



**United Nations
Network on Migration**

Working Better Together

Interview with...

Gita Sabharwal

UN Resident Coordinator, Thailand

OVERVIEW

Migrant workers' contribution to socioeconomic development in Thailand cannot be overemphasized; they fill critical labour shortages in several key sectors. Among numerous efforts to govern migration more effectively and protect migrants' rights, Thailand committed to four pledges at the first International Migration Review Forum held last May. The UN Resident Coordinator in Thailand explains what it means for the country to have volunteered to become a GCM Champion country and describes how the country Network on Migration is currently supporting the government in implementing its four pledges, the GCM's 23 objectives, and ultimately the Sustainable Development Goals.



What is the current migration situation in Thailand and what are the government's key priority areas?

Migration plays a key role in the social and economic fabric of Thailand. Representing approximately 7 per cent of Thailand's total population, some 3.9 million migrant workers reside in the country, predominantly from Cambodia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, and Myanmar. Thailand hosts nearly half of all migrant workers in Southeast Asia, most of whom are employed in agriculture, construction, domestic work and fisheries.

Migrant workers' contribution to socioeconomic development in Thailand cannot be overemphasized; they fill critical labour shortages in several key sectors.

Unfortunately, instability and economic pressure in the region continue to drive migration through irregular routes, both into Thailand and outward. The continuing flows of migrants from Myanmar, for instance, are leading to a wide array of needs. Migrants in irregular situations are at heightened risk of abuse and exploitation, particularly people smuggling and human trafficking. In addition, migrants tend to work in sectors where most modern-day slavery is found. The COVID-19 pandemic has further magnified the challenges migrants face, such as inadequate access to social protection and healthcare. They get stigmatized more frequently and also face various forms of discrimination.

Furthermore, more and more people are being forced to migrate in search of work as a result of the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. For example, out-migration from agricultural areas is partly driven by declines in water availability and crop productivity. Already, Thailand consistently ranks in the top 10 countries for climate-related loss events.

All of this has informed the Royal Thai Government's approach to migration governance, anchored in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM)'s 23 objectives. Among numerous efforts to govern migration more effectively and protect migrants' rights, Thailand committed to four pledges at the first International Migration Review Forum (IMRF) held last May:

- To enable birth registration for all migrant children born in Thailand (Objective 4);
- To make progress towards the achievement of universal health coverage, including for wider groups of migrants (Objective 15);
- To effectively implement alternatives to detention measures for migrant children (Objective 13); and
- To promote public perception regarding the positive contributions of migrants and to end discrimination and stigmatization against them (Objective 17).

Thailand is a GCM Champion country. What does that mean and what does this initiative entail for the country?

To generate momentum in support of implementing the GCM, the UN Network on Migration launched the “GCM Champion country” initiative in 2020. We were delighted to see Thailand immediately volunteer to become a Champion, a reflection of its deep commitment to maximizing the benefits of humane, well-governed migration.

Thailand has embarked on several laudable initiatives from which other countries may learn. For example, migrants were incorporated prominently into COVID-19 response and recovery plans. Over 1.5 million migrants were regularized over three phases during the pandemic, and by the end of 2021 almost 2 million migrants received at least the first dose of a vaccine, representing 42 per cent of all migrants in the country. At the same time, 1.7 million migrant workers were included in government social protection and health insurance schemes.

Thailand is making progress in the use of alternative care arrangements for migrant children in an irregular situation with a landmark Memorandum of Understanding on the Determination of Measures and Approaches to Alternative to Detention of Children in Immigration Detention Centres, established in January 2019¹. Over 300 children and their families were released from immigration detention into government shelters or community-based alternatives since the adoption of the MoU.

Importantly, the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework for Thailand (UNSDCF) 2022-2026 is well aligned to these government priorities. Its three pillars – advancing the green economy, fostering human capital development and leaving no one behind – touch on many areas relevant to migration. These include mitigating the adverse mobility impacts of climate change, maximizing the potential of migrant workers and increasing protection services for vulnerable migrants. This highlights that the UN’s work to support Thailand’s migration vision is anchored not only in the GCM, but in the overall 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

¹ In 2019, the Royal Thai Police and Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour signed the Memorandum of Understanding on the Determination of Measures and Approaches Alternative to Detention of Children in Immigration Detention Centres.

Why was the UN Network on Migration established and what has it achieved so far?

In Thailand, a UN Migration Working Group had been active for many years before the adoption of the GCM in 2018. In 2020, the group was transformed into the UN Network on Migration. Chaired by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Network's primary aim is to coordinate UN support toward the realization of the GCM in Thailand. Guided by a workplan that was validated in 2021 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Network has prioritized three areas – for which I am proud to report positive results and impacts from 2021.

On the first priority of ensuring a **migrant-inclusive COVID-19 response and recovery**, the Network played a critical role in facilitating access to vaccination for migrants, with the percentage of migrants vaccinated rising exponentially in a short period. Over 146,000 migrants were sensitized through community engagement and awareness-raising efforts, while thousands were provided access to vaccination centres.

The Network's second priority is to ensure the **protection of migrants in vulnerable situations**. Collective UN efforts led to more than 2,000 vulnerable migrants in detention receiving essential supplies; close to 6,800 migrant workers accessing legal assistance; over 150 law enforcement officials and social workers getting trained on protecting victims of trafficking and prosecuting traffickers; and 76 law officials getting trained on implementing the MoU on alternatives to detention for migrant children in irregular situations.

Finally, the third priority is to **facilitate safe, orderly, regular and affordable migration channels**. Remarkably, the UN equipped more than 1,950 government and private sector stakeholders with the knowledge, skills and tools to promote ethical recruitment, while over 155,000 migrants benefited from information on labour rights and entitlements. Meanwhile, 66 Migrant Learning Centres (MLCs) nationwide were supported to provide education for migrant children and youth.

The UN Network on Migration remains flexible and fit-for-purpose, instituting sub-working groups when the need arises – for example, on the COVID-19 pandemic, cross-border flows from Myanmar, and alternatives to detention.

In July 2021, the Network supported the mainstreaming of migration into the UNSDCF, which positively shaped agencies' work. I am optimistic that with our strong spirit of collaboration – including with academia, civil society, media and private sector partners – we will continue to see the Royal Thai Government make important headway in implementing its four pledges, the GCM's 23 objectives, and ultimately the Sustainable Development Goals.

This interview was conducted by IOM Thailand.