

Thematic brief

# Addressing labour exploitation and human trafficking as ‘sticky’ problems: The role of Southeast Asia’s political economy

Pilar Domingo, Lisa Denney, Henrik Alffram, and Sasha Jespersen

---

December 2023



Labour migration and trafficking in persons: a political economy analysis

## Key messages

---

Trafficking in persons and labour exploitation remain ‘sticky’ problems in Southeast Asia, despite the growing number of regional policies and domestic legislation to address these. Political economy factors in both countries of origin and destination contribute to sustaining conditions of labour exploitation and trafficking in persons in the region.

---

The model of export-led growth in destination countries in Southeast Asia has benefited from easy access to low-skilled and low-paid labour, and from poorly regulated working conditions. For countries of origin in the region, the benefits of remittances from their citizens who

are working abroad leads to poor monitoring of how they are treated in destination countries.

---

Prevailing political coalitions of elite groups at national and subnational levels protect economic, state bureaucracy and military power interests. These benefit from the status quo – albeit not uniformly across the region – and thus contribute to sustaining conditions of labour exploitation among migrant workers.

---

Patronage politics and weak accountability create space for complicity and impunity, enabled by poorly embedded rule of law, rights and accountable governance. Governments are not primarily focused on meeting citizens' needs, and even less so those of labour migrants and victims of trafficking.

---

Despite these challenges, there is scope to support the capabilities of labour migrants and victims of trafficking to better exercise agency in countering the power imbalances resulting from these political economy conditions. This will call for acquiring a deeper understanding of their perspectives, how they define their needs, and where they see opportunities for strategic change to address vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.

---

This thematic brief sets explores the political economy conditions that contribute to sustaining the vulnerabilities to different forms of exploitation experienced by labour migrants in Southeast Asia, and the implications for how to adapt efforts to respond.

---

Readers are encouraged to reproduce material for their own publications, provided that they are not being sold commercially. ODI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the ODI website. The views presented in this paper are those of the named authors and do not necessarily represent the views of ODI or our partners.

This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

Domingo, P., Alffram, H., Denney, L. and Jespersen, S. (2023) 'Labour exploitation and human trafficking as "sticky" problems: The role of Southeast Asia's political economy'. ODI Thematic brief. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/political-economy-of-labour-exploitation-and-trafficking-in-persons-in-southeast-asia/>)

This is an ODI publication, produced in partnership with ASEAN-ACT. ASEAN-ACT is supported by the Australian Government and implemented by DT Global. The Australian Government funded this publication through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views expressed are the authors' alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government.

# Acknowledgements

---

The authors thank Paul Buckley and Lucia Pietropaoli for their support and valuable insights, as well as the wider ASEAN-ACT team. We are grateful to Sebastian Boll for his insightful feedback and comments, and to Kathryn Nwajiaku-Dahou for quality assurance. We also recognise the support of Maegan Rodricks and Rawena Russell in the publication process, Deborah Eade for copy-editing, and Elaine Antwi for managing the project.

The thematic brief was funded by the Australian Government through the ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking (ASEAN-ACT) program.

## About this publication

This publication has been developed through a research partnership between ASEAN-ACT and ODI. The research involved conducting an applied political economy analysis to understand the dynamics of labour exploitation and trafficking in persons in Southeast Asia in order to: 1) improve the evidence base for ASEAN-ACT and partners' programming and policy engagement; and 2) develop and implement a process for feeding that evidence into ASEAN-ACT and partners' programming and consultations on a regular basis.

The research seeks to advance understanding of the vulnerabilities of labour migrants to exploitation and trafficking. This can contribute to improved response capabilities of state agencies and international programmes to address these issues and strengthen protection and support for labour migrants and victims of trafficking in persons.

Phase 1 of the research project includes four country studies: Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Phase 2 of the research project includes four country studies: Indonesia, Myanmar, Malaysia and the Philippines.

This thematic brief is the first of four in Phase 2. Thematic briefs distil findings from the four country studies on key cross-cutting issues. This brief focuses on the political economy conditions of exploitation experienced by labour migrants in Southeast Asia.

## The research team

Henrik Alffram, Lisa Denney, Pilar Domingo, Sasha Jespersen, T.M. Huong Ngo, Kuanruthai Siripatthanakosol, Leang Sok, Cong Giao Vu, and Siliphaithoun Xayamoungkhoun.

# Contents

---

Acknowledgements .....	4
Contents.....	5
Acronyms .....	6
1 Introduction .....	7
2 Economics of labour migration flows .....	8
3 Political conditions .....	13
4 Social norms, rights and responsibilities.....	18
5 Labour migrants' capacity for agency .....	22
6 Implications for practice and recommendations .....	26
References.....	29

# Acronyms

---

ACTIP	ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons
CSO	civil society organisation
ILO	International Labour Organization
NGO	non-government organisation
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
TIP	Trafficking in Persons
UNTOC	United Nations Convention on Transnational Organized Crime

# 1 Introduction

Persistent exploitation and trafficking of labour migrants are due not only (or even primarily) to a lack of knowledge, skills or capacity on the part of criminal justice and related rights protection agencies. Rather, these problems are also intrinsically related to the political economy features of Southeast Asia – all countries of origin, transit and destination. These political economy features interact in ways that sustain a lack of political prioritisation of the rights and agency of labour migrants and constrain concerted attempts to address exploitation and trafficking.

This brief reflects on key features of the political economy of four Southeast Asian countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR (hereafter Laos), Thailand and Vietnam) and how these shape the experience of labour migrants and trafficking in the region. In particular, national development trajectories, the political systems of these countries, the nature of state–society relations and associated conceptions of citizenship, rights and justice are particularly pertinent. These features interact in ways that make the problems of vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking of labour migrants ‘sticky’ and persistent. In addition, these political economy dynamics shape both constraints and opportunities for agency on the part of labour migrants. This has implications for the politics of response measures to address the vulnerabilities of labour migrants to trafficking, labour exploitation and other harms at different stages of their journey, especially from the perspective of protection and prevention.

The brief draws on research undertaken by ODI for the ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking (ASEAN-ACT) Program, looking at the political economy of vulnerability to trafficking of labour migrants in the ASEAN region. The brief focuses mainly on Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam as countries of origin, and Thailand as a country of destination, but also draws on the experience of Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore and Brunei (research on these countries is currently underway).

## 2 Economics of labour migration flows

Regional patterns of economic development have contributed to shaping the nature of migration flows in the region, with export-led growth as the bedrock of rapid development. By the mid-1990s, high-growth economies in the ASEAN region – Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and, to a lesser extent, Indonesia – had emerged as significant industrial powers, growing faster than any other group of countries (Hill, 1997). To achieve this ‘success’, these countries underwent labour-intensive industrialisation, reliant on low-skilled labour. Consequently, they became destination countries for migrant workers, drawing on cheaper labour from neighbouring countries. Labour migration thus became a prominent feature of export-led growth to meet the demand of destination countries in the region, contributing to migration fraught with risks of trafficking and labour exploitation (Jespersen et al., 2022).

In destination countries, rapid growth has contributed to improved human development indicators and to reducing poverty. In Thailand, for instance, this involved a transition from a primarily agricultural economy to one where, through trade and financial liberalisation and an increase in foreign investment, there followed rapid growth in textiles and other manufacturing, the industrialisation of seafood processing and fisheries, and agricultural production. Construction work has grown, and demand for migrant labour in domestic work remains high. As Thailand’s insertion into global supply chains of fast-growing export industries was consolidated, so too was the claim to be practising competitive ‘market-oriented’ capitalism. The pace of growth of the economy – a confirmation of the success story – led to Thailand being ranked as an upper middle-income country in 2011. Successes in poverty reduction and human development indicators relating to education and, by the 2000s, universal health coverage, elevated the standard of living of many Thais, and their access to better paid and skilled jobs.

However, the demand for low-skill and low paid labour continued to grow, attracting labour migrants from neighbouring countries to Thailand, to take up jobs in labour intensive sectors. It has been calculated that the work of labour migrants contributed between 4.3 and 6.6% of Thailand’s GDP in 2010 (OECD/ILO, 2017), excluding the economic contributions made by irregular workers (Harkins, 2019). Thus, while Thailand’s rapid growth contributed to poverty

reduction and investment in human development, significant levels of inequality persist. Poverty remains high in rural areas and among labour migrants, who are largely not fully captured in the numbers on poverty and inequality since irregular migrants are not included in the statistics (Rigg, 2016).

Labour migration in countries of origin in the region has also contributed to their economic growth. Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam have all moved from low-income to lower middle-income countries. They are still poorer than Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore, which extend from middle-income, to upper middle-income to high-income in the case of Singapore. Labour migration from these countries has become an important feature of their development strategies, primarily as countries of origin.

In Vietnam, many official documents and statements by high-ranking government officials have recognised the importance of labour migration (Anh, 2008). The 1998 Directive 41-CT/TW on labour export acknowledges labour migration as an ‘important and long-term strategy’ (Ishizuka, 2013). To ensure the benefits of labour migration were realised, the Vietnamese government set an annual migration target of 100,000–120,000 workers to be reached by 2020, which had already been surpassed in 2017, with 131,751 workers (Hoang, 2020). Remittances account for 5.8% of Vietnam’s GDP, making it the second largest recipient in the Asia-Pacific region (International Labour Organization, 2021a). Data on remittances does not include small amounts migrants send via money-transfer operators, post offices, mobile phones or informal transfers, so the remittance flow is likely to be much higher. Programmes have also been introduced to encourage labour migration, including the provision of low-interest loans to cover upfront recruitment fees, cash handouts and state-funded training (Hoang, 2020).

Laos has the youngest population of all Asian countries, with nearly 60% of the population under 25 years of age (UNICEF, n.d.). It is also one of the poorest countries in the region, with limited job growth, and challenges related to a large informal economy and the seasonality of work in its large agricultural sector (Lao Statistics Bureau and World Bank, 2020). Thus, there is a high supply of working-age adults with limited employment opportunities. Economic precarity in Laos has intensified since COVID-19 and the country’s debt crisis since 2022, with currency devaluation and spiralling inflation driving up the cost of living. Sharing a border with Thailand, the movement of Lao labour migrants is straightforward and provides important access to livelihoods for many Laotians, as well as an important economic boost for the country. In 2018, 277,845 Lao labour migrants regularly travelled to Thailand, but many work irregularly, so the actual number is significantly higher (Denney and Xayamoungkhoun, 2023).

Over the past 25 years, Cambodia has had one of the world's fastest growing economies, although economic development has been unevenly spread and many Cambodians still live in poverty. As a way of alleviating poverty, improving livelihoods and promoting stable economic growth, the Cambodian government has actively promoted labour migration (Kingdom of Cambodia, 2018). For many Cambodians struggling to find employment or needing a better paid job to make a living or service growing debt, migration has been the only option. Cambodia's proximity to Thailand's urban centres has made them the main destination for Cambodian labour migrants, sometimes travelling regularly but more often irregularly. With the rapid rise in Cambodia's working-age population, however, women and men are also migrating to other Asian and Middle Eastern countries for work. In 2019, World Bank staff estimated that remittances accounted for 5.6% of Cambodia's GDP (World Bank, n.d., b).

The economic value of labour migration and the economic differences between origin and destination countries means that the former may be less likely to challenge destination countries regarding the exploitation of their citizens for fear of closing down a migration corridor or other economic and political ties. Conducting investigations, collecting evidence and pursuing prosecutions for those responsible for labour exploitation in another country is generally difficult. This is particularly so when the perpetrator is an employer, and where cooperation from authorities in the destination country where industrialisation and private-sector growth is prioritised. These challenges are amplified by the numerous rent-seeking opportunities and conduct of different stakeholders that labour migrants encounter at different stages of their journey, irrespective of whether they follow regular or irregular routes.

In destination countries, in practice, the economic benefits of low-paid, low-skilled migrant workers trump concerns for their welfare and undermine efforts to combat trafficking and labour exploitation. The close-knit ties between political, state and economic interests that gain from the status quo in destination countries combined with conditions of weak rule of law and patrimonial politics further contribute to either the capture or ineffectiveness of relevant regulatory and enforcement agencies, both in countries of origin and destination (Domingo and Siripatthanakosol, 2023; Rigg, 2016; Farrelly, 2012).

It is not only the relevant state agencies in countries of origin that are reluctant to complain about the mistreatment of their citizens in destination countries. Labour migrants are seldom likely to raise formal complaints or seek redress, as they and their families also see migration as an opportunity to improve their prospects. Of course, this consensual aspect of labour migration does not diminish the structural element of enormous power inequalities, conditions of exploitation, abuse and frequent incidence of deception and coercion

enabled by the ways in which the economies of countries of origin and destination are embedded in wider global political economies of production and supply chains (Skrivnakova, 2018). These issues contribute to perpetuating the vulnerabilities of migrant workers to trafficking and exploitation (Jespersion et al., 2022), because their economic necessity means that they take on migration journeys that expose them to a broad range of vulnerabilities.

There are, nevertheless, some constraints on practices of trafficking in persons (TIP) and labour exploitation. First, in 2015 the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons especially Women and Children (ACTIP) was enacted. Second, there are bilateral agreements on trafficking and exploitation. How countries of origin react to their citizens' exploitation in destination countries varies. In 2018, the Philippines banned the migration of domestic workers to Kuwait following the death of several workers (Human Rights Watch, 2018). This resulted in the negotiation of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the two countries, but another ban was introduced in 2020 following a further death (Shivakoti, Henderson and Withers, 2021). Shivakoti, Henderson and Withers (2021) highlight that migration bans can be an effective way for governments in countries of origin to increase protections for their workers abroad and have been deployed by Cambodia (2011), Sri Lanka (2013), Nepal (2014) and Indonesia (2015 and again in 2022<sup>1</sup>), all related to domestic workers. In the case of the Philippines and Kuwait, however, stalled negotiations resulted in Kuwait reaching an agreement with Ethiopia to send migrant workers, which led to economic losses for the Philippines (Abueish, 2023).

Moreover, when exploitation is extreme, public anger requires governments to act. Increasing reports of trafficking and other forms of extreme exploitation of labour migrants in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and casinos have been met with significant concern on the part of non-government organisations (NGOs) and in the media. Tellingly, however, there has not yet been clear action on the part of governments hosting the casinos or SEZs (most notably Laos and Cambodia) to increase oversight of such operations. Indeed, in Laos, it has been reported that Zhao Wei – the businessman whose company holds a 99-year lease for the Golden Triangle SEZ – has been visiting other provinces in the country and discussing additional SEZs with governors (Denney and Xayamoungkhoun, 2023). Furthermore, the broader public in the region is still more concerned with being victims of scams, than with the fate of victims of trafficking into SEZs, or scamming centres as such (Jespersion et al., 2023a).

From an economic perspective, therefore, the primary blockage to addressing vulnerability to trafficking and labour trafficking is that too many powerful stakeholders have an economic interest in maintaining the status quo. The confluence of economic benefits,

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/indonesia-imposes-temporary-freeze-sending-migrant-workers-malaysia-2022-07-13/>

business and politics in many countries in the region further sustains the exploitative situations. Governments of countries of origin want workers to migrate, incorporating labour migration into their development strategies (whether for remittances, to ensure livelihoods given the levels of unemployment, or to feed the labour needs of export-led development). Recruitment agencies and informal brokers generate a profit by identifying workers and placing them with employers abroad. Employers in countries of destination gain access to cheaper labour, which increases their productivity and profit margins. Labour migrants, for their part, often want to work abroad, as they can earn more by migrating and experiencing life elsewhere. While they would benefit from better working conditions, the power imbalance in destination countries and their need to migrate for work undermines their capacity for action. This means that there are few incentives to address vulnerabilities to trafficking and labour exploitation and to change the dynamics of labour migration. The economic development imperatives in countries of origin and destination prioritise these over concerns about the welfare of labour migrants.

## 3 Political conditions

From a political perspective, common features of political and institutional development within the region combine to sustain the vulnerability of migrant workers to situations of exploitation and trafficking.

A recurrent underlying issue across the region is the **weight of patronage politics**, which characterises economic, political and social exchange across the region, albeit to varying degrees, whether political and economic trajectories have been state-centric or market-oriented. In this logic, authority continues to be structured through personal relations and informal networks that connect economic, military, political and state bureaucracy elites. These relationships are hierarchical and unequal, where personal favours and exchanges establish bonds and loyalties that trump formal rules and regulatory frameworks (Deinla, 2017; Scott, 2012). In Thailand, for instance, while the economic model has not been state-led, privileged access to military, political and state bureaucracy networks have secured economic gains and protection for certain groups and individuals, fostered by poor oversight by regulatory rules and mechanisms on the development of the sectors that have benefited from low-cost foreign labour. Similarly, in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, patronage between political and private-sector elites is a core part of the political settlements and shapes who benefits from specific economic and political opportunities.

In keeping with the logic of patronage politics, **democracy, rule of law, and human rights have not been strong features** in the political histories in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, notwithstanding their distinctive political trajectories (Croissant and Hellman, 2020; Deinla, 2017; Diamond, 2013).<sup>2</sup> Even where there are established democratic processes, rule-bound and accountable government as tenets of democracy are not prominent features of political development in these countries, and they do not underpin current political trends in the region (Croissant and Hellman, 2020; Emerson, 2013). Prevailing elite bargains have a weak attachment to rule of law and rights protection. Protest politics, social unrest or political opposition to rights abuses or social injustices have not consistently involved social mobilisation in pursuit of greater democracy. Where this has taken place, for the most part it has not

---

<sup>2</sup> It is important to underline the significant variations in the levels of freedom, coercive state practices, service delivery and civic space. Thailand – despite political instability over nine decades – ranks better than Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos in terms of democracy indicators (drawing on Freedom House scores) and effective stateness (drawing on World Bank governance scores) (Emerson, 2013: 23).

resulted in substantive political change. For instance, mobilisation and protest politics in Thailand in pursuit of democracy have been met with a heavy-handed response, drawing on the coercive capacity of the state (Chambers, 2020). Myanmar has returned to full authoritarian rule. More generally, limited civic space further constrains the prospects of social mobilisation in the region. Human rights – including social and economic rights as well as civil and political rights – are poorly grounded in either discursive imaginaries or realities of state–society relations across the region. This has direct consequences for labour conditions, and for the prospects of rights and the protection of labour migrants.

At the same time, **rule *by* law in different ways is important in the region** in countries of origin as well as destination countries (Deinla, 2023). Law and order is associated with public authority and also connected to traditions of hierarchical orders – whether in communist (Laos and Vietnam) or capitalist (Thailand) histories. Providing law and order, and to varying degrees, effective governance (including public services) and economic growth, have featured more strongly in some of the countries – for instance, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. This, it has been argued, has contributed to a degree of tolerance towards weak accountability mechanisms and reduced civic space (Chambers, 2020; Emerson, 2013). In Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, governance has been less effective, but political controls have remained strong, resulting in reduced space for civil and political mobilisation, and weak accountability. Indonesia and the Philippines are the most democratic in terms of a sustained history of electoral competition and alternation in power but political patronage and clientelism remain a challenge (Emerson, 2013).

In Vietnam, the *Đổi Mới* (open door) reforms of the mid-1980s shifted the country from a closed and centrally controlled economy to increased foreign investment in order to encourage economic growth, as this was seen as the foundation for national security (Tuan, 2009). While the economy was opened, the state remained tightly controlled. Independent candidates are still mostly banned from running in elections, and there are restrictions on freedom of expression and association, with religious freedom and civil society activism severely restricted, and social media and the internet tightly controlled (Freedom House, 2022). While in some countries a centrally controlled government has been justified as the basis for economic growth and development, Fforde and Homutova (2017) underline the effective capacity of domestic security forces to project power and authority and contain public discontent. The social contract is nascent in Vietnam and the provision of services is inadequate (Fforde and Homutova, 2017). Corruption remains a

persistent problem, although the current government has made efforts to address corruption at high levels.<sup>3</sup>

In Laos, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) introduced the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) in the 1990s, aiming to 'transform... the country from a centrally planned economy reliant on subsistence agriculture to a more market-oriented model of production connected with the wider region' (Huysmans, 2006: 15). The process has been gradual, and the political culture remains centralised and opaque to many outsiders, with the LPRP still the only legal political party. Even with decentralisation policies pursued since 2000, mostly notably under the government's *Sam Sang* (2-Builds) policy, in practice this has not necessarily resulted in greater awareness or action to address local needs (Asian Development Bank, 2009: 21). Thus, while government is in many ways pervasive, there is also a sense that it does not meet the needs of more remote areas and ethnic minorities in particular. Development is still largely state-led and economic liberalisation has not been accompanied by political liberalisation (Creak and Barney, 2018). Civic space in Laos is rated as 'closed', with rights to freedom of expression, association and protection highly constrained, and strict state controls of media and surveillance of society (CIVICUS, 2022a).

In Cambodia, although the constitution envisages a pluralistic, liberal democratic state, the Cambodian People's Party has been the dominant political force since 1979. Governance is built around hierarchical relationships of patronage, loyalty and impunity (Andersen et al., 2019). As a result, there has never been an independent judiciary capable of holding those in position of economic and political power to account, which means that those responsible for human trafficking are very rarely held to account. While the economy has moved towards the 'free market' since the late 1980s, this has contributed to personal enrichment rather than to widespread reduction of poverty (Hughes and Conway, 2003; Gottesman, 2002). When Prime Minister Hun Sen handed over power following the 2023 elections, it was to his son. Similarly, the sons of several other government ministers and leading figures in the CPP also held senior government positions, indicating continuity of the nature of the political settlement, rather than change (Reuters, 2023).

Thailand has experienced political instability for 90 years, with 19 coups since 1932, government change and constitutional reform (20 constitutional texts in this period). For the most part, governing elites have not prioritised accountable democratic governance based on rule of law, rights, or effective checks and balances. In the last 20

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/2476077/vietnam-dismisses-two-deputy-prime-ministers-amid-corruption-probes>

years there have been growing tensions between new forms of civilian politics, a reaffirmation of the military, and a reduction in civic space. At the same time, law and order has been a priority, as has an attachment to an economic development model based on export-led growth. Thailand is the most explicitly capitalist of the countries in the region.

The prevailing political settlement involved shifting coalitions between the military, elites in the state bureaucracy, and the private sector in the context of a constitutional monarchy. The strategic alliances formed across these groups over the decades, while chronically unstable, have shown a capacity to adapt to, and reinforce, a model of economic development that has been deferential to business interests, able to attract investment and centred on export-led growth, from which these groups benefited. In turn, business elites, through money politics, have secured the support and protection of successive governing coalitions (whether civilian or military led), (Wise, 2019; Sen and Tyce, 2017; Rigg, 2016).

The political system has revolved around elite bargains that have benefited from and invested in export-led growth based on low-wage, low-skilled labour, increasingly from other countries. The political weight of private-sector interests, while discursively invoking the merits of competitive market-led (rather than state-led) growth, has sustained a system rooted in a complex web of clientelist, patronage and network politics (Chambers, 2022). Among other factors, this has benefited from migrant workers' labour and migratory situation, which is not effectively regulated and enforced, and is vulnerable to high levels of exploitation and to trafficking in persons.

At the same time, Thailand has an intricate body of anti-trafficking laws, policies and measures signalling the country's commitment to the agenda of reducing trafficking in persons. In addition, certain labour legislation provides some protection to migrant workers regardless of their migration status. Mostly, however, this legal framework is inadequately used to scrutinise the practices of employers, labour conditions, or provide sufficient protection, remedy and compensation to labour migrants who have suffered exploitation and abuse or have been victims of trafficking. Moreover, not all sectors are equally covered by existing laws and policies in relation to labour protections and access to social benefits (Harkins, 2019; UNODC, 2017). In practice, the rights of labour migrants have not counted for much; and in times of economic strain, public antagonism towards migrant workers is easily mobilised, to the detriment of migrant groups.

Institutional and legal change has progressed in the region, and overall, there has been a 'thickening' of anti-trafficking legislation. Moreover, all four countries in the first phase of the study are signatories to the ILO Forced Labour Convention (No.29). But in a context of poor respect for rights, protections for labour migrants

remain weak. For their part, labour migrants distrust complaints or justice mechanisms, or these are inadequate. Labour migrants are wary of the risks of deportation if they resort to officialdom. Where they do have options to improve their situation, in order to maintain an income, they are more likely to change employers than to make a complaint, even if they become irregular in the destination country as a result. However, the perception that labour protections are not a priority is strongly felt among labour migrants (see Domingo et al., 2024, forthcoming).

Overall, the political settlements in these four countries – and to some extent in the region more broadly – have an important negative impact on labour migrants' vulnerabilities. The political coalition of elite groups bridging economic, state bureaucracy and military power interests stand to gain from the status quo, contributing to sustaining situations of labour exploitation. In addition, the logic of patronage politics and weak accountability creates space for complicity and/or corruption. This is both enabled by, and perpetuates, weak rule of law, rights and accountable governance. This means that the social contract is weak, governments are not primarily focused on meeting citizens' needs, and even less so those of labour migrants and victims of trafficking.

## 4 Social norms, rights and responsibilities

In the four countries on which this brief is focused, the elite bargains which have benefited from sustained labour migration flows, in the context of weak mechanisms of accountability, and which have no commitment to migrant workers' welfare, are able to draw on socio-normative narratives that tend to inhibit the political and social development of rights-based culture and practices. Applying a victim-centred lens, this becomes especially evident in the experience of labour migrants, both along the migration journey, and in the exploitative labour conditions in labour-intensive sectors where they end up.

In this section, we reflect on the relative weight of socio-normative histories and cultural conceptions of the public good by which the collective is prioritised over the individual in the region. This – and how these narratives might be used by vested interests – has implications for how conceptions of rights, responsibilities, duties to the family, the community and to systems of authority shape social and political interaction, and in turn contribute to ongoing practices of abuse and exploitation of migrant workers.

It is important to avoid making simplistic culturalist and deterministic explanations based on a static perception of tradition and custom (Croissant and Hellman, 2020; Diamond, 2013). Moreover, in all four countries – in different ways – there is a complex layering of tradition and custom combined with the impact of rapid economic development and insertion in global supply chains and international trade systems. Socio-normative change occurs over time and across generations regarding beliefs and ideas about justice, the value of human rights (political and civil as well as social and economic rights) as a way to check wrongs that result from different development pathways – such as those experienced by labour migrants. Generational change matters – as expressed in pro-democracy youth movements in Thailand – and international norms are also meaningful, including where there is resistance to global norms on rights and justice.

This does not mean, however, that there is any clearly progressive trajectory towards strengthening human rights and rule of law in the region – either in political discourse, in the nature of state–society relations or in the practice of informal norms and practices that

dictates social, political and economic interactions. Social orders that privilege hierarchy and order and in which political and social loyalties are based on personal and familial networks and favours are common in the four countries (Croissant and Hellman, 2020; Rigg, 2016). The individual is considered as secondary to the collective interests, but the distributional effect is not in practice an equitable allocation of power and resources in these societies. In addition, as noted, the weakness of rule of law in the region, and privileging security and order over limited government, remain prevalent, and instrumentally important for preserving the interests of elite coalitions (Deinla, 2017).

The hierarchical social orders which feature variously in all four countries fit well with the securitised focus of most anti-trafficking measures (Denney et al., 2022). These are stronger than concerns about the rights of victims of trafficking or labour exploitation, which in turn influences the trend towards decreasing civic space in much of the region. For example, the Cambodia case study highlights that only those who lack contacts and financial resources face a significant risk of being held to account for involvement in criminal activities, and the absence of accountability has been compounded as civic space has been reduced (Alffram and Sok, 2023).

Moreover, both at national and subnational levels, the discourse of hierarchy, tradition and custom suits those interests that benefit from low-paid labour migration, both in countries of origin and in destination countries. The political appropriation by elite groups of narratives that privilege the collective over the individual to protect their own interests, or idealising tradition as a way to counter 'imported ideas of rights and democracy', effectively weaken the possibility of accountability and also serve legitimisation purposes. In a global context of democratic backsliding, this poses important challenges to the objective of advancing rights-based approaches to addressing labour exploitation and trafficking in persons.

In Laos, a range of state-led development policies have routinely prioritised 'the nation' and its development over individual rights. This can be seen, for instance, in economic policies such as large-scale infrastructural development, establishment of SEZs, land and forest allocation, village consolidation, and the eradication of opium and swidden agricultural practices,<sup>4</sup> which have variously interrupted the livelihoods of many Laotians (Barney and Souksakoun, 2021: 95; Sunam, Barney and McCarthy, 2021; Asian Development Bank, 2009: 16; 21). These policies often involved re-drawing maps and forcing people off their land to make way for national development projects. An study published by the Asian Development Bank found that villages that were not affected by policies of forced relocations or village consolidations tended not to migrate and that those villages most affected by relocation were more likely to do so (Asian

---

<sup>4</sup> Swidden agriculture involves clearing land ('slash and burn') for rotational farming.

Development Bank, 2009: 33). Experiences of trafficking were also noted as more common for labour migrants that came from relocated villages (Asian Development Bank, 2009: 5).

The economic value of labour exploitation means that there are poor incentives to support the opportunities for migrant workers' voice and agency. In countries of origin in particular, civic space is heavily controlled, with harsh penalties for activists who seek to challenge the status quo. For example, in Vietnam, activists that have been critical of the government have faced restrictions on their freedom of movement, and have been targeted by tax-evasion laws (CIVICUS, 2022b). Restricting civil society, moreover, limits the availability of information on human trafficking and labour exploitation, and limits scrutiny of government efforts. Many countries experience deficits in the criminal justice response to human trafficking, and in the protection of labour rights. In practice, this results in labour migrants bearing the brunt of inadequate policies.

In Thailand, the authority of the political order has several sources of legitimation. It draws on the gains of export-led development and associated rapid growth. The system also invokes narratives of nationhood that draw on traditions of the value of community over individual, and a hierarchical social order where (citizens') loyalty is conferred to higher authority in exchange for protection and order, as the premise for governance. In practice, state–society relations at national and local levels revolve around patronage politics where personal ties and networks are at the core of patron–client relations. These remain important. This helps to mask the complex – if fragmented – web of interests that benefit from the practices of impunity and capture of different law-enforcement and justice mechanisms, regulatory processes and state agencies that are part of the anti-trafficking and migration systems, as well as private-sector interests (Wise, 2019; UNODC, 2017; Rigg, 2016). Moreover, as a country of destination, public officials and society more generally are less concerned with the rights and fate of labour migrants; and for irregular migrants, abuses can be justified as a matter of law and order.

At the regional level, the emphasis on economic development over liberal democracy and human rights in the region prompted the pronouncement of 'Asian Values', first by former President Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, which was supported by many other Asian states. It has been argued that these Asian values have largely been 'deployed to protect authoritarian governments which aim to limit the rights and liberty of people, especially their political rights' (Hoang and Giao, 2018: 306). From this perspective, 'western ideals of individual rights, including political and civil rights, have been seen as toxic to an ideology that prioritises economic development, collectivism and political stability' (Hoang and Giao, 2018: 307). Again, culturalist explanations need to be qualified, and much has changed since the pronouncement of Asian Values. ASEAN in

particular, as an increasingly robust regional organisation, has emphasised a stronger commitment to cooperation on issues including human rights, while also maintaining respect for the principles of non-interference and state sovereignty (what is sometimes referred to as the 'ASEAN Way'). Asian Values and the ASEAN Way continue to influence regional political settlements to differing degrees, although these are also dynamic and changing (see also Denney et al., 2023, forthcoming).

Thus, there is significant social tolerance in the region for limited civic space and weak democratic accountability, and rights protection coexists with elites' politically instrumentalised recourse to narratives of law and order, tradition and hierarchical social orders that privilege the community over the individual. This serves to mask the disregard for the rights of labour migrants, or indeed victims of trafficking – as well as of migrant populations in countries of destination – and very limited concern for their welfare.

## 5 Labour migrants' capacity for agency

The political economy features described in section 3 go a long way towards explaining the 'stickiness' of practices of labour exploitation and trafficking in persons in the ASEAN region, and the related vulnerabilities experienced by labour migrants from countries of origin travelling to and in destination countries. The capacity for agency is curtailed by the structural weight of unequal power dynamics that shape the political economy of labour migration in the region. This is true at every stage of labour migration (see Alffram et al., 2023; Denney et al., 2023; Domingo et al., 2024; Jespersen et al., 2023a).

The fact that coercion, deception and physical force may not characterise many (or even most) labour migrants' experiences does not diminish the severity of conditions of abuse and exploitation they encounter throughout their migration and in the workplace in destination countries. Labour migrants' acceptance of working in exploitative conditions does not justify labour exploitation, but rather reflects broader political economy factors of global trade, supply chains and consumption patterns combined with regional, national and subnational political, economic and socio-normative histories.

This all contributes to the ongoing risks that labour migrants face both in countries of origin and in destination countries as they navigate perilous migration journeys and make strategic choices along the way to mitigate these risks (Jespersen et al., 2023a). Vulnerabilities associated with these risks include, among other issues, economic precarity in countries of origin, insufficient information about risks and dangers on the migration journey, language barriers, vulnerability to possible deception and abuse by recruitment actors and informal brokers, intimidation by officials, threat of deportation and exploitation by employers, and the invisibility of the plight of labour exploitation in some sectors, such as fishing or domestic work. These vulnerabilities are rooted in and exacerbated by the political economy conditions noted earlier.

In this context, **the key question is how to identify entry-points which can contribute to addressing these power imbalances, while remaining realistic about what change is possible. It is critical not to undervalue labour migrants' agency in making choices and in navigating and negotiating both formal and informal rules and practices** (Domingo et al., 2024, forthcoming;

Derks, 2013). Migrant workers are to some extent able – individually and collectively – to mobilise resources and capabilities to mitigate the vulnerabilities that they may experience. They are adept at navigating the daily political constraints of their environment. The research conducted for this project has signalled some opportunities for investing in migrant workers’ agency and capabilities, and in wider strategic action and norm change at multiple levels which can help to strengthen protective capacities and counter the weight of the regional and national political economy dynamics that disadvantage migrant workers. These include some of the following.

**There is space for identifying and investing in labour migrants’ capabilities to be better informed and equipped to engage with the risks of labour exploitation, and to navigate the formal and informal rules of migration and access to paid work that they encounter at different stages. At the national and subnational levels this includes working with civil society organisations (CSOs) and migrant networks that work to provide different forms of support along labour migrants’ journey.** These include information and advice on travel routes, on the formal and informal rules on migration; and, in destination countries, on rights and social benefits to which they may have access – regardless of their migration status – such as legal advice, protection and shelters. NGOs and CSOs have diverse objectives, functions, and sectoral focus. Organisations like the Migrant Workers Resources Centres (MRCs) operate, or have operated, in several countries in the region (Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam). These do not all offer the same services or work in the same way. Services may include safe migration advice and information for migrants and their families, legal advice and complaints support, counselling, support for safe return, counselling and reintegration in countries of origin (International Labour Organization, 2013). MRCs sometimes work through partnerships that bring together government agencies, trade unions and CSOs, but this varies across countries and sectors (International Labour Organization, 2013; see also International Labour Organisation, 2021b). Trade unions and union-like organisations, such as the Migrant Workers Resource Network (MWRN), is also a source of support. The MRWN is a membership-based organisation, established in 2009, initially to work with migrants from Myanmar mainly in Thailand, but now also providing support to victims of labour exploitation from Laos and Cambodia (ILRF, 2020). Their services include raising awareness of rights and services to which workers are entitled and providing support with access to justice and engagement with employers and officials.

**Informal migrant workers networks are very important**, as noted in all four country studies for this research. They provide key information and advice on the *informal* aspects of travel to destination countries that are critical to improving the safety of migrant workers’ journey and relating to working conditions in specific sectors. This includes, for instance, information on safe travel tactics, travelling in

groups, and where to find safe accommodation. This less visible aspect of communication, information and support provided by these informal networks remains hugely under-researched. From the research undertaken for this project, the specific features of these informal networks are also likely to vary significantly across sectors, nationalities of labour migrants and territory, as does how they operate in specific countries of origin and destination countries.

**Civil society activism working at different levels – subnational, national, regional and global – is crucial to revealing the often invisible conditions of exploitation and abuse that victims of trafficking and labour exploitation experience.** Activities include advocacy and awareness-raising work on the multiple forms of labour exploitation, abuse and risks of trafficking in persons across sectors that labour migrants experience. This work should also involve aiming to change attitudes in destination countries towards migrant populations. The invisibility of their working conditions, their isolation, and the huge power inequalities that they experience with employers or officialdom, contribute to silencing them, and impeding their capacity for action. Advocacy and activism should continue to work across the global supply chain, such as informing consumers and seeking regulatory and legal change in consumer countries.

**Norm change and reforming legal and policy frameworks is valuable both at the national and regional level.** The implementation flaws are not only or primarily a feature of a gap in capacity, but are associated precisely with the structural obstacles noted above. Implementation gaps reflect resistance to changes in law and policy that advance commitments on holding employers and officials to account for labour exploitation, rights abuses and trafficking. In practice, this resistance across relevant stakeholders in different countries is fragmented. The evidence does not suggest a coordinated process to undermine anti-trafficking measures and addressing labour exploitation. Thus, it appears that the rent-seeking gains along the migrants' journey are fragmented rather than organised. Still, this resistance to new rules that can alter the balance of power between labour migrants and the range of stakeholders that gain from the status quo remains robust.

But changes in norms, regulatory and oversight capacity at the national, regional and global levels, as well as within government, and non-governmental stakeholders, including the private sector, can also create reputational risks for governments, real losses for sector-specific interests, and chip away at the systemic issues that sustain practices of exploitation. Opportunities to work with more reform-minded governments (or parts of government), private-sector actors and industry bodies, and regional initiatives, most notably ASEAN, will all be important in creating space for change. Of course, history tells us that any progressive change may be reversed. The wider global context of democratic backsliding, for instance, does not bode well for a region where civic space is already very limited (and in

some cases diminishing), and political commitment to rule of law and rights protection, as well as to more equitable distribution of power and resources, remain weak.

This calls for realism on what is politically possible. There is, however, also room to make the most of emerging opportunity structures, and to create opportunities for change through 'small bets' that can be strategic. This includes identifying reform champions across different policy spaces and the private sector, and building strategic alliances where these emerge.

## 6 Implications for practice and recommendations

This brief has underlined the persistent structural features of political and economic development that explain ongoing patterns of inequality, exploitation and abuse in the experience of labour migrants across the ASEAN region. These are embedded in robust systems of economic, political and social exchange and in resilient elite networks, able to ensure the persistence of informal rules and practices which secure their interest. Since there will be no quick fixes, these wider political economy features easily drop from policy discussions or practical recommendations. However, omitting them from the analysis means that the root causes of exploitation and abuse risk being overlooked.

Importantly, the research has also indicated that structures are not static, and are subject to change, either progressively, or through moments of disruption (individual or collective agency) and shifting opportunity structures (political, institutional and normative change) at different levels – subnational, national, regional or global.

What does this mean for practitioners concerned with improving the life of labour migrants?

- Programming efforts need to acknowledge how the political economy of the countries in the region sustain the persistent problems of labour exploitation and trafficking.
- Approaches based too heavily on international human rights frameworks are unlikely to gain traction with governments and other elite actors.
- Regionally designed and managed processes are more likely to be effective, such as ASEAN and the COMMIT process, as these are led by the countries in the region.
- Programming would benefit from supporting change in the wider political economy dynamics that sustain the low political priority given to the rights of labour migrants, rather than focusing primarily on the punitive aspect of counter-trafficking efforts. This is long-term work.
- There is an important role for civil society to push for greater protections, although this needs to be done cautiously given the sensitivity to public mobilisation.

**Recommendations** that flow from this:

## **1 Keep a constant focus on political economy dynamics**

- **Invest in knowledge and analysis of the wider political economy of structural inequalities and global supply chains** that are at the root of the problem of trafficking in persons and labour exploitation. This includes identifying the specific interests and incentives-based blockages along labour migrants' journeys, in particular employment in the destination countries, and wider political economy factors that help sustain practices of abuse, trafficking and labour exploitation.
- Invest in **understanding what change is politically possible and realistic**, given political economy constraints. This means research that identifies country-specific and regional opportunities that could inform different entry-points for programming and support. Building this evidence base could help direct resources to activities adapted to context and regional features which can realistically make a difference in nudging power imbalances and incentive structures, while remaining clear-sighted about the wider regional and global political economies of trade relations and supply chains. This should include privileging local expertise both on political economy conditions and on the country-specific patterns of trafficking and labour exploitation.

## **2 Work with change that is politically possible**

- **Support legal and policy change** that contributes to normative strengthening that is relevant to addressing the vulnerabilities of labour migrants at the different stages of their journey, including destination countries where labour exploitation takes place. This includes working beyond anti-trafficking criminal justice, to engage more proactively with victim-centred prevention and protection measures, and to work with labour, justice and administrative channels through which to obtain remedy or compensation for labour migrants.
- **Support strategic dialogue, cooperation and coalition building across different stakeholders** including different stakeholders across government, international organisations, the private sector and CSOs, at the national and regional levels, to find common ground and realistic change objectives. In particular, work with more reform-minded elements (positive outliers) to expand good practice.
- **Continue to work through regional bodies**, notably ASEAN, to promote greater regional cooperation and to build on advances in human rights-focused work. This is an

indispensable forum for sharing learning and good practices and influencing wider regional narratives.

### **3) Invest in understanding the perspective of migrant workers and victims of trafficking**

- **Support civil society engagement with informal networks of labour migrants in order to better understand their perspective**, choices and preferences for improving their safety and wellbeing.
- **Ensure that the perspectives and lived experiences of labour migrants inform work at subnational, national and regional levels**, better connecting efforts at these levels to make a real difference in the lives of vulnerable migrants.
- Support civil society advocacy and **awareness raising on the extent of abuse and labour exploitation at the global level to create reputational risks and sector losses**, in order to alter some of the power imbalances at the sites of labour exploitation.
- **Invest in the protective response capacity of civil society regarding victims of trafficking and labour migrants at risk of exploitation**. This includes investing in awareness raising and information sharing regarding the full spectrum of vulnerabilities encountered by victims of trafficking and labour migrants.

# References

- Abueish, T. (2023) 'Kuwait turns to Ethiopian domestic workers amid rift with Philippines over entry ban', *Alarabiya News*, 6 June (<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2023/06/06/Kuwait-turns-to-Ethiopian-domestic-workers-amid-rift-with-Philippines-over-entry-ban>).
- Alffram, H. and Sok, L. (2023) 'Labour migrants' vulnerability to human trafficking and labour exploitation in Southeast Asia: an analysis of Cambodia'. London: ODI and ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking (<https://odi.org/en/publications/labour-migrants-vulnerability-to-human-trafficking-and-labour-exploitation-in-southeast-asia-an-analysis-of-cambodia/>).
- Alffram, H., Denney, L., Domingo, P. and Jespersen, S. (2023) 'Rethinking labour recruitment to reduce exploitation and trafficking of migrants'. ODI Thematic brief. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/political-economy-of-labour-exploitation-and-trafficking-in-persons-in-southeast-asia/>).
- Andersen, H., Larsson, K.-A. and Öjendal, J. (2019) *Supporting state-building for democratization? A study of 20 years of Swedish democracy aid to Cambodia*. EBA Report 2019:03. The Expert Group for Aid Studies (EBA), Sweden.
- Anh, D. N. (2008) 'Labour migration from Vietnam: issues of policy and practice'. ILO Asian Regional Programme on Governance of Labour Migration. Working Paper No. 4. Bangkok: International Labour Organization Regional Office.
- ASEAN-ACT (2023) 'ASEAN TIP Data' (<https://aseanactpartnershiphub.com/asean-tip-data/>).
- Asian Development Bank (ADB) (2009) *Broken lives: trafficking in human beings in the Lao People's Democratic Republic*. Manila: ADB.
- Baker, C. and Phongpaichit, P. (2014) *A history of Thailand*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barney, K. and Souksakoun, K. (2021) 'Credit crunch: Chinese infrastructure lending and Lao sovereign debt', *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 8: 94-113.
- Chambers, P. (2020) 'Democratization interrupted: the parallel state and the demise of democracy in Thailand', in A. Croissant and H. Hellman, H (eds.), (2020) *Stateness and democracy in East Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- CIVICUS (2022a) "'Closed" civic space shows Laos not taking annual human rights dialogues seriously' (<https://monitor.civicus.org/country/laos/>).
- CIVICUS (2022b) 'Vietnamese activists face tax evasion charges, movement restrictions and increasing censorship' (<https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2022/05/17/vietnamese-activists-face-tax-evasion-charges-movement-restrictions-and-increasing-censorship/>).
- Creak, S. and K. Barney (2018) 'Conceptualising Party-State Governance and Rule in Laos,' *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48(5): 693-716.
- Croissant, A and Hellman, H (eds) (2020) *Stateness and democracy in East Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Croissant, A and Hellman, H (eds.) (2020) *Stateness and democracy in East Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Deinla, I. (2017). *The development of the rule of law in ASEAN: the state and regional integration*. Cambridge University Press.
- Denney, L. and Xayamoungkhoun, S. (2023) 'Labour migrants' vulnerability to human trafficking and labour exploitation in Southeast Asia: an analysis of

- Laos'. ODI Country study. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/political-economy-of-labour-exploitation-and-trafficking-in-persons-in-southeast-asia/>).
- Denney, L., Alffram, H., Domingo, P. and Jespersen, S. (2023) 'ASEAN action on labour migration and trafficking in persons: Constraints and Opportunities.' ODI Thematic brief. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/politicaconomy-of-labour-exploitation-and-trafficking-in-persons-in-southeast-asia/>).
- Denney, L., Alffram, H., Domingo, P. and Jespersen, S. (2023) 'Addressing exploitation of labour migrants in Southeast Asia: beyond a counter-trafficking criminal justice response'. ODI Thematic brief. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/politicaconomy-of-labour-exploitation-and-trafficking-in-persons-in-southeast-asia/>).
- Derks, A. (2013) 'Human rights and (im)mobility: migrants and the state in Thailand', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 28(2):216-40 (<https://doi.org/10.1355/SJ28-2B>).
- Diamond, L., Plattner, M and Chu, Yun-han, (eds), (2013), *Democracy in East Asia : a new century*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press
- Diamond, L. (2013) 'Introduction' in Diamond, L, Plattner, M and Chu, Yun-han, (eds), *Democracy in East Asia : a new century*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press
- Domingo, P. Alffram, H., Denney and Jespersen, S. (2024, forthcoming) 'Legal voice and agency among labour migrant and victims of trafficking in persons in South East Asia' London: ODI and ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking
- Domingo, P. and Siripatthanakosol, K. (2023) 'Labour migrants' vulnerability to human trafficking and labour exploitation in Southeast Asia: an analysis of Thailand'. London: ODI and ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking (<https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/politicaconomy-of-labour-exploitation-and-trafficking-in-persons-in-southeast-asia/>).
- Emerson, D. (2013) 'Minding the gap', in L. Diamond, M. Plattner and Y.-h Chu (eds.), *Democracy in East Asia: a new century*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press
- Farrelly, N. (2012) 'Exploitation and escape: journeys across the Thailand-Burma frontier', in M. Ford, L. Lyons, and W. van Schendel (eds.), *Labour migration and human trafficking in Southeast Asia: critical perspectives*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Farrelly, N. (2013) 'Why democracy struggles: Thailand's elite coup culture', *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 67(3): 281-296 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2013.788123>).
- Fforde, A. and Homutova, L. (2017) 'Political authority in Vietnam: is the Vietnamese Communist Party a paper leviathan?', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 36(3):91-118.
- Freedom House (2021) 'Freedom in the World 2021: Laos' (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/laos/freedom-world/2021>).
- Gottesman, E. (2002) *Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge: inside the politics of nation building*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Harkins, B. (ed.) (2019) *Thailand Migration Report*. Bangkok: United Nations Thematic Working Group on Migration in Thailand.
- Hill, H. (1997) 'Rapid industrialisation in ASEAN: some analytical and policy lessons', *Agenda: A Journal of Policy Analysis and Reform* 4(4): 419-432.
- Hoang, L. A. (2020) 'Debt and (un)freedoms: the case of transnational labour migration from Vietnam', *Geoforum* 116: 33-41.
- Hughes, C. and Conway, T. (2003) 'Understanding pro-poor political change: the policy process, Cambodia (second draft, August 2003). London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Huong, Ngo T.M. and Giao, V.C. (2018) 'Asian values and human rights: a Vietnamese perspective', *Journal of Southeast Asian Human Rights* 2(1): 302-322.

- ILRF (2020), 'TIME FOR A SEA CHANGE Why union rights for migrant workers are needed to prevent forced labor in the Thai seafood industry', Washington DC: International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF)
- International Labour Organisation (2013) 'Migrant Worker Resource Centres (MRCs) and the provision of support services', Geneva: ILO.
- International Labour Organisation (2021) Implementation of recommendations from the 3rd to 12th ASEAN Forums on Migrant Labour (AFML): Progress review background paper for the 13th AFML. Geneva: ILO.
- International Labour Organization (2021) 'TRIANGLE in ASEAN Quarterly Briefing Note: Vietnam July-December 2021'. Geneva: ILO.
- Ishizuka, F. (2013) 'International labor migration in vietnam and the impact of receiving countries' policies'. IDE Discussion Paper No. 414. Chiba: IDE JETRO.
- Jespersion, S., Alffram, H., Denney, L. and Domingo, P. (2022) 'Labour migration in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam: migrants' vulnerabilities and capacities across the labour migration cycle'. ODI Thematic brief. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/about/ourwork/political-economy-of-labour-exploitation-and-trafficking-in-persons-in-southeast-asia/>).
- Jespersion, S., Alffram, H., Denney, L. and Domingo, P. (2023a) 'Trafficking for Forced Criminality: The Rise of Exploitation in Scam Centres in Southeast Asia' ODI Thematic brief. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/about/ourwork/political-economy-of-labour-exploitation-and-trafficking-in-persons-in-southeast-asia/>).
- Jespersion, S., Ngo, T.M.H. and Vu, C.G. (2023b) 'Labour migrants' vulnerability to human trafficking and labour exploitation in Southeast Asia: an analysis of Vietnam'. ODI Country study. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/political-economy-of-labour-exploitation-and-trafficking-in-persons-in-southeast-asia/>).
- Kingdom of Cambodia (2018) Policy on Labour Migration for Cambodia 2019-2023. Phnom Penh.
- Lao Statistics Bureau and the World Bank (2020) *Poverty Profile in Lao PDR and Poverty Assessment 2020: catching up and falling behind*. Vientiane: Lao Statistics Bureau and World Bank.
- McCargo, D. (2020) *Fighting for virtue: justice and politics in Thailand*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.
- OECD/ILO (2017), How Immigrants Contribute to Thailand's Economy, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264287747-en>
- Reuters (2023) 'New Cambodian cabinet to feature children of the powerful', 11 August.
- Rigg, J. (2016) *Challenging Southeast Asian development: the shadows of success*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Scott, J. (1972). Patron-Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia. *American Political Science Review*, 66(1), 91-113
- Sen, K. and Tyce, M. (2017) 'The politics of structural (de)transformation: the unravelling of Malaysia and Thailand's dualistic deals strategies' in Pritchett, L. Sen, K. and Werker, E. (eds), *Deals and development. the political dynamics of growth episodes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Shikavoti, R., Henderson, S. and Withers, M. (2021) 'The migration ban policy cycle: a comparative analysis of restrictions on the emigration of women domestic workers', *Comparative Migration Studies* 9: 36.
- Skrivanakova, K. (2018) 'Defining exploitation in the context of trafficking – what is a crime and what is not', in R. Piotrowicz, C. Rijken and B. Uhl (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of human trafficking*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Sunam, R., Barney, K. and McCarthy, J.F. (2021) 'Transnational labour migration and livelihoods in rural Asia: Tracing patterns of agrarian and forest change', *Geoforum* 118(2021): 1-13.
- Tuan, H. A. (2009) 'Doi Moi and the remaking of Vietnam', *Global Asia* 4(3): 37-41. World Bank (n.d., b) (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=KH>).

UNICEF (n.d.) 'Laos: Adolescence and youth,' Available at:  
<https://www.unicef.org/laos/adolescence-and-youth>, Accessed 22 July 2022.  
UNODC (2017) *Trafficking in Persons from Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar to Thailand*. Bangkok: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.  
Wise, J. (2019) *Thailand: history, politics and the rule of law*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish.