MYANMAR

STRATEGY SUPPORT PROGRAM RESEARCH NOTE 106 MARCH 2024

Migration in Myanmar

Key Findings

- Over 1.5 years (between December 2021 and June 2023) at least 18.5 percent of the population or more than 10 million people migrated: 6.5 million individuals 15 years and older left their households and 3.1 million individuals moved together as a household or family unit.
- Fifty six percent of individuals who migrated cited employment as at least one of their drivers for migration.
- More men left their households to migrate than women. Most individuals migrated for work within Myanmar, though over time more individuals departed to find work abroad.
- In the first half of 2023, 16 percent of households received remittances from at least one member who was residing overseas or in a different state or region.
- Remittances contributed more to the household income of rural residents and the poor and were mostly used towards food purchases. Households receiving remittances had better dietary quality and were less likely to be poor.

Recommended Actions

- Set up programs that facilitate access to credit to reduce the need for migrants or households to take out high-interest loans for migration.
- Develop support programs for communities experiencing high out-migration to enhance individuals' awareness of the associated risks, processes, and job opportunities linked to migration.
- Create centers in high in-migration areas to aid migrants by providing resources, legal assistance, sustenance, shelter, and community support.
- Monitor migration and evaluate the impact of policy changes.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the February 2021 coup, sparked widespread unrest and an economic downturn in Myanmar. The ensuing turmoil, characterized by job losses, financial instability, and soaring inflation, significantly reduced living standards and contributed to a substantial upswing in migration as households and individuals sought refuge from escalating violence and deteriorating economic conditions. As of January 2024, UNHCR (2024) estimated that there were 2.6 million internally displaced persons in Myanmar and 60,500 officially recognized refugees and asylum seekers from Myanmar in other countries. However, this is only part of the migration story. Displacement is not solely due to conflict; individual and households are also relocating in search of employment within Myanmar and abroad. Consequently, these migrants are sending back remittances, which play a crucial role in supporting the welfare of families and communities in Myanmar. This note provides a synthesis of recent findings on individual and household migration as well as on remittances.

Data

The analysis presented in this paper is based on data gathered from two sources: the Myanmar Household Welfare Survey (MHWS) and the Myanmar Migration Assessment (MMA). The MHWS consists of multiple rounds that span from December 2021 to June 2023. The surveys were conducted by phone with over 12,000 households in each round and are representative at the national, rural/urban, and state/region levels. The MMA is a sub-sample of MHWS, comprising of households who either migrated themselves or had a household member migrate between 2013 and 2023. The MMA consists of 4,296 interviews conducted across all states and regions of Myanmar between June and July 2023.

Overview of household and individual migration

Over the year and a half period from December 2021 to June 2023, more than 10 million people moved, representing 18.5 percent of the population. Among them, an estimated 9.5 million individuals moved either within Myanmar or abroad (Table 1). This includes 6.5 million individuals, 15 years and older, who left their households individually and 3.1 million individuals who moved together as a household. In total, this is 17.4 percent of Myanmar's population. However, our survey does not fully capture internal displacement. When factoring in estimates of internally displaced people (IDPs) from UNHCR, over 10 million people (18.5 percent of the population) moved between December 2021 and June 2023. It is important to note that this figure represents additional migration during this period; there were already many migrants residing within Myanmar and abroad prior to December 2021.

Table 1. Estimated total number of migrants between December 2021 to June 2023

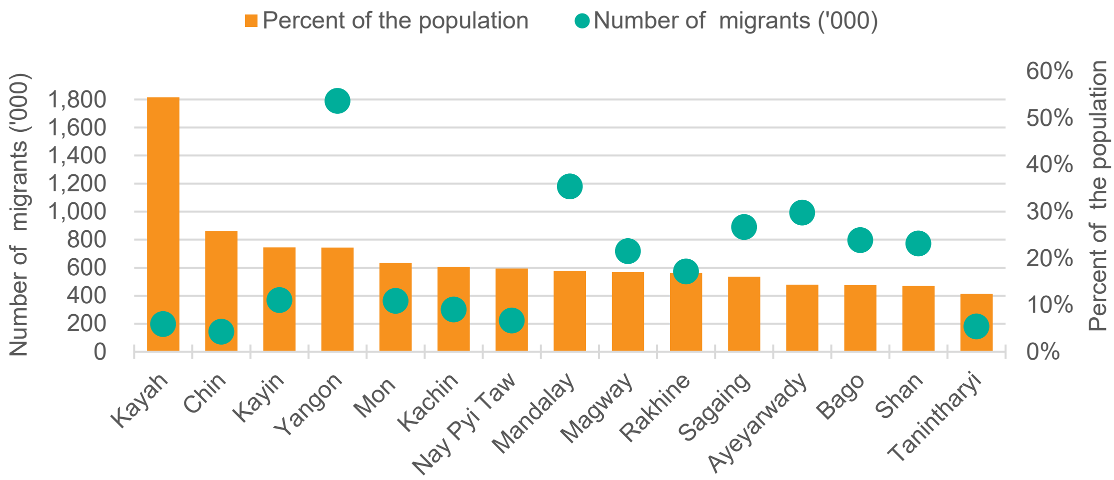
	Number of People	Percent of Population
Individual	6,451,394	11.8
Household	3,067,902	5.6
Total	9,519,296	17.4
Total + UNHCR	10,128,322	18.5

Source: Author's calculations based on MHWS and UNHCR 2023 data.

The largest number of migrants originated from Yangon, the most populous state or region, where nearly 1.8 million people migrated (Figure 1). Following this pattern, Mandalay and Ayeyarwady, the states with the next largest populations, had the subsequent most migrants during the 19-month period.

Kayah had the highest percentage of migrants with nearly 54 percent of the population moving over the period. Entire households moving internally accounted for 71 percent of the migration, while the remaining 29 percent consisted of individuals leaving their households. Following Kayah, Chin and Kayin had the next highest rates of migration, with 26 and 22 percent of the population migrating, respectively. It's worth noting that these states are severely affected by conflict.

Figure 1. Number of migrants between December 2021 and June 2023, by State/Region

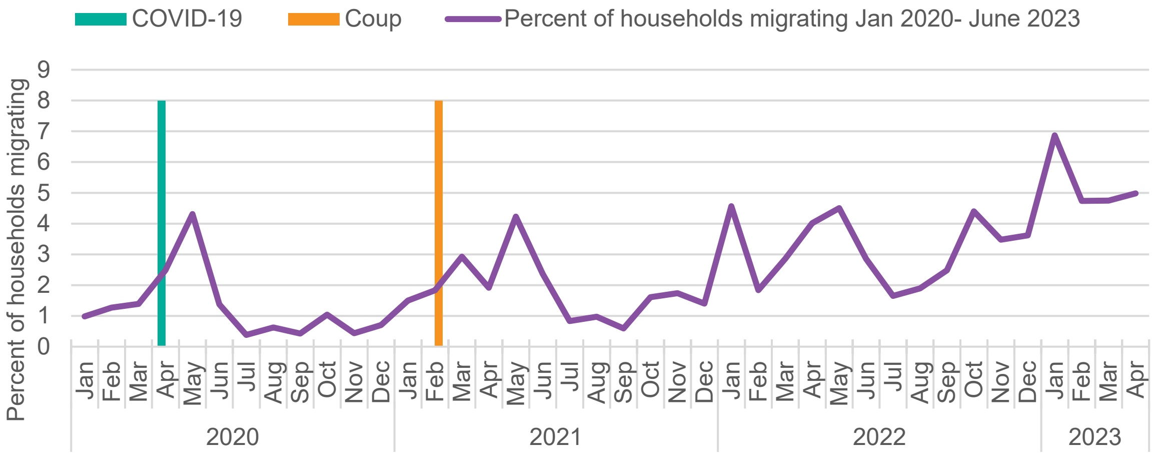


Source: Author's calculations based on MHWS data.

Household migration

Approximately 10 percent of households migrated as a household or family unit between February 2021 to June 2023. The majority of households who internally migrated remained in their state/region or relocated to Yangon. Figure 2 illustrates the monthly percentage of households relocating with Myanmar from January 2020 to June 2023, relative to the total households that migrated during this period. In 2020, the number of migrating households steadily increased, peaking in May 2020, shortly after the onset of COVID-19 lockdowns. Following this peak, there was a sharp decline and the number of migrating households remained low for the remainder of the year. As the stay-at-home orders eased after the Delta variant wave ended, household migrations began to steadily increase, and reached a new high in January 2023, with almost 90,000 households migrating internally.

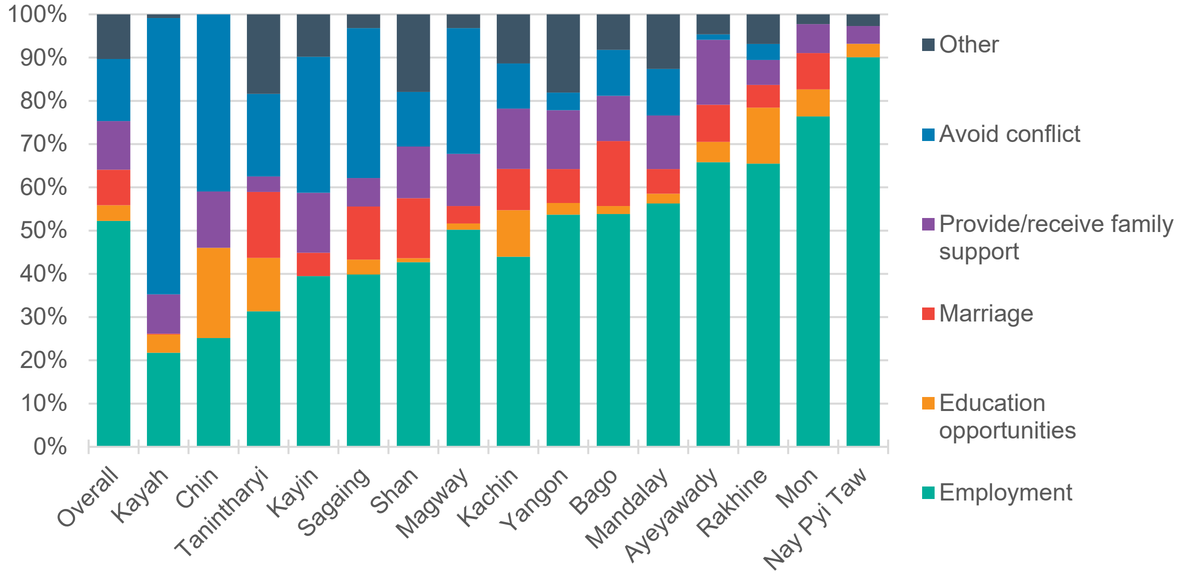
Figure 2. Percentage of households who have moved internally, January 2020-June 2023



Source: Author's calculations based on MHWS data

The primary drivers of household migration include seeking employment (54 percent) and fleeing conflict (15 percent). In state and regions with high conflict, such as Kayah, Chin, and Sagaing, migrating households relocated to avoid conflict (70, 47, and 37 percent, respectively). Otherwise, employment was the main reason for migration. Migrating households faced several challenges, including struggling to find the money to cover migration costs, travel restrictions, checkpoints, roadblocks, not being able to find reliable transport options, and a lack of housing and/or shelter.

Figure 3. Main drivers for internal household migration, February 2021 to July 2023



Source: Author's calculations based on MHWS data.

Individual migration

Around 20 percent of Myanmar's adult population left their households between December 2021 and June 2023. This translates to 28.5 percent of households that had at least one member migrate during this period. Looking at the pooled sample, 10.5 percent of households had at least one member migrate in the three-month period leading up to each survey round (Table 2). Furthermore, more rural households had individuals leave compared to urban households.

More men migrated than women. From December 2021 to June 2023, 53 percent of migrants were men, while 47 percent were women. A greater number of individuals migrated within Myanmar for employment compared to those who migrated abroad or for other reasons such as education, joining family, or marriage. However, there was a significant increase in the number of individuals leaving for employment overseas between April 2022 and June 2023. Among those who left their households and migrated internally, the majority moved to Yangon, Shan, or Mandalay. Most individuals who migrated abroad chose destinations in Thailand or Malaysia.

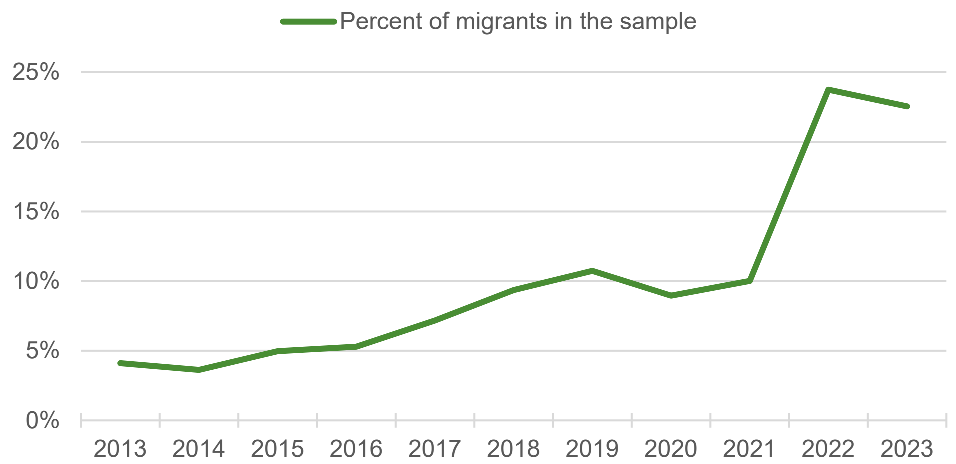
Table 2. Percentage of households with a migrant and their characteristics, December 2021-June 2023

	Dec 2021-Jun 2022	Apr 2022-Aug 2022	Jul 2022-Dec 2022	Oct 2022-June 2023	Pooled
Percent of households with a migrant					
National (%)	13.5	8.0	12.8	7.7	10.5
Urban (%)	13.9	6.1	12.0	6.5	9.6
Rural (%)	13.4	8.7	13.0	8.2	10.9
Gender of migrant					
Female (%)	49.1	48.9	48.2	42.8	47.5
Male (%)	50.9	51.1	51.8	57.2	52.5
Reason for migration					
Domestic work (%)		42.7	41.5	44.8	42.8
Overseas work (%)		10.6	15.6	21.5	15.9
Other reason (%)		46.6	42.9	33.7	41.3

Note: Households could select multiple reasons for migration so domestic work, overseas work and other reasons do not add up to 100.
Source: Authors' calculations based on MHWS data.

Individual migration surged after 2021. Migration steadily increased from 2013 to 2019. This increase was marginally interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, although migration rates remained high at approximately 9 percent in 2020 and 10 percent in 2021. However, following the February 2021 coup and the easing of COVID-19 restrictions, the number of migrants increased dramatically to 24 percent in 2022. By 2023, migration had already reached 23 percent of the sample, even though it only covers the period from January to July. Consequently, it's highly likely that individual migration in 2023 will surpass levels seen in 2022.

Figure 4. Percentage of individuals who migrated between 2013 and July 2023 and year of migration



Source: Author's calculations based on MMA data

Remittances

Sixteen percent of households received remittances in any three-month period between January and June 2023 (Table 4). This includes 9.7 percent of households who received remittances from domestic migrants and 7.5 percent of households who received remittances from migrants abroad. Overall, 57 percent of migrants sent money back to their households, with a higher percentage of overseas migrants sending money than domestic migrants.

Remittances constituted 39 percent of household income for remittance-receiving households. On average, domestic remittance flows were 127,559 MMK per month (about 61 USD), while foreign remittance flows were significantly higher at 395,835 MMK per month (about 188 USD).

Table 4. Percentage of households receiving remittances in any three-month period, January-June 2022 and January-June 2023

	January-June 2022			January-June 2023		
	National	Rural	Urban	National	Rural	Urban
Remittances all (%)	16.1	16.7	14.7	16.4	17.1	14.7
Remittances domestic (%)	11.3	11.5	10.8	9.7	9.8	9.4
Remittances abroad (%)	5.5	5.9	4.7	7.5	8.1	6.0

Source: Author's calculations based on MHWS data.

Seventy-two percent of households used a portion of their remittances for everyday food expenses in 2023 (Table 4). Additionally, 40 percent of households used their remittances on non-food expenses and 32 percent on health expenditures. A small number of households chose to invest in their house, land, business, or in acquiring productive or non-productive assets.

Income poor households are significantly more likely to spend their remittances on everyday food expenses, non-food expenses, and education expenses compared to non-income poor households. Meanwhile, non-income poor households are more likely to spend remittances on improving their houses, augmenting their savings, purchasing land, buying non-productive assets or investing in their non-farm businesses.

Table 4. Categories of remittance spending (percentage), overall for 2023 and income poor and non-poor for 2019-2023

	Overall	Income poor	Non-poor
	2023	2019-2023	
Food expenses	72	78	73
Non-food expenses	40	44	39
Health expenses	32	36	35
Education expenses	18	19	16
Farm	16	15	18
Improving house	6	6	9
Savings	5	3	8

Source: Authors' calculations based on MHWS data.

Remittances play a crucial role in improving household welfare. There is a significant and positive association between receiving remittances and a higher Food Consumption Score (FCS). Households receiving remittances from abroad and within Myanmar had a 2.3 point and 1.8 point increase in their FCS, respectively. Moreover, households receiving remittances had higher Minimum Dietary Diversity Scores and were less likely to be income poor, particularly those receiving remittances from abroad.

Conclusion

Massive migration has occurred within and outside of Myanmar in the last three years. Our estimates indicate that at least 18.5 percent of the population migrated between December 2021 and June 2023, primarily for employment. Among individuals who migrated in this period, 56 percent cited employment as one of their reasons for migrating.

There seems to be a huge gap in service provision for migration. While 87 percent of respondents felt that migration-related information and training is important to facilitate safe and successful migration, only one percent of respondents reported that someone in their household had contacted or visited an NGO to discuss migration. Furthermore, 65 percent of respondents indicated that they would attend a training course on migration. As migration continues to rise, it will be crucial for policymakers to closely monitor who is migrating, their motivations, and their destinations. This information will be essential for designing effective programs that cater to the diverse needs of migrants, migrating households, and households of migrants.

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