

Perception and Misperception: Thai Public Opinions on Refugees and Migrants from Myanmar

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This article reports on a quantitative survey in four provinces on the Thailand-Myanmar border that investigated Thai perceptions of refugees and migrant workers from Myanmar. The results show that the public is highly concerned with security issues and that the majority of the Thais surveyed believe that refugees and migrant workers pose a threat to public safety and may carry diseases. Respondents also saw refugees and migrants as competing for jobs and national resources with native Thais. Those who lived closer to the refugee camps, who are rural residents, generally had more positive views of migrants and refugees than those in urban areas located farther from the camps. The results are discussed in terms of recommendations that would help to dispel misperceptions and improve integration of refugees, migrants and ethnic minorities into Thai society.

Keywords: refugees, migrants, public opinion, xenophobia, migration policy

Introduction

Prejudice is generally referred to as a negative set of perceived beliefs or judgments about a specific group of people based on assumptions, half-truths, and guesses rather than facts (Guha, 2008). In Thailand, the changing role of the nation-state in the context of globalization and the development of both established and new migrant communities has led to a strong sense of national identity – a ‘Thainess’ – among native born citizens, which, in turn, creates a feeling of otherness for minority ethnic groups. This social construction of ‘Thainess’ has influenced Thais’ attitude toward

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immigrants and ethnic minorities, and has possibly produced prejudice and polarization (Sattayanurak, 2008; Traitongyoo, 2008)

For approximately three decades, Thailand has been a destination for refugees, displaced persons and migrants workers, particularly from Myanmar. About 150,000 refugees live in nine camps located along the border, and an estimated four million migrants live in Thailand—about half non-registered (Labour Market Research Division, 2012; Ministry of Labour, 2010; Thailand Burma Border Consortium, 2012). Thai media reports often portray Myanmar refugees and migrants as a threat to personal safety, social order and public health, as troublemakers and a burden to Thailand. Insensitive comments by the media and politicians are frequent (Aung, 2008; Ferguson, 2008; Suntivutimete, 2008). Myanmar persons are often seen as overburdening the local health system and spreading diseases. The seizure of the Myanmar Embassy in Bangkok by Myanmar students in 1999, and the hostage taking in Ratchaburi hospital by armed insurgent forces fighting the Myanmar government in 2000 led to policy changes in Thailand regarding the treatment of refugees, and caused more public negative attitude towards refugees (Traitongyoo, 2008)

Apart from political concerns, negative perceptions of refugees also result from economic issues, such as deforestation related to the hiring of refugees and migrants as loggers and competition for collective resources such as bamboo shoots, mushrooms and firewood. Typically, limited contact with refugees and migrants limit exchange of knowledge on Thai government regulations and Thai customary practices resulting in misunderstandings and misgivings between Thais and refugees (Brees, 2010). Despite the fact that Myanmar refugees make a significant contribution to the local Thai economy in terms of local procurement of food supply and other materials, and also through the establishment of development projects in Thai communities close to the refugee camps, such information is hardly mentioned in the Thai media. As a matter of fact, the Thai government has been promoting the relocation of labor-intensive industries to border provinces near Myanmar with investment incentives, infrastructure development and soft loans (Martin, 2007; Tsuneishi, 2005). Thus, it can be said that Thailand has enjoyed economic benefits from refugees and migrants without due recognition and credit given to them.

While media often convey a negative view of Myanmar migrants and refugees, to date there has been no systematic investigation of the perceptions and prejudices of Thais towards this particular group. This article presents results from the “Survey

of Thai Public Opinions on Myanmar Refugees and Displaced Persons" conducted by the Institute for Population and Social Research with funding from the World Health Organization (WHO). The objective of this study is to find out the current attitudes of Thai people towards Myanmar refugees and displaced persons (including registered and non-registered migrants), with a view to providing recommendations on interventions to overcome any prevalent misunderstandings. Any improvement in Thai attitudes towards Myanmar refugees and displaced persons will potentially strengthen political will to support policies and mechanisms to improve social and healthcare services provided to displaced persons and migrants.

Methods

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate these issues. Quantitative methods included an opinion survey that used a structured questionnaire and face-to-face interviews, for both the general public and community leaders. The qualitative component utilized in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with stakeholders. These included community leaders, government officials and representatives from non-governmental organizations representing both local and international agencies. Results from the full study are available in Sunpuwan & Niyomsilpa (2012); this article focuses on perceptions of migrants found in the quantitative survey of the general population and community leaders.

The study area for the research included Kanchanaburi, Ratchaburi, Mae Hong Son and Tak provinces, where refugee camps have been located. The survey interviewed 400 people drawn from the general population and 100 community leaders in each province, for a total 500 in each province and 2,000 total. A stratified sampling strategy was used; areas were divided into strata which were included sub districts where refugee camps were located (which are rural) and sub-districts where the city hall was located (which are urban areas). Subsequently, five villages from each sub-district were randomly selected. Forty people aged 18 and over were randomly selected from each village while ten community leaders were purposively selected.

The survey used a modified Likert scale for the opinion questions. The five-point scale uses the options agree slightly, agree somewhat, agree moderately, agree very much and agree totally. Data from the second pre-test was used for an analysis of reliability, revealing that Cronbach's alpha of total scores was high and at an acceptable level of $\alpha=0.86$.

Knowledge and sources of information about refugees

The survey first inquired into how much the general population respondents knew about refugees. Slightly more than one-fourth of respondents had actually been in a refugee camp. However there was a difference between rural and urban respondents, as slightly more than two-fifths of rural respondents had been in a camp compared with only around one-tenth of urban respondents. The questionnaire also asked whether the respondent knew any refugees personally. Almost one-fifth of respondents said that they knew one or more refugees, but there was an observable difference between rural and urban respondents. Those residing in rural areas nearby refugee camps were more likely to have experience in getting to know refugees compared to those residing in urban areas (29.2% and 5.3% respectively). When asked how they got to know refugees, about an equal proportion said that they knew them from the camps where refugees lived (46.6%) or in their communities (42.6%). This may indicate that refugees do travel outside camps to villages nearby.

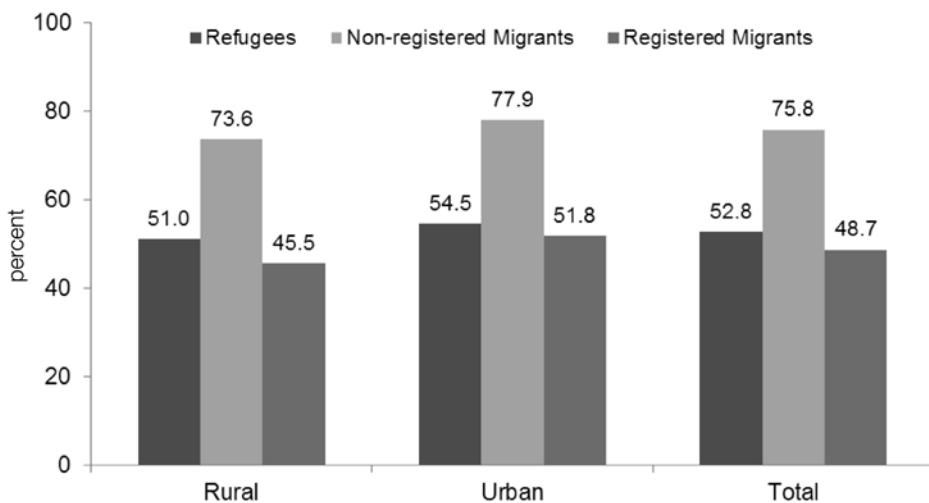
The survey also asked about preferred information channels for distributing information about refugees in the future. The most popular channel for communication information was via television (34.3%) followed by relatives/friends (31.3%), direct experience (15.0%) and printed media (8.9%). It is important to note that mass media plays a crucial role in distributing information on refugees.

Opinions about refugees and migrant workers from Myanmar

One of the issues the research explored was the extent Thai citizens perceived that migrants or refugees posed a threat to their physical and economic well-being. Respondents were asked to rate how much they agreed with the statement, “Refugees or migrant workers pose a threat to your life and property”. Figure 1 reveals that approximately half of the respondents believed registered migrant workers (48.7%) and refugees (52.8%) posed a threat to their human safety. Non-registered migrants, however, were seen as the biggest threat as 75.8% of respondents agreed with the statement. The highest percentage (82.4%) was from Tak Province, which is a transit point and destination for asylum seekers and migrants from Myanmar.

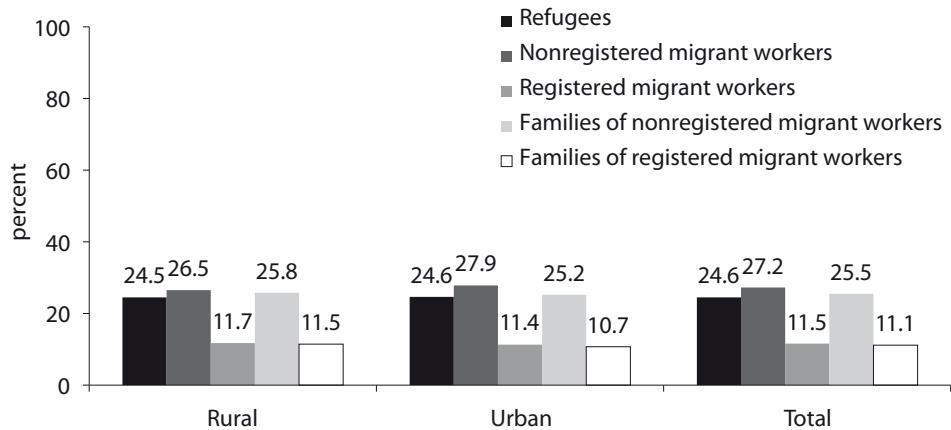
Although perceptions are also influenced by negative media reports on refugees and migrants in Thailand, research has shown that in many countries native born citizens with a strong sense of national pride tend to be more distrusting of migrants, who are seen as a threat to their national identity (Sides & Citrin, 2007). Perhaps also, public attitudes are affected by prejudice and their fear of the unknown, for example, of non-registered migrants.

Figure 1: Proportion of respondents that agree refugees or migrant workers pose a personal security threat



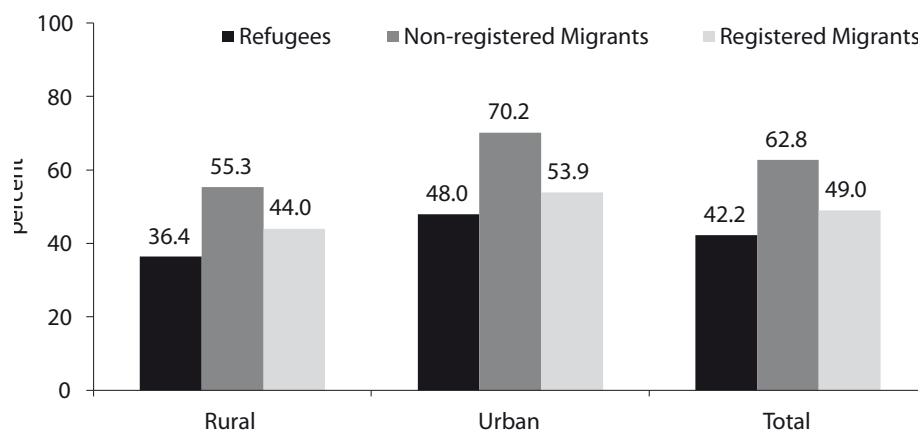
Fear of diseases from abroad is sometimes found in receiving countries and can lead to prejudice against migrants (Kraut, 2010). Respondents were asked whether they agreed that refugees and migrants are disease carriers. As shown in Figure 2, slightly more than one-fourth of respondents viewed non-registered migrants and their families as disease carriers. Slightly less than one-fourth viewed refugees as such while only about one-tenth viewed registered migrants and their families as disease carriers. This contrasting response may be due to the fact that registered migrants are provided with a health screening before applying for a work permit.

Figure 2: Proportion of respondents that view refugees and migrants as disease carriers



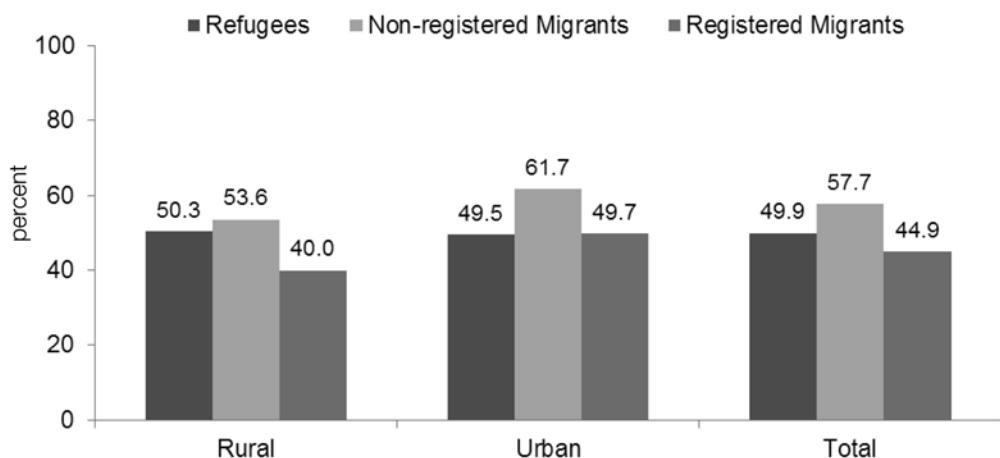
The findings also show that Thai people tend to have a negative view of Myanmar migrant workers in relation to the issue of competition for jobs and natural resources (Figure 3). Around 40% of respondents considered that refugees competed with national workers for jobs, despite the fact that refugees are not allowed to work. However, only 36.4% of respondents in rural areas agreed that there was such competition compared with 48.0% of urban respondents. Most respondents considered that job competition is fierce with non-registered migrants. Over 60% of all respondents considered that non-registered migrant workers competed with them for jobs. Almost half also have a similar view with registered migrants. In all cases, people in urban areas were worried about job competition from migrants to a greater extent than respondents in rural areas. As migrants tend to look for employment opportunities in the city, city respondents would be well aware of their presence. However, the low unemployment rate in Thailand of around 0.8% would suggest that job competition with migrants is not a particularly serious issue (Statistical Forecasting Bureau, 2011).

Figure 3: Proportion of respondents agreeing that migrants from Myanmar compete for jobs



On the issue of competition for land and natural resources such as water, around half of respondents thought that there was such competition with refugees, and almost 60% perceived such competition with non-registered migrants (Figure 4). Less than half of respondents felt such competition with registered migrants as most of them were not employed in the agricultural sector. Urban respondents had a more negative view on this issue than people living in rural areas (near the refugee camps) however.

Figure 4: Proportion of respondents agreeing that migrants from Myanmar compete for land and natural resources



Discussion and recommendations

Overall, the study found rural residents who live close to refugee camps are more familiar with refugees and migrants than people who live in urban areas in the selected provinces. Also, a sizable percentage of people living close to the camp areas have visited camps such that they tend to have a better understanding of refugees and migrants that can lead to a more positive view on them than city respondents. In general, both groups of respondents have a more positive view of registered migrant workers and refugees than non-registered migrant workers. Most refugees in the camps are seen as living in a designated area under the supervision of Thai agencies and the UN. Registered migrant workers are seen as conforming to the law, and their registration puts them in contact with the Thai authorities. On the other hand, non-registered migrant workers are mysterious to Thais despite the fact that some of them are also *de facto* refugees.

Personal safety issues are a major concern for all respondents in all provinces. With a few exceptions, over half of all respondents in all provinces in this survey perceived that migrants and refugees were a threat to their lives and property, and for non-registered migrant workers the percentage was much higher. They are also misperceived as being disease carriers. However, this perception has no basis in empirical evidence (Aung, 2008; Calderon, Rijks, & Agunias, 2012; Sargent & Larchanché, 2011). “The fear of the unknown” is a major cause of negative attitudes towards non-registered migrant workers. Such misperceptions have been partly influenced by negative media reporting on refugees and migrants in Thailand.

Regarding economic aspects, job competition and competition for land and natural resources are a major concern for many Thai respondents. This perception may have some empirical basis as many Thai farmers, refugees and some migrants outside the camps collect wood, food such as bamboo shoots and mushrooms and other natural resources in their neighborhood. There are also reports of excess garbage waste generated from the refugee camps (Brees, 2010; Morgado, 2012; UNHCR, 2011).

Table 1 summarizes the perceptions and misperceptions found in the study along with some recommendations to resolve these issues. While it is quite worrisome that the majority of Thais perceive that the inflow of refugees and migrants as a threat to their personal safety, refugees and migrants also need justice and the rights of protection while in Thailand. There are reports and evidence of their abuse and harassment by officials and employers. It is quite clear that both migrants and Thais need better protection of their lives and properties. The justice system should be improved and law enforcement be enhanced in border provinces. The more secure environment and improved community safety could ensure social cohesion in areas where mixed ethnic groups live. Better public safety and improved law enforcement might also help to reduce potential prejudice against migrants and prevent the emergence of xenophobia in the future. However, improved law enforcement, independently, is insufficient to ameliorate the situation. Additional steps, such as education of the Thai populace regarding the real situation of the migrants—for example, that crime statistics are actually lower for migrants—are needed as well (Hall, 2011; Huguet & Punpuing, 2005; International Rescue Committee, 2011).

The study found that most Thais underestimate the economic contribution of migrants in their communities, and worse still, perceive that intense job competition and competition for land and natural resources exists between Thais and migrants. Urban people have a more negative view on migrants and refugees than their peers in border areas. This perception runs against the fact that migrants are usually employed in the 3D jobs (dirty, dangerous and difficult) ignored by most Thais. In addition, the fact that Thailand has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the world (less than 1% in recent years (International Labour Office, 2011; Labour Market Research Division, 2012)) contrasts with the prevailing attitude of job competition between Thais and migrants. The Thai authorities, media and scholars should therefore produce more positive information on the economic contribution of migrants. Moreover, a thorough study of labor demand and supply is needed, so that Thailand can establish immigration policies that aim to import labor with the skills needed.

Table 1: Perceptions, misperceptions and recommendations for resolving them

Perception	Misperception	Recommendation/Action
Refugees and migrants are a threat	More threat from refugees and migrants than other strangers	Media training, more positive information, research on economic contribution of migrants
Job competition from registered and non-registered migrant workers	City people are more concerned than those in camp areas (no empirical evidences)	More balanced information from media, research on economic contribution of migrants, etc.
Competition for land and resources from refugees and non-registered migrants	Sizable, but less concern on non-registered migrant workers (no empirical evidences)	Better management of collective resources in border areas, community's involvement in migration policy, more interactions between Thais and migrants, etc.

Local integration of native Thais with refugees, migrants and ethnic minorities is a very sensitive issue in Thailand. The majority of Thais do not support the granting of permanent residence status to refugees and migrants who have had long-term residence in Thailand. Nor would they support the granting of permanent residence to stateless children whose parents are refugees or migrant workers. However, Thailand is facing human rights challenges from stateless children and refugees living outside the refugee camps. Stakeholders should be involved in public debates aimed at finding flexible solutions to local integration issues involving stateless children and migrants. Thailand should also make an effort to prevent a xenophobic environment in the country. A multiculturalism policy should be promoted by the Thai government, aimed at creating a more inclusive society where people of different ethnic origins can live and work together.

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