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Analyzing International Migrant Responses to Crisis Situations in the Context of Floods in Thailand

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The 2011 floods in Thailand were one of the most devastating disasters in the history of the country and affected migrants in several regions. The purpose of this paper is to analyze migrant responses in crisis situations and to assess the impact of the 2011 floods on migrants from Myanmar, Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The authors argue that such migrant groups have a weaker social, economic, and political position when compared with local (non-migrant) groups and are thus facing particular vulnerabilities in crisis situations. This paper is based on desk research and empirical data collection consisting of 55 semi-structured interviews.

Keywords: Crisis; Floods; Migrants; Thailand; Vulnerability



INTRODUCTION

The results presented in this paper derive from the larger European Union-funded project *Migrants in Countries in Crisis (MICIC): Supporting an Evidence-Based Approach for Effective and Cooperative State Action* which focuses mainly on post-crisis issues, primarily on the situations after a specific crisis event, including both natural disasters and civil unrest (Hendow, Pailey, & Bravi, 2016). While the overall MICIC Thailand project analyzes the response to the crisis by different stakeholders including government authorities, intergovernmental organizations, and civil society organizations (Bravi et al., 2017), this article predominantly discusses experiences of and responses by members of migrant communities in a flood crisis context.

In 2011, Thailand suffered its worst flooding in more than a half century. The floods, which lasted from July 2011 to January 2012, affected more than six million hectares of land in 66 of the country's 77 provinces and impacted more than 13 million people (World Bank, 2012). The flooding was categorized as a *level 4* which is the highest level on the country's disaster management scale. Several factors caused the flood situation in Thailand. These factors include the tropical storms coming late in the rainy season, poorly planned infrastructure, land filling for urban/commercial and industrial growth, degraded water canals in urban areas, and construction along river banks. At the time of the flood, approximately 3.5 million migrant workers were living in Thailand (Benfield, 2011) with the majority of them from Cambodia, Myanmar, and Lao PDR. According to the official statistics reported by UNDP and the World Bank, as of September 2011, over

870,000 migrants (excluding unregistered migrant workers) lived and worked in provinces that were affected by the floods. However, despite the lack of statistical information on the undocumented migrants, it was noted that up to around one million migrants (including both documented and undocumented) were working and living in the flooded areas as estimated by the Ministry of Labour (Koser, 2014). Migrant workers in Thailand are particularly vulnerable groups in crisis situations, primarily because of their political and socioeconomic status in Thailand (Bravi et al., 2017). A crisis can be defined as “a situation faced by an individual, group or organization which they are unable to cope with by the use of routine procedures and in which stress is created by sudden change” (Booth, 2015, p. 86). Against this background, this paper analyzes migrant responses in crisis situations and examines the impact of the 2011 floods in Thailand on migrants from Myanmar, Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

THE MIGRATION CONTEXT

Thailand has experienced a transformative process of shifting from a rural-based to an urban-based society and to an export-oriented and labor intensive economy with higher incomes and wage levels than most neighboring countries. This has led to a growing demand for low-skilled labor, especially from Lao PDR, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam (Huguet & Punpuing, 2005). In spite of this high demand for migrant labor, Thailand features restrictive employment regulations for low-skilled migrants (Sciortino & Punpuing, 2009). This lack of formal regulation created many informal migration channels and “subversive mobilities” (Cohen, Cohen, & Li, 2017) – often supported by brokers or smugglers – to bring unregistered migrants to the country.

Over the past 25 years, major policy changes affecting the administration of migrant workers have taken place (Chamchan & Apipornchaisakul, 2016). Migration and registration policies shape the legal statuses of Thailand’s migrant population according to the following categories (Archanvanikul, 2014): 1) unregistered / registered migrant workers without work permits, 2) registered migrant workers with work permits, 3) registered migrants who are approved by the Nationality Verification (NV) program, and 4) migrant workers who entered the country under the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The first two groups are considered to be irregular migrant workers (the first one because they do not have a work permit and the second group because of their incomplete National Verification), while the third group includes migrants regularly living in Thailand, but may comprise regular or irregular workers depending on whether their employment is authorized or not. The migrants included in the last group are considered to be regular migrant workers (Sasiwongsaroj, 2014). The criteria of the migrants’ status ranging from undocumented to the obtainment of a temporary work permit and the formal channels of NV or a MoU is important as it impacts the freedom of movement as well as the migrants’ general rights in Thailand. Undocumented migrants can be detained when crossing provincial or national borders if they are stopped by police or immigration officials and thus constitute the most vulnerable group.

RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA SAMPLE

The MICIC project was conducted in collaboration between the Institute for Population and Social Research (IPSR), Mahidol University, and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD). IPSR acted as local research partner in Thailand and conducted the majority of the interviews. Semi-structured in-depth interview guidelines were developed covering interview themes such as socio-demographic background, migration experience, legal status, realization of and information about the floods, migrant responses, role of family and relatives left-behind, employer's response, response and reactions of others within Thailand, unequal treatment, and future plans. The guidelines were translated into the native languages and the interviewers translated into respondents' language where appropriate during the interview. The fieldwork was carried out from March 27 until June 28, 2016 and took place in those provinces (Samut Sakhon, Pathum Thani, Nonthaburi, Nakhon Pathom, Ayutthaya) that were highly affected by the floods and that featured a high concentration of migrant populations from the four neighboring countries (Beesey, Limsakul, & McDougall, 2016). A total of 55 migrants from Myanmar (28 respondents), Lao PDR (6), Cambodia (11), and Vietnam (10) were interviewed in-depth. About one quarter of respondents in this study hold only a passport or a national identification card but no work permit for Thailand.

RESPONSES TO AND IMPACTS OF THE CRISIS

This section discusses how migrants perceived, experienced, and responded to the 2011 crisis situation. Migrants' responses can be divided – according to the time frame – into migrants' responses before, during, and after the flood event. This paper, however, focuses on migrant responses *during* the flooding and presents selected findings in the following paragraphs.

Deciding to Stay

The majority of the interviewed migrants stayed in Thailand throughout the crisis time. The reasons for not returning home during the flood are manifold and relate to the following factors: Moving across provinces was risky for undocumented migrants as they feared arrest; travelling home during the crisis was difficult due to the partial shutdown of roads in the flooded areas as well as the expensive nature of transportation, and the migrants interviewed reported that hardly any assistance for returning home was available or offered to them; migrants underestimated the severity of the flood and then it became too difficult to leave once the floods struck. Finally, fear of losing their jobs and sources of income also deterred migrants from leaving because they either had debt to pay or they did not want to return home; some stayed because they could earn extra money working during the floods. The size of migrants' households in Thailand also played a role in their decision to return, as travelling was more complicated and costly: "I did not think about moving back to Myanmar. My family was here. Also, transportation is way too expensive for all of us" (Female migrant from Myanmar aged 34).

Desk research, on the other hand, illustrates that several thousand migrants returned to their home countries because of the floods. According to migrant workers groups, thousands of migrants from Myanmar evacuated flooded industrial parks in the provinces of Ayutthaya, Nakhon Sawan, Nakhon Pathom, and Pathum Thani in the second half of 2011 (Undocumented workers exploited post-floods, 2011). In November 2011, aid workers estimated that about 600,000 migrant workers were stranded due to the floods (Koser, 2014). IOM reported that the flood crisis of 2011 forced many migrant workers in Thailand to flee flood-affected areas and return to their respective countries of origin (Huguet & Chamrathirong, 2011).

Preparedness and Awareness

The risk perception of migrants before the flood is mainly related to information and awareness about the crisis. In terms of information and awareness about the 2011 floods, migrants can roughly be divided into two groups. First, several interviewed migrants stated that they were surprised by the floods and only realized the severity when they had already happened.

Actually, I had no idea. I went to work on that day and nobody informed me or warned me about the flood. Until I came back from work, the flood had already attacked the market. I was completely shocked (Female migrant from Cambodia aged 24).

The lack of information and preparedness pertained especially to migrants unable to read and speak Thai (exclusion due to language barriers) and to those who were not embedded in a Thai social environment (segregation by ethnicity or nationality and socioeconomic factors). Migrants without registration or work permits tended to stay at their workplace or home to avoid problems. These migrants knew very little of what was going on in their host country because they lacked a social network, were unable to understand Thai, were without access to radio or TV, and rarely went out. During the floods, information was broadcasted via radio and TV and also spread by megaphone in the main streets by volunteers or aid workers. Thus, many migrants missed important information. They had a lower perception of the danger.

The second category refers to migrants who can understand and communicate in Thai and are socially better integrated into Thai society. They were better informed and demonstrated a stronger awareness of and preparedness for the floods, having received the news from various media, from their employers, and other people they talked to. Interviewed migrants stated that they thus tried to protect their homes, blocking them from the floods. They also tried to secure their valuables and bought a stock of food and drinking water beforehand.

Moving Within Thailand

As the water had begun to submerge their places of residence, the common immediate responses among most respondents included moving (oneself as well as one's belongings) to an upper floor or a friend or relative's house. Moving was a common

approach adopted by migrants who were affected by the flood. While some chose to return to their home country at the time of the flood, others moved to other areas in Thailand that were not flooded. The different strategies of moving within Thailand ranged from moving to a higher floor within the same house or building, moving to friends' houses or apartments in other areas, to moving to available government shelters. Some migrants also mentioned using higher elevated areas such as bridges as temporary shelter during the flood.

Experiences of Unequal Treatment and (Fear of) Discrimination

Generally, migrant respondents reported having experienced more discrimination in everyday life in Thailand than during the flood. Even though interviewees stated that they did not experience discrimination during the flood due to their national, ethnic or migrant status, the research team documented cases of denial of assistance by assistance groups and member of the Thai mainstream society dependent on these statuses.

Discrimination outside the flood context occurred in various everyday life situations. Interview partners reported daily life situations where Thai people did not want to have food with migrant workers, did not want to sit in the bus next to them, and generally disrespected them, including situations where they experienced discrimination and unequal treatment in terms of income.

I tell you the truth that I have been staying here for 16 years; I have never felt that I have a citizenship here. ... I said the truth that although I and (other) laborers are good people, nobody respects us (Male migrant from Vietnam aged 50).

Although the majority of respondents state that the level of discrimination they experienced during the flood crisis was lower than during 'outside-flood' contexts, some discrimination and unequal treatment based on legal status, national background, race-physical appearance, and language could be identified: "Yes. (I was discriminated against), the Thai people who came for distributing donations didn't give me the life aid bags because I am a migrant" (Female migrant from Vietnam aged 44).

Especially when personal 'crisis situations during the flood crisis' appeared, the vulnerability of undocumented migrants became obvious. For instance, an undocumented migrant from Cambodia had her belongings stolen by her landlord during the crisis. Due to the combination of being a migrant and lacking documentation/legal status in Thailand, she did not dare to report her case to the police. Moreover, Myanmar migrants reported cases of detainment of undocumented migrants who tried to cross provincial or international borders during the crisis.

Crisis as Chance

While the flood created many obstacles for affected migrants, this paper also aims to shed light on positive experiences of migrants as well as on migrants' *agency* and contributions during the crisis time. First, for a few of the respondents, the crisis situation opened the opportunity for new experiences and even constituted some kind

of entertainment, fun or diversion from everyday working life, at least in its initial stages. One undocumented migrant from Myanmar knew that there would not be any ID checks in his area during the flood situation. Therefore, when the water was still high he swam out through the floods to a large supermarket, an area he would usually not dare to visit out of fear of arrest by Thai authorities (personal communication, male migrant from Myanmar aged 26).

Second, for a minority of interviewees the flood brought about economic benefits. Although some migrants were not able to continue working during the flood, some even found additional jobs and turned the crisis situation into an opportunity. Before and at the beginning of the flood crisis, many migrants were hired to help by moving belongings to higher/elevated places where they would not be damaged by the flood. And when the flood subsided, they were once again hired to help clean up the houses.

Third, situations of crisis do not only show the vulnerability of migrants but also their agency and their contributions to crisis management efforts. Migrants contributed to tackling the crisis before, after, and during the flood. They supported the building of walls that protected houses and factories before the flood and supported the clean-up and reconstruction processes after the flood. Furthermore, respondents also mentioned that they gained a sense of belonging during the crisis as they were able to help Thai people and felt more included.

Do you know, I even helped the soldiers and Thai citizens to make anti-flood dams. I lived like a Thai citizen and I felt that I have responsibility to support neighbors to prevent the flood (Male migrant from Vietnam aged 50).

However, the same interviewees who mentioned this newfound inclusion or sense of belonging also noted that it could not be sustained after the floods. On the contrary, these migrants actually perceived a return to old patterns of everyday exclusion from Thai society after the crisis.

CONCLUSION

The present research shows that due to language barriers, lack of social embeddedness and underestimation of the impact of the impending floods, migrants were inadequately prepared for the crisis. Most of the migrants interviewed stayed in Thailand during the emergency as they lacked the means to return to their country of origin, feared arrest due to their undocumented status or they did not consider returning an option because their livelihoods were based in Thailand. Forms of migrant discrimination were reported before, during, and after the flood crisis. Results also show that social relations on local and translocal level help coping with hazards (Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013).

At the same time, a minority of interviewed migrants turned the crisis into an opportunity to earn additional income while their jobs and regular incomes were suspended. Some also felt more included and better embedded into the Thai community as they played crucial roles in helping to tackle the flood. The situation had therefore increased their sense of belonging and portrayed migrants as not only victims but also agents at the time of the flood.

Further developments and outputs of the Migrants in Countries in Crisis project can be accessed through the project website: <http://research.icmpd.org/projects/migration-governance/micic/>



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