Chapter 15

MIGRATION TRENDS AND IMPLICATIONS

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Following economic and political reforms initiated in 2011, the country's population has been adapting rapidly to new opportunities and challenges, including through relocation and migration. This chapter describes some of the patterns and dynamics related to these population flows, as well as their consequences for Myanmar's rural economy. Most of the chapter is based on data collected prior to the triple crises, but recent analyses allow us to give an overview of the migration landscape in the post-2020 era at the end of the chapter (MAPSA 2024c). These analyses confirm that overall migration dynamics have largely persisted.

The existence of substantial flows of migrants from and within Myanmar is not a novel phenomenon. However, the drivers and dynamics have evolved. In the pre-reform past, much of this migration was driven by conflict. Over the decade to 2020—with important exceptions, such as the mass exodus of Rohingya from Rakhine State—migration was driven more by economic factors. Following the coup, conflict again became a driving factor in migration (MAPSA 2024c). It drives refugees across borders in search of safety, along with students, government workers, and citizens who participated in the civil disobedience movement against the new regime. At the same time, economic opportunity remains the key determinant of migration in most of the country.

Most migrants seeking a higher income, an escape from poverty, or both head toward the country's growing cities or to economically vibrant neighboring countries where wages are higher. Some of these flows have been substantial for many years. In Thailand, major industries have been relying on Myanmar workers for decades (Chantavanich and Vungsiriphisal 2012; Griffiths and Ito 2016). Thai policies over the past decade have made it somewhat easier for migrants to enter and work in Thailand legally.

While rapid flows of migrants out of villages have sometimes been interpreted as draining rural areas of their resources, migrant earnings and remittances bolster rural incomes and may create opportunities for rural growth.

These remittances help maintain household consumption, finance house construction, contribute to the cost of agricultural operations, and fund business investments. Migration is an active part of structural transformation and important for building a dynamic and resilient rural economy in Myanmar.

At the same time, migration poses both challenges for the rural sector and risks to migrants themselves. Agriculture faces pressure to adapt and raise labor productivity to remain profitable, but many young migrants decide to cut short their education, which may have long-term adverse consequences for human capital development. Migrants may also face dangers, such as precarious work conditions, harassment, or exploitation. Recently, the COVID-19 crisis provided a stark reminder that remittance flows can be disrupted, leading to sudden income shortfalls for households that rely on them. Finally, outflows of educated migrants following the coup are threatening to drain human capital from the country, undermining future development potential.

This chapter provides an empirically based discussion of patterns of rural out-migration in Myanmar and the opportunities and challenges it presents, based primarily on datasets from four household surveys collected in person during the 2011–2020 decade when the country was opening up economically and politically. The four zones where household data were collected (Figure 15.1) are Mon State (2015), the Ayeyarwady Delta (2016), the central Dry Zone (2017), and Shan State (2018). Migration is an important component in the economies in these four zones, but each has specificities worth highlighting and contrasting. In addition, we draw on data from the recent nationally representative Myanmar Household Welfare Survey (MHWS), collected by phone in 2022 and 2023, to highlight how migration patterns have been impacted since the triple crises.

We first present the surveys used and the data analyzed. We follow this by reviewing the overall trends and patterns of migration, as well as migrant characteristics in each area. We then outline the economic incentives for migration and its role in household incomes. Next, we assess the impact of migration on agriculture and the nonfarm rural economy. Before concluding, we discuss the impacts of the recent crises on migration.

Surveys and data

The primary sources of data for this work are four large household surveys conducted by Michigan State University, the Center for Economic and Social Development, and the International Food Policy Research Institute between 2015 and 2018. Each survey was designed to answer a unique set of research

TABLE 15.1 Summary of household survey details, by state, region, or zone

	Mon State	Delta	Dry Zone	Shan State
Survey detail	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**
Household sample size	1,632	1,102	1,578	1,562
Area and population represented	Rural population of all 10 townships of Mon State	40 rural village tracts from four townships of Ayeyarwady and Yangon—25 with high concentrations of fishponds, and 15 with paddy and pulses as main crops	Rural population of four townships from three regions (Magway, Mandalay, and Sagaing) covering major Dry Zone agroecologies	99 rural village tracts producing maize or pigeon pea, in nine townships in southern Shan State
Size of population represented, households	273,002	37,390	160,512	201,285

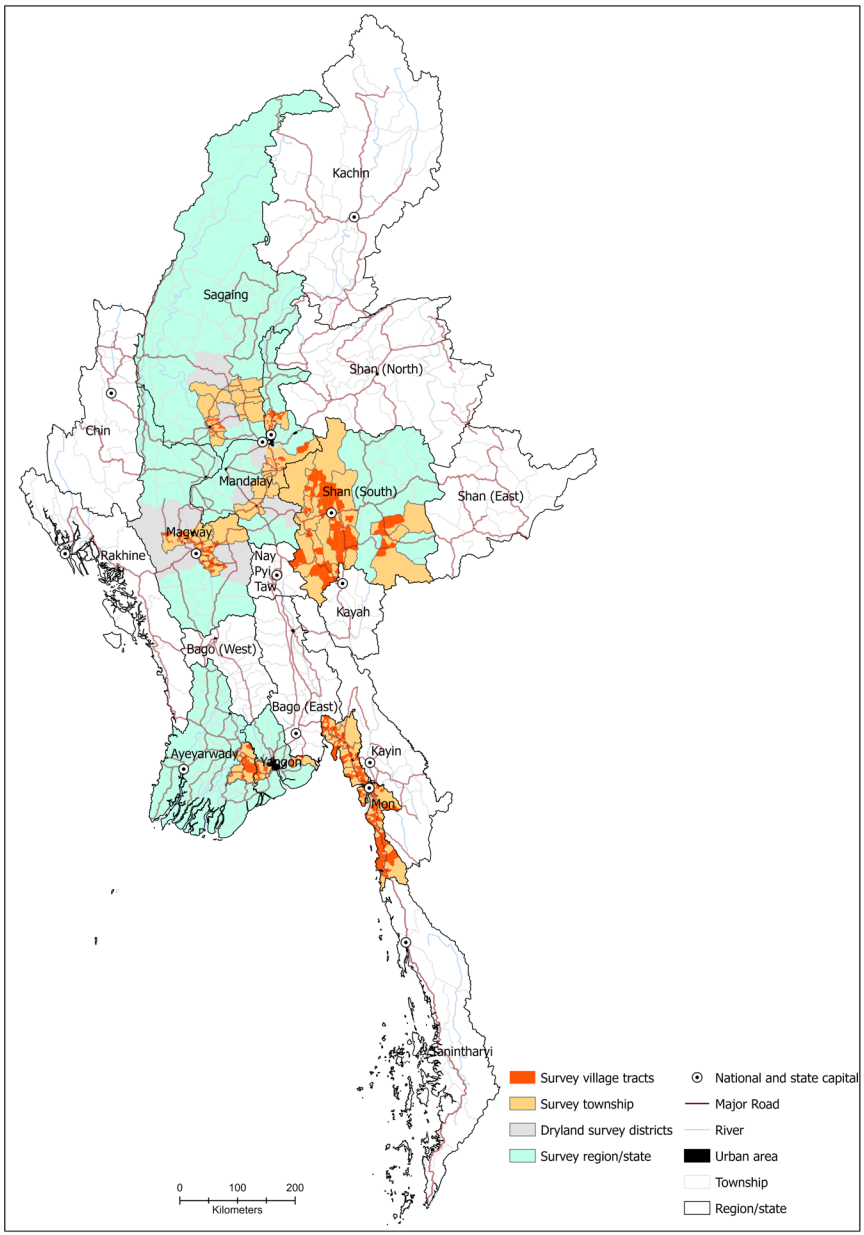
Source: Belton et al. (2021).

questions, but both surveys followed a similar structure in content, design, and implementation. Table 15.1 summarizes the details and Figure 15.1 presents the location of each survey, which included a household and a community questionnaire (see Belton et al. [2021] for full details).

The four household surveys were each designed to capture detailed information on rural livelihoods. All surveys included a migration module, which covered, at a minimum, the demographic characteristics, current location, and occupations of current migrants, as well as remittance flows. All surveys collected information on past migration and returned migrants, with the Mon State survey being the most detailed and the Delta survey the least (Belton et al. 2021).

All samples were based on the sample frame of the 2014 national census and were defined with support from staff of the Department of Planning. Enumeration areas were selected randomly by probability proportional to size. Specific sampling procedures varied with the purpose of each survey. The Mon State sample is representative of the entire rural population of the state, whereas the other surveys are representative at substate or subregion levels. The Delta survey was designed to compare areas with high and low concentrations of aquaculture, dictating the choice of village tracts surveyed, and is representative of parts of the Ayeyarwady Delta. The Dry Zone survey is representative of four townships selected to include the main agroecologies and farming systems of central Myanmar. Last, the Shan State survey is representative of the rural population of village tracts from nine townships in southern

FIGURE 15.1 Map of locations of household surveys



Source: Belton et al. (2021).

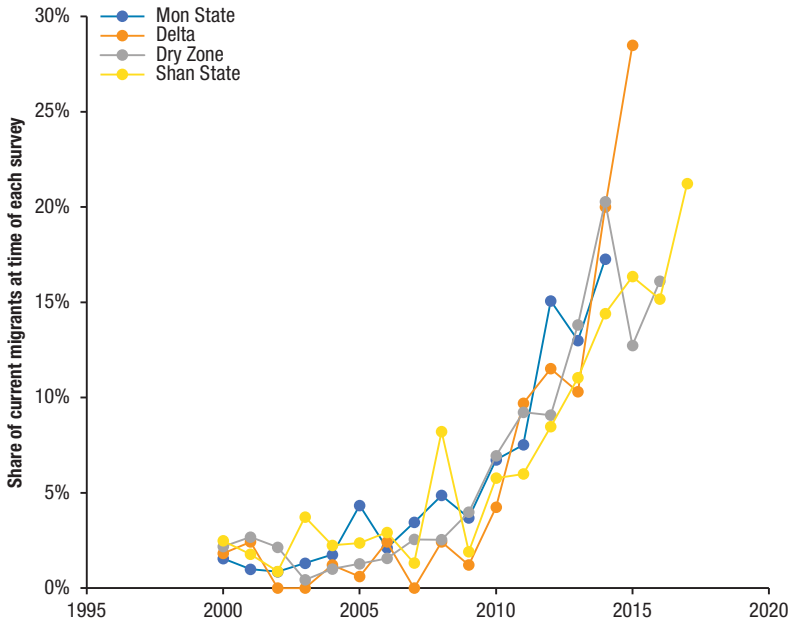
Shan where maize or pigeon pea is farmed and the security situation permitted access for survey implementation (Belton et al. 2021).

Migration prevalence, geography, demographics, and dynamics

Migration trends

Because historical data on Myanmar migration are scarce, trends over time are difficult to establish. Nevertheless, all indicate that migration both within and out of Myanmar increased dramatically after the 2011 reforms (Filipski et al. 2021). Figure 15.2 shows the year in which all migrants from survey households were reported to have migrated. While this figure does not capture all migration over time, the trends suggest that migration accelerated during that decade.

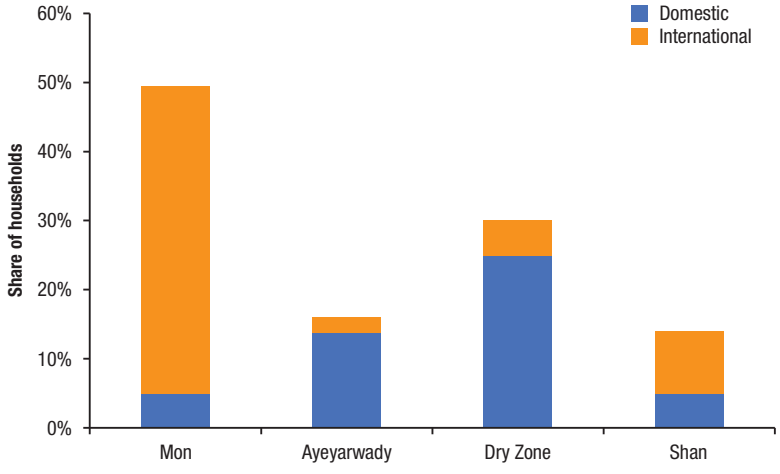
FIGURE 15.2 Year of migration for current migrants from surveyed households, by survey



Source: Filipski et al. (2017); Htoo and Zu (2016); Thu, Htun, and Belton (2019); and authors' calculations.

Note: Endpoint (year of survey) is 2015 for Mon State, 2016 for Ayeyarwady Delta, 2017 for Dry Zone, and 2018 for Shan State.

FIGURE 15.3 Share of households with a migrant, by state/zone



Sources: Authors' analysis using Filipski et al. (2017).

These data were collected prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted migration suddenly and severely. Nevertheless, the most recent evidence suggests that migration has since picked up and is now exceeding pre-pandemic levels (MAPSA 2024a). We dedicate a section at the end of the chapter to migration dynamics since the onset of the triple crises. In the meantime, the four surveys offer a window into the demographic and economic factors underlying migration that have remained relevant.

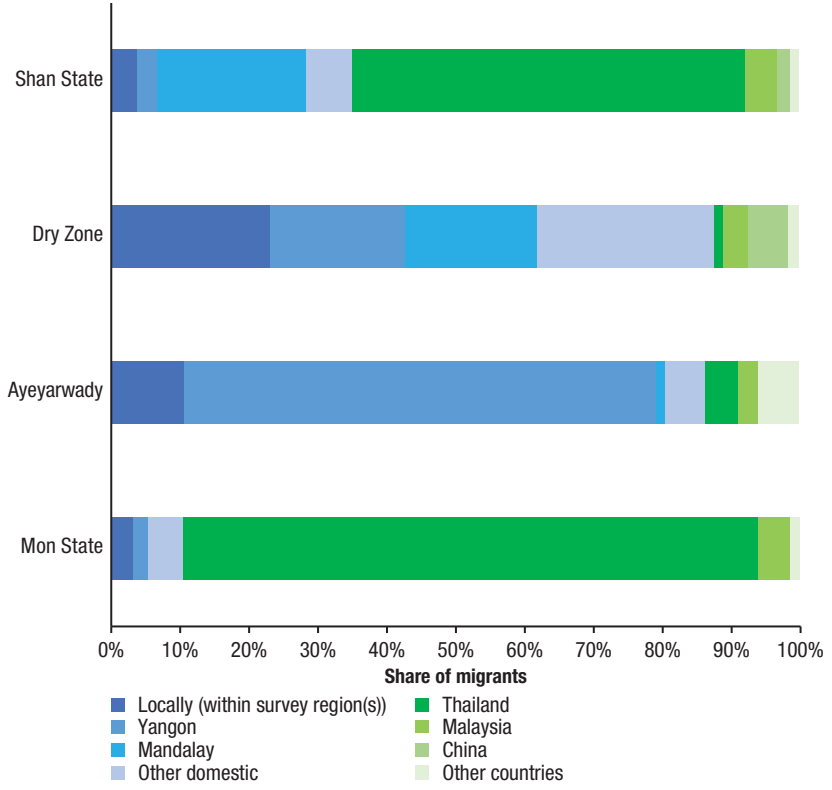
Migration prevalence in the four study areas

The overall prevalence of migration in any given area is highly context dependent, as it reflects location-specific geographic characteristics, transportation networks, and the historical development of migrant networks. Our four study areas reflect this diversity (Figure 15.3). We can contrast the four areas as follows:[1]

- Mon State is by far the biggest sender of migrants. Forty-nine percent of households had a migrating member at the time of the survey in 2016. This migration was mainly international.
- Dry Zone households also engage heavily in migration. Thirty percent had migrants in 2017, though that migration was mostly domestic.

1 These findings mostly line up with those from the Myanmar Living Conditions Survey 2017, though the MLCS classification distinguishes permanent and temporary migration, rather than domestic and international (CSO, UNDP, and World Bank 2020).

FIGURE 15.4 Migrant destinations, by state/zone or country



Source: Filipski et al. (2017); Htoo and Zu (2016); Thu, Htun, and Belton (2019).

- The Delta sends mainly domestic migrants. Nearly 16 percent of households reported migrants from their household at the time of the survey in 2016.
- Shan State in 2018 had the lowest migration rate (14 percent of households) and was the most balanced between international (9 percent) and domestic (5 percent) migration.

Destinations and migration corridors

Figure 15.4 further breaks down domestic migration destinations by region or state and international migration destinations by country. Thailand is by far the most common international destination. Most migrants from Mon State are in Thailand (83 percent), as are most migrants from our survey areas in

southern Shan State (67 percent).[2] China is the most common international destination for Dry Zone migrants. However, it represents only 6 percent of this group, as most migrate domestically. Malaysia also attracts a small share of migrants from each of the four regions. These patterns owe partly to the geographic locations of our survey areas. However, the main finding is corroborated by analysis of the national census: 85 percent of all international remittances to Myanmar come from Thailand (CSO, UNDP, and World Bank 2020). In 2021/22, 52 percent of international migrants were in Thailand, followed by 22 percent in Malaysia and 6 percent in China.

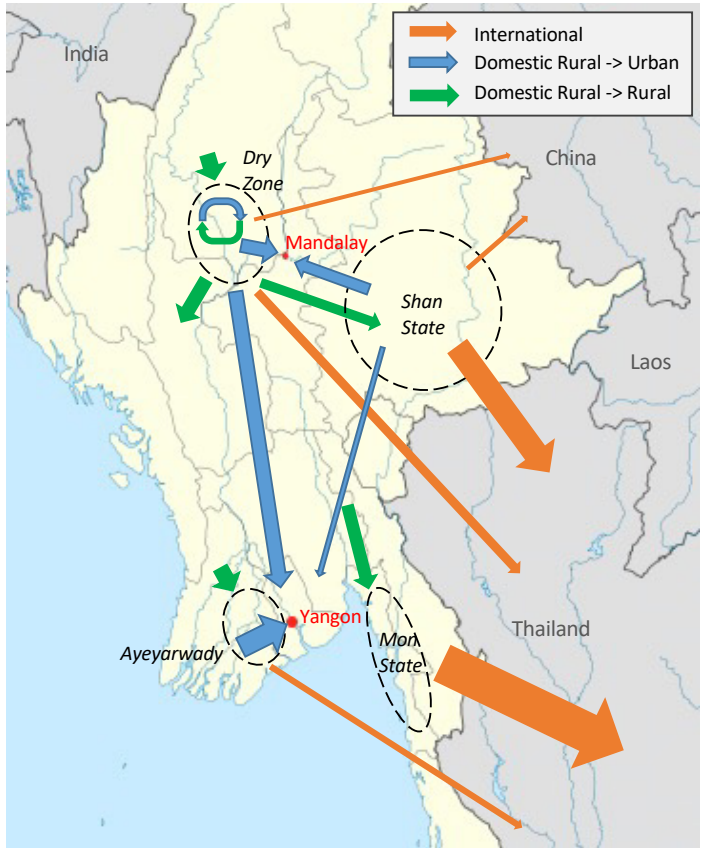
Domestically, the most common destination for Ayeyarwady migrants is Yangon (69 percent). On the other hand, a large portion of Shan State migrants go to Mandalay (22 percent), while Mon State sends very few domestic migrants (<10 percent). The Dry Zone is the only area we surveyed where just one or two destinations did not dominate migration: Dry Zone migrants leave for Yangon and Mandalay; local destinations within the region; and other remote domestic destinations in roughly equal proportions, reflecting the geographic centrality of the Dry Zone.

While large cities are ultimately the primary attractors of domestic migrants, the role of rural-to-rural migration is significant. Many rural migrants from the Dry Zone travel to rural areas of Shan State for work. These rural-to-rural migration flows are sometimes the result of "secondary" migration pressures, whereby rural areas replace their outgoing migrant workers with incoming workers from other rural areas. For instance, during the rice harvest in Mon State, rural workers who leave for Thailand are often replaced by temporary migrants from Bago Region (Filipski et al. 2017).

Taken together, these migration flows define migration hubs and corridors, which we map in Figure 15.5. The dashed circular shapes delineate the general areas represented by our survey datasets. The arrows show the different types of migration flows we encountered in sizes that roughly capture their relative proportions. Migration generally flows southward through the country. Thailand dominates international flows, whereas domestic migration is centered around the two urban hubs of Yangon and Mandalay. As workers from border regions flow into Thailand, workers from central regions flow into cities, and workers from remote areas flow inward, migration corridors are formed throughout the country.

2 Migrants from northern Shan State would likely be going to China, but our survey did not reach those areas.

FIGURE 15.5 Approximate migration flows



Source: Filipski et al. (2017); Htoo and Zu (2016); Thu, Htun, and Belton (2019).

Migrant characteristics

Migrants from rural Myanmar are mostly young, low-skilled, working-age adults. Table 15.2 shows the demographic characteristics of our four migrant samples.

Migrants are split relatively evenly between women and men, though men hold a small majority. The average age of migrants at the time of their first departure is under 25. It is lowest in the Delta, where the average migrant is 20 years old. Most migrants are of working age, with only a small fraction of migrants leaving before the age of 16. The highest share of migrants under 16 years of age is in the Delta (12 percent).

TABLE 15.2 Migrant characteristics, by state/region

Characteristic	Mon State	Delta	Dry Zone	Shan State
Male (%)	54	55	62	52
Average age at time of departure (years)	24	20	21	—
Under 16 years (%)	8	12	2	3
Over 45 years (%)	10	—	12	3
Years of schooling	6	—	—	—
Never completed primary schooling (%)	27	—	49	38
From a landless household (%)	53	—	20	19

Source: Filipski et al. (2017); Htoo and Zu (2016); Thu, Htun, and Belton (2019).
Note: — = data not available.

Migrants tend to have low levels of education. In the Dry Zone, nearly half of all migrants never completed primary school. In Mon State, 27 percent never completed primary school. This is slightly higher than the national average for rural populations of 23 percent (CSO, UNDP, and World Bank 2020), suggesting that migrants tend to be less educated than their nonmigrant peers.

Migrants come from all economic strata: 53 percent of migrants from Mon State and 19 percent from Shan State came from a landless household, with rates of landlessness similar to the general population in those states. Across all surveys, we found that the socioeconomic profile of migrants was similar to that of the overall population.

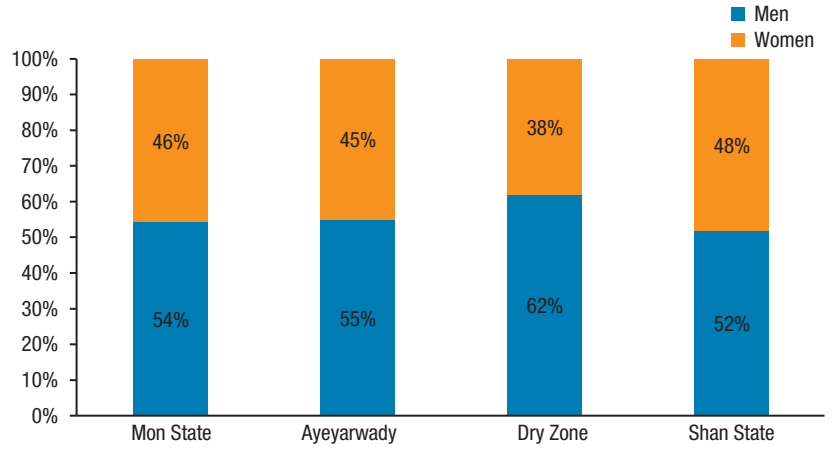
Gender and migration

Men and women in Myanmar are nearly equally likely to migrate, with migrant men only slightly more numerous than migrant women (Figure 15.6). The highest imbalance is in the Dry Zone.[3] This is largely driven by the higher propensity of Dry Zone men to engage in seasonal migration. Both men and women are generally less likely to migrate if they are married or have dependents, without much difference—that is, married women or mothers are just as unlikely to migrate as married men or fathers. However, in Shan State, we found evidence that the care of children left behind by migrant parents fell disproportionately on nonmigrant women (Thu, Htun, and Belton 2019).

We further found that most migration characteristics vary little by gender. Destinations are largely determined by origin (Mon migrants go to Thailand, Delta migrants go to Yangon, and so on), with no sizable gender differences.

3 See CSO, UNDP, and World Bank (2020) for a nationwide study of migration patterns that shows more differences by gender in propensity to migrate.

FIGURE 15.6 Gender of current migrants, by state/region



Source: Filipski et al. (2017); Htoo and Zu (2016); Thu, Htun, and Belton (2019).

The same goes for length of stay, propensity to remit, and amounts remitted. Men and women are equally likely to send money home, and they send similar amounts. The uses of remittances sent by men and women also exhibit no material differences.

The most visible differences by gender appear in the type of work that migrants engage in, though patterns appear to be highly regionalized, as migrants from different regions have access to different opportunities at their destinations (Table 15.3). For instance, Delta women are more likely than men to be working in factories in Yangon (51 vs. 46 percent), while Shan women are less likely to do so than men (10 vs. 16 percent). In contrast, Shan women tend to migrate into jobs as domestic staff (35 percent), while their male counterparts do not, nor do any migrants from the Dry Zone, whether men or women. Consistently, migrant men are more likely to work in construction, though women also engage in construction work. Table 15.3 shows some of these patterns for the Dry Zone and Shan State surveys.

Migrant jobs

The migrants in our samples can be characterized mainly as low skilled—their work experience prior to migrating is often limited to farm work. Young migrants tend to leave immediately after school, and many have no work experience. In Shan State, 70 percent of migrants listed farming as their primary occupation prior to migrating, reflecting high levels of ownership of agricultural land there (Thu, Htun, and Belton 2019).

TABLE 15.3 Differences in migrant occupations by gender, Dry Zone and Shan State

	Migrant engagement (%)			
	Dry Zone		Shan State	
Occupation	Men	Women	Men	Women
Farm work	12	25	6	5
Factory work	19	23	16	10
Domestic work	1	5	1	35
Services/trade	17	12	17	18
Construction/casual work	35	20	27	14
Government job	2	9	18	12
Natural resources	9	0	4	0
Other	6	6	13	6
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: Filipski et al. (2017); Htoo and Zu (2016); Thu, Htun, and Belton (2019).
Note: Mon State and Delta zone surveys did not provide the same level of occupational detail.

Most migrants go to urban destinations and take up a variety of nonfarm jobs (Table 15.4). While these jobs typically require a semi-skilled labor force, migrants can learn on the job and acquire these skills over time. The two most common occupations across all four regions we surveyed were construction work and factory work. Construction activities were the largest employer of migrants from Mon State (24 percent), the Dry Zone (29 percent), and Shan State (20 percent). Nearly half of Delta migrants do factory work in the Yangon area (43 percent). About 15 percent of migrants also engage in trade or services, such as food vending.

While most migration is rural to urban, migrants are also an important source of farm labor. Participation in farm work by migrants is highly correlated with the place of origin and destination of migration. Delta migrants from our sample area go to Yangon, with very few working on farms. Shan State migrants are also unlikely to work on farms (5 percent). However, 18 percent of Mon State migrants work on farms, mostly in Thailand on rubber or fruit plantations (Filipski et al. 2017), and nearly 17 percent of Dry Zone migrants work on farms, mostly within Myanmar growing field crops.

Migration as an investment

Economic opportunities are among the key drivers of migration, as numerous studies worldwide have documented. Myanmar is no exception. The New

TABLE 15.4 Distribution of migrant occupations at destination, percentage of migrants by state/region of origin

Occupation	Mon State	Delta	Dry Zone	Shan State
Farm work	18	0	17	5
Factory work	21	44	20	13
Domestic work	—	—	2	17
Services/trade	15	—	15	17
Construction/casual work	24	—	29	21
Government job	—	—	5	15
Natural resources	8	—	6	2
Other	14	56	6	10
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: Filipski et al. (2017); Htoo and Zu (2016); Thu, Htun, and Belton (2019).
Note: Questionnaires for Mon State and the Delta were less detailed, hence the missing details. — = data not available.

Economics of Migration school of thought frames migration as an investment decision taken at the household level; household members migrate to seek higher earnings, some of which flow back to the household as remittances (Stark and Bloom 1985; Taylor 1999). Even long-term migration is often thought of as temporary, with migrants planning to return home after several years or even decades. This section documents the role of remittances and return migration.

Cost of migration

Table 15.5 shows estimates of the cost of migration for three of our four surveys. Values in the table include transportation costs as well as any logistics costs, such as broker or visa fees, but not rent or cost of living at the destination. The table shows an expected high variability of costs depending on distance and destination; the cost of domestic migration out of the Dry Zone is only 22,000 kyat ($18) on average, while the mean cost of international migration out of Shan State reaches 545,000 kyat ($436).[4]

These patterns reflect the nature of migration decisions as an investment; more distant destinations cost more to get to—but also bring higher rewards. This is very clear when looking at Mon State migrants. Migrating to Malaysia is about twice as expensive as migrating to Thailand, but yearly remittance

4 Note that the area of the Delta we surveyed is about two hours away from Yangon, so most migrants will have negligible transportation and logistics costs.

TABLE 15.5 Migration costs, by state/region

Cost	Mon State	Dry Zone	Shan State
Domestic (average cost in $)	74	18	24
International (average cost in $)	349	78	436
Used loaned funds to migrate (%)	—	38	11

Source: Filipski et al. (2017); Htoo and Zu (2016); Thu, Htun, and Belton (2019).
Note: — = data not available.

amounts from Malaysia are also about twice as large (Filipski et al. 2017). More expensive migration can be more lucrative in the long run.

As with any potentially lucrative investment, households engaging in migration may decide to borrow money to finance the endeavor. Though we have loan data for migration only in the last two surveys, those for Shan State and the Dry Zone, we see that borrowing is not rare. While only 11 percent of households in Shan State take loans to migrate, up to 38 percent of Dry Zone migration is financed through loans. This highlights the nature of migration as not just an opportunity but also a risk, in some cases involving high-risk loans, dangerous working conditions, and exploitative labor arrangements (Belton, Marschke, and Vandergeest 2019; Griffiths and Ito 2016; Hein et al. 2015).

When migration occurs as an option of last resort, it leaves migrants vulnerable to harsh working conditions and exploitation. Many of the workers employed in offshore marine fisheries in Mon originate from impoverished areas of the Delta and the Dry Zone. These workers often accept wages at the beginning of the fishing season to pay off debts incurred elsewhere or to cover other emergency expenses. However, they are bound to spend the entire fishing season working on offshore rafts under extremely harsh and dangerous conditions (Belton, Marschke, and Vandergeest 2019). While the overall landscape of migration is one of economic opportunity, these less positive dynamics cannot be ignored.

The role of remittances in Myanmar's rural economy

Migrants in all four of our surveys were likely to send remittances back to their rural homes. Between 58 percent (Shan State, Dry Zone) and 81 percent (Delta) of migrants had either sent or brought money back in the past 12 months (Table 15.6). The sums involved are substantial: an average migrant sends nearly 1 million kyat per year (about $800), which is roughly

equivalent to a full year of wages in their rural areas of origin. Dry Zone migrants send the lowest average remittance amount (662,000 kyat, or $529), and Delta migrants send the highest average amount (1.44 million kyat, or $1,152). Differences in levels of remittances likely reflect regional differences in wages and costs of living. For example, Delta migrants tend to work in or near Yangon, the economic capital of the country, where wages are relatively high.

Migration studies often argue that remittances can serve as the basis for rural development, as they provide households with funds that can be productively invested in agriculture and other growth activities (de Brauw 2019). However, our surveys suggest that most remittances are used to support everyday living expenses. Three of our four surveys collected information on the use of remittances (Table 15.6).

In both the Dry Zone and Shan State, nearly two-thirds of remittances are used for everyday expenses. In Mon State, one-third of remittances go to housing, which is a trend readily visible throughout rural Mon State, with the high density of homebuilding taking place. While home construction could be seen as a form of investment, it is not directly productive and can also be viewed as a form of conspicuous consumption (Wei, Zhang, and Liu 2012). Non-negligible shares of remittances are spent on medical expenses or debt service, which leaves less than one-third for savings or productive investments: 33 percent in Mon State, 21 percent in the Dry Zone, and 18 percent in Shan State. While these amounts are low—about 200,000 kyat per year (about $160)—they are not trivial, and they accumulate over time. This suggests that remittances likely contribute to significant productive investments for some households and to rural economic growth.

Beyond their contribution to investment, remittances play a key role in sustaining rural household incomes in potentially problematic ways. The bottom of Table 15.6 shows that between 12 and 42 percent of households receive remittances, depending on the region. While in the Delta, the share of remittances in total household income is only 5 percent, it is much higher in the other three areas we studied: 15 percent in the Dry Zone, 18 percent in Shan State, and 25 percent in Mon State. Remittances play a key role in supporting rural incomes and stabilizing them through diversification away from seasonally risk-prone agriculture. At the same time, some households that depend highly on remittances are left exposed to economic vicissitudes of a different kind, as the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns recently illustrated. This is discussed further below.

TABLE 15.6 Details of migrant remittances, by state/region

Remittance detail	Mon State	Delta	Dry Zone	Shan State
Share of migrants who sent remittances (%)	66	81	58	58
Average remittance amount ($/year)	654	1,152	529	640
Use of remittances				
Housing (%)	31	—	7	5
Day-to-day and other expenses (%)	14	—	64	66
Debt (%)	6	—	6	5
Medical (%)	15	—	3	6
Savings/investment (%)	33	—	21	18
Share of households receiving remittances (%)	42	12	30	15
Overall share of household income coming from remittances (%)	25	5	15	18

Source: Filipski et al. (2017); Htoo and Zu (2016); Thu, Htun, and Belton (2019).
Note: — = data not available.

Return migration

Many migrants migrate temporarily. Even long-term migrants often plan to return to their place of origin after having reaped enough returns, although not all are successful in achieving their targets. Because migrants often learn skills while they are away, some of the migration literature emphasizes their potential role as growth catalysts upon their return, having brought back skills that may have been previously missing in their home villages (Junge, Revilla Diez, and Schätzl 2015). However, this is not frequently the case in our data.

Among returned migrants, a majority reported family reasons as their impetus for return, including marriage, pregnancy, need to care for children or parents, death in the family, or a desire to be with family (Table 15.7). This is particularly the case for international migrants, who are less likely to settle permanently at their destination compared with domestic migrants. Forty-three percent of Mon State returned migrants stated family reasons as their primary motivation for returning. Poor working conditions are another major reason for migrants returning, a factor most frequently mentioned by Mon State returnees (20 percent). A substantial share of Dry Zone migrants (23 percent) reported loss of jobs and lack of opportunities as their main reasons for returning. It is noteworthy that poor working conditions, inability to find work, lack of legal status, and incapacity account collectively for between 37 percent (Mon State) and 46 percent (Dry Zone) of the reasons given for terminating migration, underlining some of the risks associated with migrating and indicating that it is not always a successful strategy.

TABLE 15.7 Primary reason for returning, by state/zone

	Share of responses (%)			
Reason	Mon State	Delta	Dry Zone	Shan State
Family reasons	43	—	17	23
Poor work conditions	20	—	14	17
Old age/incapacity to work	8	—	7	9
Loss of job/lack of opportunities	6	—	23	14
Lack of legal status	3	—	2	3
Job prospect at home/start business	9	—	25	28
Other	11	—	12	6
Total	100	—	100	100

Source: Filipski et al. (2017); Htoo and Zu (2016); Thu, Htun, and Belton (2019).
Note: — = data not available.

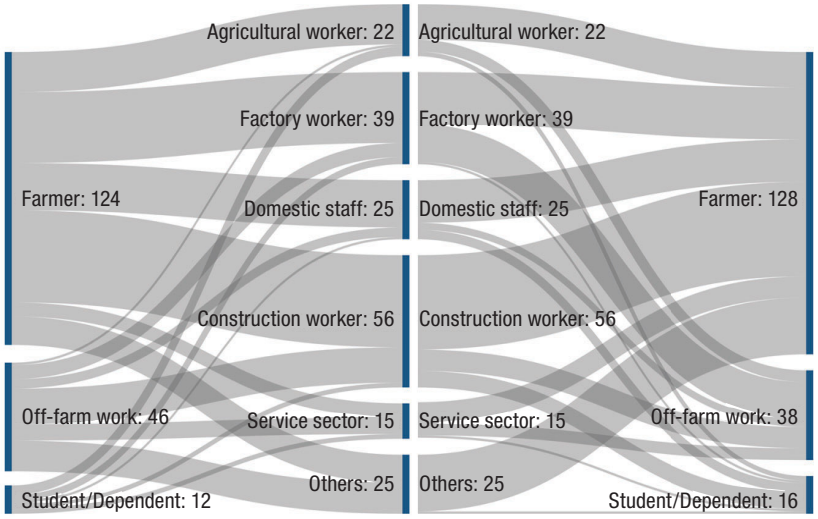
Mon State migrants seldom listed job prospects at home and job loss as major reasons for their return (9 and 6 percent, respectively). Migrants from Mon State mostly go to Thailand, where opportunities are both plentiful and relatively lucrative. In contrast, Dry Zone and Shan State migrants are more likely to return for economic reasons such as job loss (23 and 14 percent, respectively) or for an opportunity to find work or start a business at home (25 and 28 percent, respectively).

However, further analysis suggests that after their return, few migrants end up using the skills they acquired while away. In Mon State, while about half of migrants reported having acquired skills abroad, those were mostly language skills (Filipski et al. 2017). Although 10 percent reported having acquired skills in factory production, those are hard to translate into productive returns at home unless a factory is there. The most common use of skills acquired abroad by Mon State migrants was agricultural, as rubber workers returned home with seeds to start their own plantations. In Shan State, while very few migrants engage in farm work while away, the vast majority return to farming after they return home (Figure 15.7).

Migration and agriculture

The relationship between migration and agriculture is complex and multifaceted. On the one hand, migration removes part of the rural labor force, giving rise to concerns about agricultural production and food security. On the other hand, there is evidence that these concerns are overblown and that households

FIGURE 15.7 Primary activity before, during, and after migration for returned migrants from Shan State



Source: Thu, Htun, and Belton (2019).

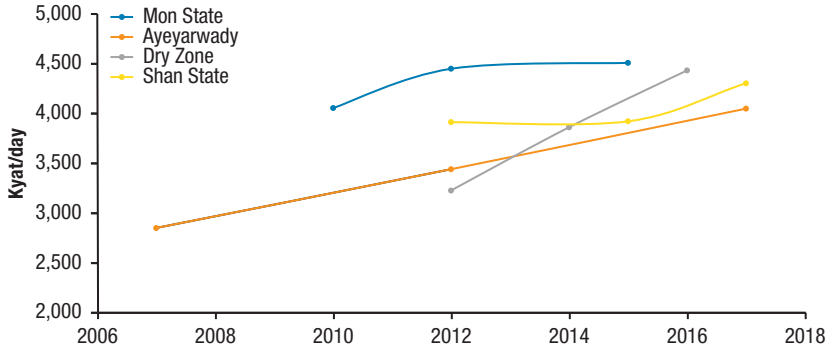
have options to maintain or increase food production despite labor out-migration (de Brauw 2019). This section reviews how some of these dynamics are playing out in Myanmar.

Migration and rural wages

It is often assumed that rural workers leave for the city because the lack of work in the rural sector renders them idle. However, the reality may not be as extreme. Workers may have existing opportunities in the rural sector that are poorly remunerated compared to urban ones. When this is the case, departing workers may leave rural producers with farm labor shortfalls. All four surveys indicate that this was happening in Myanmar's rural sector prior to 2020.

A good indicator of tight labor supply is an increasing wage rate. In all four surveys, we found that real rural wages—that is, after adjusting for inflation—had been rising, and quite sharply so in the Delta and the Dry Zone (Figure 15.8). Rising wages point to a tightening of rural labor markets as workers migrate away. Wage rates in different geographic zones also appear to be converging. This suggests that labor markets are increasingly integrated

FIGURE 15.8 Real wages over time, by state/zone



Source: Filipski et al. (2017); Htoo and Zu (2016); Thu, Htun, and Belton (2019).

over space, as would be expected given high levels of mobility and migration. This is a positive outcome for landless and land-poor rural households that derive a large share of their income from casual labor. These rising wages are reported to have contributed to improvements in welfare in the Dry Zone (Belton and Filipski 2019).

However, rising rural wages squeeze farm incomes. To compensate, rural producers may farm less intensively, switch to labor-saving crops, or even abandon production on marginal plots. Rural producers may also replace missing laborers with (in-)migrants or machines.

Out-migration begets in-migration

A major compensatory mechanism for the outflow of laborers through migration is the inflow of other laborers through migration. As discussed above, migration flows occur along corridors that link all areas of the country and likely reach even the most remote locations. As migrants from some areas leave for Yangon or Thailand, the labor shortage they leave behind may prompt other laborers to take their place, usually migrating from more remote rural areas. In Mon State, where nearly half of all households had migrant members away at the time of our survey, respondents reported that 20 percent of workers in paddy fields were migrants from Bago Region who came specifically for the rice harvest (Filipski et al. 2017).

What drives these secondary migration flows are, again, wage differentials. Thailand attracts Mon migrants across the border with daily wages for unskilled workers that are triple what they are in Mon State—roughly 10,000 to 12,000 kyat, or $8 to $10, in Thailand versus 3,000 to 5,000 kyat, or $2.50 to $4.00, in Mon State at the time of the survey. Mon State daily wages are, in turn, higher than those in Bago region—2,500 to 3,000 kyat, or $1.60 to $2.50, thus prompting a secondary migration flow, notably for temporary workers at harvest time. In our Delta study area, up to a quarter of the long-term fishpond workforce originated from more remote village tracts of the Delta (Htoo and Zu 2016). Although rigorous proof of causal impacts is difficult to obtain, evidence shows that wage levels in rural Mon State are higher precisely because so many of the workers have left for Thailand (Filipski et al. 2020), a finding that echoes studies of other countries (Mishra 2014).

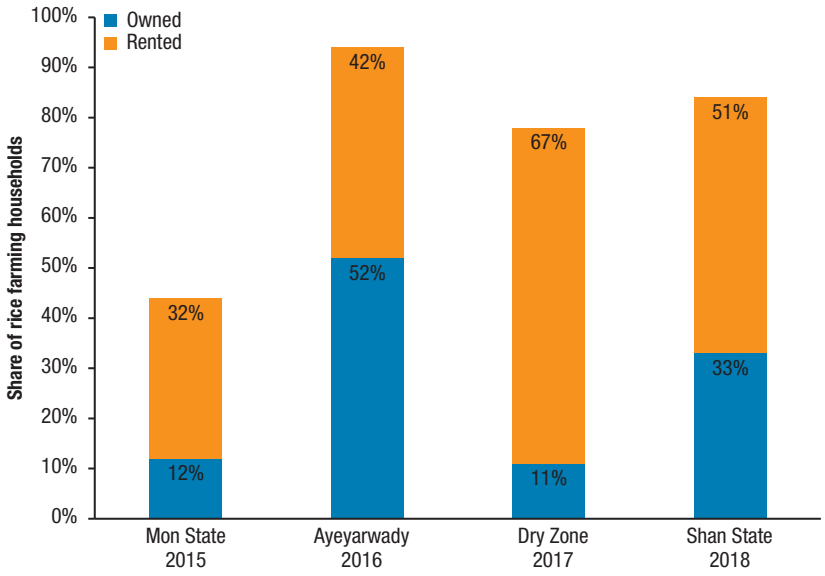
If all workers are easily replaced through secondary migration flows, production volumes can be maintained. However, this process is not entirely without friction. Replacing workers is easier when crops are similar across regions. Rubber workers from Mon State seek higher wages in Thai rubber plantations, but they are not easily replaced by incoming migrants from central Myanmar with no experience in rubber. The concentration of migrant workers is high in paddy fields, but only 3 percent of workers in rubber plantations are incoming migrants (Filipski et al. 2017). In addition, attracting these in-migrant workers requires offering wages high enough to make their trip worthwhile. Wages are indeed rising, but eventually further wage increases become economically infeasible for farmers, who may then consider labor-saving technology, including mechanization.

Migration and mechanization

A second major way in which farmers compensate for labor scarcity is mechanization, as discussed at length in Chapter 7. A common narrative assumes that replacing human workers with machines leads to unemployment, such that rural-to-urban migration results from the displacement of surplus rural workers. However, in rural Myanmar prior to 2020, the causality ran mainly in the opposite direction. That is, farmers were seeking to mechanize because migration was creating labor scarcity, not the other way around. The best evidence for this is the trend in rural wages. If there were large surpluses of idle rural workers, wages would be falling, but Figure 15.8 shows they are rising.

The signs of a rapid spread of mechanization are compellingly demonstrated in Chapter 7 for the Delta and Dry Zone. However, such signs are visible throughout Myanmar, including in all four of our surveys. Figure 15.9

FIGURE 15.9 Use of machinery in rice production, by state/zone



Source: Filipski et al. (2017); Htoo and Zu (2016); Thu, Htun, and Belton (2019).

shows that a large share of rice farmers uses machinery (two-wheel tractors, four-wheel tractors, or combine harvesters). Nearly all rice growers in the Delta (94 percent) and Shan State (84 percent) use machines, as do a large majority in the Dry Zone. Mechanization in Mon State is somewhat lower, likely because growing rice tends to be a minor activity for households there. In addition, the Mon State survey was conducted in 2015. This early date may make a significant difference in our results given that mechanization advanced at breakneck speed in Myanmar over the five years prior to 2020 (Belton and Filipski 2019).

Migration and agricultural land

Our data do not show evidence of land consolidation occurring in the wake of out-migration. A common narrative about rural-to-urban migration posits that it should go together with consolidation of agricultural landholdings—as some workers leave the countryside, others supposedly buy up or lease in the abandoned land to expand their holdings. Yet, we do not find evidence of this pattern occurring.

In Mon State, the average agricultural landholding stayed at 2.5 acres between 2010 and 2015 (Filipski et al. 2017). In the Delta, while there had been a wave of land confiscations and appropriations for the creation of fishponds in the 1980s and 1990s, our survey revealed very few occurrences of land loss or disposal in the more recent past.

This absence of land consolidation despite rapid structural transformation is common in Southeast Asia. Liu and colleagues (2020) find a remarkably stable distribution of landholding sizes in Viet Nam over the period from 1992 to 2016 despite dramatic structural change in the economy. Similar patterns are observed in other countries in the region (Rigg, Salamanca, and Thompson 2016).

The reasons for these trends are likely manifold and complex. One is that landlessness in Myanmar tends to be high. In Mon State, 60 percent of households do not own agricultural land (Filipski et al. 2017). In the Dry Zone, 40 percent of rural households neither own nor operate any land, and landlessness is increasing with each generation (Hein et al. 2015). Migration may be linked partly to this landlessness. Another reason we do not see out-migration leading to land consolidation may be that migrants remain strongly attached to their home village. They typically leave family members behind and often plan to return. This is particularly the case with international migrants, whose goal is almost invariably to return after they have met their income goals, even after a decade or more away. As Figure 15.7 shows, returning migrants tend to return to farming. As observed in neighboring Thailand, the reluctance of many rural households to divest of even small and fragmented agricultural landholdings may also reflect the precarity of many forms of off-farm employment, including migrant work, and the near absence of social safety nets (Rigg 2019).

In some cases, migrants rent out their land in their absence. In Mon State, many farmers reported cultivating land they rented from their absent neighbors. However, rental rates were low, and respondents suggested that these arrangements were aimed more at safekeeping than at creating a significant income stream (Filipski et al. 2017).

Migration and agricultural investment

Because migration and remittances tend to be associated with rising incomes for rural households, there is scope for migration to spur growth in agriculture. Farmers with access to liquidity, such as through receipt of remittances, should be better able to invest in productivity-enhancing inputs or capital such as seeds, fertilizer, labor, or machinery. While we see relatively limited

evidence of this in our four surveys, migration is clearly shaping the long-term prospects for the farming sector.

The share of households reportedly using remittances for agricultural operating costs is relatively small, at 9 percent in Shan State and 17 percent in the Dry Zone (Table 15.6). It is hard to infer a trend from these figures alone; on the one hand, the cumulative impact of remittances may be contributing significantly to agricultural growth over time. Even when migrant earnings are used to cover the costs of everyday living expenses rather than agricultural inputs, they can support agriculture indirectly by underpinning the ability of farm households to sustain themselves. On the other hand, the use of remittances for agricultural operating costs may simply be underwriting an underperforming agriculture sector, slowing decline rather than stimulating growth.

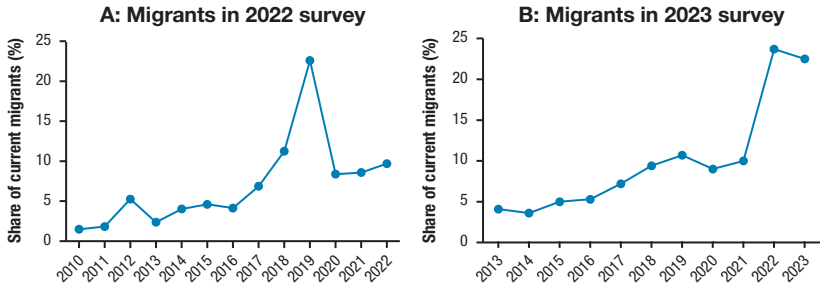
Remittances may lead to growth in agricultural productivity through investment in technology. A small fraction of households reported that their primary use of remittances was for the purchase of agricultural assets such as machinery (2, 5, and 8 percent in the Dry Zone, Shan State, and Mon State, respectively). If these technologies lead to yield growth over time, rather than simply reducing losses from rising labor costs, then remittances may have a lasting positive impact on agriculture.

Most migrants eventually return to farming (Figure 15.7), and many of them try to accumulate land in anticipation of that return. Returning migrants are more likely to have funds to invest in technologies for improved agricultural operations, including in machinery, irrigation, and commercial inputs. However, the impact of these agricultural investments may not appear clearly in agricultural production data for several years after their return. In Mon State, 24 percent of households receiving remittances reported their primary use being for agricultural land purchase, often to set up rubber plantations. Returns on such investments appear with a significant delay, making it difficult to assess the contributions of migration to agricultural growth.

Migration since the onset of the triple crises

Most of the previous sections relied on data collected prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 coup. While much remains unclear about the current period, post-crisis data show that (1) COVID-19 disrupted migration abruptly and severely, and (2) this disruption was short-lived. Both of these findings can be seen in Figure 15.10, which shows when current migrants first left their homes, based on MHWS responses from the first half of 2022 (panel A) and then again in 2023 (panel B).

FIGURE 15.10 Year of first migration for migrants surveyed in 2022 and 2023



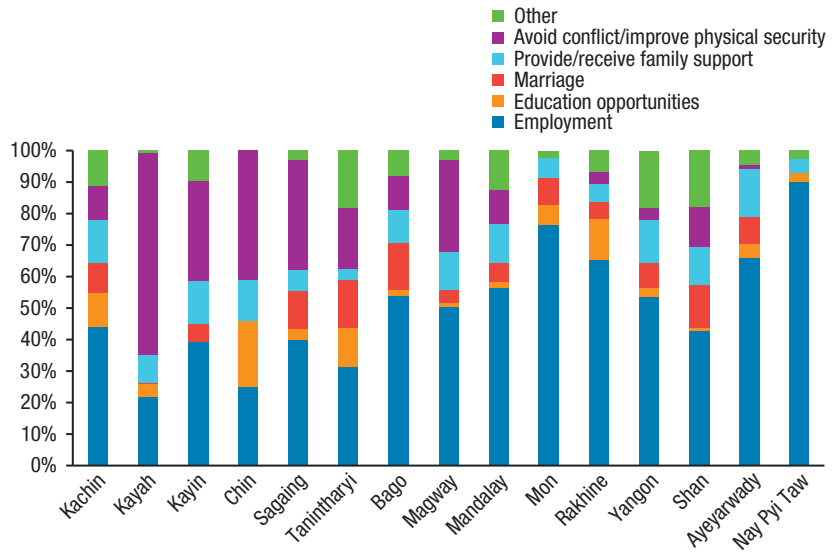
Source: Authors' analysis using MHWS and MAPSA (2024c). Migrants refers to household members migrating at time of survey.

In March 2020, Myanmar reported its first positive case of COVID-19, and the government put travel restrictions and lockdown measures in place shortly after that. China, Malaysia, and Thailand all severely restricted legal border crossings. Domestically, Myanmar dramatically reduced passenger transit services and restricted the use of certain highways (Diao et al. 2020). As a result, out-migration from the rural sector essentially halted for a few months, leading to the sharp drop we see in panel (A) of Figure 15.10. Studies have shown that this also led to rapid and massive return migration, as those who had already migrated found themselves out of work and sometimes without accommodation. An estimated 1 million migrants returned from abroad (Diao et al. 2020). This also decreased remittance flows, with severe consequences for income and consumption, providing a stark reminder that reliance on remittances can increase the vulnerability of an economy to shocks (Boughton et al. 2021; Diao et al. 2020).

In the years since the onset of the crisis, however, the migration trends from before the COVID-19 shock have resumed. The right side of Figure 15.10 shows a sharp increase in 2022, and the years 2019 to 2020 appear as a mere slowdown. Between December 2021 and June 2023, an estimated 19.9 percent of the adult population left their household (MAPSA 2024c). The crises may have, in fact, accelerated migration, as it remains one of the primary coping mechanisms in difficult economic times (see Chapter 5).

Part of the resumption of migration may be due to the political situation. On a nationwide scale, economic factors still dominate. Recent analyses show that about 70 percent of migrants cite economic opportunities as their primary reason for migration in 2021 to 2023, the same share as in the 2010s (MAPSA 2024c). Only 2 percent cite conflict as the primary reason.

FIGURE 15.11 Main drivers reported for whole-household internal migration, February 2021–July 2023



Source: Author's calculations based on MHWS data.

However, regionally, conflict emerges as a key driver. This is especially stark if we look at whole-household migration rather than household-member migration (Figure 15.11).

Between February 2021 and June 2023, approximately 10 percent of households migrated as a family unit. Nationwide, employment is the main driver, and only 15 percent cite physical security as the main reason for moving. However, in Kayah State, 70 percent of migration was conflict-driven (Figure 15.11). In the states of Chin, Sagaing, Kayin, and Magway, 30 to 50 percent of households that migrated cited conflict avoidance as their primary reason.

In terms of who migrates, where they migrate to, and what jobs they undertake while migrating, current patterns largely reflect those of the pre-crisis period (MAPSA 2024c). Remittances remain a major contributor to household incomes. In the 2023 survey, 16 percent of households were receiving remittances, which accounted for 7 percent of total income in the rural sector but 39 percent of the income of households receiving remittances (MAPSA 2024b). Remittances continue to be spent mostly on day-to-day expenses. Only a small share of households (12 to 15 percent) reports using remittances for savings or productive investments.

Conclusion

Myanmar's sustained migration flows and accompanying structural transformation are not unique in Southeast Asia. Other countries in the region, like Thailand and Viet Nam, began similar processes several decades earlier (Tarp 2015). Yet, Myanmar presents several specificities, including certain advantages that come with being a late starter in the region, such as technology spillovers to draw upon and developed regional markets in which to participate. Myanmar can cheaply and easily send millions of migrants to higher-income neighboring countries where labor is needed and wages are significantly higher. This situation contributed to the acceleration of migration seen in the years since 2011.

A good indicator of the economic importance of migration as an income-generating strategy is the total estimated size of remittances. According to World Bank data, total international remittances have hovered roughly between $3 billion and $4 billion per year in the past decade (World Bank 2024), not far behind the total value of agrifood exports, which hovered between $3.5 billion and $5.0 billion in the pre-COVID years (Chapter 14). If we add domestic remittances to that total, migration certainly cannot be ignored as a major economic driver.

Though migration appears to have contributed to income growth, rural economic diversification, and perhaps agricultural development, many uncertainties remain regarding these benefits. All migration is inspired by a combination of push and pull factors, and its contribution to economic growth and the welfare of populations depends in part on which dominates. Following the triple crisis, escaping conflict is increasingly the push factor behind migration. Remittances are increasingly being used to meet daily household needs instead of savings or productive investments. However, households that receive remittances are less likely to be income poor (see Chapter 5). In the face of the current economic challenges, migration likely will continue to increase, but the hope that remittances will help reinvigorate Myanmar's farm sector remains slim.

Even as migration continues to grow as a driver of household incomes, policy challenges remain. Migration remains a risky activity, with migrants being vulnerable to crime and exploitation, particularly when they are undocumented. In a conflict-prone environment, this is even more important, as individuals are more willing to risk migrating into a precarious situation in order to escape conflict. Domestic and foreign policy efforts are needed to ensure that migration is safe and legal and that migrants benefit from legal protection in Myanmar and abroad.

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