

POLICY BRIEF

Myanmar Youth Migrants in Thailand: Strengthening Skills, Protection, and Economic Inclusion

Comprehensive Labour Market Assessment commissioned by
Finn Church Aid (FCA), 2025

KEY POINTS

- Myanmar youth migrants are essential contributors to Thailand's labour force, especially in sectors experiencing chronic labour shortages such as agriculture, manufacturing, construction, hospitality, and care services.
- Despite relatively high education levels, a major skills mismatch remains: 65% of youth migrants work in jobs unrelated to their training due to limited TVET access, language barriers, and labour market segmentation. Employers mainly seek Thai language ability, soft skills, basic technical and safety skills, digital literacy, customer service, and caregiving skills many youth still need to strengthen to access better jobs.
- Migration channels remain dominated by non-MOU pathways due to high costs and complex procedures in the formal recruitment system.
- Thailand's legal framework offers labour protections, but enforcement gaps and administrative barriers disproportionately impact undocumented and newly arrived youth. These youth face legal vulnerability and arrest risks that restrict their movement and access to work, education, basic services, and healthcare, which is further constrained by cost and fear of detection.
- Financial inclusion is low, with most youth relying on informal remittance and lending channels, limiting savings, credit access, and financial security.
- Civil society, Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions, and community-based training models play a critical role but remain fragmented and under-resourced, with minimal private sector involvement.
- Improved coordination, data integration, skills pathways, and youth-targeted services would enhance economic resilience and support Thailand's long-term workforce strategy.

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Since 2020, migration from Myanmar to Thailand has accelerated due to political instability, economic decline, and limited domestic opportunities, with the 2021 coup heightening protection risks. Thailand remains the main destination for young Myanmar migrants, offering higher wages, proximity, and established networks.

This brief draws on the Comprehensive Labour Market Assessment (LMA) of Myanmar youth (18-35 years), commissioned by Finn Church Aid (FCA), which identifies labour trends, systemic barriers, and policy pathways in Thailand to support safe migration, skills development, and labour protection.

Based on a survey of 400 youth migrants and interviews with employers, NGOs, government agencies, recruitment agents, and financial institutions across Thailand and Mon State, Myanmar, the study examines five dimensions of the migration ecosystem:

- **Labour Supply** – Migrant demographics, motivations, skills, and aspirations
- **Labour Demand** – Employer needs and recruitment practices
- **Government & Policy** – Thai interventions and policies
- **Ecosystem & Services** – NGOs, TVET, financial services, and recruitment actors
- **Legal & Policy Framework** – Labour laws, migration policies, and bilateral mechanisms

DRIVERS, RISKS, AND STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

Myanmar youth migrating to Thailand navigate a landscape shaped by political instability, economic stress, and restrictive migration systems. Although young migrant workers are essential to Thailand's key industries, available pathways remain fragmented, high-risk, and poorly matched to youth skills. Structural barriers, including weak governance, financial exclusion, and limited protection, continue to restrict safe and productive participation in the labour market. Addressing these drivers and systemic gaps is critical to building coherent, youth-responsive policies that strengthen migration outcomes and contribute to Thailand's workforce needs.

Escalating Youth Migration Driven by Crisis

Since 2020, migration of Myanmar youth has shifted from voluntary economic mobility to forced movement driven by **political instability, insecurity, and household pressures**, with many relying on informal recruitment channels that increase risks of debt, exploitation, and irregular status.

Skills Mismatch and Limited Pathways

Although many youth are well educated, restrictive documentation, **limited Thai proficiency, and low awareness of TVET opportunities** constrain access to skilled employment. Dispersed skills-development initiatives across NGOs, employers, and government agencies further complicate youth navigation of available pathways.

Fragmented Labour Governance

Migrant labour responsibilities are spread across multiple ministries, resulting in **fragmented and reactive governance**. The lack of interoperable data systems further constrains coordination, evidence-based planning, and the development of integrated, youth-focused policies.

Financial Vulnerability

Strict Know Your Customer (KYC) requirements, **low financial literacy, and high transaction fees** push young migrants toward informal financial services. This heightens risks of scams, over-indebtedness, and unsafe remittance channels, particularly for those who are undocumented.

Limited Recognition and Protection

While Thai labour laws comply with international standards, young migrants often fall through the gaps due to **limited enforcement, employer dependency, and administrative complexity**. Many youth are unaware of their rights or unable to claim them.

Under-Utilized Role of Employers and Civil Society

Civil society actors provide essential services—but their reach is uneven. **Employers rarely invest in structured training or career progression** due to **high turnover, unclear regulations, and lack of incentives**.

PATHWAYS TO INTEGRATE MYANMAR MIGRANT YOUTH

Thailand faces a dual challenge of **labour shortages and a rapidly ageing population**, particularly in sectors such as manufacturing, construction, hospitality, and care services. Integrating Myanmar migrant youth into the formal workforce presents a strategic opportunity to address these gaps while fostering sustainable economic growth. A coordinated workforce approach ensures that these young workers are not only filling positions but also contributing to productivity through targeted skills development and career progression pathways.

Structured **upskilling and vocational training programs** can enhance both productivity and employability. Skills matching initiatives, supported by private-sector partnerships and digital labour platforms, can align migrant youth with high-demand occupations. This not only benefits businesses with a better-skilled workforce but also enables young migrants to access stable, long-term employment opportunities, supporting social mobility and economic inclusion.

Aligning workforce strategies with **ASEAN labour mobility frameworks** strengthens Thailand's position as a regional hub for talent. Cross-border recognition of qualifications and transferable skills enables youth to move safely and legally across borders, contributing to regional competitiveness. This approach also ensures that Thailand's labour market remains adaptive, resilient, and integrated into broader regional economic development plans.

Social protection and inclusion are key to safeguarding vulnerable populations. Integrating migrant youth into formal labour markets ensures access to health coverage, social security, and legal protections, reducing their exposure to exploitation and informal work. Well-managed migration policies can mitigate risks of trafficking, informality, and abuse, promote ethical labour practices and foster community trust

Finally, a **scalable, youth-inclusive labour migration architecture** requires multiple enablers: cross-border skills recognition, digital labour systems for registration and job matching, private-sector engagement for apprenticeships and on-the-job training, and community-based TVET programs. Together, these measures can create a sustainable framework that strengthens Thailand's workforce, protects migrant youth, and enhances long-term social and economic resilience.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Myanmar youth migrants are integral to Thailand's economy, yet they face systemic barriers that limit their potential and expose them to risk. By investing in coordinated governance, inclusive training pathways, legal protection, financial access, and data integration, Thailand can strengthen its labour market resilience while enhancing young migrants' safety, skills, and economic mobility. A strategic, youth-inclusive approach positions Thailand as a regional leader in fair, future-ready, and human-centered labour migration governance.

1. Strengthen Governance and Coordination

- Establish a **national mechanism** that links labour, education, and civil registration systems with participation of civil society, migrant-led organizations, the private sector, and local authorities to enable coherent, long-term planning for youth migrants.
- Strengthen inter-ministerial coordination across employment, labour, education, and immigration to streamline processes and support integrated planning for migrant youth.
- Align youth labour migration with Thailand's long-term workforce strategy and ASEAN commitments.

2. Expand Skills Development and Accessible Education

- Develop **modular, short-course, multilingual TVET pathways** accessible to both documented and undocumented youth.
- Strengthen **Thai language, digital literacy, and market-relevant training**, especially for new arrivals.
- Invest in **recognition of prior learning (RPL)** and cross-border skills certification.
- Fund community-based training models and connect them to accredited TVET systems.

3. Improve Legal Protection and Reduce Administrative Burdens

- Streamline and digitize work permit and visa procedures under both MOU and Cabinet Resolution pathways.
- Strengthen enforcement of labour protections, with targeted outreach to youth in high-risk sectors.
- Expand **youth-friendly Migrant One-Stop Service Centres** offering legal counselling, documentation support, and rights-awareness training.

4. Promote Financial Inclusion

- Support **low-fee, multilingual digital remittance services** that reduce reliance on informal agents.
- Introduce flexible KYC models for migrants, aligned with risk-based standards.
- Expand savings products, microcredit, and financial literacy initiatives through NGOs, fintech firms, and employers.

5. Engage the Private Sector as a Core Partner

- Incentivize employers to provide structured **on-the-job training**, apprenticeships, and advancement pathways.
- Promote Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG)-aligned initiatives, including youth skills development and social inclusion programs.
- Encourage employer-TVET-NGO partnerships to improve workforce retention and sector-specific skills pipelines.

6. Invest in Data Integration and Evidence-Based Planning

- Link datasets across government statistical agencies and immigration systems to track youth labour outcomes and skill needs.
- Enhance data sharing between Thailand and Myanmar to support safe, orderly migration.
- Use evidence to guide policy reforms, funding allocation, and future labour agreements.