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RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION AROUND YANGON CITY, MYANMAR

Kyan Htoo and A Myint Zu

INTRODUCTION

Labor migration is a pervasive feature of life in contemporary Myanmar, but has been the subject of only limited research to date. Furthermore, most of this work has focused on international migrants, leaving internal migration comparatively understudied.

This brief addresses this gap by exploring the characteristics of migrants and migration in four townships (Kayan, Maubin, Nyaungdon, and Twantay) located close to Myanmar's primate city, Yangon.

For comparative purposes, a representative sample of 1102 households was interviewed in May 2016, in two groups of village tracts: an aquaculture cluster characterized by high concentrations of fish farms, and agriculture cluster, where crop farming is the predominant agricultural activity.

RESULTS

Migrant Characteristics

Sixteen percent of households surveyed reported that a former member had migrated. In addition, 44% of residents of surveyed households who engaged in long term salaried employment travelled to nearby urban areas or other townships or regions to work, suggesting that regular short term labor movements are also common.

The share of households with migrants in village tracts in the aquaculture cluster was more than double that of households in village tracts in the agriculture cluster (18% versus 8%). However, the share of households with migrants varied relatively little with the primary occupation type of the household, ranging from 15% of households involved in aquaculture, to 18% of those practicing agriculture and 15% of those dependent solely on non-farm employment. Landless households were slightly less likely to have migrants than those with land (14% of households versus 19%).

For the purpose of analysis, households that owned agricultural land were categorized into three groups based on their agricultural landholdings, where tercile 1 contained the third of households owning the least agricultural land, and tercile 3 contained the third holding the most.

Households in the bottom third of the land distribution (tercile 1) were somewhat more likely to have migrants (23%% of households) than those in the upper two terciles (16% and 15% respectively).

Only 3% of migrants possessed agricultural land when they left the household, but most were too young to have inherited or purchased land at this time, and all landowners who migrated continued to retain possession of their land.

Average age at first migration was 21, with little variation by cluster or type of household. Thirty eight percent of migrants were under the age of 18 at the time they left, and 22% were below 16, indicating that they left the household when still of school going age.

Propensity to migrate varied only slightly between men and women: 45% of migrants were female and 55% male. There was little difference in rates of migration among men and women by cluster.

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Remittances

More than 80% of migrants sent remittances to their families. The share of migrants sending remittances was higher among landless households than among households occupied in agriculture or aquaculture: 91% of migrants from households in which non-farm employment provided the main source of income sent remittances, compared to 79% and 72% of migrants from households engaged in agriculture and aquaculture respectively.

Among those that sent a remittance in the past 12 months, the average amount remitted also varied by household type: migrants from aquaculture households sent the largest average remittances, at MMK 110,000 per month, while the migrants from agricultural households remitted an average of MMK 81,000 per month and those from non-farm households MMK 62,000 per month.

There was little difference in the frequency or average value of remittances made by cluster, or by the gender of the migrant remitting.

Migration Trends

This section presents trends in patterns of migration, divided into subsections on outward migration (migration by residents of surveyed village tracts to other areas) and inward migration (migration into surveyed village tracts from elsewhere).

Outward Migration

Migration is a recent phenomenon in the village tracts surveyed. Eighty per cent of current migrants left their households after 2010, when restrictions on freedom of movement were relaxed. Migration accelerated after 2012, coinciding with rapid urban growth and investment (Figure 1).

This migration was overwhelmingly rural-urban, with 90% of migrants relocating to urban areas (Figure 1). The most important of these was the nearby city of Yangon, which was the destination for 61% of migrants (Figure 2). Only 8% of migrants from the village tracts surveyed emigrated overseas.

Figure 1. Cumulative Percentage of Migrants by Year and Destination.

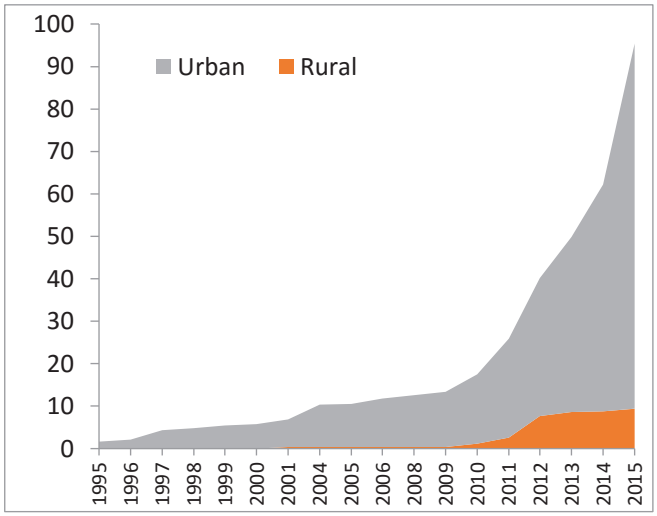
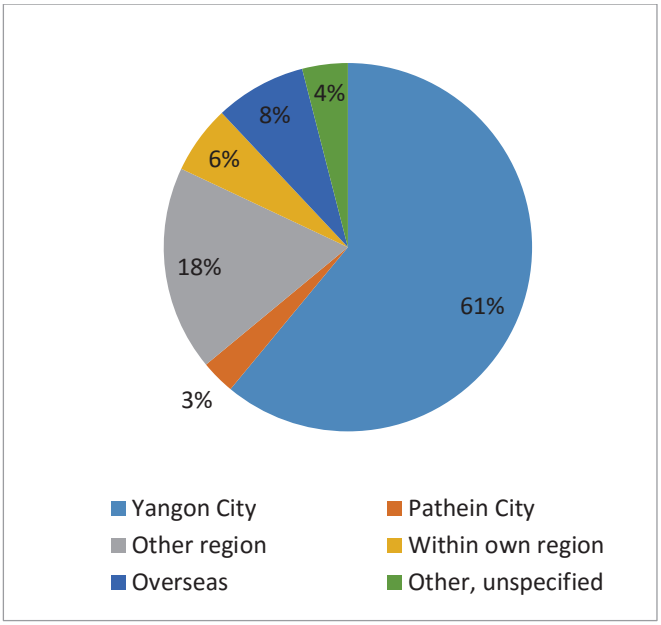


Figure 2. Share of Migrants by Destination



A large majority (70%) of migrants from the clusters surveyed engaged work in the manufacturing sector, split almost equally between women and men. Most other migrants worked in the service sector, or as skilled labor in trades.

Inward Migration

Permanent agricultural laborers accounted for almost all of the migration into the surveyed village tracts, with very little migration for non-farm work or casual agricultural labor taking place.

The aquaculture cluster created more opportunities for inward migrants than the agriculture cluster. The percentage of long-term workers employed in aquaculture that originated from outside the village tract where the farm was located could be as high as 25%, as compared to about 8% of the long-term workers employed on crop farms. Around half of inward migrants were reported to have settled permanently in the villages where they worked.

CONCLUSION

Rural-urban migration has increased dramatically since 2010 in the area around Myanmar's largest commercial center, Yangon, where it represents a far more important migration flow than international migration.

The timing of this trend parallels the growth of opportunities in the urban economy, most importantly in manufacturing, which employs 70% migrants from the village tracts surveyed.

Propensity to migrate was not found to differ widely across categories of households with different resource endowments and livelihood strategies (e.g. landed/landless, farm/non-farm), or by gender, although households with small landholdings appear slightly more likely to produce migrants than households with either large landholdings or no land.

A very high share of migrants (>80%) made regular remittances, suggesting that urban wages were sufficient to allow for some savings. Migrants from landless households remitted the smallest amounts, but did so more regularly than migrants from households with agricultural land. The size of remittances (averaging MMK 70,000 per month) was likely sufficient to make a significant contribution to the budgets of receiving households.

Although positive in many respects, this outflow of people from rural areas also brings challenges. With 16% of households having a migrant, and migrants having an average age of 21, this equates to a significant reduction in the population of young, able-bodied workers available in agriculture.

However, these were partially replaced by inflows of migrant labor from remoter areas with more limited employment prospects to take up permanent farm jobs, especially in aquaculture cluster village tracts, where there was high demand for permanent farm workers to tend fish ponds.

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