

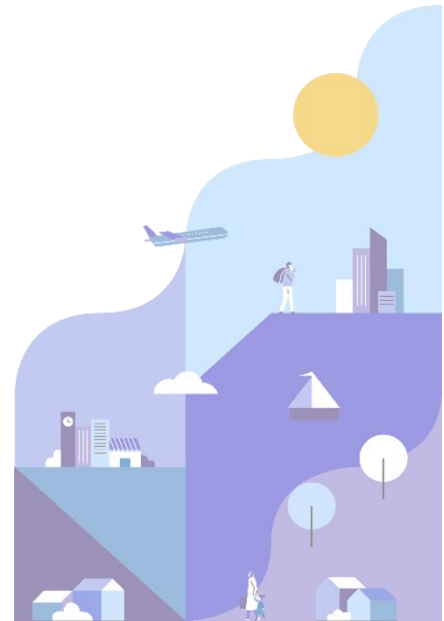


COUNTRY PROFILE: MALAYSIA

Community Perceptions and Information Needs of Persons at Risk of Irregular Migration in Bali Process Member States: Evidence from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand

February 2025

This country profile is developed based on a report published by the Regional Support Office of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime (RSO). The report is titled *Community Perceptions and Information Needs of Persons at risk of Irregular Migration in Bali Process Member States: Evidence from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand*. This report provides insights into the way in which persons at risk of irregular migration and their origin and host communities perceive irregular migration. Moreover, the report assesses the information needs of persons at risk of irregular migration and prescribe actionable recommendations to address these information needs.



Key Insights



Malaysia known for its relative economic and political stability, comparatively well-developed economy and established diaspora communities, is a key **destination country** in Southeast Asia for migrants and refugees.



As of 2017, Malaysia hosted approximately **1.23 to 1.46 million migrant workers in an irregular situation**, predominantly from Bangladesh and Indonesia.¹ Further Malaysia hosts **190,370** registered refugees and asylum seekers, with **88 percent** from Myanmar.²



While the primary driver of migration for most irregular migrants in Malaysia are economic reasons, in the case of respondents from Myanmar, both Rohingya and other Myanmar ethnic groups, it is the search for safety.



Refugees and migrants are increasingly stigmatised within local host communities, contrasting with Malaysia's heavy reliance on migrant workers for essential jobs. These negative perceptions of refugees and irregular migrants are often a result of media narratives and hate campaigns on social media reinforcing negative stereotypes, perceived socio-economic burdens, security concerns, and cultural tensions.

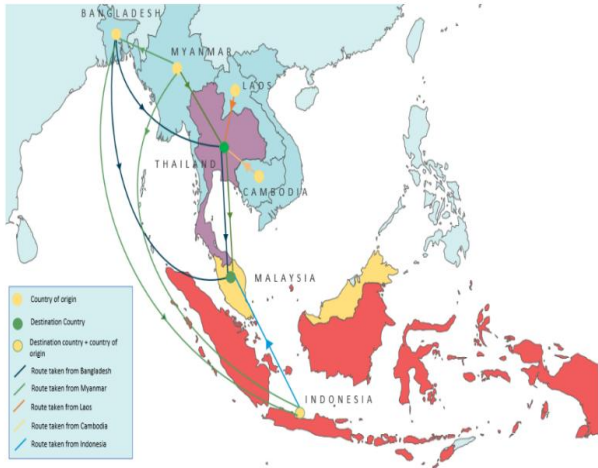
¹ World Bank (2020), Who is Keeping Score? Estimating the Number of Foreign Workers in Malaysia.

² UNHCR (2024) Figures at a glance in Malaysia | UNHCR Malaysia.



Participant overview

Malaysia is considered as a destination country in Southeast Asia for migrant workers and refugees, in this report.



Map of migration routes taken by the survey respondents

Indonesian respondents: 82 Indonesian migrants in irregular situations in Malaysia.

- **76 percent** are irregular/ undocumented
- **24 percent** has a permit which is no longer valid/ expired
- **28 percent** women; **72 percent** men
- **66 percent** of the respondents are between the ages of 36 – 55
- **90 percent** are from rural areas

Key informant interviews (KIIs): 9 experts from the Government of Malaysia, Non-Government Organisations, and the United Nations (UN) agencies.

Research period: June-August 2024

Respondents in Malaysia:

Bangladeshi respondents: 75 Bangladeshi migrants in irregular situations in Malaysia.

- **81 percent** are irregular/ undocumented
- **19 percent** has a permit which is no longer valid/ expired
- **7 percent** women; **93 percent** men
- **96 percent** of the respondents are between the ages of 18 – 35
- **57 percent** from rural areas; **43 percent** from urban areas

Myanmar: 40 surveys with Rohingya and **40** surveys with other Myanmar ethnic groups were conducted.

- **59 percent** women; **41 percent** men
- **78 percent** of the respondents are between the ages of 18 – 25
- **All** respondents are from rural areas

Migration drivers into Malaysia



Economic opportunities: Economic opportunities, and demand for migrant workers are primary draws of migrants and refugees into Malaysia. Limited job prospects, low wages, and high unemployment in origin countries drive the search for better livelihoods abroad. While economic opportunities are the primary driver of migration into Malaysia, this often overlaps with other factors like personal or family reasons and culture of migration.



Cultural patterns of migration: The entrenched culture of migration along the corridor between Indonesia and Malaysia reinforce the perception that overseas opportunities are inherently more promising than local options. This migration culture, driven by the hope for a better life, positions migration as an aspirational goal—a belief that economic success and opportunity lie abroad.



Perceptions of irregular migration across stakeholders

Perceptions among refugees and migrants

- Views on irregular migration varied significantly across different respondent groups, reflecting their unique experiences and circumstances. Respondents originating from Myanmar (Rohingya) (**65%**), Bangladesh (**48%**), and Indonesia (**45%**) perceived irregular migration negatively.
- **45 percent** of Indonesian respondents tended to view irregular migration negatively. However, a large majority (**98%**) would still choose to undertake irregular migration routes again.
- **Downplaying the associated risks to irregular migration:** Because of the strong culture of migration and reliance on informal social networks, many are influenced by positive narratives promoted by friends and family. Many do not consider the risks of the journey, believing that their connections in the host country will protect them from these risks.

Perceptions among host populations³

- **Negative perceptions from host communities:** A high proportion (between **44% to 67%**) of respondents across all groups reported encountering **negative perceptions from host communities**. These sentiments are driven by perceived socio-economic burdens, cultural tensions, and security concerns.

How migrants seek and engage with information



Information needs: Among those who sought information (**67%**), the type of information sought for preparing their journey varied widely. Respondents from Bangladesh (**24%**) and Indonesia (**24%**) prioritised information related to journey costs and financing. In contrast, most Rohingya (**40%**) sought information about living conditions at their destination, whereas other Myanmar ethnic groups (**23%**) were more focused on how to find a smuggler, travel facilitator, or agent for their journey.



Information sources: For those who sought information, **friends and family**, and **smugglers or travel facilitators** were the predominant and most reliable sources, with very few respondents accessing information from formal entities such as NGOs, UN agencies, or governments.



Means of obtaining information: Bangladeshi respondents favoured phone calls (**79%**), whereas respondents from Indonesia (**75%**) and Myanmar (**82% Rohingya and 48% other Myanmar ethnic groups**) preferred in-person meetings.

Gaps and challenges in existing information programmes

- 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.
- There is a **disconnect between information dissemination methods used** by government and non-government institutions. **Migrants and refugees typically obtain information** from friends and family. Smugglers and facilitators were also 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%**).

³ Note that this finding is based on migrants' experiences and observations of key informant interviews, rather than direct feedback from the host populations.



Recommendations for Malaysia

Practical recommendations to address information gaps



Enhance and tailor information programmes based on the needs of persons at risk of irregular migration, 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.

➔ It is important to go beyond generic information about migration risks and draw from evidence-based research to address specific concerns and perspectives. The information provided must be clear, concise, easy to understand, and accurate.

➔ As a destination country, support innovative, evidence-based approaches to migration awareness and information dissemination in origin and transit countries



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.



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. Community-specific approaches, especially at the village level, foster trust and allow programmes to engage more deeply with their target populations.



Enhance cross-border collaboration between host and origin countries to strengthen cross-border information programmes through initiatives such as the Bali Process and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Moreover, effective coordination between governments, civil society organisations, and international bodies can prevent duplication of efforts and wasted resources.

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. Additionally, bolster the presence of government institutions on social media platforms to ensure accurate information and support are readily available.

