

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON RETURNING MIGRANTS DRY ZONE ANALYSIS



Providing COVID19 health items to Regional Hospital in Magway Region. © IOM 2020

OVERVIEW

This rapid assessment was conducted by IOM and Social Care Volunteer Group (SCVG), in close coordination with the Department of Labour. The assessment covered three townships in Magway Region, namely Pakokku, Aunglan, Thayet; and three townships in Mandalay Region, namely Meiktila, Taungtha, and Thabeikkyin.¹ The objectives of the assessment were to:

1. Understand the experiences, challenges and future intentions of returnees and communities of return
2. Support an evidence-based response to the challenges faced by returning migrants as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic

RETURN MIGRATION

Of the 2,311 returned migrants surveyed, 386 or 17% (men 211; women 175) have returned to the Dry Zone area of Myanmar – comprising Magway

Region and Mandalay Region.² 183 (47%) of Dry Zone migrants surveyed had returned from abroad and 203 (53%) returned from within Myanmar. 96 (52%) international returnees had returned from China, and 73 (40%) from Thailand, with the remaining 14 (8%) international migrants returning from countries such as Malaysia, India, Japan and South Korea.

37 per cent of Dry Zone respondents said they returned because they got scared of COVID-19. 22 per cent said that they returned because they lost their job as a result of the pandemic, and 16 per cent said their family asked them to come home due to COVID-19. 15 per cent said they returned for reasons unrelated to COVID-19, and 10 per cent said they returned for other reasons, including the Thingyan holidays, to escape from lockdown, and due to hardships at destination.

The Dry Zone had relatively equal numbers of returned international and internal migrants, permitting a comparison of the impacts of the pandemic on both groups of migrants in this region.

¹For detailed methodology and full findings see main report.

²For presentation purposes this brief presents percentage figures rounded to the nearest whole percentage. For this reason and due to the rounding of decimal points, not all totals add up to exactly 100 per cent.

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Livelihoods and Food Security Fund



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Reasons given for returning were slightly different between internal and international migrants. While the highest proportion of both groups (37% of internal migrants and 35% of international migrants) from the Dry Zone reported that they returned home because they got scared and ran away, the proportion of internal migrants who returned because they lost their job was significantly higher than for international migrants (28% vs 15%). On the other hand, 26 per cent of international migrants said they returned for reasons unrelated to the pandemic (7% of returned internal migrants said their reasons were unrelated).

Differentiating the reasons for return by country in which an international migrant worked indicates that in Thailand, far more workers got scared of COVID-19 and returned home (59%) compared to in China (21%). In contrast, more returnees to the Dry Zone who had been employed in China returned because they lost their job (26%), than those who had worked in Thailand (3%). A further 33 per cent of returnees from China and 13 per cent from Thailand returned for reasons unrelated to the pandemic.

Women migrant workers from the Dry Zone were more likely than men to return home because their families asked them to return (22% vs 10%), while men were slightly more likely to have got scared of the COVID-19 situation and returned home (39% vs 33%). Just over 20 per cent of both men and women reported having to return because they lost their job.

30 per cent of migrant workers from the Dry Zone said they had experienced increased psychological stress before returning home, and 7 per cent had experienced discrimination/stigma. A further 7 per cent had experienced decreased access to social services (such as medical services), 4 per cent had "other" challenges, and 1 per cent said they had

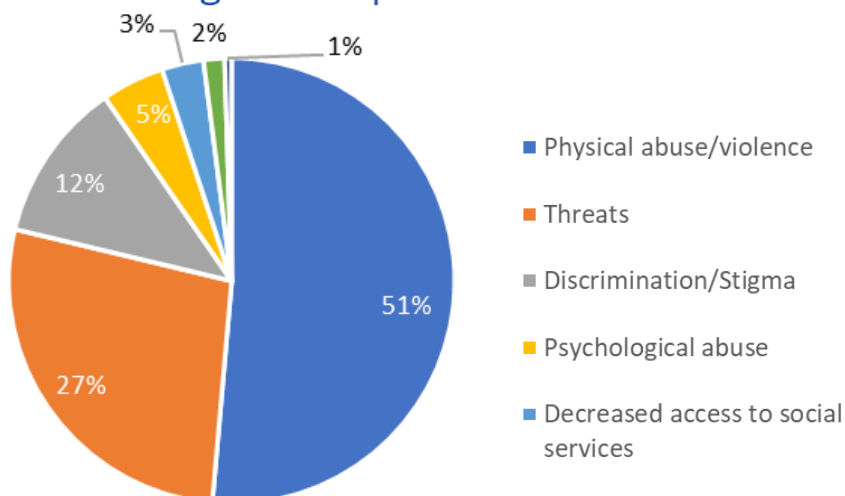
experienced threats. Just over half (51%) reported that none of the options were applicable to them. Slightly more Dry Zone women (9%) than men (6%) said they had experienced discrimination/stigma.

Dry Zone international migrants were more likely than their internal migrant counterparts to have experienced increased psychological stress prior to their return (34% vs 26%). 57 per cent of international Dry Zone returnees and 44 per cent of internal returnees said that none of the options were applicable to them. A higher proportion of migrant workers returning from China than Thailand reported decreased access to social services (17% vs 3%), and experiences of discrimination/stigma (10% vs 3%).

Returnees to the Dry Zone reported similar levels of challenges since returning home (**Figure 1**). While 51 per cent reported that none of the listed experiences were applicable, over a quarter of respondents (27%) said they experienced increased psychological stress (26% women; 29% men), and 12 per cent said they had experienced discrimination/stigma (15% women; 9% men).

Upon arriving home, over 98 per cent of migrants from the Dry Zone were requested to quarantine either in a community facility or at home. A similarly high proportion (99% in Magway, 100% in Mandalay) reported having done so. Quarantined individuals expressed a number of challenges emerging from quarantine conditions. 30 per cent of surveyed Dry Zone returnees, for instance, said there were not enough protective and hygiene items, and 14 per cent said there was not enough food. 11 per cent said they did not have enough non-food items and a further 10 per cent reported a shortage of staff/volunteers to manage the quarantine facilities. Quarantine needs were similar for internal and international returnees.

Figure 1: Experiences since return



ECONOMIC SITUATION

Myanmar households have struggled with a loss of income since migrants returned home and economic remittances subsequently dried up. 57 per cent of surveyed Dry Zone returnees said their households were no longer receiving the remittances that were their main/only source of income (men 60%; women 52%). Only 16 per cent said that remittances were their main/only source of income and they were receiving the same amount (men 13%; 20% women). A further 16 per cent said that remittances were not their households' main source of income (men 13%; women 18%), and 12 per cent said remittances were the main/only source of income but they were receiving less (men 14%; women 10%).

There was only a marginal difference in terms of remittance loss between households of internal and international returnees to the Dry Zone, and similarly, only a slight difference between the experiences of remittance loss reported by international returnees from China and Thailand.

The loss of remittances has impacted on the economic situation for many Myanmar households, but the ability to withstand sustained economic shocks differs from region to region and household to household. Households in the Dry Zone appear particularly vulnerable to such shocks, as 83 per cent of respondents said that they do not have any savings, and 13 per cent said they have savings but are using them at an increased rate. Only 5 per cent said they have savings, but do not need to use them. Men and women reported similar impacts on household savings.

As remittances have dried up, households without an economic buffer have looked to outside sources of economic relief. Borrowing money in an effort to fill an income gap has created and, in some cases, compounded existing levels of household debt. 41 per cent of Dry Zone returnees surveyed said that they are in debt and that the level of debt has worsened since the pandemic. Only 38 per cent said that they are not in debt, and 21 per cent said they are in debt with the debt level not having been affected by the pandemic. Men and women reported similar impacts on household debt.

There was only a marginal difference in terms of reported debt between internal and international migrants returned to the Dry Zone. However, a far higher proportion of returnees from China (61%) than from Thailand (16%) said they were in debt and that their debt situation had worsened since the pandemic.

INTENTIONS

As the pandemic has continued, returnees have had to consider what their next move will be. 219 (57%) of Dry Zone returnees surveyed said that they plan to remigrate. 55 per cent of those Dry Zone migrants who plan to remigrate said they plan to go as soon as possible (men 52%; women 56%), 12 per cent said they will return in the next year, and 16 per cent said they would go in the next 1-3 months. 15 per cent of respondents said they do not know what they will do.

International and internal migrants reported a similar desire to remigrate as soon as they can (54% vs 54%). 73 per cent of returned migrants from Thailand said that they plan to return as soon as possible, compared to only 38 per cent from China. 26 per cent of returned migrants from China said they do not know what their plans are (compared to 9% from Thailand).

75 per cent of Dry Zone returnees who plan to remigrate said that they intend to go back to the same place they were previously working (men 68%; women 85%). 25 per cent said they plan to go somewhere different (men 33%; women 15%). 68 per cent said they intend to work in the same job they worked before the pandemic, and 32 per cent said they plan to do something different. 76 per cent of women who said they plan to remigrate plan to seek reemployment in the same job they were previously working, compared to 61 per cent of men.

Among Dry Zone returnees not intending to remigrate, 52 per cent said they plan to work in the agriculture sector (men 49%; women 55%), 34 per



IOM staff and COVID-19 Committee posting COVID-19 risk communication poster in Pakokku Township, Magway Region.
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cent said they will find casual work (men 38%; women 29%), 7 per cent said they plan to seek employment in fields not listed in the survey (men 5%; women 11%), and 2 per cent said they will work in domestic work (men 3%; women 2%). Returnees from Thailand were far more likely to plan on finding work in agriculture than returnees from China (69% vs 40%).

As returned migrants and their families wait to see what happens with regard to a lifting or loosening of COVID-19 related travel restrictions, they have immediate needs that can help alleviate the difficulties of living without a source of income. Food support was identified as the most important immediate need by 31 per cent, 27 per cent said livelihood support, and 15 per cent said hygiene items, such as soap, toothpaste and so forth. A further 10 per cent said civil documentation is needed immediately, with 12 per cent reporting other needs, including medical care, clothing, legal assistance and psychological care. Expressions of immediate needs were similar between men and women returnees to the Dry Zone.

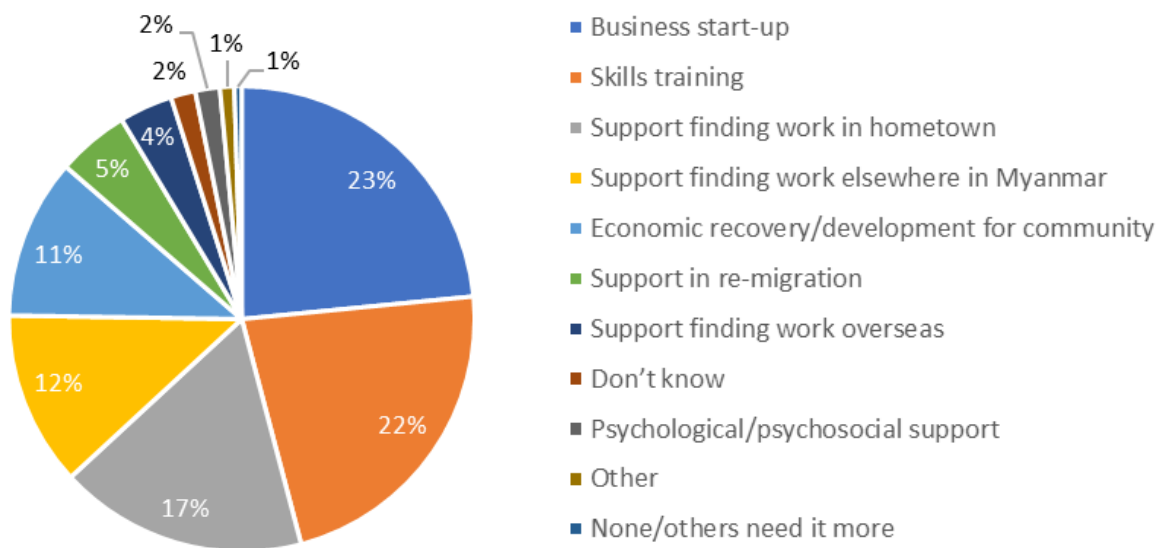
If the situation improves, there are a number of economic, social and psychosocial support interventions that will be required for returned migrants and their families, beyond satisfying

immediate needs (Figure 2). 23 per cent of Dry Zone returnees surveyed said that they would benefit from business start-up support (men 25%; women 22%), 22 per cent from skills training (men 23%; women 22%), and 17 per cent from assistance in finding employment in their hometown (men 16%; women 18%).

CONCLUSION

Findings on the experiences of returned migrant workers to the Dry Zone indicates that while the balance of international and internal migrants returning home is relatively even, the proportion of internal migrants who returned home because they lost their job was significantly higher than for international migrants. Among international migrants, returnees from China appear in a more precarious position than those returned from Thailand, as they were more significantly more likely to have lost their job. Around 80 per cent of returnees to the Dry Zone plan on remigrating, and most intend to return to where they were previously employed. While still difficult to tell when pandemic conditions will allow for remigration, if the situation starts to improve, over half of Dry Zone returnees said they would benefit from business start-up support or skills training.

Figure 2: Most beneficial support if situation improves



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