

# Policy Coherence and Migration Complexity



Singapore waterfront, 2019 (Photo: A.Nicol)

## A review of migration policy literature in Southeast Asia

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### Key messages from the review:

- Migration and complex policy dynamics in Southeast Asia increasingly involve the interplay of policy changes, socio-economic transformations and a range of growing environmental and climate factors.
- In light of this situation, policy coherence is increasingly important to ensure sustainable development outcomes are achieved, including by regularizing migration pathways, improving alignment between skills and needs, minimizing migrant exploitation, and coming to a regional agreement on refugees.
- At present, Southeast Asia experiences many types of migration; in some cases, climate and environmental changes are intensifying and altering these patterns.
- Regional and national policies currently lack both vertical and horizontal coherence, hindering effective migration management and reducing the opportunities for positive reinforcement across sectors.
- A stronger understanding of short- and long-term factors shaping migration dynamics is essential for identifying policy coherence strategies and developing policies in line with sustainable development goals, climate resilience-building, and inclusive economic transformation.

## Introduction

Based on a review of the literature, this policy brief offers guidance towards improved policy coherence for migration in Southeast Asia (SEA) at both regional and national levels through: 1) assessing the interplay between policies, mobility patterns, and environmental and climatic changes; and 2) identifying areas of policy incoherence that hamper progress towards safe, orderly, and regular migration in SEA.

In 2020, approximately 23.6 million people in SEA resided outside their home countries. Of these around 7.1 million remained within the SEA sub-region (UN DESA, 2020). Major types of migrants included labor, marriage, education, retirees, refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Mohammad Khamsya, 2016). Internal migrants could be up to three times the number of international migrants, but are much more difficult to track (UNESCO, 2018). Women constitute a significant proportion of international migrants. In Thailand, women comprise 61%, while in Malaysia this number is 56.7%, and in Laos it is 55.9% (UN DESA, 2020). They are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking, especially through employment in informal sectors like domestic work and the sex industry (ILO, 2015b; McAdam, 2020). The complexity of visa regimes and legal pathways for migration, combined with the presence of smuggling networks, means approximately one-third of international migrant workers in the region have irregular status (ILO, 2015a; McAdam, 2020). Countries with the highest levels of human trafficking in SEA include Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Philippines (IOM, 2021). SEA also hosts over 290,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, primarily Rohingya from Myanmar (UNHCR, 2020). Vulnerability to environmental disasters, such as earthquakes and tropical storms, is intensifying displacement in the region (IDMC, 2022).

Although economic factors explain most migration flows, the reasons and motives for migration are numerous and varied, as are the patterns of mobility. Migrants may decide to move for a complex set of reasons, including improved employment opportunities, higher wages, higher levels of political or social security, and generally better circumstances for an improved quality of life (Kelly, 2011; Hickey et al., 2013; Koh, 2016; Lian et al., 2016; Mohammad Khamsya, 2016). Remittances play a crucial role in regional economies. In the Philippines, for example, in 2022, remittances amounted to 38 billion dollars, accounting for 9.4% of the country's GDP (Chandra, 2023). Individuals may migrate independently or with peers or family and via regular channels or irregular means. Some individuals migrate voluntarily, making independent decisions, while others do so after discussions with, or due to pressure from, family members and others (Chantavanich et al., 2013). Political instability and conflict also play a significant role in driving migration by creating unsafe and untenable living conditions for affected populations. In countries like Myanmar, prolonged armed conflicts, ethnic violence, and political repression force people to flee their homes in search of safety, stability, and better opportunities. These conditions disrupt livelihoods, erode access to essential services, and heighten insecurity, compelling people to migrate, often under hazardous conditions.

The rapidly changing and granular effects of environmental and climate change on the ground means that there is still a lot of uncertainty around their specific impacts on migration (Piguet, 2011). Intensifying environmental and climate change are changing migration dynamics, but caution needs to be applied to "climate migration" or "environmental migration" labels. These narratives can oversimplify the role of environmental or climate change and fuel alarmist rhetoric around "climate refugees". There are rarely single-cause environmental 'push' factors. Environmental and climate factors can influence migration patterns in more complex ways including through reshaping wider economic, political, or social factors, which in turn affect migration dynamics (Bettini, 2019); and migration dynamics can then have their own environmental impacts (Ewing, 2012). This complex of influence and effect is illustrated in Figure 1, below.

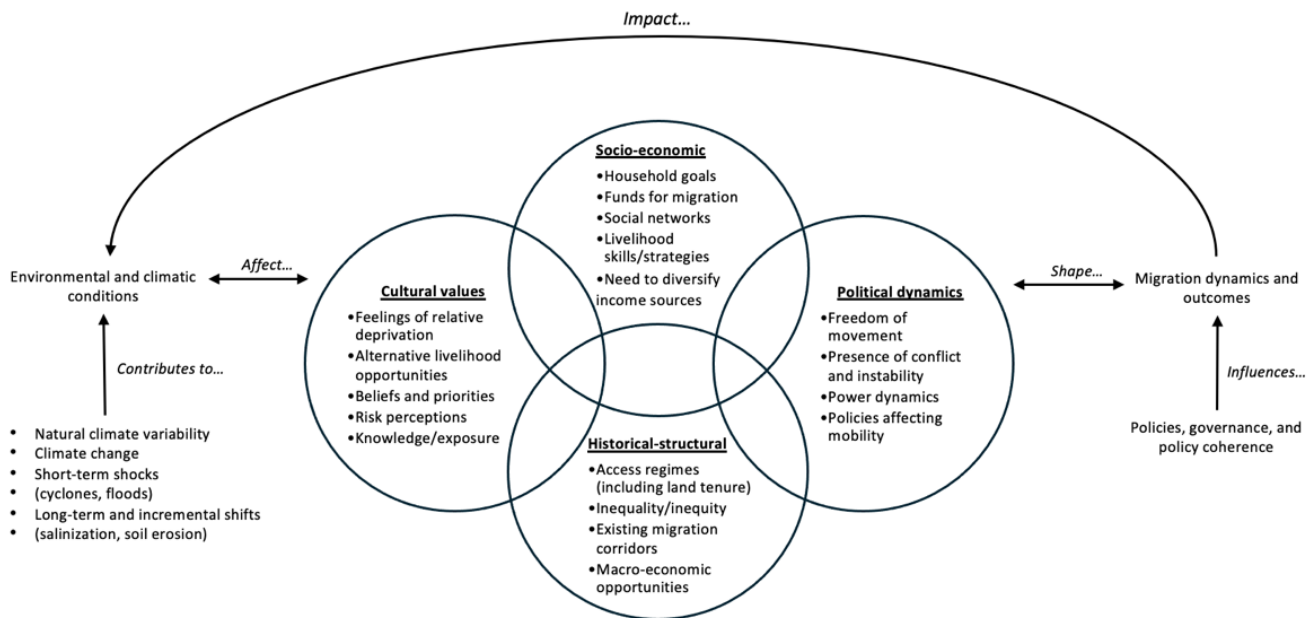


Figure 1. Factors involved in migration dynamics and outcomes (Source: Authors)

## The need to strengthen policy coherence

Multiple institutional environments help shape migration policy in the region. There are three main types of actors and institutions: supranational and regional governance organizations, state entities, and non-state actors. The first group comprises organizations such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), ASEAN, the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement (APTA), and various United Nations (UN) agencies (Tuccio, 2017). The second group includes official government representatives and various institutions, agencies, bureaucracies, and systems (official and unofficial) within the state apparatus. It is important to note that the state itself is not necessarily considered a unified actor; many different state actors can hold divergent or conflicting viewpoints, interests, or agendas on migration, and may even work at cross-purposes or in active contention (Fong and Shibuya, 2020). The third group encompasses migrants, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), migrants' organizations, trade unions, and business and capital interests directly and indirectly involved (Hickey et al., 2013; Fong et al., 2020). Migration itself is an industry, with increasingly complex brokers and agencies playing a major role, especially via the influence of social media. Potential migrants have to navigate a complex network of recruiters, trainers, gate keepers, and bureaucrats, as well as tapping into close social networks and family and friends who have already migrated and are part of the diaspora.

Migration frequently lacks an institutional "home". Governments in SEA are often unable to direct flows, manage risks, and enhance benefits to ensure that migration is as safe, orderly, and regular as possible. Part of the reason for this is that policies at national and regional levels are not coherent with each other. Policy incoherence can lead to inefficiencies, missed opportunities, and unintended (negative) consequences. Incoherence may arise due to competing priorities, lack of coordination between countries, government departments or levels, insufficient consideration of interdependencies, or inadequate communication and consultation. An important step towards policy coherence with other sectors and improved migration management in general is to ensure that national and regional actors and institutions have a clear understanding of how policies affect, and are affected by, migration. Vertical policy coherence ensures consistency between overarching national goals, national policies, and their implementation. Horizontal coherence ensures coherence among different sectors within a country to address issues in a comprehensive way. Policy coherence at the ASEAN regional level would involve harmonizing migration goals among member states, promoting information exchange, and coordinating efforts to manage migration in ways that benefit both sending and receiving countries (King et al., 2012; Zeigermann, 2020).

Managing migration necessitates understanding the role of different policies on migration dynamics and outcomes, and managing migrant flows in an integrated manner (OECD, 2023). While migration has long been a contentious political issue, it is important to not lose sight of the fact that migration has the potential to offer a multitude of benefits to both receiving and sending countries, as well as for migrants themselves. In large part it is a necessary feature of development in any regional context. This policy brief is intended to help countries enhance their understanding, maximize these benefits and minimize risks, offering guidance towards improved policy coherence for migration in SEA at both regional and national levels. It 1) assesses how policy is shaping current migration dynamics, particularly the ways in which environmental and climatic changes are influencing migration decisions and outcomes; and 2) identifies areas of policy incoherence that hamper progress towards safe, orderly, and regular migration.



Figure 1 Construction of China-Laos Railway in 2019 (Photo: A.Nicol)

## Policy effects shaping migration dynamics

This section outlines key trends in migration policy and migration-related development policy arenas and their impact on migration dynamics, both internal and at a regional level. Migration policies are those that specifically seek to regulate migration (Hong and Knoll, 2016), and fall within labor and refugee/asylum policy domains. Migration-related development policies are not specific to migration but affect and are affected by migration (Hong and Knoll, 2016). These include policies around manufacturing and industrialization, hydropower and irrigation infrastructure development, urban planning, agriculture, aquaculture, and fisheries development, land acquisitions and conversions, and disaster management. The construction of the China-Laos Railway in 2019 under the China's Belt and Road Initiative, as shown in Figure 2, is an example of the policies facilitating regional integration and migration to boost the regional economy and tourism.

### Labor migration

- *Supportive Policies in the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia.* These countries have established national frameworks to regulate international migration, facilitating remittance contributions to the economy and ensuring protections for migrants (Opiniano and Ang, 2024; Lian et al., 2016; Miller, 2015; Ma, 2017; Missbach and Palmer, 2018).
- *Inadequate Policies in Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos.* These countries have limited policies to support safe migration, leading to exploitation by migration agencies and networks (Hickey et al., 2013; Fong and Shibuya, 2020).
- *Restrictive Policies in Labor-Receiving Countries.* Destination countries, like Singapore, often have liberal policies for highly-skilled workers but restrictive measures for low-skilled migrants, preventing their integration and protection. Restrictive regimes can push migrants into irregular channels, exacerbating smuggling, trafficking, and corruption (Fong and Shibuya, 2020; Piper and Yamanaka, 2005).
- *Bilateral Agreements and Non-Binding Treaties.* Most SEA states rely on memoranda of understanding and bilateral agreements to manage labor migration, which often provide minimal protection for migrants. Multilateral agreements are non-binding due to significant resistance from destination countries (Kneebone, 2010; Chantavanich et al., 2013; Sta Maria, 2023).

## Refugees and asylum

- *Cross-Border Displacement.* Inadequate national responses can prompt movement across borders. However, no legal mechanism ensures the admission of displaced people across borders during disasters. The Nansen Initiative aims to fill this gap and develop a protection agenda for internationally displaced people due to disasters (ASEAN, 2016; Nansen Initiative, 2014 AIDF, 2017).
- *Lack of Legal Frameworks.* SEA countries lack robust legal frameworks for addressing asylum matters, resulting in inconsistent and ad hoc institutional practices for refugee protection (Missbach and Palmer, 2018). Only Cambodia and the Philippines are parties to the UN Refugee Convention, and Indonesia and Malaysia are not members of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (Pudjiastuti and Wong, 2023; Cheung, 2012; Newland, 2015).

## Manufacturing and industrialization

- *Growth of Manufacturing and Industrialization.* Agricultural processing constitutes the largest segment of industrial growth in SEA. In Thailand, Myanmar, and the Philippines, the textiles industry is significant, while Thailand and Indonesia also have substantial chemical industries. The production of light, labor-intensive goods, including electrical and electronic products, is growing in SEA. Countries with strong manufacturing industries have high labor requirements and attract migrants (Chang and Zach, 2018). Other countries such as Cambodia and Myanmar remain predominantly agricultural economies (Lee et al., 2019).
- *Deindustrialization.* Some countries, such as Malaysia, have begun to face deindustrialization. Deindustrialization is when the proportion of manufacturing in the country's GDP falls before structural transformation has taken place from low to high value-added activities. This has resulted in a decline in real wages for both locals and migrants (Rasiah et al., 2014).
- *Rises in Wages.* Increases in minimum wages in some countries, such as Thailand, have decreased profits for labor-intensive manufacturing industries. As a response, dependence on cheap and irregular migrant labor has increased. When possible, manufacturers have substituted labor with machinery (Narjoko and Putra, 2014; Lee et al., 2019).

## Hydropower and irrigation infrastructure development

- *Hydropower Development in the Mekong Basin.* Hydropower development is influenced by regional geopolitical dynamics, as upstream nations such as China and Laos expand their energy infrastructure. It has raised concerns around environmental sustainability, the equitable distribution of water resources, impacts on downstream countries, and resulting implications for livelihoods (Middleton and Dore, 2015).
- *Migration Resulting from Hydropower Development.* Hydropower development has prompted both out-migration, where local communities are resettled or forced to leave due to changes in access to natural resources, and in-migration, due to labor needs for hydropower infrastructure construction (Texier, 2013).
- *Activities Changing Water Flows.* In addition to hydropower development, water extraction for irrigation and industrial purposes has disrupted the Mekong River's flooding cycles. Farming activities, sand mining, and flood mitigation measures have increased flow velocities, causing riverbank erosion and changing flooding processes (Dun, 2011). Climate change and further hydropower development are expected to have a significant impact on river flow patterns and flood frequencies (Evers and Pathirana, 2018).

## Urban and regional planning

- *Urban Resilience Initiatives.* Cities are implementing flood prevention measures in high-risk areas and improving community preparedness to cope with sea-level rise and environmental degradation (ASEAN, 2018). However, these efforts often prioritize technical solutions that can show quick results but may not address the needs of the most vulnerable communities (Causevic et al., 2021). The phenomenon of "risk redistribution" from wealthier to poorer parts of cities has been observed in the management of floodwaters in Bangkok and Jakarta (Lebel et al., 2013).

- *Urban Migration and Environmental Conditions.* Internal migration trends show significant movement toward urban and peri-urban areas. In cities like Jakarta and Manila, migrants often move to flood-prone areas where lower-cost informal settlements are located. This contributes to riverbank or coastal encroachment and exposes migrants to climate hazards. However, populations in urban areas might be less reliant on natural resources compared to those living in rural areas, limiting their vulnerability (Ewing, 2012; Elmhirst, 2013; Chantavanich et al., 2013). Resource constraints may prevent “trapped populations” from moving to less hazardous areas (Hillmann and Ziegelmayr, 2016).
- *Migration and Urbanization Trends.* Rapid population influxes into cities strain existing infrastructure, services, and urban ecosystems and present challenges for local governments, leading to financial and accessibility issues for urban migrants (ASEAN, 2018). Policies aimed at developing industrial zones outside capital cities seek to redirect population flows to major urban centers (ASEAN, 2022; Hickey, 2013). However, this can lead to unpredictable urban growth, ecological degradation, and tensions between local populations and migrants (ASEAN, 2022; Gullette and Singto, 2017).

### Agricultural, aquaculture, and fisheries development

- *Production Maximization.* The growth of production is often prioritized over the long-term sustainability of natural resources or rural livelihoods. For example, mechanization and monoculture promotion policies that encourage mechanization and monoculture cultivation inadvertently reduce rural employment, pushing out-migration from farming communities. Weak policies on water, soil, and ecosystem management exacerbate environmental degradation, further destabilizing rural livelihoods. Cambodia and Myanmar exhibit limited regulatory frameworks to support sustainable farming and land rights, which increases household vulnerability. Conversely, Vietnam has demonstrated some success in integrating climate-resilient agricultural practices (Duoc Trong et al, 2022), highlighting the importance of coherence between environmental and migration policies.
- *Livelihood Vulnerabilities Lead to Out-Migration.* Transitions in agriculture, aquaculture, and fisheries sectors have involved the relocation of populations and implementation of industrialized production processes. However, policies focusing solely on increasing agricultural/aquaculture/fisheries yields have inadvertently contributed to rural out-migration, as mechanization reduces labor needs and supply gluts decrease product prices (Manivong et al., 2014; ASEAN, 2022).
- *Environmental Degradation and Vulnerability to Climate Change.* Rural populations reliant on natural resources are particularly vulnerable to environmental and climatic change (Morales-Muñoz et al., 2020). Intensified agricultural production can disrupt ecosystems, increase salinization, and reduce soil fertility, undermining livelihoods (Tran, 2019). Declining fish stocks due to overfishing, weak fisheries management, and ecological changes have also reduced employment opportunities and increased household debt (Middleton et al., 2013). Similarly, aquaculture expansion has degraded mangrove-dependent livelihoods (Dun, 2012; Cole et al., 2015).
- *Perceptions of Risks.* Perceptions of environmental change and their impact on migration decisions vary with livelihood strategies. Farmers and fishermen, for example, perceive changes in weather differently from each other (Parsons and Nielsen, 2021). People cite reasons for migration as the lack of alternative off-farm labor opportunities and the need for a higher income due to rising costs of living, including health care and education (Hillmann and Ziegelmayr, 2016; AGRUMIG, 2023).

- *Migration Impact on Origin Communities.* Out-migration impacts demographics in sending communities, as older people and the very young tend to remain, according to a community consultation in Northern Thailand as shown in Figure 3. This has implications for adaptation capacity and agricultural productivity, as fewer young adults are available for household labor during crucial agricultural cycles (Boas et al., 2019; Hauer et al., 2022). The expense of hiring labor to replace family labor can make farming unviable, leading to increased vulnerability and dependence on migration to cover expenses, generating, reinforcing feedback loops (Manivong et al., 2014; Kelley et al., 2020).



Figure 2 Discussion with members of outmigration community in Northern Thailand, 2022 (Photo: A.Nicol)

- *Remittances and Economic Effects.* Remittances enable faster recovery from shocks and disasters compared to formal aid channels (Kelley et al., 2020; Cole et al., 2015). While remittances generally improve economic conditions in origin communities, they can also trap some households in debt used to finance migration, undermining the livelihoods of those who stay behind (Graham and Jorden, 2011; AGRUMIG, 2023). Remittances can also increase inequality in origin communities by causing land prices to rise, as was the case in Nepal (Sunam and McCarthy, 2016).
- *Remittances and Livelihoods.* In addition to covering basic household needs, remittances and the transfer of knowledge from migrants can play a crucial role in sustaining or intensifying agricultural activities, with mixed effects on land use (Ober, 2019; AGRUMIG, 2023). While making existing plots more productive may reduce the need for new land, profitable farming may lead to land expansion and increased deforestation. Agricultural intensification may contribute to increased mechanization, and to increased use of fertilizers and pesticides, contributing to land degradation (Ober, 2019; AGRUMIG, 2023).

### Land acquisitions and conversions

- *Land Conversions and Plantation Establishment.* State and corporate investments in plantations and industrialized commodity extraction characterize many rural landscapes in SEA. Governments supporting the establishment of these plantations have sometimes criminalized customary practices and promoted cash crop cultivation (Texier, 2013; Kelley et al., 2020). Deregulation, economic liberalization, and globalization have facilitated large-scale land acquisitions (Kelly, 2011; Kelley et al., 2020). Impacts are particularly acute on those practicing traditional agriculture (Murken and Gornott, 2022; Robinson et al., 2013). Insecure land tenure also impacts fishers' livelihoods when coastal developments block access to water resources (Fabinyi, 2020). These developments can undermine local livelihoods, increase food insecurity, and exacerbate environmental degradation, contributing to migration (ASEAN, 2022; Missbach and Palmer, 2018). Migration dynamics are influenced by local power dynamics, where powerful individuals or entities seek to control large swathes of land and force dispossessed households to migrate (Van Der Geest et al., 2012).
- *Impact of In- and Out-Migration.* Plantations and land acquisitions have degraded local livelihoods prompting out-migration, while also attracting in-migration due to new job opportunities. In-migration can lead to the overexploitation of forest and water resources. In response to in-migration, locals may sell land to new arrivals and change cropping patterns to take advantage of market shifts and establish tenure security. Land commodification can replace common property regimes, undermining the resource base and production patterns on which local livelihoods depend.

Conversely, in areas experiencing net out-migration, the decline and abandonment of farming may lead to ecosystem recovery (Cole et al., 2015).

## Disaster management

- *Impact of Climate Change.* Compared to sudden and extreme climate events, gradual climatic changes are expected to have a more significant impact on migration in SEA. These changes are likely to affect environmental, social, economic, or political conditions that then give rise to progressive and deliberate patterns of mobility (Piguet, 2011; Ewing, 2012). Socio-ecological changes may not reach a critical threshold before influencing migration decisions, as mobility is influenced by a perceived decline in the desirability of staying in the current location (Kniveton et al., 2008; Bardsley and Hugo, 2010).
- *Impact of Drought.* Research has not consistently demonstrated strong causal links between drought and migration. In general, the increasing intensity of drought due to climate change will result in subtle systemic changes, such as groundwater depletion, flood frequency, experiences of extreme heat, etc., that influence decisions to migrate (Ober, 2019; Berlemann and Tran, 2020; Miyan, 2015).
- *Impact of Flooding.* Compared to drought, flooding has a clearer connection to migration patterns. Floods in SEA include seasonal floodplain inundation, irregular riverbank overflows, flash floods in urban areas, and coastal floods. These diverse flood regimes have historically shaped agrarian and fisheries-based livelihoods and migration patterns (Elmhirst, 2013). Now, upstream dam construction, human-induced environmental degradation, and climate change contribute to the intensity of flooding events (Ewing, 2012; Elmhirst, 2013). Floods can contribute to seasonal labor migration to urban centers during rainy seasons or long-term migration after repeated flooding events destroy crops (Dun, 2011).
- *Rapid-Onset Disasters.* Extreme climate-related events such as cyclones and floods often displace large numbers of people, but many return to their original homes or nearby areas (Ober, 2019). Those affected may lack resources to move far. Significant and long-term out-migration may occur when social factors increase the disaster's impact on certain groups. Extreme events can also lead to in-migration due to reconstruction labor demands and employment opportunities in humanitarian or aid organizations (Piguet, 2011).
- *Complex Disasters.* While popular narratives often link climate change, conflict, and forced displacement, there is little supporting empirical evidence (Elliot, 2012). Some studies show increased conflict risk with higher temperatures and less precipitation, but others find no relationship. The relationship between weak institutions, political exclusion, conflict, increased vulnerability to climate change, and migration, is extremely complex and context-specific (Mitchell and Pizzi, 2021; Morales-Muñoz et al., 2020).
- *Planned Relocation Policies.* Governments may resettle people living in riverbank zones exposed to flooding risks (Dun, 2011). However, most SEA countries lack comprehensive policies for the planned relocation of vulnerable communities. Challenges in relocation include ensuring livelihood opportunities and social support, engaging communities in planning and implementation, and guaranteeing transparency and financial accountability (Adams and Kay, 2019; Nansen Initiative, 2014).
- *Protection for Migrants During Disasters.* Migrants (especially irregular) in or transiting through a country during a disaster may struggle to access humanitarian assistance and consular services, negotiate employment release, facilitate departure and safe passage, and receive repatriation support (Nansen Initiative, 2014).

## Recommendations for improving policy coherence

Migrant-sending areas focus on maximizing benefits such as remittances and knowledge transfer from migrants, while seeking to minimize harmful effects such as exploitation and human trafficking. They also aim to avoid geopolitical tensions that may arise from international and large-scale irregular migration. Migrant-receiving areas prioritize benefits such as cheaper labor and economic productivity, and attempt to mitigate risks including strains on social services and infrastructure and/or political backlashes against migration. Currently, policies within countries and at a regional level are not

coherent or aligned enough to maximize benefits or minimize risks for sending countries, receiving countries, and the migrants themselves. Lack of policy coherence results from: 1) fragmentation of policy frameworks that influence migration dynamics but do not directly address and direct effects; 2) conflicting interests among stakeholders that depend on or are affected by migration patterns; 3) limited availability of data and a lack of monitoring on migration flows and impacts; 4) gaps in governance and/or the enforcement of policies, and 5) the lack of regional and international cooperation and coordination around migration (IOM, 2021; OECD, 2023).

Achieving coherence and alignment across these goals is essential for ensuring that migration in SEA contributes positively to sustainable development outcomes. Policy coherence takes on even greater importance given the mounting effects of climate change and the need for countries to prepare for altered migration dynamics. The following sections include recommendations for improving coherence across regional-level and national-level migration policies and policies that have secondary effects on migration. They are based on the OECD's (2023) eight guiding principles for achieving policy coherence: 1) political commitment and leadership, 2) strategic long-term vision, 3) policy integration taking into account synergies and tradeoffs, 4) whole-of-government coordination across different sectors, 5) subnational engagement from national to local institutions, 6) effective stakeholder engagement in different phases of the policy cycle, 7) analyzing and assessing policy impacts, and 8) strong monitoring, reporting and evaluation systems (Naik et al., 2008; OECD, 2023).

*Recommendation 1: Regularize migration to the extent possible - recognizing it as central to development*

**Minimize restrictive and punitive measures.** Besides the obvious downsides of restrictive migration regimes for sending countries and migrant themselves (border controls and limited visa channels, for example), such regimes can lead to more irregular migration and push migration further underground, limiting destination governments' management and direction of migrant flows in the long-term (Triandafyllidou et al., 2019). Punitive regimes can also increase risks for businesses in destination countries that depend on migrant labor, and expose other workers to unfair competition, provoking resentment and lowering overall standards of welfare, safety, and hygiene (KNOMAD et al., 2020). Regularized migration schemes can help responsibly and safely fill labor gaps in destination countries, increase remittances for origin countries, and provide secure channels for migrants before and after reaching destination countries (Hong and Knoll, 2016). Policies supporting circular migration in particular can help address labor shortages in destination countries and reduce unemployment in origin countries (Hugo, 2013). They can also increase remittances, ensure more secure migration channels, increase contact with family, and enhance flows of skills and knowledge (OECD, 2011).

**Actively tackle anti-migrant narratives.** A significant area of incoherence is when migration policy in destination countries favors highly-skilled migrants, even though their labor markets need workers of all skills levels. To ensure secure migration of both high- and low-skilled labor, governments in destination countries must settle on politically acceptable narratives that reconcile the benefits of immigration and perceived threats to national identity and social cohesion (Hong and Knoll, 2016). For example, increasing access to legal migration in the care and domestic sectors, where demand is high and local supply is low, is likely to be viewed favorably by the public (Triandafyllidou et al., 2019). Policy makers should also actively promote social inclusion, counter antimigrant xenophobia, and resist populist discourses that scapegoat migrants in times of crisis (Demireva, 2012; Sagar et al., 2012).

*Recommendation 2: Improve alignment between skills and needs - improving the 'transaction'*

**Invest in developing industry-specific skills in line with needs.** Incoherence between destination countries' need for certain types of skilled labor and lack of investment in developing these skills in origin countries limits benefits for migrants, origin countries, and destination countries. In origin and destination countries, measures can be implemented to provide information services and programs to upgrade immigrants' skills to meet necessary standards. This should be carried out alongside regional efforts to harmonize national qualification frameworks, in line with the ASEAN Framework Agreement on

Services and Mutual Recognition Arrangements (Sumption, 2013). Destination countries could be more deliberate in deciding which industries they need workers for and invest in training programs in collaboration with origin countries through bilateral mobility schemes. These trainings could include 1) pre-departure orientation and training activities, 2) financial training on budgeting or on how to send remittances, and 3) on-the-job training for newly-arrived migrants (Triandafyllidou et al., 2019)

***Balance trade-offs in mobility schemes.*** Some of the main challenges in bilateral mobility schemes include skills gaps in origin countries and downwards pressure on wages in destination countries. To mitigate the former, origin countries could provide more incentives for people in certain sectors to remain. To alleviate the latter, governments in destination countries could develop multilateral partnerships with civil society stakeholders to ensure better coherence between employers and labor needs, and mitigate potential backlashes against immigration. Destination countries could also leverage taxes from migrants and migration channels to improve labor market conditions (Hong and Knoll, 2016; Triandafyllidou et al., 2019).

*Recommendation 3: Minimize exploitation in both origin and destination countries*

***Increase oversight of migration industry.*** Current policies support the role of the private sector in facilitating migration, but also increase the costs of migration and introduce new risks of exploitation to potential migrants. Countries that rely on migrant remittances for economic development often do not provide enough protection to ensure migrants are not exploited either domestically or abroad, decreasing the potential benefits from migration. Origin countries could leverage destination countries' dependence on migrants to demand better protection of their citizens, as the Philippines did (see Box 1). Destination countries could leverage sending countries' dependence on remittances to ensure better monitoring of the migration industry and any ensuing abuses or exploitation. More oversight of the migration industry could also decrease up-front costs of migration and increase vulnerable groups' access to migration pathways (Hong and Knoll, 2016).

***Grant sector specific work permits.*** Destination countries aim to fill labor shortages by directing migrant labor towards certain sectors, including agriculture; but being tethered to a specific employer prevents migrants from escaping unsatisfactory or hazardous working conditions. One way to mitigate this is to link migrants to an overall sector rather than an individual or company, to ensure that gaps in the labor markets are being filled while minimizing the potential for exploitation (Ruhs, 2013; Hong and Knoll, p. 38). The ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers is a step in that direction (Triandafyllidou et al., 2019)

*Recommendation 4: Come to a regional agreement on refugee management*

***Create opportunities for refugees.*** Agreements are in place that address the rights of trafficked peoples but not of other types of refugees, creating gaps and inconsistencies that lead to confusion on regional approaches and country responsibilities. Migrant-sending countries often demand protection for their citizens working abroad but are themselves not willing to give protection to refugees that have many of the same characteristics of their migrants (e.g., Indonesia). At the regional level, ASEAN could come to an agreement on fair quotas for refugees to improve regional security and limit the burden falling on individual countries. Options that can benefit destination countries include sponsorship programs, such as the human development visa scheme developed by UNHCR, which enables the recognition of refugee skills. These programs could function with a set annual quota that is revised each year based on conditions in both countries of origin and destination (Triandafyllidou et al., 2019). Restrictions on the right to work for refugees can harm destination countries as they hinder refugee integration and self-sufficiency, and prevent them from gaining the training and skills needed for the job market (Hong and Knoll, 2016).

*Recommendation 5: Monitor and direct migrant flows at the national level*

**Improve migrant conditions in cities.** Internal migration along rural-urban pathways is growing. While cities benefit from migrant labor, they often do not provide adequate services, housing, or infrastructure for migrants. Policies tend to prioritize high-visibility business-friendly climate adaptation projects in richer urban areas. This limits migrant integration and their contribution to cities' sustainable development. Instead, municipal governments should focus on increasing access to affordable housing and essential services like healthcare and education, and undertaking sustainable urban planning that mitigates environmental impacts. Moreover, policies often promote migration to mid-sized cities with the aim of decreasing population pressure in megacities. Increased urbanization in these areas can undermine the natural resource-based livelihoods of existing residents. To improve coherence between sustainable urban development and migrant needs, governments should facilitate migration to specific areas that meet both the needs of migrants and residents. Social safety nets targeting migrant-related vulnerabilities could also improve migration outcomes.

**Ensure that rural development and industrialization do not undermine livelihoods.** Policies promoting mechanization and industrialization to increase yields in rural areas have led to a decrease in crop prices and demand for labor resulting in the loss of rural livelihoods and out-migration. Development policies

### **Box 1. Active facilitation and oversight of migration processes in the Philippines**

The Philippines is often seen as the "gold standard" for facilitating safe migration pathways, but how is this achieved? The Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) provides social protection to Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and maximizes gains from the billions of dollars in remittances sent back by overseas Filipinos and others for development (Piper and Rother, 2022). Government organizations work together with the private sector and NGOs to offer predeparture orientation programs. These programs provide migrant workers with important information on health and safety, financial literacy, the laws and customs of destination countries, and the rights and responsibilities of work contracts (Asis and Agunias, 2012). During the pandemic, when OFWs returned home, the government gave them cash grants and provided loans, scholarships, and skills training (Opiniano and Ang, 2024). The Philippine Overseas Employer Administration regulates recruitment agencies and manages a licensing and registration system for private employment agencies. The government has also signed agreements to avoid double taxation with major destination countries, covering more than 80% of OFWs (KNOMAD et al., 2020)

The government also promulgated the Philippine Development Plan, covering 2023 to 2028, which included overseas Filipinos under the ambit of social protection, covering protection from insecurity and conflicts, as well as human rights abuses. It has been able to leverage other countries' dependence on Filipino workers to ensure that they are being treated well. For example, the government banned worker deployments in Saudi Arabia after workers were left unpaid and after receiving an increasing number of complaints about the treatment of domestic workers. It only allowed the resumption of migration after workers were paid and additional safeguards for domestic workers were put in place. The Philippines is a signatory to five migration-related International Labor Organization conventions (including for domestic workers and seafarers), as well as the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (Hong and Knoll, 2016; Opiniano and Ang, 2024).

The government has successfully integrated migration and development into its major sector-specific plans, including internal development, health, labor, and environmental strategies. Interagency cooperation is facilitated by the Sub-Committee on International Migration and Development, which meets quarterly and includes numerous sectoral ministries and the Union of Local Authorities of the Philippines. National legislation mandates the involvement of key nongovernmental stakeholders in policymaking and implementation processes. The government leverages donor funding and contributes its own resources to evaluate migration and development programs. Efforts to mainstream migration and development, establish necessary institutional infrastructure, and allocate funds for evaluation represent progressive steps toward ensuring coherent migration policies (KNOMAD et al., 2020).

that prioritize the growth of plantation agriculture have contributed to environmental degradation and land grabs, also undermining local livelihoods and leading to out-migration. Policies should move beyond focusing simply on increasing production to improving livelihoods. This involves making targeted investments in infrastructure and access to markets, encouraging sustainable farming practices, and ensuring that development projects do not degrade the natural resource base on which people rely. Strengthening land rights protections is crucial for supporting sustainable development in areas where plantation agriculture, coastal development projects, or dam construction is taking place. These efforts can also help ease migration to megacities. From a regional policy coherence perspective, an ASEAN-wide framework could be developed to address rural migration with the use of financial incentives for sustainable farming techniques and cross-border agreements for labor protection in migration hotspots.

***Maximize gains from remittances.*** Maximizing gains from remittances can help sending countries benefit from out-migration. Although the cost of sending remittances has been declining, official remittance channels still entail high transaction costs. Policies can help reduce these costs, benefiting both migrants and origin communities (Hong and Knoll, 2016). Governments could also improve monitoring mechanisms to determine if investments made using these remittances are intensifying environmental degradation and undermining livelihoods of origin communities, and, if needed, put in place policies to redirect remittance investments.

**“ The rapidly changing and granular effects of environmental and climate change on the ground means that there is still a lot of uncertainty around their specific impacts on migration ”, Piguet, 2011.**

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