

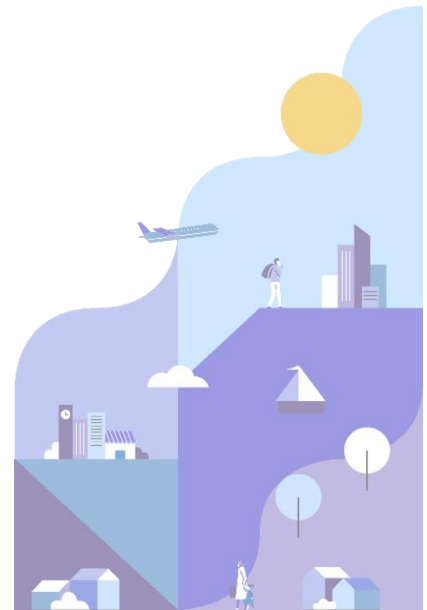


## COUNTRY PROFILE: THAILAND

*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



Thailand, which hosts **5.3 million** migrants, serves as a primary destination for migrant workers from neighbouring Southeast Asian countries and a transit and destination point for asylum seekers and refugees. As of 2023, Thailand hosted over **1.8 million** migrant workers in irregular situations from Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Myanmar, and Viet Nam, in addition to **87,613** refugees and asylum seekers, as of December 2023.<sup>1</sup>



**Economic motivations:** Economic opportunities are a primary driver of irregular migration into Thailand. Labour intensive sectors like **agriculture, manufacturing, and fishing** have a high demand for young migrant workers.



The **inaccessibility of regular migration channels** is compounded by a variety of factors, which intersect with broader vulnerabilities such as economic pressures, conflict, lack of reliable information, and statelessness. Among Cambodian and Laotian migrants there is a strong perception that irregular migration is the only viable route. Even where regular migration channels exist, they are often too costly, bureaucratically complex, or come with stringent requirements—such as health conditions and age limits—that many prospective migrants cannot meet.



**Sympathy for migrants coexists with anxiety and fear of job competition:** In Thailand, the recent mass arrival of refugees and migrants, driven largely by ongoing conflicts in Myanmar, has influenced host population sentiments. This mass arrival has generated both increased anxiety and heightened sympathy among the Thai population, reflecting a mixed response to the migrant populations.

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Network on Migration in Thailand (2024) *Thailand Migration Report 2024*. Available at: <https://thailand.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11371/files/documents/2025-03/thailand-migration-report-2024.pdf>



## Participant overview

Thailand is considered as a country of destination for migrant workers originating from neighbouring Southeast Asian countries, in this report.



Map of migration routes taken by the survey respondents

**Research period:** June–August 2024

**Respondents to the research:** 75 Cambodians, 76 Laotians, 38 Rohingya refugees, and 39 other Myanmar ethnic groups in irregular situations in Thailand.

- **46 percent** women; **54 percent** men
- **69 percent** are irregular/ undocumented
- **6 percent** have applied for a permit/ visa
- **76 percent** of the respondents are between the ages of 18 – 35
- **86 percent** are from rural areas

**Key informant interviews (KIs):** 11 experts from the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand, Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), and academia.

## Migration drivers to Thailand

**Economic opportunities:** 53 percent of Cambodian, 100 percent of Laotian, and 41 percent of Myanmar ethnic group (excluding Rohingya) respondents were in pursuit of economic opportunities. Limited job prospects, low wages, and high unemployment in countries of origin, especially in rural areas, drive the search for better livelihoods abroad. This economic drive is frequently intertwined with other considerations, such as personal and family reasons, as well as with cultural patterns of migration.

**Conflict, insecurity, and persecution in neighbouring Southeast Asian countries:** For many respondents the decision to migrate is also intertwined with conflict, insecurity, and persecution creating a complex dynamic where individuals are pushed to seek refuge abroad, especially within the context of the longstanding labour migration patterns from Myanmar to Thailand. In the context of Myanmar, the military conscription law implemented in February 2024, provides further impetus for Myanmar **youth** to flee irregularly, increasing the vulnerability of youth to irregular migration.

**Migration culture:** There is an entrenched migration culture along the labour migration corridor between Thailand and neighbouring countries such as Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar. This migration culture, driven by the hope for a better life, positions migration as an aspirational goal exacerbating the vulnerability of those who may not have access to safe, regular migration channels, pushing them toward riskier, irregular pathways.

**Environmental factors:** Environmental and climate factors are increasingly recognised as drivers of migration. More often, however, the impacts of climate change and environmental stressors act as underlying drivers of cross-border migration rather than direct triggers and may therefore be underestimated. **11 percent** of Cambodian respondents (n=75) identified natural disaster(s) or environmental factors as one of the reasons for leaving Cambodia – the highest rate observed across all respondents.



## Perceptions of Irregular Migration: Migrants and their host communities

### Perceptions among migrants

- Views on irregular migration varied significantly across different respondent groups, reflecting their unique experiences and circumstances. **81 percent** of Cambodian and **71 percent** of Laotian respondents held positive or neutral views on irregular migration.
- Of these, **64 percent** of Cambodian and **83 percent** of Laotian respondents stated that they would have chosen the same migration route, reaffirming their decision to migrate irregularly.
- This may be due to the **lower costs** associated with irregular migration pathways, the relative ease of crossing **porous borders**, and the **economic opportunities** available in neighbouring Thailand.

### Perceptions among host populations<sup>2</sup>

- **Negative perceptions from host communities:** A high proportion (between **44% to 67%**) of respondents across all groups reported encountering **negative perceptions from host communities**.
- In host countries, migrants, particularly those in irregular situations, are increasingly stigmatised within local communities. The stigma is driven by several factors, including perceived socio-economic burdens, security concerns, and cultural tensions. Host communities frequently view migrants as a strain on local resources and public services.

## How migrants seek and engage with information



Information needs: Respondents from Cambodia (**36%**) prioritised information related to journey costs and financing. Respondents from Lao PDR (**45%**) were more focused on how to find a smuggler, travel facilitator, or agent for their journey. In the case of respondents originally from Myanmar, 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.



Means of obtaining information: Cambodian respondents favoured social media or messaging applications (**61%**) to obtain information, while phone calls were preferred by Laotian respondents (**77%**). In contrast, in-person meetings were the preferred choice for respondents from Myanmar, with **82 percent** of Rohingya and **48 percent** of other Myanmar ethnic groups opting for this method.

## 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%**).

<sup>2</sup> 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 Thailand

### Practical recommendations to address information gaps



**Enhance and tailor information programmes** based on the findings of the targeted needs assessment and 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.

- ➔ 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.



**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.

