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Problems, obstacles, challenges, and government policy guidelines for Thai migrant workers in Singapore and Malaysia

Thongphon Promsaka Na Sakolnakorn

Community Management Program, Faculty of Management Science, Silpakorn University Petchaburi IT Campus, Petchaburi 76120, Thailand

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Abstract

The objectives of this study were: 1) to study the problems and obstacles faced by Thai workers in Singapore and Malaysia, 2) to study the opportunities for Thai workers in Singapore and Malaysia, and 3) to propose guidelines for government support for Thai workers there. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews, a field survey, observation, a literature review, a focus group study, and the Delphi technique using both purposive and accidental sampling, and the researcher performed content analysis and descriptive analyses on the data collected. The study found that the major problems Thai workers face are how to communicate with their employers because most workers lack foreign language skills, which places them at a disadvantage with their employers. In addition, limits on the availability of work permits and restrictions on available job positions make it difficult for Thai workers to find good jobs in Singapore and Malaysia. Therefore, the Thai government should play a key role in negotiating with the Singaporean and Malaysian governments to solve these problems, and the Thai government should train workers who return from overseas to work in small- and medium-sized enterprises. In addition, the guidelines of government policy for the management and administration of Thai workers in Singapore and Malaysia should include: 1) improving the education system based on the labor market, 2) creating policies for informal workers, 3) creating policies to support Thai workers employed abroad, 4) drafting a labor agreement between neighboring countries, 5) protecting Thai workers abroad, and 6) creating policies supporting small and medium enterprises. Furthermore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Labor should set up a new office on Borneo Island because this office could support and take care of Thai workers in Malaysia and Indonesia.

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Introduction

International migration has become a significant issue in Thailand with the number of migrants working overseas increasing over the last two decades resulting in a corresponding increase in remittances from abroad, which has helped the domestic economy in Thailand as well as the balance of payments. In addition, most of the workers who return home

go to work abroad again (Lee, Sukrakarn, & Choi, 2011). The remittances sent back home by migrant laborers have helped to improve their living standards and quality of life, to provide education for their children, to repair their houses, to their debts to other neighbors, and has reduced the cost of borrowing in the international capital market (Agbola & Acupan, 2010; Glytsos, 2002). The highest number of Thai workers in other ASEAN countries are in Singapore and Malaysia. Official data show that in 2012 there were 11,864 Thai workers in Singapore and 4,441 in Malaysia (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board, 2015). In 2013, 2,155 new Thai workers went to work in Singapore and 8,573 workers returned to work there, while in Malaysia there were 1,141 new workers and 2,709 returning workers

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: thongphon.p@gmail.com

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(Thailand Overseas Employment Administration, 2013). The data of Lorente, Piper, Hsiu-Hua, and Yeoh (2005, p. 195) showed that in 2004 to 2005 there were approximately 45,000 Thai migrant workers in Singapore. The Thailand Overseas Employment Administration (2012) reported that there were approximately 33,000 Thai migrant workers in Singapore, and that 80 per cent of the Thai migrant workers worked in the construction industry; the study of Sakolnakorn (2015, pp. 63–66) found that in 2015, there were approximately 20,000–30,000 Thai migrant workers in Singapore and approximately 100,000–200,000 Thai migrant workers in Malaysia.

However Thai workers in Singapore face problems such as their status as undocumented aliens, homesickness, the language barrier, and work-related problems such as mysterious deaths occurring among Thai male migrant workers (Yimprasert, 1993). Thai workers in Singapore lack communication skills since most cannot speak English or Chinese, which are the most commonly spoken languages in Singapore (the official languages in Singapore are English, Mandarin, Tamil, and Malayu). This issue places Thai workers at a disadvantage with their employers (Naipinit, Tepsing, & Sakolnakorn, 2014). In addition, Thai workers earn low incomes compared with Singaporean and Malaysian residents, and they work in hard and dangerous jobs that can affect their long-term health (Kitiarsa, 2010, p. 148). The problems of Thai workers in Malaysia include bad behavior not appropriate to Muslim society in Malaysia (Baka & Laeheem, 2006). The most serious problem with Thai workers in Malaysia is alcohol addiction because some of them spend all their money on alcohol and have no money left to send home (Wattanasuwakul, 2013). In addition, many Thai workers in Malaysia work illegally without a contract, with their employer holding their passports, and in some cases, Thai workers do not receive their wages (Office of Labour Affairs, Royal Thai Embassy, 2014). Migrant workers in Malaysia account for about 22 per cent of the Malaysian labor force (Kanapathy, 2006) while migrant workers in Singapore constitute about 34.7 percent of the labor force (Chia, 2011). Singapore and Malaysia are the most frequent destinations for Thai migrant workers because both countries require low-to-medium-skilled workers to fuel growth and facilitate structural adjustment, and a Thai migrant worker can receive an income higher than from working in Thailand. However, working far from home presents both opportunities and threats to Thai workers. Therefore, in this paper, the researcher considered the effects on Thai professional workers as well as non-skilled and semi-skilled workers in Singapore and Malaysia, and some guidelines are suggested for government support of Thai workers in Singapore and Malaysia.

Objectives

1. To investigate the problems and obstacles faced by Thai workers in Singapore and Malaysia
2. To study the opportunities for Thai workers in Singapore and Malaysia
3. To suggest guidelines for government support of Thai workers in Singapore and Malaysia

Literature Review

The literature review of this study was based on the most significant issues that affect Thai migrant workers abroad:

Motivation for Working Abroad

Economic issues are influential in guiding people's decisions to migrate (Alberto & Davis, 2005). People migrate to increase their job opportunities and their income, and they are able to obtain jobs through recommendations from relatives or friends or through the labor market (Ji-ying & Yao, 2015). Increased well-being at home is the main objective and motivation for migrant workers who care about their families and want to increase their income and send remittances back home (Frankel, 2011). In addition, there are non-economic motivations such as personal development and acquiring new knowledge and experience of city life (Chiang, Hannum, & Kao, 2013). Moreover, Wickramasekera (2000, pp. 7–8) stated that workers migrate because they are searching for higher incomes and are lured by friends and relatives and social networks. They may also be in search of adventure and wish to explore and satisfy their curiosity, or they may be fleeing from persecution and armed conflict.

Problems and Obstacles Faced by Thai Migrant Workers

Thai migrant workers face problems overseas as was noted by McGeehan (2015) for example, who reported that Thai workers in Israel face problems with long working hours of up to 17 hours per day with no day off (working 7 days per week), working in an unregulated work environment, receiving a salary below Israel's legal minimum wage, and living under poor camp conditions with many workers living together in one cabin where it is difficult to breathe. In addition, these workers face serious health problems from exposure to pesticides on the farms where they work. Luernshavee (2010) noted that Thai workers need to develop their communication and language skills. Additionally, many migrant workers in Malaysia (including Thai workers) remain in the country working illegally and do not go back home (Djajić & Mesnard, 2015) and in Singapore, foreign workers face a number of problems; for example Singapore has no minimum wage legislation, for Singaporean or foreign workers, and there are problems associated with worker safety, welfare and working conditions, high transaction costs, and exploitation by recruitment and placement agents, with workers working long hours with limited rest days (Yue, 2011).

Working Conditions for Foreign Workers in Singapore

In Singapore, migrant workers are employed mainly in construction, manufacturing, and domestic work and services, with the total foreign workforce making up close to 40 percent of Singapore's total workforce. Foreign workers are registered under one of three types of work passes: Employment Pass, S Pass, or Work Permit. Employment Passes are for professional staff, the criteria being a minimum salary of SGD 3,300 per month, with the staff having a job offer in Singapore in

a managerial, executive, or specialized job, and holding acceptable qualifications, usually a good university degree, professional qualifications, or specialist skills. S Passes are for skilled and semi-skilled workers, the criteria being that candidates need to earn at least SGD 2,200 per month and have a technical certificate, such as a qualification as a technician or specialist based on at least one year of full-time study. Work Permits are for semi-skilled foreign workers in the construction, manufacturing, marine, process, or services sector (Ministry of Manpower, 2016). Foreign workers eligible to work in Singapore are those from Malaysia, North Asian sources (NAS)—that is workers from Hong Kong (HKSAR passport), Macau, South Korea and Taiwan, the People's Republic of China (PRC)—and those from non-traditional sources (NTS)—India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and the Philippines. Malaysian and NAS workers can work in all sectors and all types of industry with no maximum period of employment; however NTS and PRC Work Permit holders in the process sector can only be employed as process maintenance and construction workers (Ministry of Manpower, 2015).

Working Conditions for Foreign Workers in Malaysia

Work permits in Malaysia are usually obtained by the employer. The type of work permit is dependent on the type of job and the skills involved. Employment Passes are issued to employees with specific skills, usually for technical or managerial jobs with the minimum period usually being two years, Temporary Employment Passes are issued for periods of employment of less than two years or for jobs with a monthly salary of less than MYR 5000, and Professional Visit Passes are issued to foreign nationals who remain employed by the company in the home country but are required by a Malaysian company to provide certain services for a period up to six months. In addition, the Official Portal of the Immigration Department of Malaysia (2012) stated that foreign workers working in the construction, plantation, agriculture, services, and manufacturing sectors must be from the following approved source countries: Thailand, Cambodia, Nepal, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, the Philippines (male only), Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. Indian workers are only allowed to work in the high tension cable sector of the construction industry, the service sector (for example, as goldsmiths, in the wholesale/retail sectors, or as cooks in restaurants), in the metal/scrap materials and recycling sector, the textile industry, as barbers, and in the agriculture and plantation sector. Indonesian male workers are allowed to work in all sectors except manufacturing, while female workers from Indonesia are allowed to work in all sectors, and Bangladeshi workers can work only in plantations based on a government-to-government agreement.

Free Flow of Workers Concept in the ASEAN Community

ASEAN (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations) was established in 1967 by five countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Today, ASEAN is a group of 10 countries: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

The free movement of skilled labor under the AEC framework covers the movement of professional-level workers in accordance with the Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) which are a series of arrangements agreed among ASEAN member countries facilitating the freer movement and employment of qualified and certified personnel between ASEAN member countries (Capacity Building for an ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangement in Tourism [CBAMT], 2010). Under the MRAs, ASEAN members have agreed on the free flow of professional-level workers in seven fields: engineering, architectural, surveying, nursing, medical, dental, and accounting services (The Government Public Relations Department, Office of the Prime Minister, 2013).

Methodology

This study used the data triangulation technique to capture different dimensions of the same phenomenon. This study was based on in-depth interviews, a field survey, observation, a literature review, a focus group study, and the Delphi technique. The geographical area of the study described in this paper was Singapore and Malaysia, as these are the countries where the highest number of Thai overseas workers go for employment out of the 10 ASEAN countries.

Sample

The sample in this study included 21 Thai migrant workers in Singapore: One was the headman in Singapore, seven were Thai migrant workers in Malaysia, two were entrepreneurs employing Thai workers in Singapore, and two were entrepreneurs employing Thai workers in Malaysia. They were all selected based on key informants, accidental sampling, purposive sampling, and snowball sampling. In addition, the researcher interviewed three diplomatic staff (labor counselors) in Singapore, three diplomatic staff (labor counselors) in Malaysia, one academic with expertise in the fields of labor and social welfare in Singapore, one academic with expertise in the fields of labor and social welfare in Malaysia, and one leader of a Muslim village in Narathiwat—one of the three southern-border provinces of Thailand where many Muslim villagers go to work in Malaysia. These participants were selected based on purposive sampling. In addition, the researcher invited five academics and two government officers to join a focus group to discuss public policy that supports Thai workers.

Method

This study used qualitative methods based on in-depth interviews, a field survey, a literature review, a focus group study, and the Delphi technique. The researcher utilized qualitative methods including in-depth interviews lasting at least 30–60 minutes and a combination of purposive accidental sampling and snowball sampling. The interviews were based on a semi-structured format covering motivation, problems, threats, and the need for government support.

For the field survey, the researcher visited a construction site and a camp for Thai workers in Singapore and reviewed

documents from the Thai government's office of labor affairs in Singapore and Malaysia, along with documents from the Ministry of Labor of the Royal Thai Government. The researcher also conducted in-depth interviews and small group discussions lasting at least 30–60 minutes based on semi-structured interviews.

In addition, to consider the guidelines for the government support of Thai workers in Singapore and Malaysia, the researcher formed a focus group by inviting five academics and two government officers who are experts in the fields of social welfare and public policy to discuss and suggest guidelines for solving the problems of Thai overseas workers. Moreover, the researcher used the Delphi technique by distributing a preliminary report that included the information obtained relating to guidelines for supporting Thai workers in Singapore and Malaysia.

Data Analysis

The researcher used text clustering analysis, content analysis, and descriptive analysis to analyze the data. In addition, to analyze the data obtained via the Delphi technique, the report was presented to experts for their comments, recommendations, and agreement with the content before the results could be concluded.

Results

The exact number of Thai workers in Singapore and Malaysia can be based only on the assessments of the labor counselors at the Royal Thai Embassy in Singapore and in Malaysia, who estimated that in Singapore, there are approximately 20,000–30,000 Thai workers, and in Malaysia, there are approximately 100,000–200,000.

Problems and Obstacles Facing Thai Workers in Singapore and Malaysia

The problems and obstacles facing Thai workers in Singapore and Malaysia are:

1) In Singapore, Thai workers fall under the condition of non-traditional sources (NTS; an NTS work permit holder in the process sector can be employed only as a "process maintenance and construction worker" or a "process maintenance and construction worker-cum-driver"). This condition allows Thai workers to work only in the construction sector. The Singapore government is now emphasizing the need to import Chinese workers from China because they share the same culture, language, and traditions as many Singaporeans, who are descended from people who migrated from China a long time ago. In addition, Thai workers struggle to receive promotions because most Thais lack language skills in either English or Chinese. Furthermore, the labor wage of Thai workers in Singapore is not suitable for standard living costs, as the Thai labor wage is not adjusted and is thus currently the same as the labor wage from 2010 (approximately SGD 25 per day). A new rule in Singapore also limits overtime-pay hours to no more than 75 working hours/month for safety reasons. Thus, the overtime condition prevents Thai workers

from being able to receive a higher income.

2) The Malaysian government does not allow work permits in four career types for foreigners: security guards, spa and massage workers, receptionists, and waiters and waitresses. Thus, more than 10,000 Thai workers are working illegally as waiters and waitresses in restaurants. Thai workers face problems under the labor legislation with renewal of work permits because most of them cannot get employment passes or expatriate passes, as these work permit types require a certificate of education and an employment certificate, and most Thai workers do not have these certificates. Thai workers can change their permits to receive visitor passes (temporary employment), but this carries a high service charge and is inconvenient.

Another problem for Thai workers in both Singapore and Malaysia is the issue of working visas. For instance, a six-month–one-year working visa is not long enough for most workers. This is a problem for such workers, as Malaysian work permit fees are expensive, and levies on foreign workers are high. Therefore, many Thai Muslims from the lower part of Southern Thailand work in Malaysia washing dishes and as waiters/waitresses. However, Malaysian government regulations do not allow foreign workers to work in either of these occupations, so these workers are forced to work illegally. The researcher was not able to obtain any definitive data on the number of illegal workers in Malaysia, but Thai diplomatic staff in Malaysia estimate that there are approximately 80,000–100,000 illegal Thai workers in the country. In addition, in an interview with a diplomatic staff member (labor counselor) in Malaysia, one said: *"I am not sure how many Thai illegal workers there are, but I think approximately 100,000 people, and I do not know why Thai workers do not come to Malaysia as legal workers, and not many workers have been in contact with the Department of Employment or the Overseas Employment Administration Office, and then Thai workers will contract with Thai government agencies when they have problems overseas"* (personal interview, December 22, 2014).

Opportunities in Singapore and Malaysia for Thai professionals in the seven groups covered by the MRAs

In Singapore, there are few Thai doctors, and those who work in Singapore have mostly obtained their qualifications abroad—for instance, in the United States, the United Kingdom, or Australia. During interviews with the labor counselors from the Royal Thai Embassy in Singapore, they said they had never heard of Thai doctors who had qualified in Thailand being able to pass the medical examinations necessary for obtaining a license to practice in Singapore. However, there are opportunities for other Thai professionals in the medical sector to work overseas, such as pharmacists, and at present, there are more pharmacists in Thailand than are required to meet the local labor market. Nevertheless, the researcher found that the Thai pharmacists who had gone to work in Singapore were able to work only as assistants in their first year. Thereafter, if they were able to pass their probationary period, they could take the local pharmacist licensure examination. However, only a few Thai pharmacists have been able to take the pharmacist licensure examination after their first year, and there are, in fact, no reports of Thai

pharmacists passing this examination. It is also worth noting that it is not necessary for Thai doctors and dentists to migrate to work in Singapore and Malaysia because they can earn high salaries in Thailand—salaries that are sufficient to enjoy a wealthy lifestyle. Similarly, nurses in Thailand enjoy a good quality of life, so it is not necessary for them to work overseas. In addition, there are reduced numbers of skilled and unskilled workers in Singapore because Singapore has created jobs overseas, such as in manufacturing, by investing in and setting up factories in others countries; furthermore, Singapore has a policy of increasing local jobs for Singaporeans first. The study of Ducanes and Abella (2008, p. 29) indicated that Singapore has invested a lot in neighboring countries and has taken advantage of Indonesia and Malaysia for relatively cheaper labor; as wage costs in Indonesia are only 14 percent of those in Singapore, and wage costs in Malaysia are 80 percent of those in Singapore.

The main opportunities for Thai professional workers to migrate to Singapore and Malaysia are in the engineering and surveying sectors. Both Singapore and Malaysia have a need for all types of engineers because these countries are developing their infrastructure. Singapore is developing many new projects, involving new construction work, renovating urban and city areas, developing marine facilities, and port construction. In addition, there is a high demand for petroleum engineers and surveyors because there are not enough Malaysian professionals in these fields. In addition, Thai architects who wish to work in Singapore and Malaysia must be properly qualified. In the field of accountancy and other sectors, such as hospitality and tourism, Thai professional workers have more opportunities. The hospitality and tourism sector presents opportunities for Thai professional workers because the Malaysian tourism sector is developing quickly, and the Malaysian government is trying to seriously promote Malaysia as an international tourism destination. However, Malaysia still lacks professional workers in the hospitality and tourism sector, and there are not enough Malaysian workers in this sector to expand tourism to other parts of Malaysia. However, to take advantage of these opportunities, a Thai must be able to communicate in English and Chinese to be employed in Singapore or in English, Malay, and Chinese for employment in Malaysia.

Opportunities for Unskilled and Semi-Skilled Thai Workers in Singapore and Malaysia

At present, the numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled Thai workers in Singapore are decreasing because these workers cannot compete with workers from mainland China, Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Indonesia. In particular, the Chinese government has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Singaporean government to send workers from mainland China to work in Singapore, and it is easy for Chinese people to work in Singapore because they share the same culture and language, as most people in Singapore are of Chinese origin. The number of Bangladeshi workers is also increasing in Singapore because they are prepared to work for lower wages than Thai workers, and most Bangladeshi workers can communicate in English.

The service sector is the main sector in which the Malaysian government allows foreign workers to be employed. The Ministry of Home Affairs (2017) has identified many types of work in which foreign workers are allowed, such as cargo handling, dhobi, barbering, retail and wholesale trade, textile trade, metal, scrap and used items, spa and reflexology, hotels, caddying, and welfare homes. In addition, based on this study, the opportunities for Thai workers to work in Malaysia can be classified into six categories:

1) Construction workers: The Malaysian government is focused on developing the entire infrastructure to support the country's strategy going into the new economy in 2020, so many construction workers are required because most Malaysian people do not work as laborers in the construction business. The labor wage in Malaysia is slightly higher than that in Thailand, but the job field still presents an opportunity for Thai workers because Thai workers are recognized as being high-skilled in the construction business.

2) Massage and spa workers: This is a popular business, with Malaysian people having high demands for staying healthy. However, this type of work presents more opportunities for men because the Malaysian government worries that having women work in the massage and spa field is risky, as sexual relations may occur between male customers and female workers (Malaysia is an Islamic society).

3) Restaurant workers: The restaurant industry, especially that of "sour prawn soup," is very popular in Malaysia and now employs approximately 100,000 Thai workers. However, most of them work illegally in waiter and waitress positions and the Malaysian government has maintained its ban on foreigners being employed in these positions. This issue requires both the Thai and Malaysian governments to seriously re-think Malaysian law to allow Thai people to work as waiters and waitresses in restaurants.

4) Agriculture and farming workers in Malaysia: There is a lack of workers in the agriculture season in areas such as the States of Perlis, Kedah, Perak, and Kelantan. Most Thai workers on agricultural farms come from Northeastern Thailand, arriving with border passes that allow them to stay for six months. However, the number of workers is still not sufficient for the Malaysian farm and agriculture business. In addition, Harkins (2016, p. 2) stated that agricultural migrant employment represented approximately 37 percent of the gross domestic product from 2013 to 2014.

5) Industrial sector workers: Malaysia requires high numbers of skilled workers, for employment in the areas of textiles and garments, fish netting, mesh, and furniture.

6) Tourism sector: The tourism business in Malaysia is the one sector that the government is using to boost the economy.

Guidelines for Supporting Thai Workers in Singapore and Malaysia

The guidelines suggested for supporting Thai workers in Singapore and Malaysia are:

1. The Thai government, particularly the Ministry of Labor, should play a key role in pressing the Singaporean government to revise its labor laws so that Thai migrant workers are treated more fairly and receive higher wages and more social benefits

than they do at present. In addition, the Thai government should discuss seriously with the Singaporean government the issue of unskilled and semi-skilled Thai workers being limited to working only in construction, and the Singaporean government should be encouraged to extend the job types for which Thai workers are eligible to include the service and manufacturing sectors.

2. The Thai government, particularly the Ministry of Labor, should place pressure on the Malaysian government to reduce work permit fees and to reduce the levy on Thai workers. It should also encourage the Malaysian government to extend work permits to unskilled workers who work as waiters/waitresses and washing dishes; currently, the Malaysian government will give work permits only to Thai workers employed as cooks/chefs. This is supported by the study of Klanarong, Sinprajakpol, and Pinsuwan (2013), that concluded that the Thai government should negotiate a compromise with the Malaysian government regarding migrants who work in food shops, especially waiters, and should revise the fee for the redemption of work permits or the fee for employment in food shops. In addition, Harkins (2016, pp. 14–15), based on the data of the International Labour Organization, showed that the Malaysian government now has a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with three countries for foreign migrant workers: Indonesia, Cambodia, and Bangladesh.

3. Before allowing Thai workers to work abroad, the Department of Skill Development at the Ministry of Labor should develop the communication skills of Thai workers and should emphasize the importance of English language skills to all workers who wish to work abroad. To this end, the Department should set up English training centers in all regions of Thailand to provide free English training to Thai people who wish to work in Thailand with international companies or to work abroad.

4. The Thai government should develop short-term training courses for Thai workers to impart the knowledge and skills necessary in overseas labor markets, and workers should have the opportunity to develop their capacity for working abroad, such as self-development skills, in-depth knowledge of specific fields of work, teamwork skills, and communication skills.

5. The Thai government, through the Ministry of Education, should incorporate the English language into every subject at all levels of education (primary, secondary, high school, technical college, and university) and should bring the English language into Thai daily life, thus emphasizing speaking and listening skills rather than focusing only on reading and writing skills.

6. The Thai government, through the Ministry of Education, should re-think its policy of encouraging Thai people to study at the university level because most overseas jobs available, especially in Singapore and Malaysia, require semi-skilled or skilled labor (for example, mechanics, welders, assembly workers, petroleum workers, and other kinds of engineers). Thus, the Ministry of Education should consider supporting technical colleges that train people for this kind of employment.

7. The Thai government should set up overseas health care for Thai migrant workers, such as primary health care, accidental care, and emergency health care, because Thai

workers face high costs when they experience health problems while working overseas. Overseas employers may send Thai workers back home if they face serious health problems and high health care fees.

8. The Thai government should train workers who return from overseas to work on their own land and to also work for small- and medium-sized businesses or large manufacturing companies to earn extra income. This work can help them to earn more money while they live at home with their families and thus improve their families' lives.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study found current, declining trends in the numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled Thai workers in Singapore because the workers can only be employed in the construction sector and few of the new generation of Thai workers want to work in Singapore because the work is hard and dangerous and the wages are not high compared to other types of work in other countries such as South Korea, Taiwan, and Israel. The trend is for an increasing number of Thai workers to work in Malaysia because it is a neighboring country, and it is easy to cross the border from Thailand to Malaysia. The Thai government needs to discuss with the Singaporean government how to provide more opportunities for unskilled and semi-skilled Thai workers to work in sectors other than construction, such as the service and manufacturing sectors. The Thai government should also discuss with the Malaysian government how to reduce work permit fees and levies on the employment of Thai workers and they should also encourage the Malaysian government to extend work permits to unskilled workers such as waiters/waitresses and those washing dishes. In addition, the Thai government should set up more Consular offices and send diplomatic staff (labor counselors) to work in Borneo because this island includes parts of both Malaysia and Indonesia, and this study found that there are many Thai workers in Borneo and when they face problems, it is difficult to help them because it is far from the Royal Thai Embassy in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), Jakarta (Indonesia) or the Royal Thai Embassy in Brunei Darussalam. In conclusion, most Thai people who work abroad do so because they do not have a good job in Thailand, and want to create the opportunity to improve the well-being of their family by sending remittances home. However given the choice, they would not travel far away from their families and would prefer to stay with them. Therefore increasing job availability in all areas of Thailand is a major issue which the Thai government should be addressing because Thailand has more than 100,000 workers abroad but also has one million migrant workers from neighboring countries most of whom are working illegally. Therefore, government policy should aim to reduce the number of illegal workers in Thailand and should concentrate on increasing the job opportunities for Thai workers rather than creating opportunities for workers from neighboring countries. Finally, the Thai government should increase social dialogue in policy development for Thai migrant workers and should set up MOUs between Thailand and Singapore, Malaysia, and other countries that are destinations for Thai migrant workers.

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