the development and implementation of robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks for funded programmes. Ensure that these mechanisms are used to optimise resource allocation and that interventions remain relevant and impactful over time.

Conclusion

The findings highlight the **complex nature of migration, driven by an interplay of economic, political, social, environmental, and cultural factors**. Economic motivations are significant but often intersect with other drivers like historical migration patterns, personal and family reasons, and entrenched cultural practices. These intersecting factors illustrate that migration is rarely influenced by a single issue but is the result of multiple, intertwined drivers.

The findings also reveal **significant gaps in meeting the information needs of prospective refugees and migrants**, despite the existence of various information programmes. This persistent information deficit points to the inefficiency of current programming, which often fails to reach the most vulnerable populations or to deliver content that is contextually relevant and resonant. To address these gaps, it is imperative to redesign and tailor them to the specific needs of different communities. This involves leveraging local knowledge, utilising diverse media channels, languages, and integrating informal social networks into dissemination efforts. However, it is crucial to recognise that improving information programming alone is not sufficient to address the complex realities driving irregular migration.

In conclusion, while enhancing information programming is necessary, it must be part of a broader strategy that addresses the underlying factors driving irregular migration. This includes expanding and diversifying accessible regular migration pathways, strengthening protections against exploitation, reducing vulnerabilities, and shifting perceptions within prospective migrant communities and their social networks. Only through this **multifaceted approach** can we effectively mitigate the risks associated with irregular migration and support safer, more sustainable migration practices.

Acknowledgements

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