



## EMPOWERING INTERNAL MIGRANT WORKERS IN MYANMAR: HELVETAS' EXPERIENCE AND LESSONS LEARNED

This issue sheet gives an overview of the Aye Chan Thaw Ein (ACTE) project in Myanmar, including its goals, approaches and lessons learned. Its findings can support other NGOs, donors and actors to raise awareness on populations' and migrant workers' needs in Myanmar and promote holistic, systemic and migrant-centred approaches as part of new interventions focusing on labor migration.

## BACKGROUND

In Myanmar, migration has long served as a **livelihood strategy** that allows households to respond to shocks, diversify volatile household income, and improve social mobility and human security. Rural poverty, unemployment, lack of economic opportunity, fragile livelihoods and conflicts comprise the key drivers of the country's domestic and international labor migration.

After the end of military rule in 2011, Myanmar experienced substantial economic, social and political changes. Labor migration increased and migrants widely contributed to the economic development of the country. Remittances sent by both internal and international migrants played a critical role in alleviating poverty, in particular in rural areas, though this is not reflected in official figures since the remittances often flow through informal channels.

Economic reforms actively promoted Myanmar's shift from a largely agricultural-based economy to one based on manufacturing and services. As a consequence of this industrialization process, internal migration increased, mainly through the movement of people from rural areas to peri-urban and urban areas, contributing to the already existing trend of urbanization. Yangon is the main destination for internal migration; in particular, for women migrants seeking work in garment factories.

However, a mainly informal and limited legal and regulatory framework for recruitment has led to **unfair recruitment** of migration workers. Evidence shows that malpractice at the recruitment stage of migration can lead to increased exposure to vulnerabilities and abuses at the destination, including forced labor. Rapid changes to the nature of employment have also brought significant challenges for ensuring decent work conditions, especially in regards to minimum wage, overtime, accidents and lacking compensation payments, unlawful dismissal or harassment. Hence, internal migrants can be vulnerable during the migration cycle, both at the pre-departure

stage and in the workplace. Women may be particularly vulnerable and face gender-specific vulnerabilities and risks throughout their migration trajectory.

This is the context that Helvetas' ACTE project works within. Activities are aimed at maximizing the positive impacts of migration on development and reducing the vulnerability of migrants and their families in Shwe Pyi Thar Township in Yangon.



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## Recent migration trends

Myanmar has faced overlapping crises during the duration of ACTE project: the COVID-19 outbreak and multiple lockdowns, political turmoil, armed conflict, violence and inflation. These crises have paralysed the country and the economy and had a huge impact on enterprises and workers, including internal migrants. As pointed out by the International Labour Organization (ILO), there were supply chain disruptions, heightened precarious working conditions, closure of many factories and heavy job losses. World Bank reports indicate that poverty doubled in 2022 compared to the levels in March 2020; now, around 40% of the population is living below the poverty line. More than 14 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance in the last Humanitarian Response Plan. And the Asian Development Bank projected that Myanmar's annual GDP growth would be -18.4% in 2021. As highlighted in a Helvetas article, this dire situation tends to jeopardize the traditional rural-urban migration pattern, which works as an essential livelihood strategy and brings serious consequences for migrants and their families.

## THE ACTE PROJECT<sup>1</sup>

This three-year project, which started in October 2019 and is planned to end in late 2022, is managed by a consortium of People in Need (PIN), Helvetas Myanmar and five local organizations. Funded by the multi-donor Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund (LIFT), the project Aye Chan Thaw Ein (ACTE) stands for “peaceful house.” It takes place in Yangon’s sub-urban township **Shwe Pyi Thar**, which is one of the most important destination areas for internal migration (hosting 50,000 migrant workers in over 600 factories in 2019) because of the high prevalence of **garment factories and food processing companies**.

The project promotes a **holistic approach** to migration, addressing the opportunities and challenges associated with migration. In order to reap the benefits of migration, it is essential to make sure that migration can take place in a safe manner and that remittances can be leveraged for the development of areas of origin. Hence, the overall goals are: (1) to maximise the positive impacts of migration on development and (2) to contribute to the reduced vulnerability and empowerment of female and male migrants through safer migration practices and a more responsive service delivery from both public and private actors. The project aims to ensure triple win for the migrants, the area of their destination (including the employers and the host communities), and the area of their origin (including families and communities). The project interventions use a **migrant-centred approach** and are thus designed for migrant workers to make informed choices, to know and safeguard their rights, and to ensure that the benefits from migration are made sustainable through access to justice, skills development financial literacy and policy dialogue. The project also promotes a **systemic approach** that strengthens system actors and duty-bearers to fulfill their duties as per their mandates and to provide quality services. In addition, local actors working on labor migration are strengthened to advocate strategically on migrants’ rights issues.

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Women are one target group to reflect the employment composition of the garment sector in Myanmar. In addition, women may be particularly vulnerable and face gender-specific vulnerabilities and risks throughout their migration trajectory. Hence, a **gender approach** is at the core of the project, and each component includes specific actions to address the gender gap. For gender mainstreaming to effectively contribute to poverty reduction and social equity, the project considers the different needs of men and women as well as the causes

and effects, retainers and enablers of participation and contribution of the more disadvantaged and vulnerable – both in their own development and in that of their community. Many actions have been taken to mainstream gender in the project (e.g., gender analysis, specific accessibility to trainings).

### The consortium implements a multi-sectoral intervention to achieve interlinked outcomes:

- Lack of awareness and access to credible information regarding safe migration, labor rights and management of one’s finances is a key barrier to development of migrants and wider society. The project’s first outcome is for women and men migrant workers and their families to make informed decisions, claim their labor rights, access legal services, and to manage their remittances sustainably.
- High staff turnover is detrimental both to migrant workers and factories. The project’s second outcome is for migrant workers to gain enhanced skills to cope with working conditions and claim their rights. Life skills training for migrants, factory on-boarding programs and awareness-raising events on labor rights help migrant workers to cope better with their new working environment and thereby reduces high staff turnover. Skills training in non-traditional occupations, both for migrants and workers from the host community, complemented this intervention by relying on the successfully implemented approach of Helvetas Myanmar’s Skills for Employment (S4E) project in Magway.
- The project’s third outcome is to improve framework conditions for decent work through multi-stakeholder coordination. Facilitated multi-stakeholder dialogues based on solid policy briefs, as well as capacitated civil society actors on constructive policy dialogue, contribute towards favourable framework conditions for migrants and a policy guiding internal migration.
- As poor nutrition of migrant workers, young women in particular, chips away the economic and other gains of migration, the project’s fourth outcome is for women and men migrant workers and their families to benefit from a balanced healthy diet, adopted safe hygiene practices and access to improved WASH facilities. The project achieves this outcome by improving access of migrants and their families to safe water and improved WASH facilities, to nutritious meals both in and out of work, and by promoting adequate nutrition and childcare practices among mothers and caretakers.

## KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

The multiple crises faced by the country since 2020 have challenged the effectiveness and efficiency of most activities. The project continuously adapted to new situations and continued with some key activities virtually or semi-virtually for some period of time; other activities have been delayed or put on hold. Extra coordination and innovative planning efforts were required to adapt to the rapidly changing COVID-19 situation and to the political situation.

Despite this context, ACTE managed to reach about 870,000 people within the project timeframe through the following areas of work:

### Access to information

Migrant workers have received safe migration information through the project's worker centers, the newly developed Pyo Pyo May mobile application, and the project's Facebook page. The safe migration and labor rights package consists of different chapters (e.g., how to migrate safely, labor laws in Myanmar, decent work standards, financial management). User-friendly and gamified learning methods (short articles, quizzes and animation videos) on migration and labor rights are included in the application to foster the engagement of workers. Since the beginning of the project, 656,703 people were reached by the Pyo Pyo May application and Facebook page. Since social networks are the main channels for prospective migrants to receive information about jobs, the trained workers were expected to spread the acquired knowledge and inform those in the pre-departure preparation phase.

### Access to justice

By relying on the longstanding experience of local partners, a huge amount of labor rights cases were handled by the project, representing a total of 220,640 workers (75% female), who collectively or individually requested legal support. In total, these cases have been compensated with more than 110,6217 USD from the government (SSB) or the employers. The cases were handled by paralegals trained by the project. The paralegals are providing legal support related to rights issues, in addition to supporting labor migrants with social needs, such as looking for hostels and helping them in negotiating for a debt reimbursement. A digital documentation system was also developed to improve the case documentation system.

### Skills development

The project identified demand-driven occupations in non-traditional professions after carrying out a labor market assessment and holding stakeholders' consultation meetings. The professions were selected against a set of criteria that included potential sector growth, labor demand, salary and benefits. Four selected vocational

training topics (culinary skills, hair and facial treatments, plumbing and welding) were delivered to 810 people. Career counselling and soft skills were integrated to skills trainings. The four vocational topics offered an alternative livelihood opportunity for migrants who are unemployed and intend to change jobs rather working in risky jobs. The project collaborated with micro-enterprises to host on-the-job trainings and funded for training cost-based on the result which had given a high potential on employment after completion of the training. Selected soft skills training topics were CV writing and attending interviews, mindset and attitude, team building, effective communication, decision making, problem solving, and negotiating skills. The training packages were tailored to migrants and used game-based learning for those with low literacy.

### Financial literacy

A financial literacy training package was developed, and the content of the curriculum is divided into the following sections: 1) plan for your future, 2) saving, 3) interest, 4) mobile wallet and 5) online shopping. Financial literacy trainings were delivered to 655 migrant workers and their family members in Shwe Pyi Thar. ACTE also partnered with a local partner and the online application "Monkiri App" to raise awareness on financial literacy.

### Emergency response

In response to the emergency situation (COVID-19 and political turmoil), new activities were launched to support vulnerable labor migrants. About 2,500 people were provided emergency cash assistance. Along with the cash, safe migration and labor rights pamphlets were shared to raise awareness. In addition, psychosocial counselling (virtually or in-person) was organized for workers, including dismissed workers.



## GOOD PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

**Be agile and flexible:** agility and adaptation are especially important when applying the systemic approach and having a facilitative role. This is especially true in an emergency setting. The ACTE project continuously adapted its activities, including: transferring face-to-face meetings and trainings to virtual channels or private settings instead of project centers, by renting taxis to bring workers to trainings, by supporting the launch of emergency activities with local partners (e.g., cash assistance, psycho-social support), and by increasing focus on some components (e.g., strengthening and empowering local actors).

**Systemic change is limited in emergency settings:** due to the multifaceted crisis, the multipartite dialogue on decent work conditions has been quite inactive and interactions with factories were limited. Without action at the policy level and strong relationships with private companies employing migrant workers, it is clear that systemic change is a challenge and actions are only moderately sustainable. In the same vein, the willingness to make the project's worker centres sustainable (supposed to be at the core of project's strategy), as a good practice shared by the [SaMi project](#) implemented by Helvetas in Nepal, is an unachievable goal within an emergency setting.

**Increase local capacity:** with a view to create a multiplier effect and promote a systemic approach, the empowerment of local actors was a core part of the project and focused on the following areas: organizational and technical capacities (including project cycle management), monitoring and evaluation, financial manage-

ment, reporting, gender mainstreaming, governance of labor migration. These interventions enabled local actors to reinforce their capacities, better position themselves for future projects, and take action to ensure improved services for migrants.

**Build common ground:** ACTE worked with a heterogeneous consortium comprised of diverse organizations with different mandates and understandings of project issues. This led to some challenges in coordination, division of roles and communication. These challenges might have been mitigated by conducting a thorough partnership appraisal and a political and economic power analysis (see [Helvetas PEPA manual](#)) to better understand the power dynamics among consortium partners and with key stakeholders. These tools allow diverse groups to build common ground and understanding and identify specific points of attention from the outset. They also enable facilitating organizations to plan adaptive scenarios and react swiftly to changes.

Impact of context on migrants' minds: the context seems to have substantially influenced the attitudes and minds of trained workers. Trainees are mostly young (from 18 to 22 years old), and the typical duration for vocational training is 2–3 months. In times of crisis, this time frame was considered too long due to security issues but, above all, due to the critical need to earn income as soon as possible.



**Consider constraints to hybrid models of delivering information:** some workers faced difficulties accessing job information online since they did not have a smart-phone, did not know how to use Facebook or could not afford to pay internet costs. Thus, ACTE posted up-to-date job information on the noticeboards at the Workers' Centers on a weekly basis.

## THE WAY FORWARD: EMPOWERING MIGRANT WORKERS IN MYANMAR

- Conduct research to gain knowledge on the living and working conditions of migrant workers in urban and peri-urban areas. Respond to needs through humanitarian assistance and protection, since the urban and peri-urban vulnerable populations were identified by the United Nations as disproportionately affected by the reduction in livelihood opportunities and access to basic services, and since the whole socio-economic system based on urban migration is currently collapsing.
- Conduct research to gain knowledge on the increasing trend of people using irregular and risky migration channels to flee the country. Respond to needs through protection, safe migration programs (e.g., pre-departure orientation) and policy dialogue to improve fair recruitment practices and policy frameworks to manage labor migration.
- Explore novel entry points and new partnerships with private sector companies employing migrant workers. Strong collaboration with these actors is needed to address increasingly important issues in the migration sector such growing decent work deficits are dearly needed to facilitate new areas of engagement.
- Ensure a holistic and comprehensive approach for future labor migration projects, fostering multistakeholder strategies with migrant-centred approach, strengthening local capacities to deliver services to migrants.
- Use and disseminate training packages developed by the ACTE Project and safe migration applications, which are not only useful in in Shwe Pyi Thar but can also be replicated in other areas as needed.



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<sup>1</sup> This learning document mainly focuses on the first three project outcomes managed by Helvetas.